

JULY 2022



LIFTING BARRIERS. LIFTING LIVES.

AMERICAN DREAM 2022 SNAPSHOT:

*THE HEALTH AND STATE
OF THE AMERICAN DREAM*

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INTRODUCTION

Is the American Dream still alive and well after the COVID-19 pandemic? Is it still possible to believe and have faith in the American Dream during trying economic times? During a major international conflict like the one we're seeing in Europe with all the attendant effects it has had in the United States?

In the third year of our American Dream survey, many of these questions came to mind and animated our research. We didn't specifically tie our questions to these current events but believe that the perceptions people have around these questions are certainly influenced by what is going on around them.

The health of the American Dream is one of the most important cultural issues at hand, which can inform many public discussions and even policy debates. Even as our daily lives are dominated by current events, societies that have a guiding light can inspire their citizens to pursue better lives and overcome challenges. At a time when the United States feels so polarized, the American Dream can serve as the vision statement of the country by animating and better informing many cultural conversations and ultimately unify us around a national identity that is inclusive, diverse, and hopeful.


As such it is important to study the health of the American Dream to better have a pulse on this important pillar of American society. As a reminder, one of the best and most used definitions of the American Dream is that of James Truslow Adams, in his 1931 book, *The Epic of America*. Adams defines the American Dream as follows:


that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.


This definition is very much in line with what our survey delves into: the American Dream as the pursuit of better and more meaningful lives that still serves as an aspirational guiding light for many people. Opportunity, optimism, and patriotism are other questions we included in this survey, as they represent important pillars of the American Dream. These issues animate human and individual progress but also societal progress as recent research by Clay Routledge has shown in the link between patriotism, optimism, and progress.


For this survey we partnered again with NORC at the University of Chicago and its AmeriSpeak® panel. AmeriSpeak® is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the US household population. Randomly selected US households are sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, nonzero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame. The nationally representative sample consisted of 2,073 respondents. The survey was conducted May 26–31, 2022


The Survey Results Include the Following Five Key Findings:

-  As in previous years most Americans, regardless of race, income, or education, believe that they have either achieved the American Dream or are on their way to achieving it. And the trend shows that fewer people believe the American Dream is out of reach, coming down to only 18% from 24% in 2020 and 20% in 2021.

-  Most Americans regard living better and fuller lives—rather than simply becoming wealthy—as essential in achieving the American Dream. When asked about how essential different issues associated with the American Dream are, freedom of choice in how to live and having a good family life ranked at the top with becoming wealthy as the issue least considered as essential. This has been a consistent finding since we started the survey.

-  Most Americans, and especially blacks, believe they have more opportunities than their parents. And most Americans think their children will have the same or more opportunities than they did, not fewer. In terms of changes from previous years we have seen an improvement where more people believe that both themselves and their children will have more opportunities, and less people responding that either themselves or their children will have fewer opportunities.

-  Most Americans, to the tune of three out of four Americans—and regardless of age, race, education, and income—feel proud to be American.

-  Despite the encouraging news around the American Dream, opportunity, and pride in being American, when asked if they feel optimistic about the future of the country, most people say that they feel more pessimistic than optimistic. However, there is more than meets the eye, as the results (at least by race) are a bit more nuanced. Whites are the most pessimistic, 65%; whereas Hispanics are just slightly more pessimistic than optimistic, 53%. Asian Americans are more evenly divided, and blacks are more optimistic to the tune of 64%.

THE AMERICAN DREAM IS ALIVE AND WELL

One of the most direct ways to think about the state and health of the American Dream is just to analyze what people think about the American Dream. Our survey simply asks the representative sample of people if they have achieved the American Dream, are on their way to achieving it, or if they believe the American Dream is out of reach.

Once again, our survey shows encouraging results in this question. As summarized in Table 1, eight in ten Americans believe that they have either achieved or are on their way to achieving the American Dream. Only 18% of people report that they believe the American Dream is out of reach.

In a somewhat obvious conclusion, people from older age groups are the ones that report the most as having achieved the American Dream as they have had more time to pursue it. And people with higher incomes tend to report the same.

When it comes to race, more whites report that they achieved the American Dream than other races. However, for all other races, it is not the case that they believe that the American Dream is out of reach. Most people in all groups report that they are on their way to achieving the American Dream and don't believe that their pursuit is done or that the dream is out of reach.

