



Volunteers and staff serve hot meals for people experiencing food insecurity in New York City. Climate change and war in one of the world's breadbasket regions can threaten the global food supply.
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POVERTY AND CLASS INEQUALITY

Leslie Hossfeld, E. Brooke Kelly, and Julia Waity

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Summarize patterns and trends in defining and measuring poverty.
- 2.2 Describe social class and mobility.
- 2.3 Discuss income, wealth, and other dimensions of inequality.
- 2.4 Describe how the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist perspectives apply to the problems of poverty, class, and inequality.
- 2.5 Describe how specialized theories apply to poverty and inequality.
- 2.6 Identify steps toward social change in regard to poverty.

INVESTIGATING POVERTY AND CLASS INEQUALITY: OUR STORIES

Leslie Hossfeld

I grew up in rural Mississippi and recall vividly when schools were desegregated. My parents never really told my brothers and me that things would change at school—they chose not to draw attention to it, so I don't recall family meetings about changes that would be occurring at school. Yet I did learn later that my parents were fervently committed to us remaining in public schools, something very different from our white friends at the time who were moving to private, all-white schools. Living in rural Mississippi meant about a 30-minute drive to school each morning. But when it rained, and when the floods came, our pick-up time would be different, and we would be the first kids picked up for the ride to school—not the last ones, as was the normal, daily routine. On

these days, when the bus route was reversed, I was made aware of the remarkable poverty that other kids on the bus experienced. We were middle-class white kids who had a home, food, electricity, running water—things that as a child I would never consider luxuries. But on these reverse bus route days, I learned why the kids who were normally picked up before me were asleep on the bus; why their clothes were considerably different from mine; why they sometimes wore the same clothes over and over. I would marvel at the long journey we had to get to school. How long was their bus ride before I got on in the morning? What must their homes look like inside? They appeared to be shacks on the outside. Was there electricity in these homes? How long did it take them to get to a store? This simple change in the bus route had such a profound effect on me, shaping my interests and framing my worldview.

I have chosen to be a public sociologist. By that I mean taking the tools of the discipline outside the academy to inform social problems. I find I am happiest and feel the greatest rewards when I am working *in* and *with* communities, addressing critical needs identified by those who live them, and using my sociological tool belt to do the heavy lifting.



E. Brooke Kelly

Being raised by a single mother for a significant portion of my childhood made me realize how tenuous one's economic prospects could be. Though we did not rely on public assistance or food stamps, I knew that without our social and economic support system, that could easily have been our story and drastically changed my life. Later, my undergraduate studies in sociology helped me better understand the way social inequalities impact life chances. In graduate school I became involved in a multistate study of rural, low-income families. Through several years of interviews with Latino farmworkers, many of whom migrated with their families from their homes in Texas, Florida, or Mexico to Michigan to work the seasonal crops, I came to better understand lived experiences of poverty and the resiliency of those who struggle with such circumstances. Real-life stories, such as having to drop out of school at a young age to earn money for food, families stranded when a car broke down on the way to Michigan, or mothers who made their children labor in the fields to show them the importance of staying in school, remain with me.



University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Today I continue to learn about, write about, and attempt to address poverty and inequalities as a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. UNC Pembroke is located in Robeson County, one of the highest-poverty counties in the state of North Carolina. As home of the Lumbee tribe, it is also one of the most racially and ethnically diverse rural counties in the United States. UNCP reflects some of the characteristics of the county as one of the most racially and ethnically diverse campuses in the South, with many first-generation college students and nontraditional students by age, and a majority of students relying on financial aid. Over almost two decades, I think I have learned as much from my students as they have from me, as many struggle with the challenges of limited resources, working, and/or raising families while going to school. As a professor, I enjoy helping students learn about sociology in a way that also raises their awareness of and benefits the surrounding community and campus. My students and I have worked on projects with the nearby low-income housing authority, raised awareness on campus about the conditions of farmworkers, and surveyed students on campus about whether they are getting enough healthy food to eat—a growing problem on college campuses.

Julia Waity

From when I was young, I have always been involved in volunteer work in my community. My parents encouraged me in this endeavor, and I continued to pursue this involvement in college at Washington and Lee University, where I led our campus service organization. I complemented my sociology/anthropology degree with a certificate in poverty studies. After working in Baltimore for a year at a nonprofit organization that worked with low-income youth, I decided to pursue a PhD in sociology with a minor in public policy. I conducted research in the community and consider myself to be a public sociologist.



My research focuses on one specific aspect of poverty: food insecurity. In particular, I consider spatial inequalities that are present in access to food and food assistance across the rural-urban continuum. I also study college food insecurity. I regularly teach Sociology of Poverty to both undergraduate and graduate students, where we explore the information presented in this chapter in great detail.

WHO IS HUNGRY ON CAMPUS?

Do you ever struggle with food insecurity? **Food insecurity** refers to the fact that “ability to acquire adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources” (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2022, iv). You may be surprised to hear that many college students struggle with food insecurity. In an analysis of eight studies of food insecurity on college campuses, the mean food insecurity prevalence was 43.5%, higher than in U.S. households (Nazmi et al. 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic impacted college student food insecurity, with 12% to 15% of students experiencing a decrease in food insecurity through moving in with parents for example, while 20% to 23% of students saw their food insecurity increase due to factors like job loss (Mialki et al. 2021; Soldavini et al. 2020). The U.S. Department of Agriculture has used a survey to measure rates of food insecurity in the United States since 1998. A coalition of researchers in the southeastern and Appalachian regions of the United States used a version of that survey to measure food insecurity across ten colleges and universities (Hagedorn et al. 2019) and found that the average level of food insecurity across all campuses was 30.5%, with a range of 22.4% to 51.8%. Additional ways to measure food insecurity and food access include interviews, focus groups, and mapping.

Overall, about 10.2% of American households deal with food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2022). While not all those who are food insecure are poor, and not all those who are poor are food insecure, low-income households have food insecurity rates substantially higher than the U.S. average. As with poverty rates, we see higher food insecurity rates among single-parent households, Black and Hispanic households, and households where children are present (although not the children themselves). Food insecurity is higher in rural (10.8%) and urban areas (12.2%) than in suburban areas (8.8%). These food-insecure households can turn to government benefits like SNAP, formerly called food stamps, but that may not be enough to make ends meet. They might turn to food pantries or soup kitchens as well. Food insecurity is often used as a proxy for poverty. For example, the number of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch in K–12 schools is an indicator of the school’s poverty level. The relationship between food and poverty is described in more detail in our book *Food and Poverty: Food Insecurity and Food Sovereignty Among America’s Poor* (Hossfeld, Kelly, and Waity 2018).

Increasingly, more colleges and universities are opening up food pantries and soup kitchens to assist these food-insecure students. Before they merged with Swipe Out Hunger, the College and University Food Bank Alliance had over 700 registered members. Other strides are being made to help food-insecure students. Swipe Out Hunger is working to introduce the Hunger Free Campus Bill across the country. A pilot grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture at nine California State University campuses encourage eligible students to apply for SNAP benefits and use them on campus.

With the costs of college already so high (the 2021–2022 average yearly cost of attendance ranges from \$26,000 for four-year public colleges to \$55,800 for four-year private non-profit institutions, including room and board, according to the National Center for Education Statistics 2023), there may not be enough money left over for food, especially if students are paying their own way through college. Or the food that students can afford might not be healthy and nutritious.

PATTERNS AND TRENDS

Poverty, Class, and Inequality

Some 37.9 million people in the United States live below the official poverty line, and millions more live barely above it, while those in the top 10% possess 69% of the wealth of the country (Kent and Ricketts 2023; Shrider and Creamer 2023). Class sharply divides who has access to which opportunities and resources, including a decent education and adequate health care. Inequality is growing, making it more difficult for those at the bottom to improve their lives or those of their children.

Poverty, class, and inequality are complex and intertwined concepts. They are also social constructions, yet they are more than just ideas because they frame our everyday lives. Our ideas about poverty, class, and inequality are based not simply on facts but also on images and perceptions. Poverty is not just people with incomes below a certain level; it is also images of poorly dressed people begging on street corners. We know that we live in a society where some people have very little money and resources and others have immense wealth. But is that good or bad? Is inequality a useful incentive to spur people to work hard? Or is the gap between rich and poor unjust? That is what we mean by saying that concepts are socially constructed. Where do our ideas and images about poverty, class, and inequality come from?

What is social class? Are there only a few social classes, or is class in U.S. society represented by a continuum with many gradations? What is poverty? How is it related to inequality? Is poverty inevitable, or can we eradicate it? Should we define poverty exclusively in economic terms, or should we include social and political dimensions? Is inequality only an economic term, or does it, too, have other facets? These are the central issues on which we will focus in this chapter. As Gerhard Lenski (1966, 3) put it many years ago, the basic question is, “Who gets what and why?”

Defining Poverty

More than 60 years ago, Michael Harrington published *The Other America* (1962), a book that opened the eyes of a complacent nation to deep poverty in the midst of affluence. Eradicating poverty, from Appalachia to inner cities, soon became a major focus of public policy. Critical legislation included the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Karger and Stoesz 2022). But to eradicate or even reduce poverty, we must be able to measure it. There are two ways to do so.

An **absolute measure of poverty** sets a threshold, usually based on annual income. A person or family with an annual income at the line or below it is identified as being in **poverty**. If income is above the line—by even one dollar—the person or family is identified as not being in poverty.

The line is arbitrary but set by policy makers to help guide them in developing programs for the poor, evaluating the effectiveness of antipoverty programs, or deciding who is eligible for some services. In 1963, economist Mollie Orshansky developed an absolute measure of poverty based on the cost of food. On the assumption that a family spends about one-third of its disposable income on food, Orshansky proposed a poverty threshold of three times the cost of a market basket of food, adjusted for family size. This standard has been used ever since, and the federal government adjusts the rate for inflation each year so comparisons can be made across time. In 2023 the poverty level set by the Department of Health and Human Services was \$30,000 for a family of four.

There are many criticisms of this measure. For example, it uses a subsistence-level basket of food rather than a basket based on a more nutritionally sound diet, and the assumption that a family spends a third of its annual income on food is likely no longer accurate. In fact, renters in the lowest income quintile spent 62.7% of their total household income on rent (Mateyka and Yoo 2023). Still, policy makers use the poverty line to guide them in developing and evaluating programs and in deciding who is eligible for certain services.

A **relative measure of poverty** looks at a person, or a group such as a family, in relationship to the rest of the community or society. Is the person or group far below or well above others in terms of income, quality of housing, educational levels or opportunities, or household possessions? One common relative measure uses the *median* household income for a nation, the point at which half the households are below it and half are above it. We might then consider poverty to be the income at half the median, indicating how some families compare to what is typical in their society. For example, the median U.S. household income for 2022 was \$74,580. Half of that is \$37,290. However, unlike an absolute measure, a relative measure is not a hard-and-fast line, so it changes depending on conditions in the society as a whole. The idea of a relative measure is that we see how individuals or families compare with others in their society; that is, are they relatively similar or more disadvantaged than most?

Poverty Rates Over Time and Among Different Social Groups

The U.S. Census Bureau releases an annual report on household income and poverty, usually in the early fall. In the report for 2022, the poverty rate stood at 11.5% (Shrider and Creamer 2023). That is, more than 37.9 million U.S. men, women, and children fell below the official poverty line.

