

A DATA BRIEFING FROM DT LINUX

SAMPLE PREVIEW

Why Do Humans Fear the Wrong Things? Ranking Real vs. Perceived Risk

Six sourced studies on why human fear tracks headlines and vividness instead of actual odds, from a letter-frequency experiment that exposed the availability heuristic to the radon gas that kills 21,000 Americans a year while almost no one tests for it

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DT LINUX

This is a free preview. The full report contains complete analysis of all six cases, full sourcing, and an interactive data dashboard.

What's inside this report

The full report walks through six real, sourced studies on why human fear tracks vividness and dread instead of actual odds, from a classic cognitive-psychology experiment to a radioactive gas almost no one tests for, organized into three tiers: The Spotlight, The Blind Spot, and The Dread Factor.

No.	Context	Tier	Why it's on the list
1	The word-count experiment that revealed the availability heuristic	The Spotlight	People judged words starting with "K" as more common than words with "K" as the third letter, even though the second group is about twice as frequent in real English text.
2	What the news covers is not what actually kills people	The Spotlight	Terrorism made up effectively 0% of American deaths but received about 30.6% of newspaper coverage, roughly 3,906 times its actual share.
3	Causes judged equally deadly that are not even close	The Blind Spot	Accidents were judged about as deadly as all disease combined. Disease actually kills about 15 times as many people.
4	Fear of flying put more Americans at risk, not fewer	The Blind Spot	An estimated 1,600 additional Americans died on the roads in the year after 9/11, from driving instead of flying.
5	Experts and everyday people rank the same risks in opposite order	The Dread Factor	Nuclear power ranked as the number 1 most-feared risk by lay groups, but only 20th of 30 hazards by technical experts.
6	The radon blind spot	The Dread Factor	Radon kills about 21,000 Americans a year, the second-leading cause of lung cancer, yet only 6.7% of households have ever tested for it.

The full report also includes an interactive, filterable dashboard version of this comparison, and a related-topics and keyword brief for further reading.

The clearest case: a three-letter demonstration of how fear gets built

In 1973, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman ran a deceptively small experiment. They asked people a simple question: in a typical piece of English text, are you more likely to come across a word that starts with the letter K, like "kitchen," or a word with K as its third letter, like "acknowledge"? Most people confidently picked the first option. Most people were wrong. A typical English text contains about twice as many words with K in the third position as words that start with K.

The reason people got it backward is the whole finding. Words starting with K are easy to search for in memory, so examples come to mind quickly: kangaroo, kitchen, kale. Words with K buried in the third position are much harder to retrieve on demand, even though they're objectively more common. Tversky and Kahneman called the shortcut people were using the availability heuristic: judging how likely or frequent something is by how easily examples of it come to mind, rather than by how often it actually occurs.

Nothing about a plane crash, a shark, or a terrorist attack is special to human risk psychology beyond this: all three are vivid, easy to picture, and heavily covered when they happen, which makes them easy to retrieve from memory, which makes them feel more probable than they are...

Get the full report

This sample covers the opening case. The complete report walks through all six studies in full, with the same standard of sourcing throughout.

- **Full analysis of all six cases**, including the newspaper-coverage mismatch, the post-9/11 driving-death toll, and the expert-versus-lay nuclear power ranking reversal
- **The complete "caveat that matters most" section**, tying all six cases together into one running argument about when fear tracks the real odds and when it doesn't
- **A full, cited source list** covering every study used
- **An interactive data dashboard** with filterable charts, a downloadable schema, and API access details
- **A related-topics and keyword brief** for teams researching risk communication and public perception further

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