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SOCIOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Define the sociological imagination.
- 1.2 Identify the characteristics of a social problem and its stages.
- 1.3 Compare the four sociological perspectives.
- 1.4 Explain how sociology is a science.
- 1.5 Identify the role of social policy, advocacy, and innovation in addressing social problems.

If I asked everyone in your class what they believe is the most important social problem facing the United States, there would be many different responses. This is how we spend much of our public conversation—in the classroom, at work, on the Senate floor—arguing, analyzing, and trying to figure out which problem is most serious and what needs to be done about it. In casual or sometimes heated conversations, we offer opinions about the economy, immigration, artificial intelligence, the COVID-19 virus, or climate change. Often, these explanations are not based on firsthand data collection or on an exhaustive review of the literature. For the most part, they are based on our opinions and life experiences.

What this text and your course offer is a sociological perspective on social problems. Unlike any other discipline, sociology provides us with a form of self-consciousness, an awareness that our personal experiences are often caused by structural or social forces. **Sociology** is the systematic study of individuals, groups, and social structures. A sociologist examines the relationship between individuals and society, which includes social institutions such as the family, the economy, and medicine. As a social science, sociology offers an objective and systematic approach to understanding the causes of social problems. From a sociological perspective, problems and their solutions don't involve only individuals; they also have a great deal to do with the social structures in our society. Mills (2000) first promoted this perspective in his 1959 essay "The Promise."

USING OUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

According to Mills, the sociological imagination can help us distinguish between personal troubles and public issues. The **sociological imagination** is the ability to link our personal lives and experiences with our social world. Mills (2000) described how personal troubles occur within the "character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relationships with others" (p. 8), whereas public issues are a "public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened" (p. 8). As a result, the individual, or those in contact with that individual, can resolve a trouble, but the resolution of an issue requires public debate about what values are being threatened and the source of such a threat.

Let's consider unemployment. One man unemployed is his own personal trouble. Resolving his unemployment involves reviewing his current situation, reassessing his skills, considering his job opportunities, and submitting his résumés or job applications to employers. Once he has a new job, his personal trouble is over.

However, what happens when there is a nationwide problem of unemployment? A personal trouble is transformed into a public issue. In April 2020, more than 20 million Americans lost

their jobs as a result of public health measures meant to reduce the spread of COVID-19, a highly infectious respiratory disease caused by the SARS CoV-2 virus. Although physical distancing and sheltering in place were deemed necessary by public health officials, these precautions took a staggering toll on the economy. This is a public issue not only because of how many people it affects; something becomes an issue because of the public values it threatens. Unemployment threatens our sense of economic security. It challenges our belief that everyone can work hard to succeed and that everyone has the right to work. Unemployment raises questions about society's obligations to help those without a job, no matter the circumstances.

As Mills explained, "To be aware of the ideal of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieus. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination" (Mills, 2000, pp. 10–11). The sociological imagination challenges the claim that the problem is "natural" or based on individual failures or characteristics, instead reminding us that the problem is rooted in society, in our social structures themselves (Irwin, 2001). For example, can we solve unemployment by telling every unemployed person to simply try harder? The sociological imagination emphasizes the structural bases of social problems, making us aware of the economic, political, and social structures that govern employment and unemployment trends. Individuals may have agency (the ability to make their own choices), but their actions and even their choices may be constrained by the realities of the social structure, including a global pandemic. Throughout this text, we apply our sociological imagination to the study of social problems. Before we proceed, we need to understand what a social problem is.



A key distinction between a personal trouble and a public issue is how each one can be remedied. According to C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), an individual may be able to solve a trouble, but a public issue can be resolved only by society and its social structures.

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WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

A **social problem** is a social condition or pattern of behavior that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or our physical world. A social problem such as unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse, or COVID-19 may negatively affect a person's life and health along with the well-being of that person's family and friends. Problems can threaten our social institutions, for example, the family (spousal abuse), education (the cost of college tuition), or the economy (unemployment). Our physical and social worlds can be threatened by problems related to urbanization (lack of affordable housing) and the environment (climate change). You will note from the examples in this paragraph that social problems are inherently social in their causes, consequences, and solutions.

Objective and Subjective Realities of Social Problems

A social problem has objective and subjective realities. A social condition does not have to be personally experienced by every individual to be considered a social problem. The **objective reality** of a social problem comes from acknowledging that a particular social condition exists. Objective realities of a social problem can be confirmed by the collection of data. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022) estimated that as of October 2021,

more than 146 million Americans were infected with the coronavirus. You or I do not have to have been infected with COVID-19 to know that the disease is real, with real human social consequences. We can confirm the realities of COVID-19 by observing infected individuals and their families in our own community.

The **subjective reality** of a social problem addresses how a problem becomes defined as a problem. This idea is based on the concept of the **social construction of reality**. Coined by Berger and Luckmann (1966), the term refers to how our world is a social creation, originating and evolving through our everyday thoughts and actions. Most of the time, we assume and act as though the world is a given, objectively predetermined outside our existence. However, according to Berger and Luckmann, we also apply subjective meanings to our existence and experience. In other words, our experiences don't just happen to us. Good, bad, positive, or negative, we attach meanings to our reality.

From this perspective, social problems are not objectively predetermined. They become real only when they are subjectively defined or perceived as problematic. This perspective is known as **social constructionism**. Recognizing the subjective aspects of social problems allows us to understand how a social condition may be defined as a problem by one segment of society but be completely ignored by another. Much has been documented how the problem of COVID-19 has been socially constructed, beginning with President Donald Trump's declaration that the virus was no worse than the flu and would simply go away over time. Competing narratives about the threat of the virus were played out in the news media and throughout the 2020 presidential election campaign. There was acrimonious public debate regarding the need to protect the public from the virus while also preserving the economy and our individual freedom.

Sociologist Donileen Loseke (2003) explained, "Conditions might exist, people might be hurt by them, but conditions are not social problems until humans categorize them as troublesome and in need of repair" (p. 14). To frame their work, social constructionists ask the following set of questions:

What do people say or do to convince others that a troublesome condition exists that must be changed? What are the consequences of the typical ways that social problems attract concern? How do our subjective understandings of social problems change the objective characteristics of our world? How do these understandings change how we think about our own lives and the lives of those around us? (Loseke & Best, 2003, pp. 3–4)

The social constructionist perspective focuses on how a problem is socially defined in a dialectic process among individuals interacting with each other and with their social world. In June 2023, the Pew Research Center asked a sample of 5,115 Americans what they perceived as a very big problem in the United States. Results, organized by age group, are presented in Table 1.1. From a sociological perspective, the experience of social problems will vary by our social position, determined primarily by our social class, race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age. You'll learn more about these social positions in Chapters 2–6.

In the next section, we'll examine how identifying a social problem is part of a subjective process. Social problems just don't happen.

The Identification of a Social Problem

Problems don't appear overnight; rather, as Malcolm Spector and John Kituse (1987) argued, the identification of a social problem is part of a subjective process. Spector and Kituse identified four stages to the process. Stage 1 is defined as a transformation process: taking a private trouble

TABLE 1.1 ■ Percentage of Individuals Who Say _____ Is a Very Big Problem in the United States Today, by Age, June 2023

	18–29	30–49	50–64	65+
Illegal immigration	22	37	62	65
Violent crime	43	53	67	75
Inflation	63	65	64	68
Affordability of health care	67	67	63	59
Drug addiction	46	61	64	70
The ability of Democrats and Republicans to work together	55	55	69	72
Gun violence	54	57	61	69

Source: Pew Research Center (2023).

and transforming it into a public issue. In this stage, an influential group, activists, or advocates call attention to and define an issue as a social problem. In early January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that it was tracking a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China. Most of the world first learned about COVID-19 when WHO declared it as a global public health emergency on January 30. The U.S. secretary of health and human services declared a public health emergency on January 31. By the time President Trump declared a national emergency on March 13, there were more than 2,000 confirmed cases and 48 coronavirus-related deaths. Scientists and public health advocates blamed Trump's inconsistent response to the pandemic for increasing the spread of the disease and the number of deaths in the country. As of April 2024, greater than 1.2 million deaths in the United States were attributed to COVID-19.

Stage 2 is the legitimization process: formalizing how the social problem or complaints generated by the problem are handled. For example, an organization or public policy could be created to respond to the condition. An existing organization, such as a federal or state agency, could also be charged with taking care of the situation. In either instance, these organizations begin to legitimize the problem by creating and implementing a formal response. In the United States, the CDC mobilized its laboratories and trained specialists and surveillance systems to identify, track, and contain outbreaks of the disease. Vice President Mike Pence led the White House's COVID-19 Task Force, which included several leading public health and infectious disease specialists. Similar response groups were convened in other countries. Although no single organization or country was in charge, all were intent on combating the disease and finding a cure.

Stage 3 is a conflict stage, when Stage 2 routines are unable to address the problem. During Stage 3, activists, advocates, and victims of the problem experience feelings of distrust and cynicism toward the formal response organizations. Stage 3 activities include readjusting the formal response system: renegotiating procedures, reforming practices, and engaging in administrative or organizational restructuring. Many early public health protocols were revised in response to increased understanding about how COVID-19 is spread and best treated. Patient isolation, social distancing, and the use of personal protection equipment became standard practices. Early in the pandemic and during consequent surges, hospitals had to address shortages of surgical masks, ventilators, and dedicated intensive care unit beds. In an effort to expand the availability of COVID-19 testing, many hospitals and public health departments established drive-through testing sites.

Finally, Stage 4 begins when groups believe that they can no longer work within the established system. Advocates or activists are faced with two options: to radically change the existing system or to work outside the system. Many state and local leaders maintained aggressive public health measures, while the Trump administration declared the virus was contained, dismantled the COVID-19 task force, and shifted its focus on economic recovery. As an alternative to the COVID-19 response from the federal government and public health agencies, numerous independent community and advocacy groups began providing services and support to vulnerable populations such as undocumented immigrants, prisoners, unsheltered people, and essential front line workers. Across the country mutual aid groups were established to provide temporary aid and emergency necessities, but as the pandemic continued, these groups expanded their services to include mental health support, internet access, and veterinary services (de Freytas-Tamura, 2021).

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

According to Ballantine and Roberts (2012), sociologists examine the software and hardware of society. A *society* consists of individuals who live together in a specific geographic area, who interact with each other, and who cooperate for the attainment of common goals.

The software is our *culture*. Each society has a culture that serves as a system of guidelines for living. A culture includes *norms* (rules of behavior shared by members of society and rooted in a value system), *values* (shared judgments about what is desirable or undesirable, right or wrong, good or bad), and *beliefs* (ideas about life, the way society works, and where one fits in).

The hardware comprises the enduring social structures that bring order to our lives. This includes the positions or *statuses* that we occupy in society (student, athlete, employee, roommate) and the social *groups* to which we belong and identify (our family, our workplace). *Social institutions* are the most complex hardware. Social institutions, such as the family, religion, or education, are relatively permanent social units of roles, rules, relationships, and organized activities devoted to meeting human needs and to directing and controlling human behavior (Ballantine & Roberts, 2012).

The way sociologists conduct sociology and study social problems begins first with their view on how the world works. Based on a **theory**—a set of assumptions and propositions used for explanation, prediction, and understanding—sociologists begin to define the relationship between society and individuals and to describe the causes and consequences of social problems.

Theories vary in their level of analysis, focusing on a **macro level of analysis** (societal) or a **micro level of analysis** (individual). Theories help inform the direction of sociological research and data analysis. In the following section, we review four theoretical perspectives—functionalist, conflict, feminist, and interactionist (see also Table 1.2)—and how each perspective explains and examines social problems. Research methods used by sociologists are summarized in the next section.

