



Opportunity for Few

The Withering of the
American Dream

Learning Objectives

1. Discuss how economic inequality is impacted by the American Dream.
2. Describe the opportunity divide that exists in the United States.
3. Explain why some students succeed in school and others do not.
4. Recognize why poor people may be unmotivated to better their lives.
5. Discuss how the same social forces that enable some people's successes contribute to others' hardships.
6. Explain why Americans are often resistant to providing aid to those living in poverty.
7. Describe the shared societal costs of economic inequality.

Struggling to Get Ahead in the Land of Opportunity

2.1 Discuss how economic inequality is impacted by the American Dream.

Linda Tirado used to work two low-wage jobs and live in a weekly rental motel. Although her life was tough, she acknowledged in a viral blog post that she had also made some bad choices. She smoked, ate junk food, and got pregnant. Therefore, you'd have reason to wonder whether these choices contributed to her being poor or living in **poverty**, which the federal government defines as having a household income below an amount annually adjusted for inflation. In 2018 this amount was about \$25,000 a year for a family of four, and less for a single mother like Tirado (see Table 2.1). Whereas the majority of poor people in the U.S. are White, Blacks and Latinos are more likely than Whites to live in poverty (see Figure 2.1 on page 12).

TABLE 2.1 • Defining Who Is Poor

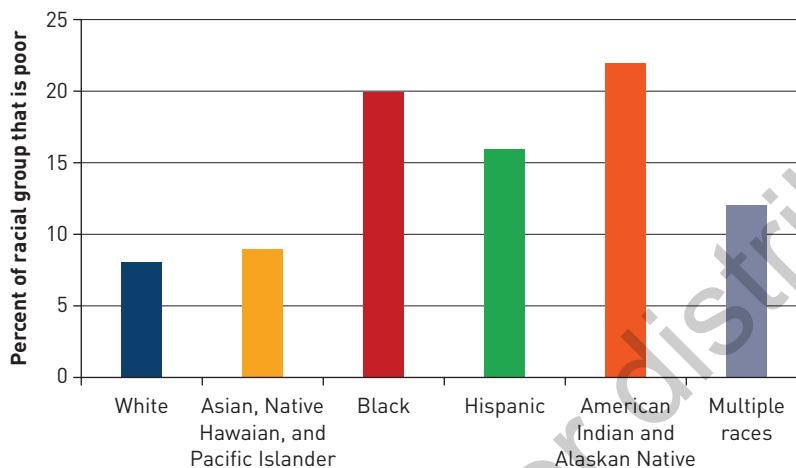
Whether Americans live in poverty depends on the size of their family and their annual household income.

Size of Family Unit	Annual Household Income
One person	\$12,752
Two person	\$16,414
Three people	\$19,173
Four people	\$25,283
Five people	\$30,490
Six people	\$35,069

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Poverty Thresholds," 2018, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html>.

iStockphoto.com/duncan1890

FIGURE 2.1 ● Race and Poverty



Source: Adapted from Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, "Poverty Rate by Race/Ethnicity," 2017, <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D#note-1>.

Based on Tirado's own words, several portions of her story appear to confirm the conventional wisdom that poor people contribute to their own struggles:

- "Junk food is a pleasure that we are allowed to have; why would we give that up?"
- "I smoke. It's expensive."
- "I make a lot of poor financial decisions."¹

The thirty-something Michigan native's life, indeed, seems emblematic of the way many Americans think about poor people—as having themselves to blame for their inability to overcome hardship.

This individual perspective is deeply rooted in American culture. There's a long-standing belief that our nation is the land of opportunity, where hard work and self-discipline lead to **upward mobility**, which is a long-term increase in a person's income and status. This belief, commonly known as the **American Dream**, is the core of our founding narrative about colonists coming to these shores with aspirations to create better lives than the ones they left behind in Europe. They regarded determination and sacrifice as the keys to upward mobility. The view that anyone can "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" remains prevalent. Although this view has waned a bit over the past couple of decades, over 60 percent of Americans still believe it's possible for someone who begins life poor to become rich. This belief offers a justification for seeing someone like Linda Tirado who's stuck in poverty as deserving blame for their struggles.²

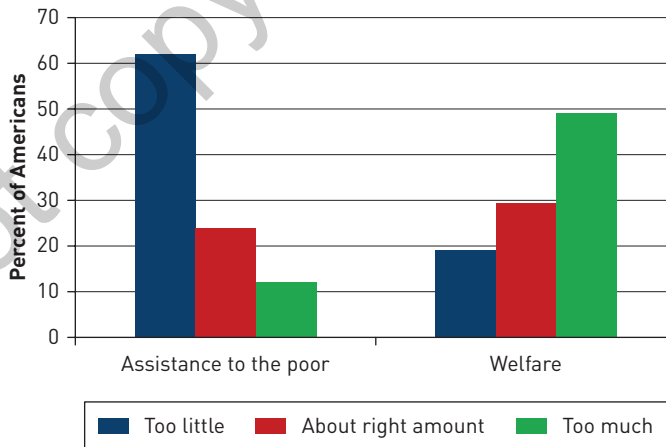
Because of this belief, there’s considerable opposition to the government providing **welfare**—food stamps, health insurance, affordable housing, and other types of support to enable low-income people to have a basic standard of living. Look at the right side of Figure 2.2. These data indicate that whereas in 2014 fewer than 20 percent of Americans thought the government spent too little on welfare, nearly 50 percent thought it spent too much. Many believe welfare prevents people from getting ahead; for example, because they use their food stamps to buy soda, juice, and other sugary drinks with little nutritional value. Opposition to welfare is strongest among Whites who see it as giving Blacks unfair advantages and making them lazy. Yet these same Whites make up part of the overwhelming support that exists for assistance to the poor (see the left side of Figure 2.2). Labels matter; assisting the poor doesn’t fuel public resentment even though it’s the same as welfare.³



Publicity about Oprah Winfrey and other celebrities with rags-to-riches stories reinforces the idea that anyone can succeed in the U.S.
Kevin Winter/Getty Images

FIGURE 2.2 • Words Matter

Americans’ attitudes toward *assistance to the poor* and toward *welfare* substantially differ from one another.



