

Among Us Always

Prior to September 11, the issue of poverty in America was poised to move to the center of the public opinion stage, as the first welfare recipients approached the end of the five-year limit on their federal assistance imposed by the welfare reform law of 1996. That focus of attention shifted, of course, with the terrorist attacks and ensuing war. Like so many other domestic calamities, poverty was, for a time, pushed to the background of the public consciousness, and there has since been little polling on the subject, even as the economy has gone into recession.

Yet the poor are still here, as we are told in Matthew 26:11, among us always.

Some would prefer to believe they were not; the idea of an America divided into “haves” and “have-nots” runs counter to the vision many of us hold dear of a land of opportunity and equality for all. Polls find a majority denying such a division exists, and Americans don’t come close to agreeing on what the meaning of poverty is, at least not in dollar terms.

In fact, the polls show us that our perception of economic hardship is, above all else, a relative thing. For instance, in one survey, 21% of respondents with annual household incomes of less than \$20,000 think of themselves as “haves;” 6% making over \$75,000 call themselves “have-nots.” And while 19% of the former say they find it easy to afford the things they want, exactly the same proportion of the latter finds it difficult.

Indeed, many of the survey responses make one wonder what is going on in some of the nation’s households. How

is it that nearly one in ten people with incomes of more than \$50,000 couldn’t pay their utility bills in the previous year? Is it simple gratitude for a roof over their heads that leads nearly two-thirds of the lowest-income respondents to express satisfaction with their housing, while 28% in the \$50-75,000 group say they’re dissatisfied with their furnishings and appliances?

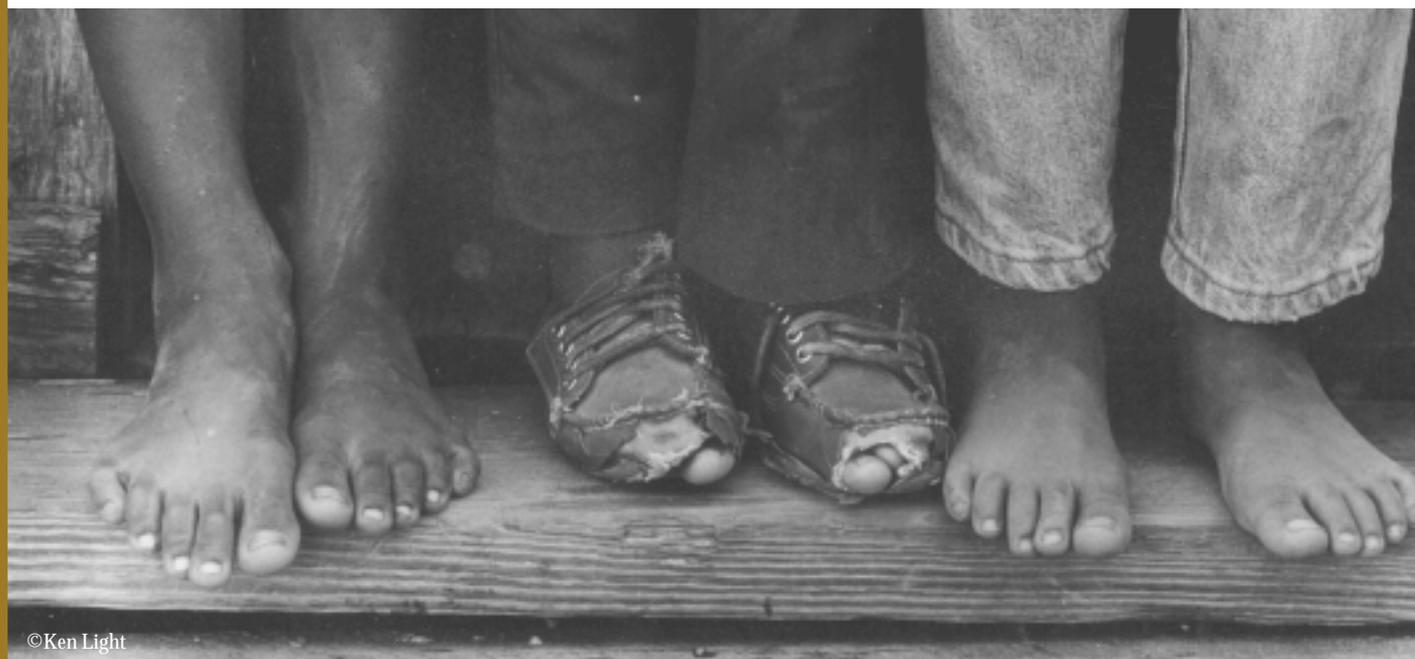
And, given these clearly divergent frames of reference within which we assess our own economic well-being, how troubled should we be that over a third of Americans consider themselves poor?

