

Once Again, the Future Ain't What It Used to Be

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE MAY 2, 2006 12:00 NOON EDT

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A Social Trends Report

Once Again, the Future Ain't What It Used to Be

The idea that each generation of children will grow up to be better off than the one that preceded it has always been a part of the American dream. But barely a third of adults expect things to work out that way for today's children, according to a new Pew Research Center survey.

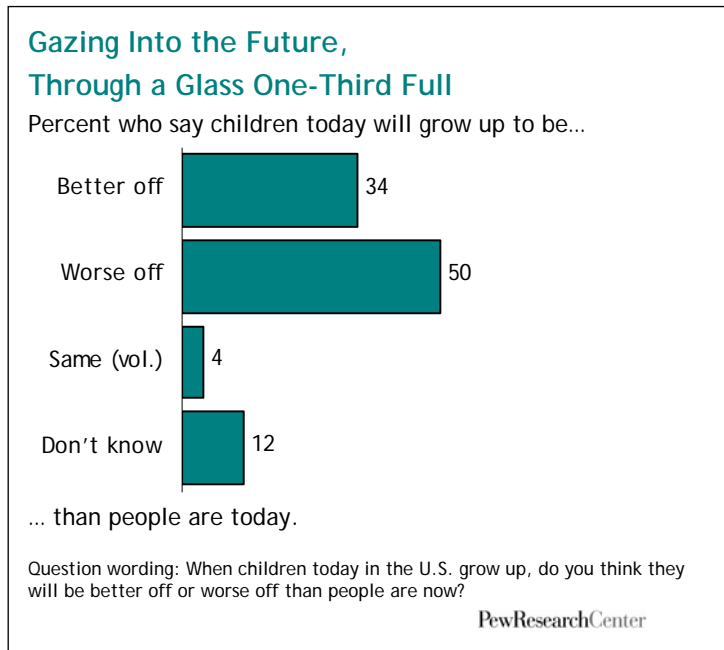
About half of adults (50%) say that today's children will grow up to be worse off than people are now. A third (34%) say they'll be better off and most of the rest say they aren't sure.

The only major racial or ethnic group which doesn't buy into this pessimistic view of the next generation's future is one that has been much in the news lately – Hispanics. Even though Latino adults are less satisfied than whites and blacks are about the quality of their own lives today, they're more optimistic than both other groups about the future of American children.

The downbeat assessment that much of the country shares about the future of today's children is by no means unprecedented. A dozen years ago people had roughly the same negative view that they have now. But as the economy boomed in the 1990s, America's faith in the future rose with it. By 1999, a majority (55%) believed that children would grow up to be better off than their parents, while just over a third (36%) said they would be worse off.¹

Then came the attacks of September 11, 2001 – and the onset of a new mood of wariness about the future. In 2002, only about four-in-ten (41%) said they expected today's children to be better off when they grow up than people are today. And now, that number has dropped still further – to 34%, about where it was in 1994.

The question in the Pew survey – “When children today in the U.S. grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off than people are now?” – was posed to a nationally representative sample of 2,250 randomly selected adults in a telephone survey conducted from Feb. 8 through March 7, 2006. The question doesn't define what “better off” or “worse off” mean; this is left for respondents to determine for themselves.



¹ Note that the wording of the question asked in the 1990's varies somewhat from the wording of the question asked since 2002. In the earlier surveys the question read: “Looking to the future, do you think most children in this country will grow up to be better off or worse off than their parents?” In 2002 and 2006 the question read: “When children today in the U.S. grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off than people are now?”

It bears noting that the question wording refers to “children in the U.S.” and not to “your own children.” Other surveys taken through the years have found respondents to be more optimistic about their own children’s future than they are about the future of American children in general.²