Contrary to what we hear in the media or from the “expert” class, the American Dream continues to be alive and well in the hearts and minds of people. It is important to notice that people understand that the American Dream is as much an end goal as a journey and pursuit. It has never been an assurance. Americans pursue life, liberty, and happiness as much as they pursue the American Dream.

**Table 1 | TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU BELIEVE YOUR FAMILY HAS ACHIEVED THE AMERICAN DREAM?
WOULD YOU SAY ...?**

	Has Already Achieved it	On Way to Achieving it	It is Out of Reach
Total	30%	50%	18%
18-29	19%	56%	22%
30-44	21%	55%	23%
45-59	34%	50%	15%
60+	42%	43%	14%
No HS diploma	17%	56%	20%
HS grad or equivalent	25%	51%	23%
Some college/AA	27%	53%	19%
BA+	41%	46%	12%
White, NH	36%	45%	18%
Black, NH	16%	61%	19%
Hispanic	25%	57%	16%
Other/2+, NH	21%	57%	17%
<\$30k	17%	49%	30%
\$30k-<\$60k	24%	53%	22%
\$60k-<\$100k	29%	54%	15%
\$100k+	47%	45%	7%

Note: Results for “Did not respond” or skipped questions are not included

Trend-wise we see that even though the percentage of people who say they have already achieved their dream is fluctuating, in total more people overwhelmingly say that they have either achieved the American Dream or are on their way to achieving it. However, we see a downward trend in terms of how many people believe the American Dream is out of reach, which illustrates a more positive outlook.

Table 2 | ANNUAL COMPARISON: TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU BELIEVE YOUR FAMILY HAS ACHIEVED THE AMERICAN DREAM? WOULD YOU SAY ...?

	Has Already Achieved it	On Way to Achieving it	It is Out of Reach
2022	30%	50%	18%
2021	34%	45%	20%
2020	29%	45%	24%

THE AMERICAN DREAM IS ABOUT MORE THAN JUST ECONOMIC WEALTH

The American Dream is constantly subject to caricatures. If it is not a negative perception about the American Dream being in decline—which is a myth we dispelled in the first question—the American Dream is accused of only being associated with pursuit of material goods or a material representation like owning a house or having the car of your dreams.

One constant throughout our survey in the last three years is what people associate with being essential to the American Dream. More people continue to believe and say that when we talk about the American Dream, freedom of choice in how to live and having a good family life are both deemed essential. Some people still view having a good retirement, owning a house, and having a successful career as essential to the dream, but not as many people think about those as essential as they do the former two elements.

Having a fuller life continues to be a common theme when discussing the American Dream. The national ethos of the American Dream is more holistic and encompassing than we might think. And in that diversity of subjective views of what could represent fuller lives, like freedom of choice in how to live and having good family lives (whatever that might mean to people), lies a strength of the American experience that can unify us as a nation.

Table 3 | HOW ESSENTIAL DO YOU THINK EACH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS IS TO YOUR OWN VIEW OF THE AMERICAN DREAM?

	Essential	Important but Not Essential	Not Important
Freedom of choice in how to live	83%	15%	1%
Have a good family life	79%	19%	2%
Retire comfortably	72%	26%	2%
Own a home	51%	44%	5%
Have a successful career	41%	53%	5%
Make valuable contributions to community	36%	57%	7%
Become wealthy	15%	56%	29%

Note: Results for “Did not respond” or skipped are not included

Of those who considered various components essential, it is interesting to analyze some of the subgroups and key characteristics in more detail. In Table 4 we provide more detail.

Table 4 | HOW ESSENTIAL DO YOU THINK EACH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS IS TO YOUR OWN VIEW OF THE AMERICAN DREAM?

