

## D.6. A SURVEY OF PARTICIPANTS IN THE VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY MOVEMENT

These notes are excerpts from the results of a survey I conducted of participants at a large conference on Voluntary Simplicity held in Los Angeles in 1998. Following the 1998 material I've added some reflections on the survey and its results after two decades. This material is from the dissertation Hayes (2004).

### A. Introduction

The voluntary simplicity movement arose in close association with the counterculture and environmental movements of the late 1960's and early 1970's. It valued moderation over excess, spiritual development over material consumption, cooperation over competition, and nature over technology. In the United States the movement peaked in the mid-1970's, declined, and was quiescent through the 1980's. In the early 1990's voluntary simplicity became a focus of renewed interest. Some observers linked this straightforwardly to the resurgence of environmental activism that began in 1988. Others believed it was a pragmatic response to the recession and economic restructuring of the early 1990's. For still others it was a response to psychic stress associated with rapid technological change, social fragmentation, and the relentless expansion of consumerist values into all domains of human life. Today the prospects for the voluntary simplicity movement are uncertain. With strong and steady economic growth, a shortage of ecological disasters and growing acceptance of high-tech social norms, the movement might fade once more. If any of these conditions should become problematic, interest in voluntary simplicity could grow.<sup>1 2</sup> In September 1998 a major conference on voluntary simplicity was held in Los Angeles, California. More than 750 attendees heard numerous speakers address many aspects of voluntary simplicity. Nearly half the attendees signed up to participate in voluntary simplicity discussion and support groups in their local areas. The conference agenda is shown in **IIC-26**.

### B. The Survey

I conducted a survey of attendees at this conference. I had three purposes in mind. First, I wanted to find out what the notion of voluntary simplicity meant to people involved in that movement. Second, I wanted to find out what sorts of people were attracted to the idea of voluntary simplicity. Third, I wanted

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<sup>1</sup> There is a long literature on voluntary simplicity. A good history is David Shi's *The Simple Life* (1985). Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Richard Gregg's *The Value of Voluntary Simplicity* (1936) are foundational. Duane Elgin's *Voluntary Simplicity* (1981) set the tone for the current movement. Many of the environmentalist and Green texts listed in Box IIC-1 advocate one aspect or another of voluntary simplicity. With revived interest in the early 1990's came many new books, including Amy Saltzman's *Downshifting: Reinventing Success on a Slower Track* (1991), Amy Dacyczyn's *Tightwad Gazette* (1993), Cecile Andrews' *The Circle of Simplicity* (1997), and Jerome M. Segal's *Graceful Simplicity: Towards a Philosophy and Politics of Simple Living* (1999). Periodicals include *The Simple Living Journal*, *In Context*, and *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures*.

<sup>2</sup> There are many varieties of voluntary simplicity. Amitai Etzioni (1998) distinguished three: "downshifters", who maintain high income and consumption patterns, even if they scale back a bit or adopt a simplicity of style; "strong simplifiers," who give up high income careers and live at markedly reduced levels of consumption, but who do not necessarily see themselves as part of a social movement, and who may hold any number of social and political views; and "simple living movement activists" who likewise live on low incomes, but who see voluntary simplicity as part of a wider vision of planetary sustainability.

to find out how participants in the voluntary simplicity movement reconciled competing values concerning consumption, equity, ecological sustainability and economic growth.

This section reports results of the survey. It focuses especially on the third purpose just noted. We saw in Section II.C.2 that while most people are supportive of environmental protection, they are reluctant to pay very much for it, and even more reluctant to consider reducing income or consumption in the aggregate as a way of helping lessen the impact of economic activity on the environment. I figured that participants at the Voluntary Simplicity conference would be much more receptive to the idea of cutting back consumption. I figured further that participants at this conference were likely to have given more thought to the many ways in which values and behaviors concerning consumption, the environment, equity and growth inter-relate with one another. Thus, I thought, any opinions concerning these issues held by attendees at this conference might represent the edge of the envelope of social and political practicability. That is to say, I thought it unlikely that some other sample of Americans would call for *lower* levels of future economic growth, or *lower* preferred levels of household consumption, than would participants at a conference such as this one. The values endorsed by attendees at this conference might thus serve as a set of constraints on the long-range, global scenarios developed in the dissertation, especially those that envision lower rates of economic growth.

The survey form I developed is shown in IIC-27. It was distributed along with the conference program. Of the 750 or so participants, 255 (34%) returned completed forms. Although the response was high there is no guarantee that it represented a random sample. Thus the results given in the sections that follow apply to the 255 *respondents*, and not necessarily to the 750 *participants*.<sup>3</sup>

## C. Survey Results

### 1. What does voluntary simplicity mean to the respondents?

Box IIC-28 displays a sample of responses to the first question in the survey, “*In just a few words, what does ‘voluntary simplicity’ mean to you?*” A great many of the responses touch on one or more of these three themes: 1) reducing consumption, reducing spending, living within means  
2) having a rich inner life and peace of mind; spirituality; consciousness  
3) living in harmony with the earth

Two additional themes appear repeatedly but not as frequently as the first three:

- 4) resisting materialist/consumerist/competitive values imposed by society; asserting personal autonomy
- 5) spending more time with family and friends, building community

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<sup>3</sup> To the extent that we want to learn anything about people who are *attracted* to the notion of voluntary simplicity, i.e., the population of conference attendees, the non-randomness of the survey responses is a disadvantage. For some of the other things we want to learn, however, the non-randomness might actually be an advantage. We might suppose that the 255 survey respondents represent a particularly committed, articulate sub-group of the 750 participants, whose responses to the survey questions might reflect greater engagement with the issues at hand. However, this is speculation.

## **BOX IIC-26. THE VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY CONFERENCE**

Here is the program for the conference “*No Purchase Necessary: Building the Voluntary Simplicity Movement*,” held on September 19, 1998 at the University of Southern California. It was organized by Seeds of Simplicity, a non-profit education organization. \*

### *Conference Program*

- 9:00 Welcome/Introduction by Carol Benson Holst, Seeds of Simplicity  
9:05 Event Parameters by Michael Beck, Seeds of Simplicity  
9:10 Welcome by Tom Shelley, Tom Shelley Enterprises  
9:15 Cecile Andrews, Duane Elgin and Ellen Funari -  
A Visioning Conversation: Why Are We Here?  
9:40 Ed Begley, Jr. - How Much is Enough?  
10:00 Audience Forum Janet Luhrs Booksigning  
10:30 BREAK  
10:4 Panel: “The Best Things in Life Aren’t Things”  
Duane Elgin - Voluntary Simplicity: Indicator of Global Change  
Mary Kalifon - Children, Families, and Simplicity  
Rev. Peter Moore-Kochlacs - Faith and Simplicity Connections  
Julie Ozanne - A Consuming Passion  
Susan Salterberg - Simplifying for Wellness  
12:00 Audience Forum Cecile Andrews Booksigning  
12:30 LUNCH PBS Special, *Escape from Affluenza*  
1:30 Remarks by John de Graaf, Co-Producer of the *Affluenza* series  
1:40 Kalle Lasn - Action Goals: Buy Nothing Day  
2:00 Panel: “Taking Action on Simplicity in Your Life.”  
Cecile Andrews - Advancing Simplicity Circles  
Michael Fogler - Un-Jobbing  
Janet Luhrs - The Simple Living Guide  
Carol Pimentel - Your Money or Your Life  
Dave Wampler - Voluntary Simplicity in Cyberspace  
3:15 Audience Forum Duane Elgin Booksigning  
3:45 BREAK  
4:00 Panel: “Taking Action on Simplicity in Your Group”  
Lois Arkin - LA Eco-Village  
Kevin Finney - Environmentalists Seize the Day  
Julie Russell - Eco-Home Network  
May Webber - Ithaca Eco-Village  
Rod Gorney - Simplicity and the Human Community  
5:15 Audience Forum Michael Fogler Booksigning  
5:30 Wrap Up by Ellen Funari
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\* P.O. Box 9955, Glendale, CA 91226; 818-247-4332; [www.sl.net.com/cip/seeds](http://www.sl.net.com/cip/seeds)

## BOX IIC-27. SIMPLICITY SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA at Berkeley

### **VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY SURVEY**

distributed at the Seeds of Simplicity Conference, 9/19/98

This survey is part of a doctoral research project concerning Voluntary Simplicity. The investigator is Rich Hayes, a student in the U.C. Berkeley Energy and Resources Program. The results of this survey will also be used by Seeds of Simplicity. Participation in this survey is voluntary. No personal identifying information is requested, and we ask that you do **not** write your name, address, or other identifying information anywhere on this sheet. University regulations only allow persons 18 years of age or older to participate in this survey. We'd like you to answer all questions, but this is not a requirement. Drop the completed sheets in one of the two **BIG BOXES** labeled "SURVEY!" by the **Exit Doors**. If you would like copies of the survey results, or other information about the survey, contact Rich Hayes by phone (415-566-0849) or email (rhayes@socrates.berkeley.edu). Thank you so much!

