



REPORT

Stuckness in America

Results from a National Survey

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Summary

People sometimes feel “stuck” in life. It is a commonly expressed sentiment, one that we intuitively understand but never think to measure and unpack.

In this report, we examine the concept of “stuckness.” Motivated by the experiences of our patients and conversations with people around the country, we characterize stuckness and document its prevalence among working-age Americans. To do so, we developed a measure of stuckness based on patient encounters, semi-structured interviews, and pilot surveys. We then fielded this measure, and a rich set of open ended-questions to better understand responses to it, in a first-of-its kind nationally representative online survey of nearly 1,500 Americans between ages 18-64 conducted in July 2025.

Our results point to stuckness as a critical driver of well-being in America. When people say they are stuck, they are conveying the combination of a sentiment and a material reality that reinforce one another in a self-perpetuating trap. The *feeling* of getting stuck is one of being unable to change our circumstances despite your best efforts. The *material reality* of stuckness is a cycle of cascading disadvantage in multiple areas of our lives, including our finances, the neighborhoods we live in, our relationships, and our power to affect change. The feeling and material reality coalesce to create a trap that is hard to escape and harms our health and well-being.

The prevalence of stuckness is high in America. In our survey, 20% of respondents – representing at least 40 million working-age Americans -- strongly agreed with the statement “I currently feel stuck.” Nearly half of the respondents agreed to some degree. Americans who feel stuck are more likely to have lower incomes, lower rates of employment, and unmarried. However, even higher income, employed, and married Americans report feeling stuck. Stuckness is common across different age groups, racial and ethnic groups, and different parts of the political spectrum.

Stuckness strongly predicts health, even after taking economic outcomes -- such as income and employment, measures of relationships such as marital status and loneliness, and measures of psychological well-being, such hope, life satisfaction, and beliefs about upward mobility – into account.

Our report demonstrates how stuckness is an important and distinct measure of American well-being. Stuckness in many ways is the opposite of the American Dream, and measuring it allows us to better understand the barriers people face in realizing the promise of that dream. Stuckness also captures the reality of the social and economic lives of Americans who find themselves struggling. It provides us a name and a way to measure how disadvantages in different parts of our lives can concentrate in a vicious cycle, ultimately robbing us of hope, agency, and good health.

Our findings suggest that stuckness should become a fixture in the set of measures we use to track well-being in America. They tell us that getting Americans unstuck is an urgent priority: identifying policies and interventions that reduce stuckness may be key to achieving the American Dream for all.

Methodology

Our measure of stuckness was informed by clinical encounters and responses to a series of open-ended questions about feeling stuck directed to an online sample of working-age participants (n=50). These questions included the following: “Sometimes people say they feel ‘stuck’ in life. This can take many forms--trouble finding a job or worthwhile career, difficulty maintaining healthy relationships, overwhelmed with obligations (including as parents). Often people who feel stuck often feel powerless to change their circumstances. Have you felt this way? Why?” The question resonated with participants, who provided detailed answers. Based on these answers, we worked with YouGov to field a series of single-item, multiple-item, and open-ended questions about stuckness over three pilot studies conducted between April 2025 and July 2025. Using results of the pilot studies, we created the following single-item measure to elicit stuckness:

Sometimes people feel “stuck” or “trapped” in life. There are many different reasons why people feel this way.

Using the following scale, please rate the extent to which you agree with the statement:

I currently feel stuck

(Response options: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree.)

This measure yielded stable estimates of prevalence across pilot surveys. Assessment of correlates and open-ended responses provided evidence of construct validity.

We then fielded this question -- along with open ended questions about why people felt stuck and how it affected their health -- over the period July 11-22, 2025 to 1434 respondents ages 18-64 participating in a national YouGov panel. Survey weights were constructed and applied to all analyses to ensure that the sample was representative of American voters.¹

Our survey sample was nearly evenly split by gender (49.6% female and 50.4% male) with a representative age distribution (15.6% 18-25 years old; 21.2% 26-35 years old; 23.6% 35-45 years old; 14.2% 46-55 years old; and 25.5% 56-64 years old). 59.0% identified as non-Hispanic White, 13.5% non-Hispanic Black, 18.4% Hispanic, and 9.2% with other racial or ethnic groups.