Functionalist Perspective

Among the theorists most associated with the functionalist perspective is French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Borrowing from biology, Durkheim likened society to a human body. As the body has essential organs, each with a specific function, he theorized that society has its own organs: institutions such as the family, religion, education, economics, and politics. These organs or social structures have essential and specialized functions. For example, the institution of the family maintains the health and socialization of our young and creates a basic economic unit. The institution of education provides knowledge and skills for women and men to work and live in society. No other institution can do what the family or education does.

TABLE 1.2 ■ Summary of Sociological Perspectives: A General Approach to Examining Social Problems

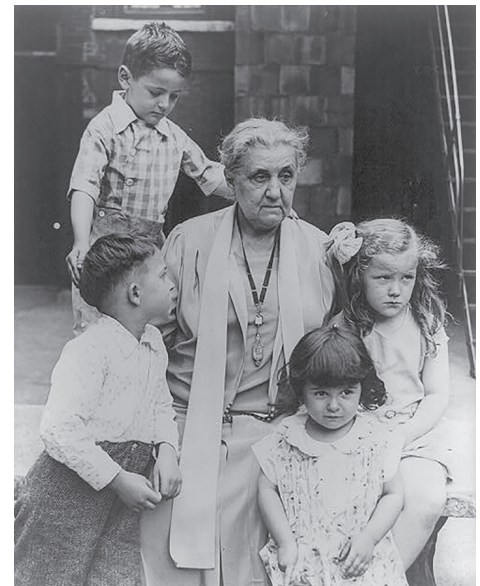
	Functionalist	Conflict/Feminist	Interactionist
Level of Analysis	Macro	Macro	Micro
Assumptions about society	Order. Society is held together by a set of social institutions, each of which has a specific function in society.	Conflict. Society is held together by power and coercion. Conflict and inequality are inherent in the social structure.	Interaction. Society is created through social interaction.
Questions asked about social problems	How does the problem originate from the social structure? How does the problem reflect changes among social institutions and structures? What are the functions and dysfunctions of the problem?	How does the problem originate from the competition among groups and from the social structure itself? What groups are in competition and why?	How is the problem socially constructed and defined? How is problem behavior learned through interaction? How is the problem labeled by those concerned about it?

Durkheim proposed that the function of society is to civilize or control individual actions. He wrote, “It is civilization that has made man what he is; it is what distinguishes him from the animal: man is man only because he is civilized” (Durkheim, 1973, p. 149). The social order can be threatened during periods of rapid social change, such as industrialization or political upheaval, when social norms and values are likely to be in transition. During this state of normlessness or **anomie**, Durkheim believed, society is particularly prone to social problems. As a result, social problems cannot be solved by changing the individual; rather, the problem has to be solved at the societal level. The entire social structure or the affected part of the social structure needs to be repaired.

The **functionalist perspective**, as its name suggests, examines the functions or consequences of the structure of society. Functionalists use a macro perspective, focusing on how society creates and maintains social order. Social problems are not analyzed in terms of how “bad” they are for society. Rather, a functionalist asks, how does the social problem emerge from society? Does the social problem serve a function?

The systematic study of social problems began with the sociologists at the University of Chicago. Part of what has been called the Chicago School of Sociology, scholars such as Ernest W. Burgess, Homer Hoyt, Robert E. Park, Edward Ullman, and Louis Wirth used their city as an urban laboratory, pursuing field studies of poverty, crime, and drug abuse during the 1920s and 1930s. Through their research, they captured the real experiences of individuals experiencing social problems, noting the positive and negative consequences of urbanization and industrialization (Ritzer, 2000). Taking it one step further, sociologists Jane Addams and Charlotte Gilman studied urban life in Chicago, developed programs to assist the poor, and lobbied for legislative and political reform (Adams & Sydie, 2001).

According to Robert Merton (1957), social structures can have positive benefits as well as negative consequences, which he called dysfunctions. A social problem such as homelessness has a clear set of



Jane Addams's (1860–1935) sociological perspective informed her connection to her Chicago community and led her to a life of social action. She developed programs to assist the poor and advocated legislative and political reforms.

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dysfunctions but can also have positive consequences or functions. One could argue that homelessness is dysfunctional and unpleasant for the women, men, and children who experience it, and for a city or community, homelessness can serve as a public embarrassment. Yet a functionalist would say that homelessness is beneficial for at least one part of society, or else it would cease to exist. The population of the homeless supports an industry of social service agencies, religious organizations, community groups, and service workers. In addition, the homeless also highlight problems in other parts of our social structure, namely, the problems of the lack of a livable wage or affordable housing.

Conflict Perspective

Like functionalism, conflict theories examine the macro level of our society, its structures, and its institutions. Whereas functionalists argue that society is held together by norms, values, and a common morality, those holding a **conflict perspective** consider how society is held together by power and coercion (Ritzer, 2000) for the benefit of those in power. In this view, social problems emerge from the continuing conflict among groups in our society—based on social class, gender, race, or ethnicity—and in the conflict, the dominant groups have the advantage. There are multiple levels of domination; as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) described, domination “operates not only by structuring power from the top down but by simultaneously annexing the power as energy of those on the bottom for its own ends” (pp. 227–228).

As a result, this perspective offers no easy solutions to social problems. The system could be completely overhauled, but that is unlikely to happen. We could reform parts of the structure, but those in power would retain their control. The biggest social problem from this perspective is the system itself and the inequality it perpetuates.

The first to make this argument was a German philosopher and activist, Karl Marx. Conflict, according to Marx, emerged from the economic substructure of capitalism, which defined all other social structures and social relations. He focused on the conflict based on social class, created by the tension between the **proletariat** (workers) and the **bourgeoisie** (owners). Capitalism did more than separate the haves from the have-nots. Unlike Durkheim, who believed that society created a civilized man, Marx argued that a capitalist society created a man alienated from his **species being**, from his true self. **Alienation** occurred on multiple levels: Man would become increasingly alienated from his work, the product of his work, other workers, and, finally, his own human potential. For example, a salesperson might be so involved in the process of their work that they don't spend quality time with their coworkers, talk with their customers, or stop and appreciate the merchandise. Each sale transaction is the same; all customers and workers are treated alike. The salesperson cannot achieve their human potential through this type of mindless unfulfilling labor. According to Marx, workers needed to achieve **class consciousness**, an awareness of their social position and oppression, so they could unite and overthrow capitalism, replacing it with a more egalitarian socialist and eventually communist structure.

Widening Marx's emphasis on the capitalist class structure, contemporary conflict theorists have argued that conflict emerges from other social bases, such as values, resources, and interests. Lewis Coser



W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) used his sociology to document the complex dimensions of race and class in the United States (Applerouth & Desfor Edles, 2021). He argued that both race and racism are formed by structural forces.

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(1956) focused on the functional aspects of conflict, arguing that conflict creates and maintains group solidarity by clarifying the positions and boundaries between groups. Mills (2000) argued the existence of a “power elite,” a small group of political, business, and military leaders who control our society. Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) explained that conflict of interest is inherent in any relationship because those in powerful positions will always seek to maintain their dominance.

Drawing upon Marx’s class analysis, W. E. B. Du Bois was one of the first theorists to observe the connection between racism and capitalist-class oppression in the United States and throughout the world. Du Bois argued how capitalism is racially stratifying force, enabling mobility for Whites but not for others (Robinson, 2019). Cedric Robinson (1983) used the term “racial capitalism” to acknowledge how the development of capitalism is built upon racialized ideologies. The accumulation of capital is associated with features of White supremacist capitalistic development—slavery, colonialism, genocide, and migrant exploitation (Melamed, 2015). The enslavement of Africans as a source of cheap labor in the south and the use of Chinese labor to build early Western railways are examples of the capitalist connections to racism and oppression (Johnson, 2001). “Racial capitalism helps us to understand how people become divided from each other in the name of economic survival or in the name of economic well-being,” according to Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018, p. x).

Conflict theorists may also take a social constructionist approach, examining how powerful political, economic, and social interest groups subjectively define social problems.

Feminist Perspective

Rosemarie Tong (1989) explained that “feminist theory is not one, but many, theories or perspectives and that each feminist theory or perspective attempts to describe women’s oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women’s liberation” (p. 1). By analyzing the situations and lives of women in society, the **feminist perspective** defines gender and other areas of oppression (i.e., race and ethnicity, age, social class, sexual orientation, and disability) as the source of social inequality, group conflict, and social problems. For feminists, the patriarchal society is the basis of social problems. **Patriarchy** refers to a society in which men dominate women and justify their domination through devaluation; however, the definition of patriarchy has been broadened to include societies in which powerful groups dominate and devalue the powerless (Kaplan, 1994).

Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley (2004) explained that feminist theory was established as a new sociological perspective in the 1970s, largely because of the growing presence of women in the discipline and the strength of the women’s movement. Feminist theory treats the experiences of women as the starting point in all sociological investigations, seeing the world from the vantage point of women in the social world and seeking to promote a better world for women and for humankind.

Although the study of social problems is not the center of feminist theory, throughout its history, feminist theory has been critical of existing social arrangements and has focused on concepts such as social change, power, and social inequality (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 2004). Feminist scholarship begins from the standpoint that “gender and gender relations order social life and social institutions in fundamental ways” (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988, p. 504). Major research in the field has included Nancy Chodorow’s (1978) psychoanalytic feminism and reproduction of mothering, Jessie Bernard’s (1982) study of gender inequality in marriage, Dorothy Smith’s (1987) sociology from the standpoint of women, and Collins’s (1990) development of Black feminist thought. Sociologists in this perspective address how

men and women are situated in society, not only differently but also unequally (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 2004).

Interactionist Perspective

An **interactionist perspective** focuses on how we use language, words, and symbols to create and maintain our social reality. This micro-level perspective highlights what we take for granted: the expectations, rules, and norms that we learn and practice without even noticing. In our interaction with others, we become the products and creators of our social reality. Through our interaction, social problems are created and defined. More than any other perspective, interactionists stress **human agency**—the active role of individuals in creating their social environment (Ballantine & Roberts, 2012).



Individuals come together in public rallies to show their support of frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. These demonstrations galvanized the efforts of advocacy and activist groups as well as educated the public about the pandemic.

ROBYN BECK/AFP via Getty Images

George Herbert Mead provided the foundation of this perspective. Also a member of the Chicago School of Sociology, Mead (1962) argued that society consists of the organized and patterned interactions among individuals. As Mead defined it, the self is a mental and social process, the reflective ability to see others in relation to ourselves and to see ourselves in relation to others. Our interactions are based on language, based on words. The words we use to communicate with are symbols, representations of something else. The symbols have no inherent meaning and require human interpretation. The term **symbolic interactionism** was coined by Herbert Blumer in 1937. Building on Mead's work, Blumer emphasized how the existence of mind, self, and society emerge from interaction and the use and understanding of symbols (Turner, 1998).

How does the self emerge from interaction? Consider the roles that you and I play. As a university professor, I am aware of what is expected of me; as university students, you are aware of what it means to be a student. There are no posted guides in the classroom that instruct us where to stand, how to dress, or what to bring to class. Even before we enter the classroom, we know how we are supposed to behave and even our places in the classroom. We act based on our past experiences and based on what we have come to accept as definitions of each role. But we need each other to create this reality; our interaction in the classroom reaffirms each of our roles and

the larger educational institution. Imagine what it takes to maintain this reality: consensus not only between a single professor and their students but between every professor and every student on campus, on every university campus, ultimately reaffirming the structure of a university classroom and higher education.

So, how do social problems emerge from interaction? First, for social problems such as juvenile delinquency, an interactionist would argue that the problem behavior is learned from others. According to this perspective, no one is born a juvenile delinquent. As with any other role we play, people learn how to become juvenile delinquents. Although the perspective does not answer the question of where or from whom the first delinquent child learned this behavior, it attempts to explain how deviant behavior is learned through interaction with others.

Second, social problems emerge from the definitions themselves. Objective social problems do not exist; they become real only in how they are defined or labeled. A sociologist using this perspective would examine who or what group is defining the problem and who or what is being defined as deviant or a social problem. As we have already seen with the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem became real after medical and public health officials called attention to the disease.