#### **I. Voluntary Simplicity**

1. In just a few words, what does "voluntary simplicity" mean to you?
  
2. What do you think are the one or two most important things you could do to significantly make your life more simple than it is right now?

#### **II. You and Your Household**

1. Are you married or not married? Married \_\_\_\_ Not Married \_\_\_\_
2. Do you own your own home? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_
3. How many people are in your household? (Include yourself as 1) \_\_\_\_
4. How many people in your household are children 17 years old or younger? \_\_\_\_
5. What is the total number of cars owned by people in your household? \_\_\_\_
6. Roughly, how many hours a week do you, personally, spend watching television? \_\_\_\_

#### **III. General**

1. City & State of residence \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_ Sex \_\_\_\_
2. Occupation \_\_\_\_\_
3. Highest level of schooling: some high school \_\_\_\_ high school diploma \_\_\_\_ some college \_\_\_\_  
four-year college degree \_\_\_\_ professional/post-graduate degree \_\_\_\_
4. Political Party Registration: Republican \_\_\_\_ Democrat \_\_\_\_ Green \_\_\_\_ Libertarian \_\_\_\_  
Peace & Freedom \_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_ unaffiliated \_\_\_\_ not registered \_\_\_\_

#### **IV. Money**

1. In the part of the state in which you live, what would you say is the minimum annual household income, before taxes, currently necessary to support a household of four people, including two children of high-school age, at each of these levels:
  - a. "Just enough to get by": \$ \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. "Enough to live in reasonable comfort and security": \$ \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. "Much more than enough", i.e., the income level that might be considered "too much": \$ \_\_\_\_\_
2. Roughly, what was your before-tax annual household income last year, from all sources? \$ \_\_\_\_\_
3. Roughly, how much did you put into savings last year, or otherwise not spend? \$ \_\_\_\_\_
4. Roughly, what level of annual household income do you expect to be living at, during the period of your life when you and the members of your household are earning their highest total income? (Assume, for this question, that price levels remain roughly as they are today.) \$ \_\_\_\_\_
5. If you had to live on an annual household income 20% below the level you lived on last year, what steps would you take to do this?

over, please →

BOX IIC-27 (cont'd.)

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*simplicity survey (cont.)*

6. After you (and your spouse or partner, if any) have both retired, how much annual household income would you like to be able to live on? (If you're already retired you can skip this question.) \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**V. The Level and Distribution of Income**

In 1996 the before-tax annual incomes of American families with heads in the 45-54 age-range were as follows:

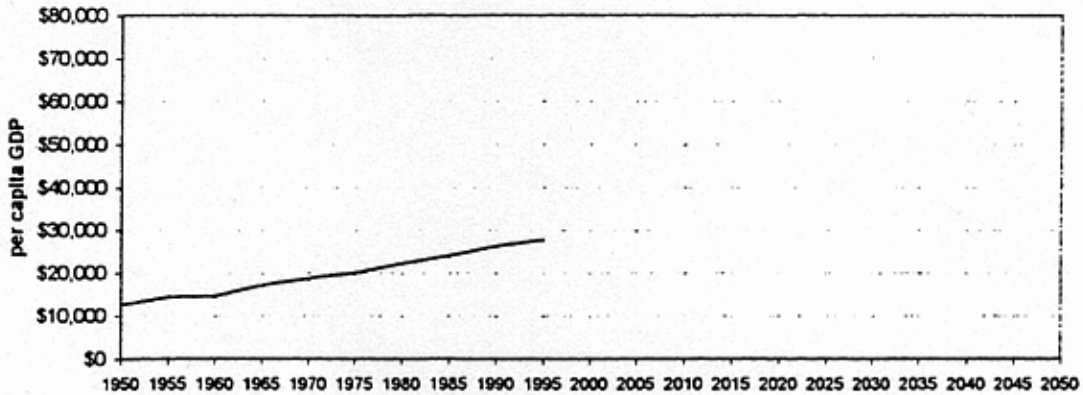
- The bottom 20% of these families had an average annual income of about \$18,100.
- The middle 20% of these families had an average annual income of about \$58,600.
- The top 20% of these families had an average annual income of about \$147,000.

What levels of income for families with heads in the 45-55 age-range do you believe would be consistent with sustainability and fairness, and might be aspired to, over the coming century, as goals for our country? (Assume that price levels remain roughly as they are today.) Just put a dollar value in the spaces below:

- The bottom 20% of these families would have an average annual income of about \$ \_\_\_\_\_.
- The middle 20% of these families would have an average annual income of about \$ \_\_\_\_\_.
- The top 20% of these families would have an average annual income of about \$ \_\_\_\_\_.

**VI. Economic Growth**

The chart below shows the path along which per capita GDP (Gross Domestic Product) has changed in the United States over the 45 years between 1950 and 1995. The dollar values are adjusted for inflation, so they show real purchasing power. With your pen or pencil, sketch the path of *future* per capita GDP change, between 1995 and 2050, that you believe is desirable and achievable. Just sketch a straight or curved or wavy line.



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**VII. Conference Evaluation:** To help Seeds of Simplicity evaluate this conference, please answer this question: "Keeping in mind that volunteers paid for this event, and that no break-out space was possible, what did you find valuable about this conference, what could have been done better, and what else might be done to support people interested in voluntary simplicity?"

That's it! When finished, please drop this sheet in one of the two **BIG BOXES** marked **SURVEY!** at the **Exit Doors**. Thank you very much!

## **BOX IIC-28. THE MEANING OF “VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY”**

The first question on the Simple Living Survey was:

*In just a few words, what does “voluntary simplicity” mean to you?*

Here are the verbatim responses taken from the first and every fifth survey form (52 responses = 20.4% of responses). The original numbering of the survey forms was random.

1. spending wisely; creating with raw materials; respecting the earth; seeking a rich inner life
5. “smell the roses”
10. reduce stress—let serenity take precedence
15. reducing consumption; getting rid of unnecessary activities-daily life; allowing time for intimacy, spirituality, relaxation; questioning corporate dominance of world economy & politics.
20. ...that one is choosing sanity.
25. enjoying your life, not too concerned about other things and just being plain happy and contented.
30. my choice of life style using less.
35. living in ways to have as little impact on the Earth as practicable. Living in community.
40. consciousness of what’s really important.
45. being at peace with what I do and what I have.
50. not consuming, living simply, not buying processed goods, not shopping, riding my bike.
55. having the time to enjoy life, friends/family and the things you have.
60. living consciously, sustainably—both for the earth, future generations and myself.
65. choosing to have less stuff.
70. not being a slave to your possessions.
75. living within my means while maintaining a high quality of life.
80. it means being comfortable with who you are and having peace of mind.
85. living with less stuff and less money.
90. everything in Janet Luhr’s books! Less “stuff” & not worrying about having too little \$\$.
95. purposeful living simply with few resources and control over my life as much as possible; “downsizing.”
100. consciously exercising better stewardship of resources.
105. choosing to reduce consumption of material things and peripheral unwanted complications in life to enjoy it more and help heal the planet. Sustainability.
110. choosing to live a conservation lifestyle.
115. simplifying one’s life through reducing consumption, waste & stress. Increasing the healthy aspects such and diet & fun.
120. hey check it out. You never know how you might change.
125. living in a way that has little impact on the planet and great (positive)impact on my community; taking the needs of humanity into consideration as I make choices for my family, especially with regard to consumerism.
130. choosing quality of life over quality of possessions.
135. learning to live consciously, deliberately, richly, by reducing the habits, patterns or things that distract us from what is most meaningful to us.
140. scaling back

[More =>]

BOX IIC-28 (cont..)

145. deep abiding warm nurturing respect for people, nature and things around me. It is attention.
150. spending less money. Acquiring less “stuff”
155. dropping out of the “keeping up with” syndrome and happily doing with less.
160. living below one’s means, with purpose or on purpose.
165. enjoying life does not involve buying and spending.
170. living in harmony with earth and all living things.
175. always to have a soulful (?) life and life from the inside out.
180. living with materialism within your needs rather than wants.
185. slowing down, reducing consuming
190. simplify life as much as possible; give extra cash to charity.
195. making choices to unclutter my life in mental and physical ways.
200. having what I need and sharing what I have.
205. a desire to de-complicate many of today’s self-imposed regimens and not follow fashion.
210. looking at what is most important to me in my life and trying to center my lifestyle around it. also living in harmony with the earth as much as I can.
215. (not answered)
220. focus on meaningful activities in life; reduce consumer consumption.
225. peaceful living, living with integrity, purpose, intent joy and living lightly.
230. consuming less; being environmentally conscious, recycling everything!
235. enjoying what is most important to me—eliminating what is not essential—becoming comfortable with choices.
240. downsizing consumption; preserving the environment; regaining or sustaining spirituality & promoting gender equity.
245. creating a community of conscious care for people, the earth and spirit.
250. being conscious in my life of how my actions affect the earth, others, & my children.  
Also, paring down in order to have more of what matters.
255. choosing to “not buy into” values dictated by others. Rather, living by my own values.