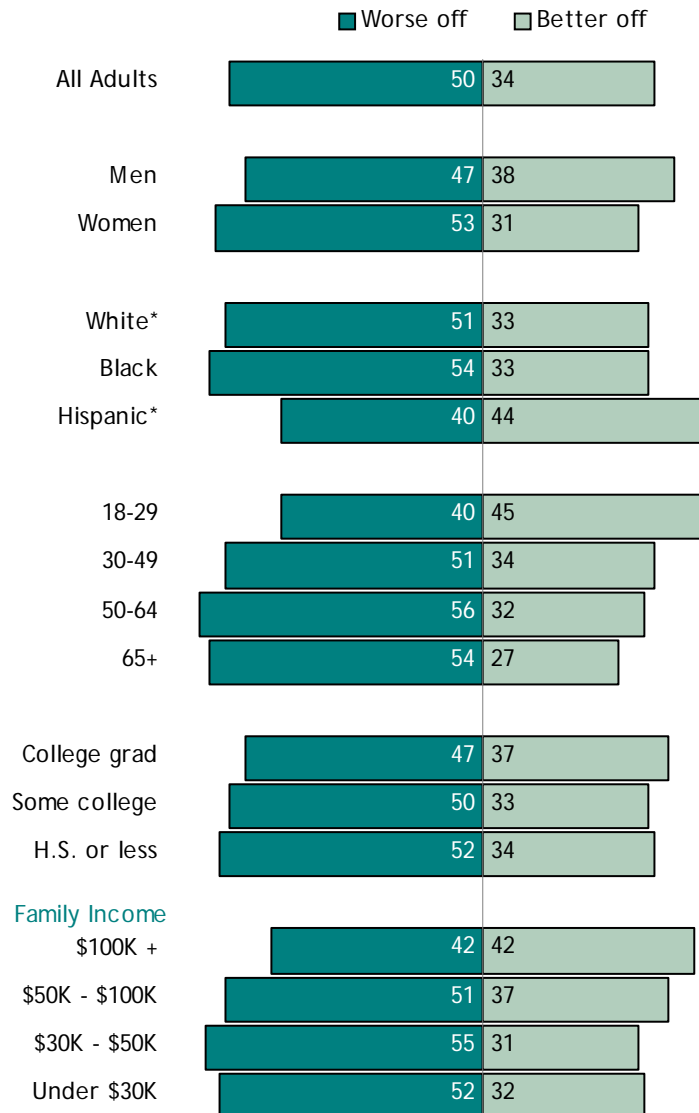
The Old Are More Downbeat than the Young

Now as in 2002, older Americans have the least faith in the future of today’s children. By a two-to-one margin, people ages 65 and over say today’s children will be worse off when they grow up than people are now. By contrast, a slight plurality (45%) of 18-to-29 year olds say kids today will grow up better off, while 40% of people in this age group say they will be worse off. (Looking at even younger age groups, a 2005 Gallup survey of teenagers found even more optimism. By a margin of nearly three-to-one, teenagers are optimistic rather than pessimistic about the world that their own children will one day live in, the Gallup survey found.)³

As for other groupings in the 2006 Pew survey, women are more pessimistic than men about the future of today’s young; the low-income are more pessimistic than the well-to-do; Democrats are more pessimistic than Republicans; and those whose families have been in this country two generations or more are more pessimistic than immigrants.

Views on the Future of Today’s Children, by Demographic Group

When children today in the U.S. grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off than people are now?



* Whites include all non-Hispanic whites. Hispanics are of any race.

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² See “Optimism Reigns, Technology Plays Key Role.” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. October 24, 1999. <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=51>. Also see Newsweek Poll. August 23-25, 1994.

³ “Teens Look Ahead With Youthful Optimism.” Gallup Poll. April 26, 2005. <http://poll.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?ci=16012>

One group which has registered an especially sharp decline in optimism over the past four years has been the college educated (“better off” down 14 percentage points since 2002; “worse off” up 9 percentage points). Other declines have occurred among the middle-aged and the middle-income.

One of the more reliable predictors of whether someone is downbeat or upbeat about the next generation’s future has to do with how that person rates his or her life right now. Those who say the quality of their own life is fair or poor are more likely to be downbeat about the future prospects of today’s young than are those who rate their own life as good or excellent.