We would like to think no one has to be poor in America today. Nearly three-quarters of us believe that “most people who want to get ahead can make it if they’re willing to try,” and close to half say poverty is due less to unfortunate circumstance than to people simply not doing enough to help themselves out of it.

But we are not terribly optimistic that poverty in the US can ever be eliminated. And the polls presented here are completely silent on what we think about poverty in other parts of the world, where the frame of reference might be defined, quite literally, by the provision of one’s daily bread, or the possession of a blanket or a tent.

That, however, is a calamity of an entirely different magnitude, and beyond the scope of this examination.

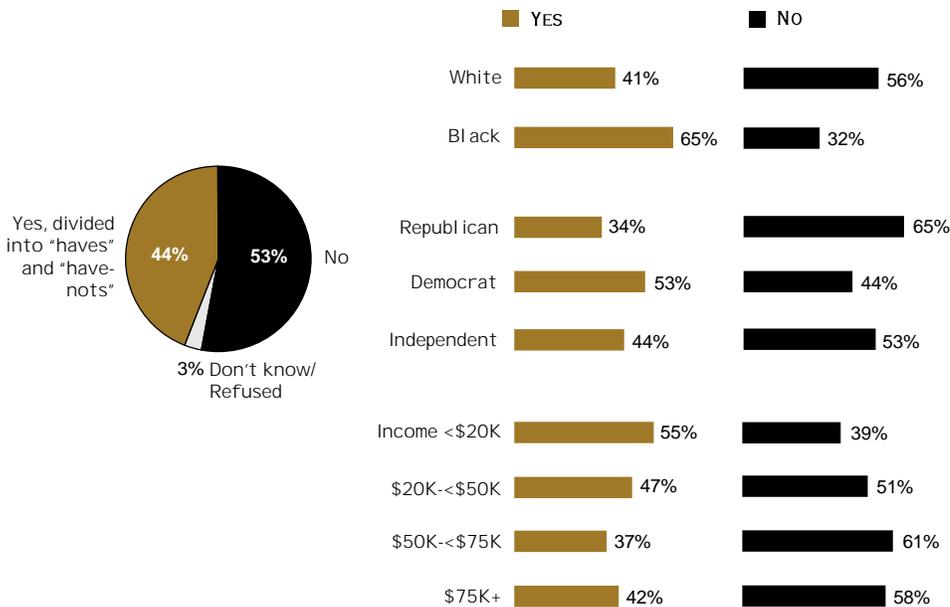
—Lisa Ferraro Parmelee, Editor



Empty Pockets

Question:

Some people think of American society as divided into two groups, the "haves" and the "have-nots," while others think it's incorrect to think of America that way. Do you yourself think of America as divided into haves and have-nots, or don't you think of America that way?

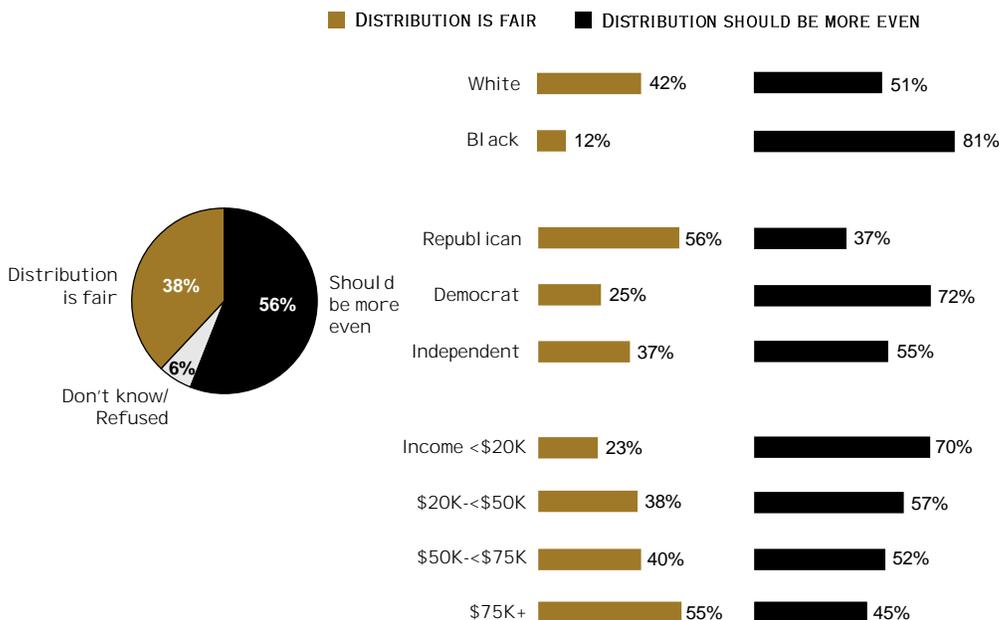


Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, June 13-17, 2001.

Them That's Got Shall Get

Question:

Do you feel that the distribution of money and wealth in this country today is fair, or do you feel that the money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed among a larger percentage of the people?



