Perceptions about

INCOME INEQUALITY &
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Excerpted From the full report
A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY II: AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC OPINION ON POVERTY
Section 3

KEY FINDINGS

3.1 The majority of Americans are concerned about income and wealth inequality and support some form of government intervention

3.2 Americans’ faith in the viability of the American Dream is at a five-year low

3.3 Many Americans are skeptical about trickle-down economics and a growing percentage of Americans believe the economic system unfairly favors the wealthy

3.4 Americans’ faith in the importance hard works plays in getting ahead has increased slightly

3.5 Many Americans believe that people tend to be wealthy or poor because of the availability of opportunities

3.6 Americans are increasingly concerned about equal opportunity
The majority of Americans are concerned about income and wealth inequality and support some form of government intervention.

Attitudes concerning the distribution of wealth and income have a significant impact on perceptions of poverty, in addition to support for or opposition to more even economic distribution. Prior research examining survey and polling trends has shown that Americans’ beliefs about mobility and meritocracy (that is, the idea that people succeed or advance in life based on their abilities or hard work) has limited wider support for a reduction in income and wealth inequality.41

In 2014, our examination of public perceptions of the gap between the wealthy and those living in poverty revealed that Americans are overwhelmingly concerned about wealth distribution in the nation and support some form of government intervention. As of 2013, the majority (70 percent) of Americans said they believe that the “gap between the rich and the poor in the United States” has gotten larger, while 21 percent believe it has stayed about the same.42 In a 2011 poll, the majority (60 percent) of Americans also agreed that “the government should do more to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor,” while 39 percent disagreed.43

In recent years, Americans’ concern about income inequality, specifically the gap between the nation’s richest and poorest individuals, has not subsided. A substantial majority (67 percent) surveyed in 2015 continue to express the belief that the gap between the rich and the poor in the United States has gotten worse, while 25 percent believe it has stayed about the same.44 As of 2015, the majority of Americans (57 percent) also continue to agree that the government should do more to “reduce the gap between rich people and poor people.”45

Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government (Pew Research Center)

Though most Americans do not trust the government in the abstract, they do see a clear role for government action on many issues, including several related to poverty. Only 19% of Americans trust the government always or most of the time, but 74% want government action to strengthen the economy and 55% want government action to help people get out of poverty. Pew’s research on Americans’ views of government is [Here](#).
Other survey data also points to rising public concern about this. In a November 2015 survey, respondents were asked how important the growing gap between the rich and the poor was to them personally—nearly 9 in 10 (86 percent) reported that it is “critical” or “one among many important issues.”

When Americans were posed a similar question in 2014, 78 percent of respondents said that the widening gap is a “very big” or “moderately big” problem, up from 74 percent in 2013.

There are notable partisan differences in opinion. In an early 2015 NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, 67 percent of Democrats surveyed identified reducing income inequality as an “absolute priority,” compared to 19 percent of Republicans.

Americans’ faith in the principle of the American Dream—defined as achieving financial security, self-sufficiency, a good job, and home ownership—is at a five-year low. In 2010, 2011, 2013, and 2014 Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) surveys, respondents were asked if they think the American Dream “still holds true,” “never held true,” or “once held true but does not anymore.”

While responses to this question have fluctuated over the years, in 2010, 50 percent of those surveyed expressed the belief that the American dream still holds true, while 43 percent were in agreement that the American Dream once held true but does not anymore, and 4 percent felt that it never held true. By 2014, 42 percent of Americans expressed the belief that the American dream still holds true, down 8 percentage points from 2010, while nearly half (48 percent) stated that the American Dream once held true but does not anymore, and another 7 percent stated the American Dream never held true.
Figure 2: AMERICANS’ FAITH IN THE AMERICAN DREAM IS IN DECLINE

Do you think the American Dream still holds true, never held true, or once held true but does not anymore?

