

More Americans see middle-class status slipping



] Jae C. Hong, Associated Press

Delegates to the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, N.C., in 2012 watch Bill Clinton speak.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

April 2, 2014

WASHINGTON -- A sense of belonging to the middle class occupies a cherished place in America. It conjures images of self-sufficient people with stable jobs and pleasant homes working toward prosperity.

Yet nearly five years after the recession ended, more people are coming to the painful realization that they're no longer part of it.

They are former professionals now stocking shelves at grocery stores, retirees struggling with rising costs and people working part-time jobs but desperate for full-time pay. Such setbacks have emerged in economic statistics for several years. Now they're affecting how Americans think of themselves.

Since 2008, the number of people who call themselves middle class has fallen by nearly a fifth, according to a survey in January by the Pew Research Center, from 53 percent to 44 percent. Forty percent now identify as either lower-middle or lower class compared with just 25 percent in February 2008.



According to Gallup, the percentage of Americans who say they're middle or upper-middle class fell 8 points between 2008 and 2012, to 55 percent.

And the most recent National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey found that the vast proportion of Americans who call themselves middle or working class, though still high at 88 percent, is the lowest in the survey's 40-year history. It's fallen 4 percentage points since the recession began in 2007.

The trend reflects a widening gap between the richest Americans and everyone else, one that's emerged gradually over decades and accelerated with the recent recession. The difference between the income earned by the wealthiest 5 percent of Americans and by a median-income household has risen 24 percent in 30 years, according to the Census Bureau.

Individuals and families who feel they've slipped from the middle class are likely to spend and borrow less. Such a pullback, in turn, squeezes the economy, which is fueled mainly by consumer spending.

"How they think is reflected in how they act," said Richard Morin, a senior editor at the Pew Research Center.

People are generally slow to acknowledge downward mobility. Many regard themselves as middle class even if their incomes fall well above or below the average. Experts say the rise in Americans who feel they've slipped below the middle class suggests something deeply rooted.

More people now think "it's harder to achieve" the American dream than thought so several decades ago, said Mark Rank, a sociology professor at Washington University in St. Louis.

Americans' self-perception coincides with data documenting a shrinking middle class: The percentage of households with income within 50 percent of the median - one way to define a broad middle class - fell from 50 percent in 1970 to 42 percent in 2010.

Roughly 8.4 percent of respondents to the National Opinion Research Center's survey, last conducted in 2012, said they consider themselves lower class. That's the survey's highest percentage ever, up from 5.4 percent in 2006. NORC is a social science research organization at the University of Chicago.

AP: Copyright 2014 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.



**PREMIUM
OUTLETS®**
5 Area Locations
Gilroy • Livermore • Napa • Petaluma • Vacaville

[CLICK HERE FOR EXCLUSIVE COUPONS](#)

HEARST *newspapers*

© 2014 The Hearst Corporation