Source: The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, “Inequality: Trends in Americans’ Attitudes,” 2015, <http://www.apnorc.org/projects/Pages/HTML%20Reports/inequality-trends-in-americans-attitudes0317-6562.aspx>.



During the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan often talked about a woman who allegedly used fake names, addresses, and telephone numbers to collect over \$150,000 in Social Security, food stamps, and veterans' benefits for deceased husbands who didn't exist.⁴

lanDagnall Computing/Alamy Stock Photo

Each year, the U.S. Census Bureau releases a report containing data about America's poor.⁵ Over the past several years, roughly one in seven Americans has lived in poverty. Millions more are modestly better off yet also face daily struggles. Nearly *half* the population has annual family earnings under twice the poverty line. Low-income people who live in expensive cities like New York, San Francisco, Boston, and Washington, D.C., especially experience hardship. Table 2.2 paints a picture of **economic inequality**, or gaps among people based on their financial worth. Whereas 60 percent (the bottom three quintiles) of the population collectively earns just a quarter of all income, 20 percent (the highest quintile) earns over half. Figure 2.3 reveals, moreover, that these earnings overwhelmingly go to a very tiny slice of the population. Inequalities in **wealth**, which includes total assets a person has in addition to their earnings, are even greater. The four hundred richest Americans collectively have more wealth than the 150 million people who make up the bottom 60 percent of the U.S. population.⁶

Some low-income people may bear partial responsibility for their struggles. However, we'll see in this chapter that the individual perspective cannot account for the difficulties such a vast segment of Americans experiences, nor for the successes of others who have good jobs and earn decent incomes. By highlighting the social forces that create disparities in attainment of the American Dream, the sociological perspective explains these disparities.

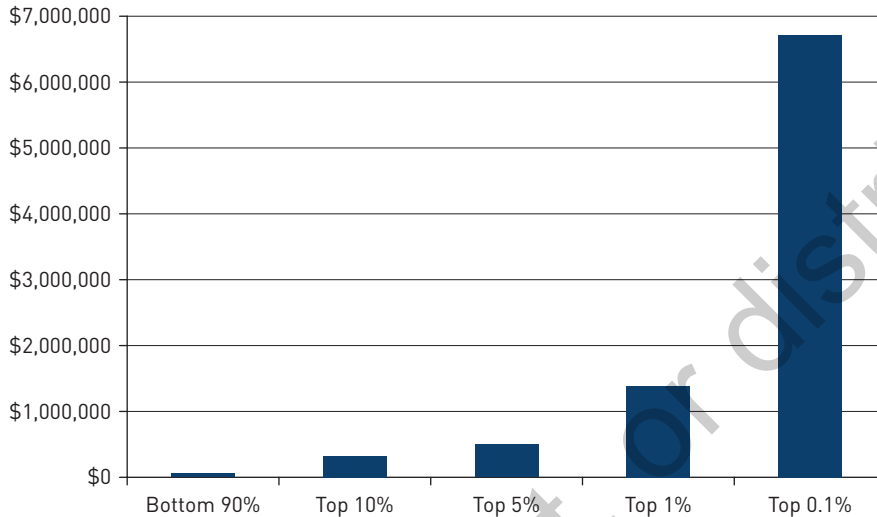
TABLE 2.2 ● Economic Inequality in the U.S.

	Percentage of Total U.S. Income	Median Income	Income Range
Highest quintile	51.1	\$202,366	More than \$117,003
Fourth quintile	23.2	\$92,031	\$72,002 to \$117,002
Third quintile	14.3	\$56,832	\$43,512 to \$72,001
Second quintile	8.2	\$32,631	\$22,801 to \$43,511
Lowest quintile	3.1	\$12,457	Less than \$22,800

Source: Bernadette D. Proctor, Jessica L. Semega, and Melissa A. Kollar, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015," 2016, U.S. Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p60-256.pdf>.

FIGURE 2.3 • Strikingly Unequal Earnings

In the U.S., the lion's share of income goes to just .01 percent of the population.



Source: Emmanuel Saez, "Income Inequality," Institute for Policy Studies, 2017, <https://inequality.org/facts/income-inequality>.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS?

1. Where does your knowledge about poverty come from—social media, TV, news reports, encountering panhandlers on the street, firsthand experience, or somewhere else? How do these sources influence the ways you look upon poor people?
2. How does Linda Tirado's story lend support to the individual perspective toward poverty?
3. Why are many Americans opposed to welfare?

The Opportunity Divide: How American Society Produces Economic Inequality

2.2 Describe the opportunity divide that exists in the United States.

Did you play musical chairs when you were a child? You may recall that kids circle around a row of chairs and when the music stops, everyone tries to sit down. Since there's one fewer chair than the number of players, someone always comes up short. In the end, only one person is left sitting. I remember when I played that some kids



In addition to being a popular children's game, musical chairs is emblematic of how our society produces inequalities in jobs, education, housing, and other opportunities. iStockphoto.com/SerrNovik

would try as aggressively as they could to win. I never liked those kids; they took this simple and fun game way too seriously.