	Freedom of Choice in How to Live	Have a Good Family Life	Retire Comfortably	Own a Home	Have a Successful Career	Make Valuable Contributions to Community	Become Wealthy
Total	83%	79%	72%	51%	41%	36%	15%
18–29	83%	73%	73%	67%	56%	35%	29%
30–44	81%	80%	71%	52%	41%	37%	17%
45–59	86%	81%	70%	46%	38%	37%	10%
60+	83%	79%	72%	43%	34%	35%	7%
No HS diploma	83%	68%	69%	62%	52%	33%	33%
HS grad or equivalent	78%	79%	70%	54%	41%	30%	14%
Some college/AA	85%	80%	70%	51%	39%	32%	15%
BA+	86%	80%	75%	45%	41%	44%	10%
White, NH	84%	79%	71%	45%	35%	33%	8%
Black, NH	79%	79%	72%	63%	59%	50%	32%
Hispanic	81%	80%	72%	62%	46%	34%	23%
Other/2+, NH	89%	74%	74%	57%	54%	39%	21%
<\$30k	76%	71%	66%	55%	45%	36%	19%
\$30k–<\$60k	85%	81%	71%	50%	38%	36%	12%
\$60k–<\$100k	83%	78%	72%	49%	42%	30%	15%
\$100k+	88%	83%	76%	51%	40%	43%	13%

Note: Results for “Did not respond” or skipped questions are not included

Table 5 shows the comparisons during the last three years on what people consider as essential to the American Dream. We don’t see a lot of change, but the bigger responses remain. The larger trends and responses remain.

Table 5 | ANNUAL COMPARISON: HOW ESSENTIAL DO YOU THINK EACH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS IS TO YOUR OWN VIEW OF THE AMERICAN DREAM?

	Freedom of Choice in How to Live	Have a Good Family Life	Retire Comfortably	Own a Home	Have a Successful Career	Make Valuable Contributions to Community	Become Wealthy
2022	83%	79%	72%	51%	41%	36%	15%
2021	85%	80%	65%	46%	44%	35%	10%
2020	82%	81%	71%	49%	45%	38%	13%

DO WE HAVE MORE OPPORTUNITIES?

When asked about the American Dream and what is the promise of America, “the land of opportunity” is one of the most common phrases people use. Despite many challenges in securing equal opportunity to all throughout history, the American Dream still has, as one of its bedrock foundations, the pursuit and supply of more opportunities for more people.

As our 2021 edition of the survey showed, the majority of people valued equality of opportunity more than equality of outcome. And the American Dream is an invitation and a promise of more opportunity. So besides asking people if they believe in the American Dream, we asked if they felt they have more opportunities than previous generations. Table 6 shows the results.

Table 6 | RELATIVE TO THE OPPORTUNITIES YOUR PARENTS HAD, HOW DO YOU VIEW YOUR OWN OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESS? DO YOU FEEL YOU HAVE...?

	More Opportunities	About the same Opportunities	Fewer Opportunities
Total	55%	32%	12%
18–29	44%	40%	14%
30–44	44%	38%	18%
45–59	55%	32%	13%
60+	72%	22%	6%
No HS diploma	50%	38%	6%
HS grad or equivalent	52%	35%	13%
Some college/AA	49%	35%	16%
BA+	63%	26%	10%
White, NH	53%	33%	14%
Black, NH	63%	28%	8%
Hispanic	53%	34%	13%
Other/2+, NH	61%	28%	6%
<\$30k	46%	38%	16%
\$30k–<\$60k	54%	31%	15%
\$60k–<\$100k	58%	29%	12%
\$100k+	60%	31%	8%

Note: Results for “Did not respond” or skipped questions are not included

Most people across, age, race, and education believe they have more or about the same opportunities as their parents. Across age groups we see that older generations believe more that they have/had more opportunities than their parents did. And even though younger generations still believe they have more opportunities than their parents, it is not as pronounced as older generations.

It is interesting to highlight that blacks and other ethnicities (which usually refers to Asian Americans) are the groups that report the highest number of people who feel they have more opportunities than their parents and the lowest percentage of people who think they have fewer opportunities.

In terms of trends, in Table 7 we see an interesting finding in the last three years. Despite a challenging economic environment, people believe they have more opportunities; and fewer people in the last year reported having fewer opportunities, coming down from 16% to 12%.

Table 7 | ANNUAL COMPARISON: RELATIVE TO THE OPPORTUNITIES YOUR PARENTS HAD, HOW DO YOU VIEW YOUR OWN OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESS? DO YOU FEEL YOU HAVE...?