The Census Bureau takes into account age, family size, and number of children in a household in counting the number of people below the poverty line. This creates a grid of what the Census Bureau calls the **poverty thresholds**, and a new set of thresholds is produced annually to take inflation into account. In 2022, the poverty threshold was \$29,678 for a four-person household, which includes two children under age 18, and \$23,578 for a three-person household including two children.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services uses a simplified version of the Census Bureau thresholds, called the **poverty guidelines**, which set what is known as the federal poverty level (FPL) (see Table 2.1). The main difference is the Census Bureau's focus on the number of persons, including adults and children, in the household. The FPL, as developed by Orshansky, is the number generally referred to in the media when they mention the poverty line and also the guideline used to determine eligibility for many public services.

For many years, U.S. poverty rates declined (see Figure 2.1). The historic high was 1959, the first year for which figures were estimated. Nearly 40 million people were then in poverty, or about 23% of the U.S. population. Both absolute numbers and rates declined for most of the next two decades, especially among older adults, since Social Security pensions were increasing not only in amount but also in extent of coverage. However, the Census Bureau uses a lower threshold for older people, so some of the decline in poverty among this group may be artificial.

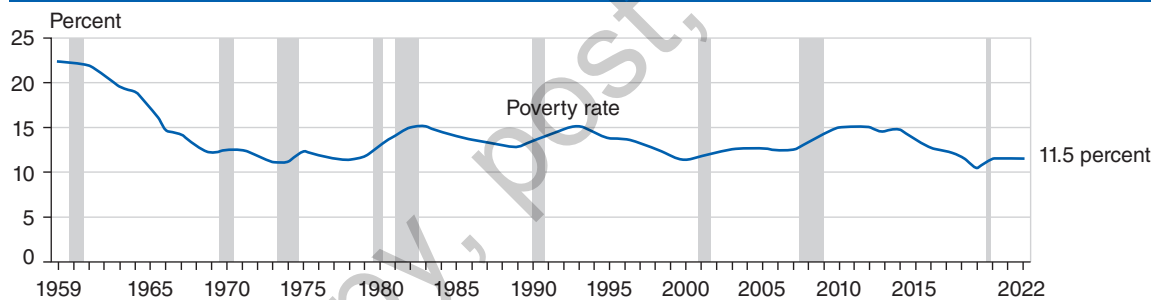
By 1980, poverty rates began to grow again, peaking in the early 1990s and then dropping again until the 2000s. The poverty rate increased sharply during the Great Recession, which occurred from late 2007 to 2009, and its aftermath. The absolute number of people in poverty was higher than in 1959, and the poverty rate went from 11.7% to 15.1%, an increase of 29%. In 2015, the poverty rate finally started to decrease, although at 13.5% this was still higher than before the Great Recession. The economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

TABLE 2.1 ■ Poverty Guidelines in the United States, 2023

| Persons in Family | Poverty Guideline (Annual Income in \$) |
|-------------------|---|
| 1 | 14,580 |
| 2 | 19,720 |
| 3 | 24,860 |
| 4 | 30,000 |
| 5 | 35,140 |
| 6 | 40,280 |
| 7 | 45,420 |
| 8 | 50,560 |

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2023. "HHS Poverty Guidelines for 2023." <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines>.

Note: For families with more than eight persons, add \$5,140 for each additional person. Alaska and Hawaii have higher poverty guidelines.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Poverty Levels in the United States, 1959–2022

Source: Shrider, Emily A., and John Creamer. 2023. "Poverty in the United States: 2022." U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-280. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2023/demo/p60-280.pdf>.

brought another increase in poverty, although not as stark as from the Great Recession (Shrider and Creamer 2023).

Some categories of people are more likely to be in poverty than others. The poverty rate for non-Hispanic whites was 8.6% in 2022, compared to 17.1% for Blacks, 16.9% for Hispanics (any race), and 8.6% for Asian Americans. If we look just at families, the rate for female-headed households is 24.7%, compared to 11.6% for male-headed households and 5.4% for married couple families (see Table 2.2). Looking specifically at age, we see children under 18 have the highest poverty rate, at 15.0%, while adults aged 65 and older have the lowest poverty rate, at 10.2%. Those living in rural areas and principal cities have higher poverty rates (15.0% and 14.1%) than those living in suburban areas (9.2%).

Extreme Poverty and Low Income

It is not just the poverty rate or the number of people in poverty that is rising. People with low incomes seem to be concentrated in particular counties and neighborhoods. **Extreme poverty**

TABLE 2.2 ■ Poverty Rates of Selected U.S. Subgroups, 2022

| Category | Percentage |
|--|------------|
| White, non-Hispanic | 8.6 |
| Black | 17.1 |
| Hispanic | 16.9 |
| Asian | 8.6 |
| Female-headed households | 24.7 |
| Male-headed households | 11.6 |
| Married couple families | 5.4 |
| Children under 18 | 15.0 |
| Adults aged 18–64 | 10.6 |
| Adults aged 65 and older | 10.2 |
| Inside metropolitan statistical areas | 11.0 |
| Inside principal cities (urban) | 14.1 |
| Outside principal cities (suburban) | 9.2 |
| Outside metropolitan statistical areas (rural) | 15.0 |

Source: Shrider, Emily A., and John Creamer. 2023. "Poverty in the United States: 2022." U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-280. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2023/demo/p60-280.pdf>.

neighborhoods are areas, usually U.S. Census tracts, with poverty rates of 40% or more. Four percent of census tracts and 11 counties in the United States fell into this category in 2015–2019. There are also enduring poverty counties, which have poverty rates of 20% or higher for at least five consecutive measurement periods. These 304 counties are concentrated in Appalachia, the Black Belt, the Mississippi Delta, the Ozarks, the Southwest, and counties with large American Indian and Alaska Native populations (U.S. Department of Agriculture n.d.). Concentrated disadvantages that result from this spatial concentration of poverty can be seen in higher crime rates, fewer educational opportunities, and worse health outcomes, just to name a few.

Not only are more people falling into poverty, but their plight is also more severe now than in the past. In their book *\$2 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*, sociologist Kathryn J. Edin and poverty policy expert H. Luke Shaefer, document that one and a half million households live on less than two dollars a day in the United States. Access to public assistance programs is declining, making the living conditions of those at the bottom of our society more difficult. Public assistance programs require individuals or families to meet eligibility requirements, such as having income below a certain level (e.g., the FPL) and meeting asset limits.

The Social Safety Net

What we now call the **social safety net** consists of programs that emerged during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Before that point, most charitable programs were either private, often church-based, or state and local in scope. Unfortunately, these social programs could not begin

to alleviate the widespread suffering of the 1930s. The roots of the safety net are found in the Social Security Act of 1935. Most people probably think of Social Security as providing pensions for older adults, but also included in this legislation were provisions for a number of additional programs: unemployment insurance; assistance to the aged, blind, and disabled; survivor benefits; and public assistance (originally for widows with children). Since its initial signing, the Social Security Act has been amended, and some services have been modified or combined and others added.

A second period of expansion in federal programs occurred during the 1960s, when poverty emerged as a national concern. In addition, in response to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, important federal legislation was enacted, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Researchers focused not only on the problem of poverty but also on how minority status, including race and sex, was connected to poverty.



During the Great Depression, hundreds of hungry, homeless men lined up at the Municipal Lodging House in New York City for a free Thanksgiving Day dinner. The unemployment rate rose to 25% in the United States during the 1930s. Do you think this could happen again?

Bettmann/Getty Images

Some parts of the social safety net are **social insurance programs**, such as OASDI—or Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance—in which individuals pay into the system (or have spouses who pay into the system) and earn “entitlement” to services. One of the programs that has had the most impact on poverty is Social Security pensions for older adults. By the 1960s,

increasing numbers of workers were covered, and the level of payments helped to keep many older individuals and couples above the poverty line. Social Security pensions are now the most common form of income for older people, with more than 97% of older households receiving or about to receive such income. In fact, more than half of all older adult households receive half their income from these benefits. The average monthly benefit in February 2023 was \$1,782 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2023).

In 1965, Medicare was added to the Social Security program. This is a public health care program for people aged 65 and older, and most older people now participate in it. Other social insurance programs include unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, and disability insurance.

Some other social safety net elements, in contrast to social insurance programs, are **means-tested programs** for which people usually qualify by having a certain income, usually below the poverty level or 185% of the poverty line, as described earlier. The general public has had a negative image of means-tested public assistance programs, which are often associated with racial stereotypes. Some politicians have used images of “welfare cheats” and “welfare queens” to advance their careers, though there has been little evidence of widespread cheating among welfare recipients (Segal and Kilty 2003).

Medicaid, a means-tested program, is an important part of the social safety net. This is a public health insurance program for the poor, which now includes the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). While most doctors and hospitals accept patients insured by Medicare, fewer are willing to accept Medicaid patients, making it difficult for many individuals who qualify for Medicaid to find physicians or hospitals that will treat them.

Other means-tested programs include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a program of cash assistance to poor families, and the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**, from which 41.9 million people received benefits in April 2023 (Desilver 2023). Another important food-related program is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which provides nutrition education and a small amount of supplemental income that can be used with authorized vendors. In 2021, the average monthly WIC benefit per person was \$56.90. Some means-tested programs allow recipients to have incomes somewhat higher than the official poverty line. The National School Lunch Program, for instance, provides free or reduced-cost meals for students whose family incomes are up to 185% of the poverty line.

While the programs that make up the social safety net are valuable and help many people, especially the social insurance programs, fewer people are receiving benefits such as TANF, and the levels of benefits have dropped. Using North Carolina as an example, the maximum TANF benefits were \$272 for a single-parent family of three. The TANF-to-poverty ratio in 2019–2020 (which is the number of families receiving TANF for every 100 families living in poverty) was 5, which represents a drop of 69 points since welfare reform was enacted in 1996 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities n.d.). In fact, the amount of help available for low-income individuals and families in the United States falls far short of what is accessible in many other countries, especially other industrialized nations.

Another concern for families, particularly low-income families, is the cost of child care. Child care is very expensive in the United States. (Ireland, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom are the only countries where it is more expensive.) In North Carolina, for example, the average cost for infant care is \$9,480 a year according to the Economic Policy Institute, about 29% more than the average cost of in-state tuition at a public college (Economic Policy Institute 2020).

Low-income families can qualify for child care subsidies, but even with a subsidy, it is difficult to find high-quality child care without long waiting lists. Even if child care were available and affordable, it wouldn't solve every problem. Many low-income jobs, like waiting tables, require hours outside the times that child care centers are open, or they have schedules that change weekly or monthly (like many retail jobs), so it is especially difficult for those parents to access child care. Despite the high cost of child care, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) reports that child care workers made a median annual wage of \$28,520 in 2022, which keeps them near or below the poverty line.

The United States has some public preschool programs, but only 32% of four-year-olds are enrolled in them (Friedman-Krauss et al. 2019). In contrast, France offers government-run day cares with a sliding fee scale based on income, as well as free universal preschool. Having affordable, accessible, high-quality day care translates into more French women than American women returning to work after having children.