Regardless of how well people play musical chairs, all but one person eventually loses. That reality is built into the structure of the game. In a similar way, poverty is carved into how our society is organized. Upward mobility is certainly possible, and the success of those who achieve it may stem from individual characteristics like hard work and self-discipline. However, for millions of others stuck in poverty, it's typically

not because they haven't embraced these traits. Instead, they're constrained by social forces beyond their control.⁷

To see why, we need to examine the **opportunity divide**: People born into higher-income families have lots of chances to better their lives, while those born into lower-income families have comparatively few. Paying attention to this divide focuses our attention on how economic inequality is eroding the American Dream. Consider the opening passage of a book social critic Robert Putnam wrote about the opportunity divide:

My hometown was, in the 1950s, a passable embodiment of the American Dream, a place that offered decent opportunity for all the kids in town, whatever their background. A half century later, however, life in Port Clinton, Ohio, is a split-screen American nightmare, a community in which kids from the wrong side of the tracks that bisect the town can barely imagine the future that awaits the kids from the right side of the tracks.⁸

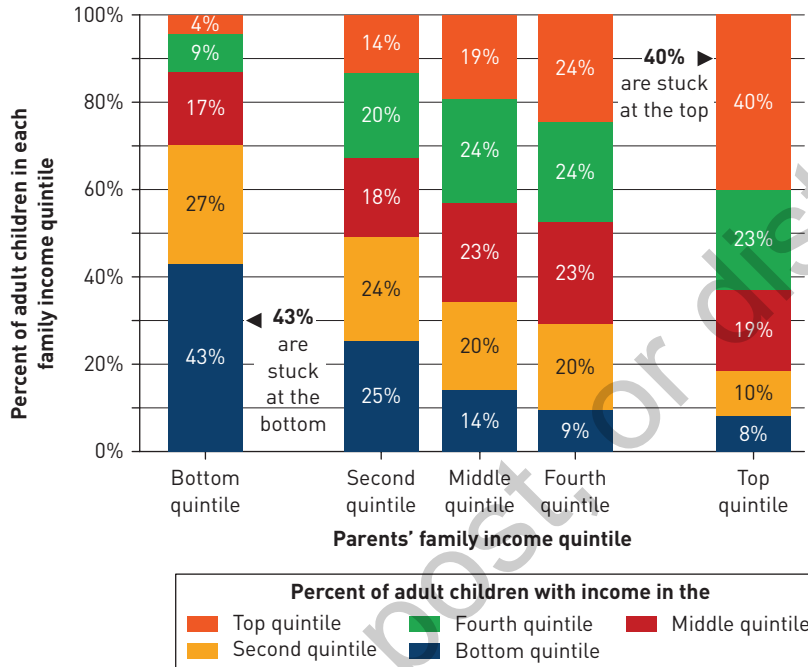
Putnam's words highlight our country's failure to live up to its image as a place where anyone who works hard can achieve upward mobility.

The withering of the American Dream is evident in towns and cities across the country. Consider that 92 percent of people born in 1940 earned more as adults than did their parents, with the greatest gains occurring among the poor and middle class. Yet only half of those born in 1984 outearned their parents. Figure 2.4 illustrates poor kids' dim chances of doing better financially as adults than their parents. Among people born into the bottom quintile (20 percent) of families based on income, 43 percent stay there as adults; 70 percent either remain or move up only slightly. A person's family income at birth has increasingly become an indicator of their family income as an adult. Biology is predictive of destiny.⁹

Since low-income people are often unable to achieve upward mobility no matter how hard they try, the individual perspective cannot adequately explain these inequalities. A better explanation explores why a society that trumpets "opportunity for all" provides many more chances to the haves than to the have-nots.

FIGURE 2.4 • Stuck at the Bottom

Despite efforts to achieve the American Dream, people born into low-income families often fare no better financially as adults.



Source: Pew Charitable Trusts, "Pursuing the American Dream: Economic Mobility across Generations," July 2012, http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/reports/economic_mobility/pursuingamericandreampdf.pdf.

Let's develop this sociological perspective by chronicling stories of people whose lives have had very different measures of success and failure. Despite variation in their experiences, we'll see how similar social forces explain the directions these Americans' lives have taken.

Blocked Opportunities: How Social Forces Impede Low-Income Youth from Living the Dream

2.3 Explain why some students succeed in school and others do not.

Think about the pleasure you have felt whenever you've read a book so riveting that you couldn't put it down. That was my experience with Jay MacLeod's *Ain't*



In addition to the examples mentioned in this chapter, what other forms of cultural capital are important for academic success?
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No Makin' It, which is what got me hooked on sociology when I was in college. The author studied a group of Black teenage boys living in a housing project near Boston. Despite their poor upbringing, these boys—whom MacLeod called the Brothers—believed someday they'd have good jobs and own houses. MacLeod followed up with them twice, seven years and twenty-two years after he conducted the study I read in college. What he discovered shattered popular beliefs about the American Dream. Though they had followed the script expected of low-income kids striving

to achieve a better life—working hard and staying out of trouble—the Brothers fared only marginally better financially than their parents had.

One major reason is because the Brothers lacked **cultural capital**, or the particular types of knowledge one needs in order to achieve upward mobility. Kids with this knowledge are most likely to have acquired it at home. The Brothers' parents, however, didn't impress upon them that there are various steps one needs to take in order to apply to college. As you know, these include taking college prep courses, forging relationships with high-school teachers who can write letters of recommendation, and researching universities that match your skills and interests.

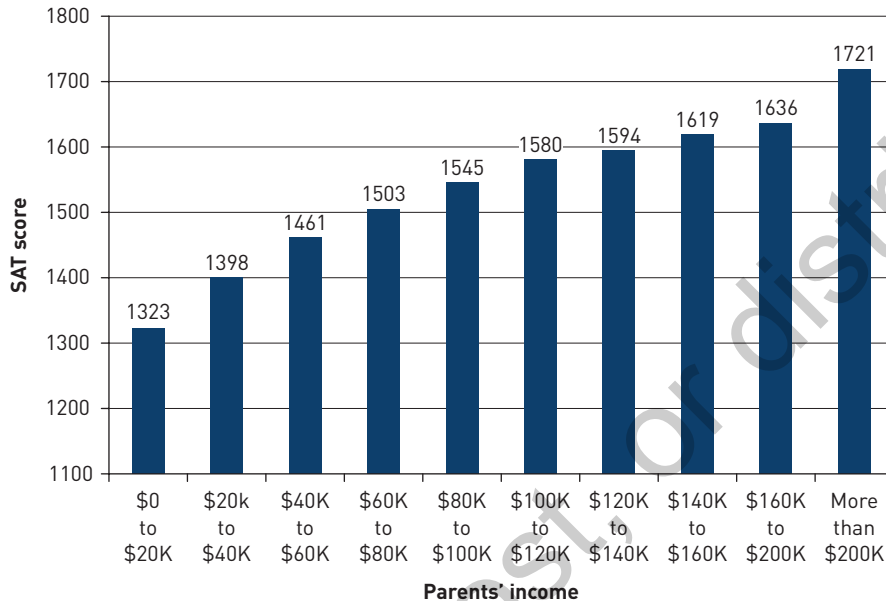
Even though the Brothers were industrious, cultural capital isn't something they could gain simply by working harder. After all, not having it meant they didn't know what they needed to know. Therefore, lacking cultural capital wasn't the Brothers' fault. Nor was it their parents' fault; since the parents didn't have this knowledge, they couldn't transmit it to their sons.

