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Americans are Working Harder Than Ever in a Rigged System, But Refuse to Give Up

Policymakers' assumptions about the economy are flawed and the standard economic indicators no longer reflect the reality of American workers' lives.

To: Interested Parties

From: GQR/Dignity of Work Institute

A new survey from GQR and the Dignity of Work Institute paints a picture of Americans fighting to stay afloat in an economy that is much more brittle than the standard narrative suggests, where incomes are not keeping up with the cost of living and the economic and political systems are failing them.¹ People are working harder than ever, often working multiple jobs, and are struggling with incomes that do not keep up with the cost of living. However, they remain aspirational and believe their lives will improve in the next five years if they can catch a break that helps them raise their income and get relief from high costs.

The economic indicators used most often by policymakers to tout a strong economy do not reflect most Americans' economic reality. Workers' responses make clear that a slowing rate of inflation is not enough – Americans need their overall cost of living to decrease and their income to increase. People believe the inability to keep up with rising costs as their wages stagnate is among their biggest barriers to success.

Working multiple jobs is now a way of life for many.

One job is not enough to get by for many Americans. A huge majority, 60 percent, say they have worked more than one job at some point in their lives, and one in five have worked three or more jobs at a time. One in four have worked more than one job at the same time just in the last two years, including a stunning 37 percent of people under age 50. The inability to live on one income is exacerbated by the reality that only 40 percent of workers are salaried, and a large majority are susceptible to a loss of income due to reduced hours or work availability.

¹GQR conducted a 20-minute phone survey among 1,300 (1,000 base and 100 each Black, Hispanic, and age 18-29 oversamples) registered voters nationally from February 13-23, 2025. Respondents were selected using the voter file. The full survey is subject to a margin of error of +/- 3.10 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence interval; the margin of error is higher among oversamples (Black +/- 6.76 percentage points, Hispanic +/- 6.80 percentage points, 18-29 +/- 5.49 percentage points) and subgroups. The data are statistically weighted to ensure the sample's regional, age, and gender composition reflects that of registered voters nationally.

The financial squeeze of incomes that do not keep up with high costs means more than half of Americans say they would not be able to comfortably afford an unexpected \$1,000 expense. Three in ten say they would be in a dire situation and would have to cut back on basic necessities or go into debt.

Workers are so strapped that their definition of “essential” is the bare minimum.

The crush produces low expectations when workers consider what is “essential” to their definition of success. Americans’ top essentials are remarkably basic: More than eight in ten say that being able to pay their bills on time each month and having a steady and solid income are essential to their success. People are not asking much – just to be able to afford to live.

Workers are less likely to view other items as essential that might have been seen as essentials in the past. Only a little more than half of Americans (55 percent) believe that owning a home is essential to success, and even fewer – 44 percent – view living on one income or job is essential. Young people have a particularly limited view of what is essential and are even less likely to view owning a home or living on one income as essentials.

Many feel like the economy is stacked against them.

The prevailing view of Americans is that the current economy makes it more difficult to be successful instead of helping. When asked to name the barriers to success, 40 percent cite finances or the economy – too much money going out the door, and not enough money coming in to afford to live. Another third cited personal reasons, including needs like getting more education or experience, or having to retire.

The economic barriers are evident for Americans across the board and are particularly acute for younger women, who are even more likely to cite the economy and finances as barriers (59 percent), and for moms - 17 percent of whom mentioned child care as a barrier to their success.

The absence of income security coupled with rising prices pushes Americans to use government and social programs that supplement their incomes. A large majority, 60 percent, report using at least one of these programs to supplement their income, including unemployment, Medicaid, food stamps, free or reduced lunch for children, food banks, skills or technical training programs, and child care assistance. Americans across the board cite experience with these programs but the need is most acute for women, who report extremely high levels of usage of the programs.

Americans want big changes to the economy that produce higher incomes and lower costs.

The need for both higher incomes and lower costs produces a deep appetite for major changes to the economy. Half of voters say the economy needs major change in order for them to get ahead, including three in ten who say the entire economic system needs to change, and 86 percent say it is time for a significant level of change.

The changes Americans say the economy needs are similar to the current barriers to their success: Workers need higher incomes and lower costs. When asked to name the necessary changes they need to get ahead, nearly 70 percent cite something related to their personal finances that would increase their income or reduce their costs, or the broader job market and economy. Again, people's priorities are both too much money going out the door and too little money coming in. Another 15 percent cite government or political forces that would help them, including policies that support a social safety net and improvements to health care and education.

Americans everywhere are struggling, but some groups are hurting more acutely.

Throughout the survey, distinct patterns emerge in who is most strapped. Women are struggling, particularly younger women, mothers and women who do not have college degrees. They tend to be less secure in their economic situation and much less likely to be able to afford an unexpected expense, as well as more likely to use government and social programs for help, say the system needs to completely change and rate the quality of their lives lower. While all of these women express high levels of income insecurity, these concerns tend to be even higher among Hispanic and Black women. Similarly, younger Americans are having difficulty getting a foothold in the economy. They are working multiple jobs and rate their current quality of life fairly low, although they expect it to get better in the next 5 years.

Most think their life will improve.

Most Americans are not particularly upbeat about their current lives, but they remain aspirational and believe things will improve. On a ladder from 0 to 10, where the bottom is the worst possible life and the top is the best possible life, voters gave their current situation an average 6.7 rating. Just a minority, 37 percent, placed themselves at 8 or higher. However, many move to a more optimistic place when asked where they expect to be in 5 years – nearly two-thirds then place themselves in the top range of 8 or higher.

It is telling that the people who rise the most on the 5-year future ladder tend to be those facing serious financial struggles and place themselves low currently: Younger workers, parents, Black and Hispanic workers, as well as those working more than one job and those who are paid hourly. They believe their lives will improve dramatically over the next 5 years but are not entirely sure what will help their situation.

People believe they can succeed but the economy is failing them.

In the face of serious economic challenges, most Americans still believe that better times are ahead despite a sense that the economy and political system is failing them. The double whammy of stagnant incomes and rising costs stands in the way of success for many, and they are turning to working multiple jobs or using government programs to supplement their incomes, or both. The survey overall shows that Americans are hard working people who want to do well and thrive – they are still chasing the American Dream. They just need the economy to give them a chance to succeed.