33.7% of the sample completed a four-year college degree or higher. 40.0% of respondents reported being employed full time, 13.7% employed part time, 14.3% unemployed or laid off, 8.2% reporting a disability, and 24.0% identifying as students, retired, homemakers, or other. Family income was distributed as follows: less than \$30,000 (28.7%), \$30,000-\$60,000 (24.1%), \$60,000-\$100,000 (26.0%), \$100,000-\$200,000 (16.1%), and above \$200,000 (5.2%).

Key Findings

1. Stuckness is common.

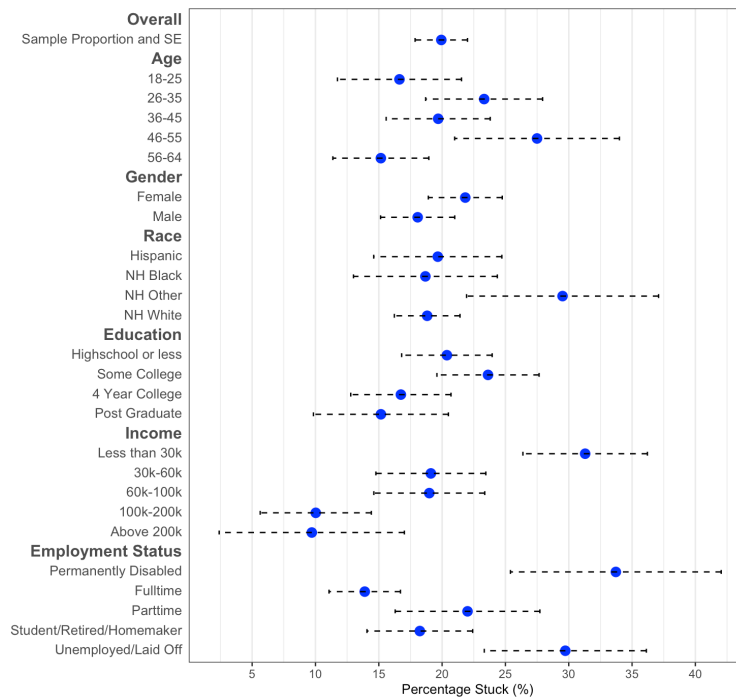
19.9% of the respondents to our survey responded that they “strongly agree” to the statement: “I am currently feeling stuck.” Another 28.4% said they “somewhat agree.”

Projecting these estimates out to the full U.S. population suggests that anywhere from 40 to 95 million working age adults in America feel stuck in their lives.

2. Stuckness reaches across class and demographic boundaries.

The prevalence of stuckness in our survey varied across demographic and economic categories (Figure 1). Stuckness was most prevalent among 26-55-year-olds – a period during when Americans progress in their jobs and consolidate wealth and start and raise families. The highest rates of stuckness occurred among 46-54-year-old Americans. Women were slightly more likely to report feeling stuck than men.

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents selecting strongly agree on the stuckness scale by demographic and other characteristics



Note: The points show the percentage of respondents that selected “Strongly Agree” to the statement “I am currently feeling stuck”. The p-values of the categories are as follows- age [Pr = 0.010], gender [Pr = 0.096], race [Pr = 0.072], education [Pr = 0.070], income [Pr = 0.000] and employment status [Pr = 0.000]. Sample Size: N= 1434.

Rates of stuckness are generally similar across racial and ethnic groups and slightly lower for those who completed a 4-year college degree or more.