2014 responses by racial/ethnic background

45% White Americans answered ‘still holds true’

42% Latinos answered ‘still holds true’

31% Black Americans answered ‘still holds true’

5% White Americans answered ‘Never held true’

9% Latinos answered ‘Never held true’

14% Black Americans answered ‘Never held true’

As of 2015, only 3 in 10 (33 percent) of surveyed Americans said that the American Dream still holds true, compared to 57 percent who say it once held true but does not anymore, and 10 percent who said it never held true. White Americans (45 percent) and Latinos (42 percent) are more likely than black Americans (31 percent) to believe that the American Dream still holds true today, while black Americans are more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to say that the American Dream never held true (14 percent versus 7 percent of all Americans, 9 percent of Latino Americans, and 5 percent of white Americans).

**3.3 MANY AMERICANS ARE SKEPTICAL ABOUT TRICKLE-DOWN ECONOMICS AND A GROWING PERCENTAGE OF AMERICANS BELIEVE THE ECONOMIC SYSTEM UNFAIRLY FAVORS THE WEALTHY**

Americans tend to be skeptical of the notion that less taxation on the rich will also benefit those at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder, a concept popularly known as trickle-down economics. In a 2015 survey, 45 percent of Americans said that they disagree “that lower taxes on the wealthy stimulates the economy, with the end result of greater wealth for everyone.” Agreement differs across party lines, with the majority of Democrats (62 percent) disagreeing, while 5 in 10 Republicans (50 percent) agree. Independents tend to disagree (42 percent) rather than agree (28 percent).

Another indication of Americans’ growing discontent with the current economic system is seen in their changing attitudes towards large corporations. The majority of Americans (56 percent) believe that large corporations are having a negative effect on the way things are going in the country these days, and 57 percent believe corporations make too much money. In addition, when asked if “selfish” describes business leaders very well, fairly well, not too well, or not at all well, nearly 7 in 10 Americans (67 percent) believe that “selfish” describes business leaders very well or fairly well. The percentage agreeing with the statement “business corporations do not share enough of their success with their employees” increased from 69 percent in 2014 to 88 percent as of late 2015. In addition, the percentage of Americans agreeing
with the statement “the economic system in this country unfairly favors the wealthy” increased from 66 percent in 2012 to 79 percent in 2015.56

**3.4 AMERICANS’ FAITH IN THE IMPORTANCE OF HARD WORK IN GETTING AHEAD HAS INCREASED SLIGHTLY**

Despite rising pessimism concerning the viability of the American Dream, recent survey data indicate that Americans’ faith that people can get ahead through hard work has increased after a period of steady decline that began in 2007 and ended in 2012. In a 2014 Gallup social series poll, 54 percent of Americans said that they were “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with “the opportunity for a person to get ahead by working hard.” When this same question was posed again in 2015, 6 in 10 of those surveyed said that they were
very or somewhat satisfied with the opportunity to get ahead through hard work.\(^5^9\)

In recent years, researchers at The Stanford Institute on Poverty and Inequality have taken a closer look at the role that belief in social mobility plays in shaping public opinion on poverty and inequality. They found that in addition to economic conditions, an individual’s level of belief in social mobility, or “mobility optimism,” is just as predictive as annual household income in determining their attitude towards economic inequality: “[M]obility optimists may simultaneously express hostility to the ‘rich’ or the ‘1 percent’ and harbor doubts about the ‘fairness’ of the economy. But they may also retain a belief in the promise of their own (or their children’s) economic prospects that insulates them from reacting to historical trends with more vigorous support for policy reform efforts.”\(^6^0\)

### 3.5

**MANY AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT PEOPLE TEND TO BE WEALTHY OR POOR BECAUSE OF THE AVAILABILITY OF OPPORTUNITIES**

While the steadfast belief that hard work yields prosperity continues to shape public attitudes towards poverty, Americans are becoming more aware that hard work alone is not a guarantee of success. A study from the Center for Community Change examined public perception of both poverty and wealth, and found that an increasing number of Americans believe that wealthy and poor people got that way because of the availability of opportunities as opposed to just hard work or talent. Between 2014 and 2015, the percentage of Americans agreeing with the statement “poor people have fewer opportunities to be successful than others” increased from 52 percent...
to 62 percent. There has also been a slight increase in the percentage of Americans who believe success is determined by forces outside of individual control. Between 2002 and 2014, the percentage of Americans agreeing with

Figure 4: More Americans Accept That Success in Life Can Be Determined by Forces Outside of Our Control

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside of our control.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2009</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


the statement: “success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside of our control” increased from 32 to 40 percent.

