

The American Dream Is Alive and Well

Most people in this country say that they are living it—but what they mean by the phrase might surprise you

By: Samuel J. Abrams

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

- 1 I am pleased to report that the American dream is alive and well for an overwhelming majority of Americans.
- 2 This claim might sound far-fetched given the cultural climate in the United States today. Especially since President Trump took office, hardly a day goes by without a fresh tale of economic anxiety, political disunity or social struggle. Opportunities to achieve material success and social mobility through hard, honest work—which many people, including me, have assumed to be the core idea of the American dream—appear to be diminishing.
- 3 But Americans, it turns out, have something else in mind when they talk about the American dream. And they believe that they are living it.
- 4 Last year the American Enterprise Institute and I joined forces with the research center NORC at the University of Chicago and surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,411 Americans about their attitudes toward community and society. The center is renowned for offering "deep" samples of Americans, not just random ones, so that researchers can be confident that they are reaching Americans in all walks of life: rural, urban, exurban and so on. Our findings were released on Tuesday as an American Enterprise Institute report.
- 5 What our survey found about the American dream came as a surprise to me. When Americans were asked what makes the American dream a reality, they did not select as essential factors becoming wealthy, owning a home or having a successful career. Instead, 85 percent indicated that "to have freedom of choice in how to live" was essential to achieving the American dream. In addition, 83 percent indicated that "a good family life" was essential.
- 6 The "traditional" factors (at least as I had understood them) were seen as less important. Only 16 percent said that to achieve the American dream, they believed it was essential to "become wealthy," only 45 percent said it was essential "to have a better quality of life than your parents," and just 49 percent said that "having a successful career" was key.

- 7 This pattern—seeing the American dream as more about community and individuality than material success and social mobility—appeared across demographic and political categories. In the case of political party affiliation, for example, 84 percent of Republicans and independents said having freedom was essential to the American dream, as did 88 percent of Democrats; less than 20 percent of those in either party held that becoming wealthy was essential.
- 8 The data also show that most Americans believe themselves to be achieving this version of the American dream, with 41 percent reporting that their families are already living the American dream and another 41 percent reporting that they are well on the way to doing so. Only 18 percent took the position that the American dream was out of reach for them.
- 9 Collectively, 82 percent of Americans said they were optimistic about their future, and there was a fairly uniform positive outlook across the nation. Factors such as region, urbanity, partisanship and housing type (such as a single-family detached home versus an apartment) barely affected these patterns, with all groups hovering around 80 percent. Even race and ethnicity, which are regularly cited as key factors in thwarting upward mobility, corresponded to no real differences in outlook: Eighty-one percent of non-Hispanic whites; 80 percent of blacks, Hispanics and those of mixed race; and 85 percent of those with Asian heritage said that they had achieved or were on their way to achieving the American dream.
- 10 Income did make a difference, with 72 percent of those earning under \$35,000 expressing a positive outlook about the American dream, compared with 90 percent of those earning over \$100,000—but those numbers are still overwhelmingly positive. Another difference was generational. Eighty-three percent of baby boomers, 80 percent of Gen Xers and 81 percent of millennials were optimistic about the American dream. But those in Gen Z—Americans born in 1997 or later—were notably less optimistic at 73 percent.
- 11 In general, though, the data are clear: Individuality and family, not wealth and real estate, are what Americans seek and believe they are finding in the national "dream."
- 12 What conclusions should we draw from this research? I think the findings suggest that Americans would be well served to focus less intently on the nastiness of our partisan politics and the material temptations of our consumer culture, and to focus more on the communities they are part of and exercising their freedom to live as they wish. After all, that is what most of us seem to think is what really matters—and it's in reach for almost all of us.