In order to explain why poor students are often disadvantaged by a lack of cultural capital, take a look at Figure 2.5. It presents data about kids' performance on the SAT, which of course is a critical factor in college admissions. You can see that those from lower-income families typically do not fare as well as their higher-income peers. It's not that richer kids are born with greater intellectual gifts or a more disciplined work ethic. Rather, various social forces give them a leg up in being prepared to do well on high-stakes tests. The sociological perspective enables you to discover the factors that play into these kids' advantages. In what ways are higher-income parents better positioned than lower-income parents to give their kids resources for success on the SAT?

The Brothers' lack of cultural capital was a key reason why none of them earned a four-year degree after graduating from high school. While having limited funds to pay for college is certainly a barrier, we're seeing that the obstacles low-income kids face in attending college go well beyond cost. Several Brothers did attend community college, but since they didn't have a clear sense of how this might lead them toward a four-year degree or directly into a good job, they dropped out. The one person who enrolled at

FIGURE 2.5 • Test Scores Reflect Family Background

How well a student does on the SAT can be predicted by their parents' income.



Source: Daniel H. Pink, "How to Predict a Student's SAT Score: Look at the Parents' Tax Return," 2012, <https://www.danpink.com/2012/02/how-to-predict-a-students-sat-score-look-at-the-parents-tax-return>.

Note: This graph is based on data from 2011, when a perfect SAT score was 2400.

a state university also left. He felt ostracized, not knowing how to fit in with his many peers from suburbs and small towns.¹⁰

The Brothers' story is emblematic of the experience of other low-income youth. Whereas 81 percent of kids who come from the highest-earning quintile of families (the top 20 percent) are enrolled in a two- or four-year college, just 51 percent of kids from the bottom quintile are. There's also a gap in graduation rates. Two-thirds of kids from the top quartile (the top 25 percent) earn a bachelor's degree, yet fewer than half as many kids from the bottom quartile do. These data, as a whole, highlight the significance of **social class** in shaping opportunity. Social class refers to a



Even if low-income students know about financial aid and other resources for applying to college, these students may still lack the cultural capital needed to persevere through academic and personal challenges so they can graduate.

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person's financial standing and how it relates to other types of resources and opportunities they have or don't have, such as their level of educational attainment, type of occupation, the people they know, and their cultural capital.¹¹

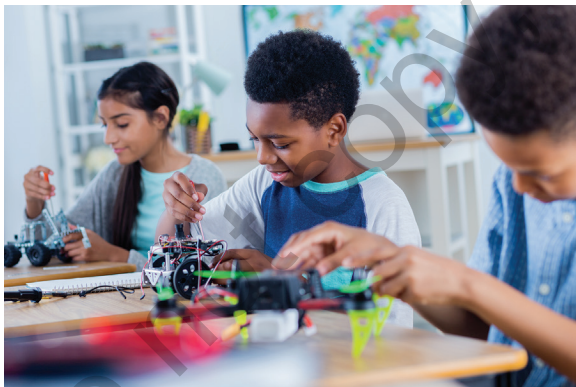
Becoming familiar with the Brothers' story offers you a mirror for examining your own situation in ways you probably have never done before. If you grew up with a clear understanding of the college process, you now understand why inequalities in cultural capital are so consequential in explaining why some kids pursue higher education and others don't. If your childhood more closely resembled the Brothers', you're now aware of a rarely advertised payoff of college: It offers opportunities for gaining knowledge that can help you succeed. I don't mean formal knowledge that comes from taking courses, but informal knowledge you can pick up along the way about how to advance yourself. Ask your peers—especially those who are close to graduating—for tips about how you can access opportunities during the rest of your time in school and beyond. If you do so, you may discover that acquiring cultural capital is one of the most valuable benefits of college.

The Brothers also faced racial barriers in their efforts to get ahead. Employers were often biased against hiring them because they were Black. Even though they were well-mannered and respectful, employers didn't necessarily infer this demeanor from their appearance. The ways they dressed and spoke signaled that they were lower class, and some employers clung to the prejudice that low-income Black males are thugs who can't be trusted. (See Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of this racial bias and its effects.)¹²

The Brothers' story exposes how factors outside a person's control may impede poor people from fulfilling their aspirations for success. Having a strong work ethic hardly guarantees that someone will get ahead. Moreover, for low-income minority youth to believe they can succeed when the odds are stacked against them can be damaging to their self-esteem. They're prone to blame themselves for their failure to get ahead and may also believe that negative stereotypes about their racial or ethnic group are a valid explanation for their failure.¹³

The Brothers' experiences highlight how scarring it can be for poor minority kids to believe they have personal control over their lot in life. These boys' story exposes why the

individual perspective is shortsighted. It's unreasonable simply to blame high-aspiring youth for their struggles to escape poverty. These boys did exactly what our society expects of kids who want to achieve the American Dream, and yet they still came up short. Their story underscores why it's crucial that we shine a spotlight on the social forces causing the United States to fail to live up to its promise as the land of opportunity.



Trying hard in school but not achieving upward mobility may lead poor minority kids to believe they're failures.