Also crucial to the ability of parents to return to work are family leave policies. Unlike most other industrialized nations, the United States has no federally mandated paid parental leave (Livingston and Thomas 2019). Many jobs do offer paid maternity leave, but these jobs tend to be well-paid, white-collar jobs. While the United States does have federally mandated family and medical leave for most employees, this is unpaid, so those with limited resources may not be able to take the decrease in pay associated with the leave. In contrast, paid maternity leave is universal for all mothers in France, with the amount of leave varying based on the circumstances of the birth. Fathers get two weeks of paid leave as well.

To further assist parents with the costs of raising children, France and other countries provide parents with family allowances and other subsidies that increase based on the number of children they have. Family allowances are cash benefits provided by the government to those with children as a right of citizenship. Note that unlike some policies in the United States that focus on income requirements, family allowances are universal.

Other Dimensions of Poverty

So far, we have looked at poverty in economic terms, focusing specifically on income. Are there other components to poverty?

We noted earlier that with a relative measure of poverty we are trying to get a picture of how individuals or families compare to their communities or societies. That suggests we should look at the extent to which particular individuals or families can actively participate in society. Are they accepted as legitimate members? Do they see themselves as legitimate members? When a child goes to school, can their family provide adequate resources, such as crayons? How does the child dress? Will they be accepted or shunned by peers?

People are unequal not just in income or wealth but also in desirable social and political qualities. Many now argue for considering certain “economic human rights” as part of our fundamental human rights. For instance, who can vote in the United States? Legislative efforts to limit voting rights have included restrictions on voter registration and the requirement to show photo identification at the polls. In some states, a person loses the right to vote if convicted of a felony, including simple drug possession. If you cannot vote, are you then deficient in a specific quality, in the same way as being below a certain income level? Should lack of political rights be included in a definition of poverty?

What about the right to choose to be public or not about your sexual orientation? What about the right to be public about your gender identity? Should some people be so anxious about

losing—or even getting—a job that they feel they must keep that part of their humanity hidden? Should we think of social conditions as a part of poverty?

SOCIAL CLASS

All societies are organized or stratified, most often into social classes, which are groups with different access to resources. In other words, inequalities in wealth, income, education, and occupation are common, and the system of social stratification we find in a particular society helps us to understand who gets what and why.

Many American citizens believe the United States is unique and that social class does not really exist here. We tend to see our nation as egalitarian and open, a place where, through hard work and self-reliance, social mobility is not only possible but common. A majority claim “middle-class” or “upper-middle-class” status (52%), and 35% label themselves “working class”; 2% identify as “upper class” and only 11% as “lower class” (Jones 2022). Although Americans have been more likely to identify as working class or lower class and less likely to identify as middle class since the Great Recession (Jones 2022), few seem to question the nature of the social class structure or whether it seriously affects opportunities. In fact, challenging whether the wealthy possess too much typically leads to charges of “class warfare”—especially from the rich and their conservative political allies.

Roots of the “Classless” Society

The roots of U.S. beliefs in egalitarianism and openness go back to colonial days. By the 17th century, when colonies in North America were firmly established, the English, French, and Dutch colonists found themselves in a vast expanse of open and what they perceived as unclaimed land. There was an indigenous population, but it was not as large as the one the Spanish and Portuguese found and subdued in South and Central America or the southern part of North America. For the hardy, the opportunities seemed boundless.

Yet opportunities were actually extremely limited for most European colonists. In the 13 English colonies, large landowners were generally given tracts of land by the English Crown, particularly in the southern colonies, where plantation farming and slavery were developing in the early 1600s. Most early colonists, and Africans brought to North America, were indentured servants obligated to work for landowners, merchants, or craftsmen for set periods of time, usually 7 to 10 years. Chattel slavery developed between 1620 and 1660, when the rights and freedom of Africans were gradually taken away. However, in the early 1600s, Black and white settlers were treated largely the same, and they lived lives of abject poverty. Since the average life expectancy then was only about 35 years, many indentured servants did not survive to become “free.”

A class structure was developing based on land and ownership of enslaved people in the southern colonies and on land and industry in the North. Opportunities were mainly reserved for those who arrived with advantage by birth. All the same, by the 19th century, a powerful narrative of success based on hard work, self-reliance, and perseverance had developed. This was the concept of the “self-made man”—the idea that anyone could rise from humble beginnings and become wealthy and successful simply by applying himself (Miller and Lapham 2012). In this view, social position is a matter of individual achievement and has little or nothing to do with a person’s origins in the social hierarchy.

One of the major advocates of this **self-made myth** was the 19th-century author Horatio Alger (1832–1899), who wrote more than 100 “rags-to-riches” novels and stories. Although his

work had its critics even then, his vision became a central part of the American image. Later, the libertarian writer Ayn Rand (1905–1982) came to have a powerful influence on the continuing acceptance of the self-made myth, especially through her novel *Atlas Shrugged*. Her writings provided the foundation for the political philosophy and ethics of capitalism that lie behind modern conservative political thought and that advocate self-reliance and limited government influence on the economy. This is a powerful ideology that we hear expressed in the political rhetoric of such figures as Donald Trump.

Class as a Social Science Concept

Two of the most important social scientists in the development of social class as a scientific concept were Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Max Weber (1864–1920). According to Marx, social position revolves around one important factor: ownership of the means of production. In essence, there are *capitalists*, who own the factories and other means of producing goods, and there are the *working class*, who sell their labor in order to survive. Many of Marx's critics, including Weber, have focused on this oversimplification of social stratification. (Marx does identify other classes as well.)

Marxist analysis of social structure has not been widely accepted in popular or academic circles in the United States because of the link between Marx and communist ideology. Much more acceptable have been the writings of Weber, who identifies three aspects of social structure: class, status, and power. **Class** refers to a person's position relative to the economic sector, such as proprietor, wage laborer, or renter. **Status** refers to social position in the context of characteristics like education, prestige, and religious affiliation. **Power** refers to political affiliations and connections.

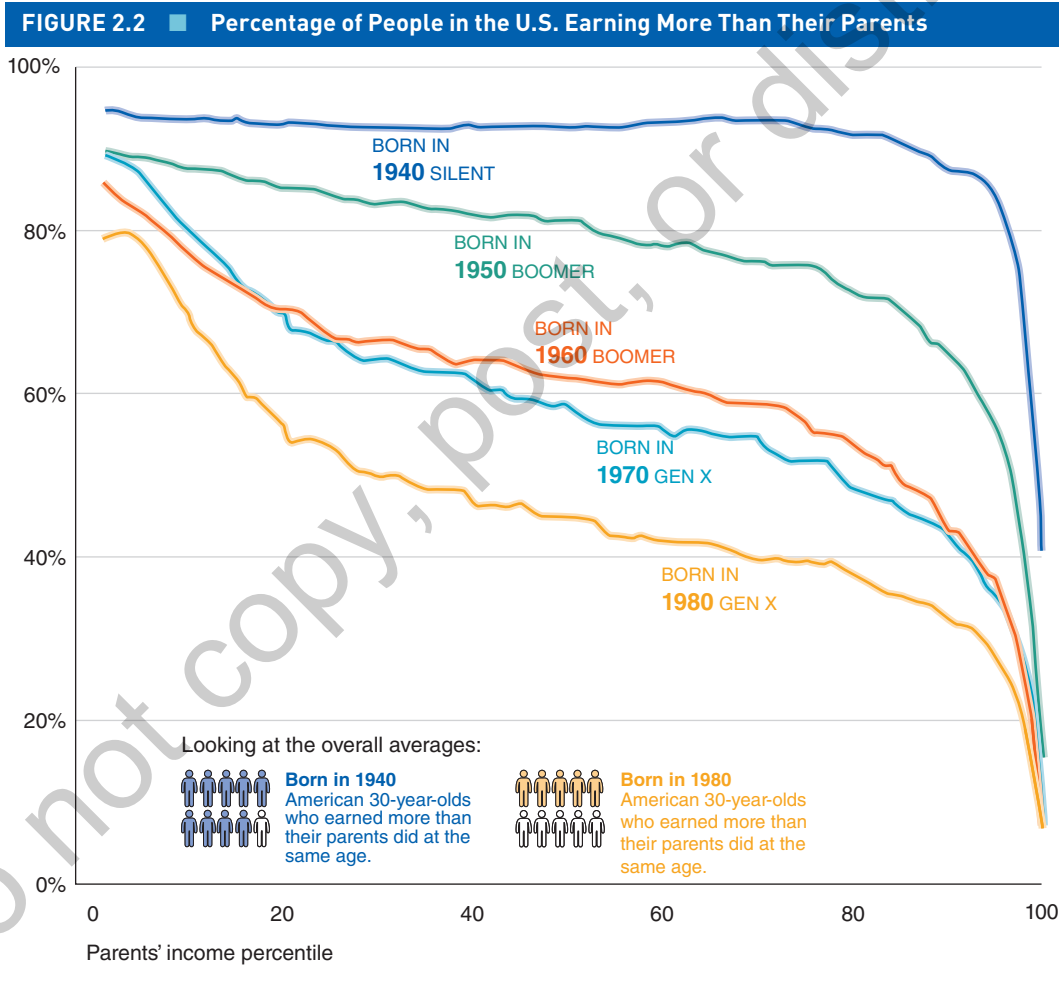
Weber's ideas led to a conceptualization of U.S. social class as a continuum of **socioeconomic status (SES)**, rather than as a set of discrete categories that are easily distinguished from each other. Taking this perspective, we need to create an index of class based on factors such as education, income, and occupation. That is how social science research generally treats class—by using a quantitative scale that measures several variables.

In many surveys and polls, in contrast, individuals are still often asked to self-identify as members of social classes using a subjective series of categories such as “upper class,” “middle class,” “working class,” or “lower class.” As we have seen, a majority of respondents identify themselves as members of the middle class.

Social Mobility

Social mobility is upward or downward movement in social position over time in a society. That movement can be specific to individuals who change social positions or to categories of people, such as racial or ethnic groups. Social mobility between generations is referred to as *intergenerational mobility*. As we saw earlier, the self-made myth suggests that social position in the United States is largely up to the individual, implying that mobility is quite common and easy to achieve for those who apply themselves. However, what people believe and what is fact are often not the same. Americans substantially and consistently overestimate the amount of income mobility and educational access that exist in society (Alesina et al. 2018). The higher one's social class, the more likely they are to overestimate social mobility. In other words, wealthy Americans tend to subscribe to the belief that pulling one's self out of poverty is easier than it actually is and that one's wealth is a result of hard work and initiative, rather than luck or birth (Kraus and Tan 2015).

While social mobility has always been limited in the United States, it has become even more so in past decades. For example, children born in 1940 experienced 90% mobility relative to their parents, whereas the mobility of children born a few decades later in the 1980s dropped to 50% (Chetty et al. 2017). Figure 2.2 plots the probability that a 30-year-old American has to out-earn their parents (vertical axis) depending on their parent’s income percentile (horizontal axis). Though intergenerational mobility has declined overall, when we look at differences by class, we find that fewer people in the lower and middle classes are climbing the economic ladder, and the middle class is experiencing the largest decline (World Economic Forum 2020). Furthermore, the United States lags well behind most Western European nations in mobility (Isaacs 2016). Declining social mobility is a relevant issue for current college students. Not only will many graduate with considerable debt, but they are the first generation in U.S. history likely to end up at a lower social position than that of their parents (Ermisch, Jantti, and Smeeding 2012).



