



New American Dream Survey Report September 2004

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New American Dream Poll Major Findings

This summary provides the major findings from a Census-balanced and nationally representative poll of 1,269 American adults ages 18 years of age and older. The “New American Dream Poll” was conducted by Widmeyer Communications of Washington, D.C. for the Center for a New American Dream. The margin of error for the study is +/- 2.7%.

The major **findings** of the study are:

1. Americans say our society’s priorities are “out of whack,” with an overwhelming majority agreeing that as a society we are too focused on working and making money and not enough on family and community.
2. The current definition of the American Dream does not adequately reflect the values Americans consider important. A re-definition of the American Dream is needed that places more importance on values that reflect quality of life and less importance on consuming, wealth, and national power.
3. Most believe that the American Dream is getting harder to achieve and that few Americans will ever realize it. Americans point to two powerful trends that are impeding the American Dream: the high cost of healthcare, housing and making ends meet; and excessive materialism and rising debt.
4. Americans express concern about the excessive materialism of our culture and recognize that it has serious consequences for our society, the environment and the world at large. They also worry about its impact on our children. Americans feel their lives are out of balance and many say they would be more satisfied if they had less stress and had more time with family and friends.
5. Americans say that our lifestyle harms the global environment by producing too much waste and depleting natural resources. Most Americans recognize that we need to make changes in our daily lives and a significant percentage say they already have.
6. Large majorities of Americans say they are willing to take action in their personal lives to reduce consumption and materialism. In fact, a large plurality of Americans state they are even willing to take difficult steps, such as driving less.
7. Nearly half of all Americans say they have made VOLUNTARY changes in their lives that resulted in making less money. These Americans are happy with the changes they made and say that the major motivations for making less money are reducing stress, striking a balance in their lives, and having more free time.

1. Americans say our society's priorities are "out of whack," with an overwhelming majority agreeing that as a society, we are too focused on working and making money and not enough on family and community.

Americans express uncertainty about the direction the country is moving in and question the country's priorities.

- More than 4 in 5 Americans (83%) do not believe the country is focused on the right priorities.
- More than 4 in 5 Americans (85%) say that our society's priorities are out of whack.

Americans believe too much priority is placed on work and making money, and not enough on family and community. Americans want more of what really matters in life.

- Nearly all Americans (93%) agree -- more than half agree strongly (52%) -- that Americans are too focused on working and making money and not enough on family and community.
- More than 4 in 5 Americans (83%) agree that they wish they had more of what really matters in life.

What Americans say would make them more satisfied with their lives is less stress, more time to spend with friends, and being more active in their communities, NOT more things.

- A majority of Americans say that spending more time with family and friends (53%) and having less stress in their lives (52%) would make them much more satisfied with their lives.
- Less than 3 in 10 say that having a bigger house or apartment (29%) or nicer things (16%) would make them much more satisfied.

2. **The current definition of the American Dream does not adequately reflect the values Americans consider important. A re-definition of the American Dream is needed that places more importance on values that reflect quality of life and less importance on consuming, wealth and national power.**

American Dream Does Reflect Values Important to Americans

In the poll, respondents were read a list of words and phrases and then asked two questions that related to the concept of the American Dream:

- How well does each concept (word or statement) describe the American Dream?; and
- How important should each concept be as part of *your* American Dream?

As the table below illustrates, Americans believe that freedom, happiness, and family best describe the current definition of the American Dream, and these are also most important to them in defining their ideal American Dream. Far fewer Americans identify financial success, the ability to consume, and achieving an affluent lifestyle as describing the American Dream. These words were also less important to Americans in defining their ideal American Dream.

Word or Phrase that Describes the American Dream <i>All figures represent the percentage of respondents who chose 8, 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale</i>	How Well It Describes Concept (%8-10)	How Important It Should Be (%8-10)	Gap
Freedom	86	93	-7
Happiness	76	90	-14
Family	75	89	-14
Personal Fulfillment	74	82	-8
Security or having all my basic needs met	73	87	-14
Equality of opportunity for all	73	88	-15
Peace	71	88	-16
Optimism	68	81	-13
Financial success	63	65	-2
Enough free time outside of work to enjoy life	69	83	-14
Strong communities	66	81	-15
Free market society	61	66	-5
Compassion for others	66	87	-21
Fair wages and taxes	65	86	-21
U.S. is recognized as the world leader	60	57	+3
Social responsibility	59	78	-19
U.S. is the most militarily powerful country	56	54	+2
To consume or buy whatever we want	55	49	-6
Absence of poverty	56	79	-23
Living in harmony with the environment	54	75	-21
Achieving an affluent or wealthy lifestyle	49	44	+5

The most noteworthy aspect of this poll finding is the gap or difference between the percentage of Americans who say each word or phrase describes the current American Dream well and the percentage who say it should be part of the American Dream. The larger the gaps, the less Americans feel that the current formulation of the American Dreams reflects what is important to them.