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Tarnished Hopes for the Future: How Poverty Impedes Low-Income People's Motivations to Get Ahead

2.4 Recognize why poor people may be unmotivated to better their lives.

Let's now return to the story of Linda Tirado, the woman we met at the beginning of this chapter. Whereas the Brothers believed that hard work would propel their lives forward, poverty stymied Tirado's ability to plan for the future. She described in her blog post her fatigue from working two low-wage jobs while going to school and raising a child:

You have to understand that we know that we will never not feel tired. We will never feel hopeful. We will never get a vacation. Ever. We know that the very act of being poor guarantees that we will never not be poor. It doesn't give us much reason to improve ourselves.

We don't plan long-term because if we do we'll just get our hearts broken. It's best not to hope.¹⁴

These words underscore how poverty can strip a person of the motivation to overcome it. A person's brain responds to chronic hardship by producing stress and fear, both of which impair the capacity to think beyond the immediate situation. Given the neurological obstacles they face in setting goals and completing tasks, it's often hard for poor people to imagine a better future.¹⁵

Because of these obstacles, someone living paycheck to paycheck may make choices that seem foolish to those who haven't experienced similar hardships. For a poor person to spend \$10 or more for a pack of cigarettes may strike you as irresponsible. But to Linda Tirado, smoking offered relief from her daily grind. It also helped her stay awake and alert. The same was true for consuming chips, candy, soda, and other junk foods. They were not only affordable; they provided one of the few forms of satisfaction available to her. Spending money on these habits enabled Tirado to cope with the challenges of making ends meet.

The manufacturers of cigarettes and junk food understand the constraints poor people face and seek to exploit them. Tobacco companies concentrate their storefront and billboard advertising in poor neighborhoods and also sometimes offer low-income consumers coupons for future purchases. Likewise, companies like Frito-Lay and Coca-Cola aggressively market junk foods that are high in salt, sugar, and fat to low-income minority communities. Given the daily struggles of living in poverty and the power of tobacco and food companies to promote products that offer cheap and addictive pleasures, these products are practically irresistible to low-income consumers.¹⁷



The sociological perspective reveals why those who can least afford the cost of smoking are the most likely to do so.¹⁶

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Living hand to mouth can inhibit a person from believing they can have a better life, prompting them to spend their limited income on immediate forms of gratification, like junk food.

iStockphoto.com/nkbimages



Given the particular constraints that poor women face, this sight is familiar among America's homeless population.

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We're seeing how the sociological perspective explains why someone like Linda Tirado may make choices that compound her hardships. Her story offers a different sociological explanation for the opportunity divide than we saw with the Brothers. They had a strong work ethic yet were unable to achieve college success or land good jobs. Social forces blocked them from *achieving* upward mobility. Tirado's account highlights that being poor can impede a person from developing a strong work ethic in the first place. Social forces blocked her from *believing* upward mobility was even possible.

These forces particularly impact poor women. In addition to working in low-wage jobs, they typically shoulder greater parenting responsibilities than the fathers of their children. Like other women, they're also susceptible to gender bias. Because of these constraints, in 2016 women were 38 percent likelier than men to be poor. Among families headed by single mothers, 35.6 percent lived in poverty—over twice the poverty rate (17.3 percent) for families headed by single fathers and over five times the rate (6.6 percent) for two-parent families. Sociologists use the term **feminization of poverty** to refer to women's greater likelihood than men to be poor.¹⁸

Linda Tirado's story took an improbable turn after she wrote her blog post. Not only did the post go viral but people came out of the woodwork with offers of help. So Linda created a GoFundMe, which raised more money than she'd been earning in her two jobs. Moreover, a top publisher invited her to write a longer account of her experiences living in poverty. Her book became a commercial success. The odds that a woman of her background with dim hopes for the future would become upwardly mobile were about as likely as her winning the lottery.¹⁹

A Personal Tale from the Other Side of the Opportunity Divide: How Social Forces Bolster Success

2.5 Discuss how the same social forces that enable some people's successes contribute to others' hardships.

My life is night and day compared to the people discussed so far in this chapter. I earn an income that puts me among the top 15 percent of Americans. I have a stable career

and a happy marriage. I have two well-adjusted kids and a cute dog. I don't say these things to gloat. My aim is instead to bring humility to my achievements—to show you that the sociological perspective can explain the good fortune of someone like me just as it can deepen your understanding of poor people's struggles.

From an individual perspective, my accomplishments are the result of effort and perseverance. I did indeed work very hard during my ten years spent in college and graduate school. But, if I'm being honest—and a good sociologist!—I have to acknowledge that this perspective only partially explains my achievements. Although I've worked hard, that's not the whole story.

Consider that I grew up in a spacious, single-family house in Scarsdale, a suburb of New York City. The kids I knew spanned the spectrum of the middle class. Some families were well-off, but that level of wealth now pales in comparison to how the community has changed over the past few decades. No longer can any but the superrich afford to live in Scarsdale anymore. With a median family income of \$241,453, it's the wealthiest town in the U.S.²⁰

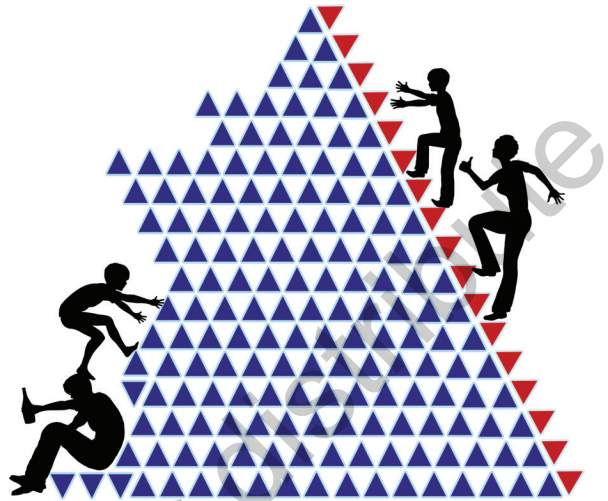
Long before Scarsdale came to epitomize the very top of the opportunity divide, there were distinct advantages to living there. I attended Edgemont High School, which for years has been among the top-ranked in the country. Even though I graduated in the 1980s, data from 2015–16 offer a snapshot of the perks I enjoyed. That year, the school district spent \$28,551 per student, which was 22 percent more than the average for New York as a whole. The poorest kids in the state attended schools that allocated less than 50 percent of the amount per student as Edgemont.²¹