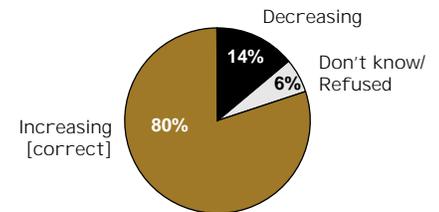
Source: Survey by Gallup/CNN/USA Today, September 11-13, 2000.

For Richer,

Not Poorer

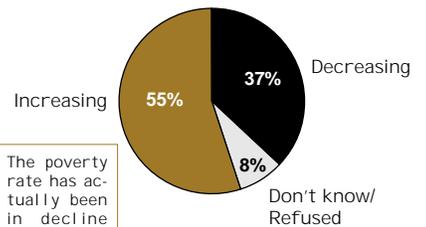
Question:

Would you say that the percentage of Americans who are rich is increasing from year to year, or decreasing from year to year?



Question:

Would you say that the percentage of Americans living below the poverty line is increasing from year to year or decreasing from year to year?

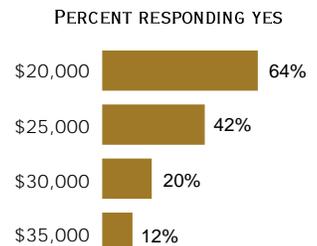


Source: Survey by Gallup/CNN/USA Today, September 11-13, 2000.

What is Poor?

Question:

...Would you consider a family of four making [dollar amount] a year to be poor?



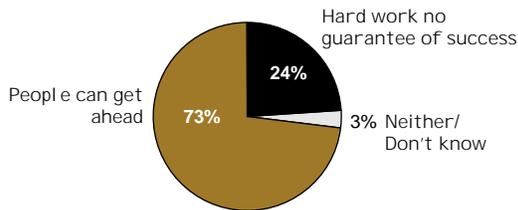
Note: The federal poverty line for 2000 was \$17,603 on average for a family of four.

Source: Survey by National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 4-February 27, 2001.

Big on Bootstraps

Question:

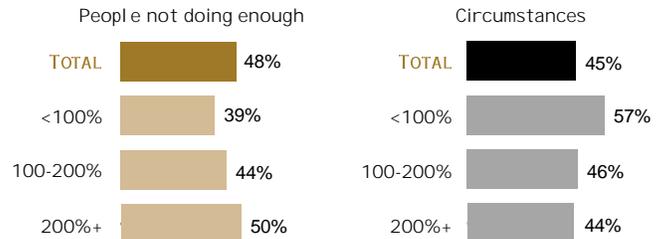
...[T]ell me [which]... statement comes closer to your own views... Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard, [or] hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people.



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, August 24-September 10, 2000.

Questions:

In your opinion, which is the bigger cause of poverty today—that people are not doing enough to help themselves out of poverty, or that circumstances beyond their control cause them to be poor?



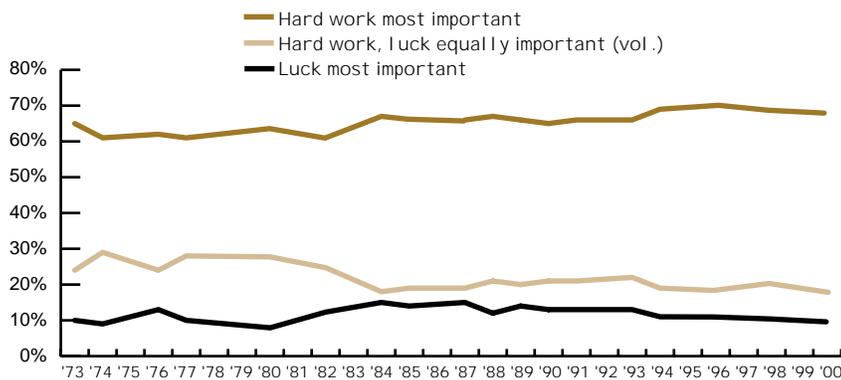
Note: The sample is broken down into those whose income is less than 100%, 100-200%, or more than 200% of the poverty threshold level. The level used is the 2000 US Census Bureau calculation of \$17,603 a year, on average, for a family of four.

Source: Survey by National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 4-February 27, 2001.

An Enduring Belief

Question:

Some people say that people get ahead by their own hard work, others say that lucky breaks or help from other people are more important. Which do you think is most important?

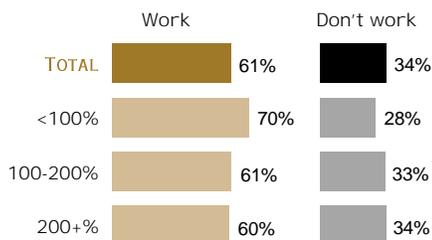


Source: Surveys by the National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey, latest that of February 1-June 25, 2000.