- For example, 90% of Americans say that happiness is a very important part of the American Dream. But only 76% say that happiness describes the current dream well. This large gap (14%) means that Americans believe that the American Dream, as it is currently defined, does not adequately reflect a value they consider important.

In the poll, respondents were also read some contrasting definitions of the American Dream and asked which one best described *their* concept of the American Dream. Overwhelmingly, Americans choose descriptions that place more emphasis on quality of life issues compared to descriptions that emphasized material achievement:

- Nearly 9 in 10 American (86%) say that *more of what matters in life* better describes their concept of the American dream than *more is better* (3%).
- More than 4 in 5 American (85%) say that *living in a fair and just society* better describes their concept of the American dream than *achieving an affluent or wealthy lifestyle* (10%).
- Nearly 3 in 5 Americans (59%) say that *working enough to have a good life* (59%) better describes their concept of the American Dream than *working hard to get ahead* (34%).
- Nine in ten Americans (90%) say *living in a country dedicated to preserving democratic values, a high quality of life and a healthy future for all* better describes their concept of the American Dream than *living in the most powerful country in the world* (5%).

3. Most believe that the American Dream is getting harder to achieve and that few Americans will ever realize it. Americans point to two powerful trends that are impeding the American Dream: the high cost of healthcare, housing and making ends meet; and excessive materialism and rising debt.

Large majorities of Americans say that it getting harder to achieve the American Dream.

- More than 3 in 5 Americans (62%) say that the American Dream is harder to achieve today compared to their parent's generation. Only 24% say it is easier.
- More than 3 in 5 Americans (64%) say that the American Dream is harder to achieve today compared to 10 years ago. Only 17% say it is easier.

Americans offer a variety of reasons why the American Dream is getting harder to achieve. The most important is that “many Americans are in debt” (76%). Other reasons cited by a majority of Americans relate to the fact that, as a society, we have lost touch with important values and priorities.

- Americans have lost touch with important values (69%);
- Too many people expect to have a good life handed to them (69%);
- It is harder to make ends meet (68%);
- We have a materialistic culture (61%);
- Government has the wrong priorities (58%);
- Current society favors the rich (54%); and
- Wages for workers are too low (51%).

Americans also offer a number of reasons why they say it is harder for the *average* American to achieve the American Dream. More Americans say that the “high costs of healthcare” (81%) and “high cost of housing” (68%) are the major factors that make it harder for the average American to achieve the American Dream. Other factors that a majority identifies as making it harder for the average American to achieve the American Dream includes:

- Outsourcing of jobs to other countries (66%);
- Taxes (63%); and
- Government spending priorities (61%).

Clearly many Americans believe that there are numerous elements of our current society that are inconsistent with the American Dream. Americans question tax breaks for the wealthy, our propensity to buy products from overseas sweatshops, and our decisions to cut safety net programs. More than half of all Americans say that the following are inconsistent with the American Dream.

- Tax breaks for wealthy Americans (67%);
- Buying products produced in overseas sweatshops (62%);
- Cutting social programs such as healthcare (62%);
- Buying now and paying later (60%);
- Being the world's largest debtor nation (59%);
- Depleting our natural resources (54%); and
- Tax breaks for corporations (54%).

Given that Americans believe that it is getting harder to achieve the American Dream, it not surprising that they also believe that fewer Americans -- including themselves -- will ever be able to achieve their idea of the American Dream.

- Only 15% say that all or most of Americans will be able to achieve their ideal of the American Dream; 50% say some and 32% say only a few.
- More than 2 in 5 Americans (42%) don't think they will be able to achieve their idea of the American Dream in their lifetime and 22% are unsure.

- 4. Americans express concern about the excessive materialism of our culture and recognize that it has serious consequences for our society as well as the environment and the world at large. They also worry about its impact on our children. Americans feel their lives are out of balance and many say they would be more satisfied if they had less stress and had more time with family and friends.**

Most Americans (88%) believe that American society is too materialistic. For example, more than 4 in 5 (81%) say that American society is too focused on shopping and spending.

What are the consequences of excessive materialism? According to Americans, they are far and wide. More than 3 in 4 Americans believe that the following are caused by or a result of American society being too materialistic.

- People living beyond their means (90%);
- People finding themselves in debt (87%);
- Overly commercialized children (80%); and
- Increased stress in their daily lives (78%).

A majority of Americans point to other negative consequences of excessive materialism:

- People working too much (58%);
- Other nations perceive us as greedy (57%);
- Lack of free time (52%); and
- Harm to the environment (52%).

One thing most Americans agree on is this: excessive materialism is causing harm to the environment.

- Three in four Americans (74%) say that excessive materialism is causing harm to the environment in this country.
- Americans recognize that the consequences of our materialism extend across our borders. Seven in 10 Americans (70%) say that excessive materialism is causing harm to the global environment.
- Nearly 3 in 4 Americans (74%) believe that the country cannot continue to use natural resources at current level without negative consequences.