The proportion of respondents reporting feeling stuck was highest among individuals with annual incomes below \$30,000 and lowest among those in the \$100,000–\$200,000 and above \$200,000 income groups. However, 10% of respondents in these latter groups strongly agreed with the statement that they currently feel stuck. Stuckness was highest among individuals who reported having a permanent disability, followed by those who were unemployed, and part-time employed. 14% of full time employed respondents reported feeling stuck.

3. There are several on ramps into stuckness.

We asked people who reported they somewhat or strongly agreed to our question on stuckness with the following open-ended question: “What circumstances made you feel stuck?” Nearly all respondents provided detailed answers. We analyzed the text of these responses in word clouds (Figure 2) and identified common themes using large-language models (LLMs, GPT-4):

Employment and finances:

“I've been unemployed for several months, so everything I do has to be limited while feeling powerless on getting a job. I apply to so many places, but no one will hire me, and I feel there's nothing I can do to change it.”

- Male, Age 28

“I am very unhappy and dissatisfied with my employment. I work two jobs and in both, my hard work and effort goes unnoticed and unrewarded. I lack benefits such as holiday pay in my secondary job and I am not getting enough hours. My main job is not fulfilling, and I have reached as far as I can go, and need to look for better prospects”

- Female, Age 47

Personal relationships and caregiving responsibilities:

“Having to care for my elderly mother, daughter and younger brothers after my dad passed unexpectedly. She has Alzheimer's and we all must work together to take care of her 24/7, because she nor I can afford to put her in a nursing home. It is preventing my daughter and brothers from gaining employment and taking a toll on me mentally being a caregiver for her at night and weekends for over a year now.”

- Female, Age 44

“I was in an abusive relationship with the father of my children who was an alcoholic and a narcissist. He left me with nothing. I am currently working towards earning my BA. As a single mom studying full time it is hard for me to work at times.”

- Female, Age 27

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Geographical immobility and neighborhood conditions:

"Made a bad decision when I moved to try and work remotely, but that fell through and now I'm stuck further from work in the suburbs, and my friends and family have moved away."

- Male, Age 30

"I feel like I am in a job with no chance of advancement. I want to move out of my neighborhood, but I don't have the time or resources."

- Male, Age 48

Mental and physical health and disability:

"My disability prevents me from being able to make the money I need for basic needs. I find myself struggling month to month with things like not having enough food, or not being able to buy the more expensive healthy food that I need."

- Female, Age 58

"I am wheelchair bound due to a neurological disorder that my medical team cannot find conclusive diagnosis for my condition I have been dependent on my family to change bathe eat transfer from my wheelchair to any seat and clean my diapers due to this issue I was brought back to life from my brother because I had a bilateral pulmonary embolism and found that I had polycythemia vera I am still trying my best each day and remind myself that I should be grateful for my situation of having a supporting medical team and family I continue occupational and physical therapy and have a home nurse to keep up with my vitals and communicate with my medical team"

- Male, Age 30

Discrimination and lack of power:

"Racism was used against me at my prior job of 17 years and now I feel my age is working against me trying to find a job"

- Male, Age 54

"I'm going to a religious college that condemns queer people as a queer person because I can't afford anywhere else, I'm worried my saved money won't be enough, and I'm worried the career I want to go into won't take me."

- Female, Age 19

Figure 2: Reasons for people feeling stuck

“I am caring for my elderly mother and my disabled husband. I have also had some health issues of my own this year. The combination of circumstances has rendered me unable to go to work since the end of February. Money is very tight and I have had to put off paying for most medical bills in order to keep the other bills paid.”

