

Round One

Newsweek

“The American Dream Is Alive and Well”

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By Angela McArdle

The American spirit is frequently expressed through music and film. The classic theme song of Walt Disney's *Pinocchio* starts out, "When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are." The message of that iconic song conveyed something transcendent about the American Dream. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from—anything is possible in the Land of Opportunity.

What is the American Dream?

It is the realest version of wishing upon a star. It is upward economic mobility. It is the assurance that if you work hard enough, you can provide for your family and achieve something of significance. The American Dream is built upon equality of opportunity, a color-blind society, representative democracy, and consent of the governed (the absence of a threatening, totalitarian government). There's something almost supernatural about America's incredible potential. It's more than just middle-class comfort. It's the chance to make it big; to beat the odds. It's supported by the legendary founding of our country—a tale of beating the odds and forging a new beginning unlike anything the world had ever before seen.

Has the American Dream disappeared like a childhood fairytale? Many millennials feel shut out of the American Dream as the rising costs of inflation have made home ownership unattainable.

In 1960, the average price of an American home cost \$11,900 (or \$123,320.18 when adjusted for inflation). Very few homes today could be purchased for as little as \$123,000. What happened to the purchasing power of the dollar?

In 1971, the United States went off the gold standard and inflation began to soar. Inflation has outpaced wage growth, and younger generations must fight harder to attain what their parents were able to obtain so easily. According to the Pew Research Center, "The \$4.03-an-hour rate recorded in January 1973 had the same purchasing power that \$23.68 would today."

Beyond economic concerns, many Americans feel their civil liberties have eroded after the lockdowns and mandates of 2020. They feel disillusioned with this once great country, and worry that the best years are behind us. The growth of bureaucracy, regulation, and government

overreach have endangered the American Dream. I think it is still alive, though, if we are willing to fight for it.

The American Dream is made possible by the following uniquely Western values, which many of us still hold dear:

- Freedom of speech
- The presumption of innocence
- The right to privacy
- The consent of the governed
- Equal protection under the law
- A color-blind society
- Property rights
- Informed consent
- Peaceful foreign policy

There is a broad, populist coalition working to preserve these precious American traditions. The Libertarian Party has joined forces with Defeat The Mandates and Bret Weinstein to launch a movement called "Defend The West." This coalition is focused on reversing the damage that was done by lockdowns, mandates, and attacks on free speech and medical freedom over the last few years.

On the economic side of things, enter Javier Milei—the Argentinian president and self-described anarcho-capitalist. When Milei took office, Argentina's inflation was 211 percent. In less than a year, Milei has slashed Argentina's government agencies in half and brought his country's inflation rate on food to zero. Milei takes his inspiration from famous economists like Ludwig von Mises and Murray Rothbard, who have a uniquely American, capitalist mindset, and believe government meddling and spending are what drives up inflation and crushes the American Dream.

If Javier Milei can turn things around in Argentina, there is hope for America. Libertarians here want to abolish wasteful and oppressive government agencies, lower taxes, end U.S. involvement in foreign conflicts, and restore the Western ideas that set America apart from the rest of the world. They are joined by a broad populist movement that includes Donald Trump, Vivek Ramaswamy, Chase Oliver, and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. All of these candidates have pledged to slash government spending in order to save the economy, and they have all been watching Milei's success.

There is broad support for a revitalization of the American Dream. People are rejecting the totalitarian impulses of the past administration, and big government spending. They are ready to reclaim their futures. As Americans, we should prioritize freedom and economic mobility. These are the ideas that America was founded on, and what undergirds the broader values we all cherish in the Western world. Let's all work to protect the American Dream and preserve it for future generations by cutting back our run-away government, and returning power to the people.

Round Two

“Harlem”

Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

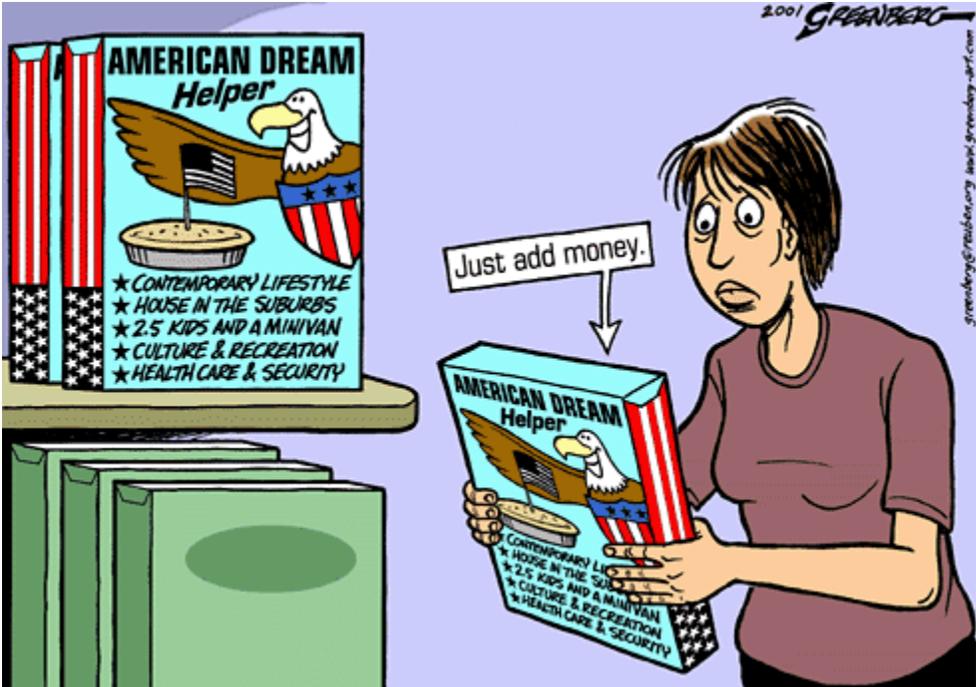
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Round Three



Final round

The New York *Times*

“How to Bring Back the American Dream”

Jan. 28, 2026

By Nicholas Kristof

Opinion Columnist

We need some good news now, and here’s some out of left field: An important new study suggests that there’s a highly effective way to overcome one of the most intractable problems in 21st-century America — intergenerational poverty.