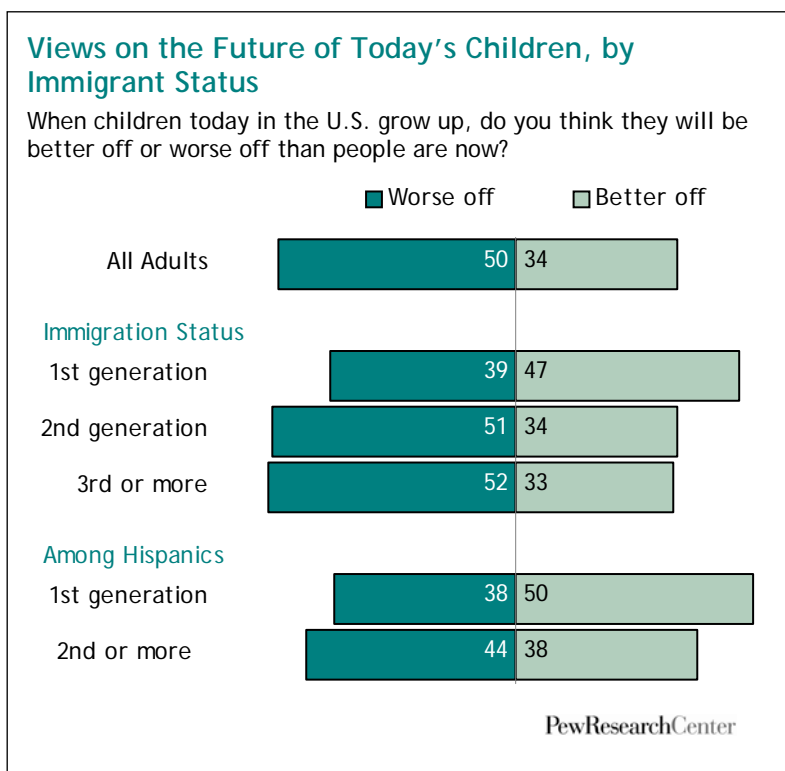
The Hispanic Exception

Hispanics are the only major racial or ethnic group in the country that tilts toward optimism about the future of today’s children. Some 44% of Hispanics say that today’s children will grow up to be better off than people are now, while 40% say today’s children will be worse off.

By contrast, half of all non-Hispanic whites say things will be worse for today’s children when they grow up, while just a third (33%) says things will be better. Blacks are even more pessimistic: 54% say things will be worse and just 33% say things will be better. (There were not enough Asian-American or other ethnic/racial group respondents in the sample to permit meaningful assessments of their views on this question).

The relative optimism of Hispanics about the future of U.S. children is especially notable because Hispanics register less overall satisfaction with the quality of their own lives today (64% say it’s good or excellent) than do either non-Hispanic whites (86% good or excellent) or blacks (76% good or excellent). Still, they’re more optimistic about the next generation’s prospects.

One likely explanation is that so many Hispanics are immigrants – and immigrants throughout history have tended to be upwardly mobile people with faith in the future. In the 2006 Pew survey, half of all first-generation Hispanics say that today’s children in the United States will be better off than people are now, while 38% of second- and later-generation Hispanics say that.



In a separate 2002 survey of Latinos by the Pew Hispanic Center, respondents were extremely upbeat about the upward mobility of *Hispanic* children in this country. More than three-quarters of all Hispanics in that survey said they were confident that Hispanic children would get a better education (80%) and better-paying jobs (76%) than they themselves have now.⁴

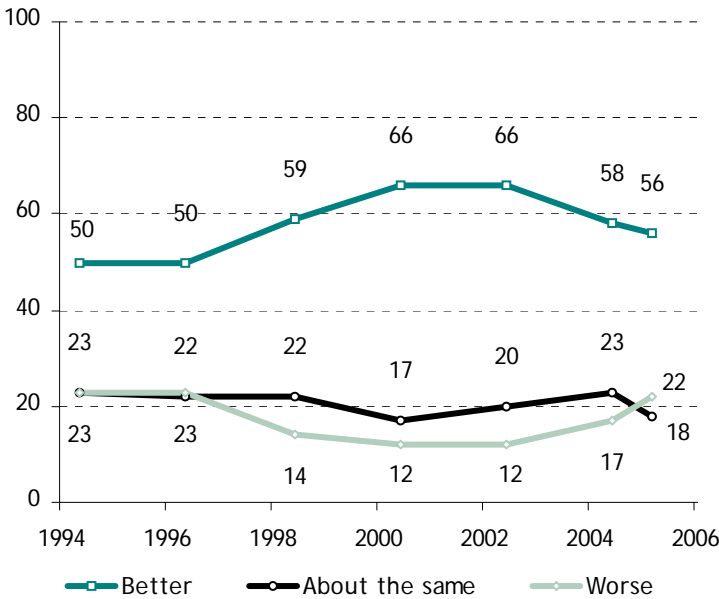
Attitudes about Generational Upward Mobility: The Trend Lines

Since 1994, the General Social Survey (GSS), conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, has asked respondents every few years to compare their own standard of living with that of their parents when they were the same age – and also with what they think their children’s will be when they grow up to be the same age. Last year, a New York Times poll also asked those questions.⁵

These are not quite the same questions as the one posed by Pew. Those surveys focus specifically on standard of living, and ask about one’s own children and parents, rather than about all children and parents. Nonetheless they shed light on the same general topic of changing attitudes about generational upward mobility.