Most Americans worry about the negative impact of excessive materialism on our children. They worry about advertising to children and the impact on materialism on our ability to instill positive values.

- Nearly 4 in 5 Americans (79%) believe there should be limits placed on advertising for children.
- Nearly 9 in 10 Americans (87%) say that our current consumer culture makes it harder to instill positive values in our children.

5. Americans say that our lifestyle harms the global environment by producing too much waste and depleting natural resources. Most Americans recognize that we need to make changes in our daily lives and a significant percentage say they already have.

Americans agree that the way we live produces too much waste and consumes too many resources.

- More than 9 in 10 Americans (91%) agree – 54% strongly – that the way we live produces too much waste.
- More than 8 in 10 Americans (83%) agree – 45% strongly – that the way we live consumes too many resources.

Americans also appreciate the connection between our daily actions and the impact on the global environment.

- Nearly 2 in 3 Americans (64%) agree that Americans are responsible for many of the world's environmental problems because we consume more resources and produce more waste compared to other countries.

Americans recognize that we need to make changes in our lifestyle and consumption patterns to protect the environment.

- Four in five Americans (81%) agree that protecting the environment will require most of us to make major changes in the way we live.
- Nearly 9 in 10 Americans (87%) agree – 55% strongly – that we should be more focused on recycling, conserving energy and water, and buying goods that are not over-packaged in order to protect the environment.

Nearly half or more of Americans say that there are numerous actions they can take in their daily lives – some of which require little effort – that would make a BIG difference in improving the environment.

- If we invested in cleaner and more efficient fuels and technology (69%);
- If we taught our children to be less materialistic (59%);
- If we passed and enforced tougher anti-pollution laws on industry (54%);
- If we recycled more bottles, cans and paper (53%);
- If companies reduced the amount of packaging on their products (47%); and
- If we all reduced the amount of stuff we consumed (45%).

Recognizing a problem and acting are two different things. However, most Americans (85%) say they would spend a little more for products to protect the environment and more than 2 in 5 (41%) say they have actually purchased products that cost more because they protect the environment.

6. Large majorities of Americans say they are willing to take action in their personal lives to reduce consumption and materialism. In fact, a large plurality of Americans state they are even willing to take difficult steps, such as driving less.

Many Americans say they are poised to take actions in their daily lives that would reduce consumption and materialism. Poll respondents were read a list of possible actions and asked whether each was:

- A good idea and I'm ready to do my part;
- A good idea but I'm not ready to do that yet; and
- That's not a good idea.

A large majority of Americans say they are willing and able to “do their part” and take the following actions to reduce consumption and materialism:

- Use our possessions longer instead of buying new things (77%);
- Spend less on toys for our children or grandchildren so I can spend more time with them (73%);
- Pay off all credit card balances each month and reduce my debt (73%);
- Spend less money so we can save more (67%); and
- Spend more time working with our neighbors on community service projects and less time on shopping (58%).

Conventional wisdom is that most Americans are willing to take the “easy road” but will “balk” when faced with tough choices that impact their personal lifestyle. One noteworthy result is that more than 2 in 5 Americans say they are willing to take unpopular and difficult steps to reduce consumption and materialism.

- Watch less TV than we do now (52%);
- Drive our cars less than we do now (45%); and
- Work fewer hours and spend less money (42%).

7. Nearly half of all Americans say they have made VOLUNTARY changes in their lives which resulted in making less money. These Americans are happy with the changes they made and say that the major motivations for choosing to make less money are reducing stress, striking a balance in their lives, and having more free time.

Over the past 5 years, nearly half of Americans (49%) say that they have voluntarily made changes in their life which resulted in making less money.

What kinds of changes have Americans who are downshifting made? One in three Americans (33%) say they have “quit working outside the home” and more than 1 in 4 say they have either changed to a lower paying job (28%) or reduced their work hours (26%).

- Quit working outside the home (33%);
- Changed to a lower paying job (28%);
- Reduced work hours (26%);
- Reduced the number of jobs you hold (16%); and
- Moved (16%).

A desire to reduce stress, achieve balance, and have more time is the major reasons 1 in 2 Americans willingly accept less money.

- Wanted a less stressful life (47%);
- Wanted a more balanced life (36%);
- Wanted more time (33%);
- Wanted more meaning or satisfying work (30%); and
- Wanted to spend more time caring for my children (27%).

Americans who have down-shifted say there are prices to pay for accepting less money. Six in ten Americans (60%) are happy about the change even if they admit they miss the extra income. Only 1 in 10 (10%) are unhappy about the change.

- I'm happy about the change and I don't miss the extra income much (23%).
- I'm happy about the change, but I miss the extra income (37%).
- Losing the income was a real hardship, but I'm still happy about the change (23%).
- I'm unhappy about the change (10%).

Interestingly, a majority of Americans (53%) would be willing to give up one day's pay per week in exchange for one day off per week to spend more time with family and friends.



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