The first theme is instrumental/pragmatic in nature. The second theme is psychological/spiritual. The third theme contains both instrumental/pragmatic and psychological/spiritual elements. The fourth and fifth themes are social, or social-psychological, in nature.<sup>4</sup>

**Box IIC-29** displays a sample of answers to the second question, “*What are the one or two most important things you could do to significantly make your life more simple than it is right now?*” The answers given suggest four repeated themes:

- 1) get rid of things, sell things, reduce clutter
- 2) work less, consume less, travel less, commute less
- 3) increase attention to family, friends, community
- 4) increase attention to art, spirituality, nature

The first and second themes are of a pragmatic/instrumental nature and emphasize stock reduction and flow reduction, respectively. The third and fourth themes concern social, psychological, and spiritual activities.

## **2. Who is attracted to the notion of voluntary simplicity?**

**Boxes IIC-30 and IIC-31** show aggregate results for selected items included in the survey, and compares them with comparable values for the general populations of Los Angeles County, California and the United States.

Broadly, the survey respondents were middle-aged, middle-class and highly educated.<sup>5</sup> Over two-thirds were women. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents were in their 40’s or 50’s; for Los Angeles County as a whole these age groups comprise only 28% of the population age 20 and over. Only 8% of the respondents were in their ‘20’s; for LA County the figure is 27 %.

Fully 44% of respondents had graduate or professional degrees, compared with 8% for the general population.

Seventy-four percent of respondents had no children under age 18 as part of their household. Either they have not been parents, or their children are living elsewhere. The comparable figure for LA county is 65%. The average household size--2.2 persons per household--is also notably smaller than elsewhere.

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<sup>4</sup> I tried to estimate quantitatively the frequency with which these themes were mentioned by respondents. However, many items mentioned could be categorized in more than one way. Further, the themes themselves are subjective constructs, and a more careful content analysis might reveal different conceptual clusters. To report my results as part of the main text would be premature. That said, my estimate of the frequency with which each of the themes were mentioned, or implied, by the 52 respondents listed in Box 3 is as follows: Reducing consumption, etc: 54%; Having a rich inner life and peace of mind, etc: 33%; Living in harmony with the earth: 27%; Resisting consumerist values, etc: 23%; Spending time with family, friends, in community, etc: 12%.

<sup>5</sup> Based on past experience I expected conference attendees to be predominantly non-Latino Caucasian, and did not ask that race or ethnicity be identified on the survey form. At the conference I estimated that perhaps 5-10% of attendees were non-Caucasian or Latino.

## **BOX IIC-29. MAKING YOUR LIFE MORE SIMPLE**

Here is a random sample of 36 responses (14 % of all responses) to Survey Question #2: *What do you think are the one or two most important things you could do to significantly make your life more simple than it is right now?*

5. work less (commute less) & more concentration on my art work.
10. go back to my parent's roots—Ireland--and take those of my eight (8) children who are interested with me. And interface with those who never left.
15. cut activities by 2/3
25. a stable job with a good salary, so that I can help my family and my friends/relatives/also people in need. Be a big help in saving the environment (and also protecting it.)
30. stay at home more.
35. sell business stuff (trucks & equipment); dispose of a bunch of personal "stuff".
40. my life is pretty simple right now.
45. get rid of the things in the "get rid of" storage.
55. live in a city that is planned for people (not cars) & has great public transportation; work less hours.
60. plan time to include doing fun or just nothing; grade fewer papers.
65. buy less stuff; clear out clutter
75. make my email work.
80. stop buying fast food. Bring healthy lunches to work. I would save \$\$\$!!
85. have fewer and less expensive hobbies; have a smaller house; work instead of being unemployed.
90. don't worry too much.
100. sell the R.V.
105. understand what I enjoy and what I do for the wrong reasons; scrutinize my spending habits.
110. move closer to work; to work on simplifying my own life; to help others to do the same.
115. stop eating at restaurants & drive less & grow my own food.
120. simple or simpleton. Know the difference.
125. recycle more; pay off debt; stop "charging."
140. travel less
145. stay out of malls; limit TV watching; manipulate homemaking resources appropriately so that I don't have to spend hours cleaning on the weekend; fix meals and eat at home 5 nights (at least) a week.
150. get rid of credit cards (and debts)
160. reduce clutter, junk in my home; scrutinize my spending.
165. get rid of excessive stuff; enjoy life with my kids
175. spend more time in nature and less in front of computer; volunteer more.
180. live within my means; work closer to home
185. leave work at 4:00; say no more or less
190. bike more- drive less
195. get rid of things that create clutter and aggravation for me, things that require taking care of.
200. learn to sew. Stop owning a car.
205. it's pretty simple now - but I'm willing to listen.
216. get rid of computer and television
220. prioritize my time
225. declutter, reduce.
230. stop spending money on "stuff"; reducing what I put out as waste.
240. reduce hours @ work; spending more time w/ spiritual pursuits.
245. quit my current job; use my bicycle for transportation and work at home
250. share, borrow, cut back intentionally, on stuff & search for my purpose
255. eliminate consumer debt; reduce commute time (get a job closer to home).

BOX IIC-30. Summary statistics from Voluntary Simplicity survey, with comparisons  
 [See notes and sources in Box IIC-31]

survey item	Respondents	LA County	California	USA
sex: % women	68	50	50	51
% men	32	50	50	49
% married	44	52		61
% homeowners	61			
age: mean years	46			
age: median (years)	45			
age by decade (percent):				
less than 20	1	-	-	-
20-29	8	27	25	20
30-39	21	26	25	24
40-49	31	17	18	20
50-59	27	11	12	13
60-69	10	10	10	11
70-79	2	6	7	8
80 or over	0	3	3	4
mean # people/household	2.2	3	2.9	2.7
# children <18 in household:				
0	74	65		65
1	12			
2	12			
3 or more	2			
mean hrs TV/week/respondent	6.9			31
mean # cars/household	1.8	1.7	1.3	1.4
household income				
median	\$50,000	\$37,507	\$39,072	\$37,005
mean	\$61,410			\$49,692
household savings				
median	\$5,000			
mean	\$10,490			- \$ 2,500
education (%'s)				
no high school diploma	0.4	30	23.8	19.1
high school diploma	1.6	20.7	22.2	34.4
some college	21.7	27	30.5	24.4
BA degree	31.9	14.5	15.3	14.7
graduate/professional degree	44.4	7.8	8.1	7.5
voter registration status:				
Democrat	55.7	46.2	37.8	
Republican	12.1	26.0	29.2	
Green	8.9	0.3	0.5	
Libertarian	1.2	0.3	0.4	
Peace & Freedom	0.8	0.5	0.4	
other	2.0	2.8	2.8	
decline-to-affiliate	-	9.3	9.1	
unaffiliated	14.1	-	-	-
not registered to vote	5.2	14.6	19.8	

## BOX IIC-31. SUMMARY STATISTICS: NOTES AND SOURCES

All values listed in the “Respondents” column in Box IIC-31 were obtained from the survey response forms. Values shown in other three columns—Los Angeles County (LA), California (CA), and USA (USA) are as described below. Values are shown for 1997 unless noted otherwise.

**sex:** LA: 1990 US Census, data base C90STF3A. [venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup](http://venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup).

CA: 1990 US Census; [venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909174476](http://venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909174476).

USA: Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1996, table #12, p. 14. Figures for 1995.

**% married:** LA: 1990 US Census Data, Database C90STF3A, [venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909171896](http://venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909171896).

**age:** The mean age of heads of households in the US in 1997 was 48.6 [U.S. Census Bureau, The Official Statistics, 9/2/98, table 2 p. 5.] The median age for the whole US population in 1995 was 34 [Statistical Abstract of the US, 1995, table 13, p. 14.]

**age by decade:** LA: 1990 US Census, Database C90STF3A

[venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909163337](http://venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909163337). CA: [venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909174476](http://venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909174476).

USA: Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1996, table #16, p. 16. Figures for 1995. The breakdown of age by decade gives percents for all persons 20 or older, for LA, CA and USA. The percents shown for Respondents are for all respondents; only 1% were less than age 20, so the other values don't change when they are adjusted to show percents of all respondents 20 or older.

