



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on January 9, 2017

The New York Times: The American Dream Is Slipping Away

According to David Leonhardt, editor of the *New York Times*' "The Upshot," a blog focused on "analytical journalism," [the American Dream is rapidly fading away](#), and Trump won't be able to do anything about it. In fact, according to Leonhardt, Trump may actually make things worse.



People born in 1940 had a better than 90-percent chance of out-earning their parents, according to a study put together by some economists and analyzed by Leonhardt, while those born in 1950 had less than an 80-percent chance of doing so. By the 1960s and '70s, the chances dropped to 60 percent, while people born in 1980 (now turning 37) have only a 50-percent chance of out-earning their parents at the same age.

Raj Chetty, an economics professor at Stanford University, headed up the study, utilizing millions of tax records stretching over decades, which allowed for "linking" of generations based on incomes. The results, wrote Leonhardt, are appalling:

The index is deeply alarming. It's a portrait of an economy that disappoints a huge number of people who have heard that they live in a country where life gets better, only to experience something quite different.

Leonhardt spent the rest of his time lamenting various causes, while nearly completely avoiding the most obvious: the dumbing down of American students in its public school system so they aren't prepared for a workforce that increasingly needs capable workers.

Though he did say that it's the frustrations of those coming out of school woefully unprepared to work that led to the election of Donald Trump:

Their frustrations helps explain not only this year's disturbing presidential campaign but also Americans' growing distrust of nearly every major societal institution, including the federal government, corporate America, labor unions, the news media and organized religion.

In the 1970s, said Leonhardt, it was the energy crisis that caused the American Dream to start to falter. In the 1980s, educational decline was only one part of the reason. It was "a result of globalization, technological change, government policies favoring the well-off and a slowdown in education attainment and the work force's skill level."

Without proof, Leonhardt continued to turn the results of the study to fit his ideology: the American Dream is failing "because the fruits of growth have gone disproportionately to the affluent." And that bodes ill for the Dream under Trump:



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The painful irony of 2016 is that nostalgia and anger over the fading American dream helped elect a president who may put the dream even further out of reach for many people: taking away their health insurance, supporting ineffective school vouchers and showering government largess on the rich.

“The Upshot” is a political blog, and Leonhardt is free to draw any conclusions he wishes. But to dress it up as a serious analysis of what’s happening to the American Dream is deceitful.

James Truslow Adams, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for History, first coined the expression “The American Dream” in his 1931 *The Epic of America*:

[It is] that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement....

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

In 2012, American cultural historian Lawrence Samuel authored *The American Dream: A Cultural History*, echoing Adams:

Upward mobility has served as the heart and soul of the American Dream: the prospect of “betterment” and to “improve one’s lot” for oneself and one’s children ... “Work hard, save a little, send the kids to college so they can do better than you did, and retire happily to a warmer climate” has been the script we have all been handed.

In 2013, pollsters asked Americans, “Do you think that the American Dream has become impossible for most people to achieve?” with those polled split between “yes” and “no.” But when the question was changed to, “Do you agree with the statement that anyone with talent who is willing to work hard and put the effort in can have a successful career and rise to the top, regardless of background?” almost two out of three agreed.

What Leonhardt should have done is quiz the Stanford professor who headed up the study about the matter. He would have learned from the professor that teacher quality has a direct impact on students’ achievement and that current dismissal and seniority rules keep incompetent teachers in the classroom. Professor Chetty testified for the plaintiffs (nine California students who sued the state of California that they weren’t getting a good education) in *Vergara v. California*. The suit alleged that several California statutes regarding teacher tenure, layoff, and dismissal violated the California Constitution by retaining some “grossly ineffective” teachers and thus denying equal protection under the law to students who were assigned to those teachers. Chetty and two others experts presented evidence to show that those students failed to receive an adequate education thanks to the inability of the administration to rid itself of poor teachers.

Instead Leonhardt let his political ideology take over in order to make a case for his conclusions: Trump was elected by Americans frustrated over losing the American Dream, and that lost dream is a result somehow of globalization, technological change, government policies favoring the rich, decline of membership in labor unions, and so forth.

In other words Leonhardt let his liberal ideology get in the way of his thinking, which prevented him from offering reasonable solutions to recovering the American Dream.



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