

## America's Four Middle Classes

By Richard Morin, Senior Editor, Pew Research Center

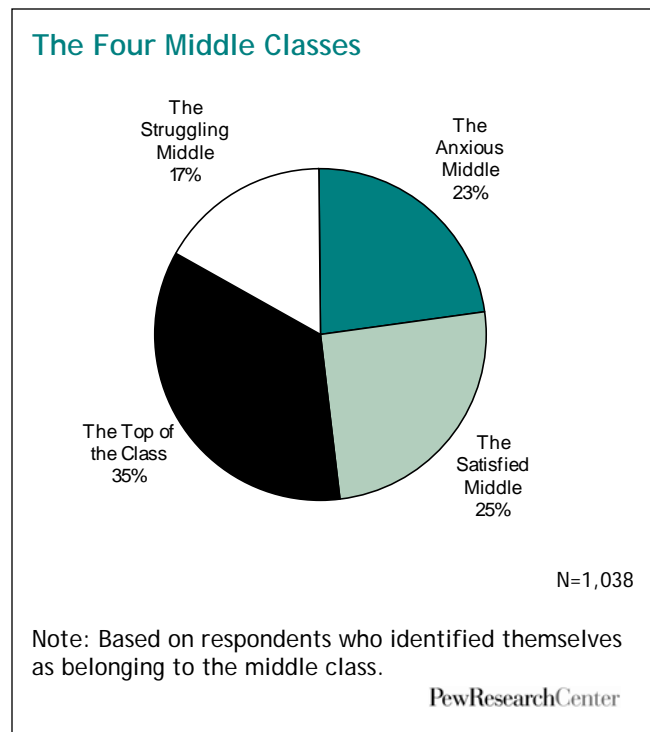
There isn't one American middle class; there are four. Each is different from the others in its attitudes, outlook and financial circumstance—sometimes in ways that defy traditional stereotypes of the middle class, according to an analysis of a recent national survey conducted by the Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends Project.

One middle class is doing quite well, thank you. And members of this group—predominantly male, disproportionately well-educated and financially secure—expect to do even better in the future. It's the largest of the four groups, comprising slightly more than a third of the 53% of Americans who identify themselves as “middle class” in the Pew survey. Call them **The Top of the Class**.

Life is considerably tougher for **The Struggling Middle**, a group disproportionately composed of women and minorities. In fact, many members of the Struggling Middle have more in common with the lower class<sup>1</sup> than they do with those in the other three groups and actually have a lower median family income than Americans who put themselves on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. About one-in-six self-identified middle class Americans fall into the Struggling Middle.

The **Satisfied Middle** has everything but money; their comparatively modest incomes have not muted their sunny outlooks or overall satisfaction with their lives. This group is disproportionately old and disproportionately young; middle aged adults are relatively scarce in the Satisfied Middle. They make up a quarter of the middle class.

By the conventional yardsticks of income, education, age, employment and family status, the fourth middle class group is the most middle class of all—and the most dissatisfied and downbeat of the four groups. While they enjoy some of the economic advantages of the Top of the Class, they express many of



<sup>1</sup> Survey respondents were asked which social class they identified with: the upper class, the upper-middle class, the middle class, the lower middle class or the lower class. For purposes of this study and reports based on this poll, the upper class is comprised of those who identified with the upper or upper middle class, or 21% of the sample. The lower class is defined as those who said they were lower middle or lower class while the middle class comprise 25% of the sample. Fifty-three percent identified themselves as middle class and the remainder did not answer the question.

the same bleak judgments about their lives as those in the Struggling Middle. Call them the **Anxious Middle**; they make up slightly less than a quarter of all middle class Americans.

These four groups are all part of the 53% majority of Americans who identified themselves as “middle class” in a Pew telephone survey taken from Jan 24 through Feb. 19, 2008 among a nationally representative sample of 2,413 adults. The groups were revealed by a statistical technique known as cluster analysis that searched for patterns in the way these self-identified middle class Americans answered key survey questions.

Two of the groups that emerged from this analysis—The Satisfied Middle and Anxious Middle—straddle the statistical middle of the American life. But the Top of the Class and Struggling Middle seem, in some ways, anything

but middle class. Why don’t those in the Struggling Middle identify with the Lower Class; after all, their median family incomes fall well below the earnings of those Americans who say they’re in the least advantaged social class? And why don’t those seemingly privileged members of the Top of the Class identify with the Upper Class, with whom they seem to share so many advantages?