Third, the solutions to social problems also emerge from our definitions. Helen Schneider and Anne Ingram (1993) argued that the social construction of target populations influences the distribution of policy benefits or policy burdens. Target populations are groups of individuals experiencing a specific social problem; these groups gain policy attention through their socially constructed identity and political power. The authors identified four categories: Advantaged target populations are positively constructed and politically powerful (likely to receive policy benefits), contenders are politically powerful yet negatively constructed (likely to receive policy benefits when public interest is high), dependent target populations have positive social construction but low political power (few policy resources would be allocated to this group), and deviant target populations are both politically weak and negatively constructed (least likely to receive any benefits).

Jean Schroedel and Daniel Jordan (1998) applied the target population model to U.S. Senate voting patterns between 1982 and 1992, examining the allocation of federal funds to four distinct HIV/AIDS groups. As Schneider and Ingram's (1993) theory would predict, the groups receiving the most funding were those in the advantaged category (war veterans and health care workers), followed by contenders (gay and bisexual men and the general population with AIDS), dependents (spouses and the public), and, finally, deviants (intravenous drug users, criminals, and prisoners).

Denisa Gándara and her colleagues (2023) examined how California and Texas policymakers made decisions about funding higher education versus other budget categories (e.g. community college or K–12) and supporting institutions (via appropriations) versus students (via financial aid) during the COVID-19 pandemic. While budgets for the University of California and California State University systems were reduced during the pandemic, lawmakers preserved funding for the state's financial aid program and used CARES Act funding to support K–12 online learning. According to researchers, policymakers viewed higher education institutions as less deserving because they have access to nonstate funding streams (e.g. tuition revenues), whereas K–12 populations were deemed more deserving with high levels of political power and media attention. Although funding for community college systems in both states were spared or protected by law, their study revealed how community college funding was protected by policymakers' perceptions about how these community colleges play a vital role in local workforce development. California community colleges may have also benefited from "widespread perceptions that these institutions can advance racial justice goals and from political power tied to racial justice movements in the state" (Gándara et al., 2023, p. 13).

SOCIOLOGY AT WORK

DOING SOCIOLOGY

At the end of each chapter, the Sociology at Work feature will examine how your sociological imagination and skills can be used in the workplace.

You may be most familiar with how your sociology professors use their sociological imagination as teachers and researchers. Yet sociology is practiced in a variety of ways and settings beyond academia. Hans Zetterberg, in his 1964 article, "The Practical Use of Sociological Knowledge," identified five roles for sociologists: decision-maker, educator, commentator or critic, researcher, and consultant. Notice that none of these roles includes sociologist in the title. People are doing sociology, using sociological methods and skills or applying their sociological imagination in their work, even though sociology or sociologist is not part of their job description.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), many sociology bachelor's degree holders find positions in related fields, such as social services, education, or public policy. Based on a survey of bachelor's degree graduates, the American Sociological Association (Senter et al., 2015) reported that more than 20% of sociology graduates were employed in social services or as counselors. The largest percentage of graduates (43.3%) were employed by private, for-profit companies. Graduates who strongly agreed that they used their sociological skills on the job were more likely to be very satisfied with their job than those who strongly disagreed that they use those sociological skills.

In Chapters 2–5, we will review how your sociology learning experiences and skill development will be important for your postcollege work life. Specific occupations will be examined in Chapters 6–15, including social work, criminal justice, public health, education, and medicine. Told through stories of sociology alumni, these features highlight how sociology can be used in the workplace. We'll conclude with a discussion on postgraduate study in Chapter 16.

THE SCIENCE OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is a science of our social world based on information derived from research (Ritzer, 2013). **Science** relies on logical and systematic methods to investigate social phenomena (Chambliss & Schutt, 2016) and encompasses the knowledge produced by these investigations (Schutt, 2012). All research begins with a theory or theories to help identify the phenomenon we're trying to explain and provide explanations for the social patterns or causal relationships between variables (Frankfort-Nachmias et al., 2017). We practice **empiricism**, using our five senses to gather data (Ballantine et al., 2018; Ritzer, 2013) and allowing the evidence to inform our theories about how the world works.

Sociological research is divided into two areas: basic and applied. The knowledge we gain through **basic research** expands our understanding of the causes and consequences of a social problem, for example, identifying the predictors of long COVID-19 or examining the rate of infection among African Americans. Conversely, **applied research** involves the pursuit of knowledge for program application or policy evaluation (Katzner et al., 1998); effective program practices documented through applied research can be incorporated into social and medical programs serving COVID-19 patients.

Variables are a property of people or objects that can take on two or more values. For example, as we try to explain COVID-19, we may have a specific explanation about the relationship between two variables: social class and COVID-19 infection. Social class could be measured

according to household or individual income, whereas COVID-19 infection could be measured as a positive test for the COVID-19 antibodies. The relationship between these variables can be stated in a **hypothesis**, a tentative statement about how the variables are related to each other. We could predict that COVID-19 infection would be higher among lower-income individuals than upper-income individuals. In this hypothesis statement, we've identified a **dependent variable** (the variable to be explained, COVID-19 infection) along with an **independent variable** (the variable expected to account for the cause of the dependent variable, social class). Data, the information we collect, may confirm or refute this hypothesis.

Research methods (i.e., how sociologists collect data) can include quantitative or qualitative approaches or a combination. **Quantitative methods** rely on the collection of statistical data. They require the specification of variables and scales collected through surveys, interviews, or questionnaires. Data are analyzed with statistical techniques, producing simple averages to complex mathematical models (Babbie, 2014). **Qualitative methods** are designed to capture social life as participants experience it. These methods involve field observation, depth interviews, or focus groups. Following are definitions of each specific method. Qualitative data are often described as richer in meaning and detail than quantitative data (Babbie, 2014).

Survey research: This is data collection based on responses to a series of questions. Surveys can be offered in several formats: a self-administered mailed survey, group surveys, in-person interviews, or telephone surveys. For example, information from COVID-19 patients may be collected by a survey sent directly in the mail or by a telephone or in-person interview.

Qualitative methods: This category includes data collection conducted in the field, emphasizing the observations about natural behavior as experienced or witnessed by the researcher. Methods include participant observation (a method for gathering data that involves developing a sustained relationship with people while they go about their normal activities), focus groups (unstructured group interviews in which a focus group leader actively encourages discussion among participants on the topics of interest), or intensive (depth) interviewing (open-ended, relatively unstructured questioning in which the interviewer seeks in-depth information on the interviewee's feelings, experiences, and perceptions). Sociologists can utilize qualitative methods in COVID-19 research—collecting data through participant observation at clinics or support groups and focus groups or depth interviews with patients, health care providers, or key informants.

Historical and comparative methods: This is research that focuses on one historical period (historical events research) or traces a sequence of events over time (historical process research). Comparative research involves multiple cases or data from more than one time period. For example, researchers can examine the effectiveness of COVID-19 treatments over time and compare infection rates between men and women.

Secondary data analysis: Secondary data analysis usually involves the analysis of previously collected data that are used in a new analysis. Large public survey datasets, such as the U.S. Census, the General Social Survey, the National Election Survey, or the International Social Survey Programme, can be used, as can data collected in experimental studies or with qualitative data sets. For COVID-19 research, a secondary data analysis could be based on existing medical records or a routine health survey. The key to secondary data analysis is that the data were not originally collected by the researcher but were collected by another researcher and for a different purpose.

Empirical evidence is part of the scientific process. Some social scientists disagree about the applied use of data, arguing that the role of science is to simply describe the world as it is. Others (like me) acknowledge how research and data not only inform our understanding of a social problem but also identify a solution or a path to some desired change. Lawmakers, public leaders, professionals, and advocates utilize research and data to inform policy, programming, and

education. Simply stated, social problems research and data are important not only for expanding what we know about the causes and consequences of problems but also for identifying what can be done to address them.

The U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policy Making was established in 2016 by legislation cosponsored by House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senator Patty Murray. Releasing a set of recommendations to improve access and use of government data, the commission (Commission on Evidence-Based Decision Making, 2017) stated, “The American People want a government that functions efficiently and responsibly addresses the problems that face this country. Policy makers must have good information on which to base their decision about improving the viability and effectiveness of government programs and policies.” In October 2017, Ryan and Murray introduced the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act. The act is intended to improve the ability of researchers and statisticians both inside and outside the government to use government data to better inform important policy decisions, implementing many of the commission’s recommendations. President Trump signed the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act into law in January 2019 (Abraham & Haskins, 2018).

VOICES IN THE COMMUNITY

ADIA HARVEY WINGFIELD

Sociologist Adia Harvey Wingfield is the Mary Tileston Hemenway Professor in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis. Her scholarship examines how and why racial and gender inequality persists in professional occupations (Washington University in St. Louis, 2020). In 2019 she published *Flatlining: Race, Work, and Health Care in the New Economy* describing the experiences of Black workers in health care based on interviews with 60 Black doctors, nurses, and technicians. Wingfield concluded that among people of color, one’s professional status within the organization has a significant effect on how one perceives instances of racial discrimination. Her research documents the racism in health care work but also identifies real solutions.

Wingfield (2020) wrote about how one unanticipated consequence of the coronavirus was “a setback of the modest advances the medical industry has made towards improving racial diversity among practitioners.” Black people constitute only 5% of all doctors and 10% of all nurses despite being approximately 13% of the population. “Both professions have come to realize that more racial and gender diversity is essential for providing care in a multiracial society—especially given data indicating black patients’ health outcomes improved when matched with a same-race provider.”

Although fellowships, training programs, and pipelines programs can attract underrepresented minority students into the field of medicine, there is more work to be done. She explained:

Programs like these will become all the more crucial if black doctors and nurses are hit as hard by the coronavirus as many of the patients they treat. But hospital administrators should also consider other ways to address the issues that adversely affect black health care practitioners’ work—the routine gender discrimination black women doctors face, for example, and the unevenly implemented and enforced diversity policies.

What other social problems could a sociologist study?

THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Although Mills identified the relationship between a personal trouble and a public issue, less has been said about the transformation of an issue into a solution. Mills leads us in the right direction by identifying the relationship between public issues and social institutions. By continuing to use our sociological imagination and recognizing the role of larger social, cultural, and structural forces, we can identify appropriate measures to address these social problems. Mills (2000) suggested how “the educational and political role of social science in a democracy is to help cultivate and sustain publics and individuals that are able to develop, to live with, and to act upon adequate definitions of personal and social realities” (p. 192).

Modern history reveals that Americans do not like to stand by and do nothing about social problems. Most Americans support efforts to reduce homelessness, improve the quality of education, or address immigration. In some cases, there are no limits to our efforts. For example, supporting our nation’s poor has been an administrative priority of many U.S. presidents. No president or Congress has ever promised to eliminate poverty; instead, each promised only to improve the system serving the poor or to reduce the number of poor in our society. President Franklin Roosevelt proposed sweeping social reforms during his New Deal in 1935, and President Lyndon Johnson declared the War on Poverty in 1964. President Bill Clinton offered to “change welfare as we know it” with broad reforms outlined in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. In 2022, President Joe Biden promoted the American Families Plan as an investment in our children and our families, helping families cover basic expenses, lowering health premiums, and reducing child poverty.

Solutions require social action—in the form of social policy, advocacy, and innovation—to address problems at their structural or individual levels. **Social policy** is the enactment of a course of action through a formal law or program. Policymaking usually begins with the identification of a problem that should be addressed; then, specific guidelines are developed regarding what should be done to address the problem. Policy directly changes the social structure, particularly how our government, an organization, or our community responds to a social problem. Think about it this way: Policies reflect and shape the way we view social problems and the people affected by these problems (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). According to Jacob Lew, President Barack Obama’s budget director, “The [federal] budget is not just a collection of numbers, but an expression of our values and aspirations” (quoted in Herbert, 2011, p. 11). In addition, policy governs the behavior and interaction of individuals, controlling who has access to benefits and aid (Ellis, 2003). Social policies are always being enacted.