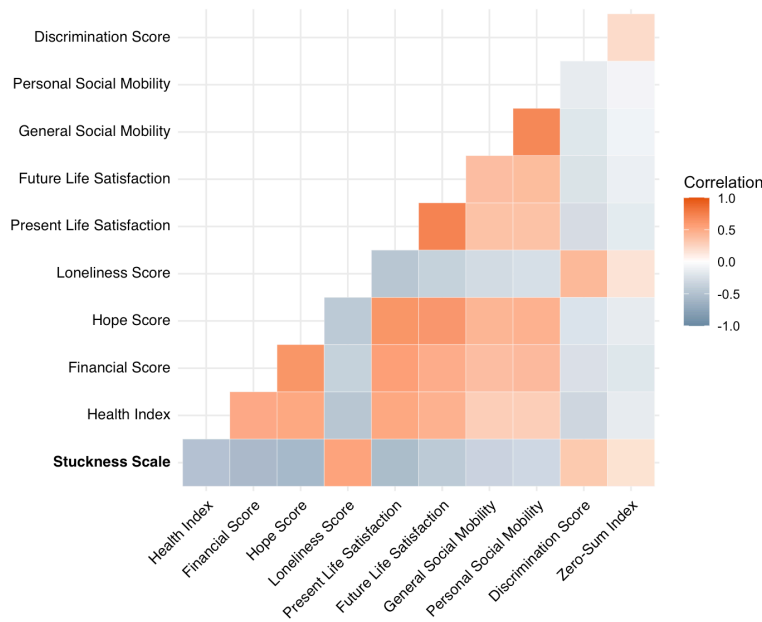
- Female, Age 64

Respondents who agreed strongly with the statement “I currently feel stuck in life” were more likely to report disadvantages in multiple parts of life. 30% of these respondents reported three or more of the following: unemployment or disability, income below the national median, loneliness, and below median scores on an index of health. In contrast, less than 4% of respondents who ‘strongly disagreed’, ‘somewhat disagreed’ or ‘neither agreed nor disagreed to feeling’ stuck reported the same.

5. Stuckness is distinct from other measures of well-being.

We fielded a broad range of well-known survey instruments capturing different elements of well-being. We find that stuckness is correlated with many of these measures in the directions we would expect (Figure 3). However, we find that stuckness is a distinct construct. For example, stuckness was negatively correlated with scores on the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s Financial Well-Being Score and the Snyder Hope Scale and positively correlated with the Hughes Loneliness Scale.ⁱⁱ These correlations were above 0.5, indicating moderate to strong correlation. Stuckness was also negatively correlated with measures of current and future life satisfaction,ⁱⁱⁱ perceived social mobility,^{iv} and discrimination.^v

Figure 3: Correlations between measures of health, well-being, and stuckness



Note: The heatmap plots correlations between different measures of well-being, health, and our stuckness measure. Darker colors indicate stronger correlations. N=1,434.

6. People who are stuck are in worse health.

In statistical analyses, respondents who reported feeling stuck also reported worse general, physical, and mental health as well as days of work lost due to poor health (Figure 4). Responses from open-ended questions suggested a two-way relationship between stuckness and health: stuckness leads to poorer mental and physical health, and poor health can lead to deeper stuckness.

"I am on disability for chronic health problems and therefore very low income. I feel stuck in my current housing that I am unhappy with. I have no money for fun things. I am unable to work and often able to get out and do things therefore I am very isolated and lonely. I have little control over my health issues as well."

- Female, Age 55

"I became totally disabled some years back, and had to make adjustments plus exhaust my savings in order to continue living in my small apartment. However, over the past 8 or so years, it became harder to do so, as gentrification and speculation has driven up rental rates in this area. At the same time, my insurance premiums and co-pays have gone up. More recently, inflation has been crazy. In the past three years, I've developed dental issues that are not covered by my limited (preventative) insurance. I keep putting off getting the work done, as I cannot save enough for even the first visit. Over the past 12 months, my blood pressure has gone from fair to quite high. I believe deep dental issues are significantly contributing to this, as well as to overall inflammation and related health conditions. It's so frustrating to be feeling poorly, and to not be able to do anything about it."

