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What Happens to the American Dream in a Recession?

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

Given the battered economy, increasing joblessness and collapse of the housing market, what is the state of the American dream? Pollsters for The New York Times and CBS News set out last month to try to answer that question. And the results seemed somewhat contradictory. Although the nation has plunged into its deepest recession since the Great Depression, 72 percent of Americans in this nationwide survey said they believed it is possible to start out poor in the United States, work hard and become rich — a classic definition of the American dream.

And yet only 44 percent said they had actually achieved the American dream, although 31 percent said they expect to attain it within their lifetime. Only 20 percent have given up on ever reaching it. Those 44 percent might not sound like much, but it is an increase over the 32 percent who said they had achieved the American dream four years ago, when the economy was in much better shape.

Compared with four years ago, fewer people now say they are better off than their parents were at their age or that their children will be better off than they are. So even though their economic outlook is worse, more people are saying they have either achieved the dream or expect to do so. What gives?

We asked Barry Glassner, who is a professor of sociology at the University of Southern California and studies contemporary culture and beliefs.

“You want to hold on to your dream even more when times are hard,” he said. “And if you want to hold on to it, then you better define it differently.”

In other words, people are shifting their definition of the American dream. And the poll — conducted on April 1 to 5 with 998 adults, with a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points— indicated just that.

The Times and CBS News asked this same open-ended question four years ago and again last month: “What does the phrase ‘The American dream’ mean to you?” Four years ago, 19 percent of those surveyed supplied answers that related to financial security and a steady job, and 20 percent gave answers that related to freedom and opportunity. Now, fewer people are pegging their dream to material success and more are pegging it to abstract values. Those citing financial security dropped to 11 percent, and those citing freedom and opportunity expanded to 27 percent. Here’s some respondents’ answers that were put in the category of freedom and opportunity:

“Freedom to live our own life.”

“Created equal.”

“Someone could start from nothing.”

“That everybody has a fair chance to succeed.”

“To become whatever I want to be.”

“To be healthy and have nice family and friends.”

“More like Huck Finn; escape to the unknown; follow your dreams.”

Those who responded in material terms were hardly lavish. Here’s a sampling:

“Basically, have a roof over your head and put food on the table.”

“Working at a secure job, being able to have a home and live as happily as you can not spending too much money.”

“Just financial stability.”

“Owning own home, having civil liberties.”

Mr. Glassner said, “For the vast majority of Americans at every point in history, the prospect of achieving the American dream has been slim but the promise has been huge.”

“At its core, this notion that anyone can be president or anyone can be a billionaire is absurd,” he said. “A lot of Americans work hard, but they don’t become president and they don’t become billionaires.”

Still, he said, Americans have always believed in possibilities. And they have consistently said over time that they can start poor in this country and become rich, regardless of the economy or their circumstances. The 72 percent who feel that way today is down from the 81 percent who felt that way in 2007, but 72 percent is still a very high percentage, especially given the downward economy.

“It would be hard to find another country where it’s as high,” Mr. Glassner said.

The percentage of people who say the American dream does not exist or is only an illusion has remained low — 3 percent today and 2 percent four years ago. As one such person put it to our pollsters last month: “A bunch of hooley.”

By the way, the phrase “the American dream” is generally agreed to have been coined first in 1931, in the midst of the Depression. In his book, “The Epic of America,” the historian James Truslow Adams wrote, “It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable.”