	Hard work	Hard work, luck	Luck
1973	65%	24%	10%
1974	61	29	9
1976	62	24	13
1977	61	28	10
1980	63	28	8
1982	60	25	13
1984	67	18	15
1985	66	19	14
1987	66	19	15
1988	67	21	12
1989	66	20	14
1990	65	21	13
1991	66	21	13
1993	66	22	13
1994	69	19	11
1996	70	18	11
1998	67	22	10
2000	64	24	10

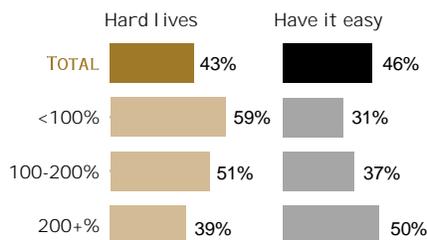
Question:

Do you think that most poor people in the United States are people who work but can't earn enough money, or people who don't work?



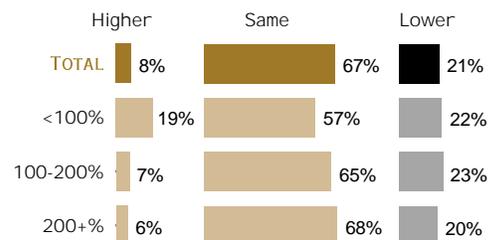
Question:

Which... comes closer to your views? ...Poor people today have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything in return, or poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently?



Question:

In general, do you think poor people have higher, lower, or about the same moral values as other Americans?



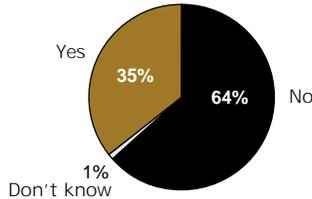
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Among Us Always

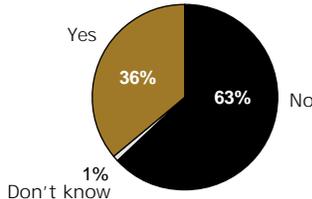
Question:

When you think of your situation today, do you think of yourself as poor or not?



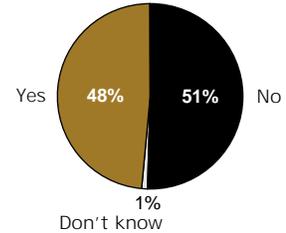
Question:

Thinking about your own family—both your immediate family living here and your other close relatives like aunts, uncles, cousins and so on—as far as you know, is anyone in your family poor?



Question:

Do you have any close friends who are poor?

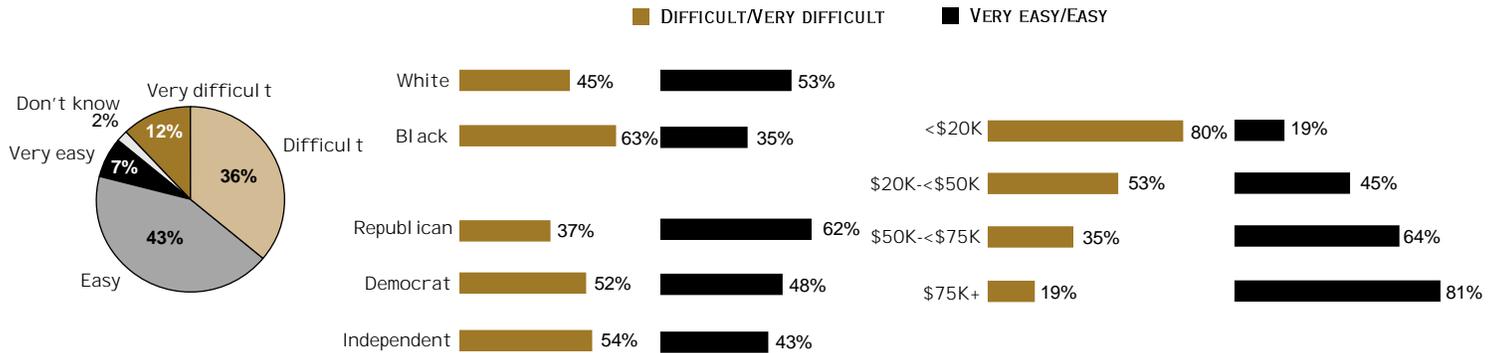


Source: Survey by National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 4-February 27, 2001.

Who is Poor?