- Male, Age 60

"My serious health issues prevent me from being able to work. I don't have many friends and family either for moral support"

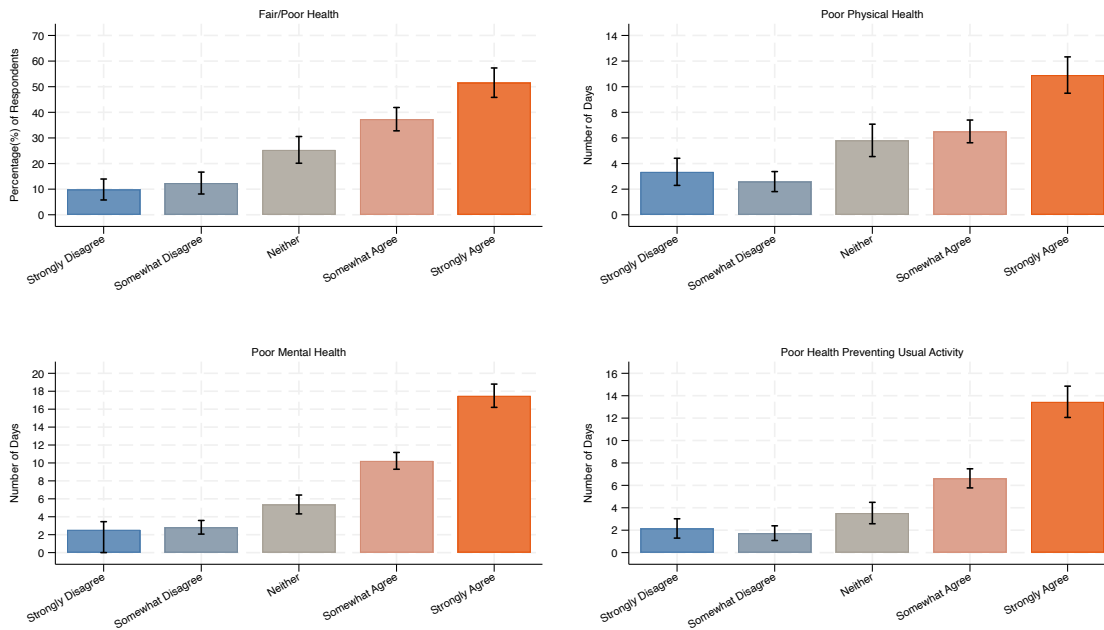
- Female, Age 28

"I was hit by a car and am now partially disabled. Disabled enough to be limited in work and not make enough money but not enough to get disability. Poor enough I can't get regular health insurance but not enough to get medicaid."

- Male, Age 26

The correlation between stuckness and measures of health remained even after adjusting for a rich set of demographic characteristics (age, gender, race/ethnicity), socioeconomic status (employment, income group, financial well-being measures), and measures of general well-being (life satisfaction, hope, loneliness, perceptions of upward mobility). This suggests that stuckness is a unique, independent risk factor for poor health, a pattern consistent with the responses to the open-ended questions.