**mean # people/household:** LA: State & Metro Area Data Book, 1997-98, pp. 75, 130.

CA, USA: California Statistical Abstract 1997, p 182. Figures for 1996.

**# children < 18 in household:** LA: US Census Database: [venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909170682](http://venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909170682).

US: Statistical Abstract of the US, 1995. Table 66, p. 58. Figures for 1994.

**mean hrs TV/week/respondent:** USA: Statistical Abstract of the US, 1997, table 887, p. 565.

**mean # cars/household:** LA, USA: 1997 California Statistical Abstract, p. 182, 187.

**household income:** USA: US Census Bureau, The Official Statistics, Sep. 2, 1998. Table 2, p. 5. (median and mean). CA & LA: US Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, P60-197, Table C, p. xiii. Money income in the US. For CA, 1995-1996 moving average = \$38,457. To adjust 95-96 figures to be comparable to the respondent's 1997 figures I multiplied each value by an estimated consumer price index of 1.5. by an estimated cpi of 1.016, to get \$39,034. For LA, 1995-96 moving average = \$36,917, x 1.015 = \$37,470. The respondents' figures are directly comparable with those for LA County, but comparison of these figures with those of the US, and to a lesser extent of CA, requires cost-of-living adjustments. The American Chamber of Commerce Research Associates (ACCRA) COL for the metropolitan LA region for 1996 was 1.197. This means that the US figures, for example, should be increased by 19.6% to be comparable with the LA and respondents' figures: \$37,005 x 1.197 = \$44,294. However, the ACCRA index is based on consumption patterns of fifth quintile, “middle management” households, so it may be a bit high.

**HH savings:** USA: figures for 1996: savings/HH = \$246.6 bill (Statistical Abstract of the US, 1997, table 704, p. 455) / 98.751 HH in US (California Statistical Abstract 1997, section P p. 182) ~ \$2500.

**education:** LA: [venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909162909](http://venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909162909).

CA: [venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909174476](http://venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/909174476). USA: Statistical Abstract of the USA, 1995. p. 158, table 240.

**party affiliation:** LA and CA: California Statistical Abstract, Nov. 1997, Section O. Percents shown are for the total population eligible to vote. On the survey form I used the term “unaffiliated” rather than the correct term “decline-to-affiliate.” This may have been misleading, and compromises the value of these figures.

About 56 % of respondents were Democrats, compared with 46% for LA County. About 9% of respondents were members of the Green Party, well in excess of their representation among voters in general but still limited. Only about 12% of respondents were Republicans, less than half their LA County proportion.

Respondents spend only 7 hrs/week watching TV, far less than the mean of 31 hrs/week for all Americans. On the other hand, the number of cars per household owned by respondents is slightly *higher* than the American average.<sup>6</sup>

Median household income of the respondents in 1997 was \$50,000. This is higher than that of the general population, which in LA County was about \$37,000. Is this result consistent with participation in a movement that stresses lower consumption, simpler life styles, and more attention to spiritual than material pursuits? It depends. **IIC-32** shows a breakdown of income by education and age, for the respondents and for the United States as a whole. We see in Table 1 that the mean and median household incomes of the respondents are quite a bit *lower* than the household incomes of other Americans of equivalent education. Thus one interpretation might be that the respondents have chosen to live at levels of income lower than those they would otherwise be able to command, albeit at levels still higher than average. Of course, it is possible that the lower levels of income reflect real differences in abilities, or at least marketable skills, despite the formal equivalence of educational background.

Table 2 in Box IIC-32 shows that some of the difference in incomes between respondents and Americans at large could be due to the fact that the mean age of the respondents is higher than the mean for the country as a whole. For both groups persons under 35 have lower incomes than those over 35.

The results in Table 1 show that respondents appear to be putting a larger share of their earnings into savings than are Americans overall. However, this result could also be an artifact of differences in the age distribution of the two groups.

**Box IIC-33** displays the occupations given by a random sample of 102 (40%) of the 255 respondents. Note the high proportion of respondents involved in education (~27% of the sample) and medical services (~13%), and services in general. Few respondents hold high-tech jobs and almost none hold blue-collar jobs.

**Box IIC-34** suggests that the financial aspirations of respondents might be characterized as moderate to moderately high in comparison with typical American household incomes. At the peak of their earning powers the respondents aspire to mean household incomes of somewhat more than \$70,000/year. In 1997 about 30% of all U.S. households with heads of age 45-54 had incomes of \$75,000 or more. It

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<sup>6</sup> All but a very few respondents live in Los Angeles County, where automobiles are a practical necessity.

**BOX IIC-32. HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY EDUCATION AND AGE**

Table 1. Income by education (dollars)

	Respondents		United States - 1997	
	median	mean	median	mean
BA	43,000	54,112	59,048	71,521
MA		69,000	68,115	82,955
Prof. degree			92,228	126,778

Table 2. Income by age (dollars)

Age	Respondents		United States - 1997	
	median	mean	median	mean
15-24	12,000	14,000	22,583	29,026
25-34	35,000	42,900	38,174	45,099
35-44	60,000	64,400	46,359	57,036
45-54	50,000	61,900	51,875	65,286
55-64	55,000	59,000	41,356	57,396

[Figures for the United States: U.S. Census Bureau, The Official Statistics, 9/2/98, table 2, p. 5.]

Note: The figures shown are not adjusted to account for cost-of-living differences between the LA metropolitan region and the average for the US. As noted in Box IIC-31, the ACCRA cost-of-living index for LA is 1.197. Adjusting figures for the US upward by this amount (19.7%) to allow for comparability would reinforce the pattern described in the text in which respondents have lower household incomes than do persons of comparable educational level. However, the caveats noted in Box IIC-31 remain.

**BOX IIC-33. RESPONDENT OCCUPATIONS**

Shown are 101 verbatim responses (40% of all responses), selected at random.

1. library assistant
3. student
5. accountant-artist
7. clinical social worker
10. RN-retired
12. scholar assistant
15. college teacher
17. registered nurse
20. special education assistant
22. teacher
25. full-time college student
27. organizer
30. retired teacher
32. public relations
35. self-employed: cleaning business
37. trainer
40. paralegal/songwriter
42. college student
45. health educator
47. systems analyst
50. high school teacher
52. journalist
55. computer programmer
57. retired aerospace engineer
60. high school teacher
62. physician
65. teacher
67. urban planner
70. chemist
72. register nurse - mental health
75. planner for LA county
77. medical assistant
80. quality assurance coordinator
82. marketing communications manager
85. film editor
87. retired - toxins at work (defense)
90. homemaker
92. manager
95. retired teacher
97. actuary
100. retired professor of plastic surgery
102. finance computer systems analyst
105. writer
107. speaker/entertainer
110. operations manager
112. housewife
115. social work: mentoring juvenile offenders
117. college geography teacher
120. mail carrier

122. mother
125. writer
127. environmental nonprofit administrator
130. elementary school teacher
131. teacher
135. former health program administrator
137. elementary school teacher
140. agent
142. engineer
145. office worker
147. psychotherapist
150. grad student: art history
152. body/mind therapist
155. at home mom
157. administrative assistant
160. high school science teacher
162. home school teacher
165. retired homemaker
167. retired elementary school teacher
173. R.N.
172. senior financial manager
175. writer/entrepreneur
177. coach
180. teacher
182. environmental activist
185. school counselor
187. administrative assistant
190. investor
192. actor, writer
195. asst. food service director: school district
197. designer/teacher/artist
200. unemployed; trying to become a teacher
202. student
205. retired engineer
207. high school student
210. mother at home; social worker
212. social worker
216. teacher (substitute)
217. environmental planning & design assistant
220. paralegal
222. paralegal
225. stay home mom/childbirth educator
227. bank teller
230. Americorp-mentor to teens
232. counselor/teacher
235. writer
237. real estate entrepreneur
240. sociologist
242. retired
245. research audiologist
247. counselor for disabled
250. stay at home mom
252. occupational therapist
255. computer security

**BOX IIC-34. Survey Responses Concerning Income and Savings**  
 [dollars; see Box IIC-27 for the wording of the questions]

	median	adjusted mean	mean
Table 1.			
household income	50,000	54,520	61,410
household savings	5,000	6,036	10,490
max. household income anticipated	70,000	72,840	89,210
anticipated retirement income	40,000	37,630	56,490

Table 2. How much to			
just get by	33,500	33,330	37,190
live in reasonable comfort	50,000	54,990	60,470
too much	100,000	119,200	169,800

Table 3. How much for			
bottom 20%	30,000	29,120	30,560
middle 20%	55,000	51,350	54,190
top 20%	90,000	91,340	98,620

percentage difference:	-10.4%	-12.6%	-17.8%
(Panel 3 - Panel 2) / Panel 2	10.0%	-6.6%	-10.4%
	-10.0%	-23.4%	-41.9%

The adjusted mean is determined by computing the interquartile range, multiplying this value by 1.5, adding this product to the upper quartile to get an upper boundary and subtracting it from the lower quartile to get a lower boundary, and deleting as outliers all sample values that lie above or below these new boundaries.

appears that a majority of survey respondents aspire to place within the top 30% of households of their own age cohort, at least for some period.<sup>7</sup>

As for retirement, respondents hope to be able to have secured enough savings, or be the beneficiary of sufficient other incomes, to have household incomes of about \$40,000/year. Given that their current median incomes are about \$50,000 a year, their retirement goals might be thought of as roughly equivalent to their current level of consumption, minus expenditures on kids, commuting, and mortgages. A retirement income of \$40,000 per year is equivalent to ownership or entitlement assets of about \$600,000, assuming a 6.5% return on investment.

