

By Darrell A. Hughes Of DOW JONES NEWSWIRE WASHINGTON - A national survey released Thursday examining wealth inequality shows that Americans, by a 71% to 21% margin, are more interested in the government trying to improve their economic standing than they are in seeing income inequality addressed.

The survey, conducted for Pew's Economic Mobility Project, suggests less support for President Barack Obama's call to shrink the gap between rich and poor as the U.S. struggles with a deep recession.

The project was launched two years ago by the Pew Charitable Trusts and is a collaborative effort among four other think tanks: the American Enterprise Institute, the Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation and the Urban Institute. The survey examines Americans' attitudes toward improving their economic standing and their perception of the "American Dream."

"We are by definition a country of strivers, people who look ahead, who think that ambition, hard work and individual drive is what defines economic success as opposed to other factors like the state of the economy," said John Morton, economic policy director for Pew.

The Pew survey specifically provides insight on Americans' perceptions of improving economic mobility compared with addressing income inequality - which was a hot-button issue during the 2008 presidential campaign. Economic mobility is a measure of how much a person's income changes over time, according to Pew.

During the campaign, Obama called for more progressive tax policies that would shrink that gap and allow more Americans to share in the country's economic gains.

Obama had statistical backing from such think tanks as the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, which has data showing in 2006 the average inflation-adjusted, pre-tax income for the top 1% of households increased 5.8%, or \$60,000, compared with a gain of 1.4%, or \$430, for the bottom 90%.

While the data don't reflect the current economic downturn, Robert Greenstein, the center's executive director, testified before the House Ways and Means Committee in October 2008 that "inequality has been increasing for more than 30 years."

Ray Boshara, vice president of the New America Foundation, said he was struck by respondents' belief that "focusing on inequality of opportunity, and not so much inequality of outcomes, was most important."

This sentiment was shared across all income levels and racial groups, Boshara said. He added, "If you take a longer intergenerational view of these two inequalities, they're not unrelated."

"The inequality of outcomes in one generation becomes inequality of opportunity in the next, and that's because families don't have enough wealth to pass on from one generation to the next," Boshara said.

Nonetheless, Morton of Pew said this survey on the perception of the American Dream and the potential for future prosperity seems to be "overly optimistic."

According to the survey, 94% of people view the economic condition negatively, yet eight out of 10 Americans think it is possible to improve their economic standing.

"Even in the face of this downturn, people feel responsible for their own movement up the ladder," Morton said, pointing out as people are moving up, "many are falling down."

Survey respondents said the best way for the government to improve standards of living across the board is by crafting policies that enhance such things as affordable college, reducing health-care costs or investing in early childhood learning.

More people care about this generation and the generations thereafter being able to attain a fair shot at prosperity, Morton said.

"People are saying, 'We don't begrudge the wealthy for what they've gotten. What we care about is that everyone has an equal chance of making it, and government policy ought to focus on making sure people get to the same starting line, as opposed to tearing down the wealthy,'" Morton said.

Looking ahead, the survey showed more than two-thirds, or 72%, of people believe their personal economic circumstances will be better in the next decade than they are today.

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