Part of the explanation likely lies with the powerful attraction that the label “middle class” has on most Americans and the stigma that some might associate either with the upper or lower class labels. But the analysis suggests that’s not all of the answer. On many key measures, the Top of the Class is different from the 21% of Americans who identify themselves as upper class in the Pew survey. For one thing, they don’t make as much money: The median income of those in the Top of the Class is \$86,280, while median income for the upper class is \$95,875, or more than \$30,000 above the overall middle class median. And in terms of levels of education, total wealth and how they rate their lives, the Top of the Class lags behind those in the upper class.

Similarly, those in the Struggling Middle are, as a group, demonstrably different from those who identify with the lower class. They’re significantly more likely to be male, to be young and to be single. But more importantly, they are more satisfied with

their lives and more likely to say they’re living better than their parents. Also, they are more hopeful about their own futures and, in particular, the future of their children. A 40% plurality of the Struggling

### How the Four Middle Classes Rate Their Present Lives...

*Percentage in each group that rate their present quality of life as...*

	High %	Medium %	Low %	DK/Ref %
Top of the Class	46	42	12	*=100
Satisfied Middle	41	36	23	*=100
Anxious Middle	16	43	40	1=100
Struggling Middle	24	27	47	2=100

### ..And How They See the Future

*Percentage in each group that predict their quality of life five years from now will be...*

	High %	Medium %	Low %	DK/Ref. %
Top of the Class	71	14	10	5=100
Satisfied Middle	61	16	12	11=100
Anxious Middle	54	20	18	8=100
Struggling Middle	55	16	17	12=100

Middle say they expect their children’s lives will be “much better” than theirs are, compared with 25% of those who identify with the lower class. For these middle class Americans, at least for now, the American Dream may be more a dream than a reality—testimony that “middle class” is as much a state of mind as it is a financial condition.

Taken together, this statistical typology of the four middle classes paints a nuanced picture of the American middle class and those who claim membership in it. Rather than being demographically and culturally monotonic, America’s middle class is an amalgam of distinct groups that share different outlooks on life and life experiences, a blend of young and old, black, white and Latino, optimists and pessimists, achievers and dreamers, those who are barely hanging on to the Middle Class Dream and those who are living it fully.

What follows is a statistical portrait of the four faces of the American middle class.

### Middle Class or Middle Classes?

Is the American middle class one vast, featureless demographic plain, or is it a medley of distinctive groups that share a label? And if it is a mosaic, what are its constituent parts?

To find out, a statistical technique known as cluster analysis was applied to these survey data. The analysis looked across the 53% of respondents who identified themselves as middle class and grouped together those who answer key questions in similar ways.

For purposes of this analysis, the questions used to dissect the middle class into its constituent parts included those that measured how satisfied people were with their lives, how much progress they had made in life, their outlook for the future as well as their income and details of their financial condition. Respondents who refused to answer any of the core questions were excluded from the study. In all, a total of 1,038 out of the 1,276 respondents who identified themselves as “middle class” were included in the analysis.

Cluster analysis typically produces a number of “solutions”, each containing different numbers of clusters, or groups. These cluster solutions are then evaluated on the basis of their statistical properties as well as on the more subjective criteria of how interpretable the clusters are and how well they appear to describe the data. In the end, the four-cluster solution that is described in this report emerged as the one with the best statistical properties as well as the one that made the most substantive sense.

The analysis was produced by survey research consultant Carolyn Miller and reviewed by Jonathan Best, chief methodologist at Princeton Survey Research Associates, the research firm that conducted the interviewing for the Pew Middle Class survey.

## The Middle Classes: Who Makes Up Each Group

	Top of the Class	Satisfied Middle	Anxious Middle	Struggling Middle
<b>Gender</b>	%	%	%	%
Male	56	45	49	37
Female	<u>44</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>51</u>	<u>63</u>
	100	100	100	100
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>				
White, non-Hispanic	79	75	73	56
Black, non-Hispanic	10	7	10	20
Hispanic	6	12	11	19
Other	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>5</u>
	100	100	100	100
<b>Age</b>				
18-29	16	31	13	35
30-49	46	19	59	32
50-64	30	16	26	18
65+	<u>8</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>15</u>
	100	100	100	100
<b>Education</b>				
College or more	41	15	30	8
Some college	29	29	30	16
High school or less	<u>30</u>	<u>56</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>76</u>
	100	100	100	100
<b>Family Income</b>				
\$100,000	32	*	14	*
\$50K-\$99K	68	1	62	*
\$30K-\$49K	*	60	24	19
\$20K-\$29K	*	23	*	23
LT \$20,000	<u>*</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>*</u>	<u>58</u>
	100	100	100	100
<b>Marital Status</b>				
Married	69	37	67	22
Not married	31	62	32	77
DK/Ref.	<u>*</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
	100	100	100	100
<b>Quality of Present Life</b>				
High (8-10)	46	41	16	24
Medium (6-7)	42	36	43	27
Low (0-5)	12	23	40	47
DK/Ref.	<u>*</u>	<u>*</u>	<u>*</u>	<u>2</u>
	100	100	100	100
<b>Will Children Have Better Life than You?</b>				
Better	49	63	44	58
Worse	17	12	28	16
Same	24	17	20	18
No children	6	3	6	4
DK/ref.	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>4</u>
	100	100	100	100

\*Mentioned by fewer than .5% of respondents.