Americans Are Increasingly Concerned About Equal Opportunity

A report published by the Public Religion Research Institute reveals that Americans are becoming more concerned about the state of equal opportunity in America. As of 2015, 65 percent of Americans believe that “one of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance in life.” When the same question was posed in 2010, 53 percent of Americans expressed agreement with this statement.

There are considerable differences of opinion between racial and ethnic groups, and based on socioeconomic status. The overwhelming majority (87 percent) of black Americans says that one of the big problems facing the country is a lack of equal opportunity, compared to roughly 62 percent of
Latinos, 58 percent of Asian Americans and half of white Americans. More than 4 in 10 (42 percent) of white Americans believe that it is not really that big a problem if some people have more of a chance in life than others; however, opinion between working-class and college-educated white Americans differs by 9 percentage points. More than 6 in 10 (64 percent) of working-class white Americans agree that a lack of equal opportunity is one of the big problems facing the country compared to 55 percent of college-educated white Americans.64

**Figure 5: THE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE STATE OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY**

Which of the following statements comes closest to your own view: “it is not really that big of a problem if some people have more chances in life than others” or “one of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance”?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>“it is not really that big of a problem if some people have more chances in life than others”</th>
<th>“one of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 2010</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2013</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 2015</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TALKING POINTS**

**NARRATIVE, MESSAGING, AND STORYTELLING RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Highlight systemic solutions for systemic problems**

While news reports generally ascribe poverty to systemic causes, they do so through fleeting references to general trends such as plant closings, the scarcity of jobs, or the “weak economy.” Few stories explain root causes in any detail, and forces behind the disparate impact of poverty based on race, ethnicity, and gender receive practically no attention.

However, our research shows that a majority of Americans agree that “one of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance in life,” so there is an opening for advocates to talk about the systemic underpinnings of poverty and system-wide changes needed to address it. Because many Americans are not knowledgeable about effective solutions to poverty, anti-poverty policies and programs that have demonstrated positive results, along with research pointing the way to positive outcomes, should be made more visible, as should the positive role that government plays in creating opportunity.

**Show the connections**

The idea that we are interconnected and all in this together is crucial to the success of anti-poverty communications. Americans intuitively understand that increasing inequality and poverty hold back the economy and country as a whole and also create an environment in which serious social problems develop and worsen. But their thinking on poverty easily defaults to an extreme “personal responsibility” and “bad decisions” frame. Both showing and telling how we’re all affected and connected—through images, research, spokespeople, and storytelling, as well as specific messaging—is crucial.
1.2 FUTURE RESEARCH

Make a distinction between poverty and inequality

Over the years, public opinion research has included questions about inequality that often conflate inequality of outcomes (such as disparities in health outcomes, wealth, and income) with inequality of opportunities (such as access to quality education, housing, and employment). This lack of distinction presents major challenges to interpreting public opinion on inequality. There is a pressing need to adopt more sophisticated analysis of public perceptions of poverty and inequality, including greater exploration of the distinction between public perception of “inequality” versus “perpetual poverty”.

1.3 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO UPLIFT


Westen Strategies for Change to Win, “Making the American Dream Mean Something Again – Inequality and the Middle Class,” Strategic Messaging Advice, May 2011.
WORK CITED


3. Ibid, p. 25.


5. Ibid.


10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.


13. Ibid.


THIS SECTION FORMS PART OF A LARGER REPORT EXPLORING PUBLIC OPINION ON POVERTY AND RELATED ISSUES. TO ACCESS THE FULL REPORT AND LEARN MORE, PLEASE GO TO: OPPORTUNITYAGENDA.ORG/POVERTY_TO_OPPORTUNITY