

DREAM ON
General Discussion Questions

Just before starting the film, ask viewers to consider the following questions to watch more proactively and be prepared to engage in discussion after the credits roll:

1. What does the American Dream mean to you?
2. How many of you think the American Dream is alive and well in the United States?

After the film, begin discussion with general questions about the American Dream:

1. Has the film changed your view of the current state of the American Dream, and if so, how?
2. The American Dream is predicated on the promise that if you work hard and play by the rules, you will get ahead. Has this promise been broken?
3. Is the American Dream no longer attainable for many Americans, and if so, why?
4. What policies have endangered the American Dream, and what policies could revitalize it?
5. There is an endless ideological debate between those on the left who think the American Dream can be revitalized with more progressive taxation and more government spending versus those on the right who favor cutting taxes and government regulation. How do we get beyond the partisan paralysis to restore the American Dream?
6. “Personal responsibility” has been touted as an important American virtue by presidents from Reagan to Obama. Is this perspective something the left and right agree upon? Is there a danger that Horatio Alger success stories lead some people to blame the poor for their predicament?
7. If viewers largely believe the American Dream is increasingly out of reach, ask them why they and many of the subjects in the film still believe in it.
8. Statistics show that Blacks and Latinos in the U.S. believe in the American Dream more than whites, even though they experience greater poverty and immobility. What does this phenomenon tell us about the American Dream?
9. If Tocqueville could return to America today, what would surprise him most about equality, opportunity, and social mobility in the U.S. today?

Questions about social mobility

1. What are the chances that a person born in the bottom 20% of the income spectrum can get to the top 20%, and how have these odds changed over time?
2. For many low-wage earners like Fiora Vasquez and Tina McCoy, there has been no upward mobility for generations. What are the traditional ladders out of poverty for working families? Are they still accessible?
3. Has it become more likely that if you were born to a family at the top of the economic ladder, you will remain there?
4. What choices determine a person’s ability to move up the economic ladder? Is the “choice of who your parents are” the most important choice you can make, and has that phenomenon changed?

5. Will this be the first generation of Americans to fare worse than their parents?
6. Is the reduction of mobility due to structural economic forces beyond our control like automation, globalization, and the shift from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy? Or, is the decline in mobility due to policies we adopted?
7. What impact does diminished mobility have on our economic growth? What impact does it have on our health, happiness, and civic well-being?
8. What role has education traditionally played in economic mobility, and what inequalities in educational opportunity seem to be stifling mobility?

Questions about Income Inequality

1. The top 400 Americans have as much wealth as the bottom 150 million. What happened to Tocqueville's perception that Americans enjoyed more equality than any country on earth?
2. How does the U.S. compare to other countries with respect to income inequality? What countries now have greater equality and what countries does the U.S. now resemble?
3. Tocqueville worried that the concentration of property and wealth in the hands of a few would diminish democracy. Has his fear been realized?
4. How has the growth of income inequality manifested itself? In executive compensation? In the share of wealth owned by the top 1%? In workers' wages?
5. Is income inequality a result of forces beyond our control, or did we create it?
6. If we live in a democracy, how has such a small group at the top been able to capture most of the wealth instead of the much larger middle class?
7. How is increasing income inequality related to the influence of money in politics today? Can the influence of money in politics be reduced?
8. In the past, productivity gains were always shared with labor. When and why did the benefits of increased productivity cease to show up in worker compensation?
9. What danger does rising income inequality pose for our society?
10. Have there been other historic periods of high income inequality? What happened in the past when wealth was concentrated in the hands of the few?
11. Are you worried that income inequality will be catastrophic for the country, or are you optimistic that we can increase shared prosperity?
12. Americans traditionally have not been terribly troubled by income inequality as long as everyone had a chance of moving up the economic ladder. How has growing income inequality affected upward mobility?
13. There's a difference between the policies and the politics that are needed to bring back upward mobility. Do politics stand in the way of adopting policies that could increase social mobility?