Note: Based on respondents who identified themselves as belonging to the middle class.

## The Top of the Class

35% of the Middle Class, 19% of all adults

Life is good for these middle class Americans—and most in this group predict it’s only going to get better. A 54% majority say their lives have improved in the past five years, and nearly half report they’re close to living their ideal life right now. These Top of the Classers are the best educated of the four groups. They’ve got the highest incomes. And according to their own reports, they’re in the best of health of the four middle class groups. They also are the largest of the four classes: 35% of all adults who identify as middle class fall into the Top of the Class, or 19% of all Americans.

### Who They Are

Fully four-in-ten are college graduates (41%) and another 29% attended college. Nearly a third (32%) have family incomes of at least \$100,000 a year and almost two-thirds earn \$75,000 or more. Virtually every member of this group earns at least \$50,000 a year. In pointed contrast, no member of the Struggling Middle earns that much.

They exhibit other trappings of prosperity. Three-in-four (75%) own stocks, bonds or mutual funds, the most of any group. Fully a third (33%) receives income from interest on savings or bonds. And they have taken steps to secure their financial futures: Nearly nine-in-ten (86%) has an IRA, 401k or similar kind of retirement account, again top of the four groups.

It’s no surprise, then, that members of the Top of the Class are the most likely of any of the four groups to say they are living “comfortably” (58% vs. 39% of the middle class as a whole) and the least likely to report they just meet their

### The Top of the Class: Healthier, Wealthier and Better Educated

	Top of the Class	All Middle Class
<b>Gender</b>	%	%
Male	56	48
Female	<u>44</u>	<u>52</u>
	100	100
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White, non-Hispanic	79	73
Black, non-Hispanic	10	11
Hispanic	6	11
Other/refused	<u>5</u>	<u>5</u>
	100	100
<b>Family income</b>		
\$100,000+	32	14
\$50K-\$99K	68	38
\$30K-\$49K	*	24
\$20K-\$29K	*	10
LT \$20,000	<u>*</u>	<u>14</u>
	100	100
<b>Education</b>		
High school or less	30	47
Some college	29	27
College or more	<u>41</u>	<u>26</u>
	100	100
<b>Health</b>		
Excellent	43	31
Good	51	54
Only Fair	6	11
Poor	<u>*</u>	<u>4</u>
	100	100
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	69	53
Not married	<u>31</u>	<u>47</u>
	100	100

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expenses or fall short each month.

Doctors, lawyers and other professionals are most likely to be found in this group. Whatever they do, many love their jobs: more than a third (36%) say they're "completely satisfied" with their job while virtually all (96%) say they're at least mostly satisfied.

In addition to being relatively wealthy and college educated, a plurality of these self-described middle-class Americans also enjoy good health: Fully 43% their overall fitness as "excellent," compared with 31% of all middle class adults, the highest of any group. Only 6% say they feel "only fair" or "poor."

Rating the Quality of Present Life		
	Top of the Class	ALL Middle Class
	%	%
High (8-10)	46	34
Medium (6-7)	42	38
Low (0-5)	12	27
DK/Ref	*	<u>1</u>
	100	100
Number of respondents	360	1038
Note: Based on respondents who identified themselves as belonging to the middle class.		
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When asked to compare their own lives to the lives their parents led at a similar age, more than seven-in-ten say they're doing better than mom or dad, and nearly half say they're doing "much better." And when asked to rate their current lives on a scale ranging from 10 for the best possible life and zero for the worst, nearly half (46%) of this group rate themselves at or near the top of the ladder (ranking themselves as a ten, nine or eight) while only 12% place themselves on one of the lower rungs (5 or lower). They're also the most optimistic about the future: 71% predict they'll be at or near the top of the ladder in five years—that's 25 percentage points more than say they're currently at or near the top.

### What They Think

These middle class Americans feel firmly in control of their lives and reject the view that fate rules their destiny; fully three-quarters disagree that success in life is beyond one's control, the largest proportion of any of the four groups. While a majority agrees with the proposition that "the rich just get richer and the poor get poorer," a substantial minority of 35% disagrees, a figure matched within the middle class only by one other group -- the Satisfied Middle.