The current and anticipated incomes of the respondents show wide variances, as displayed in **IIC-35**. Although median household income is \$50,000, fully 25% of respondents have incomes above \$78,000.

### **3. Opinions about income, consumption, growth and equity**

#### **a. How much is enough?**

The question “how much is enough?” is perhaps the central question of the entire debate over economic growth, ecological integrity and social equity. Question IV-1 follows Roper-Starch (1995) and divides the question into three parts, as shown on the survey form in Box IIC-27.<sup>8</sup> The responses, shown in Box IIC-35, table 2, suggest that a majority of respondents believe that \$33,500 is enough, or more than enough, for a family of four to “just get by” on; that \$50,000 is enough, or more than enough, for them to “live in reasonable comfort and security;” and that \$100,000 or more is “much more than enough,” or “too much.”

The distribution of responses is shown in **IIC-36**. We see that variance is least for “get by,” more for “comfort” and greatest for “too much”.<sup>9</sup>

A quarter of respondents said that \$40,000 or more is necessary to “just get by,” that \$70,000 or more is needed to live in “reasonable comfort and security,” and that household income would have to reach \$170,000 before qualifying as “much more than enough”.

The median level of \$50,000 felt to be needed for “reasonable comfort and security” is precisely the

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<sup>7</sup> Are these figures consistent with an ethic of voluntary simplicity? It’s difficult to say without data on life-cycle income patterns. It’s possible that some respondents, now in their late fifties, are aspiring towards household incomes of \$70,000 for only the final few years of a worklife that otherwise generated far lower incomes. Further, cost-of-living adjustments using the ACCRA index of 1.196 would reduce the share of respondents aspiring to place within the top 30% from a majority to about 36%.

<sup>8</sup> *Roper Reports*, 1995. The data displayed was taken from Andrew Hacker, 1995, *Money: Who has how much and why*, pp 39-40

<sup>9</sup> The standard deviations for the three categories “get by,” “comfort” and “too much” are \$14K, \$27K and \$110K, respectively. The interquartile ranges for these categories are \$15K, 30K and \$96K. These values exclude outliers of \$100K or more for “get by,” \$200K or more for “comfort” and \$1 million or more for “too much”.

**BOX IIC-35. Current income, maximum anticipated income, and anticipated retirement income**

The three charts below show responses to questions IV.2, IV.4 and IV.6 of the survey, as displayed in Box IIC-27. Values on the horizontal axes are in thousands of dollars. The vertical axes show the percent of respondents who gave answers in the ranges shown on the horizontal axes.

Figure 1. Income of respondents, 1997

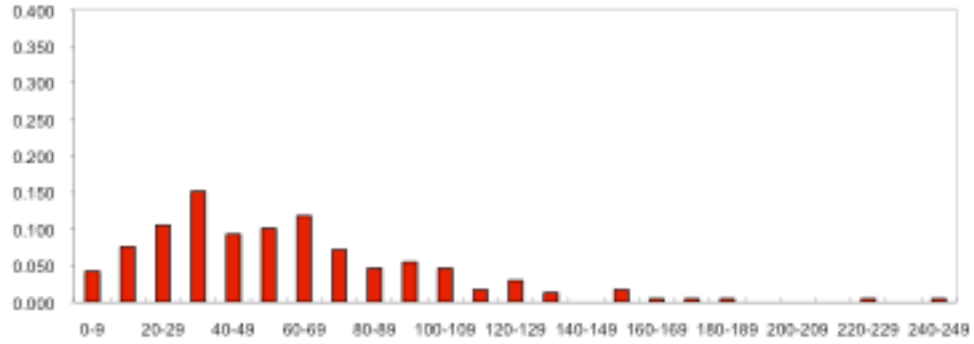


Figure 2. Maximum household income anticipated

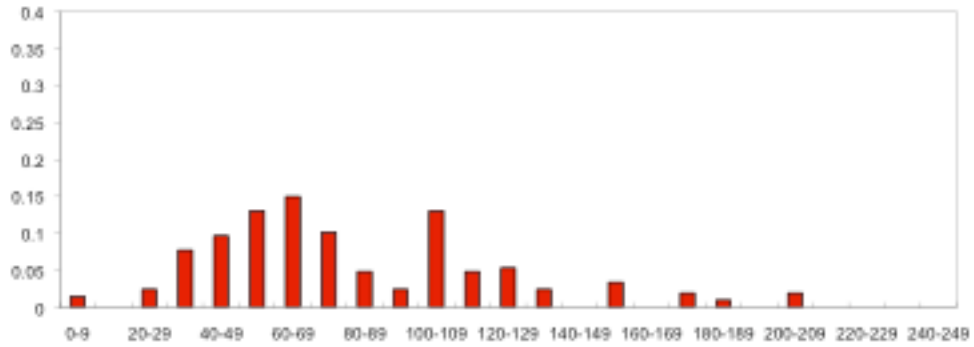
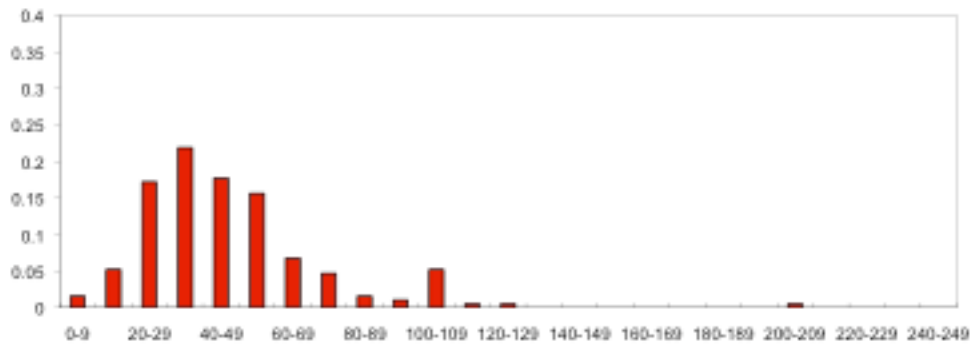


Figure 3. Anticipated retirement income



**BOX IIC-36. INCOMES NEEDED TO SUPPORT DIFFERENT LIFE-STYLES**

The three charts below show responses to Question IV.1 of the survey, as displayed in Box IIC-27. Values on the horizontal axes are in thousands of dollars. The vertical axes show the percent of respondents who gave answers in the ranges shown on the horizontal axes.

Figure 1. "JUST ENOUGH TO GET BY"

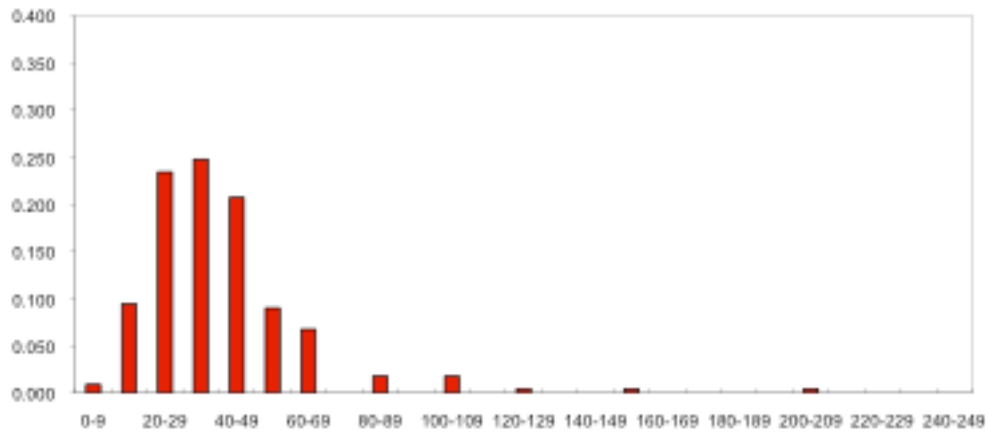


Figure 2. "ENOUGH TO LIVE IN REASONABLE COMFORT AND SECURITY"