Question:

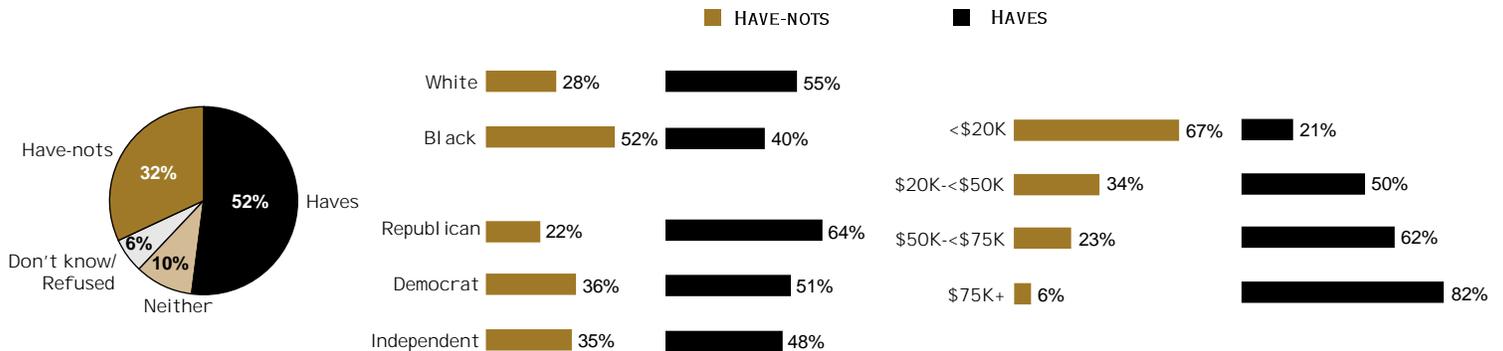
In general, how easy is it for you to afford the things in life that you want—very easy, easy, difficult, or very difficult?



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, June 13-17, 2001.

Question:

If you had to choose, which of these groups are you in, the haves or the have-nots?

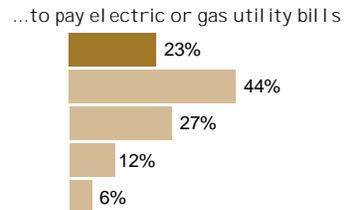
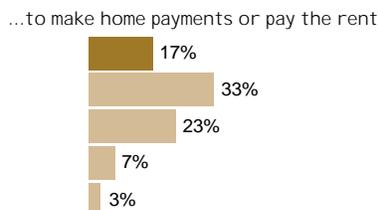
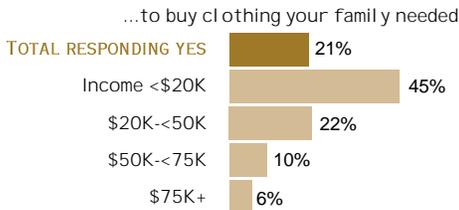
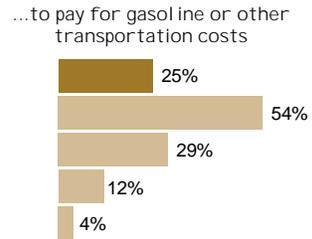
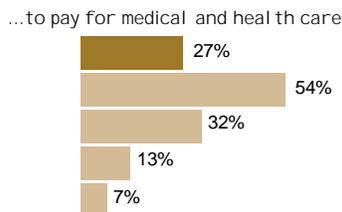
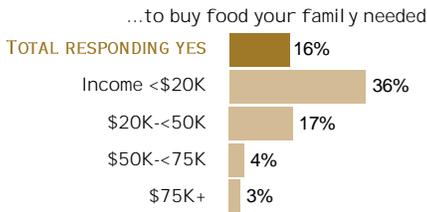


Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, June 13-17, 2001.

Cost of Living

Questions:

Have there been times during the last year when you did not have enough money...?

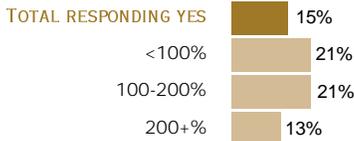


Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, June 13-17, 2001.

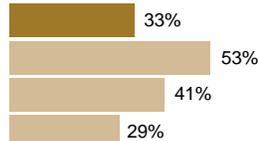
Questions:

In the past year, have you or someone in your immediate family had a serious problem with any of the following?

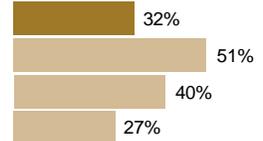
Being unable to find child care or being forced to take your child out of child care because you can't pay



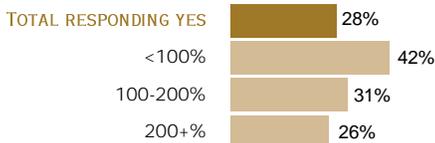
Falling behind in your gas, electric, or phone bills



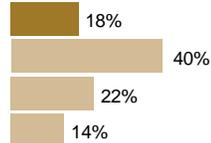
Being unable to get medical care because of the cost



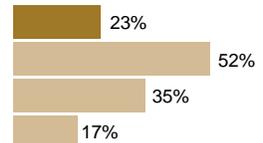
Falling behind in your rent or mortgage payments



Being unable to pay for adequate transportation to get to work or school



Having too little money to buy enough food

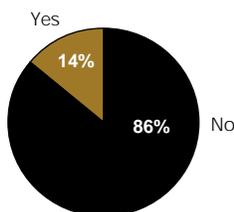


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Question:

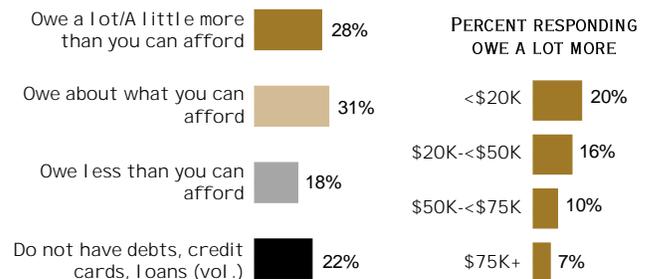
Do you or does anyone in your household work at more than one job?



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, June 13-17, 2001.

Question:

Thinking about the money you owe on credit cards and installment loans, would you say you owe a lot more than you can afford, owe a little more than you can afford, owe about what you can afford, or owe less than you can afford?

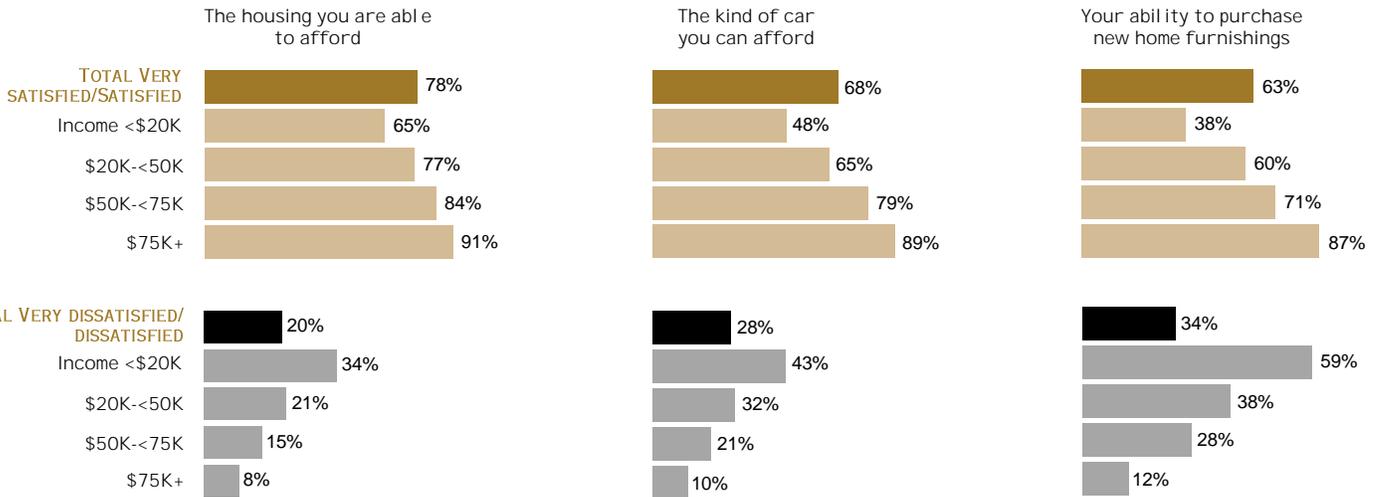


Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, June 13-17, 2001.

Levels of Contentment

Questions:

How satisfied are you with each of the following—very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied?...

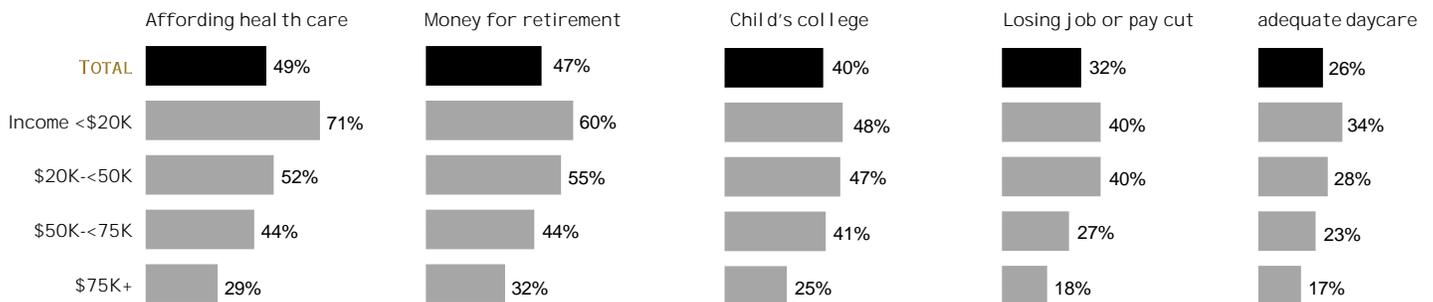


Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, June 13-17, 2001.

