

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Most young people want some version of the American Dream, but they're pessimistic about their ability to achieve it. That was a key finding in a new survey published by the Center for Scholars and Storytellers at UCLA. Young respondents say they are worried that uncertainty in the job market, the affordability of education and healthcare, lack of social and financial support and political barriers would keep them from achieving the American Dream and prevent them from achieving happiness. Joining me today to discuss the American Dream Report is Dr. Yalda T. Uhls, Founding CEO of the Center for Scholars and Storytellers. Uhls starts by sharing a surprising finding in the survey.

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls:

We actually had a different hypothesis going into the study. We thought maybe they were redefining the American Dream and thinking perhaps the American Dream meant clean air or community stuff, but in fact they still believe in the American Dream. Maybe not believe in it, but they want the American Dream. Everybody wants to succeed in the way that their family did or even more than their family did, but they don't believe that they can achieve it, and that is based on the reality of their lives. There is such income and inequality, it is just increasing. They also don't believe that the system works. They don't believe that politics work, education is broken.

The things that are meant to be able to lift us up and get you on a path of economic stability, unfortunately is not really prevalent in today's society, in particular from those from lower income families.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I noticed that the number one barrier is that economic barrier as you mentioned. So the job market, the economy, the generation or family wealth, do they feel like they are just not a part of that in any way?

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls:

Yeah, I mean I think it's homeownership with real estate just being more and more expensive and particular in urban areas, that has traditionally been a way to accumulate wealth and that feels out of reach. Even for privileged children, upper income children, it is really, really challenging to be able to buy property in today's real estate. As I said, education, which traditionally you would get a college degree and you'd come out of college and you'd be able to get a job. And one, it's much harder to get into college, a four-year college and two, it's not guaranteed of a job. There are a lot of people graduate from college and can't get a job. My daughter is considering getting an MBA. She's talking to people who have an MBA and can't get a job.

So all of these places that our culture has invested in or have invested in telling young people the narrative and everyone, the American people, "Come here, work hard, get a good education, and you'll be able to buy a nice home and provide for your family." We're seeing that isn't working and so they're disenfranchised and disengaged with it.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Talking about that group that is in a four year school right now, as you're talking about, that education is not affordable. There's been a shift in one of my recent podcasts, was about that skills first hiring part of

it, so we're talking about 33% of the population who may get a four year degree and still don't feel like they can find a job. And then there's the other, the 67% who have maybe a high school diploma, if that, or some credentials, and I'm sure that group in the Gen Z subgroup here, I'm sure that they probably feel even more disenfranchised.

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls:

Absolutely. And we have not really promoted vocation schools and different pathways to a solid economic lifestyle and we've also, with unions breaking up and with less sort of these pathways of jobs where you stay for most of your life, that's all gone. Tech has really taken over. AI is pretty scary, so it means a lot of people are wondering, "Where can I go?" And there's still a service economy. There still are different things that are needed, but the pay is so low with food costing more, inflation, with housing being so expensive, you really can't make ends meet in those jobs. And I think it's kind of a norm now that many young people, the young people that work for me, they have maybe two or three jobs. They have their jobs and then they have their side hustles so that they can just be able to make ends meet.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I also noticed in the study that the idea of a lack of support and social capital mentorship, guidance exposure, maybe to these careers that will lead to economic mobility, is a big issue to the young people that you spoke to.

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls:

Yeah, I mean, they don't really feel like they can get the support they need. I mean, I think that's also indicative of the breakdown of the system. They don't feel like they can trust the system and they don't feel like they can trust the people that are supposed to be guiding them. Philanthropy has tried to come in, but it doesn't have enough resources to be able to really fill the gap. We just don't have as strong family units. It's as an individualistic society. We don't have just the support around us that we used to have many, many years ago and other cultures do. So in Europe people don't make very much money, but there's such a robust social system to support people for when they're struggling and school is free and we don't have any of that.

So on top of salaries not being high enough and pathways for work not being available and being very hard to get into college, all of these things that would in the past in America, may have set you up for doing better than your family, they're not as available and we don't have any of the mechanisms that they have in other countries to support young people.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Your study shows that people in Gen Z, they take this personally, it seems. So they don't feel like the American Dream is achievable for them, but they think it is achievable for many people. Is that correct?

