



FREE MINDS AND FREE MARKETS

## Why Are So Many Younger Americans Okay with Big Brother Monitoring Their Homes?

J.D. Tuccille

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The good news is that "only" a minority of younger American adults favor Big Brother-style surveillance of our home life. The bad news is that we're discussing this because it's a disturbingly large share supporting such a totalitarian intrusion. Worse, the idea seems to be gaining acceptance. We either need to get a handle on what's going on here, or else potentially suffer lives monitored by unblinking eyes of the state, imposed by popular demand.

Among Gen Z, 29 Percent Love Big Brother

"Americans under the age of 30 stand out when it comes to 1984-style in-home government surveillance cameras. 3 in 10 (29 percent) Americans under 30 favor 'the government installing surveillance cameras in every household' in order to 'reduce domestic violence, abuse, and other illegal activity,'" the Cato Institute's Emily Ekins and Jordan Gygi wrote last week. "Support declines with age, dropping to 20 percent among 30–44 year olds and dropping considerably to 6 percent among those over the age of 45."

The survey in question focused on central bank digital currencies (CBDCs)—government-sponsored alternatives to such digital money as bitcoin. CBDCs would offer the convenience of digital payments, but potentially without privacy protections, and could empower the state to control what people buy and sell.

"Interestingly, more than half (53 percent) of those who support the United States adopting a CBDC are also supportive of government surveillance cameras in homes, while only 2 percent of those who oppose a CBDC feel the same," add Ekins and Gygi. "This suggests there may be a common consideration that is prompted by both issues. Likely, it has to do with willingness to give up privacy in hopes of greater security."

If that's the case, it may be a *growing* willingness to prioritize security over privacy. Note not just the 29 percent support for in-home surveillance among the youngest cohort, but also the 20 percent support among those 30–44. Six percent support among older cohorts is the sort of random approval for any crazy idea that you'd expect to see in a population. The jump to 20 percent and then 29 percent looks like something different. But what?

## A Cycle of Technology and Anxiety

"I think there are two ways to think about this new finding from Cato and both can be true at the same time, and may even be connected," psychologist Clay Routledge, Vice President of Research and Director of the Human Flourishing Lab at the Archbridge Institute, told me by email. "The first is a story of technology driving changing attitudes. Younger generations have grown up with less privacy than older generations because of technological trends related to smartphones and social media so this finding may represent a greater comfort with more surveillance as a result of how they grew up. The second is a story of mental health driving changing attitudes. Younger generations are more anxious and when people are anxious they become more likely to privilege security over freedom so this finding may represent a greater comfort with less freedom as a result of greater mental distress. And these explanations might be connected because the growing surveillance culture and social media more broadly may be contributing to higher rates of anxiety which ironically may lead to greater support for more surveillance, leading to more anxiety.

Routledge has been following such developments for several years. In 2017, while teaching at North Dakota State University, he wrote a piece for *The New York Times* examining survey results revealing declining support for free speech and democracy among younger adults. He worried that years of safety-obsessed parenting and schooling promoted "a culture of victimhood" that made children anxious and fearful. Those children then carried their concerns forward into adulthood.

"In short, fear causes people to privilege psychological security over liberty," he warned.

Routledge's concerns echoed those of Greg Lukianoff, president of The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt in "The Coddling of the American Mind," an article published by *The Atlantic* in 2015 and later expanded into a book. They delved into the then relatively new phenomenon of intolerance on college campuses for the free exchange of ideas. The roots, they suggested, lay in overprotective childrearing that encouraged anxiety and warped culture.

"Stories of abducted children appeared more frequently in the news, and in 1984, images of them began showing up on milk cartons. In response, many parents pulled in the reins and worked harder to keep their children safe," they wrote. "The flight to safety also happened at school."

The result was a "vindictive protectiveness" that smothered dissent and prioritized safety over liberty.

A 21-year-old college graduate in 2015, the year Lukianoff and Haidt wrote, would be 29 now—the upper age limit of the cohort with the highest support for Orwellian surveillance. We may be seeing preferences for security over freedom carried forward into discussions about privacy and surveillance.

Of course, we can't be sure that this is a growing preference rather than a blip, or something younger survey respondents will grow out of. Nobody seems to have thought in the past to ask

Americans if they considered George Orwell's dystopian *1984* a viable blueprint for the future, so the question will have to be repeated. But the data gives us something to consider.

### Omen For a Surveillance-State Future?

"We don't know how much of this preference for security over privacy or freedom is something unique to this generation (a cohort effect) or simply the result of youth (age effect)," note Ekins and Gygi. "However, there is reason to think part of this is generational. Americans over age 45 have vastly different attitudes on in-home surveillance cameras than those who are younger."

At least one expert studying the issue agrees that the surveillance survey results reveal something real and unsettling.

"I do think this new finding from Cato is just one indicator of a very real trend of Americans, and especially younger generations of Americans, prioritizing security over freedom. And I think it is a bigger issue than many realize," Routledge told me.

It's worth emphasizing that the large minority of young adults who favor in-home surveillance is still a *minority*—the majority even in that cohort wants nothing of the sort. The same can be said of the surprisingly large share of support for monitoring among blacks (33 percent) and Hispanics (25 percent) relative to Asians (11 percent) and whites (9 percent). Those are puzzling and troubling percentages, but not enough to overwhelm opposition to surveillance cameras in every bedroom.

But if these survey results reveal a continuing shift towards prioritizing security over liberty, Orwell's *1984* may become less of a cautionary tale and more of a description of everyday life.