Questions:

...How concerned are you, if at all, about...? Are you very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned, or not at all concerned about this?

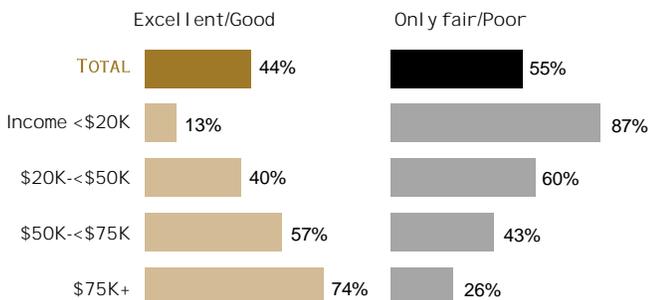
PERCENT RESPONDING VERY CONCERNED



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, June 13-17, 2001.

Question:

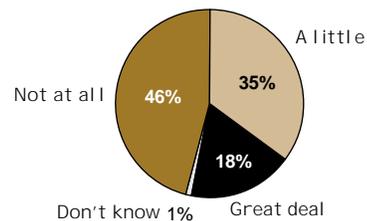
How would you rate your own personal financial situation? Would you say you are in excellent shape, good shape, only fair shape, or poor shape?



Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates/Pew Research Center, June 13-17, 2001.

Question:

Some people tell us that they worry about becoming poor. What do you think? Does the possibility of becoming poor worry you a great deal, worry you a little, or doesn't it worry you at all?

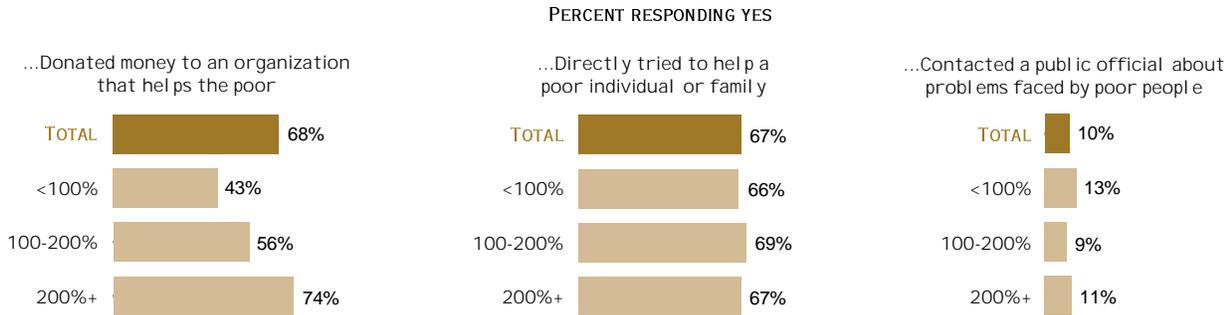


Source: Survey by National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 4-February 27, 2001.

My Brother's Keeper

Questions:

I am going to read you a list of things that some people do and others don't. In the past twelve months have you...?

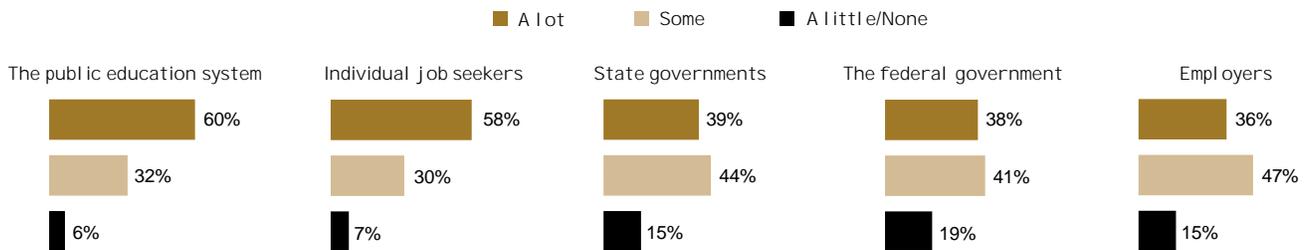


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Help to Help Themselves

Questions:

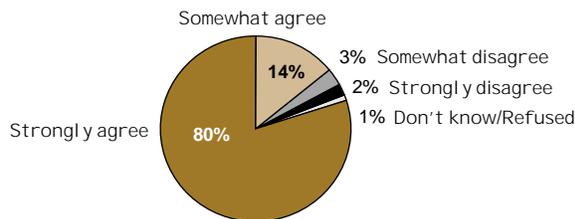
[How much responsibility do each of the following have in making sure that the American workforce has the right skills and enough education to compete in the global economy?] How about... Do they have a lot of responsibility, some, only a little, or no responsibility at all?



Source: Survey by Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates, April 27-30, 2000.

Question:

Please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement... As a country, we should make sure that people who work full time should be able to earn enough to keep their families out of poverty.