It's not hard to see disparities between the social class disadvantages these kids had in school and the advantages available to me. Jonathan Kozol, a longtime activist for equity in public education who studied several poorly funded schools in New York City, offered a riveting account of one of these schools:

I had made repeated visits to a high school where a stream of water flowed down one of the main stairwells on a rainy afternoon and where green fungus molds were growing in the office where the students went for counseling. A large blue barrel was positioned to collect rainwater coming through the ceiling.²²

This kind of environment obviously hampers learning. It makes kids think that if their school doesn't place value on their education, then why should they?

The scene Kozol described starkly differs from Edgemont High School, which is located on a sprawling campus lined with trees and gardens. My classes were small,



Inequalities across school districts in the amount of money they spend per student produce inequalities in kids' chances to do well academically.
Sangoiri/Shutterstock.com



Dilapidated schools have to spend funds for repairs that could otherwise be used to purchase instructional materials or pay higher salaries to more qualified teachers.

Getty/ranplett



Extracurricular activities enable kids to develop self-confidence that contributes to academic success, yet many parents can't afford to pay for their kids to participate in these activities.

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and teachers gave me lots of individualized attention. This was critical since my visual impairment made it difficult for me to see notes written on the blackboard. Whereas I could have floundered academically, the extra help teachers provided enabled me to reach my potential.

The support I received at school multiplied the benefits of having a family invested in my educational success. Higher-class parents can most afford to make these investments. Even though lower-income parents may want what's best for their children, these parents often don't have the resources to provide what can enable their kids to thrive. Therefore, while some kids have a relatively easy time maintaining the social class advantages they received at birth, others struggle to become upwardly mobile.²³

My parents both went to college, held professional jobs, and could afford to pay for my expenses at a private, four-year institution. I graduated without loans, which meant I could start saving money for a house long before this was possible for my peers who had incurred considerable debt. Moreover, my parents contributed to the down payment on the home that my wife Nancy and I own.

It's also significant that I'm White. The house I grew up in was my parents' second suburban address. They had bought their prior house in 1966 when there was still **redlining**—a practice that barred Blacks from purchasing real estate in certain communities. Although this practice legally ended six

years before my parents bought the Scarsdale house in 1974, the unequal effects of redlining lingered. By being able to buy a starter home in the mid-1960s, my parents were able to make a profitable investment at a time when many Black families could not. When they sold that house at a much higher price, my parents had enough money to make a down payment on the Scarsdale house.

Historic housing discrimination is a leading reason for racial inequalities in wealth. A person with an annual income of \$40,000 and a house valued at \$400,000 is wealthier than a person who earns \$100,000 a year and owns a house worth \$300,000. Moreover, wealth typically grows more rapidly than income, as my parents experienced

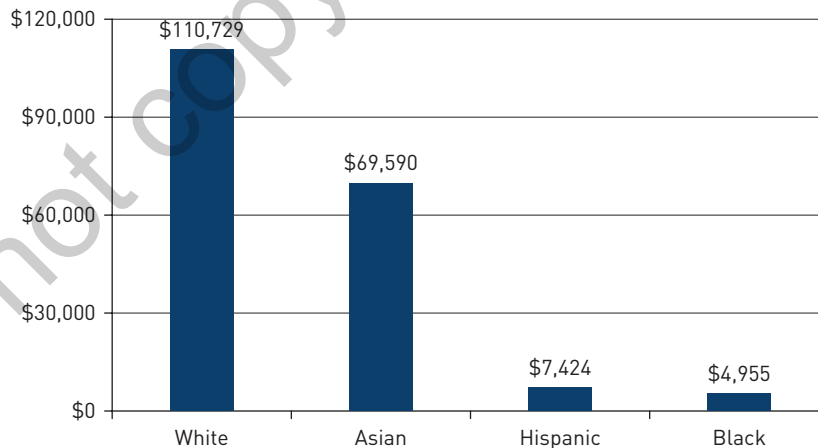
by buying a starter house that significantly appreciated in value. Figure 2.6 highlights the stark wealth gap between Whites and Blacks: \$110,729 versus \$4,955. This is over 22:1. Whereas 70 percent of White adults own homes, the homeownership rate for Blacks is just 41.2 percent.²⁴

Comparing my story to the two others discussed in this chapter highlights that in order to explain inequalities in achievement of the American Dream, we must take into account **intersectionality**, which is the idea that a person's identities are interwoven. My social class and race combine to create advantages for me in the same ways that they produce disadvantages for low-income Black people. Moreover, being male is another key piece of my success. We saw earlier in relation to Linda Tirado's story that women are likelier to be poor than men. Figure 2.7 (on page 26) highlights, moreover, that being White and male advantage me compared to women of color. Race, gender, and social class combine to produce significant inequalities of opportunity.

Despite the many advantages I've had, they still haven't guaranteed my successes. Take another look at Figure 2.4, discussed on page 17. Eight percent of kids born into the top quintile of families by income (the top 20 percent) ended up in the bottom quintile as adults—an indicator that downward mobility is possible. A person may lack initiative or experience unexpected hardship. Since I could have struggled to launch a successful career, the individual perspective is certainly a useful way to understand my story, but it hardly captures the whole picture.