Figure 4: Correlation between stuckness scale and health variables

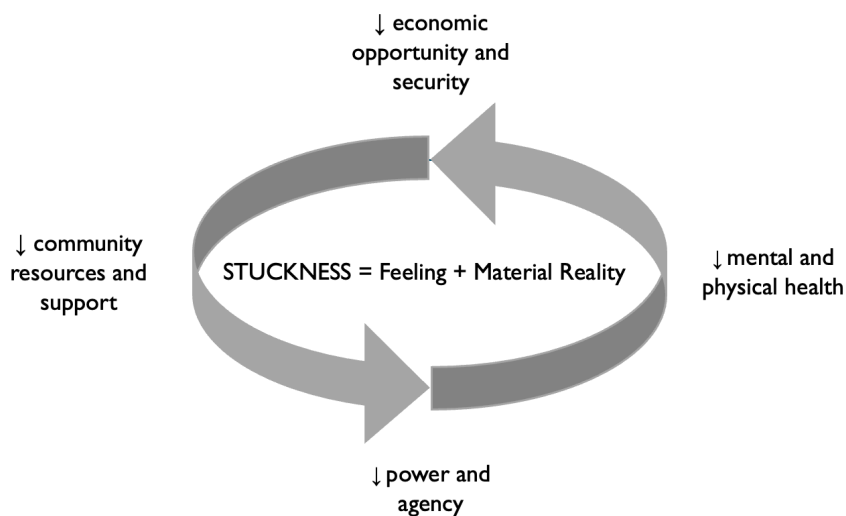


Note: The figures plot the relationship between the stuckness scale and the following self-reported health measures: a binary measure of fair or poor self-rated health; the number of poor physical health days in the last month; the number of poor mental health days; and the number of days in the last month where poor health prevented individuals from working/doing their usual activities. Sample Size: N= 1434.

Conclusions

This report identifies and quantifies, for the first time, stuckness as a key aspect of American life. Our findings suggest a scientific definition of stuckness: the combination of a sentiment and a material reality that reinforce one another in a self-perpetuating trap. This trap leads people to downgrade their expectations of the future, diminishing hope, and increases stress, all of which can worsen health and well-being (Figure 5). Our estimates suggest that at least 40 million Americans find themselves mired in such a trap.

Figure 5: Conceptual model of stuckness



The concept of stuckness offers several advantages to researchers and policymakers seeking to understand challenges in modern American life. First, by focusing on sentiment, it offers an easy to ascertain way to measure key social science phenomena that are otherwise difficult to quantify, such as poverty or resource traps.^{vi} Second, it may offer insights into otherwise puzzling social trends, such as discordance between measures of standard of living (such as wages or income) and beliefs about economic hardship. Third, stuckness may serve as a unifying concept to understand the co-occurrence of multiple troubling trends in American life, including growing income inequality, falling social mobility, increasing social isolation, and widening partisanship as well as stagnating life expectancy. Our findings welcome further research and inquiry into all these areas. We at Opportunity for Health hope to catalyze this work through further research on stuckness and collaboration with interested parties.

Finally, stuckness – if elicited as a valid construct in other work – can serve as a unified concept to frame a new policy agenda for the United States. As a social driver of well-being and health, stuckness is both highly prevalent and often hidden in plain sight. When individuals feel trapped in their current circumstances, this can trigger cascading and self-reinforcing disadvantages that hinder their ability to become “unstuck.” Accordingly, policies that address specific on-ramps into stuckness and prevent negative “shocks” in one domain of life (e.g., a sudden illness or job loss) from propagating into other domains of life and resulting in a vicious cycle.

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ⁱ We verified our sample was nationally representative using national population benchmarks from the March 2024 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC). Across the majority of demographic and economic categories, the sample means closely approximated the corresponding population means and fell within sampling error, indicating that the weighted sample was nationally representative.

ⁱⁱ Snyder CR, Sympson SC, Ybasco FC, Borders TF, Babyak MA, Higgins RL. Development and validation of the State Hope Scale. *J Pers Soc Psychol.* 1996 Feb;70(2):321-35 and Hughes ME, Waite LJ, Hawkley LC, Cacioppo JT. A Short Scale for Measuring Loneliness in Large Surveys: Results From Two Population-Based Studies. *Res Aging.* 2004;26(6):655-672.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cantril, H. (1965). *The Pattern of Human Concerns*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

^{iv} Day MV, Fiske ST. Movin' on Up? How Perceptions of Social Mobility Affect Our Willingness to Defend the System. *Soc Psychol Personal Sci.* 2017 Apr;8(3):267-274.

^v Williams DR, Yan Yu, Jackson JS, Anderson NB. Racial Differences in Physical and Mental Health: Socio-economic Status, Stress and Discrimination. *J Health Psychol.* 1997 Jul;2(3):335-51.

^{vi} Bowles, S., Durlauf, S.N., and Hoff, K. (eds). (2006). *Poverty Traps*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press