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls:

I wouldn't say they think it's achievable for many people, but they think it's achievable for more people than the people around them. They see it. It's very in your face with tech wealth, some of the people that just have become these billionaires and incredibly, incredibly successful. So they see examples of people achieving the American Dream, but it doesn't seem like they can do what these people have done.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So that leads to a very good point, that a lot of the perception around what success is in achieving the American Dream, seems to have come from social media and your organization is all about storytelling. So the story that is being told on social media is influencing young people to think, "Ah, this person's a success and this is the pathway to it." Is that a correct assumption?

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls:

I do think social medias, and they said that's where they get most of their information, actually, about the American Dream. I do think social media pushes, there's so many get-rich-quick schemes on social media. There's so many things. Everybody is portraying themselves as having more than they really do and when you're young and you don't have the life experience to think, "Well, is that real, or maybe they are putting on a game face?" You may believe it more. I think that social media ends up really selling a lifestyle. It's funny, because a lot of it is sort of also like the van lifestyle or the, do it yourself lifestyle. It's not necessarily, make a lot of money. Some of it is, but it is these lifestyles that are aspirational that are not really real. They are the van lifestyle. What the person doesn't see is what's behind the scenes essentially, and it seems so idealistic, but the reality is you're sleeping a little cramped bed, you can't get internet, all these things.

Content has always done that. Movies have always sold aspirational stories. TV often does it too. Magazines are constantly selling aspirational stories. Advertising is based on that. "If you do this, you will have more. You will look like this person." It's nothing new, it's just more accessible and it's all over and in many different domains because everyone can do this and they can look at it all the time on their phones anywhere. So it can really influence the way someone feels about themselves and the way that they feel about their ability to be like someone else. In psychology, we have a term... I'm a developmental psychologist. We have a term called social comparison.

Not a very complicated term, but it is a theory that was developed 70 years ago about how we compare ourselves to others to understand how to be in the world, and there's upward social comparison and downward social comparison. And upward social comparison where you're looking at someone that's achieved a great deal can often make you feel worse because you feel that you can never get there. Every once in a while it can inspire you, but a lot of times it can make you feel worse and you see a lot of that on social media.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And also I know there's the term, confirmation bias, that there's a lot of people who may go through their social media. I think that would also reinforce it if it's this constant churn of, "Look how successful this person is. I'm never going to get there. I'm never going to get there. I'm never going to get there." That gets to the point of happiness, which I know you also looked at in your study and that so many young people, so many people in Gen Z are saying, "It's going to be harder for me to be happy."

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls:

Yeah. We did another study that we collected that data in August and we asked young people out of 15 things what was their number one goal? And the number one goal was to be safe. They don't feel safe. We're in an age of uncertainty. I mean, life is uncertain, so it's not any different than it ever was, but it's in your face all the time. We just lived, where I'm at in Los Angeles, through the Palisades fires and the Eaton fires, everything, 5,500 homes burned down. In the Palisades, everybody lost everything in the blink of an eye and with the political climate and climate change issues everywhere, school shootings

and all that information being thrown at us, it feels very scary. Young people are reacting. It's also the Maslow's pyramid, where the psychologist Maslow came up with a theory of you have to feel safe first before you can start actualizing yourself. So you have to have safety and then have food and shelter and then community, but we can't have those other things or focus on them until you feel safe and they don't feel safe.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I also found it interesting that while young audiences really get their storytelling off of TikTok or Instagram, even Facebook to some degree, they want television and films to be more realistic, which I find interesting that it goes to this idea they don't know if they can achieve happiness or the American Dream and they're feeling bad about what they see and then they want TV to be more realistic, though. They don't want it all to be perfect, right? Tell us a little bit about that.

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls:

Well, I think that in some ways, as I'm thinking about it, it's a little bit also a reaction to... Well, traditional storytelling has been very aspirational, and I used to be in the movie business. I was a senior VP at MGM and I made movies and we always were trying to tell these positive stories of how you can lift yourself up and the American Dream is actually such an essential part of storytelling. We did a study actually about three years ago where we looked at how the American Dream showed up in the top 10 television shows, and we looked at the lead characters and we saw that the American Dream was quite present, overly present in the shows and particular for people of color.