Social advocates use their resources to support, educate, and empower individuals and their communities. Advocates work to improve social services, change social policies, and mobilize individuals. There are many examples of community members who have taken a stand against a particular social problem and dedicated their lives to addressing it. After surviving the mass shooting



With more than 70 national organizations around the world, Habitat for Humanity is supported primarily by local volunteers. In this photo, volunteers from the Rochester Institute of Technology are building a home during their spring break in Wichita Falls, Texas.

AP Photo/Wichita Falls Times Record News, Torin Halsey

at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, student David Hogg became a gun control activist. Hogg, the cofounder of the March for Our Lives, explained, “There is no age limit to changing the world. And age is no excuse not to be involved, no matter if you’re too young or too old” (quoted in Leigh, 2019). At the age of 15, Greta Thunberg started a global movement by skipping school and protesting in front of the Swedish Parliament. She inspired millions to join the largest climate demonstration on September 20, 2019. Thunberg told a group of world leaders at the 2019 World Economic Forum, “I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act” (quoted in Alter et al., 2019).

Social innovation may take the form of a policy, program, or advocacy that features an untested or unique approach. Innovation usually starts at the community level, but it can grow into national and international programming. Millard and Linda Fuller developed the concept



Service and volunteer opportunities are available to college and university students in the United States and abroad. This student is doing his service work in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti.

Al Diaz/Miami Herald/Tribune News Service via Getty Images

of “partnership housing” in 1965, partnering those in need of adequate shelter with community volunteers to build simple interest-free houses. In 1976, the Fullers’ concept became Habitat for Humanity International, a nonprofit, ecumenical Christian housing program responsible for building more than 1 million houses worldwide. When Millard Fuller was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor, President Clinton described Habitat for Humanity as “the most successful continuous community service project in the history of the United States” (Habitat for Humanity, 2004).

In his book *Social Things: An Introduction to the Sociological Life*, Charles Lemert (1997) wrote that sociology is often presented as a thing to be studied. Instead, he argued that sociology is something to be “lived,” becoming a way of life. Lemert (1997) wrote,

To use one’s sociological imagination, whether to practical or professional end, is to look at the events in one’s life, to see them for what they truly are, then to figure out how the structures of the wider world make social things the way they are. No one is a sociologist until she does this the best she can. (p. 105)

We can use our sociological imagination, as Lemert (1997) recommended, but we can also take it a step further. As Marx (1972) maintained, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (p. 107).

Throughout this text, we explore three connections. The first connection is the one between personal troubles and public issues. Each sociological perspective—functionalist, conflict, feminist, and interactionist—highlights how social problems emerge from our social structure or social interaction. Although maintaining its primary focus on problems within the United States, this text also addresses the experience of social problems in other countries and nations. The comparative perspective will enhance your understanding of the social problems we experience here.

The sociological imagination will also help us make a second connection: the one between social problems and social solutions. Mills believed that the most important value of sociology is in its potential to enrich and encourage the lives of all individuals (Lemert, 1997). In each

chapter, we review selected social policies, advocacy programs, and innovative approaches that attempt to address or solve these problems.

Textbooks on this subject present neat individual chapters on a social problem, reviewing the sociological issues and sometimes providing some suggestions about how it can and should be addressed. This book follows the same outline but takes a closer look at community-based approaches, ultimately identifying how *you* can be part of the solution in your community.

I should warn you that this text will not identify a perfect set of solutions to our social problems. Individual action may be powerless against the social structure. Some individuals or groups will have more power or advantage over others. Solutions, like the problems they address, are embedded within complex interconnected social systems (Fine, 2006). The politicalization of social problems make it difficult to reach agreement on what constitutes a problem or how to address it. Any progress seems to be the result of a two steps forward, one step back strategy, and when partisan politics gets in the way, it feels like no real change can be made. The ways a society responds to its social problems is closely related to existing policy and program approaches. Programs and policies are never permanent; they can be modified. A program may no longer exist because of a lack of funding or a shift in political and/or public support. Consider that in 2023, at least 25 states enacted laws limiting the authority of governors and state health officials from issuing mask mandates, closing schools, and/or requiring vaccinations in the event of another pandemic. In contrast, other states expanded state emergency powers including increasing vaccine access, expanding the pool of eligible medical professionals that could administer COVID-19 vaccines, and strengthening public health investigation and enforcement authorities for state agencies (Davis et al., 2023).

The reality is that our social problems persist and in communities such as yours and mine, individuals and community groups choose to take action against social problems. They are adults and children, common citizens and professionals, from different backgrounds and experiences. Whether they are working within the system or working to change the system, these individuals are part of their community's solution to a problem. The goal might be to solve one social problem or several or to create what Joe Feagin (2002) described as a “new global system that reduces injustice, is democratically accountable to all people, offers a decent standard of living for all, and operates in a sustainable relation to earth's other living systems” (p. 17). What Feagin (2002) described has also been referred to as *social justice*. Although the term is widely used, there is no single definition. Social justice has different meanings and will vary depending on one's ideology, discipline, and experience. One way to think of social justice is to consider what constitutes a “perfect” society and what it takes to make that happen.

In the end, I hope you agree that it is important that we continue to do something about the social problems we experience. Inaction is not an option; as Gary Fine (2006) observed, “Those who care about social problems are obligated to use their best knowledge to increase the store of freedom, justice and equality” (p. 14). Consider this course and your textbook as part of your accumulation of “best knowledge.” Critically engage with the theories and data presented throughout this term, and consider what should be done and what can be done to address our social problems.

Make the final connection to social problems and solutions in your community. For this quarter or semester, instead of focusing only on problems reported in social and news media, start paying attention to the solutions offered by academics, politicians, community members, and advocates. How does empirical data inform their solutions? How do they measure the extent of a problem or the success of a solution? Through the internet or through local programs and agencies, take this opportunity to investigate what social action is taking place in your community.

Regardless of whether you define your “community” as your campus, your residential neighborhood, or the city where your college is located, consider what avenues of change can be taken and whether you can be part of that effort. As civil rights icon John R. Lewis said, “When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something” (quoted in Christian, 2020).

I often tell my students that the problem with being a sociologist is that my sociological imagination has no “off” switch. In almost everything I read, see, or do, there is some sociological application, a link between my personal experiences and the broader social experience that I share with everyone else, including you. As you progress through this text and your course, I hope that you will begin to use your own sociological imagination and see connections between problems and their solutions that you never saw before.

CHAPTER REVIEW

1.1 Define the sociological imagination.

The sociological imagination is the ability to recognize the links between our personal lives and experiences and our social world.

1.2 Identify the characteristics of a social problem and its stages.

A social problem is a social condition that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or the physical world. A social problem has objective and subjective realities. The identification of a social problem is part of a subjective process that includes four stages: transformation, legitimization, conflict, and creation.

1.3 Compare the four sociological perspectives.

A functionalist considers how the social problem emerges from society itself. From a conflict perspective, social problems arise from conflict based upon social class or competing interest groups. By analyzing the situations and lives of women in society, feminist theory defines gender (and sometimes race or social class) as a source of social inequality, group conflict, and social problems. An interactionist focuses on how we use language, words, and symbols to construct and define social problems.

1.4 Explain how sociology is a science.

Sociology is a science of our social world. Sociology relies on logical and systematic methods to investigate social phenomena. The knowledge we gain through basic research expands our understanding of the causes and consequences of a social problem, whereas applied research involves the pursuit of knowledge for program application or policy evaluation.

1.5 Identify the role of social policy, advocacy, and innovation in addressing social problems.

Solutions require social action—in the form of social policy, advocacy, and innovation—to address problems at their structural or individual levels. Social policy is the enactment of a course of action through a formal law or program. Social advocates use their resources to support, educate, and empower individuals and their communities. Social innovation may take the form of a policy, a program, or advocacy that features an untested or unique approach. Innovation usually starts at the community level but can be applied to national and international programming.

KEY TERMS

Alienation	Objective reality
Anomie	Patriarchy
Applied research	Qualitative methods
Basic research	Quantitative methods
Bourgeoisie	Proletariat
Class consciousness	Science
Conflict perspective	Social construction of reality
Dependent variable	Social constructionism
Dysfunctions	Social policy
Empiricism	Social problem
Feminist perspective	Sociological imagination
Functionalist perspective	Sociology
Human agency	Species being
Hypothesis	Subjective reality
Independent variable	Symbolic interactionism
Interactionist perspective	Theory
Macro level of analysis	Variables
Micro level of analysis	

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does the sociological imagination help us understand social problems?
2. Select two of the sociological perspectives introduced in this chapter. Compare and contrast how each defines a social problem. What solutions does each perspective offer?
3. Apply your sociological imagination to the problem of the increasing cost of college. Is the increasing cost of tuition a public issue or a private matter?
4. Using the social constructionist perspective, analyze how the primary messages in the 2024 presidential campaign were defined by the candidates, political leaders, the media, and public interest groups. In your opinion, what was defined as a social problem?
5. Explain how science and the scientific method help us understand social problems. How is this different from a commonsense understanding of social problems?
6. Select two research methods, and explain how each could be used to examine the impact of climate change in your home state.
7. What is the relationship between social policy, social advocacy, and innovation?

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THE BASES OF INEQUALITY

Sociologists use the term *social stratification* to refer to the ranking of individuals into social strata or groups. We are divided into groups such as women, men, and nonbinary or African Americans and Asian Americans. Our lives are also transformed because of our group membership. In U.S. society, being different has come to mean that we are unequal.

The differences among social strata become more apparent when we recognize how some individuals are more likely to experience social problems than others are. Attached to each social position are *life chances*, a term Max Weber used to describe the consequences of social stratification, how each social position provides particular access to goods and services such as wealth, food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care. Sociologists refer to the unequal distribution of resources, services, and positions as *social inequality*.

In the next five chapters, we will explore two basic sociological questions: Why does social inequality exist, and how are we different from one another? We will review sociological theories that attempt to explain and examine the consequences of social inequality. Although the five bases of inequality are discussed in separate chapters, real life happens at the intersection of our social class, racial and ethnic identity, gender, sexual orientation, and age. These bases of inequality simultaneously define and affect us. We need to recognize how each social characteristic (class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or age) shapes the history, experiences, and opportunities of men, women, and children in the United States (Shapiro, 2004) and throughout the world. Your life experience may have less to do with your ability or your hard work and more to do with how you are positioned in society. Ultimately, this includes your experience of social problems.

If this is your first sociology course, these chapters will provide you with an overview of several core sociological concepts. If you have already had a sociology course, welcome back; these chapters should provide a good review.

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2

SOCIAL CLASS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Explain the difference between income and wealth.
- 2.2 Compare the four sociological perspectives on social class and poverty.
- 2.3 Identify the major consequences of poverty.
- 2.4 Explain the evolution of U.S. welfare policy.

The United States is perceived as one of the world's richest countries. Nonetheless, economic inequality is one of the most important and visible of America's social problems (McCall, 2002). According to Matthew Desmond (2023), poverty "is connected to every social problem we care about—crime, health, education, housing—and its persistence in American life means that millions of families are denied safety and security and dignity in one of the richest nations in the history of the world" (p. 23). Sociologists Steve McNamee and Robert Miller (2014) observed:

Opinion polls consistently show that Americans continue to embrace the American Dream. But as they strive to achieve it, they have found that it has become more difficult simply to keep up and make ends meet. Instead of "getting ahead," Americans often find themselves working harder just to stay in place, and despite their best efforts, many find themselves "falling behind"—worse off than they were earlier in their lives or compared to their parents at similar points in their lives. (p. 217)

By many measures the pre-pandemic U.S. economy was doing well. Among U.S. households, the median income had increased 17% from \$68,004 in 2010 to \$79,475 in 2019. The financial stress caused by the COVID-19 recession was felt mostly in lower- and middle-income households. From 2019 to 2020, the median income of lower-income households fell by 3.0% and the median income of middle-income households fell by 2.1% (Kochhar & Sechopoulos, 2022a). The share of middle-class American families decreased from 61% in 1971 to 50% in 2021 (Kochhar & Sechopoulos, 2022b).