Most Parents Expect Their Children To Live Better Than Them—But More Now Have Doubts

Asked of parents: When your children are your age, do you think their standard of living will be better, about the same or worse than yours today?



Parents expect their own children to have a better standard of living than their own. The most recent survey by the NYT in 2005 shows parents are more pessimistic about their children’s future standard of living compared to earlier surveys conducted by the GSS. (For more details see table.)

Source: 2005 from New York Times Poll, March. 2004 to 1994 from General Social Survey.

The GSS and New York Times surveys show that respondents by heavy margins believe that they have done better than their own parents, and by strong but not quite as lopsided margins believe that their own children will grow up to do better than they’ve done. Keep in mind that people tend to be more upbeat when asked about their own children’s future than when asked about the future of children in general. And also note that, in the GSS and New York Times trend line, optimism about one’s own children’s future was higher in the late 1990s (coinciding with a rising economy), but has since fallen back a bit.

⁴ 2002 National Survey of Latinos. Pew Hispanic Center and The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. December, 2002. <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=15>

⁵ See “Class in America: Shadowy Lines That Still Divide.” New York Times. May 15, 2005. Survey on Class Matters. <http://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/politics/class-poll.pdf>

The future, in short, looks a bit less rosy than it did at its peak for many American families. There could be many reasons – worries about terrorism, personal security, moral values, standard of living, what have you. Since 2002, satisfaction with the overall state of the country has also declined.⁶ So in America circa 2006, there is declining contentment with the present and growing pessimism about the future.

About the Pew Social Trends Reports

The Pew social trends reports explore the behaviors and attitudes of Americans in key realms of their lives – family, community, health, finance, work and leisure. Reports analyze changes over time in social behaviors and probe for differences and similarities between key sub-groups in the population.

The surveys are conducted by the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan “fact tank” that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world.

Survey reports are the result of the collaborative effort of the social trends staff, which consists of:

Paul Taylor, Executive Vice President
Cary Funk, Senior Project Director
Peyton Craighill, Project Director

About the Survey

Results for this survey are based on telephone interviews conducted with a nationally representative sample of adults, ages 18 years and older, living in continental U.S. telephone households.

- Interviews conducted February 8-March 7, 2006
- 2,250 interviews
- Margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.5 percentage points for results based on the total sample at the 95% confidence level. The margin of sampling error is higher for results based on subgroups of respondents.

Survey interviews conducted under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish.

In addition to sampling error, bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias in the findings of opinion polls.

⁶See “Can’t Get No Satisfaction: Public’s Current Gloom Is Out of Sync with Past Experience,” Michael Dimock and Jodie Allen. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, March 22, 2006. <http://pewresearch.org/obdeck/?ObDeckID=12>

PEW SOCIAL TRENDS
 FINAL TOPLINE
 February 8 - March 7, 2006
 N=2,250

Q.1 How would you rate the overall quality of your life? **(READ)**

34	Excellent
48	Good
14	Only fair
3	Poor
<u>1</u>	Don't know/Refused (VOL. – DO NOT READ)
100	

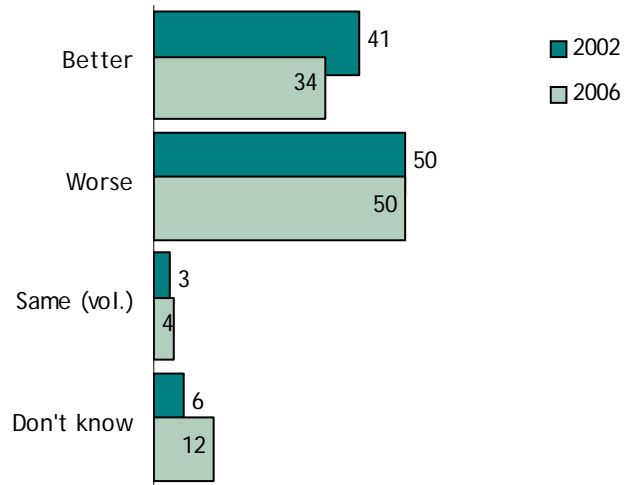
Q.2 When children today in the U.S. grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off than people are now?

