A New AEI Survey on Communities, Neighborliness, Loneliness, and the American Dream

On February 5, 2019, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) released a new national survey on the American dream. The authors were AEI scholars Ryan Streeter, who focuses on the role of civil societies and communities in public policy; Karlyn Bowman, AEI’s public opinion expert; Sam Abrams, who focuses on US civic and political culture, and researcher Eleanor O’Neil. The University of Chicago’s NORC (formerly known as the National Opinion Research Center) collected the data for AEI. The new survey found that beneath the surface of the nation’s social divisions lies a more optimistic storyline of life in America . . . [showing] that people still trust in the goodness of their communities, believe in the American dream, and prioritize family and freedom over materialism.

Bottom line: We are not as divided as we think we are. After analyzing the data, the authors found that because opinion polls ask specific questions about divisive issues, the American people have come to believe that they have grown more polarized politically and culturally. However, when Americans are surveyed more holistically (i.e., when asked about the big picture), they reply that they are actually pretty satisfied with how things are going. Specifically:

- The survey finds that 73 percent of Americans are satisfied with the state of their communities, compared to 43 percent who feel the same way about the country.

- People largely draw their sense of community and identity from friends, neighbors, and hometowns, rather than ideologies or ethnic identities. Seventy-five percent say they get a sense of community from their city, and 71 percent say the same about their neighborhood, compared to 64 percent who say they get a sense of community from their political ideology and 58 percent from their ethnic identity. Identity politics apparently has its limits.

- Significant majorities in every demographic group (age, race, income, etc.) say they are satisfied with life in the community where they live and rate it good or excellent. Most percentages on these issues hover around 75 percent.

- The so-called loneliness epidemic is probably overblown. About a third of Americans report feeling lonely sometimes (though the percentage saying they are lonely often is under 10 percent), but of this third, about 75 percent still say they have someone to whom they are close and someone to rely on. Because there is a range of questions on belonging and loneliness, the survey’s data on loneliness are more in-depth than what has appeared in the many articles that have made news recently.

- Americans of all demographic groups believe being free to live your life and having a rewarding family life are more essential to the American dream than owning a home, becoming wealthy, or even having a better life than their parents. About eight in 10 Americans believe they are living the dream or are on their way to achieving it.

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