FIGURE 2.6 • Wealth Inequality

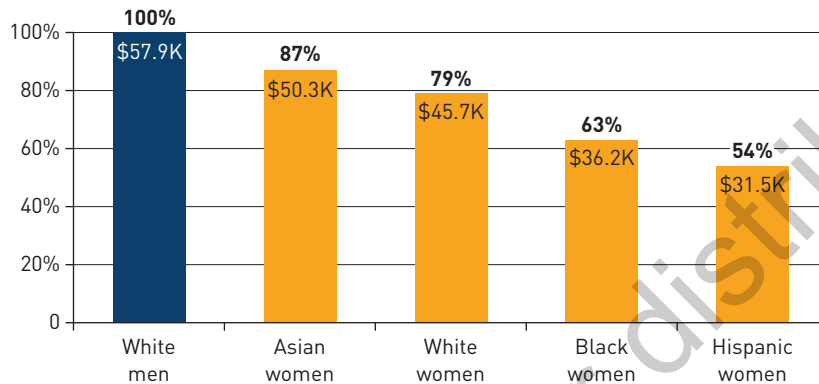
There is a huge disparity in the U.S. between Whites and Asians as compared to Blacks and Hispanics.



Source: Tami Luhby, "Worsening Wealth Inequality by Race," CNN Money, June 21, 2012, <http://money.cnn.com/2012/06/21/news/economy/wealth-gap-race/index.htm>. Data source: U.S. Census Bureau.

FIGURE 2.7 ● White Male Advantage

There is significant inequality in earnings based on race and gender.



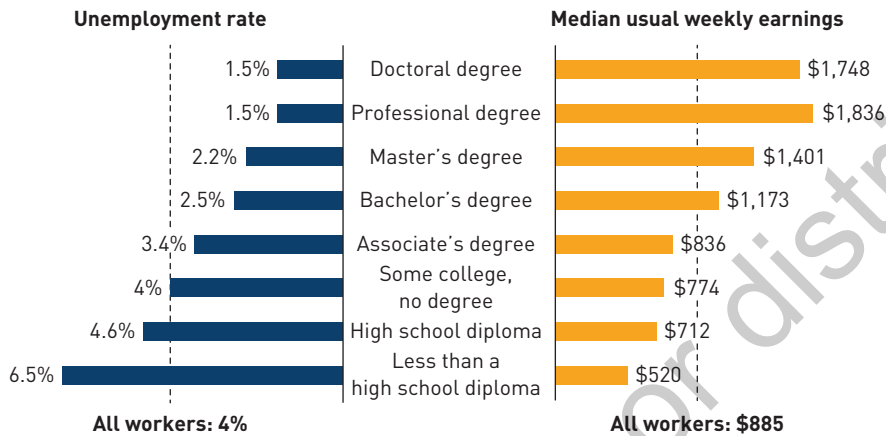
Source: Sonam Sheth, Shayanne Gal, and Skye Gould, "Six Charts Show How Much More Men Make Than Women," *Business Insider*, August 27, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/gender-wage-pay-gap-charts-2017-3/#the-gender-wage-gap-varies-widely-depending-on-the-state-1>. Data source: U.S. Census Bureau, "2017 American Community Survey."

The sociological perspective alternatively emphasizes how the advantages I grew up with turned the tides in my favor. Having a supportive family, financial security, access to a high-quality education, and racial privilege gave me both the drive to work hard over many years and the confidence that trying to advance myself was worth the effort. Notice how these details contrast with the earlier stories you read about Linda Tirado and the Brothers. Whereas working two low-wage jobs to make ends meet impeded Tirado from thinking about how to achieve a better life, I had lots of reasons to believe my chances for success were high. I also had the cultural capital to know how to advance myself educationally, which the Brothers lacked. Indeed, many social forces influence how far a person is likely to advance educationally. And, as Figure 2.8 highlights, there is a strong relationship between one's level of educational attainment and their employment opportunities.

Moreover, the particular circumstances of my upbringing enabled me to see beyond the conventional wisdom that people create their own lot in life. My parents worked in a very different type of neighborhood than the bucolic setting of our suburban home. They were both lawyers, partners in work as well as marriage. When I wasn't in school, I'd occasionally help them by filing legal papers and doing other clerical work. What I remember most about going to their office was the surrounding neighborhood. It was two blocks from Yankee Stadium in one of the poorest sections of New York City. There were boarded-up buildings and panhandlers standing on street corners.

FIGURE 2.8 • Credentials Matter

As a person attains more formal education, they're likelier to earn a better income and avoid unemployment.



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017.



Sociology enables me to recognize that scenes of neighborhood disparity I noticed as a child but didn't understand are telling indicators of broader inequalities in American society.

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I was just a kid, so I had no idea why my eyes focused on these contrasts. It wasn't until I took my first sociology course in college that I started to connect the dots. I began to understand how a combination of individual and social forces explains the opportunities a person has in life. I can now see that the successes I've enjoyed and the struggles of people like the Brothers and Linda Tirado share commonalities. Whereas the advantages I grew up with have enabled me to reap ongoing benefits, the deck has been stacked against these low-income people enjoying similar successes.

Rethinking Welfare: How the Sociological Perspective Can Widen Your Understanding of Who Deserves Help

2.6 Explain why Americans are often resistant to providing aid to those living in poverty.

Ten years after my parents closed their law practice in 1999, their neighbors opened a new ballpark a block from where the old Yankee Stadium had been. For several years before construction plans were finalized, owner George Steinbrenner had threatened to move the Yankees across the Hudson River to New Jersey. Since this would have been a huge loss for the city, it agreed to subsidize \$528 million of the overall building costs in partnership with the State of New York. A **subsidy** is government money—which comes from taxpayers—given to a recipient that reduces the recipient's out-of-pocket price for goods or services. Including subsidies from the federal government, the total public expense of the new ballpark rose to a whopping \$1.2 billion. This meant taxpayers funded more than half of the \$2.3 billion overall cost. And this wasn't the only publicly financed ballpark to open in New York City in 2009; the crosstown Mets (my favorite team!) unveiled Citi Field the same year.²⁵

Over the past few decades, nearly every Major League Baseball franchise has gotten a new stadium, with taxpayers footing most of the bill. The strong public support for



The high regard baseball has as the “national pastime” contributes to public support for subsidizing new stadiums.
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these construction projects sits in contrast to the sentiment toward government spending for programs that help poor people. We saw at the beginning of this chapter that in American society there is significant opposition to welfare. On the other hand, politicians have been able to convince urban residents that new ballparks are a worthy investment because they generate tax revenue to make up for the subsidies, and then some. Welfare recipients, on the other hand, are allegedly moochers who offer society nothing in return for the assistance our tax money provides them. We've already exposed one reason to call into question this way of thinking: It masks the social forces that keep people in poverty and therefore in need of help. The other shoe is about to drop.

