

The American Dream

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The [American Dream](#) is often referred to in literature and film and is a ubiquitous theme in the American consciousness. The idea is that [success](#) can be attained through hard work no matter one's circumstances. The concept stems from a promise in the Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." In other words, Americans believe that all people deserve the opportunity to work toward their own happiness, and no person or country should be able to take that right away. In America, people are ideally free to pursue any level of success they can achieve: This is the American Dream.

America does not have an uncompromising class system as is found in some countries. People are not destined to remain at one status for their entire lives based on factors over which they have no control, such as ancestry. This ideal has appealed to immigrants who have moved to the [United States](#) to pursue success.

Our Founding Fathers

The writers of the Declaration of Independence made clear in this historic document that all citizens of the United States inherently hold certain rights. First, all citizens are created equal. No background provides some with more rights than others. Second, all people have certain rights that cannot be taken away by their leaders or fellow citizens. These rights include liberty, or [freedom](#), to pursue whatever it is in life that they believe will bring happiness.

For many of the immigrants who flocked to the United States when the country was new, the American Dream meant the possibility of becoming a landowner—an objective that was all but impossible in their home countries. America was founded by many common people who wanted better lives for their families—a measure of success meager compared to how some define it today. The Revolutionary War was spurred by common citizens who simply wanted the same rights as their more affluent countrymen, whose success often came by virtue of birth rather than achievement.

Abraham Lincoln: The American Dream in Action

Abraham Lincoln is often cited as a good example of someone who achieved the American Dream. Born into a poor, undistinguished country family in Kentucky in 1809, Lincoln yearned for a better life. He performed manual farm labor and worked in a store. Yet Lincoln managed to educate himself and worked hard to be able to travel throughout the United States, where he saw how people across the young country lived.

On a trip to the South, Lincoln witnessed the practice of [slavery](#) for the first time. He served as a captain in the Black Hawk War and was elected to the Illinois legislature. Through hard work and a strong dedication to learning, Lincoln grew up to become the sixteenth [president of the United States](#). As president, he was instrumental in ending slavery in the United States while also keeping the states united following the [Civil War](#). He helped the country greatly improve itself during his term of service, and has gone down in history as one of the finest American presidents.

The American Dream in Pop Culture

The American Dream features prominently in literature. Several classic American novels address the struggle and consequences involved in pursuing the American Dream, and many artists have sought to define and redefine it. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's [The Great Gatsby](#), a young, idealistic dream-seeker tells the story of Gatsby, who rose from nothing to achieve tremendous success. His [wealth](#) and status, however, meant little to some members of society. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the main characters embark on a drug-fueled quest to locate the true meaning of the American Dream. In fact, the subtitle of Hunter S. Thompson's famous novel is *A Savage Journey into the Heart of the American Dream*. The main character of the [American drama](#) [Death of a Salesman](#) by Arthur Miller also claims to be searching for the American Dream—something he never finds. The playwright challenges the myth of [materialism](#) in the postwar economy. [American literature](#) sends a clear message: As America grew older, its citizens were faced with more complex definitions of the type of happiness they should be pursuing.

The Current State of the American Dream

Many people argue that the American Dream is no longer attainable given the state of the country's economy and society. Just scraping by is not the American Dream to most. Rising above one's circumstances through hard work alone has become increasingly difficult. For instance, some believe they must have the financial resources to pay for their children to attend the best schools if they want them to be successful—a notion that seems to restrict the American Dream to the wealthy upper classes. Some say socializing in the right circles and knowing the right people are necessary to get good jobs or enter the political arena. Because some people believe the country has reverted to an unfair class system, headlines and editorials at times claim that the American Dream is dead.

Furthermore, several critics argue that the American Dream has morphed into something very different from what the Founding Fathers imagined. Today, many Americans clamor for fame and money instead of land, [home ownership](#), and better lives for their children. The American Dream has come to symbolize tremendous, one-in-a-million success—something very few people can actually attain. With this shifting definition, the American Dream has become something that grows more and more elusive with each year.

The Elusive Dream

Many citizens argue about the exact definition of “happiness” in the American Dream. For some, it is

material wealth. For others, it is freedom from the unfair treatment they received in the land of their birth. Some critics claim the American Dream is something that can never be attained because it creates in America's citizens a feeling that there is always more to be gained. Some believe that class in the United States is now determined by wealth, which is itself often determined by education. If achieving the best education is the means to success, wealth is again necessary to succeed.

As for improving the lives of the next generation, research has found little upward mobility, as the chasm between the rich and poor has grown. Forty-eight percent of millennials (those aged eighteen to twenty-nine) in a 2015 survey for the *Washington Post* said that the American Dream is dead. Millennials believe that it has become harder for them to get ahead, and that surpassing their parents' success has become much more difficult as the wealth gap has widened.

A study by the Pew Research Center has determined that the middle class, the segment of the population that drives the American Dream, has been shrinking steadily over the past four decades. The study found that the middle class is no longer America's economic majority; it is exceeded by the number of people in the economic tiers above and below it. In 2015, 120.8 million adults were in middle-income households, while 121.3 million were in upper- and lower-income households combined. The center found that the wealth gap between middle- and upper-income families increased sharply in the past thirty to forty years. Upper-income families, which had three times as much wealth as middle-income families in 1983, had seven times the amount of wealth of middle-income families by 2013.

Even though households in all income tiers saw gains in income from 1970 to 2014, the gains for the upper-income households surpassed that of the middle and lower tiers. Upper-income families more than doubled their wealth from 1983 to 2013, from \$323,402 to \$650,074, despite the economic recession, which significantly hurt lower- and middle-income families. Median wealth for middle-income families fell from \$161,050 in 2007 to \$98,000 in 2013. This created a drastic wealth gap between upper- and middle-income families that has left many people wondering if attaining the American Dream is even possible anymore.

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