We like to think of ourselves as a land of opportunity, but researchers find that today the American dream of upward mobility is actually more alive in other advanced countries.

The new study highlights a powerful way to boost opportunity. It doesn’t involve handing out money, and it appears to pretty much pay for itself. It works by harnessing the greatest influence there is on kids — other kids.

The study, just released, is the latest landmark finding from Raj Chetty, a Harvard economist, and his Opportunity Insights group, along with other scholars.

The team dug into the long-term effects of a huge neighborhood revitalization program called Hope VI. Beginning in 1993, Hope VI invested \$17 billion to replace 262 high-poverty public housing projects around America.

Remember the high-crime, dysfunctional Cabrini-Green and Robert Taylor housing projects in Chicago that the government emptied and then demolished? That was Hope VI, which replaced them with mixed-income homes — meaning fewer housing units for the poor, something that was controversial. Critics protested that the resulting gentrification, as more affluent people moved into what had been exclusively low-income neighborhoods, was harming the most vulnerable.

When Chetty’s team combed through income data, one finding from Hope VI was utterly disappointing: Adults who lived in the new public housing units did not benefit economically. That fits in with other studies: Turning around the lives of adults is difficult.

Here’s where the redevelopment succeeded: with kids. Children moving into public housing in the redeveloped, mixed-income neighborhoods stayed only five years on average but saw a 17

percent increase in the likelihood that they would attend college and, among boys, a 20 percent decrease in the prospect that they would end up incarcerated. Those living in the new housing for their entire childhoods will earn 50 percent more over their lifetimes, the study concluded.

The secret of this success?

It wasn't the nicer housing as such. Presumably the families appreciated better public housing and safer neighborhoods, but by themselves the improved apartments did not defeat poverty.

Rather, the low-income children thrived because of something that can be hard to talk about: They acquired better-off friends and thus a window into middle-class lifestyles and aspirations.

“The single strongest predictor of economic mobility across areas is the fraction of higher-income friends that low-income people have,” Chetty told me. “In communities where you have more cross-class interaction, kids do much better.”

The neighborhoods previously had been overwhelmingly low-income — America used to lump poor people together in housing projects and concentrate them there. And this study underscores what a failure that was. In its place, Hope VI mostly created mixed-income communities and links with neighboring areas that were better off, so poor and middle-class families interacted more.

The researchers used anonymized Facebook friend networks and cellphone location data to show that children in these redeveloped neighborhoods spent more time in homes outside of public housing and befriended kids in more affluent families.

Those friendships were the driver of increased upward mobility, the study found. Some Americans flinch at gentrification, perceiving exploitation and marginalization, but the truth is more complicated: When it leads to cross-class interactions, that can be a plus for children.

“More than half of jobs in America are obtained through referrals,” Chetty said. “So if you're connected to people whose parents have a job at a good company, you're more likely to get an internship there, get to develop a career in that kind of business.”

Perhaps more important, he added, those interactions shape a child's aspirations and sense of what's possible.

Friends shape norms about behaviors, from doing homework to using drugs, from gang membership to marriage. Children in areas where marriage rates are higher, for example, are more likely to end up married themselves.

Each public housing unit in the Hope VI program cost about \$170,000 to redevelop, and those who spent an entire childhood in this redeveloped housing then were on track to earn far more — an extra \$500,000, in present-value terms, the study found. Each unit often had multiple children, and the apartments will house generations of children, resulting in impressive returns on the housing investment. The increase in tax revenues that the former residents will pay, and the reductions in incarceration and welfare payments, will offset much of the upfront cost to taxpayers, the study said.

Mayor Andre Dickens of Atlanta is overseeing similar neighborhood redevelopments in his city, so I asked him about the study. He grew up poor in Atlanta, and he said the results made sense to him.

He noted that a big influence on him had been an entrepreneurship program that he participated in from fourth grade through high school, held in a church basement and attracting children from a mix of families. “I saw men with suits,” he recalled. The man running the program “was like a father figure to me, because I didn’t know my father,” he added.

So today Mayor Dickens is trying to bring children together across class backgrounds so that they can mingle and lift one another up — and not just in housing.

A national nonprofit called Purpose Built Communities, based in Atlanta, already is working to structure neighborhoods so that people from different class backgrounds interact: “brushing up against one another in very informal ways — sitting together at an orchestra performance or at the science fair or an athletic event,” said Carol R. Naughton, the C.E.O. of the organization.

It’s not only children in the most horrific neighborhoods who would benefit from these kinds of interactions. The Opportunity Insights researchers found that many neighborhoods nationwide are ideally situated for programs that build cross-class connections. They have a map showing which ones.

This is, of course, only one of many evidence-based ways to chip away at poverty. Over time, I’ve come to think that we liberals overemphasize strategies that create income streams, such as welfare, disability or unemployment payments. Such programs have their place and address immediate needs, but we sometimes underappreciate interventions that don’t involve cash transfers but do lay foundations for the longer run, from early childhood programs to skills training, from giving children glasses to supporting parents.

And as this study suggests, some of the best coaches we can find to help struggling children escape poverty may be other children and their families.

