

**Bigger is Not Always Better**  
**Return of the Original American Dream**

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The American Dream, a term first coined by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book titled "The Epic of America" was what every American strived for, a beautiful house, large lawn and a white picket fence. The spirit of this idea can be traced to the Declaration of Independence, "...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The pursuit of happiness, this was the original American Dream. It was the idea that if you played by the rules and worked hard you would be able to achieve a better and economically secure life for yourself. So how did we, the American population go from desiring economic security to desiring a life of abundance? The dream evolved as the American economy grew. Success was no longer measured by how secure you were, but by how much you could buy, it was easily measured by the size of your home. Now, at present we are living in a world overflowing with useless things and there are some people that want to return to a more simplistic lifestyle. They are part of the small home movement, a group of people trying to return to the original American Dream, the one that focused on economic security rather than abundance. The movement is allowing people financial freedom, the opportunity to decrease their carbon footprint, and a chance to return to the days when close knit families were more important than having a television in every room so each family member could watch their favorite show in peace.

The driving force of this movement are the individuals who give up their 1,000-2,000 square foot houses and in some more extreme cases their McMansions that could be 10,000 square feet and move into a tiny home, a home that is 500 square feet or less. Why did Americans become so focused on acquiring a large home? It all started with the New Deal and the Great Depression. The nation was in a recession and the government saw the housing market as a way towards economic recovery (Creating the American Dream). Before the depression, a family had to save virtually all of their money to afford a house, "if a family did buy a home, it was often later in life. It was not a rite of passage into adulthood (Creating the American Dream)." During the depression the government encouraged spending on home construction, furniture and appliances. Additionally, the government made houses more affordable by insuring mortgages and encouraging people to pay the mortgage off over a longer period of time. Now, people didn't need to save as much (Creating the American Dream). What followed was the GI Bill. It "offered vets government backed home loans that required nothing down, and mortgage payments that made buying a home cheaper than renting (Creating the American Dream)." Now people had extra money to spend on luxury items. Veterans were given a lot more options, "And boy, that house came with a new washing machine and refrigerator if you just paid an extra 50 bucks, or something absurd like that...It was a wonder (Creating the American Dream)!" In 1960 the United States was blessed with a booming economy and low unemployment. The future appeared very bright and then came the Vietnam war in the 1970s. The war put the nation in debt, and then inflation followed. However, this still didn't deter Americans from buying their dream homes, they wanted their children to enjoy the same luxuries as everyone else. "...everyone had a desire 'for bigger houses, for fancier appliances, for vacations. So people began to think of investment income and debt as a way to pay for those because they couldn't afford them out of their salary(Creating the American Dream).'" Instead of viewing homes as a secure place to live people started to look at homes as an investment that brought you returns every year thanks to the mortgage interest tax deduction. "Real estate became the single most tax-advantaged investment a person could make...You get to deduct your mortgage interest, you get to deduct your state and local taxes. Now you have this incredible tax break on any gain, so more and more money flowed into real estate (Creating the American Dream)." It was a no brainer to buy house,

and now there was even more of a reason to buy bigger more expensive house. You were able to deduct the interest from your mortgage, which would help bring you to a lower tax bracket.

