

# How the American Dream Has Changed Over Time

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The beginnings of the idea of the [American Dream](#) can be traced to the Founding Fathers, who declared their independence from England because of their belief in unalienable rights. Those men believed people inherently possessed the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They created a country where people could break free from class restrictions and pursue the life they chose despite the circumstances of their birth. In time, writers dubbed this idea the American Dream, but people's definition of the American Dream has changed greatly over time.

## Origins

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The term *American Dream* is often traced back to James Truslow Adams, a historian and author. In 1931, as Americans suffered through the Great Depression, Adams wrote a book called *The Epic of America* in which he spoke of “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement ... regardless of fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” In the beginning, the American Dream simply promised a country in which people had the chance to work their way up through their own labor and ingenuity. [Immigrants](#) fled the entrenched class restrictions of their homelands for the [United States](#) in the hope of obtaining land and gaining religious and other freedoms.

Revolutionaries fled England in search of [freedom](#). This promise of a better life attracted people from all over the world to the United States. They came to America ready to work hard.

## Evolution of the American Dream

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Colonial America saw the dream realized in the interaction among classes. People of the time wrote about the new experience of equality. Employees could speak openly to their employers and believed that with dedication they could improve their status. During westward expansion, the American Dream led many to race for land and live rugged lives on the frontier. By nature of their hard work, they could set down roots on a piece of the expansive land open to homesteaders and pioneers. This idea of the American Dream was rather competitive and individualistic—people fought others to own a piece of land for themselves. In the early twentieth century, Americans discovered a shared dream in which citizens worked together to make life better for the American masses. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR's) New Deal programs promised safe, healthy futures for every American—a new understanding of the American Dream.

Many people who encouraged Americans to get involved in World War II did so believing that people all over the world deserved their chance to realize the American Dream. Participating in the war allowed Americans to put their national concept of idealism on display for the world. Americans fighting

in the war were fighting for the preservation of the American Dream, which was summed up by FDR as the possession of four essential freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of [religion](#), freedom from want, and freedom from fear. People who could feed their families, keep them safe, worship as they pleased, and say how they felt were living the American Dream, he said.

After World War II, men returned from the war with a new American Dream in mind. Americans fantasized about homes filled with happy families who vacationed every summer. Veterans used the GI Bill to obtain low-interest [mortgages](#) on homes, resulting in a building boom and the creation of [suburbs](#) across the United States. The American Dream became closely tied to [home ownership](#), and the American marketplace filled up with products to help improve life at home.

The American Dream transformed into an ideal that relied on people being able to afford all the modern accessories: cars, television sets, and college educations for one's children. Television greatly helped define the American Dream as the acquisition of material goods. Americans dreamed of living ideal lives like those portrayed in shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. Many Americans fueled their purchase of the new American Dream with [credit cards](#), a choice that eventually affected the state of the American Dream.

## The Modern American Dream

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As more people used [credit](#) to purchase goods, Americans accrued a lot of [debt](#). Keeping up with the American Dream was growing into a costly endeavor. People still strived for lives like the ones they saw on television. Those televised lives were becoming increasingly extravagant and unrealistic, however. Furthermore, saving was no longer necessary. The American Dream could be purchased on credit.

Then the mortgage crisis of the early twenty-first century caused many people to lose the lives they had worked so hard to achieve. In his inaugural speech, President Barack Obama spoke of the reversal of the American Dream. He was referring to the many people who were losing their homes. President Obama suggested many young people no longer believed they could have better lives than their parents, but that the American Dream did still exist—the problem was in our understanding of it.

According to a survey from the Center for a New American Dream, 78 percent of people considered personal freedom extremely important in their vision of the American Dream. At the opposite end, 23 percent considered achieving affluence as very important. However, a shrinking American middle class has resulted in 48 percent of millennials (those aged eighteen to twenty-nine) in 2015 thinking that the American Dream is dead, according to the *Washington Post*. Millennials believe that it has become harder for them to get ahead, and that surpassing their parents' [success](#) has become much more difficult.

This idea stems from the research indicating that the middle class, the segment of the population that drives the American Dream, has been shrinking steadily over the past four decades. According to the Pew Research Center, 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. The center reported that 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 as much wealth as middle-income families by 2013. In 1971, 61 percent of adult Americans were in the middle-income tier; in 2015 that number decreased to 50 percent.

Many people speculate that the American Dream has become something few can attain. Owning land is no longer the dream. Owning a home is no longer the dream. Even having a good life is no longer the dream. Instead, many people strive to own the most expensive vehicles, the largest homes, the most stylish clothes, and so on. Under this definition, the American Dream can be possessed by only a few citizens.

As a result of this new definition, the American Dream is more difficult to see in action. Because of the recession, many Americans have struggled just to keep their families fed. Furthermore, the best schools and other amenities seem to be attainable for only the wealthiest citizens. Many Americans must prioritize needs because they cannot afford as much as they once had.

The contradiction in this belief that the American Dream is no longer possible is that Americans have more now than they have ever possessed before. If people fear that the American Dream is dead, it is because the concept has changed from the idea that everyone can improve their life through hard work to the idea that everyone can become a millionaire through virtually no work. The American Dream as first conceived, however, is still possible. While people often must struggle, they are not sentenced to stay at that same station forever. They have the right to strive for more.

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