Anticipating the Quality of Life Five Years from Now		
	Top of the Class	ALL Middle Class
	%	%
High	71	62
Medium	14	16
Low	10	14
DK/Ref	<u>5</u>	<u>8</u>
	100	100
Number of respondents	360	1038
Note: Based on respondents who identified themselves as belonging to the middle class.		

Politically, the Top of the Classes are no more likely than the middle class as a whole to describe their views as politically conservative or liberal, or to disproportionately identify with one or another political party. On a number of issues tested, however, they take conservative positions. They're the only group in which fewer than half (45%) agree that the government has a responsibility to take care of those who cannot take care of themselves. They also are the least likely to agree that the government should guarantee health care to every individual (62% vs. 72% for the middle class as a whole).

**Comfortable Life**  
Which phrase best describes your financial situation?

	Top of the Class	ALL Middle Class
	%	%
Comfortable	58	39
Meet expenses with a little left over	36	38
Just meet expenses	5	19
Don't meet expenses	-	3
DK/Ref	*	*
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>
Number of respondents	360	1038

Note: Based on respondents who identified themselves as belonging to the middle class.

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But on other issues they take moderate or liberal positions. For example, eight-in-ten (80%) disagree that women should return to their traditional roles in society, compared with 73% of all the middle class. And they're no more or less likely than other groups to endorse gay marriage. Whatever their political inclinations, they're voters: fully 85% report that they are "absolutely certain" that they're registered to vote, compared to 73% of all middle class Americans.

## The Anxious Middle

**23% of the Middle Class; 12% of all adults**

These working and worried Americans are the most middle class of the four middle class groups. Members of this group aren't the wealthiest or the least affluent of the four groups, nor are they the oldest or the youngest group. In terms of education, too, they come closest to the median for the middle class as a whole. In fact, on most key measures of social standing they fall comfortably and consistently in the middle. Overall, they comprise 23% of all self-identified middle class Americans, or about 12% of all Americans.

On the surface, these middle class Americans seem to be living the American Dream. But they say they're not, and their distinctly bleak judgments of their lives and the future stand in sharp contrast to their seemingly comfortable circumstances and distinguish them from each of the other three groups.

The Anxious Middle is the most likely of any group to be dissatisfied with the “way things are going in this country.” Looking inward, only 16% are highly satisfied with their lives, fully half the proportion of the middle class as a whole. They are the most likely of any group to say it’s harder for people to get ahead today than 10 years ago, and they’re the least likely to predict that their children will do better than they did in life.

Why so glum? The survey suggests these members of the middle class are financially vulnerable, despite their comparatively high incomes. They are disproportionately more likely than the middle class as a whole to say they had to cut back on household spending in the past year or to report that they had trouble paying their rent or mortgage. And there’s more trouble ahead, many in the Anxious Middle fear: Nearly a quarter say it’s likely they will be laid off or fired in the coming year, nearly double the proportion of the middle class as a whole.

### Who They Are

As befits their position in the middle of the middle class, they’re neither particularly affluent nor are they poor. More than seven-in-ten have family incomes of \$50,000 or more, and nearly a third earn more than \$75,000. No one in this group earns less than \$30,000. About three-in-ten are college graduates, similar to the proportion of college-educated in the middle class. About half are women (51%) and about half are men (49%), making this the only middle class group in which one gender does not predominate.

The Anxious Middle: The Middle of the Middle Class		
	Anxious Class	All Middle Class
	%	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	49	48
Female	<u>51</u>	<u>52</u>
	100	100
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White, non-Hispanic	73	73
Black, non-Hispanic	10	11
Hispanic	11	11
Other/refused	<u>3</u>	<u>1</u>
	100	100
<b>Family income</b>		
\$100,000+	14	14
\$50K-\$99K	62	38
\$30K-\$49K	24	24
\$20K-\$29K	-	10
LT \$20,000	<u>-</u>	<u>14</u>
	100	100
<b>Education</b>		
High school or less	40	47
Some college	30	27
College or more	30	26
<b>Health</b>		
Excellent	26	31
Good	63	54
Only Fair	9	11
Poor	<u>2</u>	<u>4</u>
	100	100
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	67	53
Not married	<u>32</u>	<u>47</u>
	100	100

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The median age of the Anxious Middle is 43 years old—one year less than the median age of the middle class as a whole. Nearly six in ten (59%) are between the ages of 30 and 49 while only 3% are 65 or older and 13% are under the age of 30.