Source: World Economic Forum. 2020. "Is the American Dream Over? Here's What the Data Says." <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/09/social-mobility-upwards-decline-usa-us-america-economics>.

The possibility of social mobility also differs considerably within the United States depending on the neighborhood where you grow up. As part of the Atlas Opportunity Project, researchers used an experimental approach to see what happens to adults’ future prospects when they

move from one neighborhood environment to another as children. Some of their findings are illustrated through a map that shows how low-income children fare as adults when they grow up in different neighborhoods. Consider checking out the interactive map on the website <https://www.opportunityatlas.org/> to review the outcomes of particular groups in your own county. By making the interactive map based on their findings available to the public, researchers hoped to enable communities to better understand and improve upon local barriers to economic prosperity for children and families (Chetty and Hendren 2017). Cities such as Charlotte, North Carolina, learned from this research project that not all members of their communities were experiencing the city's economic prosperity and have made efforts to change that (Ydstie 2018). Such research on mobility in the United States suggests that distributing wealth growth more equally across different income groups, reducing segregation by income and race, and improving schools would help increase U.S. mobility rates (Chetty et al. 2017; Chetty and Hendren 2017).

Another Way of Understanding the U.S. Class Structure

Focusing on income as an indicator of social class is a simplistic way of looking at class. However, it may help us get a basic picture of the structure of our society. Table 2.3 presents the U.S. household income distribution for 2020 by quintile—that is, broken into five equal parts. The table shows the mean income for each quintile, as well as the share of the total income going to that group. Keep in mind that these income numbers are for *households*, not individuals.

TABLE 2.3 ■ Annual Household Income in the United States by Quintile, 2021

| Quintile | Mean (\$) | Share of Total (%) |
|-----------------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Top (\$149,132 or more) | 269,356 | 52.7 |
| Fourth (\$89,745–\$149,131) | 115,462 | 22.6 |
| Third (\$55,001–\$89,744) | 70,879 | 13.9 |
| Second (\$28,008–\$55,000) | 41,025 | 8.0 |
| Bottom (\$28,007 or less) | 14,859 | 2.9 |

Source: Semega, Jessica, and Melissa Kollar. 2021. "Income in the United States: 2021." U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-276. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

For 2021, the median household income was \$70,784, compared to a mean of \$102,316. The *median* is the midpoint in a distribution where half the scores are above and half are below, while the *mean* is computed by adding all the scores together and dividing by the number of scores. The gap between the mean and the median is important because it illustrates how unequal the distribution of household income is. Income is a skewed distribution, or a distribution in which a few values are at one extreme. In this case, the skewness is due to a few very high income values, compared to many more in the lower ranges.

Even more telling indicators of the depth of inequality in the United States are the upper limits for each of the quintiles. We saw in Table 2.1 that the 2023 poverty guideline for a family of two was \$19,720, and for a family of three \$24,860. Virtually the entire bottom quintile falls below those thresholds. The numbers for the second quintile are also striking, with many families not far above the FPL. In fact, the bottom 40% of all U.S. households received only 10.9% of

all earned income in 2021. The top quintile, in contrast, received 52.7% of household income, with a mean of \$269,356. In the top 5%, the mean household income was \$480,236.

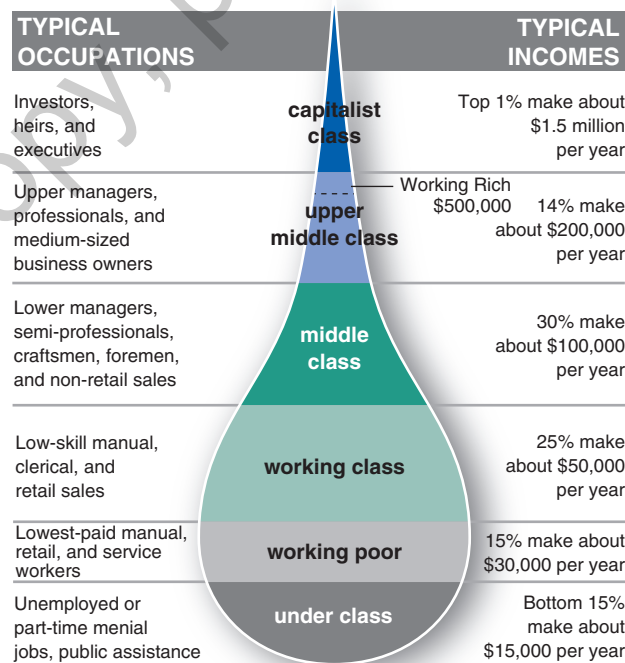
While income is useful as a metric variable, another way to consider social class is to use the quintiles as rough indicators. The bottom quintile represents people living in poverty (with those below the mean for that group experiencing extreme poverty), the second quintile the “near poor” or “working poor,” the third the “middle class,” the fourth the “upper middle class,” and the top quintile the “upper class.” We could also divide that top quintile into the affluent (the first 15%), the rich (the next 4%), and the super-rich (the top 1%).

INEQUALITY

When we ask who gets what and why, we are dealing with the issue of **inequality**—the fact that some people in a society have more than others. Inequality is increasing in countries throughout the world, but the gap between those at the top and those at the bottom is greater in the United States than in nearly all other industrialized societies, especially those in Europe. Since the 1970s, the wealth of the top 1% has increased more rapidly in the United States than among European counterparts (Horsley 2019). The same is true when we measure the proportion of the population below 50% of the median income (a measure of relative poverty, as described earlier). We use the term *poverty* to depict the status of those at the very bottom. A good way to think of inequality, then, is as a continuum, with extreme poverty (or the poor) at one end and wealth (or the super-rich) at the other:

Poverty ←————→ Wealth

FIGURE 2.3 ■ Class in the United States (Gilbert-Kahl Model)

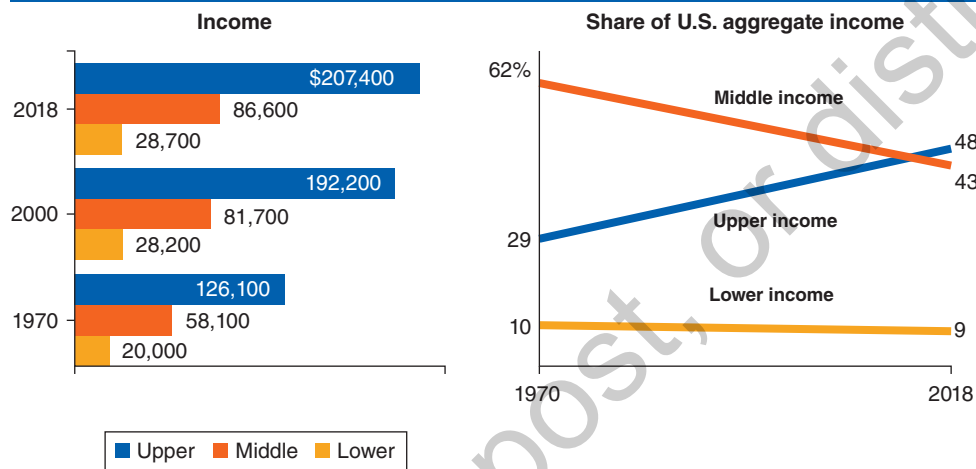


Source: Gilbert, Dennis L. 2020. *The American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality*, 11th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

While income is an important aspect of this divide between top and bottom, it is not all there is to inequality.

What about housing? Or access to health care, good jobs, and education? What about assets (which we'll discuss later)? We also need to understand that no population or country is evenly distributed on this continuum—in fact, distribution is generally far from even. The continuum will not look like a flat line, such as we saw when we broke the income distribution into five equal parts or quintiles. It will not look like a bell curve, in which most of the population falls in the middle, with equal numbers of extreme cases on both sides. The continuum of inequality is a highly skewed distribution in which many more individuals fall toward the bottom than the top.

FIGURE 2.4 ■ Median Household Income in 2018 Dollars and Share of U.S. Aggregate Household Income by Income Tier



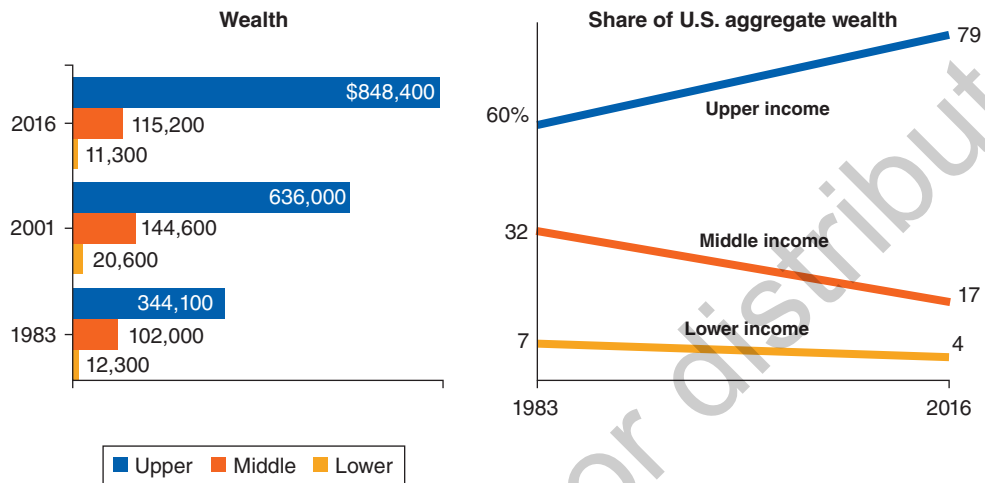
Source: Horowitz, Juliana, Ruth Igielnik, and Tanya Ardit. 2020. "Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority." Pew Research Center, p. 15. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/most-americans-say-there-is-too-much-economic-inequality-in-the-u-s-but-fewer-than-half-call-it-a-top-priority>.

Income and Wealth

What is the difference between income and wealth? Each year, the Census Bureau releases a report on U.S. households that defines **income** as the money that flows into a family or household from a variety of sources, such as earnings, unemployment compensation, Social Security benefits, interest and dividends, and rental income. **Wealth**, in contrast, is often defined as a family or household's assets or possessions, or as *net worth*—the difference between the value of these assets and the amount of the family or household's debt. Many wealthy people may have high incomes as well as plentiful assets, but because income from investments often is subject to capital gains taxes rather than income taxes, it is not included in surveys of household income. As a result, many wealthy people may not appear to have large incomes based on statistics from the Internal Revenue Service. But they still have plenty of money to spend and live very well compared to others. Currently, 10% of the population possesses about 70% of all the wealth in the United States, meaning the other 90% together share a meager 30% of everything there is to own. Even then, there are extremes among that top 10%. And the divide between those at the top and the rest of U.S. society has been growing since the 1980s (Horowitz et al. 2020). Though economic relief packages during the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020 and 2021

lessened inequalities, as temporary relief from government fades, those gains may prove fleeting (Clemens 2023).