	<i>Pew Global Attitudes</i>
	<u>2002</u>
34 Better	41
50 Worse	50
4 Same (VOL.)	3
<u>12</u> Don't know/Refused (VOL.)	<u>6</u>
100	100

QUESTIONS 3 THROUGH END HELD FOR RELEASE OR IN PREVIOUS RELEASE

Declining Optimism About the Future of Today's Children

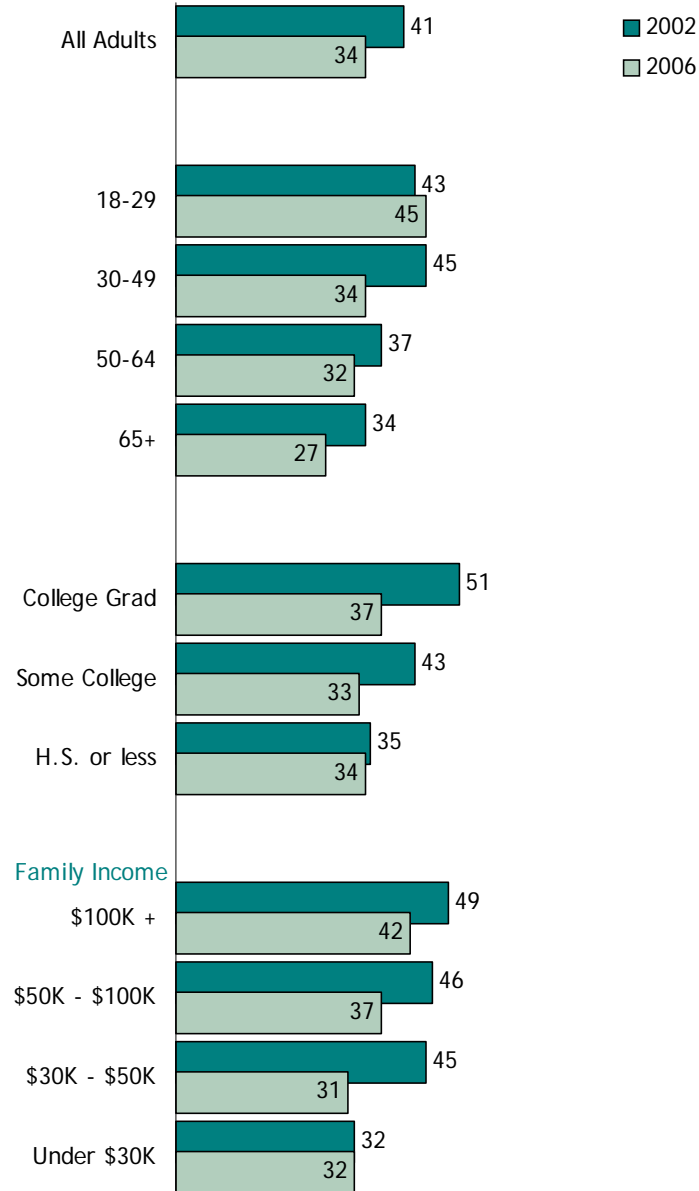
When children today in the U.S. grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off than people are now?



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Which Groups Have Grown Less Optimistic About Children's Future?