They are the most likely to be employed full time (76%) and the least likely to be retired (5%). Fully two-thirds are married compared with about half of the middle class as a whole. Along with the Top of the Class, they are most likely to own their homes; fully eight-in-ten (81%) are homeowners. (In fact, on a number of financial measures the Anxious Middle and the Top of the Class are similar.) They're the most likely to say their home represents more than half of their net worth. But 61% say they've paid off less than half their mortgage, compared with 44% of all middle class homeowners. And they are far more likely than others in the middle class to say they have taken out a second mortgage on their homes or a home equity loan (42% vs. 29%).

### Anxious about Their Children's Future

	Anxious Middle Class	ALL Middle Class
	%	%
Much better	17	28
Somewhat better	27	25
About the same	20	20
Somewhat worse	21	14
Much worse	7	4
No children	6	5
DK/Ref	<u>2</u>	<u>4</u>
	100	100
Number of respondents	237	1038

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### What They Think

These married, working, home-owning Americans would seem to have it all. But they say they don't, and in terms of their overall levels of satisfaction, they're not particularly happy with their lives. More than eight-in-ten (84%) rate their ladder-of-life standing as "medium" or "low"—easily the largest proportion of any group to place themselves in these categories—and of these, fully four-in-ten (40%) place themselves on the lowest rungs of the ladder.

### Anxious Middle Say It's Harder to Get Ahead

	Anxious Middle Class	ALL Middle Class
	%	%
Easier to get ahead	6	16
Harder to get ahead	76	59
About the same	18	23
DK/Ref	<u>*</u>	<u>2</u>
	100	100
Number of respondents	237	1038

Question: Thinking about today compared to ten years ago, do you think it is easier or harder for people to get ahead today, or is it about the same as it was?

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Their dissatisfaction reaches beyond their own lives. They are the most dissatisfied of any group with the way things are going in this country (76% vs. 61% for the middle class as a whole); barely two-in-ten say they're satisfied (21%). They're even more sour about the current state of the economy than the Struggling Middle: 33% say the nation's financial condition is "poor," the largest proportion of any of the groups, while another 54% say it's "not so good."

These gloomy Americans see tough times for their children: 28% say they expect their children will do worse in life than they themselves have done, the largest proportion of any middle class group. They are the most likely of any group to say it's harder for people to get ahead today, a view shared by 76% of them, 17 percentage points more than other self-identified members of the middle class and 13 percentage points more than the Struggling Middle. And they are at least as cynical as the most disadvantaged members of the middle class: 78% agree that the "rich just get richer while the poor get poorer," a view they share with 79% of those in the most pressured middle class group.

### Why They Are Unhappy

On virtually every key measure they rank only behind the Struggling Middle as having experienced the most economic problems in the past year: 23% say they had problems paying their rent or mortgage, 25% say they couldn't afford or otherwise get needed medical care, 41% say they or someone in their household had to start working or take on an extra job to help pay the bills and 12% say they lost their job.

Also, they are just as likely as the Struggling Middle to say they had to cut back on household spending because money was tight (87% vs. 53% for the middle class as a whole).

Looking ahead, they see a future nearly as troubled as the one envisioned by the Struggling Middle. Half say they will have trouble paying their bills. Nearly nine-in-ten predict they'll have difficulty saving. And more than eight-in-ten expect they will have to cut back on household spending because money is tight. More than two-in-

ten (23%) fear they will lose their job in the coming year. These anxious middle class Americans rank second only to the Struggling Middle in their bleak responses to all these questions.

<b>Anxious Middle Face Household Budget Woes</b>		
	<b>Anxious Middle Class</b>	<b>All Middle Class</b>
<i>% who faced each problem in past year:</i>	%	%
Had to cut back on household spending	87	53
Had trouble getting or paying for medical care	24	18
Had problems paying rent or mortgage	23	13
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## The Struggling Middle

17% of the Middle Class; 9% of the total population

On virtually every key measure of social stature and attainment—income, education, home ownership and even health, members of the Struggling Middle are lagging behind other middle class Americans. Women significantly outnumber men in this group and minorities are disproportionately represented, though whites still constitute the majority of the Struggling Middle. It is the smallest of the four classes: 17% of middle class identifiers and 9% of all adults fall into this group.

In some respects, many members of the Struggling Middle appear to have more in common with the lower classes than with other self-identified middle class Americans. A 58% majority have family incomes of less than \$20,000 a year—easily the lowest income of any of the four middle-class groups. It’s no surprise, then, that they’re the most likely to report they had trouble paying their bills. They’re the second least likely to be employed full-time; only the Satisfied Middle, a group in which a majority are either retirees or students, contains as few full-time workers. They’re the only group in which a majority does not own their homes. These self-

described middle class Americans also had the most trouble paying their rent or mortgage payments last year.

