

In March 2011, the Economic Mobility Project updated its 2009 national poll to reassess public perceptions of economic mobility and the American Dream in the wake of the Great Recession.

Large majorities of Americans felt that the recession had hurt their economic status and rated their current financial situation as only fair or poor. However, even in the face of personal economic hardship, Americans maintained a strong belief in their ability to achieve the American Dream and control their own economic situations.

New analyses on the 2011 poll data examine demographic differences by age cohort, education, income, employment, and race/ethnicity.



Economic Mobility and the American Dream: Examining Generational Differences

Generational differences emerged among questions focused on the future—Millennials stood out as the most optimistic cohort.¹ Americans of all ages reported similar responses when assessing the personal impact of the recession, their current financial situations, and their level of control over their own finances.

Age Cohorts

- **Silent Generation** – those born in 1912 through 1945
- **Baby Boomers** – those born in 1946 through 1964
- **Generation X** – those born in 1965 through 1980
- **Millennials** – those born in 1981 through 1993

Generational cohorts based on Pew Research Center definitions.

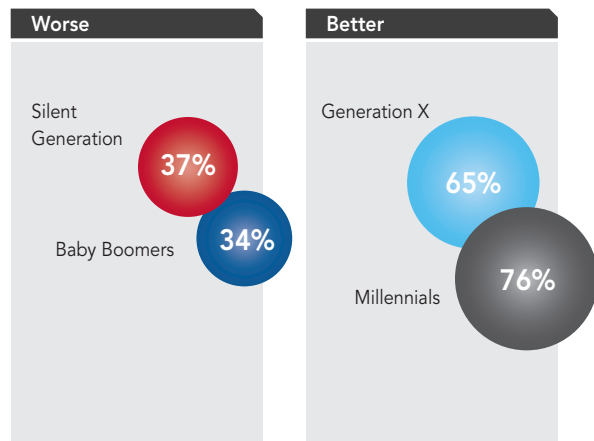
¹ The question of what is driving generational differences in the poll results lies beyond the scope of what the data can answer. Cohort differences could reflect variations in underlying attitudes, differing expectations based on life or career stage, or any number of other possible factors.

The younger the cohort, the more faith people had that their economic situation would improve over time.

Three-quarters (76 percent) of Millennials predicted their economic situation would be better 10 years from now, followed by nearly two-thirds of Generation Xers (65 percent). This compares with fewer than half of Baby Boomers (48 percent) and members of the Silent Generation (42 percent). In fact, more than one-third (37 percent) of the Silent Generation and 34 percent of Baby Boomers believed they would be worse off in 10 years (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Americans' Beliefs About Their Economic Circumstances in 10 Years



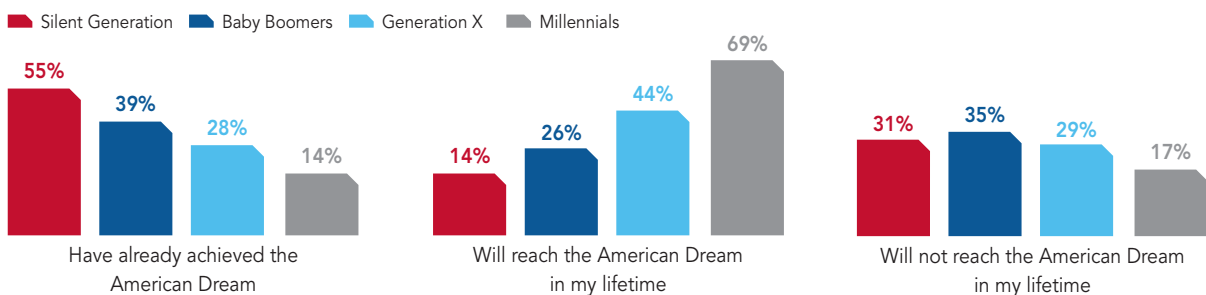
Younger cohorts, particularly Millennials, also were the most optimistic about believing they had already or would achieve the American Dream.