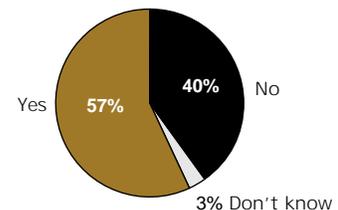


Source: Survey by Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates, April 27-30, 2000.

Willing to Pay

Question:

Would you be willing to pay more in taxes to pay for more... government spending to help the poor?

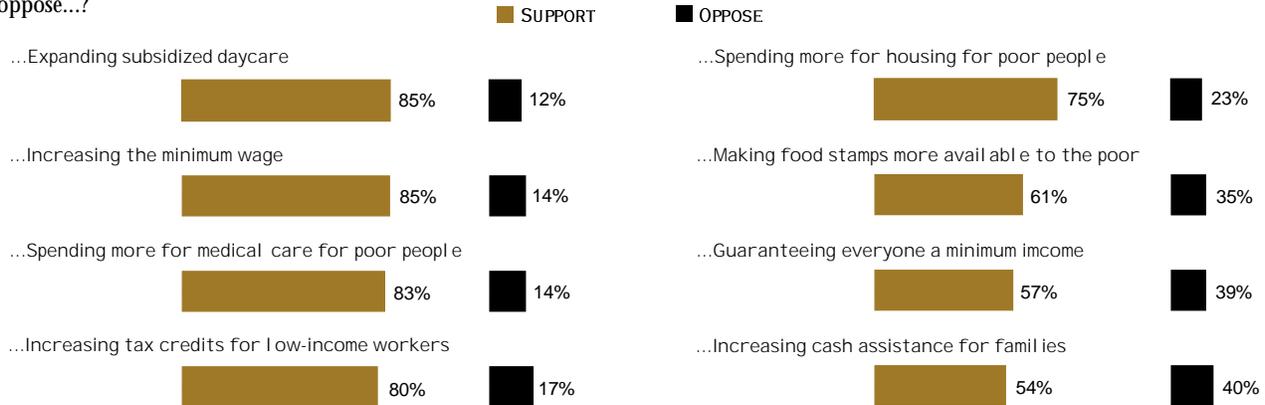


Source: Survey by National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 4-February 27, 2001.

Government Assistance

Questions:

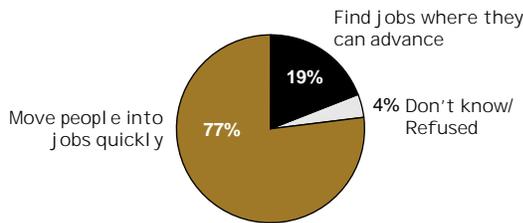
Here is a list of things the government could do to directly help the poor in America. Please tell me if you support or oppose each. Do you support or oppose...?



Source: Survey by National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 4-February 27, 2001.

Question:

...[P]lease tell me which comes closer to how you feel... The government should move people off welfare and into jobs as quickly as possible, even if the jobs offer little opportunity for advancement, because the most important thing is getting people off welfare...[or] The government should help people develop skills and get jobs where they have opportunities for advancement, so that they can be successful in the workforce and not need government assistance in the future.

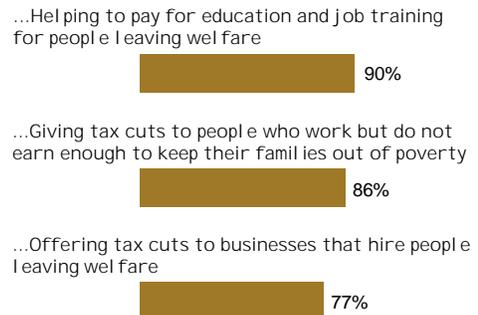


Source: Survey by Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates, April 27-30, 2000.

Questions:

...For each, please tell me if you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose this idea...

PERCENT RESPONDING STRONGLY OR SOMEWHAT SUPPORT

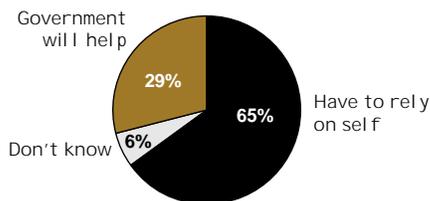


Source: Survey by Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates, April 27-30, 2000.

Own Two Feet

Question:

Do you feel the government will help you if you fall on bad times, or do you think you'll have only yourself to rely on?

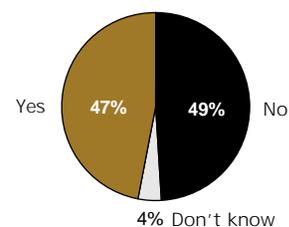


Source: Survey by National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 4-February 27, 2001.

Perhaps Someday

Question:

If the government were willing to spend whatever it thought was necessary to eliminate poverty in the United States, do you think that this is something that could be accomplished, or not?



Source: Survey by National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 4-February 27, 2001.