A Bad Year		
	Struggling Middle Class	All Middle Class
<i>% who faced each problem in past year:</i>	%	%
Had to cut back on household spending	86	53
Had trouble getting or paying for medical care	52	18
Had problems paying rent or mortgage	32	13
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Nearly half (47%) rank themselves on the bottom rungs of the quality-of-life ladder, 20 points higher than for the middle class as a whole. In terms of their attitudes, they are the most politically liberal but socially conservative of the four groups, broadly favoring government assistance to help the needy while opposing gay marriage. They also are the most likely of the four groups to agree that it would be better if women returned to their traditional roles.

### Who They Are

Money—or more precisely, the lack of it—defines these struggling Middle Class Americans. Even though they identify broadly with the middle class, fully 30% have family incomes of less than \$10,000, and nearly six-in-ten have total family incomes of less than \$20,000 a year. No one in this group earns more than \$50,000.

Those income statistics are even more striking when they are compared with those in the Pew survey who say they identify with the lower classes. Among these most disadvantaged Americans, fewer than a third have family incomes of less than \$20,000, about half the proportion of those middle class Americans who fall into the Struggling Middle (30% vs. 58%).

These middle class identifiers defy the middle class stereotype in two other ways. While a majority of those in the middle class are homeowners, this is the only group in which the majority does not own a home. Six-in-ten (60%) are renting, more than double the proportion of the middle class as a whole, while just a third (34%) are own their own homes. Also, while fully half (53%) say it's "very important" to them to be married, they are the least likely to be married—fewer than a quarter are married (23%), less than half the proportion of all middle class Americans (53%).

Women dominate this group: 63% of the Struggling Middle are female, the largest proportion of any of the four groups. The Struggling Middle contains the largest proportion of minorities: 20% are black and 19% are Hispanics while 56% are white. The Struggling Middle includes the largest proportion of non-citizens (14%), as well as adults born in another country (21%).

The Struggling Middle is also disproportionately young and represent the flip side of the more upbeat and successful young adults in the Satisfied Middle. Slightly more than a third (35%) of those in this group are under the age of 30, compared with 22% of all adults who identify as middle class. Those in this group are the least-well educated of the four groups. Only 8% are college graduates, while more than three-in-ten (31%) did not graduate from high school and another 45% did not go on to college after they graduated from high school.

Life has been tough and may get tougher for members of the Struggling Middle. Nearly a third (32%) had problems paying their rent or mortgage, more than double the proportion for the middle class as a whole. Nearly three-in-ten (28%) were laid off or lost their job, double the proportion of the middle class as a

<b>Women, Minorities Dominate The Struggling Middle Class</b>		
	<b>Struggling Middle</b>	<b>All Middle Class</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	37	48
Female	<u>63</u>	<u>52</u>
	100	100
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White, non-Hispanic	56	73
Black, non-Hispanic	20	11
Hispanic	<u>19</u>	<u>11</u>
	100	100
<b>Family income</b>		
\$100,000+	-	14
\$50K-\$99K	-	38
\$30K-\$49K	19	24
\$20K-\$29K	23	10
LT \$20,000	<u>58</u>	<u>14</u>
	100	100
<b>Home ownership</b>		
Own home	34	69
Rent	59	26
Other	<u>7</u>	<u>1</u>
	100	100

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whole. Fully half (52%) say they had problems getting or paying for medical care for themselves or their families in the past year, more than double the proportion in the middle class as a whole. That result is particularly troubling in light of another finding: Only 15% rate their health as “excellent” while 36% say it is “only fair” or “poor”—more than double the proportion of the middle class as a whole and easily the largest share of any group that view their health so negatively.

And they fear there’s more trouble ahead. More than seven-in-ten (72%) predict they’ll have difficulty paying their bills in the coming year, and an even larger proportion say they will have difficulty saving money for the future. They also are the most likely to say they may be laid off in the coming year, a worry expressed by 30% of these struggling Middle Class Americans.

Politically, Democrats outnumber Republicans 3-1 in the Struggling Middle (42% vs. 15%). That Democratic advantage is diminished, however, by the fact that more than half (53%) say they are not registered to vote.

### What They Think

Nearly half (47%) rank themselves on the bottom rungs of the quality-of-life ladder—the largest proportion of any of the four groups who are so dissatisfied with their lives—while only a quarter (24%) rate themselves at the top.

Dreams of the Struggling Middle Class		
	Struggling Middle	All Middle Class
<i>% saying it is “very important” for them to be:</i>		
Successful in a career	75	60
Wealthy	28	12
Married	53	55
PewResearchCenter		

But hope springs eternal: fully 40% say they expect that their children will live much better than they do; only the Satisfied Middle comes close to matching their optimism for their children (37%).