FIGURE 2.5 ■ Median Family Wealth in 2016 Dollars and Share of U.S. Aggregate Family Wealth by Income Tier



Source: Horowitz, Juliana, Ruth Igielnik, and Rakesh Kochhar. 2020. "Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority." Pew Research Center, p. 19. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/most-americans-say-there-is-too-much-economic-inequality-in-the-u-s-but-fewer-than-half-call-it-a-top-priority>.

We need to carefully distinguish between income and wealth when discussing the extent of inequality in a society. Typically, distributions of income and wealth will be similar, but they will not give identical depictions of the depth of inequality because the distribution of wealth is generally more unequal than the distribution of income, as we see in Figures 2.4 and 2.5.

We know that household or family income stagnated or declined during the Great Recession of 2007–2009. Yet we can see in Figure 2.3 that not all segments of the population have been affected in the same way. Dividing Americans into three income groups—lower-income, middle-income, and upper-income—illustrates shifts in the distribution of income between them since 1970. Most notable is the dip in income of the middle class, from 62% to 43%, a decline of almost 20% and the corresponding rise in the share of income of the upper-income group, from 29% to 48%, an increase of almost 20%. Correspondingly, the share of American adults who live in middle-income households has declined. In considering the upper-income group, incomes have increased most rapidly among the most affluent families, those in the top 5%. Income inequality in the United States is also higher than among most industrialized peers (Horowitz et al. 2020).

We see similar results for net worth in Figure 2.4. Yet the wealth gap among upper-income families and middle- and lower-income families is sharper than the income gap between these groups. To consider this, note the difference between the share of U.S. aggregate income in Figure 2.3 and the share of U.S. aggregate wealth in Figure 2.4. Though all groups experienced overall gains in wealth in Figure 2.4, the gains of lower-income and middle-income families were exceeded by those of upper-income families. The gap between the comparative share of wealth of the upper-income group and the middle-income group from 1983 to 2016 more than doubled (from a difference of almost 30% to 62%). During the Great Recession, those at the top of the

wealth distribution were largely protected from declines felt by the remaining 90% (Horowitz et al. 2020). These figures are striking, and the persistent gap between rich and poor should actually be even more of a public concern. According to Thomas M. Shapiro (2017),

- “The rise of wealth inequality is almost entirely due to the increase in the top 0.1 percent’s wealth share” (14).
- “Nearly half of the wealth accumulated over the past thirty years has gone to the top 0.1 percent of households” (33).
- “Half of the U.S. population has less than \$500 in savings” (14).

Although these numbers are staggering, we must also remember that wealth affects people’s everyday lives. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Shapiro and his research team interviewed families from white and Black middle-income and lower-income communities. His accounts of these families illustrate the way wealth or the lack of it can help or hinder in profound ways. For those who possess it, wealth provides a safety net for getting through difficult times, such as unanticipated health problems, unemployment, or loss of a spouse, without incurring debt. In contrast, the absence of wealth can turn small crises into major disasters. Wealth provides transformative advantages, such as a down payment on a home in a resource-rich neighborhood or the ability to send one’s children to private schools, start a business, or plan for retirement. Advantages such as safe neighborhoods and quality schools positively impact—or, when absent, present serious obstacles for—future generations. And as the wealth gap increases, the prevalence of high-poverty neighborhoods is on the rise. “A child born into a wealthy family is more than six times as likely to become a wealthy adult than a child born into a poor family” (Shapiro 2017, 26).

Sixty-one percent of Americans believe that there is too much economic inequality in the United States, but only 42% say that reducing economic inequality should be a top policy priority for the federal government. Those with lower incomes are most likely to suggest reducing economic inequality should be a top priority. A majority of adults who say there is too much economic inequality say that solving the problem will require significant changes to the economic system, such as raising taxes on the wealthiest Americans (Horowitz et al. 2020, 3–8).

It is not only in economic terms—in measures of income or the value of assets and possessions—that inequality exists in our society. We can also see inequality in access to education, good jobs, health care, and incarceration.

Other Dimensions of Inequality

Economic disparity is the central aspect of inequality, but many other social forces drive inequality in the United States and around the world. Two of the most significant of these are gender and race/ethnicity. It has been over a half century since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, but sexual and racial discrimination persist. While many hailed the election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency in 2008 as the beginning of a “postracial” era in the United States, for example, racial discrimination is still a fact of life. We also find major differences among racial and ethnic groups in income and wealth, particularly when we compare Blacks and Hispanics with whites (see Table 2.2).

Shapiro (2017) argues that we cannot understand contemporary class inequality without considering the widening racial wealth gap, a combination he refers to as *toxic inequality*. Indeed, class and racial inequality are inextricably linked. The gap between white and Black family wealth has increased nearly threefold over the past generation. The Great

Recession produced the largest loss of minority wealth in U.S. history, with a wealth loss of 50% for Blacks and 66% for Hispanics (Shapiro 2017, 40). In 2019, the median net wealth of white households was \$187,300, compared to \$14,100 for Black households and \$13,700 for Hispanic households (Bennett et al. 2022). Mobility is also a greater challenge for Black families, who are more likely to be stuck at the bottom of the income and wealth ladders and who have a harder time exceeding their parents' family income and wealth than whites do (Shapiro 2017, 43).

Another important dimension of inequality is access to health care. During the Great Recession, the number of people without health insurance in the United States increased, in part because of the rise in unemployment and the loss of job-based health insurance for the newly unemployed. With the implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, often referred to as Obamacare, the number of people with health insurance increased substantially. Yet in 2018, 8.5% of the U.S. population was without health insurance coverage for the entire calendar year. Potential future changes in health care legislation could increase the numbers of those who are uninsured. Hispanics and Blacks fell well behind whites, and lower-income groups lagged behind higher-income groups (Berchick, Barnett, and Upton 2019). If we look at actual health conditions, we find that mortality, self-rated health, and specific serious illnesses are all associated with poverty. Some conditions may be due to occupations in which toxic conditions are more likely to be part of the environment. Others may occur or worsen because of inadequate or nonexistent health insurance. Lower-income workers are much more likely than higher-income workers to be underinsured or to have insurance that covers only themselves and not their spouses or dependent children. Chronic conditions often develop slowly, but among people with no or limited insurance these conditions go untreated until they become much more serious. Preventive treatments and screenings are also often unavailable to many. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these patterns related to social class, race, health, and health insurance came into play. Lower-income workers were more likely to be categorized as essential workers and exposed to the COVID-19 virus. Since they were also less likely to have health insurance and more likely to have chronic health conditions, all of these factors made lower-income people and people of color more vulnerable during the pandemic.

The likelihood of being imprisoned in the United States is directly related to race and ethnicity (Bonczar 2003). Although incarceration rates for all racial groups have decreased since 2005, when we look at race and ethnicity, we find the incarceration rate per 100,000 adults is 222 for whites, 619 for Hispanics, and 1,186 for Blacks (Carson 2022). Black adults, then, are 5.3 times, and Hispanic adults 2.8 times, as likely as white adults to be incarcerated.

In 2021, 378,000 Black people were in prisons across the United States, making up approximately 32% of the total prison population, while 24% of all inmates were Hispanic and 31% were white. Compare these numbers to the proportions of these groups in the general U.S. population: Blacks, 13.6%; Hispanics, 19.1%; and whites, 75.5%. Who commits crimes and who goes to prison? Are certain groups of people more likely to commit crimes, or are other factors, such as racial discrimination, at work in sending people to jail?

There are many other dimensions to inequality as well. We could look at educational rates, unemployment rates, quality and location of housing, likelihood of being hungry or participating in programs like SNAP, and many other measures. Clearly, however, despite what many believe about the extent of social mobility in the United States, especially in comparison to other countries, inequality is a fact of American life. For those who believe social change is possible and something to work toward, facing that reality is just the first step.

EXPERIENCING POVERTY AND CLASS INEQUALITY

When you are at the supermarket, do you ever think about where the food comes from? Whose hands labored in the sun to pick the fruits and vegetables you find neatly packaged in the store? Much of the way our food is produced and distributed remains invisible to us, but the stories of farmworkers in particular often go unheard. The story of Afra and her family, who were interviewed over the course of several years in Michigan, illustrates many of the challenges that farmworkers still face today.

Afra and her husband, Reynaldo, have been working in the fields harvesting crops since they were young. Over the years, they typically have migrated from a home in Texas to work harvesting the seasonal crops in Michigan. In a typical season they work through a series of crops for about six months of the year, working 40 to 60 hours per week. Reynaldo sometimes returns to Michigan again in October to harvest Christmas trees and works at construction when back in Texas. The amount of work and pay vary based on the crop and the weather. On a typical workday in Michigan, Afra gets up at 4:30 or 5:30 a.m. She makes lunches and cooks breakfast. She takes her children to her niece's home and usually arrives at work at 6:30 a.m. They work from 7:00 a.m. until sometimes as late as 7:00 or 8:00 p.m.

Like Afra and Reynaldo, many farmworkers face challenging working conditions and low pay.



Farmworkers like these working in a field in Lompoc, California, plant, cultivate, harvest, and pack the fruits, vegetables, and nuts that Americans consume. Migrant and seasonal farmworkers make about \$15,000 to \$17,499 a year. They have higher rates of death and illness than most Americans, due in part to a combination of poverty, limited access to health care, and hazardous working conditions.

Tayfun Coskun/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

- About 30% of farmworkers live below the poverty line, which is almost double the U.S. poverty rate.
- Farmworkers' average annual income ranges from \$15,000 to \$17,499; for a family it is \$20,000 to 24,999.
- More than two million farmworkers were deemed "essential" workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to sustain food supply chains. For that labor, they earned just under 60% of what comparable workers outside of agriculture made in 2020 (Costa 2021).

- 500,000 children work in agriculture.
- Agriculture is consistently listed as one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States. Among the reasons for that are the following:
 - It has the highest rate of toxic chemical injuries and skin disorders among any workers in the country, as well as significant rates of eye injuries.
 - Workers often lack adequate sanitation facilities and drinking water in the field.
 - There are higher incidences than for other wage earners of heat stress, dermatitis, urinary tract infections, parasitic infections, and tuberculosis.
 - 45% of agricultural workers are uninsured. (Student Action with Farmworkers 2018)

Over the course of three years, Afra and her family have had some serious health problems. After having her gallbladder removed, the next year Afra developed a hernia from working in the fields. After working through the rest of the season with the hernia, she had to have another operation to remove it when they returned to Texas. The next year she developed pancreatitis, with which she'd had trouble previously. "So, the doctor just told me that they can't do anything And I'm going to be like that, that I can die any day or they never know." She experienced sporadic pain due to the pancreatitis. Afra's husband was also diagnosed with diabetes.

- Farmworkers face many health issues, such as high blood pressure, inadequate prenatal care or health care for children, and depression.
- Nearly 5 out of 10 farmworker households in North Carolina cannot afford enough food for their families, which can be related to higher rates of diabetes and other health issues.
- Farmworkers are excluded from nearly all federal labor laws that protect other workers, such as labor organizing, minimum wage, overtime pay, and child labor laws. (Student Action with Farmworkers 2018)

Not all of these health issues were directly related to the conditions of farm work; nonetheless, with the family's limited financial resources, Afra's illnesses placed financial strain on the family. In addition to having difficulties keeping up with bills due to lost wages from not being able to work and medical expenses from surgeries, the family lost a plot of land and the trailer home on which they'd been making payments. Although Afra recently qualified for Medicaid, a health program for low-income families, it would not cover the hospital bills from before the coverage began.