What does this all mean for the American Dream? To achieve the American Dream means to have a big house filled with lots and lots of things. “The ‘Big House’ is all about the American lifestyle: how we live, what we drive, and how we fail to appreciate the finite nature of land and energy resources.” (Behind...) According to the US Census Bureau in 1900 “the most common household contained seven or more people. From 1940 to 2000, households with two people represented the most common household size (Figure 3).” Additionally, “average household size declined from 4.60 in 1900 to 2.59 in 2000, or by 44 percent (Hobbs 137).” While household size was decreasing average square footage of homes increased greatly. In the 1960s average household size was 1500 square feet, in 2010 it grew to an average of 2100 square feet (Figure 4). ““The big house represents the atomizing of the American family...each person not only has his or her own television - each person has his or her own bathroom. Some of these houses are literally designed with three playrooms for two children. This way, the family members rarely have to interact (Behind...)” Homes from the 1900s fulfilled the basic needs of the family. Homes didn’t have media rooms or play rooms, multiple living rooms or dining rooms because children were encouraged to play outside and interact with neighbors and the community. In the 1960s 22.2% of homes had a beach, or park within the neighborhood as compared to the 16.0% in 2005-2009. The percentage of neighborhoods with public transportation almost decreased by half from the 1960s to 2005-2009 (Figure 2). Now more and more people have less of a reason to leave their homes. The percent of homes that have recreation rooms increased from 2.9% in the 1960s to 6.2% between 2005-2009, and tv rooms increased from 8.9% in the 1960s to 14.7% in 2005-2009. The percentage of homes with two or more living rooms almost doubled from the 1960s to 2005-2009 (Figure 1). “Now, houses are expected to fulfill every need or want of the family. They come equipped with theaters, gyms, bowling alleys, indoor swimming pools, and basketball courts – activities that Americans used to participate in outside of the home. Americans require instant gratification... (Cammel)”

Interestingly enough in President Carter’s 1979 address to the United States he prophesied the implications of an American Dream that was focused on materialistic things. “In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities...too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning (Creating the American Dream).” Some people now understand the change in American values that President Carter spoke about while others have become disheartened by what seems to be an unattainable American Dream. In the present we are living in a second recession, the difference between this one and the Great Depression is that the government hasn’t found solution for economic recovery. “There are people struggling. And what you’re seeing especially right now are people who feel like they played the game the right way, like they did what they were supposed to do, and the rules they thought they could play by...have changed on them somehow (American Dream).” People are looking for a way out, they do not want to be bound by mortgages, and cluttered houses. Those things didn’t give them happiness they trapped them. The small home movement gives them freedom.

The American Dream is a pseudo-event, something that has been dramatized and exaggerated by media and society. The American Dream is “a symptom of expectations enlarged

beyond the capacity of the natural world to satisfy (Boorstin 1077).” The dream was blown out of proportion and the people that have started the small home movement are trying to resize it. Daniel J. Boorstin provides insight on how to solve pseudo-events like the American Dream. “ ‘Each of us must disenchant himself, must moderate his expectations...The first step is to begin to suspect that there may be a world out there, beyond our present or future power to image or imagine...(Boorstin 1078)’” The American people rid themselves of the notion that the American Dream is defined by what you own and how much you own. They need to get out of their homes and reconnect with the world. Founder of the Tumbleweed Tiny House Company, Jay Shafer, shared similar sentiments in the documentary titled “Tiny: A Story About Living Small”. “You know I guess the primary asset that comes with a small house is freedom. The world gets a lot bigger when you’re living small because I can uh, I can afford to do a lot more things now in terms of cash and time (Tiny).”

If you ask different people what qualifies a house as ‘small’ you will get different answers depending on how big their current house is. To some a tiny house is 84 square feet, to another it is 200 square feet and to others it could be 2,000 if they downsized from a McMansion. While the small house movement has the word small in the title it is not about size. Kerri Fivecoat-Campbell, owner of a 480 square foot home says “...the movement is really all about: Living happily in the home with only the things you need and love surrounding you. (kerri)”