Eighty-three percent of Millennials and seven in 10 (71 percent) Generation Xers believed they had achieved or would achieve the American Dream within their lifetimes. Only 17 percent of Millennials and 29 percent of Generation Xers believed they would *never* achieve the American Dream.

At the other end of the age spectrum, half of the Silent Generation—the largest percentage of any cohort—believed that they had achieved the American Dream (55 percent). However, nearly one-third (31 percent) thought they would not reach it in their remaining years. Interestingly, an even larger percentage (35 percent) of Baby Boomers believed they would never achieve the American Dream (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Do Americans Think They Will Reach the American Dream?



The youngest and oldest Americans were the most likely to believe that they were better off financially than their parents had been at the same age.

In thinking about their current financial situation, a majority of Americans of all ages reported experiencing one important element of the American Dream: improving their financial position relative to their parents. Almost three-quarters (69 percent) of the Silent Generation and nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of Millennials reported having better finances than their parents at the same age. This compared to more than half (55 percent) of Baby Boomers and Generation Xers (see Figure 3).

Despite strong faith in the continued viability of the American Dream, a substantial share of Americans of all ages reported concerns about earning enough money in the future to lead the lives they want.

The story of an optimistic Millennial generation is tempered slightly by the finding that nearly one-quarter (23 percent) said they did not think they would earn enough money in the future to lead the kind of life they want. In fact, concerns about insufficient future earnings were apparent across age groups and more prevalent with age, affecting 34 percent of Generation Xers, 42 percent of Baby Boomers, and 47 percent of the Silent Generation (see Figure 4).

Figure 3

Do Americans Feel Better Off Financially Than Their Parents at the Same Age?

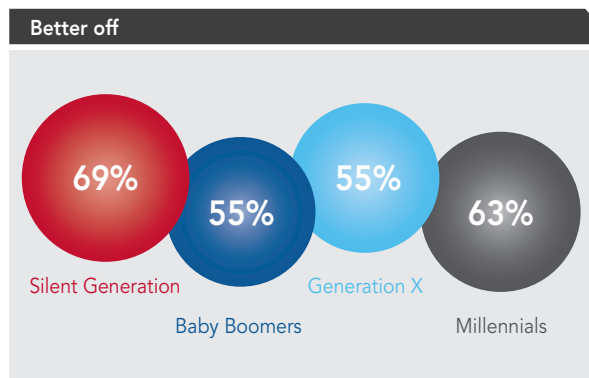
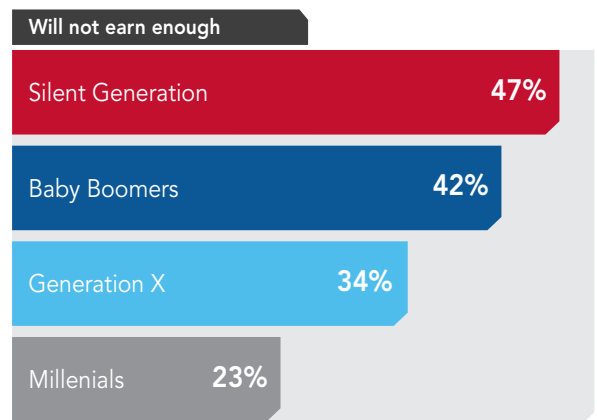


Figure 4

Will Americans' Future Earnings Support the Lives They Want?



FULL POLL RESULTS ARE AVAILABLE AT: WWW.ECONOMICMOBILITY.ORG/POLL2011

METHODOLOGY

On behalf of The Pew Charitable Trusts' Economic Mobility Project, a national survey, focus groups, and individual interviews were conducted by the Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies. For the survey, 2,000 adults nationwide were interviewed by telephone March 24-29, 2011. The margin of error is +/-2.2% at the 95% level of confidence for the sample as a whole, but larger for subgroups. Very few respondents reported "Don't Know" or refused to answer select questions. Such missing cases were excluded from final analyses on a question-by-question basis.