- Most farmworkers are not eligible for social services. Less than 1% of all farmworkers use general assistance welfare, only 2% use Social Security, and fewer than 15% are Medicaid recipients.

Afra completed eighth grade, and Reynoldo made it through 11th grade. When asked why she did not complete high school, Afra explained that she left school when their house burned down: "We all started helping my dad to build another house." They had no other place to live, so they all stayed with a neighbor until the house was finished. Afra began field work when she was 12 years old. She has done this work ever since.

- 30% of farmworkers have completed 10th, 11th, or 12th grade, and 10% completed education beyond high school. (Costa 2021)

Like Afra's family, dire circumstance and economic need propel many children of farmworkers out of school and into the fields. Since many farmworkers migrate, sometimes with families, the need to move to follow crops can also interrupt children's schooling and require regular changes in schools attended, presenting challenges to remaining in and doing well in school.

Poverty and Class Inequality Beyond Our Borders

Food is the most basic need for all humans, yet food insecurity remains a vexing social problem everywhere. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP), both United Nations agencies, have their key mission and focus on eliminating hunger and food insecurity across the globe. FAO has not only been reporting on global hunger since

1974, they have also set the agenda for action to combat this persistent and complex problem. FAO has identified sustainable development goals to eradicate hunger through food systems that help local communities improve nutrition and food access by 2030. In 2023, more than 345 million people worldwide experienced high food insecurity, or severe food insecurity. Crises like the war in Ukraine and the 2023 flooding in Libya are examples of calamities that exacerbate already trying and difficult hunger experiences in all areas of the globe and that WFP responds to.

What does this have to do with the community you live in? It brings home the reality that the experience of hunger is universal and that solutions designed by FAO (2023) to create local food systems that empower individuals in communities are key to combating food insecurity. As discussed throughout this chapter, there are many examples in the United States of communities organizing to address hunger, through food banks, community organizations such as those in the Mississippi Delta, food share programs, and afterschool food programs. Many of these strategies are informed by FAO and WFP guidelines that focus on building local food systems so that hunger can be eradicated. These strategies remind us that our actions go beyond our borders and that the human condition is inextricably interconnected. The FAO logo includes the Latin phrase *fiat panis*, “let there be bread,” and reminds us of the most basic human need: food. When communities come together to tackle formidable social problems, aligning with others provides an opportunity for meaningful social change.

USING THEORY TO EXPLAIN POVERTY AND CLASS INEQUALITY

Sociologists and other social scientists have long grappled with the issues of poverty, class, and inequality. Some theoretical explanations have focused on individual situations and characteristics, while others have looked at the structures of societies, institutions, and organizations. Still others have tried to bring the personal and the social together by describing how individuals manage within social contexts. We look at these three different perspectives in turn.

RESEARCH METHODS: COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

One example of a community coming together to make change is through work done in the Mississippi Delta on a project called the Good Food Revolution of North Bolivar County, Mississippi. This project is a great example of a research method tool called **community-based participatory research**, which is a collaborative research process that brings together academics and community to address an issue together as community researchers.

The Good Food Revolution came about by the work of a small nonprofit called Delta Fresh Food Initiative (DFFI), a multisector collaboration of community members focused on developing a just and equitable food and farming system that strengthens their community and improves health outcomes. North Bolivar County is one of the poorest counties in the United States, with high poverty rates, low healthy food access, and high diabetes and obesity rates. DFFI wanted to make change and build a more resilient and healthy community, so they decided to organize as a community and wanted to put a plan into action. The community was hoping to resurrect and build upon an earlier food security initiative from the 1960s known as the North Bolivar County Farmer Cooperative (Smith 2023).

Through the training of a cadre of Youth Ambassadors, 23 young community members surveyed their community to find out key needs. Youth Ambassadors were trained in survey data collection, and over four consecutive Saturdays they interviewed their communities,

collecting over 200 face-to-face surveys. Focus groups, town halls, church meetings, and farmer meetings were also held to gauge the desire and needs of the community.

From the data collected, it was determined that the community wanted to create a sustainable community food system in which youth learned to grow and sell food through a mobile market. The market travels to designated locations and sells healthy, local produce to the community with SNAP electronic benefits transfer capacity. Cooking and nutrition programs coincide with the production and selling of healthy foods. Youth Ambassadors work closely with local farmers and the Alcorn State Demonstration Farm to grow their own food to sell at the mobile market. The North Bolivar Good Food Revolution is making a difference in their community. Through a well-designed community-based participatory research project, residents are building resiliency and a community food system focused on strengthening community relationships, improving health, and building sustainability informed by research and action (Hosfeld, Kerr, and Belue 2019).

Functionalism

Functionalism examines the nature of society and how it is organized. **Functionalist theory** sees societies as complex systems whose various institutions and organizations work together to maintain a level of cohesion and stability. Society's norms, mores, values, traditions, and beliefs give individuals a sense of what to do and when to do it, as well as how to interact with others, particularly when they differ in social status. This shared awareness and acceptance of the structure of society is our shared culture, in which individual members accept their particular positions, whether at the top, in the middle, or at the bottom.

Drawing on the work of modern structural functionalist Talcott Parsons, the seminal work on functionalism and its application to poverty, class, and inequality is an article by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore (1945), "Some Principles of Stratification." The principles outlined by Davis and Moore still largely reflect the functionalist view of poverty, class, and inequality: (a) some positions in a society are more valuable than others and require special skills to perform; (b) only a few people have the talent for the more important positions; (c) learning those skills requires sacrifices on the part of those who have the talent to learn; (d) to induce them to make the sacrifices requires that they receive more of society's scarce resources and rewards than others in less important positions; and (e) access to scarce resources and rewards becomes attached to different positions in the social hierarchy. As a result, (f) different positions in the social hierarchy have different levels of prestige and esteem, and (g) social inequality among these positions is both inevitable and functional to society's maintenance.

Herbert J. Gans (1971) presents a clear application of these principles in "The Uses of Poverty," in which he described 15 "positive functions" for poverty. These include getting the "dirty work" of society done cheaply (garbage collection and working in farm fields); ensuring the purchase of low-quality products (overripe fruits and vegetables and day-old bread); and guaranteeing higher social status for those who are not poor, since someone has to be at the bottom. However, Gans goes on to demonstrate that these presumably positive functions can be quite costly for society and the affluent, not just financially but also in moral terms, by requiring the toleration of exclusionary practices.

More recent theorists have continued to argue that social inequality is necessary and inevitable for the maintenance of any society, including the United States. To be a surgeon or an engineer requires much more training—which is time-consuming and arduous—than to be a custodian or a parking lot attendant. As a result, higher positions carry greater prestige and

authority as well as access to scarce resources and rewards such as higher income and better housing. In his book, *Coming Apart*, political scientist Charles Murray (2012) argues that those in the top 5% of the population, particularly CEOs and policy makers, have extremely high IQs that lead to their success and for which they are rightly highly compensated.

Policy Implications of Functionalism

According to the functionalist perspective, inequality is not only inevitable but necessary for the functioning of society. Certain positions need higher levels of rewards because of the difficulty in acquiring the skills to perform them.

A good example of this approach is seen in welfare reform. The welfare rights movement of the 1960s was successful in expanding coverage and benefits provided by the Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) program. However, after the election of Richard M. Nixon to the presidency in 1968, critics of the “war on poverty” (social welfare legislation introduced by Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s) began a concerted attack on public assistance, arguing that many recipients were merely unwilling to work and instead were taking advantage of public benefits. These arguments escalated during the years Ronald Reagan was president, leading to a call for welfare reform based on the propositions that many able-bodied individuals were avoiding work or job training, had become entrenched in a “culture of poverty,” and needed to be pushed to learn appropriate work habits and values. Critics of welfare rejected structural explanations for poverty and believed that welfare recipients should take personal responsibility for their disadvantaged situation. By the 1990s, “welfare reform” had become policy at the federal level, leading to the **Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)** of 1996. Among this act’s major provisions were time limits for receipt of benefits (no more than 60 months in a lifetime at the federal level, but less time at any state’s discretion) and work requirements whereby individuals refusing to work could be sanctioned (including by losing monthly benefits).

Austerity programs—typically taking the form of cutbacks to social welfare programs that assist those at the bottom—are clearly reflections of this policy. Some politicians and commentators arguing for limiting the social safety net and reducing so-called entitlement programs (such as Social Security) may take the functionalist approach. Other types of public assistance, such as SNAP and Medicaid, are also facing possible reductions by the U.S. Congress, even though they are vital to the health and well-being of many lower-income individuals and families. Austerity is proposed and often enacted for social safety net programs, while bailouts for banks are not seen in the same light. In fact, those programs (which some would call corporate welfare) are seen as essential to the national economy, and no one has raised the need for “personal responsibility” on the part of Wall Street bankers.

Conflict Theory

At the heart of Marxist thought, from which conflict theory developed, is the division of class into two basic groups: the *capitalists*, or owners of the means of production, and the *proletariat*, or working class. Capitalists do not produce anything themselves. Rather, they extract surplus value from the work of those who make things the capitalists sell for a profit. The conflict is the struggle to control the *means of production*, the land, labor, and capital that can be used to produce goods or services.

The point of capitalism is to maximize profit. In the early days of capitalism, the profit extracted from the production of material goods or commodities was invested in the making of new goods. But profit can also be accumulated for its own sake, and money can be hoarded, just

like material goods. Furthermore, anything can be a *commodity*, including essential items, such as clean water, electricity, and healthy food, which then are largely available only to those who can afford them. A modern commodity in the United States is health care. Those who can afford it (or who can afford health insurance) can have it, and those who cannot have to do without or rely on public and charitable programs. Even money can be a commodity, packaged and traded in various ways, as are home mortgages and other financial instruments that most of us need.

While anything can be a commodity, often the thing itself becomes what is of value rather than the human labor that makes it—what Marx referred to as a *commodity fetish*. Many of us are consumed with possessing “things” and give little thought to the labor that goes into them or the conditions of *sweatshops* that make our clothing, where workers, many of them undocumented immigrants, are underpaid and overworked.

Marx proposed the concept of **alienation** to describe the separation between the workers’ labor to make something and the object itself, about which workers have little or no say. Workers sell their labor to capitalists and have little or no say in what they do as part of that production process. Alienation is not a psychological condition but rather a division between workers and their true human nature. Marx saw this as a key development in capitalist society, and it applies to all workers, whether laborers or farmworkers or professors. Marx believed in **dialectical materialism**—the idea that contradictions in an existing economic and social order, such as the conflict between owners and laborers, would create a push for change, eventually leading to new economic conditions and social relationships (Allan 2011).



Women working in a ready-made garment (RMG) factory in Bangladesh. These women work in sweatshop conditions that include unhygienic and unsafe working environments, unlivable wages, unreasonable hours, and lack of safety equipment. If you knew that your jackets, hoodies, and pajamas were manufactured in a sweatshop, would you stop buying them?

Ziaul Haque/NurPhoto via Getty Images

From these ideas emerged conflict theory, which proposes that we need to examine the nature of power relationships in society. Do we actually have a shared acceptance or collective

consciousness, or are different groups struggling to ensure that their positions and views remain predominant?