So the people of color in these shows achieved the American Dream three times more than the white characters. And the storytellers, I'm sure, wanted to show Cosby Show, if you think of it, somebody who's achieved. They didn't want to show this negative story about people of color, but the problem is, and this is what happens with social medias, if all you're seeing are these people that are achieving so much and you're just figuring out life, you're like, "What's wrong with me? Why can't I achieve that? What am I doing wrong?" Our suggestion was to also show the systems that put roadblocks, that make it harder for someone, for example, who has to take care of their siblings or they have a single parent with no money, or they only can take the bus or their Internet's bad.

These issues that really end up impacting people who have less resources in their path to try to get stable. If we can show that then... But still show some people will triumph and there are always people who do actually achieve quite a bit, then I think it'll be more relatable. They actually also want hopeful stories. That's what they've also said. They want to feel like there's hope in the world. But they don't want something that's just fake. One of our biggest findings from our Teens in Screen studies was that they want to see more platonic relationships and the press ran away with it and was like, "They don't want sex." And that wasn't it. They still want to see sexuality and even heterosexuality, but they want to see it as more authentic and real versus, "Oh, I meet the person. We go on two dates and then we have perfect sex and everything's great."

Or always a love triangle that things that just don't always exist in the real world. They want to see more authenticity.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That comes down to the, which you've touched on, the financial situation. So yes, they have to take the bus or maybe somebody is working two jobs. There's a lot of stories out there of doctors, a lot of TV shows about doctors and a lot of TV shows about lawyers, people who have reached a certain

professional level and you don't really see much about someone who maybe is working construction or maybe working at a pharmacy and maybe they're happy.

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls:

Exactly. Yeah. We did a lot of work on economic diversity in the beginning of our center, and we talked to a lot of different companies. We even did an event for the TV Academy about it, about portraying people from lower income households. And we see that in our data still, and in fact, I think it was in the American Dream Report, that they want to see more stories with economic diversity. And it's funny, one executive was like, "Oh, this is really sad." He said, "Poverty is depressing." It is, obviously. But at the same time, I was like, "You know, sometimes I think somebody with a really strong family who may not have a lot of money is probably happier than you, VP in the entertainment business." In the Heights portrayed really a happy group of people that some of these cultures have strong familial ties that kind of make the poverty or the lower income bracket not as depressing.

In fact, we now know social capital is one of the most important things you need to have peace and happiness, and sometimes the social capital is much stronger in those households. So yeah, we have a youth program and the youth did a study about colleges. They're always at some fancy college. They're never young people at a community college. They're never at a vocation school. You said, 67% aren't going. Their lives aren't being portrayed, and then you think there's just one thing to do, and if you're not achieving it feels really bad.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What would the American Dream really look like to young people today?

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls:

Well, I would like the American Dream to look like a place where you could make a living, have a family, have a community of friends, have affordable housing, have a walkable city. I know a lot of young people who really don't want to live in places where they can't walk or bike and want to have children, if you want to have children. A lot of people say they don't want to have children, not because they don't feel love and desire for a kid, but because worried about this world, where we didn't have to worry about gun violence. Things like that, that I think I would like young people to want that for the American Dream.

As I said, they came across that they still want the traditional American Dream. I mean, surveys are very challenging to get deeper, so you can only ask a question and get an answer. If we did focus groups, maybe we would've found deeper meaning around these dreams. But the American Dream is still what they say they want, is still the way that social media, Hollywood, overarching narratives from the political system are selling, that everyone can achieve it and that there's no broken systems. That's what they say they want. We'll see if they can start to believe more in their own capabilities and the capabilities of our culture helped support them, and then maybe come from a place of, "What do I really need to feel good?" It doesn't have to just be money.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yalda, thank you very much.

Dr. Yalda T. Uhls:

Thank you so much for having me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was Dr. Yalda T. Uhls, founding CEO of the Center For Scholars and Storytellers at UCLA. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief at WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.