

## KEY FINDINGS FROM A 2009 NATIONAL SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS

### **Despite the current downturn, Americans are optimistic about their opportunities for economic mobility, both within and across generations.**

- Fully eight in ten (79 percent) believe it is still possible for people to get ahead despite the current economy. This remains true even among lower-income, less-educated and unemployed Americans. Such consensus is striking given that a near-unanimous 94 percent of Americans describe the current economic condition of the country negatively.
- Americans are optimistic about the future — a 72 percent majority believes their economic circumstances will be better in the next ten years. This optimism crosses party lines and demographic groups. African Americans are the most optimistic (85 percent) compared to whites and Hispanics (71 percent and 77 percent, respectively).
- Most Americans report considerable improvement in their standard of living. A 58-percent majority says they enjoy a higher standard of living than did their parents at a similar age; and 56 percent said it was easier for them to move up the income ladder than it was for their parents.
  - Hispanics (64 percent) are among the most likely to recognize an improved standard of living compared to their parents.
  - Among Americans under 40, those who are married are more likely to report a higher standard of living than that of their parents.

### **Most parents say their own children will have a better standard of living than they have, but are split overall as to whether their children will have a harder time moving up the income ladder.**

- Sixty-two percent of people with kids in the home say their children will have a better standard of living than they have. However, parents are split about whether their children will have a harder time moving up the income ladder (48 percent say same or easier, 46 percent say harder). The difference reflects the fact that a minority of parents believe that even though their child will have a higher standard of living, it will be harder for them to move up the income ladder. People without children in the home are more pessimistic about how today's children will fare.
- African American parents are most likely to say it will be the same or easier for their children to move up the income ladder than it was for them (65 percent) — compared to 51 percent of Hispanic parents, and 46 percent of parents under 40.
- Only 34 percent of white parents, however, believe it will be easier for their children to move up the income ladder.

### **Americans believe they largely determine their own economic mobility and opportunity.**

- Seventy-four percent of Americans believe they have at least some control over their own economic situation, while only 43 percent think that other people are in control of their economic situation.
- By a 71 to 21 percent margin, Americans believe that personal attributes, like hard work and drive, are more important to economic mobility than external conditions, like the economy and economic circumstances growing up.
- Education also plays a huge role in this discussion; 83 percent rate education as essential or very important to economic mobility. Personal attributes such as poor life choices and too much debt were the top explanations given for downward mobility.
- Although research by the Economic Mobility Project has found considerable differences in economic mobility by race and gender, respondents ascribed relatively little importance to their impact on mobility (15 percent and 16 percent, respectively). Further, the Economic Mobility Project's research has also found that there is a strong relationship between parents' income and their children's adult income. However, coming from a wealthy family was among the least important factors that respondents cited (28 percent).<sup>1</sup>
- Americans are the most worried about the rising cost of living, losing their jobs and taking on too much debt, as things that could cause them to fall down the income ladder.

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America* at [http://www.economicmobility.org/reports\\_and\\_research/mobility\\_in\\_america](http://www.economicmobility.org/reports_and_research/mobility_in_america)

## **Americans care more about opportunity than inequality and are far more concerned about the ability of lower-income Americans to move up the economic ladder than the persistence of upper-income Americans at the top.**

- By a 71 to 21 percent margin, Americans believe it is more important to give people a fair chance to succeed than it is to reduce inequality in this country. Each demographic subgroup, including those at the lowest end of the economic spectrum, concurs with the majority on this issue.
- A majority of Americans believe that the lack of upward mobility from the bottom rung of the income ladder is a major problem for this country, while they are relatively unconcerned about how little downward mobility there is from the top. Recently, the Economic Mobility Project found that 42 percent of those who are born to parents on the bottom rung and 39 percent who are born to parents on the top rung remain there a generation later. The “stickiness” at the top is not a major problem for respondents (17 percent), but 53 percent did think the “stickiness” at the bottom is a major problem.<sup>2</sup>
- A 55 percent majority *disagree* with the statement, “In the United States, a child’s chances of achieving financial success is tied to the income of his or her parent.”

## **Americans believe the government hurts more than it helps people move up the economic ladder; but they believe a range of policies would be effective at encouraging upward mobility.**

- By a 46 to 36 percent margin, Americans believe the government does more to hurt than to help people move up the economic ladder, reflecting past research by the Economic Mobility Project showing that while there is federal investment in mobility-enhancing policies, it more often benefits upper-middle- and upper-income households.<sup>3</sup>
- Large majorities believe the government could adopt mobility-enhancing policies that would be effective, including making college more affordable, supporting job training and early childhood education.

## **While definitions of the American Dream vary, some core themes emerge: freedom to accomplish anything you want with hard work, freedom to say or do what you want, and that one’s children will be financially better off.**

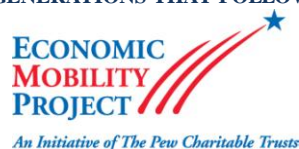
- Importantly, these definitions are not entirely financially driven. In fact, “becoming rich” and “being middle class” rank the lowest of the given definitions of the American Dream.
- There is some variation in Americans’ definitions of economic status, but African Americans, Hispanics and whites all arrive at virtually the same conclusions when describing the American Dream.

### **About the Survey**

The poll and 10 focus groups were conducted for Pew’s Economic Mobility Project by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and Public Opinion Strategies. The focus groups were held between January 6 – 15, 2009 in Baltimore, Atlanta, Chicago, Phoenix and San Diego among a racially diverse set of panelists. The survey was conducted between January 27 and February 8, 2009; 2,119 respondents were interviewed for the survey, including 517 African Americans, 520 Hispanics and 497 people under 40. All interviews in the under-40 oversample were conducted on cell phones. The overall margin of error for the survey is +/- 3.4 at 95 percent confidence interval.

For more information on the poll visit [www.economicmobility.org](http://www.economicmobility.org)

**BY FORGING A BROAD AND NONPARTISAN AGREEMENT ON THE FACTS, FIGURES AND TRENDS RELATED TO MOBILITY, THE ECONOMIC MOBILITY PROJECT IS GENERATING AN ACTIVE POLICY DEBATE ABOUT HOW BEST TO IMPROVE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY IN THE UNITED STATES AND TO ENSURE THAT THE AMERICAN DREAM IS KEPT ALIVE FOR GENERATIONS THAT FOLLOW.**



<sup>2</sup> See *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America* at [http://www.economicmobility.org/reports\\_and\\_research/mobility\\_in\\_america](http://www.economicmobility.org/reports_and_research/mobility_in_america)

<sup>3</sup> See *How Much Does the Federal Government Spend to Promote Economic Mobility and For Whom?* at [http://www.economicmobility.org/assets/pdfs/PEW\\_EMP\\_FEDERAL\\_SPENDING.pdf](http://www.economicmobility.org/assets/pdfs/PEW_EMP_FEDERAL_SPENDING.pdf)