In this chapter, we will examine how the overall distribution of wages and earnings has become more unequal and how the distance between the wealthy and the poor has widened considerably in recent decades and worsened during the Great Recession of 2007–2009 and the coronavirus pandemic. The 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement highlighted wealth and income inequality through its central protest question: Are you a member of the wealthy 1% or part of the remaining 99%? Martin Marger (2002) wrote, "Measured in various ways, the gap between rich and poor in the United States is wider than [in] any other society with comparable economic institutions and standards of living" (p. 48).

INCOME AND WEALTH IN THE UNITED STATES

According to the U.S. Census, for 2022 the median income was \$74,580 (Guzman & Kollar, 2023). The U.S. Census examines income distribution by dividing the U.S. household population into fifths or quintiles. If all U.S. income were equally divided, each quintile would receive one-fifth of the total income. However, based on U.S. Census data for 2022, 52% of the total

TABLE 2.1 ■ Mean Household Income and Share of Aggregate Income Received by Each Fifth, 2022

Fifth	Mean Income	Share
Top fifth	\$277,300	52.1%
Second fifth	\$119,900	22.5%
Third fifth	\$74,730	14.0%
Fourth fifth	\$43,850	8.2%
Lowest fifth	\$16,120	3.0%

Source: Guzman and Kollar [2023].

U.S. income was earned by households in the highest quintile or among households making an average of \$277,300. The lowest 20% of households (earning an average of \$16,120 per year) had 3.0% of the total income (Guzman & Kollar, 2023). Since 1981, the incomes of the top 5% of earners have increased faster than the incomes of other families. (Refer to Table 2.1 for the share of aggregate income for 2022.) For 2022, the top 5% of earner households had a median income of \$499,900 and a 23.5% share of the aggregate income.

Wealth, rather than income, may be more important in determining one's economic inequality. Wealth is usually defined as the value of assets (checking and savings accounts, property, vehicles, and stocks) owned by a household (Keister & Moller, 2000) at a point in time. Wealth is measured in two ways: gross assets (the total value of the assets someone owns) and net worth (the value of assets owned minus the amount of debt owed) (Gilbert, 2003). Wealth is more stable within families and across generations than is income, occupation, or education (Conley, 1999) and can be used to secure or produce wealth, enhancing one's **life chances**.

As Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro (1995) explained,

Wealth is a particularly important indicator of individual and family access to life chances. Wealth is a special form of money not used to purchase milk and shoes and other life necessities. More often it is used to create opportunities, secure a desired stature and standard of living, or pass class status along to one's children. . . . The command over resources that wealth entails is more encompassing than income or education, and closer in meaning and theoretical significance to our traditional notions of economic well-being and access to life chances. (p. 2)

Wealth preserves the division between the wealthy and the nonwealthy, providing an important mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of inequality (Gilbert, 2003). Scott Sernau (2001) wrote,

Wealth begets wealth. . . . It ensures that those near the bottom will be called on to spend almost all of their incomes and that what wealth they might acquire, such as an aging automobile or an aging house in a vulnerable neighborhood, will more likely depreciate than increase in value, and the poor will get nowhere. (p. 69)

Data reveal that wealth is more unequally distributed and more concentrated than income. Since the early 1920s, the top 1% of wealth holders have owned an average of 30%

of household wealth (Fry & Kochhar, 2014). As of 2016, the median wealth of upper-income families (\$848,400) was 7.4 times greater than the median wealth of middle-income families (\$115,200) and 7.5 times greater than the wealth of lower-income Americans (\$11,300) (Horowitz et al., 2020). Richard Fry and Rakesh Kochhar (2014) attribute the decline in middle-class and lower-class family wealth to the Great Recession of 2007–2009, describing these families as “financially stuck” and that “the economy recovery has yet to be felt for them.” Upper-income families were the only income tier to build on their wealth from 2001 to 2016, benefiting from a rebounding stock market after the recession ended (Horowitz et al., 2020). The racial and ethnic wealth gap widened further after the Great Recession. According to Rakesh Kochhar and Anthony Cilluffo (2017), in 2016, the median wealth of White households was \$171,000, 10 times the wealth of Black households (\$17,100) and eight times the wealth of Hispanic households (\$20,600).

What Does It Mean to Be Poor?

The often-cited definition of poverty offered by the World Bank is an income of \$2.15 per person per day. This represents “extreme poverty,” the minimal amount necessary for a person to fulfill their basic needs. According to the organization (World Bank, 2009),

Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not being able to go to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom.

Due to significant improvements in education, gender equality, health care, environmental degradation, and hunger, there has been a decline in both the overall poverty rate and the number of poor, according to the World Bank. In 2019, a total of 659 million people (8.5% of the world’s population) in the developing world had consumption levels below \$2.15, lower than the 1.85 billion (35% of the population) in 1990 (Mahler, 2023; World Bank, 2020). About 60% of the world’s extreme

poor in 2019 lived in Sub-Saharan Africa (Baah et al., 2023). However, due to the COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine, the World Bank predicted that an additional 75–95 million people would be pushed into extreme poverty in 2022 (Mahler et al., 2022).

Sociologists offer two definitions of poverty: absolute poverty and relative poverty. **Absolute poverty** refers to a lack of basic necessities, such as food, shelter, and income. **Relative poverty** refers to a situation in which some people fail to achieve the average income or lifestyle enjoyed by the rest of society. Our mainstream standard of living defines the “average” American lifestyle. Individuals living in relative poverty may be able to afford basic necessities, but they cannot maintain a standard of living comparable to that of other members of society. Relative poverty emphasizes the inequality of income and the growing gap between the richest and poorest Americans.



Although most of China’s citizens have increased their household income and standard of living, poverty still exists in the country. According to the United Nations, about 3% of the country lives on less than \$1.90 per day.

Kevin Frayer/Getty Images

A definition reflecting the relative nature of income inequality was adopted by the European Council of Ministers: “The poor shall be taken to mean persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and societal) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the member state in which they live” (European Commission, 1985).

The Federal Definitions of Poverty

There are two federal policy measures of poverty: the poverty threshold and the poverty guidelines. These measures are important for statistical purposes and for determining eligibility for social service programs.

The **poverty threshold** is the original federal poverty measure developed by the Social Security Administration and updated each year by the U.S. Census Bureau. The threshold is used to estimate the number of people in poverty. Originally developed by Mollie Orshansky for the Social Security Administration in 1964, the original poverty threshold was based on the economy food plan, the least costly of four nutritionally adequate food plans designed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Based on the 1955 Household Food Consumption Survey, the USDA determined that families of three or more people spent about one-third of their after-tax income on food. The poverty threshold was set at three times the cost of the economy food plan. The definition of the poverty threshold was revised in 1969 and 1981. Since 1969, annual adjustments in the levels have been based on the consumer price index instead of changes in the cost of foods in the economy food plan.

The poverty threshold considers money or cash income before taxes and excludes capital gains and noncash benefits (public housing, Medicaid, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). The threshold does not apply to people residing in military barracks or institutional group quarters or to unrelated individuals younger than age 15 (foster children). The threshold does not consider housing costs or any variability in health insurance coverage or the medical needs of family members. In addition, the definition of the poverty threshold does not vary geographically.

The **poverty guidelines**, issued each year by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, are used to determine family or individual eligibility for federal programs such as Head Start, the National School Lunch Program, or the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. The poverty guidelines are designated by the year in which they are issued. For example, the guidelines issued in January 2023 are designated as the 2023 poverty guidelines, but the guidelines reflect price changes through the calendar year 2022. There are separate poverty guidelines for Alaska and Hawaii. The current poverty threshold and guidelines are presented in Tables 2.2 and 2.3.



Not everyone in our society can achieve the dream of owning a home. For almost 600,000 Americans, home is life on the streets, in shelters, and in transitional housing. From a sociological perspective, homelessness is a structural problem. The chronically homeless experience significant barriers to housing stability, including poverty, physical or mental health conditions, and substance abuse issues (Colburn & Page Aldern, 2022).

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TABLE 2.2 ■ Poverty Threshold in 2022 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years (in Dollars)

Size of Family Unit	Related Children Under 18 Years								
	None	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8+
One person under 65	15,225								
One person 65 years or older	14,036								
Two people: householder under 65	19,597	20,172							
Two people: householder 65 or older	17,689	20,095							
Three	22,892	23,556	23,578						
Four	30,186	30,679	29,678	29,782					
Five	36,402	36,932	35,801	34,926	34,391				
Six	41,869	42,035	41,169	40,339	39,104	38,373			
Seven	48,176	48,477	47,440	46,717	45,371	43,800	42,076		
Eight	53,881	54,357	53,378	52,521	51,304	49,760	48,153	47,745	
Nine or more	64,815	65,129	64,263	63,536	62,342	60,699	59,213	58,845	56,578

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2023).

TABLE 2.3 ■ 2023 Federal Poverty Guidelines (in Dollars)

Size of Family Unit	48 Contiguous States and District of Columbia	Alaska	Hawaii
1	14,580	18,210	16,700
2	19,720	24,640	22,680
3	24,860	31,070	28,590
4	30,000	37,500	34,500
5	35,140	43,930	40,410
6	40,280	50,360	46,320
7	45,420	56,790	52,230
8	50,560	63,220	58,140
For each additional person, add	5,140	6,430	5,910

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023).

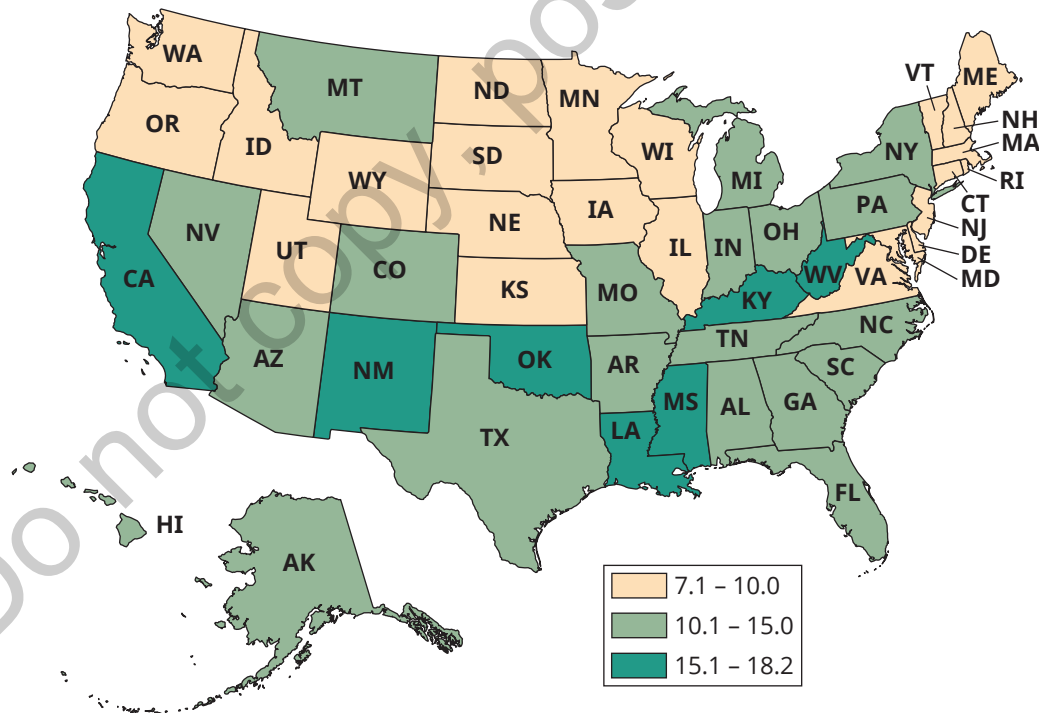
Who Are the Poor?