One of the most eye-opening facts I learned in doing the research for this book is how common it is for Americans to experience poverty. A study by sociologist Mark

Rank of people's annual earnings over the course of their careers found that 58.5 percent of those studied had been poor for at least a year, 45 percent for two or more years, 38.6 percent for three or more, and 33.9 percent for four or more. Therefore, a majority of Americans experience poverty at some point in their lives. "For most of us," Rank writes, "the question is not whether we will experience poverty, but when."²⁶ Therefore, one of the assumptions fueling opposition to welfare—that poor people's values are at odds with the mainstream—often isn't true. For many low-income individuals who at one time experienced financial security, their lives spiraled downward because of a job loss, illness, or divorce—*not* because they suddenly and unexplainably became irresponsible.

Moreover, consider how often adults turn to the government for help. Rank found that between ages twenty and sixty-five, nearly two-thirds of Americans benefit from welfare. Over 58 percent use it for two or more years and over half (52.7 percent) for three or more years. These statistics dispel negative stereotypes surrounding welfare. Those who accept Medicaid or food stamps do not reject traditional values like hard work and self-discipline.²⁷

In fact, low-income people are much *less* likely to receive help from the government than Major League Baseball teams and other corporations. These companies collectively get hundreds of billions of dollars in federal subsidies and tax breaks each year. I say this with no axe to grind against baseball, but as an avid fan. However, my love of the game is beside the point. Given how often people question poor Americans' deservedness of help, it's reasonable to ask whether the Yankees, Mets, and other teams with subsidized ballparks are providing as much public value as taxpayers have doled out to build them.²⁸



Contrary to popular belief, any of us may unexpectedly fall into a situation where we temporarily need help from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or other welfare programs in order to get back on our feet.

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On what basis does it make sense to think about welfare in connection with Major League Baseball?

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Taking Collective Responsibility: Why the Withering of the American Dream Is Everyone's Problem

2.7 Describe the shared societal costs of economic inequality.

Each school day, over thirty million kids receive a free or reduced-price meal from the federally subsidized National School Lunch Program. This program enables

low-income children to learn about healthy eating habits and ensures that they're adequately nourished so they can have a chance to do well in school. Subsidizing lunches seems like a worthy use of government funds—which come from our tax dollars—since schools cannot possibly be engines of the American Dream if some kids are unable to concentrate due to hunger.²⁹

Don't we have a responsibility to promote equal opportunity given the disadvantages that stem from economic inequality? These disadvantages include the following:

- Low-income kids experience higher rates of asthma and lead poisoning than kids living in higher-income neighborhoods.
- Poor children are less likely to receive routine medical care, and when they do, it tends to be from a neighborhood or hospital-based clinic rather than a private doctor.
- By the time kids enter kindergarten, test scores of literacy and math on average tend to be 60 percent lower among the poorest children than among the most affluent.
- This gap grows during elementary and middle school, to the point that students from low-income families are six times more likely to drop out of high school than kids from high-income families.

You might wonder how any of these inequalities affect those who don't directly experience them. Let's consider what happens when a vast segment of the population grows up unhealthy and undereducated. They go to the emergency room for costly procedures that could have been avoided if they'd had better primary care, and they don't productively contribute to the economy. Moreover, they're likely to spend time in prison, which has a *higher* per capita annual expense (\$31,286) than it costs to attend many universities. In all, childhood poverty costs our society a staggering half a trillion dollars a year.³⁰



School is where you've heard the strongest message that how hard you work influences how much you succeed. Embracing the sociological perspective, therefore, requires critically reevaluating this core belief you've been taught since you were very young.

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Nonetheless, it may be tempting to ignore the huge social and economic costs of poverty. Such denial is a by-product of the individual perspective, which views the hardships poor people experience as their own fault. Personalizing the reasons for other people's struggles can validate one's own successes. From a very young age, we hear the message that hard work is the key to getting ahead in life. This may incline a person to see their achievements as wholly earned. As a result, it becomes easy to feel contempt toward those who have little and convenient to believe that if they only worked harder, they'd be better off.

The sociological perspective elevates your understanding of these inequalities by exposing the social forces that influence people's choices. Integrating sociological thinking into how you understand the withering of the American Dream doesn't make excuses for people's struggles; it offers a clearer picture of why a person's life takes a particular course. Start paying attention to how the individual and sociological perspectives jointly enable you to understand the chances you had growing up and the shape your life may take in the years to come. The goal isn't to feel guilty about having had advantages or self-pity for having struggled but rather to gain insight about the realities of America's opportunity divide.

What Do You Know Now?

1. In what sense are explanations for inequality of opportunity in American society analogous to the reasons why people win or lose at musical chairs? Explain how, just like in the classic children's game, being successful in life is the result of *both* individual and sociological factors.
2. How did the Brothers' lack of cultural capital hurt them in their efforts to achieve a better life?
3. How does Linda Tirado's account of living in poverty challenge the individual perspective that the reason people like her struggle to get ahead is because of bad choices they've made?
4. Draw on details about the author's life to illustrate how his achievements have been the result of both personal efforts and social advantage.
5. Why is it significant that more than half of Americans experience poverty at some point in their lives?
6. How does your life story fit within this chapter? In other words, how do the opportunities you've had compare to those of the people you read about?

Key Terms

Poverty 11	Wealth 14	Redlining 24
Upward mobility 12	Opportunity divide 16	Intersectionality 25
American Dream 12	Cultural capital 18	Subsidy 28
Welfare 13	Social class 19	
Economic inequality 14	Feminization of poverty 22	

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