In the documentary “Tiny: A Story About Living Small” the main character Christopher planned to build a tiny house, 124 square feet, 19’ by 7’. Christopher intended for the project to take two to three months, but it ultimately took him one year and \$26,000. He did everything himself, he did his own electrical, he cut the rafters for the roof, refinished the flooring, installed all of the appliances and even sewed his own curtains. The finished project was a home with a small porch, a kitchen that flowed into a small living room, a bathroom right off the kitchen, and a loft for sleeping (Tiny). The interior of the house was built for functionality, each piece of furniture having a specific purpose. Tiny homes have many advantages. There is less clutter because there is simply no room for useless things, “...you can’t go out and buy frivolous items whenever you’re feeling bored or blue (Levin 1).” You spend less time cleaning and more time doing things you enjoy. Small homes save you more money, on average a tiny home cost \$23,000, you save money on heating, cooling, property taxes, home maintenance and groceries since you have smaller fridges. People who live in tiny homes enjoy a higher quality of life, “they don’t feel weighed down by...frivolous items...or a huge mortgage, and they spend less time and money cleaning and maintaining...which allows more time and money for leisure activities (Levin 2).” Finally, tiny homeowners leave a smaller carbon footprint. Because of their size tiny homes are automatically green homes, as they require less energy and less resources. Ann Holley, owner of a 125 square foot tiny house shares her thoughts about the movement in the documentary, “I think we’re encouraged as a culture to consume more, to have more, to feel better about ourselves when we have more and to feel good when you go out and buy things...we are not encouraged to think of...the full cycle of what that means. So this house allows us to kind of interrupt that cycle (Tiny).”

The tiny home has brought families closer together. “I love the fact that my husband and I sit in the same room and watch the same shows on television...at our larger house in the city, he would usually retreat to the family room, while I went to the bedroom to watch something

different...Our large house was keeping us apart and we didn't even realize it. (Levin 3)'' The small home movement has resized the American Dream to something that is attainable for all. American people are no longer bound by a mortgage, or a clutter filled house. Being able to pay up front for a tiny house gives people more opportunities to pursue careers that they truly enjoy. People no longer have to work 40 - 60 hours to pay for their six figure homes. It's time that society strives for the original American Dream, the dream of economic security. Doing so will open up the world to them, a world where success isn't determined by the number of square feet, but by the quality of the space and the degree to which you are truly happy.

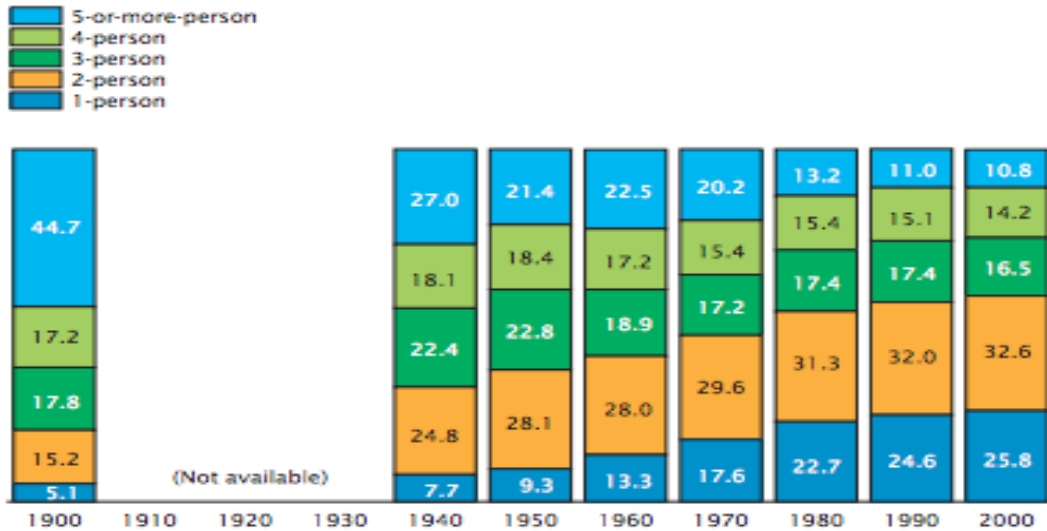
Room Type	1960s & Earlier	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000-2004	2005-2009
Bedroom	98.5	99.1	99.5	99.7	99.6	99.4
<i>Percent With 4 &amp; More</i>	<i>16.8</i>	<i>17.2</i>	<i>17.2</i>	<i>25.2</i>	<i>31.2</i>	<i>33.6</i>
Kitchen	99.1	99.5	99.7	99.8	99.7	99.7
Bathroom	99.4	99.8	99.7	99.8	99.9	99.9
<i>Percent With 2.5 &amp; More</i>	<i>10.1</i>	<i>16.7</i>	<i>23.9</i>	<i>35.8</i>	<i>43.9</i>	<i>47.9</i>
Living room	98.4	98.1	98.2	98.5	97.9	98.3
<i>Percent With 2 &amp; More</i>	<i>3.1</i>	<i>3.4</i>	<i>3.6</i>	<i>4.8</i>	<i>5.4</i>	<i>6.1</i>
Porch/Deck/Balcony/Patio	79.8	83.1	88.4	89.6	90.6	88.6
Garage	59.5	58.7	62.4	70.7	76.6	79.3
Dining room	46.9	40.4	42.5	48.6	52.1	50.6
Laundry/Utility room	17.5	19.7	21.8	29.3	34.0	38.2
Family/Great room	12.7	16.7	16.8	22.2	21.6	21.6
Den/Library/TV room	8.9	7.3	8.1	10.8	14.0	14.7
Recreation room	2.9	3.0	3.6	4.5	5.3	6.2