C. Wright Mills began an important tradition in U.S. social thought by examining how those in power assert themselves. In *The Power Elite*, Mills ([1956] 2000) focused on the interconnections among corporate leaders, the military, and the government—what President Dwight D. Eisenhower would later term “the military-industrial complex.” By the late 20th century, academic leaders were also identified as part of this matrix, participating in a process in which individuals moved readily from one position to another in the corporate world, the academic world, and the government. Federal Reserve Board chairs Ben Bernanke and Janet Yellen, for instance, both held powerful positions in corporations, the federal government, and higher education. Sociologist G. William Domhoff published a series of studies identifying these “interlocking directorates,” which show that the United States, like many other countries, is dominated by a powerful elite whose members are able to maintain their control based on their own or others’ wealth and social positions.

Scholars concerned with class inequality have employed conflict theory to examine the dynamics of wealth and poverty (Piven and Cloward 1993). They have shown that poverty is systemic, rather than a function of the values or personal inclinations or attributes of people with low incomes. As Gans (1971) has argued, poverty serves a “useful” function in society, in the sense that the threat of poverty hangs over every working person. No matter how bad the financial situation is for a person with a job, it would be worse if they lost that job—a possibility that is part of everyday life for most Americans. How many paychecks away from destitution are we? Are we willing to challenge our bosses and organize our coworkers, or are we afraid we will lose our jobs if we raise our voices? Those in power have the money to propagate their desired messages—that the poor are shiftless and lazy, that anyone who applies themselves and works hard enough will be successful—through what sociologist Frances Fox Piven calls the “propaganda machine.”

Policy Implications of Conflict Theory

From the conflict theory perspective, people with low incomes serve to keep wages for other workers low, since employers can fight efforts to raise wages by replacing them with the unemployed. Who has the power is the critical element in the conflict theorist’s view of society, and those with wealth have much more power than those at the bottom. Wealth not only buys influence through corporate leadership positions and access to the media for disseminating particular messages but also buys legislators and policy makers through campaign contributions and jobs outside government. Examples include the White House cabinet appointments of President Donald Trump, which the *New York Times* described as “more white and male than any first cabinet since Reagan’s” (Lee 2017). For example, Trump’s first U.S. Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, was the president and chief executive of ExxonMobil. U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin was a Goldman Sachs executive. U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis was a military general. These appointments reflect a true “interlocking directorate” of power.

Challenging the welfare “reform” of the 1990s means working with the people in poverty as they organize. In the 1960s, it was not just federal legislation that created a war on poverty but also the National Welfare Rights Union, which advocated for the plight of low-income women and children, and the civil rights movement, which led to legislation that established voting rights and protected marginalized groups and women from discrimination in the labor market. According to Frances Fox Piven (2006) and Mimi Abramovitz (2000), change is likely only when social movements like these are strong. Electoral politics can open possibilities, but

political figures will advocate for the poor only when the poor themselves challenge authority in dramatic ways.

When the Great Recession began in 2007, many blamed homebuyers who had taken on large, high-risk (subprime) mortgages. Although that certainly happened, thousands were led by unscrupulous bankers into taking out risky loans for houses with inflated values, without being informed they had other options. The bankers, the corporate leaders, and the media chose to blame the victims.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism developed from George Herbert Mead's hypothesis that the meanings of social events emerge from the interactions among individuals, who are actors rather than reactors. An interaction is a negotiation, a learning process, in which the individuals involved absorb not only relevant norms and traditions but also beliefs and values—the core elements of a shared culture. In a sense, then, we learn culture through the interaction process.

One of the most significant applications of interactionism to poverty, class, and inequality is the **culture of poverty thesis** proposed by anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1966). Lewis believed people are poor not just because they lack resources but also because they hold a unique set of values that makes it difficult for them to escape poverty, including a sense of powerlessness that leads to feelings of helplessness and inferiority and lack of a work ethic.

This thesis is similar to *labeling theory*, which applies interactionism to the understanding of deviance (Kilty and Meenaghan 1977). Individuals seen as deviant or as outsiders become labeled by others who are more advantaged because of their sex, race, ethnicity, class, or age. Labeling effectively reduces the options for both labeled and labelers. People living in poverty are among the most disadvantaged in our society, and many are at further disadvantage because they are women, are people of color, and/or have limited education and occupational histories. These were the marginalized groups—women, Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, Appalachians—to whom the culture of poverty thesis was applied beginning in the 1960s. Many in these groups likely did feel powerless or appear to lack a work ethic. What were their options? Rather than looking at opportunity structures, the culture of poverty thesis focuses on the presumed failings of individuals—or, in William Ryan's (1976) words, on “blaming the victim.”

Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism

The most striking application of symbolic interactionism to social policy is the continuing assault on public assistance—not only welfare but also other public services such as SNAP, Medicaid, and Head Start. A study of comments by members of the U.S. House of Representatives about PRWORA revealed that the legislators sounded certain themes, including personal responsibility, getting something for nothing, out-of-wedlock births, and fraud and abuse (Segal and Kilty 2003). The notion that only the “deserving” poor should get help was common, as was the idea that welfare encourages many to remain in a “cycle of dependency.” Nearly all adult welfare recipients are women, while the majority of members of the House are men. Male representatives were more likely to speak in favor of the “need” for welfare reform and to vote for the legislation than were female representatives—although female representatives were certainly more privileged than female welfare recipients.

Labeling theory was meant to identify how power differentials marginalize particular groups, such as women or people of color. To a large extent, it drew from the principles of *critical theory*, which argues that we need to examine cultural ideas in terms of which groups benefit from them and who then advocate their points of view. In this case, we need to examine who

was applying particular labels to low-income people as a way of ostracizing them on the grounds that they are responsible for their circumstances, rather than focusing on the systemic causes of poverty—who gets what and why.

SPECIALIZED THEORIES APPLIED TO POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

Other theoretical frameworks have been used to understand the nature of poverty, class, and inequality. Theories concerned with social empathy, for example, focus on why some people seem more able than others to identify with the experiences of other people and on whether or not empathy can be learned. Frameworks that examine social inclusion look at how being marginalized and stigmatized affects people’s interconnections. Distributive justice is concerned with the relationship between perceptions of inequality and the principle of fairness.



“Eat the rich” graffiti in protest over an advertisement for new townhouses and apartments in Birmingham, England. High-end luxury apartment tower blocks are being built all over the city. “Eat the rich” is a political slogan used in response to increasing class inequality.

Mike Kemp/In Pictures via Getty Images

Social Empathy

According to social policy analyst Elizabeth A. Segal (2018, 4), many people lack **social empathy**—“the ability to understand people and other social groups by perceiving and experiencing their life situations.” If people cannot appreciate the circumstances of others, social bonds are increasingly likely to weaken, and it may become very difficult for those who are advantaged to act in a humane way toward those who are not. Social empathy is thus a crucial trait for policy makers who are responsible for developing and managing programs intended to respond to the needs of impoverished people. As Segal (2006) has documented, members of Congress and recipients of TANF benefits share few characteristics such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, or degree of wealth. The two groups come from very different worlds, and those in decision-making

positions have little awareness of the lives of those at the bottom—a situation very different from the one that existed for the members of Congress who helped develop the New Deal programs of the Great Depression era.

Nickols and Nielsen (2011) have demonstrated that participation in a poverty simulation exercise can lead to greater understanding of the structural conditions responsible for poverty and greater awareness of the difficult lives of the poor. Exercises like this are often used in classrooms and with volunteers and staff in social service programs and charitable organizations. Putting a human face on poverty is a necessary step in changing misconceptions about poverty.



Volunteers help load donations onto trucks. Hundreds of people donated diapers, clothing, and personal items as dozens of homeless families were displaced due to a fire at the Francis Drake Hotel, a low-income residential hotel, in downtown Minneapolis. Do you think it is necessary for volunteers to have a certain degree of empathy with the people they are trying to help?

Mark VanCleave/Star Tribune via Getty Images

Social Inclusion

How is it possible for someone on the margins of society to feel a sense of inclusion? Without **social inclusion**, individuals do not have a sense of interconnection with others, nor do they have incentives that may help them work toward changing their circumstances. We have seen that those at the top have not only high incomes but also considerable assets. Social policies favoring these assets exclude low-income people, and many public programs require them to have few or no assets in order to qualify for aid. Yet moving out of poverty requires not only an adequate income but also the development of assets, without which home and auto ownership, for instance, are not possible. According to Christy-McMullin and colleagues (2010, 252), “This Catch-22 mentality, whereby the poor do not have access to the wealth accumulation they need to move out of poverty, contributes to the economic injustice and intergenerational poverty that [are] prevalent in this country.”

The goal of the Individual Development Account (IDA) is to help people of limited means obtain and then accumulate assets in the form of personal savings (Lombe and Sherraden 2008).

Usually, this takes the form of a structured social program that both matches an individual's savings and provides that person with information about the benefits of acquiring and maintaining savings or assets. IDAs have been shown to produce an increasing sense of social inclusion and economic participation.

Distributive Justice

One of the predominant principles of social welfare is **distributive justice**—relative equality in the distribution of society's social and economic resources (DiNitto 2005). Proponents of distributive justice propose that government efforts be applied to address social inequalities. In political terms, this is the approach of liberals or progressives. On the other side, conservatives argue that inequality is not only necessary but inevitable.

Appeals about fairness in public policy often focus on tax policy and whether the rich are paying their “fair share.” Since the Reagan administration, the tax burden on the wealthiest Americans has been steadily reduced, on the grounds that low tax rates on the wealthy will increase the number of jobs. In 2016, when Donald Trump, with an alleged net worth at \$4.5 billion, was accused of not having paid federal income tax in some years, Trump said, “That makes me smart.” Then in 2017, as president, Trump signed into law the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, a \$1.9 trillion tax bill favoring corporations and wealthy Americans. Despite these policy actions, jobs did not materialize, and at least three major recessions occurred since Reagan left office—including the so-called Great Recession that began in 2007 (Mishel et al. 2013).

Another common argument for reducing taxes on the wealthy is that they pay the bulk of the income taxes collected by the federal government. This is true, but the reason why is they have very high incomes, and they have benefited the most from tax cuts over the past 30 years.

Another tool of tax policy is the payroll or Social Security tax. Until recently this was a flat tax of 6.2% on earned income. A flat tax is an example of a *regressive tax*, one whose burden is greater on lower-income people. But the payroll tax is even more regressive because it has a cap, currently \$160,200 for 2023. Income above the cap is not subject to the payroll tax, no matter how much higher that income may be. Table 2.4 shows how the Social Security payroll tax works. For incomes up to the cap, individuals pay a flat rate of 6.2% of their income. However, the maximum tax anyone pays is \$9,932.40. If someone makes \$250,000 in a year, that person still pays only that amount, which means their effective tax rate is no longer 6.2% but drops to 4.0% ($\$9932.40/\$250,000$).

As Table 2.4 shows, the effective tax rate continues to shrink as income rises. The burden of the tax falls especially on those at the low end, since they must meet their basic expenses of housing, food, clothing, and transportation from a much smaller after-tax (or discretionary) income. Ongoing legislation proposes to eliminate the cap in order to make the payroll tax more equitable (Torry and Wehrman 2013).