	More Opportunities	About the Same Opportunities	Fewer Opportunities
2022	55%	32%	12%
2021	50%	33%	16%
2020	52%	33%	15%

And how do people believe that future generations will fare? Table 8 shows the data. Most people and especially blacks by a wide margin, believe their kids will have more opportunities. Very few people across age, education, race, and income believe their children will have fewer opportunities. So again, the American Dream is alive and well, and people believe they will continue to have more opportunities in the future.

In Table 9 we see a trend towards more people thinking their children will have more opportunities and fewer people believing their kids will have fewer opportunities. This optimistic vision of the future could become self-fulfilling, but it is important that more people become aware of the data so they can internalize it and instill it into their peers and future generations.

Table 8 | RELATIVE TO YOUR OWN OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESS, HOW DO YOU VIEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUR CHILDREN? DO YOU FEEL YOUR CHILDREN ARE...?

	Likely to Have More Opportunities	Likely to Have About the Same Amount of Opportunities	Likely to Have Fewer Opportunities	No Children
Total	41%	26%	16%	16%
18-29	35%	29%	14%	22%
30-44	38%	29%	13%	21%
45-59	41%	27%	20%	11%
60+	48%	22%	17%	13%
No HS diploma	46%	26%	10%	17%
HS grad or equivalent	46%	25%	16%	12%
Some college/AA	41%	22%	18%	18%
BA+	36%	29%	17%	18%

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White, NH	35%	28%	19%	18%
Black, NH	63%	20%	5%	11%
Hispanic	46%	23%	18%	13%
Other/2+, NH	48%	22%	11%	19%
<\$30k	48%	20%	13%	19%
\$30k–<\$60k	44%	24%	16%	15%
\$60k–<\$100k	41%	27%	16%	16%
\$100k+	34%	32%	19%	15%

Note: Results for “Did not respond” or skipped questions are not included

Table 9 | ANNUAL COMPARISON: RELATIVE TO YOUR OWN OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESS, HOW DO YOU VIEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUR CHILDREN? DO YOU FEEL YOUR CHILDREN ARE...?

	Likely to Have More Opportunities	Likely to Have About the Same Amount of Opportunities	Likely to Have Fewer Opportunities	No Children
2022	41%	26%	16%	16%
2021	35%	27%	19%	18%
2020	35%	26%	18%	20%

AMERICAN PATRIOTISM AND OPTIMISM

Recent research into patriotism by Clay Routledge shows that when people express feeling patriotic about their country, and more specifically the United States, it promotes a more optimistic vision of the future and promotes more support for human progress and fulfillment. Being such an important part of the human flourishing experience in the United States and to celebrate the Fourth of July we asked people if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “I am proud to be American.”

Despite the current polarization and the many continuing challenges in the country, 75% of people, or three in four Americans, are proud to be American. This is true across age, race, income, and education levels with the more pronounced differences being across age, where older generations report more pride in being American—9 in 10 or 8 in 10, depending on the age group. And younger generations only reporting between 5 and 6 people out of 10 being proud.

Even though the American Dream is alive and well and people still believe that this is the land of opportunity and will remain so for their kids, there are certainly many challenges. The American Dream is a vision statement that is continually being fulfilled and improved. But because challenges remain as a nation, we must regularly face those challenges and try to improve on them. However, besides acknowledging and facing those problems, we have to believe that we can address them, and have an optimistic vision of that future. As such, we thought it was important to ask how people felt about the future of America. Table 11 show the result of the question if people are more optimistic or pessimistic about the future of America.

**Table 10 | TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT?
I AM PROUD TO BE AMERICAN**

	Totally Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Totally Disagree
Total	43%	33%	15%	8%
18-29	25%	32%	24%	16%
30-44	31%	38%	21%	10%
45-59	50%	32%	12%	6%
60+	60%	29%	8%	2%
No HS diploma	33%	21%	20%	19%
HS grad or equivalent	51%	29%	14%	6%
Some college/AA	47%	33%	15%	5%
BA+	37%	39%	16%	7%
White, NH	47%	32%	14%	6%
Black, NH	37%	35%	19%	8%
Hispanic	40%	30%	18%	11%
Other/2+, NH	35%	39%	13%	8%
<\$30k	44%	31%	14%	10%
\$30k-<\$60k	43%	34%	14%	9%
\$60k-<\$100k	45%	32%	15%	6%
\$100k+	42%	32%	19%	6%

Note: Results for “Did not respond” or skipped questions are not included

Despite the encouraging news around the American Dream, opportunity, and pride in being American, when asked if they feel optimistic about the future of the country, most people say that they feel more pessimistic than optimistic. However, the results are even more interesting when investigated more closely. Whites are the most pessimistic, 65%; whereas Hispanics are just slightly more pessimistic than optimistic, 53%. Asian Americans are more evenly divided, and blacks are actually more optimistic to the tune of 64%.