The 2022 official poverty rate was 11.5% or 38 million. In 2020–2022, the South had the highest poverty rate (13.1%) followed by the Northeast (10.8%), the West (10.7%), and the Midwest (9.8%) (Shrider & Creamer, 2023; see also Map 2.1). The variation in regional rates of poverty may be due to people-specific characteristics (percentage of racial/ethnic minorities, female heads of households) or characteristics based on place (labor market, cost of living). Your social position determines your life chances of being poor (refer to Figures 2.1 through 2.3).

Based on 2022 U.S. poverty figures and redefined racial and ethnic categories, Whites (who reported being White and no other race category along with Whites who reported being White plus another race category) compose the largest group of poor individuals in the United States. American Indian and Alaska Native individuals had the smallest share of the poverty population, but they were the most disproportionately overrepresented group in poverty (Shrider & Creamer, 2023). Although individual factors are often identified as the primary cause of poverty, from a sociological perspective, the social structure is responsible for economic inequality. Racial segregation and institutional racism have contributed to the high rate of minority poverty in the United States. Minority groups are disadvantaged by their lower levels of education, lower levels of work experience, lower wages, and chronic health problems—all characteristics associated with higher poverty rates (Iceland, 2003).

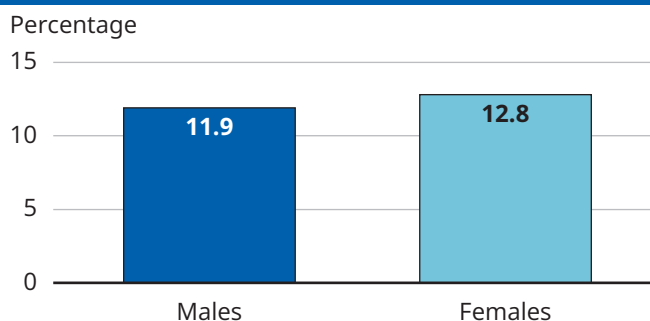
According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (2001), children are more likely to live in poverty than Americans in any other age group. Family economic conditions affect the

U.S. DATA MAP 2.1 ■ Percentage of People in Poverty by State, 3-Year Average 2020–2022

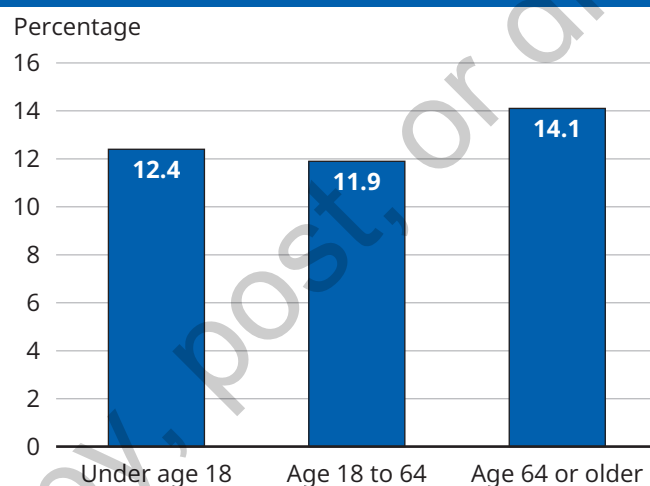


OVERALL: 11.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2023).

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Percentage Below Poverty Level by Gender, 2022

Source: Shrider & Creamer (2023).

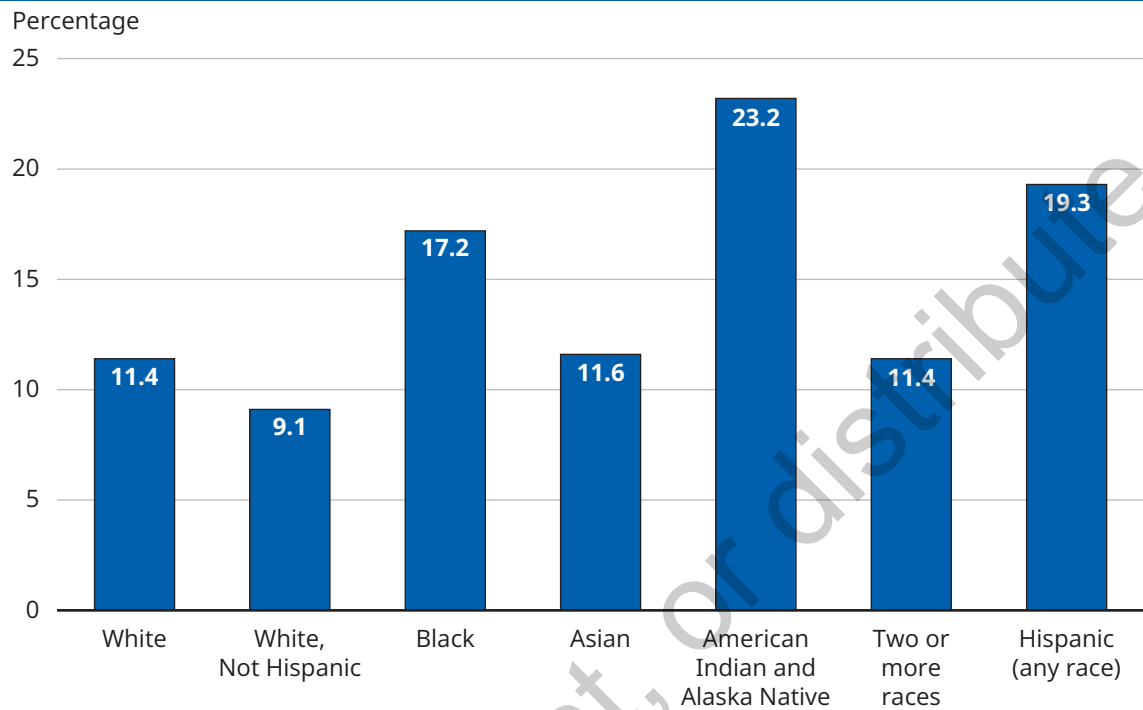
FIGURE 2.2 ■ Percentage Below Poverty by Age, 2022

Source: Shrider & Creamer (2023).

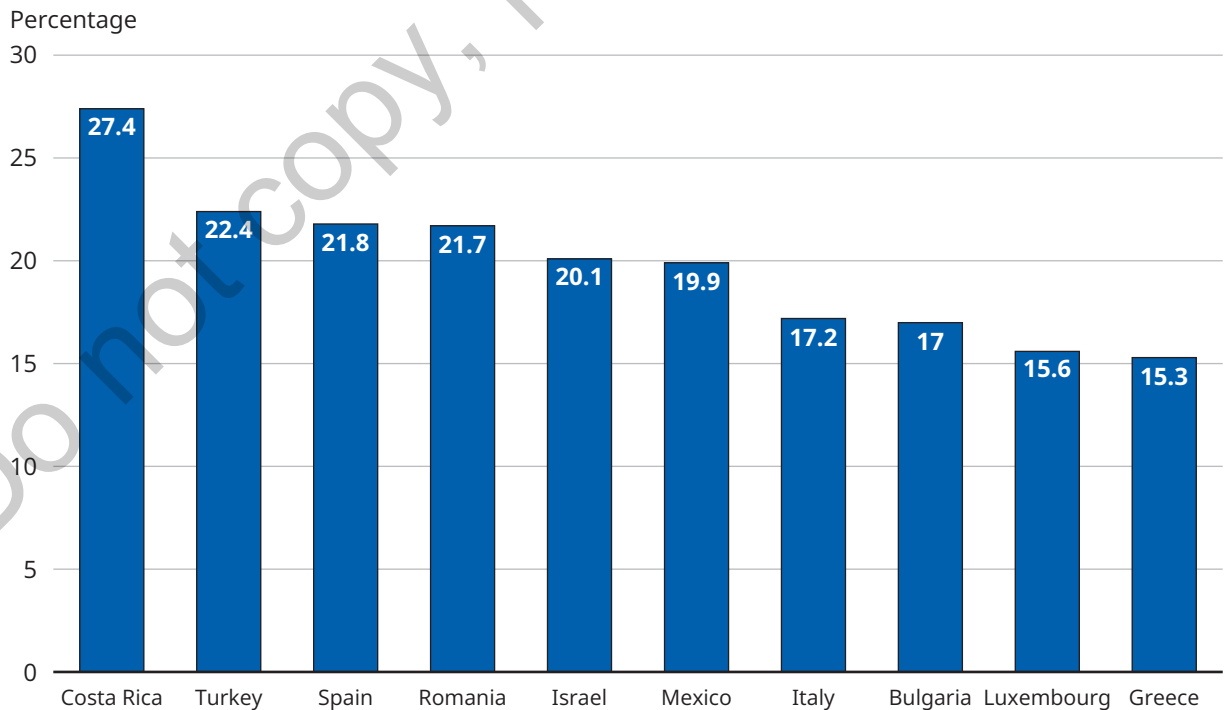
material and social resources available to children. The quality of their education, the neighborhood environment, and exposure to environmental contaminants may reinforce and widen the gaps between poorer and more affluent children and adults (Holzer et al., 2008).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) tracks child well-being in rich countries, identifying the percentage of children living in relative poverty (in households with income below 50% of the national median income). For 2021, Costa Rica had the highest rate of children living in relative poverty (27.4%) (OECD, 2023). The other countries with the highest poverty rates for children are presented in Figure 2.4. The United States ranks 14th with a poverty rate of 13.7%. Finland has the lowest child poverty rate of 2.9%.

The poverty rate for U.S. children peaked in 1993 at 22.5%. In 2022, the poverty rate among U.S. children was 12.4% (Shrider & Creamer, 2023). The risk of being poor remains high among specific groups. In 2021, there were more poor Hispanic children (4.1 million) than poor White (3.1 million) or poor Black children (3.0 million). More than two-thirds of poor children lived in a single-female-headed household. There remains a wide variation in children's poverty rates among states; in 2021, rates ranged from 8.1% in Utah to 27.7% in Mississippi among poor children under age 18 (Children's Defense Fund, 2023).

FIGURE 2.3 ■ Percentage Below Poverty by Race and Ethnicity, 2022

Source: Shrider & Creamer (2023).

FIGURE 2.4 ■ The Percentage of Children (Age Up to 17) Living in Households With Income Below 50% of the National Median Income, 2021

Source: Adapted from OECD (2023).

In 2021, families with a female householder and no spouse present were more likely to be poor than were families with a male householder and no spouse present, 22.6% versus 14.7%, respectively. In contrast, the poverty rate for married-couple families was 7.6% (Shrider & Creamer, 2023). Single-parent families are more vulnerable to poverty because they lack access to resources to avoid poverty compared to two-parent family households. These resources include time, wealth, human capital, number of adults who can seek employment, and the ability for partners to share or distribute childcare and household tasks. For example, if a child is sick in a two-parent family, the parents have the flexibility to determine which parent is best able to stay at home and care for the sick child (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015).

Female heads of household are disadvantaged even further because women, in general, make less money than men do. Karen Kramer and her colleagues (2015) argued how single mothers are in double jeopardy: “Their earnings are lower not only because of their gender, but also because they have more children than single fathers” (p. 37). Single mothers may be employed but lack access to family-friendly employment benefits such as parental leave or flexible working hours. Based on their analysis of income data for single mothers and fathers, the researchers found that single mothers are penalized for having more children (each additional child decreases the mother’s work income), whereas single fathers experience an increase in their work income with each additional child. In the case of a single mother with a sick child, Laurie Maldonado and Rense Nieuwenhuis (2015) explained, “If her child is sick, she must choose between work and caring for her child. If she chooses the later, she will miss work and risk losing her job” (p. 399).

