

"Only in America, can a kid that's washing cars, take a giant step and reach right up and touch the stars"

Popular top 40 Hit by Jay and the Americans 1963

WHAT IS YOUR AMERICAN DREAM?

Students in FYS 01 Political Science 101
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"Think of yourself on the threshold of unparalleled success. A whole clear glorious life lies before you. Achieve! Achieve!" Andrew Carnegie

Background

The American Dream is a key component of the popular ideology that gives legitimacy to our political system. It is what ordinary people work for as an expression of their belief in that system. References to the American Dream are a constant in American culture and political discourse but, in the face of the current economic difficulties, do people still believe in it?



Moreover, is our peer group (18 to 22 years old) more optimistic about the promise of the American dream than the people in our parent's generation? We weren't sure what we would find out so we conducted some exploratory research to check this out.

Literature

We started with a poll conducted by the Pew Economic Mobility Project in May of 2011 (as an update to its 2009 poll) to assess the public's perceptions of economic mobility over the course of the Great Recession that began in 2008.

Here are some of their key conclusions:

- Americans continue to remain optimistic about the promise of the American Dream with 68% believing that they have achieved or will achieve the American Dream.
- But, Americans overwhelmingly define the American Dream in terms of financial stability (85%) over upward mobility (13%).
- And, despite this continued optimism, parents have grown increasingly pessimistic about their children's future economic chances. The percentage of adults who believe that their children will attain a higher standard of living than they themselves currently enjoy has dropped from 62% in 2009 to 47% as of May of 2011.



What did we do?

We decided to explore the findings of this poll as a way of initiating a conversation with our peers and with important adults in our life. We wanted to get a feel for what people in our immediate circle were thinking and, through this experience, to also engage with ourselves. We asked a series of questions about the American Dream that we drew up in class. We also practiced a little bit with follow up questions.

Conclusion 1

The economy has provoked many of our respondents to take a more critical stance towards the promise of the American Dream that, contrary to the conclusions of the Pew study, point to an undercurrent of pessimism.

Question 1:

Given the economic problems we are facing here and around the world, do you think the promise of the American Dream is sustainable? Do you think that people's expectations of the American Dream are reasonable looking into the future? Why or why not?



Answers:

Rafael (Age 18): "Not everybody. Most people's dreams are too big for our economy. People aspire to be the next Bill Gates but it isn't happening."

Daryl (Friend): I don't know. Hopefully the economy is going to be better by the time I get out of college."

Rafael (Age 18): "Not everybody. Most people's dreams are too big for our economy. People aspire to be the next Bill Gates but it isn't happening."

Daryl (Friend): I don't know. Hopefully the economy is going to be better by the time I get out of college."

David (Age 21): "With the economic problems we face today I think the dream can push more people to getting things done. Yes, the future is what keeps them going, hoping for a better future."

Dennis (Age 23): "People these days are not looking for the American Dream because the American Dream refers to a fairy living in a house and living happily ever after. Houses are expensive these days."

Vanessa (Age 23): "I think the American Dream is still there. It's going to be harder to accomplish everything you want from life. I think people's expectations of the American Dream are the same but people are going to have to struggle more to get there."

George (Age 28): "Most people these days have a dream with no plan."

Mary (Parent Age 53): The American Dream is not sustainable. People are losing jobs and hope."

Conclusion 2

On concrete questions about the American Dream, the responses reflect our respondent's bitterness with everyday experiences.

Question 2:

Even though it may seem like a smaller local issue, how would you connect MTA fare hikes and service changes with the American Dream?

Answers:

David (Age 21): "I hate it when they raise the MTA fares; that's more money I don't have being spent on getting to work. If they keep up raising tolls and gas many people will give up on their dreams."

Vanessa (Age 23): I think the MTA fare hikes and service changes are making it harder for people to live. People are losing their jobs and their income is not going up, but everything else is. My parents always say, OMG, its expensive. I remember when it used to be..."

George (Age 28): "I heard it cost a quarter back in the day. You tell me."

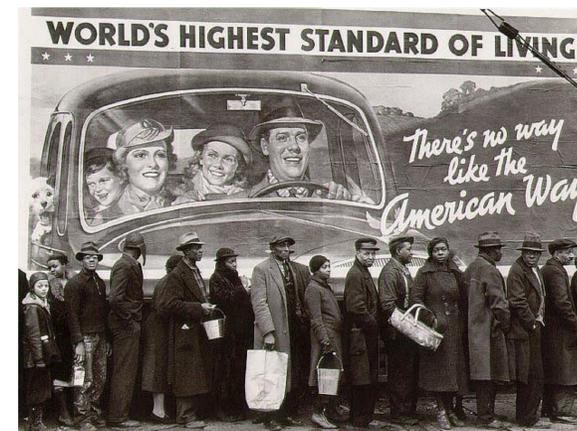
Myrna (Age 47): "That's not part of the American Dream! They're always raising the prices, everything goes up, up up up, and our salary stays the same. From one corner to the next is almost three dollars and if and if you have to take it twice a day and five times a week, hello do the math that's about \$1000 a year."

Mrs. Labake: "The MTA buys out of people's pocket. It really affects a lot of people and the service is very poor despite the fare increase."

Mr. David: "I pay \$104 monthly to pay to buy a metro card, even the price of gas is ridiculous. The increase has limited my budget and how I spend my money. Every month I worry about \$104."

Richard (Parent Age 52): The raises of the MTA hikes are a joke. I disagree with the raises because the American Dream can't be lived when people are losing money and jobs left and right."

Nicholas (Dad): "Everything is so expensive nowadays. You can make more money but if everything keeps going up in price then there's no point. Tolls are outrageous and gas is too high."



Conclusion 3

The theme of financial security is pervasive in our responses across generations. We weren't, however, able to look at differences across income groups.

Question 3:

What does the idea of the American Dream mean to you? What are some things you would like to accomplish to consider your life a success?

Answers:

Cheyenne (Age 18): "I can be what I wanna be; and be financially secure."

Vanessa (Age 23): "The idea of the American Dream to me means having everything you want. I would love to start and finish school and get my life career started. I would also like to buy a house or buy an apartment and settle down and start a family."

Christopher (Age 24): "The American Dream is having a good job, working hard, always having stability financially and having a nice place to live and being able to pay for it as well as pay for all your other bills at the same time."

Mary (Parent: Age 53): "The American Dream to me is living a successful life, having a good education, getting a good job, living in a good house and building a family."

Luis (Age 57): The American Dream to me is working hard and when you retire you have something to look forward to and enjoy in this country."

Grandma: "To create a better quality of life for my children and grandchildren and to give them a broad horizon." Mrs. Labake: "Achieving in life, living a good life. Buying a house and driving a nice car."



So what did we get out of this?

For starters we got the experience, itself, of doing these interviews and the push to think for ourselves about the American Dream; about what we want for ourselves and what it will take to get it and also about our level of expectation.

But this is also about looking into something like a social scientist. Even though the poll numbers bore out certain conclusions that were made by the researchers at the Economic Mobility Project, there's always more there than meets the eye if you look behind the numbers like we did with our interviews. Quantitative research (polling and numbers and stuff like that) should always be supplemented with more up close and personal qualitative research.