

Gloomy Americans foresee a downhill slide to 2050

January 3 2014, by Connie Cass



Political science student La'Shon Callaway, 19, of Egg Harbor Township, N.J., poses for a photograph as he stands on the campus of The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, in Galloway, N.J., Tuesday, Dec. 31, 2013. Callaway is optimistic that racial discrimination will continue to decline over his lifetime. "People are getting tired of it, and fed up," said Callaway. "They're realizing even if you're not the same color as me, you're still a person and I'm still a person." Ask people to imagine American life in 2050, and you'll get some dreary visions. Whether they foresee runaway technology or runaway government, rampant poverty or vanishing morality, a majority of Americans predict a future worse than today. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)

(AP)—Ask Americans to imagine life in 2050, and you'll get some dreary visions.

Whether they foresee runaway technology or runaway government, rampant poverty or vanishing morality, a majority of Americans predict a future worse than today.

Whites are particularly gloomy: Only 1 in 6 expects better times over the next four decades. Also notably pessimistic are middle-age and older people, those who earn mid-level incomes and Protestants, a new national poll finds.

"I really worry about my grandchildren, I do," says 74-year-old Penny Trusty of Rockville, Maryland, a retired software designer and grandmother of five. "I worry about the lowering of morals and the corruption and the confusion that's just raining down on them."

Even groups with comparatively sunny outlooks—racial and ethnic minorities, the young and the nonreligious—are much more likely to say things will be the same or get worse than to predict a brighter future.

"Changes will come, and some of them are scary," says Kelly Miller, 22, a freshly minted University of Minnesota sports management grad.

She looks forward to some wonderful things, like 3D printers creating organs for transplant patients. But Miller envisions Americans in 2050 blindly relying on robots and technology for everything from cooking dinner to managing their money.

"It's taking away our free choice and human thought," she says. "And there's potential for government to control and regulate what this artificial intelligence thinks."

Overall, 54 percent of those surveyed expect American life to go downhill, while 23 percent think it will improve, according to a December survey from the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Only 21 percent predict life will stay about the same. That minority may be onto something, however.

While no one can say what catastrophes or human triumphs are to come, contentment at a personal level has proven remarkably stable over the past four decades.

Interviews by the federally funded General Social Survey, one of the nation's longest-running surveys of social trends, show Americans' overall happiness as well as satisfaction with their jobs and marriages barely fluctuating since 1972. Those decades spanned the sexual revolution and the women's rights movement, race riots and [civil rights](#) advances, wars from Vietnam through Afghanistan, the birth of the home computer and the smartphone, boom times and hard times.

Despite the recent shift toward negativity, the portion of U.S. residents rating themselves very or pretty happy stayed around 9 out of 10.

"Most people evaluate their lives very stably from year to year," said Tom W. Smith, the director since 1980 of the GSS, conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago.

The GSS, conducted once every two years, will send interviewers back into the field in 2014. The AP-NORC Center survey asked people to rate the change in American life during the period tracked by the GSS, from 1972 to 2012.

A majority—54 percent—say life in America is worse today than four

decades ago.

Those old enough to remember the early '70s are especially nostalgic. Those who say U.S. life has declined are more apt to name politics, the economy, moral values or changes in families as the biggest difference.



Penny Trusty, 74, a retired software designer and grandmother of five, poses with photographs of her grandchildren in her home in Rockville, Md., Thursday, Dec. 26, 2013. Ask people to imagine American life in 2050, and you'll hear some dreary forecasts. Whether they foresee runaway technology or runaway government, rampant poverty or vanishing morality, a majority of Americans predict a future worse than today. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)

The 3 in 10 who think life is better are more likely to point to computers and technology as the big change. Racial and ethnic minorities are apt to cite domestic issues, including civil rights.

Equality

Some of the opinions voiced in the 1972 survey are rarely uttered today.

Back then, nearly 4 in 10 nonblacks agreed with the idea that whites had the right to keep blacks "out of their neighborhoods." A quarter of nonblacks said they wouldn't vote for a black man for president, and 26 percent of all adults wouldn't back a well-qualified woman.

Now the president of the United States is black and a woman is the most-discussed presidential prospect for 2016. The GSS dropped those three questions in the 1990s.

Love and family

In 1972, the [sexual revolution](#) was ablaze. That year the Supreme Court ruled that unmarried couples had a right to birth control.

Still, a third of Americans back then disapproved of a woman working if she had a husband to support her. The GSS no longer bothers asking that one.

Americans today are more worried about divorce and the increasing number of never-married moms. Nearly 4 out of 10 women who gave birth in 2011 were unmarried, according to the census.

Despite the social turmoil, 98 percent of married people today say their union is happy, including two-thirds who are "very happy." And marital fidelity remains an ideal endorsed by nearly all Americans.

The political debate over abortion shows no signs of being resolved, more than 40 years after Roe vs. Wade. Young people today are

somewhat more conservative on the issue than middle-aged Americans.

Gay marriage, on the other hand, appears headed toward future acceptance. Young people are solidly in favor, while opposition is strongest among the oldest Americans.

Money

Recession, a stock market crash, runaway inflation and an oil crisis marred the U.S. economy in the early 1970s. Forty years later, those look like the good times to many.

Before the Great Recession hit in 2007, most people consistently said their family finances were getting better instead of worse. That's not the case anymore. Americans are more likely to consider themselves "lower class" than ever in GSS history—8 percent say that.

Whites are especially pessimistic about their prospects. Black and Hispanic optimism surged after Barack Obama became the first black president in 2008.

Yet overall, about half of Americans still believe their children will have a better standard of living than they do.

"They're going to have to deal with a lot," Bill Hardy, a 67-year-old investment adviser, said of his grown children and three grandkids. "They'll deal with it. Kids today are very smart."

More information: AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research:
www.apnorc.org

Citation: Gloomy Americans foresee a downhill slide to 2050 (2014, January 3) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-01-gloomy-americans-downhill.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.