Total tax burden is heavier on lower-income people who have less discretionary income, especially women and people of color (Abramovitz and Morgen 2006). In addition to federal income and payroll taxes, they pay state income taxes; sales taxes; property taxes; and state and federal taxes and fees on gasoline, cigarettes, and alcohol. Furthermore, deductions from income taxes for interest paid on mortgages benefit mostly the affluent, who realize about 60% of the \$68 billion in savings this federal housing subsidy is worth. Those with incomes under \$40,000 a year benefit little from such deductions (Kilty 2009, 2022).

Tax policy, then, has great potential for distributive purposes. Whereas the principle of distributive justice is that we should reduce inequality, the policy question is whether we will reduce inequality or increase it. As it now stands, U.S. tax policy benefits those at the top

TABLE 2.4 ■ Social Security (Payroll) Tax at Various Income Levels, With Effective Tax Rate

| Income (\$) | Subject to Tax (\$) | Actual Tax (\$) | Less Paid (\$)* | Effective Tax Rate (%) |
|-------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| 20,000 | 20,000 | 1,240.00 | 0 | 6.2 |
| 50,000 | 50,000 | 3,105.00 | 0 | 6.2 |
| 70,000 | 70,000 | 4,340.00 | 0 | 6.2 |
| 95,000 | 95,000 | 5,890.00 | | 6.2 |
| 125,000 | 125,000 | 7,750.00 | 0 | 6.2 |
| | | | | |
| 160,000 | 160,200 | 9,932.40 | 0 | 6.2 |
| 250,000 | 160,200 | 9,932.40 | 5567.60 | 4.0 |
| 500,000 | 160,200 | 9,932.40 | 21,067 | 2.0 |
| 1,000,000 | 160,200 | 9,932.40 | 52,067 | 1 |

Source: U.S. Department of Treasury, Internal Revenue Service. 2023. "Circular E, Employer's Tax Guide for Use in 2024." Publication 15 (Cat. No. 10000 W). <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p15.pdf>.

* "Less paid" is the difference between what an individual paid and what he or she would have paid if Social Security taxes applied to total income.

while hurting those at the bottom (Brown 2022; Marr and Huang 2012). Scholars who advocate for distributive justice assert that that is unfair and needs to be changed. Taxing those at the top in a more equitable way would provide resources that could be used to help those at the bottom.

SOCIAL CHANGE: WHAT CAN YOU DO?

One of the most powerful moments in a person's life is when they recognize their potential to create meaningful social change. Sociologists call this "social agency." A good example of social agency and social change is evident in the number of protests that have developed in response to the 2016 U.S. presidential election results and the many organized protest movements that have been carried out under the "Resist" or "Anti-Trump" movement (Dreier 2017). Indeed, immediately after Trump was sworn into office, one of the largest single-day demonstrations in U.S. history was held. On January 21, 2017, it is estimated that three to five million people organized and marched in the United States alone; similar marches were held across the world, including major cities like Berlin, Cape Town, Johannesburg, London, Mexico City, Nairobi, Paris, and Sydney, to name a few. This movement has continued, with subsequent marches organized around immigration, climate change, science, and labor.

We all have a role in social change, yet taking action can be scary. What will our family and friends think? Will we get in trouble with school officials or the police? What can we actually achieve when the problems are so big? But we can take action; we all have the strength to change the way things are.

Volunteer in Your University or Community Food Pantry

Many colleges and universities now offer alternative activities during spring break and other breaks in the academic year in which student volunteers take part in service immersion projects such as working at homeless shelters, food and clothing banks, or soup kitchens, or participating in neighborhood cleanups. Food pantry usage by community members influences household food insecurity, particularly in rural communities. Targeting rural food insecure communities with food pantry social assistance is an important strategy policy makers and local funders can take to improve food security (C. Hossfeld et al. 2023). Many college students themselves face hunger and challenges surrounding food access. Many colleges and universities have created food pantries to address student hunger. Find out if your university offers such a program. You can help by volunteering at your university food pantry—perhaps you yourself are in need of the services these programs provide.

Nonprofit Organizations and Community Agencies

As you have read in this chapter, hunger is a very real problem in the United States. How can you address **food insecurity** and food access in your communities? There are many nonprofit and other organizations that focus on alleviating hunger through access to farmers' markets for low-income consumers using electronic benefits transfer of SNAP dollars. Backpack programs provide children who receive free and reduced-price lunch at school with nutritional staple items that are sent home over the weekend so they can have weekend food outside of school. These organizations thrive on volunteer hours and are great ways to get involved in your local community (Hossfeld, Kelly, and Waity 2016).

Many students who live off campus find themselves in low-income neighborhoods. What are the housing conditions like? Are food banks or clothing banks needed in your neighborhood? Is quality day care a problem? Is there a local public health clinic? Are community organizing groups or settlement houses active? Such agencies are always looking for volunteers. Other informal community groups organize around such issues as renters' rights, quality of housing, availability of public transportation, and health care access. Labor unions sometimes provide legal or health services for their members and others in local communities.

Groups like Habitat for Humanity are looking for volunteers to help build new houses for low-income families. Other organizations, such as welfare rights unions and civil rights groups, may be more concerned with organizing people to challenge local, state, or federal authorities regarding the rights of the poor and near-poor.

Members of state legislatures, city councils, and school boards sometimes engage in electoral politics from their commitment to public service. If you believe change can come through the electoral process, working with politicians who share your views is another option for bringing about change.

Raising Awareness

Raising awareness is another meaningful action. Arranging screenings of relevant films such as the documentary *A Place at the Table*, about poverty and food insecurity in the United States, or *Food Chains*, about the conditions that farmworkers face, can help many see what they may never have experienced on a personal level. If a student group doesn't already exist that would be open to doing this, you might try creating one. Forums and panels where local experts provide information about community problems of poverty or inequality are also useful educational opportunities.

Agenda for Social Justice

A great resource that provides concrete ways for citizens and policy makers to get involved and make change is the book series *Agenda for Social Justice*, sponsored by the Society for the Study of Social Problems (https://www.sssp1.org/index.cfm/m/771/Agenda_for_Social_Justice). It examines social problems like the environment, health, race, poverty, gender, sexuality, housing, criminal justice, and many more. It outlines an agenda to make meaningful social change and ways we can all get involved.

Change rarely happens as the result of the efforts of a solitary person. As individuals, we are limited in what we can do and who we can reach. But when we join organizations—whether student clubs, local or national organizations, religious groups, secular community groups, social service organizations, or professional organizations—we gain strength through numbers. Then we have the opportunity to try to change the world. What better legacy can we leave?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

2.1 Summarize patterns and trends in defining and measuring poverty.

We measure poverty in the United States using an absolute measure, an income threshold at or below which households or families are considered to be in poverty. During the 1960s and 1970s the U.S. poverty rate dropped, especially during the government's war on poverty. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s it stayed relatively constant, increased dramatically during the Great Recession, and decreased slightly to 11.5% in 2022. Poverty is also harsher now and more difficult to escape.

2.2 Describe social class and mobility.

Social mobility is much more limited in the United States than most people believe, especially in comparison with social mobility in industrialized European countries. Those in the middle continue to fall further behind those at the top.

2.3 Discuss income, wealth, and other dimensions of inequality.

Inequality in income and in wealth has been increasing steadily for the past 30 years. While the United States is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, it is also one of the most unequal. Inequality also exists in terms of race and ethnicity, gender, opportunity, and other social and political characteristics.

2.4 Describe how the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist perspectives apply to the problems of poverty, class, and inequality.

From the functionalist perspective, some positions in society (doctor, lawyer) are more valuable than others; the talented need to be motivated to make the sacrifices necessary to learn the skills to hold these positions; these positions deserve greater rewards than others; and there is a shared awareness and acceptance of social position. Symbolic interactionism focuses on interactions among individuals and the development of shared meaning. One approach here is labeling theory, originally applied to understanding why some groups become marginalized and learn to accept their disadvantaged position. It also led to the “culture of poverty” thesis, which argues that the poor learn a dysfunctional set of values that keeps them in poverty and thus are responsible for their own situation. Rather than arguing for a shared awareness and acceptance of social conditions, conflict theory focuses on power dynamics and the way those at the top of a social structure try to maintain

their privileged position at the expense of those at the bottom. From this perspective, those at the bottom will try to change those conditions, often through social and protest movements challenging those in authority.

2.5 Describe how specialized theories apply to poverty and inequality.

We can apply many other theoretical frameworks to understanding poverty, class, and inequality. One is social empathy, which looks at why some people seem more able than others to identify with people in positions different from their own and how those who are less able to do so can be taught how to develop social empathy. Another is social inclusion, which is concerned with how being marginalized and stigmatized affects people's social connectivity. A last example is distributive justice, which is concerned with the relationship between perceptions of inequality and the principle of fairness.

2.6 Identify steps toward social change in regard to poverty.

A wide variety of community groups work to make change, such as settlement houses and organizations like Habitat for Humanity, which uses volunteer labor to build new homes for poor families. When we put our energy together through groups and organizations, we can change the world.

ASK YOURSELF

1. What advantages do you see in continuing to use the current method of calculating the poverty rate? What disadvantages do you see? What other ways might poverty be measured? How do you feel poverty should be defined?
2. Why do you think poverty rates and numbers have increased in the past decade? Why are rates so much higher among female-headed households and lower among married-couple families?
3. Do you think that the differences in social safety nets for parents affect children? If so, how? Why do you think the social safety net is so much more limited in the United States than in France and other countries?
4. What components do you think a definition of poverty should include? How would you define poverty?
5. How do you feel about the self-made myth? Is a person's success based mainly on how hard that person works? Or does an individual succeed because of advantages received from family and social position? Does luck have anything to do with economic success? What about collective resources, such as schools, roads, and courts?
6. How has the neighborhood where you grew up impacted your prospects for social mobility? If neighborhoods make a difference in children's long-term success, are we obligated to make changes to improve outcomes for all children? If so, how?
7. Some people believe inequality in income and wealth is inevitable and natural. How do you feel about that? Is inequality unfair? Or is it just to be expected?
8. Imagine yourself poor and consider the functionalist provision that inequality is inevitable and functional. Would you accept your status as unavoidable and necessary?

9. Why do some people get labeled in a positive way and others in a negative way? Why do certain ideas about some groups become widely accepted, such as who is good at certain sports or who is best able to work certain jobs?
10. Can anything—not just material objects—be a commodity? Should we treat such necessities as food and health care as commodities? Should people have a right to necessities, whether they can afford them or not? Do you believe there is a “power elite” in the United States?

KEY TERMS

| | |
|--|---|
| Absolute measure of poverty | Poverty |
| Alienation | Poverty guidelines |
| Class | Poverty thresholds |
| Community-based participatory research | Power |
| Culture of poverty thesis | Relative measure of poverty |
| Dialectical materialism | Self-made myth |
| Distributive justice | Social empathy |
| Extreme poverty neighborhoods | Social inclusion |
| Food insecurity | Social insurance programs |
| Functionalist theory | Social mobility |
| Income | Social safety net |
| Inequality | Socioeconomic status (SES) |
| Means-tested programs | Status |
| Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) | Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) |
| | Wealth |