

Is the American Dream dying?

By DIANA SROKA RICKERT, The Chicago Tribune

JUL 13, 2015 AT 3:28 PM

Cezar Iordan came to the U.S. from Romania when he was 20.

He didn't know anyone, and he didn't speak English. He had only \$100 in his pocket.

But he was determined to succeed.

Now 10 years later, Iordan runs a successful moving business called Moovers Chicago.

He has a bachelor's degree, and owns a home.

"When you're forced by economic reasons to come to a different country, you (want) belonging and to find a place," said Iordan, 30. "I'm very happy with the way things have gone. I worked really hard to be where I am at."

The idea that someone can come to this country with nothing, work hard, and then start and run a successful business is what makes our country great. Even for people who aren't immigrants, the U.S. has always been a place where talent and drive is rewarded. Just think about someone like Apple's Steve Jobs.

In spite of our nation's flaws, people pursuing their dreams propel the U.S.

But what if we as a society no longer believe that anyone can achieve success? What if we have given up on the American Dream?

The findings of a new study raise those questions.

The Journal of Poverty recently reported that young adults are losing confidence in the American Dream.

About 20 years ago, researchers asked high school seniors what they thought of the national ethos. Their feelings were overwhelmingly positive. The students surveyed felt that hard work and determination would open doors no matter who their parents were or how much money they had.

Members of this age group have their entire lives ahead of them. The findings from 1996 made sense.

But the researchers came back 15 years later and asked current high school seniors similar questions. This time, their answers carried less optimism.

"Having motivation is not enough," the researchers wrote. This generation thinks opportunities are handed out to individuals, rather than created by them. "You can always work hard, but if you aren't given the opportunity ... (then) you never get the chance to get out of where you are," one student told the researchers.

The report's authors subtly make the case for government to increase funding for college. But there's a different interpretation of the study: An entire generation is giving up before adulthood has even begun.

On one hand, maybe some of these students are spoiled. This generation has more resources available to them than any other. This will be the most educated generation. Already, about 50 percent of teens have iPhones — technology that wasn't even available 15 years ago. They can't say they don't have resources at their disposal.

But can we really blame them for thinking that someone, somewhere is responsible for doling out the opportunities and determining your lot in life?

In the past few decades, we've created a society in which someone — usually government — must say "yes" before we can pursue our dreams.

In fact, the National Bureau of Economic Research estimates that 1 of every 3 U.S. workers needs government permission before they are legally allowed to work. The uphill climb doesn't just apply to people who want to start their own business; it affects people who want to work for someone else too.

Take Jordan, for example. He started his business while a full-time student in order to pay for school. He was working as a laborer on construction jobs when a co-worker mentioned that he is strong and has a van. No one likes moving, so why not offer to move people when he wasn't studying? Seemed simple, so Jordan advertised his availability online.

One day he drove to Des Plaines to meet a customer. Instead, police with the Illinois Commerce Commission met him. He said the police asked for his license, and he thought they meant his driver's license.

"I didn't know you needed a license to be a mover," he said. "I was very surprised, because I was treated like a criminal. I did not feel like a criminal."

Jordan said he understands and appreciates why licensing is needed, and immediately obtained credentials from the state.

But this kind of challenge is faced all the time, not just by people who start businesses but also for people in everyday professions. There often are numerous regulatory hurdles to overcome and hundreds or thousands of dollars in professional fees. Licenses that take months or years to earn. Permission from government bureaucrats, industry groups or competing businesses that must be obtained.

There's no question that all these hurdles and hoops, in part, contribute to a waning faith that even the "little guy" can make it big in the 21st century.

"The American Dream is not dead," Jordan said, maintaining his optimism. "It just got a little more difficult to achieve. People have to sacrifice. The reason I got to be where I'm at is because I made a lot of sacrifices."

Personal sacrifice is tough and perhaps a fading virtue. No one ever said the American Dream is easy, or should be. But government shouldn't be the gatekeeper of success to the point of deterring an entire generation. If that happens, we all suffer.

Diana Sroka Rickert is a writer with the Illinois Policy Institute. The opinions in this essay are her own.