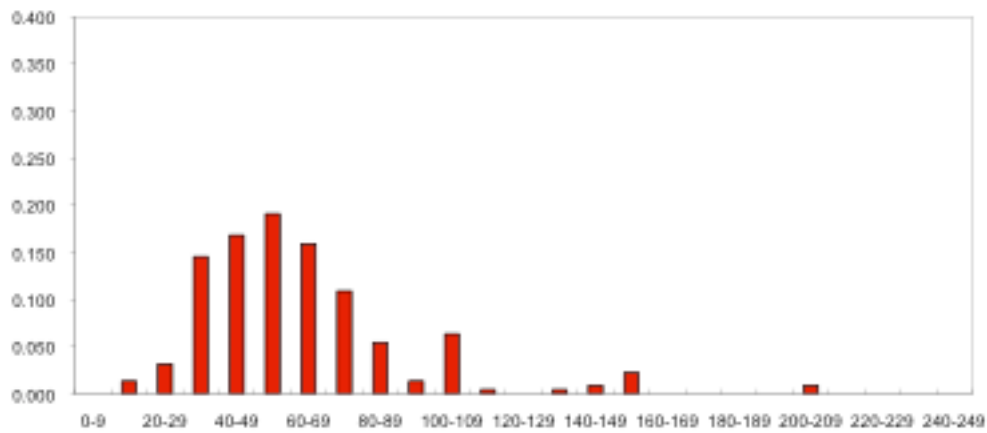
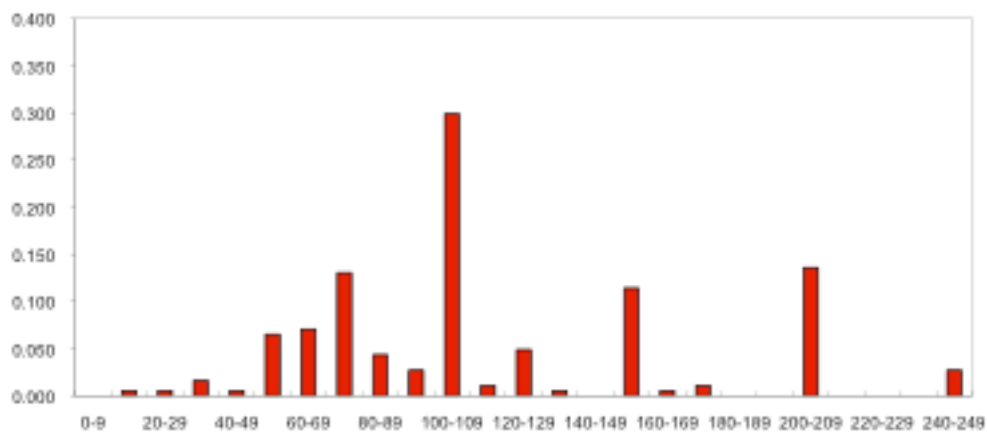


Figure 3. "MUCH MORE THAN ENOUGH"



median level of the respondents' own current household incomes, as shown in Box IIC-30. Fourteen percent of respondents currently have incomes of \$100,000 or more, the median level judged to be "too much." Fully 33% of respondents aspire to have incomes of \$100,000 or more at some time in the future.<sup>10</sup>

It might be expected that attendees at a major conference on "Building the Voluntary Simplicity Movement" would differ from the general public in that the levels of income they believe are "enough" would be lower, perhaps significantly lower, than the levels that the general public believes are enough. IIC-37 compares the Survey results with results from a 1995 Roper Starch poll of the general public. We see that the Survey respondents and the general public do not appear to differ much in their assessment of the incomes needed to "just get by," and to "live in reasonable comfort and security."<sup>11</sup> However, the Survey question asked for the income needed to support "a family of four, including two children of high school age," while the Roper Starch poll asked about "you and your family." Since a majority of American households include fewer than four people, it is reasonable to suspect that had the question as worded in the Simplicity Survey been asked of the Roper sample, the responses regarding needed levels of income might have been higher.

In its third question the Roper Starch poll asked for the level of income needed "to fulfill all your Dreams" whereas the Simplicity Survey asked for the level of income that respondents considered to be "much more than enough" or "too much." Median responses were both just about \$100,000. With the adjustments noted in IIC-37, and the caveat about household size noted above, it's clear that the median response given by the Survey respondents is lower than that given by the Roper Starch sample, although perhaps not greatly so. In comparison with responses to the Survey, which were strongly centered near the modal value of \$100,000, responses to the Roper poll were skewed to the upper end. Thus in the Roper poll 32% of the general public said that incomes of \$200,000 or more would be necessary to fulfill all their dreams, whereas only 12% of respondents to the Survey said that an income in excess of \$200,000 was *not* "too much."

The question "how much is enough?" was addressed a second time, with heavier contextual loading, in Question V of the Simplicity Survey. This question first provided current income figures for bottom, middle and top quintile United States households, and then asked for the income levels that respondents believed were "consistent with sustainability and fairness, and might be aspired to, over the coming

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<sup>10</sup> The distribution of maximum anticipated incomes shown in Box IIC-35 is bimodal. One mode centers on incomes of about \$60,000 and the other—actually more of a spike—is found at \$100,000. This pattern might reflect the hold that the cultural image of the "\$100,000 life" has on many Americans, apparently including a large minority of participants at the Voluntary Simplicity conference. Alternatively, it might be an artifact of habitation patterns: persons who expect to be living alone might aspire to incomes near \$60,000, while those who expect to be living as a couple could aspire to twice that amount, with little significant difference in personal earning status.

<sup>11</sup> If the ACCRA index overstates the cost-of-living then it could be that Survey respondents actually believe that *higher* incomes are necessary to "just get by" and to "live in comfort," than do Americans in general.

**BOX IIC-37. LIFE-STYLE INCOME COMPARISONS**

Roper Starch, 1995	Survey Respondents, 1998
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How much would you and your family need to...

Just Get By

percents:

<=\$20,000	26	19
\$20,001 - \$35,000	45	33
\$35,001-\$50,000	15	36
over \$50,000	14	12
Get-by median:	\$25,500	\$33,500

Adjusted comparison:\*

Roper	Respondents
\$31,600	\$33,500

Live in Reasonable Comfort?

<=\$35,000	37	12
\$35,001-\$50,000	21	41
\$50,001-\$70,000	25	22
over \$70,000	17	25
Comfort median:	\$41,100	\$50,000

\$51,000	\$50,000
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Fulfill all your Dreams? / Much more than enough?

under \$50,000	12	8.5
\$50,001-\$100,000	28	60
\$100,001-\$200,000	28	19
\$200,001-\$1 million	14	12
over \$1 million	18	0.5
Dreams median	\$102,000	\$100,000

\$126,500	\$100,000
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Sources: Data from the Roper Starch poll are taken from Hacker (1997).  
See Box 2 for the wording of the questions used in the Simplicity survey.

\*I adjusted the 1995 Roper figures upwards to make them more comparable with the respondents' 1998 figures, by two values. One was a consumer price index of  $(1.012)^3 = 1.036$ . The other was the ACCRA cost-of-living index of 1.197 noted in Box IIC-31. Together these gave an index of  $1.036 \times 1.197 = 1.240$ . However, the ACCRA index may overstate the differential, especially for the middle and lower quintiles. On the other hand, the different wording ("you and your family" vs. "household of four...") could have elicited higher income responses from the Survey participants, as noted in the text.

century, as goals for our country.” Median and mean responses are shown in IIC-34 and the distributions of responses are displayed in IIC-38.<sup>12</sup>

The responses are close to the income thresholds that persons offered in response to Question IV.1. The median level believed to be fair, sustainable and practicable for the “bottom 20%” of households (\$30,000) is 10% less than the level given in Question IV needed to “just get by” (\$33,500). The median level given for the “middle 20%” of households (\$55,000) is 10% greater than the level given for “reasonable comfort and security” (\$50,000). And the level given for the “top 20%” (\$90,000) is 10% less than the level that is considered “more than enough” (\$100,000).

While the median household income levels among parallel income categories given in response to Questions V.1 and V are similar, an important difference shows when we consider *mean* levels. In Table 3 of IIC-34, we see that the mean level given as fair, sustainable and practicable for the “top 20%” of households (\$98,600) is 42% less than the mean of the incomes considered to be “too much” (\$169,800). However, the differences between the means for the “bottom 20%” and the level needed to “just get by,” and between the means for the “middle 20%” and the level needed for “comfort and security,” are proportionately much less. These results suggest that when constraints of equity, sustainability and practicability are taken into account, respondents will adjust their earlier, unconstrained answers by reducing the highest incomes received by the households in the highest income sector.