Beset with financial problems and facing somewhat limited prospects, members of the Struggling Middle are the most likely of the four groups to accept the proposition that success is pretty much determined by forces outside one’s control; fully half (50%) agree, compared with about a third of the middle-class in general.

In key ways, this is the most economically liberal of the four groups but socially the most conservative. A 57% majority “completely agree” that the “government should guarantee health care to every citizen,” compared with 40% of the middle class as a whole. At the same time, nearly four-in-ten agree that “women should return to their traditional roles in society,” a view shared by less than a quarter of the overall middle class.

Those in the Struggling Middle also dream of a better life for themselves as well as their children. They are by far the most likely to rank being successful in a career as a top life priority. Fully three-quarters say

job success is “very important” to them, compared with 60% of all middle class adults. Significantly, this is fully 20 percentage points greater than the proportion of those in the most accomplished group, the Top of the Class, who valued career success as highly (75% vs. 54%). This group also is the most likely to say that “being wealthy” is very important to them, a view shared by 28% of the Struggling Middle but 12% of the middle class as a whole.

## The Satisfied Middle

25% of the middle class; 12% of all adults

The optimism of youth and the contentment that comes with old age together define this group and make them distinctive from the other three middle class groups analyzed in this study. About a quarter of those who identify themselves as middle class are in the Satisfied Middle, or about 12% of the country as a whole.

Retirement-aged adults and twentysomethings are overly represented in The Satisfied Middle. But on several core issues, there’s no generation gap for these self-described middle class Americans. On virtually every measure of life satisfaction these self-described

middle class Americans consistently rank at or near the top. For older members of the Satisfied Middle, these views may reflect the contentment that comes after a long and successful life, while for the younger members of this group, the survey suggests these views reflect the confidence and optimism of young people.

These middle class Americans prove you don’t need money to be happy: Even though they rank third out of the four groups in terms of median family income—the older people because they disproportionately are living on fixed incomes, the young because they’re still a decade or two from their peak earning years – nearly half (47%) say they’re living comfortably compared with 39% of all middle class Americans.

## Who They Are

The Satisfied Middle is both disproportionately young and disproportionately old, and this striking age distribution is their single most defining demographic characteristic. Fully a third (34%) are 65 and older; that’s more than double the proportion of seniors in any of the other groups. At the same time, nearly as

Who Needs Money?		
Satisfied middle less affluent, more likely to say they are comfortable		
	Satisfied Middle Class	ALL Middle Class
	%	%
Comfortable	47	39
Meet expenses with a little left over	40	38
Just meet expenses	12	19
Don't meet expenses	*	3
DK/Ref	-	*
	100	100
Number of respondents	264	1038

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many (31%) are under the age of 30, the second highest proportion of any of the four groups. A majority are women (55%), in large part because women outnumber men among older adults.

This age duality is reflected in characteristics of this group. Nearly four-in-ten (39%) are retired, most of any group. At the same time, one out of five in the Satisfied Middle are students. As is true generally of older people, fully half the homeowners in this group have paid off their homes (57%). That’s about double the proportion in the middle class as a whole.

Despite their contented outlook, these Satisfied Middlers don’t earn a lot of money. Half (52%) have family incomes between \$20,000 to \$40,000. That’s nearly three times the percentage of all middle class Americans. More than eight-in-ten (84%) earn \$20,000 to \$50,000. Fully four-in-ten (41%) receive Social Security or some other form of retirement benefit, nearly double the proportion of others in the middle class.

Attitudes toward money reflect the age skew of this group. Overall, members of the Satisfied Middle are the second most likely to value wealth, largely reflecting the disproportionately large number of young people, who, as a group, want to be rich.

### What They Think

Personal progress also defines this group, and by their own accounts, they’ve come a long way. Those in the Satisfied Middle are, with those in the Top of the Class, the most likely to say they’re doing better than their parents: fully 45% say they’re doing “much better” than their parents did at a similar age, a view held by both the youngest and oldest

### The Satisfied Middle: Old and Young Find Common Ground

	The Satisfied Middle	All Middle Class
	%	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	45	48
Female	<u>55</u>	<u>52</u>
	100	100
<b>Age</b>		
18-29	31	22
30-49	19	40
50-64	16	24
65+	<u>34</u>	<u>14</u>
	100	100
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White, non-Hispanic	75	73
Black, non-Hispanic	7	11
Hispanic	12	11
Other	<u>6</u>	<u>5</u>
	100	100
<b>Family income</b>		
\$100,000+	*	14
\$50K-\$99K	1	38
\$30K-\$49K	60	24
\$20K-\$29K	23	10
LT \$20,000	<u>16</u>	<u>14</u>
	100	100
<b>Education</b>		
High school or less	56	47
Some college	29	27
College or more	<u>15</u>	<u>26</u>
	100	100
<b>Health</b>		
Excellent	31	31
Good	53	54
Only Fair/Poor	<u>16</u>	<u>15</u>
	100	100
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	37	53
Not married	63	47
DK/Ref	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
	100	100

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members of the Satisfied Middle. Nearly nine-in-ten (88%) say they live comfortably or meet expenses with a little left over; only 12% report they just meet expenses or fall short each month.