By income, there are also some interesting results with the poorest among us (less than \$30,000 of income per year) being divided evenly among pessimists and optimists. However, people earning more than that, in every other income bracket, are more pessimistic, 62% on average.

Table 11 | ARE YOU GENERALLY OPTIMISTIC OR PESSIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE UNITED STATES?

	Very Optimistic	Somewhat Optimistic	Somewhat Pessimistic	Very Pessimistic
Total	7%	35%	43%	15%
18–29	6%	31%	44%	17%
30–44	6%	32%	44%	17%
45–59	7%	35%	42%	15%
60+	8%	40%	40%	11%
No HS diploma	9%	36%	42%	13%
HS grad or equivalent	9%	34%	39%	16%
Some college/AA	8%	35%	43%	13%
BA+	4%	35%	45%	15%
White, NH	4%	31%	48%	17%
Black, NH	16%	48%	25%	9%
Hispanic	8%	39%	38%	15%
Other/2+, NH	11%	38%	40%	10%
<\$30k	14%	35%	35%	14%
\$30k–<\$60k	6%	39%	38%	16%
\$60k–<\$100k	6%	31%	50%	12%
\$100k+	4%	34%	46%	16%

Note: Results for “Did not respond” or skipped questions are not included

CONCLUSIONS

Despite many challenges, or maybe precisely because of them and their ability to be overcome, people remain positive and upbeat about the American Dream. More people continue to think that they have either achieved the American Dream or are on their way to achieving it than people who think the dream is out of reach. More people think they have had more opportunities than their parents and that their kids will have more opportunities than they have. Most people are also proud to be American.

Because people today are more pessimistic about the future of America, the need to coalesce around the ethos of the American Dream and pride in America is more important than ever. If more Americans knew about the positive news regarding the health of the American Dream and the nation's continued status as the land of opportunity, perhaps they would feel more hopeful about the prospects for the country.

This is extremely relevant because the belief in the American Dream can lead us to aspire, pursue, and aim for much better, richer, and fuller lives both for current and future generations. It is the difference between adopting an attitude oriented towards more achievement—conquering new frontiers in innovation and also civil rights—instead of adopting a negative and nihilistic vision of the future and our nation that strips away individual agency as a mechanism to improve the world around us.

The ideal of the American Dream has shaped our culture and will continue to play a central role in our national history. But instead of building new caricatures of it or declaring the American Dream dead on arrival—almost a national sport among critics of this ever-improving experiment—it can help unite the country and open new opportunities for many more people. To address the many real challenges the nation still faces and further new challenges that will arise, the ethos and promise of the American Dream and the vision statement it represents need to continue leading us towards a better future.



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Growing up around the world in Uruguay, Israel, Ecuador, and Bolivia, Gonzalo saw poverty firsthand and wondered how to get individuals on the path to prosperity. After earning his bachelor's degree in economics at the Catholic University of Bolivia and his master's in economics from George Mason University, he began his life's work of reducing poverty. This led Gonzalo to found the Archbridge Institute, an organization dedicated to lifting barriers to human flourishing.

While forming the idea to start the Archbridge Institute, Gonzalo Schwarz was working as the Director of Strategic Initiatives at Atlas Network. In his free time, Gonzalo loves to spend time with his two kids, read, and watch his favorite sport fútbol, the appropriate name for soccer.



LIFTING BARRIERS. LIFTING LIVES.

Increasing opportunities for social mobility and human flourishing is the defining challenge of our time. Through rigorous academic research, sound public policy solutions, and reviving the spirit of entrepreneurship, the Archbridge Institute works to empower individuals to achieve better, richer, and fuller lives by identifying and removing the barriers that constrain their potential. The Archbridge Institute is a non-partisan, independent, 501(c)(3) public policy think tank.