In order to achieve the levels that respondents believe are fair, sustainable and practicable, the average incomes of the lowest 20% of families would need to increase by 66% (\$18,100 to \$30,000), while those of the highest 20% of families would decrease by 39% (\$147,000 to \$90,000). Average incomes of the middle 20% would stabilize at somewhat less than their present levels (\$58,000 to \$50,000).

The ratio between the highest and lowest quintiles, the “80/20” ratio, is a standard measure of income inequality. Survey respondents believe that an 80/20 ratio of \$90,000/\$30,000, or 3, is fair, sustainable and practicable for the United States. A comparison with the values shown in Box IIB-1 of these notes shows that at the present time an 80/20 near 3 exists in only one country in the world, the Slovak Republic (80/20 = 2.9), and that only three countries in the world (out of 108 for which statistics exist) have 80/20 ratios below 4<sup>13</sup>. The mean 80/20 ratio for the industrial democracies is today about 6.5. The United States has an 80/20 ratio of 8, the highest of the industrial democracies. IIC-39 shows the range of 80/20 ratios imputed by survey respondents. We see that the survey responses of fully 95% of respondents generate 80/20 ratios of less than 6.5.

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<sup>12</sup> The current distributions of income by age of householder were calculated using tables F1, F2 and F3, “Money income received by families”, in *Money Income in the United States*, U.S. Bureau of the Census, for 1996. See web site [http://ferret.bis.census.gov/cgi-bin/ferret.\[c\]](http://ferret.bis.census.gov/cgi-bin/ferret.[c])

<sup>13</sup> These are Ukraine (3.7), Latvia (3.8), and Hungary (3.9)

**BOX IC-38. Sustainable and Fair Annual Average Incomes**

The three charts below show responses to Question V of the Survey, as displayed in Box IC-27. Values on the horizontal axes are in thousands of dollars. The vertical axes show the percent of respondents who gave answers in the ranges shown on the horizontal axes.

**Figure 1. Bottom 20% of Households**



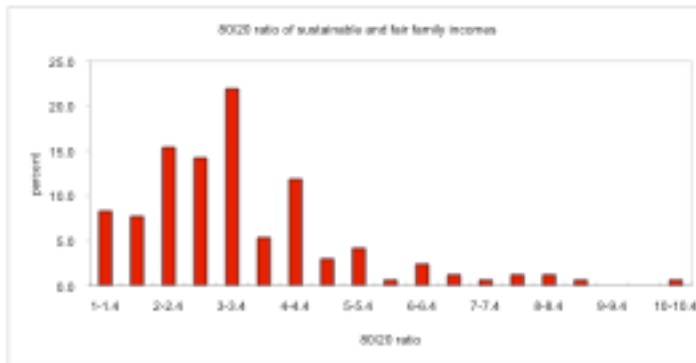
**BOX IC-39. 80/20 RATIOS**

The table and chart show the ratios of the values given by respondents for the fifth quintile (top 20%) of families and the first quintile (bottom 20%) in response to Question V of the survey. That question asked respondents to give the level of income that they believed would be "consistent with sustainability and fairness, and might be aspired to, over the coming century, as goals for our country."

Table 1

80/20 ratio	count	percent
1-1.4	14	8.3
1.5-1.9	13	7.7
2-2.4	26	15.4
2.5-2.9	24	14.2
3-3.4	37	21.9
3.5-3.9	9	5.3
4-4.4	20	11.8
4.5-5-4.9	5	3.0
5-5.4	7	4.1
5.5-5.9	1	0.6
6-6.4	4	2.4
6.5-6.9	2	1.2
7-7.4	1	0.6
7.5-7.9	2	1.2
8-8.4	2	1.2
8.5-8.9	1	0.6
9-9.4	0	0.0
9.5-9.9	0	0.0
10-10.4	1	0.6
total	169	100.0

Figure 1



## **b. Economic growth**

Question VI of the Survey attempted to assess attitudes about long term economic growth. The question displayed a diagram showing per capita GDP growth in the United States for the 45-year period 1950-1995, and asked respondents to sketch the growth trajectory they believe is “desirable and sustainable” for the coming 55-year period, 1995-2050. The results are shown in **IIC-40**. Forty-six percent of respondents sketched a trajectory of positive growth, with a mean growth rate of 0.8%. Twenty-four percent drew a flat line from 1995 to 2050. Twenty-nine percent showed declining per capita GDP, with a mean growth rate of -1.0%.

These average values don’t capture some of the variations in the growth trajectories sketched by respondents, in particular those that combine periods of initial growth or decline with subsequent stability. A sample of growth trajectories is shown in **IIC-41**. In Table 3 of IIC-40 we see that 63% of respondents believe that it is desirable to attain zero economic growth by 2050. Of these, 35% would do so after an initial period of positive growth, 27% would do so after an initial period of negative growth, and 38% would move to zero growth more or less immediately.

It is difficult to know how the respondents interpreted their own responses. A recession is two successive quarters of negative economic growth, and a depression is a prolonged recession. Thus one interpretation of the survey results shown in Table 1 of IIC-40 would be that nearly 30% of respondents believe that a 55-year national depression, over which time personal incomes shrink by an average of 42%, is desirable, presumably because at the end of that period economic output will have at last attained a sustainable level.

The 24% of respondents who advocated zero economic growth from 1995 on have the experience of the period 1984-1996, during which most household incomes did not grow, as a reference case for short-term practicability. Of course, zero economic growth as a permanent condition, beginning soon, would present far greater challenges, particularly regarding distributional equity.

The trajectory of slow positive growth advocated by 47% of respondents appears less socially and politically challenging. However, the mean growth rate of 0.8% would still be considered unacceptably low by most Americans at the present time.<sup>14</sup>

The growth trajectory that is quantitatively most consistent with the “fair, sustainable and practicable” levels of household income specified in response to Question V, and displayed in IIC-34, table a, is one of zero, or perhaps slightly negative, economic growth. If we use the three quintile values given in Question V and its responses to estimate plausible values for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> quintiles, we can estimate relative total GDP under present and proposed conditions. We can then calculate the rate of growth that would be

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<sup>14</sup> The Clinton administration set a goal for average annual per capita GDP growth of 2.2%.

**BOX IIC-40. Opinions about future economic growth**

The values shown were given in response to Question VI of the survey, shown in Box IIC-27.

**Table 1.**

	number	percent	mean per capita GDP in 2050	mean annual growth rate, '95 to '50 (%)
participants who sketched:				
positive growth	62	46	\$46,000	0.77
no growth	33	25	\$28,000	0
negative growth	39	29	\$16,000	-1.01

**Table 2.**

	number	percent	example in Box IIC-41 [form #]
participants who sketched:			
constantly positive growth	29	26	137
initially positive growth, slowing to zero growth by 2050	25	22	201
constantly zero growth	27	24	29
initially negative growth, "slowing" to zero growth by 2050	19	17	169
constantly negative growth	12	11	82