Percent who say today's children will grow up to be "better off" than people are now

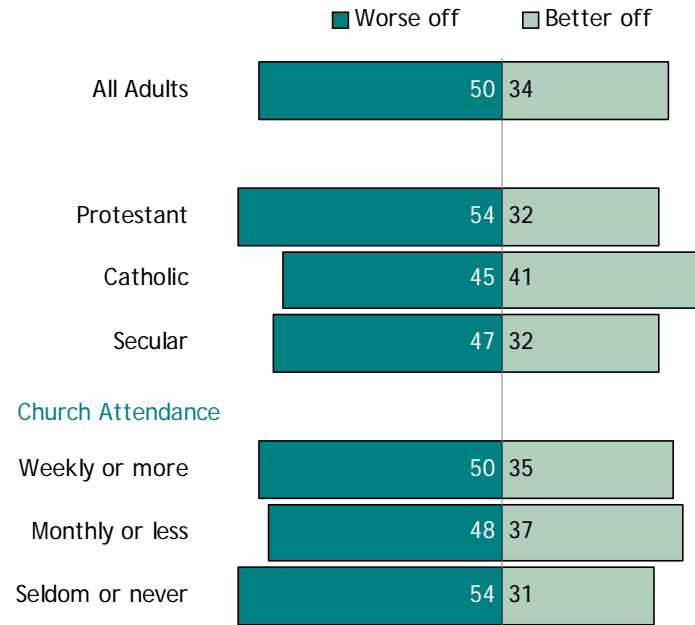


Question wording: When children today in the U.S. grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off than people are now?

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Views on the Future of Today's Children, by Religion and Church Attendance

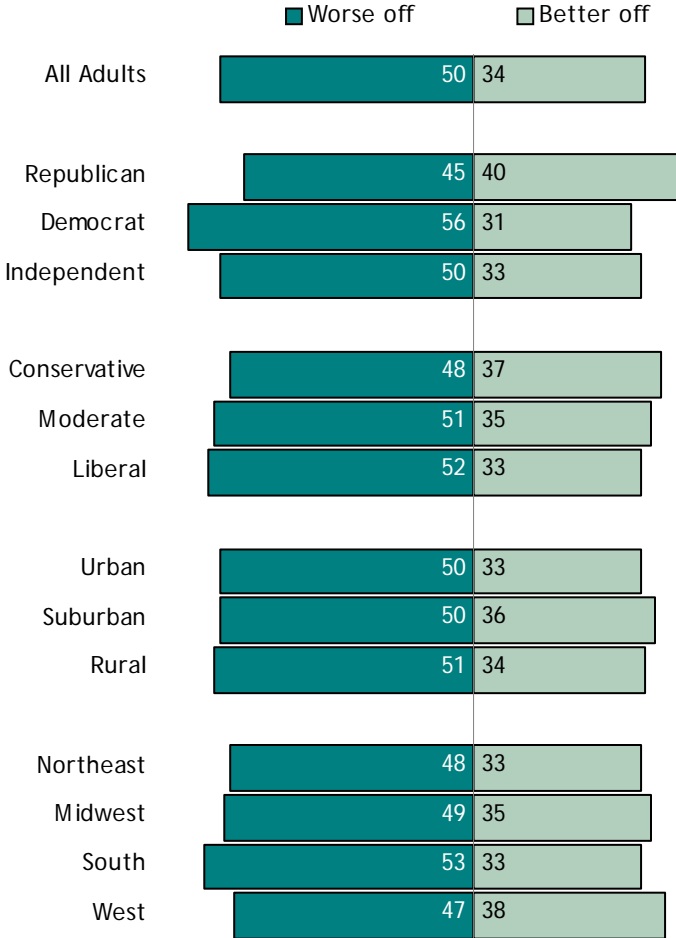
When children today in the U.S. grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off than people are now?



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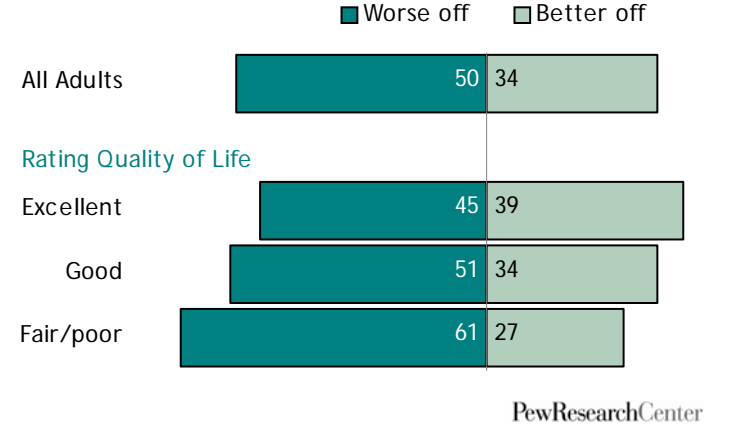
Views on the Future of Today's Children, by Party, Ideology and Region

When children today in the U.S. grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off than people are now?