Figure 1 - Table 1: Rooms in Homes (Percent of All Homes with Each Type of Room) 1960 - 2009 (Sarkar 3).

Neighborhood Characteristic	1960s & Earlier	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000-2004	2005-2009
Grocery or similar stores within one mile	95.8	95.8	95.3	95.0	94.8	95.5
Public transportation	65.2	53.7	50.2	38.1	35.1	32.5
Beach, park or shoreline	22.2	17.4	16.0	16.6	17.5	16.0
Community Center/Clubhouse	17.6	23.8	26.6	23.4	27.1	27.2
Walking/Jogging trails	19.0	18.1	18.4	20.3	22.5	21.9
Daycare centers	19.4	12.8	9.9	9.1	8.2	6.9
Golf course	17.6	14.9	12.3	14.0	13.9	8.4
Shuttle bus	10.9	8.9	8.0	6.3	6.1	4.1

Figure 2 - Table 4: Neighborhood Characteristic (Percent of All Occupied Homes with Each Neighborhood) 1960 - 2009 (Sarkar 6).

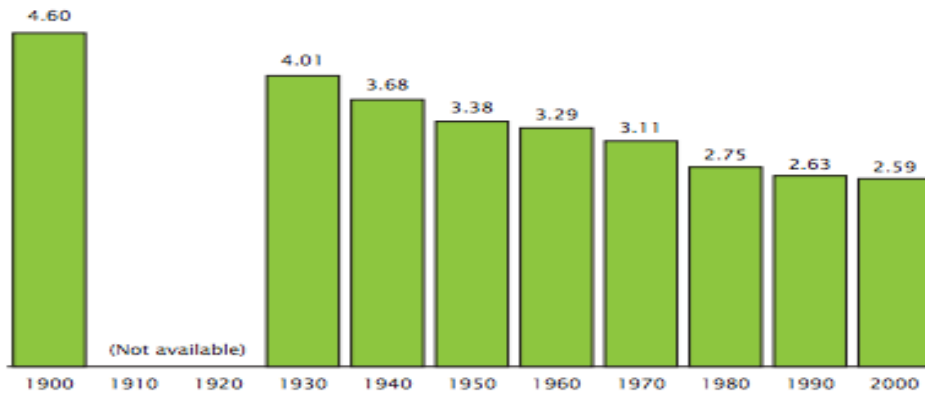
Figure 5-2.  
**Distribution of Households by Size:**  
**1900 and 1940 to 2000**  
 (Percent)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial census of population, 1900, and decennial census of housing, 1940 to 2000.

Figure 3 - Figure 5-2: Distribution of Households by Size: 1900 and 1940 to 2000 (Percent) (Hobbs 141).

Figure 5-3.  
**Average Household Size: 1900 and 1930 to 2000**  
 (People per household)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial census of population, 1900 and 1930 to 2000, and decennial census of housing, 1940.

Figure 4 - Figure 5-3: Average Household Size: 1900 and 1930 to 2000 (People per household) (Hobbs 143).

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