Poverty rates vary across geographic areas because of differences in person-specific and place-specific characteristics (Levernier et al., 2000). A region may have a higher rate of poverty because it contains disproportionately higher shares of demographic groups associated with greater poverty, such as racial and ethnic minority groups, female heads of household, and low-skilled workers. Area poverty is also related to place-specific factors, such as the region’s economic performance, employment growth, industry structure, and cost of living.

There is an additional category of poverty—the working poor. These are individuals who have spent at least 27 weeks working or looking for work but whose incomes have fallen below the official poverty level. In 2020, there were 6.3 million working poor (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Black and Hispanic workers were more likely than White or Asian workers to be working poor. The number of working poor women (3.4 million) was higher than that of men (3 million). Individuals with less than a high school diploma (13%) were more likely to be classified as working poor than college graduates (3%) were. Service occupations accounted for about a third of all those classified as working poor (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

David Brady et al. (2010) compared the status of the working poor in the United States to that of 17 other affluent Western democracies. The rate of working poverty was highest in the United States (14.5% of the population). Belgium had the lowest rate of working poor at 2.23%. The sociologists documented how several demographic characteristics were related to the likelihood of being working poor—individuals from households with one income earner, with more children, or with a young household head with low educational attainment.

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL CLASS AND POVERTY

Why do some prosper while others remain poor? Why does poverty persist in some families, but other families can improve their economic situation? In this section, we will review the four sociological perspectives to understand the bases of class inequality.

Functionalist Perspective

Functionalists assume that not everyone in society can and should be equal. From this perspective, inequality is necessary for the social order, and it is equally important how each of us recognizes and accepts our status in the social structure. Erving Goffman (1951), an interactionist, offered a functional explanation of **social stratification**, defining it as a universal characteristic of social life. Goffman argued that as we interact with one another, accepting our status in society and acknowledging the status of others, we provide “harmony” to the social order. But “this kind of harmony requires that the occupant of each status act toward others in a manner which conveys the impression that his conception of himself and of them is the same as their conception of themselves and him” (Goffman, 1951, p. 294).

Functionalists contend that some individuals are more important to society because of their function to society. For example, society values the lifesaving work of a medical surgeon more than the retail function of a grocery store cashier. Based on the value of one’s work or talent, society rewards individuals at the top of the social structure (surgeons) with more wealth, income, or power than those lower down in the social structure (grocery cashiers). According to this perspective, individuals are sorted according to their abilities or characteristics—their age, strength, intelligence, physical ability, or even sex—to play their particular role in society. Certain individuals are better suited for their positions in society than others. Our social institutions, especially education, sort everyone into their proper places and reward them accordingly. Because not all of us can (or should) become surgeons, the system ensures that only the most talented and qualified become surgeons. In many ways, the functionalist argument reinforces the belief that we are naturally different.

Functionalists observe that poverty is a product of our social structure. Specifically, rapid economic and technological changes have eliminated the need for low-skilled labor, creating a population of workers who are unskilled and untrained for this new economy. In many ways, theorists from this perspective expect this disparity among workers, arguing that only the most qualified should fill the important jobs in society and be rewarded for their talent.

Herbert Gans (1971) maintained that poverty exists because it is functional for society. Gans explained that the poor uphold the legitimacy of dominant norms. The poor help reinforce cultural ideals of hard work and the notion that anyone can succeed if only they try (so if you fail, it is your fault). Poverty helps preserve social boundaries. It separates the haves from the have-nots by their economics and according to their educational attainment, marriage, and residence. The poor also provide a low-wage labor pool to do the “dirty work” that no one else wants to do. Gans (1995) maintained that the positive functions of poverty should be considered in any antipoverty policy.

Our social welfare system, designed to address the problem of poverty, has been accused of being dysfunctional itself; critics have suggested that the welfare bureaucracy is primarily concerned with its own survival. Poverty helps create jobs for the nonpoor, particularly the social welfare system designed to assist the poor. As a result, the social welfare bureaucracy will develop programs and structures that will only ensure its survival and legitimacy. Based on personal experience working with and for the system, Theresa Funicello (1993) observed, “Countless middle class people were making money, building careers, becoming powerful and otherwise benefiting from poverty. . . . The poverty industry once again substituted its own interests for that of poor people” (p. xix). We will discuss this further in the next perspective.

Conflict Perspective

Like the functionalist perspective, the conflict perspective argues that inequality is inevitable but for different reasons. For a functionalist, inequality is necessary because of the different positions and roles needed in society. From a conflict perspective, inequality is systematically created and maintained by those trying to preserve their advantage over the system.

For Karl Marx, one's social class is solely determined by one's position in the economic system: You are either a worker or an owner of the means of production. Nancy Krieger et al. (1997) offered this explanation of class:

Class, as such, is not an a priori property of individual human beings, but is a social relationship created by societies. One additional and central component of class relations involves an asymmetry of economic exploitation, whereby owners of resources (e.g. capital) gain economically from the labor effort of non-owners who work for them. (p. 346)

But social class, according to Max Weber, is multidimensional. Economic factors include **income**, the money earned for one's work, and **wealth**, the value of one's personal assets such as savings and property. A person's social class is also influenced by **prestige**, the amount of social respect or standing given to an individual based on occupation. We assign higher prestige to occupations that require specialized education or training, that provide some social good to society, or that make more money. A final component of class is **power**. Weber defined power as the ability to achieve one's goals despite the opposition of others. Power is the ability to do whatever you want because no one can stop you.

Power is not limited to individuals. People with similar interests (or with similar income, wealth, and prestige backgrounds) often collaborate to increase their advantage in society. C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) argued that the United States is ruled by what he called a **power elite**. According to Mills, this elite group comprises business, political, and military leaders. This elite group has absolute power because of its ability to withhold resources and prevent others from realizing their interests. Mills identified how the power elite effectively make decisions regarding economic policy and national security—controlling the difference between a boom economy and a bust economy or peace and war abroad (Gilbert, 2003).

G. William Domhoff (2002) claimed that real power is **distributive power**, the power individuals or groups have over other individuals or groups. Power matters when a group can control strategic resources and opportunities to obtain such resources. Money, land, information, and skills are strategic resources when they are needed by individuals to do what they want to do (Hachen, 2001). According to Domhoff, distributive power is limited to an elite group of individuals whose economic, political, and social relationships are closely interrelated. Control over four major social networks—economic, political, military, and religious—can be turned into a strong organizational base for wielding power (Mann, 1986).

Michael Harrington (1963) argued, "The real explanation of why the poor are where they are is that they made the mistake of being born to the wrong parents, in the wrong section of the country, in the wrong industry, or in the wrong racial or ethnic group" (p. 21). Inequalities built into our social structure create and perpetuate poverty. As Manning Marable (2000) stated, capitalism is fraud. Although it promotes the idea that everyone has a fair and equal chance to succeed, advantages are given to members of particular groups based on their gender, race, or social class.

Conflict theorists assert that poverty exists because those in power want to maintain and expand their base of power and interests, with little left to share with others. Welfare bureaucracies—local, state, and national—represent important interest groups that influence the creation and

implementation of welfare policies. The poor are excluded from social and political networks that can promote their needs and interests. A welfare policy reflects the political economy of the community in which it is implemented (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1991).

Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward (1993) concluded that the principal function of welfare is to allow the capitalist class to maintain control over labor. Welfare policy has been used by the state to stifle protest and to enforce submissive work norms. During periods of economic crisis, the state expands welfare rolls to pacify the poor and reduce the likelihood of serious uprising. However, during economic growth or stability, the state attempts to reduce the number of people on welfare, forcing the poor or dislocated workers back into the expanding labor force.

Those who remain on welfare are condemned and stigmatized for their dependence on the system. For example, as of 2023, 17 states require drug testing or screening for public assistance applicants or recipients. Opponents of this policy argue that punitive testing policies perpetuate the stereotype that people on public assistance are morally corrupt and more likely to use drugs. It also distracts from the need for and access to drug treatment and prevention. A 2012 assessment of the Florida welfare drug test law revealed that there were no direct savings for the state; contrary to the law's intent, it did not identify many drug users and had no effect on reducing the number of individuals applying for welfare assistance (Alvarez, 2012). The Florida law was struck down by a federal appeals court in 2014; the court ruled that the state failed to demonstrate that drug abuse was more prevalent or unique among Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) clients than the general population. A review of seven state program programs revealed that applicants test positive for drugs at a lower rate than the general population (Covert & Israel, 2015).

Feminist Perspective

Feminist scholars define the welfare state as an arena of political struggle. The drive to maintain male dominance and the patriarchal family is assumed to be the principal force shaping the formation, implementation, and outcomes of U.S. welfare policy (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001).

Social welfare scholar Mimi Abramovitz (1996) noted that welfare has historically distinguished between the deserving poor (widows with children) and the undeserving poor (single and divorced mothers). In the 1970s and 1980s, media and politicians created the image of the “Cadillac driving, champagne sipping, penthouse living welfare queens” (Zucchino, 1999, p. 13), suggesting that women—specifically, single mothers—were abusing welfare assistance. Women were accused of having more children to avoid work and to increase their welfare benefits. Marriage, hard work, honesty, and abstinence were offered as solutions to their poverty. The negative stereotypes of poor women stigmatized these women and fueled support for punitive social policies (Abramovitz, 1996), and they continue to be a part of welfare policies today.

The bias against women is reproduced systematically in our social institutions. Fraser (1989) argued that there are two types of welfare programs: masculine programs related to the labor market (social security, unemployment compensation) and feminine programs related to the family or household (Aid to Families with Dependent Children [AFDC], food stamps, and Medicaid). The welfare system is separate and unequal. Fraser believed that masculine programs are rational, generous, and nonintrusive, whereas feminine programs are inadequate, intrusive, and humiliating. The quintessential program for women, AFDC, institutionalized the feminization of poverty by failing to provide adequate support, training, and income to ensure self-sufficiency for women (Gordon, 1994). The program operated from 1935 to 1996.

Our current welfare system, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and its TANF program, have been criticized for their treatment

of women and their families. PRWORA created a pool of disciplined low-wage laborers: women who must take any available job or find themselves and their families penalized by the government (Piven, 2002). Joy Rice (2001) warned how “policies that assume individualistic causes [of poverty] will continue to emphasize programs that focus on quickly getting poor women into the workforce in any job, however lower paying or dead-end” (p. 370). With its emphasis on work as the path to self-sufficiency, TANF forces women back to the same low-pay, low-skill jobs that may have led them to their poverty in the first place (Gilman, 2012; Lafer, 2002). The new program requirements, according to Debra Henderson et al. (2005), also deny women the choice to be full-time mothers. Eligibility guidelines force poor women to work, making them choose between the competing roles of good mother and good welfare recipient. When poor women in the low-wage workforce choose work over their children, they are judged for neglecting their children. In fact, authorities file abuse and neglect charges against mothers who leave their children unattended or with inappropriate caregivers while they are trying to make a living (Rich, 2016). The new policies fail to address the real barriers facing women: low job skills and educational attainment, racism and discrimination in the labor market, and the competing demands of work and caring for their children.

Interactionist Perspective

An interactionist would draw attention to how class differences are communicated through symbols, how the meaning of these symbols is constructed or constrained by social forces, and how these symbols reproduce **social inequality**. Our language reflects the quality of life that is associated with different amounts of economic resources. We distinguish the “very rich” from the “stinking rich” and someone who is “poor” from someone who is “dirt poor” (Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003).

Some sociologists have suggested that poverty is based on a **culture of poverty**, a set of norms, values, and beliefs that encourage and perpetuate poverty. In this view, moral deficiencies of individuals or their families lead to a life of poverty. Oscar Lewis (1969), Edward Banfield (1974), and Myron Magnet (1993/2000) argued that the poor are socialized differently (e.g., living from moment to moment) and are likely to pass these values on to their children. Patterns of generational poverty—poor parents have poor children, who in turn become poor adults, and so on—seem to support this theory.