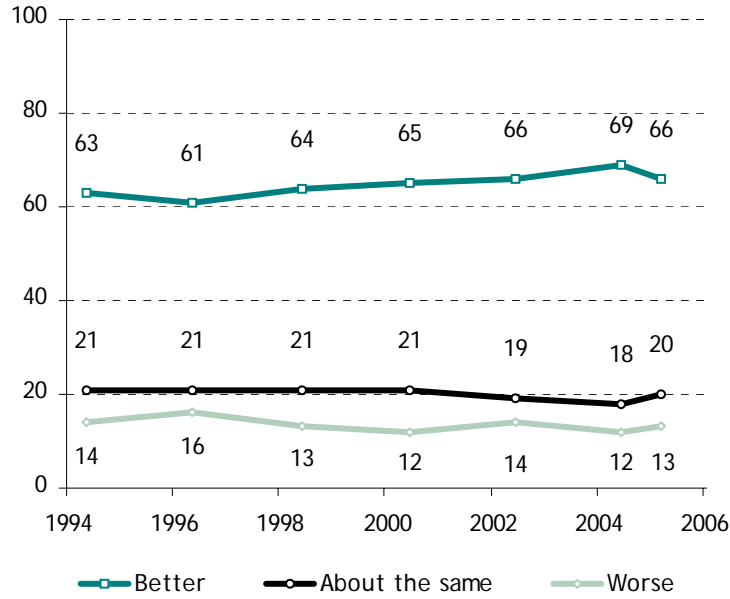
Quality of Life Correlates with Optimism About Childrens' Future

When children today in the U.S. grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off than people are now?



Most Americans Say They Are Living Better Than Their Parents Did

Comparing your standard of living to your parents when they were your age



About two thirds of Americans judge their own standard of living to be better than that of their parents at the same stage in life. This pattern is consistent across surveys taken by the NYT and the GSS since 1994. (For more details see table.)

Source: 2005 from New York Times Poll, March. 2004 to 1994 from General Social Survey.

Most Americans Say They Are Living Better Than Their Parents Did

Compared to your parents when they were the age you are now, do you think your own standard of living now is...

	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2005
Much better	31	32	33	34	33	39	39
Somewhat better	32	29	31	31	33	30	27
About the same	21	21	21	21	19	18	20
Somewhat worse	11	12	10	9	11	9	9
Much worse	3	4	3	3	3	3	4
Don't know	2	2	2	2	1	1	1
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: 2005 from New York Times Poll, March. 2002 to 1994 from General Social Survey.

Question Wording: Compared to your parents when they were the age you are now, do you think your own standard of living is much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse than theirs was?

Most Parents Expect Their Children To Live Better Than Them— But More Now Have Doubts

Asked of parents: When your children are your age, do you think their standard of living will be better, about the same or worse than yours today?

	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2005
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Much better	19	22	24	32	29	26	25
Somewhat better	31	28	35	34	37	32	31
About the same	23	22	22	17	20	23	18
Somewhat worse	17	18	10	9	9	13	15
Much worse	6	5	4	3	3	4	7
Don't know	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>5</u>
	100	100	100	100	100	100	101

Source: 2005 from New York Times Poll, March. 2004 to 1994 from General Social Survey.

Note: Figures for the New York Times trend total to 101% due to rounding.

Question wording: When your children are the age you are now, do you think their standard of living will be much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse than yours is now?

In the 1990's, Rising Optimism About the Next Generation

How will most children today fare when they grow up?

	1994	1996	1999
	%	%	%
Better off	33	38	55
Worse off	50	55	36
Same (vol.)	6	3	4
Don't know	<u>11</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
	100	100	100

How will your own children fare when they grow up?
(Asked of parents with children under age 18)

	1994	1996	1999
	%	%	%
Better off	47	51	67
Worse off	39	41	22
Same (vol.)	5	4	7
Don't know	<u>9</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>
	100	100	100

Source: 1994 from Newsweek, August. 1996 and 1999 from Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

Question wording:

Looking to the future, do you think MOST children in this country will grow up to be better off or worse off than their parents?

Asked of parents with children under age 18: Looking to the future, when your children grow up do you think they will be better off or worse off than you are now?

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