

## **Most Americans Believe They Can Shape Their Future — New Gallup Study Shows Communities Help Determine Whether They Can**

New research highlights how economic opportunity, education, access to nature and strong community conditions help Americans build better futures

BENTONVILLE, Ark. (May 18, 2026) – Two-thirds of Americans believe they have the power to shape their own future. A new Gallup-Walton Family Foundation study finds that belief alone is not enough. Whether people can turn that confidence into real opportunity depends on the conditions in their communities, including access to good jobs, affordable housing, quality schools and natural spaces. The release of the [How Opportunity Takes Root](#) report comes as the Walton Family Foundation adopts a [new five-year strategic plan](#).

“Americans’ belief in their ability to shape their future is a powerful signal of hope — but optimism alone doesn’t guarantee opportunity,” said Luis Gonzalez, Deputy Director of Communications at the Walton Family Foundation. “Creating the conditions people need to succeed is one of the defining challenges of this moment. That’s why the Foundation is expanding its efforts to close the gap between optimism and access to opportunity.”

While 67% of Americans feel they can shape their own path, one-third feel their lives are more often pushed by circumstances beyond their control. This lack of agency has a profound impact on wellbeing: Just 25% of adults who mostly feel pushed by circumstances are thriving in their lives, compared with 63% of those who feel more in control.

The study also finds that younger and lower-income Americans are the most likely to feel they lack control over the direction of their lives. Just 60% of adults aged 34 and younger feel able to shape their own path, compared with 75% of adults 55 and older. Household income is the strongest predictor of agency, with eight in 10 adults in the top-earning quintile reporting a sense of control, compared with just over half in the lowest quintile.

### **Communities Create the Conditions that Put Opportunity Within Reach**

Gallup’s research finds that certain conditions within communities can help residents feel empowered to pursue choice-filled lives. The strongest community-based predictors of individual agency are economic. Adults who agree that their community offers jobs providing stable income and affordable housing are 14 to 18 percentage points more likely to say they can shape their own path.

Yet significant gaps persist. More than three-quarters of Americans (77%) say housing in their community is not affordable. Nearly half of adults (46%) do not believe their community offers enough stable jobs. And communities with closer interpersonal ties, where neighbors rely on one another and work together, see markedly higher levels of individual agency and wellbeing.

Rural Americans are slightly less likely to feel like their towns are making progress. At least half of adults living in large (51%), medium (50%) and small metro counties (53%) say their city is moving in a positive direction, compared with 44% in nonmetro counties. However, the report shows that communities of all sizes can help residents feel opportunity is within reach by cultivating an environment where all can thrive, such as building strong local economies and ensuring affordable housing.

### **Nature Plays a Key Role in Building Strong, Resilient Communities**

The study also reveals a broad consensus on the value of natural spaces. More than eight in 10 Americans agree that access to nature improves the quality of life in their community, a sentiment that holds across cities, suburbs and rural areas in every region of the country. Nearly two-thirds of adults (64%) agree that nature is essential to their community's economy. And about three-quarters of Americans who agree that nature is essential to their town or city also agree that their community encourages its residents to guard these resources.

Yet more than half of Americans (57%) report that their community has been negatively affected by at least one extreme weather event, including flooding, drought or severe weather damage in the last 12 months. Among those affected, nearly two-thirds are worried about a recurrence.

### **Access to Quality Education Builds Communities Prepared for the Future**

The study underscores the powerful connection between education and individual and community wellbeing. About half of U.S. adults are considered thriving in their overall life evaluation, and this measure is highly correlated with educational attainment. The report also shows Americans who live in places with high-quality schools are markedly more likely to be satisfied with their overall community and to have a positive outlook on its future.

Among parents of children 18 years or younger, 49% who say local schools are excellent or very good are very satisfied with where they live, compared with 20% of parents in communities with lower-quality schools. Eighty percent of adults who say the quality of the education their local K-12 schools offer students is excellent or very good also agree that they are hopeful about what's next for their community. They are twice as likely to agree their community is prepared to handle future challenges as those who say their schools are not very good (61% vs. 29%).

### **Americans Remain Hopeful and Ready to Invest in Their Communities**

Despite the challenges identified in the survey, Americans remain broadly hopeful about the places where they live. Nearly three-quarters of adults (72%) agree that their community is worth investing in. About two-thirds of adults (64%) agree they have a great future ahead of them, with this optimism especially high among younger adults aged 18 to 34 (69%).

However, many Americans question whether their voices will be heard. Only 34% of adults say someone would listen to their ideas to improve their town or city. And about six in 10 adults do not trust their local leaders to act in the best interest of their community. The study finds that residents who believe their voices matter are about twice as likely to feel motivated to give back and take responsibility for making their community better.

"Choice-filled lives are the through-line of this study. When communities create the conditions for people to shape their own path, with good jobs, quality schools, affordable housing and trusted neighbors, wellbeing follows," said Gallup Principal, Justin Lall. "These are the building blocks of opportunity, and they are within every community's reach when they have access to the necessary tools."

### **Methodology**

Results are based on a Gallup Panel™ web study completed by 6,732 U.S. adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. All responses were collected between Feb. 26-March 6, 2026. For results based on the overall sample of adults, the margin of sampling error at the 95% confidence level is ±1.5 percentage points for response percentages around 50%. Margins of error for subgroups are higher.

All reported margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

### **About the Walton Family Foundation**

The Walton Family Foundation is, at its core, a family-led foundation. Three generations of the descendants of our founders, Sam and Helen Walton, and their spouses work together to lead the foundation and create access to opportunity for people and communities. We work in three areas: improving education, protecting rivers and oceans and the communities they support, and investing in our home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta. To learn more, visit [waltonfamilyfoundation.org](https://waltonfamilyfoundation.org) and follow us on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#) and [X](#).

### **About Gallup**

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world.

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