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Public Debates Line Between Public Safety and Civil Liberties

USA TODAY

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Americans have long struggled to protect both lives and liberties; survey shows how tricky that is

NEW YORK -- The debate over where to draw the line between public safety and civil liberties is being waged, among other places, in the labyrinth of train and subway entrances below Penn Station.

For her part, Judy Joseph, who works for a publishing company in the city, would like to see more security on trains, not less. She's comfortable with police randomly searching bags and backpacks as long as "it's clear that everybody could be subject to being searched."

Robert Carter, 49, a substance-abuse counselor from Philadelphia who is African-American, worries about a slide toward the sort of racial profiling that he believes has prompted state troopers to pull him over on the New Jersey Turnpike. While he wants to feel secure, he says, "I don't want it to be like a police state."

Nearly four years after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, Americans continue to struggle with how to strike a balance between security and freedom -- a question that has been intensified this summer by the bombings of London's transit system.

A USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll taken July 22-24 found a public with definite and nuanced views. When it comes to walking through a metal detector before entering office buildings, most Americans are willing to put up with the intrusion. If the issue is letting police search homes at will, nearly everyone thinks that goes too far.

But the question of ethnic profiling -- for instance, subjecting U.S. citizens who are Arabs to more stringent airport screenings -- divides the public and provokes a sometimes-anguished debate, according to the survey and subsequent interviews across the country.

"Historically in wartime we've had to change where we draw the line, and sometimes that's been abused, no question," says Alan Baron, 63, a lawyer from Washington, D.C., taking a train to meetings in New York. "But we are at war."

What about tougher screenings at airports for Arab citizens? "I hate to say it, I agree with that," he says. "Look at London: Several people there (involved with the bombings) were British citizens."

Across the aisle, Tami Martin couldn't disagree more. "I have been, myself -- and especially males in my family -- and friends have been racially profiled and searched. We call it 'driving while black.'"

Martin, 37, of Alexandria, Va., owns a business that offers customized computer training.

When Willie Wright, an assistant Amtrak conductor, comes down the aisle collecting tickets, his security checks do seem random: He asks for IDs from both Baron, who is white, and Martin, who is black. He says later that the conductors had agreed to check everyone sitting in odd-numbered seats.

After the London bombings, police in New York began random bag searches on the subways, a step also being weighed in Washington. The New York Civil Liberties Union plans to file a lawsuit in U.S. District Court today, arguing that the bag checks violate the Constitution's prohibition of unreasonable searches and its guarantee of equal protection.

The USA TODAY Poll found:

*Support for requiring everyone to show an ID before entering an office building, and for adding airport-style security on mass transit systems.

*Opposition to making it easier for police to read e-mail or tap telephones, and to allowing the government to imprison citizens suspected of terrorism without trial for years.

*A split over whether to allow police to stop people on the street at random and ask for ID. Random searches on the street were opposed.

*Support for requiring all Americans to carry a national ID card, but narrow opposition to requiring Arabs, including those who are U.S. citizens, to carry special IDs. A narrow majority favored requiring Arabs to undergo more intensive security checks at airports.

Attitudes varied considerably among different groups. Women surveyed narrowly approved of special IDs for Arabs; men strongly opposed them. Those 65 and older were for the idea by 2-to-1; those younger than 30 were against it by nearly 3-to-1. The idea of special IDs was opposed in the West but supported in the South.

"I really hate to say this because I don't think it's right, but I don't see how searching an old lady or a 4-year-old is going to do anything," says Barbara Carlson, 63, a homemaker in Phoenix. "If (terrorists) were white, Anglo-Saxon women, I wouldn't mind being searched."

From the nation's earliest days, Americans' views on such matters have fluctuated with the perception of threats. The Alien and Sedition Acts were passed in 1798 to give the president the power to deport aliens and silence critics. Four years later, the acts were gone.

"Throughout history, when our national security has been threatened, we have responded by reducing liberties," says Carol Lewis, a political scientist at the University of Connecticut who studies the issue. Over time, "we ask: We not only want to survive, but survive living under what conditions?"

"I worry about being safe but I don't want it to infringe on every aspect of my life," says Laura Benge, 25, in Wilmington, Del. She was carrying eight books she had checked out from the downtown library. She'd worry about allowing police to search library records. "It's kind of private," she says.

Monroe Jones, 66, a retired heavy equipment operator from Sevierville, Tenn., rejects those concerns. "I would say the way the world is today, we need security; we need it bad," he says. "If it imposes on somebody, tough luck."

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