## Appendix: Survey Questions Used to Create Clusters

- Q Imagine a ladder with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. Suppose the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you; and the bottom, the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder do you feel you personally stand at the present time? You can name any number between 0 and 10.

**ENTER NUMBER** (Range 0-10)

99 Don't know/Refused

- Q. And on which step would you say you stood five years ago? Zero is the worst possible life and 10 the best possible life.

**ENTER NUMBER** (Range 0-10)

99 Don't know/Refused

- Q. And on what number step do you think you will be five years from now? Zero is the worst possible life and 10 is the best possible life. {PST June 2006}

**ENTER NUMBER** (Range 0-10)

99 Don't know/Refused

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

- 1 Much better
- 2 Somewhat better
- 3 About the same
- 4 Somewhat worse
- 5 Much worse
- 9 Don't know/Refused **(VOL.)**

- Q. How would you describe your household's financial situation? Would you say you **(READ)**

- 1 Live comfortably
- 2 Meet your basic expenses with a little left over for extras
- 3 Just meet your basic expenses
- 4 Don't even have enough to meet basic expenses
- 9 Don't know/Refused **(VOL. --DO NOT READ)**

- Q. On the whole, would you say you are saving as much money as you should, or do you feel you should probably be saving more?

- 1 Saving as much as you should
- 2 Should be saving more
- 9 Don't know/Refused **(VOL.)**

- Q. For each of the following, please tell me whether or not it is something that happened to you in the past year....Have you **[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE]**?
- a. Had trouble getting or paying for medical care for yourself or your family
  - b. Had problems paying your rent or mortgage
  - c. Or someone else in your household had to start working or take on an extra job because you needed the money
  - d. Been laid off or lost your job
  - e. Gotten a pay raise at your current job or gotten a better job
  - f. Had to cut back your household spending because money was tight

**RESPONSE CATEGORIES:**

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 9 Don't know/Refused **(VOL.)**

- Q. Looking ahead to the coming year, how likely is it that you will **[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE]**? Is it very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely or not likely at all likely?  
{New}

**IF NECESSARY:** Is it very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely or not likely at all likely that you will **(REPEAT ITEM)**

- a. Have trouble paying your bills
- b. Have trouble saving money for the future
- c. Have to cut back on household spending because money is tight

**RESPONSE CATEGORIES:**

- 1 Very likely
- 2 Somewhat likely
- 3 Not too likely
- 4 Not at all likely
- 9 Don't know/Refused **(VOL.)**

**ASK IF EMPLOYED**

- Q. Thinking about the next 12 months, how likely is it that **[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE]**? Is it very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely or not at all likely? {New}

**IF NECESSARY:** Is it very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely or not likely at all likely that **(REPEAT ITEM)**

- a. Your employer may go out of business or relocate to another city
- b. You may not get a raise
- c. You may have your health care benefits reduced or eliminated by your employer
- d. Your job may be outsourced to a worker in another country
- e. You may be asked to take a cut in pay
- f. You may be laid off
- g. Your income may not keep up with the cost of living.

**RESPONSE CATEGORIES:**

- 1 Very likely
- 2 Somewhat likely
- 3 Not too likely
- 4 No at all likely
- 9 Don't know/Refused **(VOL.)**

Q Do you or your spouse)...**(READ)**

- a. Own any stocks, bonds or mutual funds
- b. Have a checking or savings account
- c. Have an IRA, 401K or a similar kind of retirement account
- d. Own a business or a farm
- e. Have some kind of health insurance

**RESPONSE CATEGORIES:**

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 9 Don't know/Refused **(VOL.)**

INCOME

Last year, that is in 2007, what was your total family income from all sources, before taxes? Just stop me when I get to the right category. **[READ]**

- 1 Less than \$10,000
- 2 10 to under \$20,000
- 3 20 to under \$30,000
- 4 30 to under \$40,000
- 5 40 to under \$50,000
- 6 50 to under \$75,000
- 7 75 to under \$100,000
- 8 100 to under \$150,000
- 9 \$150,000 or more
- 10 **(VOL. DO NOT READ)** Don't know/Refused