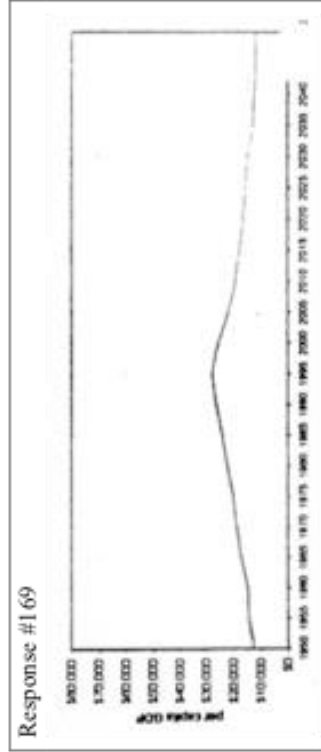
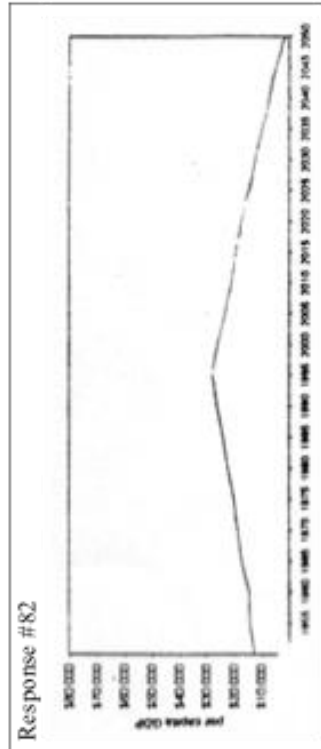
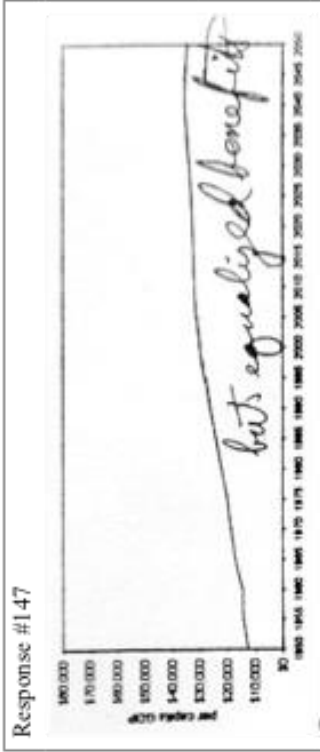
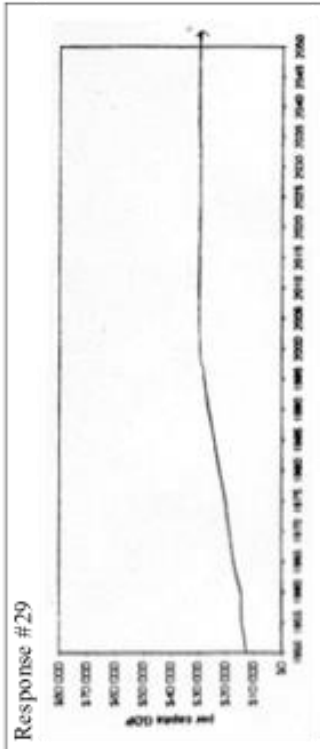
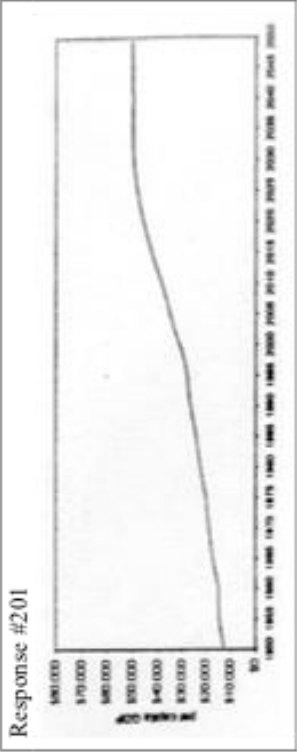
**Table 3.**

	number	percent
participants who sketched zero growth by 2050 [ = the sum of the middle three categories shown in 14b.]	71	63

[note: some trajectories which showed net positive or negative growth over the 55-year period of interest are not described even by the finer categories used in Table 2, and so are not included here. This accounts for the discrepancies between Table 1 and Table 2.]

**BOX IIC-41 Growth Trajectories, 1950-2050**

These are examples of responses to Question VI, asking participants to sketch their vision of "desirable and achievable" economic growth.



necessary to arrive at the proposed total GDP level over the 55-year period shown in Question VI. This rate of growth is about  $-.0032/\text{year}$ , which is one-third of the way between the growth rate of zero given by 25% of respondents and the mean negative growth rate of  $-.01/\text{yr}$  given by 29% of respondents.<sup>15</sup> If we use the 100-year time frame suggested in Question V, the preferred rate of economic growth is essentially zero.

#### **D. The Voluntary Simplicity Survey: Discussion and Conclusion**

Respondents to the Simplicity survey were largely white, middle-class and middle-aged. They were highly educated but worked in human services occupations rather than in more highly paid professional sectors. Their household incomes appeared to be comparable with those of Americans of similar age, but were lower than those of households headed by persons of similar educational level.

The characterization most frequently mentioned by respondents when asked about the meaning of voluntary simplicity was that it involved reducing consumption, spending or income. Fully 54% believe that the desirable rate of economic growth over the coming 50 years is zero or negative.<sup>16</sup> At the same time a large minority, and perhaps a majority, of respondents aspire to earnings that would place them within the top 30% of American households with heads of comparable age. Over a third of respondents aspire to household incomes of \$100,000 or more. A majority of respondents wish to see a significant increase in the annual incomes of the bottom 20% of households, from about \$18,000 to about \$30,000.

Are these responses consistent? They appear not to be, but in truth the survey questions were not finely grained enough to allow inconsistency to be firmly established in all particulars. Using the speculative values suggested in Footnote 104, it would appear that the fair and sustainable income quintile levels affirmed by the respondents could be consistent with zero economic growth, although not with more than minimally negative growth. If a top quintile family were to transfer \$12,000/year to a bottom quintile family and \$16,000/year to a 2<sup>nd</sup> quintile family, the income levels of the bottom three quintiles would be in rough alignment with the levels that the respondents felt were fair and sustainable, and would leave the top two income quintiles with money left over. The mean income of the top quintile would need to decline by another \$29,000/year in order for the entire economy to be operating at the median values given for fair, sustainable levels.

It's notable that in those cases where responses could be used to construct or approximate an 80/20 ratio, the income levels that were suggested as being reasonable, or as consistent with "fairness and sustainability," generated ratios of about 3 to 1. The actual 80/20 ratio in the United States is about 9.8 to 1.

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<sup>15</sup> Using values given for the 1st, 3rd and 5th quintile given in the prefatory statement in Question V, we estimate plausible current household income levels for each quintile (in thousands of dollars) of 18, 24, 50, 89 and 147. Using similar proportions applied to the responses to Question V, we estimate plausible desired levels of 30, 40, 50, 70 and 90. These values give relative total GDP values of 345 (present) and 280 (desired). Using  $280 = 345(1+r)^{55}$ , we calculate  $r = -.0032$ .

<sup>16</sup> An additional ~22% of respondents believe that economic growth should be positive but decline to zero by 2050. Only ~25% believe that positive economic growth should continue beyond 2050 (see IIC-40).

An obvious problem concerns practicability. The Simplicity survey did not ask for opinions concerning the means by which the various outcomes preferred by the respondents might be achieved. It is possible that additional questions focused on the means of achieving desired outcomes could lead to a re-evaluation of the outcome levels themselves.

By emphasizing different aspects of the responses, different interpretations can be had.

- If we look at the respondents' actual and anticipated levels of income, we see what appears to be a group of well-educated urban professionals living, and expecting to live, modestly comfortable lives.
- If we look at the narrative responses concerning the meaning of voluntary simplicity, we see insightful, challenging questions being raised about the entire modern industrial/consumer society.
- If we look at the quantitative values given for fair and sustainable levels of income and economic growth, we see patterns consistent only with the most radically ecological and egalitarian ideologies.

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### **Addendum: Thoughts After Twenty Years (2018)**

This survey was conducted in September 1998 and this note is being written in September 2018, a distance in time of 20 years to the month. In the Introduction I noted that interest in voluntary simplicity and similar lifeways initiatives waxes and wanes, and that

“...the prospects for the voluntary simplicity movement are uncertain. With strong and steady economic growth, a shortage of ecological disasters and growing acceptance of high-tech social norms, the movement might fade once more. If any of these conditions should become problematic, interest in voluntary simplicity could grow.”

Both of these scenarios came to pass. Through the mid-2000s the global economy remained strong, there were no ecological disasters, society increasingly came to applaud high-tech social norms and interest in voluntary simplicity faded. With the financial crisis of 2008, the ensuing Great Recession, the awareness of growing economic inequality, the growing concern over climate change and since 2016 the growing distrust of Big Tech and what its products are doing to our minds and our society, a revival of interest in simplicity is underway. It is thin, scattered and tentative, and hardly yet a movement.

For many observers the critical uncertainty concerns technology. Will technological innovation save us and permit us all to live increasingly affluent lives forever? Or will technological innovation, together with social innovation, save us in a very different way, permitting us all to lead modest, healthy, low-consumption lives, for a normal lifespan as individuals and indefinitely as a species, without a sense of material hardship and without social disorder? Or will technological innovation, together with bad societal response, accelerate all the worst possible outcomes along their worst trajectories, leaving the world with a few people filthy rich and many desperately poor and everyone fatally divided against

everyone else across multiple polarized axes, followed almost certainly by some sort of catastrophic collapse? We're no closer to being able to answer these questions analytically than we were two decades ago.

In theory and as a matter of common sense, the shape of the human future shouldn't *depend on* technology as if it were an autonomous *deus ex machina*. Rather, the human community should decide on the sort of future we realistically want to see come to pass and then focus on developing the technology that seems likely to help us get as close to realizing that future as possible.

A sobering reality is that many people today seem quite willing to let "technology" determine the shape of the human future rather than engage one another in deciding on a desirable human future in the first place. I'll have more to say on this in the final working paper; three observations will suffice for now.

One is the obvious fact that we can't turn decisions about the human future over to "technology" even if we wanted to. All we can do is turn these decisions over to those who develop, own and control technology.

The second observation follows from the first: If we want to decide what the nature of the human future is going to be like, we will need to have effective ownership and control of technology and of its development.

And the third observation complicates the second. What does it mean for "the human community" to "decide" on *anything*, much less "the human future"? We have no idea.

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