Yet the culture of poverty explanation has been widely criticized. Opponents have argued that there is no evidence that the poor have a different set of values and beliefs. This perspective defines poverty as a persistent state; that is, once you are poor, your values prohibit you from ever getting out of poverty. Poverty data reveal that for most individuals and families, continuous spells of poverty are likely to last less than 2 years (Harris, 1993).

Interactionists also focus on the public’s perception of welfare and welfare recipients. Most Americans do not know any welfare recipients personally or have any direct contact with the welfare system. Their views on welfare are likely to be shaped by what they see on television and by what they read in newspapers and magazines (Weaver, 2000). As a society, we have developed a sense of the “undeserving poor”; dependent mothers and fathers and nonworking recipients have become powerful negative symbols in society (Norris & Thompson, 1995). Critics of social programs for the poor fear that the United States is becoming an entitlement society, creating a large segment of the population who would rather depend on government benefits than work (Sherman et al., 2013). During the 2012 presidential campaign, Governor Mitt Romney was secretly taped promoting this negative rhetoric of public assistance. In his comments, Romney referred to the 47% of Americans who were dependent on the government and who believed they

were victims. Romney said his job was “not to worry about those people.” His statements are at odds with welfare program facts: More than 90% of those on entitlement and mandatory programs are the elderly (people aged 65 and older), disabled, and members of working households (Sherman et al., 2013). Romney also ignored the practice of corporate welfare, giving government subsidies to the defense and tech industries, agricultural conglomerates, and pharmaceutical companies.

Martin Gilens (1999) explained that *welfare* has become a code word for *race*. Race and racism are important in understanding public and political support for antipoverty programs (Lieberman, 1998; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Quadagno, 1994). Gilens (1999) stated that Americans perceive welfare as a Black phenomenon, believing that Blacks make up 50% of the poor population (compared with an actual 25%). This belief is exacerbated by the notion that Blacks are on welfare not because of blocked opportunities but largely because of their lack of effort.

Gilens (1999) asserted that the news media are primarily responsible for building this image of Black poverty, that is, for the “racialization of poverty.” During the War on Poverty in the early 1960s, the media focused on rural White America, but as the civil rights movement began to build in the mid-1960s, the media turned their attention to urban poverty, and the racial character of poverty coverage changed. Between 1965 and 1967, sensationalized portrayals of Black poverty were used to depict the waste, inefficiency, or abuse of the welfare system, whereas positive coverage of poverty was more likely to include pictures and portrayals of Whites. “Black faces are unlikely to be found in media stories on the most sympathetic subgroups of the poor, just as they are comparatively absent from media coverage of poverty during times of heightened sympathy for the poor” (Gilens, 1999, p. 132). According to Gilens, this exaggerated link between Blacks and poverty is a serious obstacle to public support for antipoverty programs. The media continue to reinforce stereotypical images and cultural explanations for racial inequalities. For example, news programs disproportionately focus on Black crime and poverty, ignoring the reality of Black lives (Warren, 2010).

A review of all sociological perspectives is presented in Table 2.4.

	Functionalist	Conflict/Feminist	Interactionist
Explanations of social class and poverty	<p>Inequality is inevitable and emerges from the social structure.</p> <p>Poverty serves a social function.</p>	<p>Inequality is systematically maintained by those trying to preserve their class advantage.</p> <p>Class is based on multiple dimensions—income, wealth, prestige, and power.</p> <p>Welfare bureaucracies represent important interest groups that influence the creation and implementation of welfare policies.</p>	<p>Each social class has a specific set of norms, values, and beliefs.</p> <p>Poverty is a learned phenomenon based on a “culture of poverty” that encourages and perpetuates poverty.</p> <p>The public’s perception of the welfare system and welfare recipients is shaped by the media, political groups, and stereotypes.</p>

(Continued)

TABLE 2.4 ■ Summary of Sociological Perspectives: Inequalities Based on Social Class (*Continued*)

	Functionalist	Conflict/Feminist	Interactionist
Questions asked about social class and poverty	<p>What are the functions and dysfunctions of inequality?</p> <p>What portions of society benefit from poverty?</p>	<p>What powerful interest groups determine class inequalities?</p> <p>How do our welfare policies reflect specific political, economic, and social interest groups?</p>	<p>Is poverty learned behavior?</p> <p>How are our perceptions of the poor determined by the media, news reports, and politicians?</p> <p>Has society created two images—the deserving versus the undeserving poor?</p> <p>Are these images accurate?</p>

SOCIOLOGY AT WORK

CRITICAL THINKING

Your college education involves more than learning new things; it also includes developing the skills to apply your new knowledge. This skill is referred to as critical thinking. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2013) has defined critical thinking as “a habit of the mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.” A good critical thinker can apply these habits in “various and changing situations encountered in all walks of life” (AAC&U, 2013). What does critical thinking look like? Critical thinking does not consist of one specific activity or outcome; rather, it involves the use of reason, logic, and evidence to solve a problem, to evaluate a claim or situation, or to investigate a new aspect of our social world.

Take, for example, the subject of this chapter: social class. Most sociological discussions about social class begin with a discussion on Karl Marx. A critical thinker would not simply accept Marx’s theory as the only explanation about social class but would also consider alternative perspectives and explanations, some that might even disagree with Marx. A critical thinker would look for evidence, considering whether historical data support or refute Marx’s theory on the rise of the proletariat class. Critical thinking can also involve applying Marx’s theory to the way that we live and work now. What would Marx think about our current solutions for poverty?

In a 2017 national survey of employers, the majority of respondents rated critical thinking and problem-solving as the most essential competencies among new hires (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2017). Critical thinking is an asset in the workplace because it promotes effective communication between teams and coworkers and develops unique perspectives on situations and challenges at work (Kramer, 2020).

How have you applied critical thinking in your sociology courses? How could you use this skill in the workplace?

THE CONSEQUENCES OF POVERTY

This section is not an exhaustive list of the consequences of poverty. The remaining chapters will also highlight the relationship between social class and the experience of a specific social problem (such as educational attainment or access to health care). Given the intersectionality of

all the bases of inequality covered in this section of the book, there is a persistent overlap in the experience of social problems as a result of one's class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and age.

Food Insecurity and Hunger

About 12.8% of households, or 17 million American families, were food insecure for at least some time throughout 2022 (Rabbitt et al., 2023). **Food insecure** means that these families did not always have access to enough food for one or more household members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food. Fifty-five percent of the food-insecure households said they had participated during the previous month in one or more federal food and nutrition assistance programs—the National School Lunch Program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, described later), or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. The prevalence of food insecurity is higher for certain groups: single-female-headed households with children (33.1%), Black households (22.4%), Hispanic households (20.8%), and households with income below the poverty line (36.7%) (Rabbitt et al., 2023). Food insecurity was more common in large cities and rural areas than in suburban areas and exurban areas around larger cities.

The USDA provided food assistance through one of 17 public food assistance programs. The U.S. food stamp program, now called SNAP, is the nation's largest nutrition program for low-income individuals and families. More than 80% of SNAP beneficiaries are working families, people with disabilities, or elderly people. During 2023, the program served an average of 42 million low-income Americans each month. The average monthly benefit was \$245.79 per person. Food stamps cannot be used to buy nonfood items (personal hygiene supplies, paper products), alcoholic beverages, vitamins and medicines, hot food products, or any food that will be eaten in the store. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2013a) described SNAP as a powerful tool in fighting poverty. Serving as a bridge program, SNAP provides temporary assistance to individuals and families during periods of unemployment or a crisis (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2013). During the pandemic SNAP benefits increased an extra \$95 per month (or an amount that brought their total benefit up to the maximum level for their household size). The additional benefit amount was eliminated in 2023 (Sullivan, 2023). State and local governments and agencies were left to address the continued demand at food banks.

Although SNAP and other USDA programs have been shown to be effective in improving the purchasing power and nutritional status of a specific population, many low-income families are not being adequately served or served at all by these programs. As reported by Briefel et al. (2003), food pantries and emergency kitchens play an important role in the nutritional safety net for America's low-income and needy populations. These organizations are part of the Emergency Food Assistance System, a network of private organizations operating with some federal support. Food pantries considered by Briefel et al. were likely to serve families with children (45% of households included children), whereas emergency kitchens were likely to serve men living alone (38%) or single adults living with other adults (18%). In a comparative study of food banks in the United States, Canada, and Australia, Chantelle Bazerghi et al. (2016) concluded that although food banks have an important role to play in providing immediate solutions, they are "limited in their capacity to improve overall food security outcomes due to the limited provision of nutrient-dense foods in insufficient amounts, especially from dairy, vegetables and fruits" (p. 732).

Feeding America (2020), the nation's largest hunger-relief organization, reported that before the coronavirus pandemic, its network of food banks, food pantries, and meal programs served 37.2 million people, including 11.2 million children. The organization estimated that during 2020, approximately 45 million, including 15 million children, experienced food insecurity



Food pantries and emergency kitchens played an important role in the nutritional safety net during the COVID-19 pandemic. In many cases, individuals and families were using food banks for the first time. This was a line for a food distribution event in Clermont, Florida.

Paul Hennessy/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

during the pandemic. The estimates declined for 2021: 42 million people, including 13 million children (Feeding America, 2022). Many individuals and families never used food banks before the pandemic. The organization noted how “the future remains tenuous for people who have experienced uncertain access to enough food for their families. It is likely that it will take time for food insecurity levels to recover, especially in communities of color.”

Affordable Housing

Although most Americans still aspire to own a home, for many poor and working Americans, home ownership is just a dream (Freeman, 2002; Savage, 1999).

The generally accepted definition of affordability is for a family to pay no more than 28% of its annual income on housing (30% for a rental unit). Nearly one in four working households (households where individuals work more than 20 hours per week and have a household income of no more than 120% of the median income in the area) spends more than half its income on housing costs (Williams, 2012). Renters are more than twice as likely as homeowners to pay more than half their income for housing (Fischer & Sard, 2013).

Lance Freeman (2002) explained that because housing is the single largest expenditure for most households, “Housing affordability has the potential to affect all domains of life that are subject to cost constraints, including health” (p. 710). The affordability standard for housing is 30% of household income. Most families pay their rent first, buying basic needs such as food, clothing, and health care with what they have left. The lack of public assistance, increasing prices, slow wage growth, and a limited inventory of affordable apartments and houses make it nearly impossible for some to find adequate housing (Pugh, 2007). Although there was unprecedented support for renters during the COVID-19 pandemic, once their benefits were phased out, many individuals and families struggled to find affordable housing.

The combination of low earnings and scarce housing assistance results in serious housing problems for the working poor. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition (2023), there is no state where a full-time minimum-wage worker can afford a modest two-bedroom rental home. The coalition has estimated that the hourly wage a person working full-time needs to earn to afford a one-bedroom apartment is \$23.67, more than three times the federal minimum wage. About 73% of low-income renter households were using greater than 50% of their income for housing. Increasing the minimum wage would not solve the affordable housing problem. Low-income households would remain at higher risk for experiencing housing instability, eviction, poor housing conditions, and homelessness (Aurand et al., 2020).

In his 2016 book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, Matthew Desmond documented the experience of eviction for eight families living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In his fieldwork, Desmond witnessed how being evicted from one’s home leads to serious psychological, social, and economic instability. Desmond wrote, “Losing your home and possessions and often your job; being stamped with an eviction record and denied government housing

assistance; relocating to degrading housing in poor and dangerous neighborhoods; and suffering from increased material hardship, homelessness, depression, and illness – this is eviction’s fallout” (p. 298). He concluded, “Eviction is a cause, not just a condition, of poverty” (p. 299).

Health

Regardless of the country where a person lives, social class is a major determinant of one’s health and life expectancy (Braveman & Tarimo, 2002); those lower on the socioeconomic ladder have worse health than those above them (Marmot, 2004). The link between class and health has been confirmed in studies conducted in Australia, Canada, Great Britain, the United States, and Western Europe (Cockerman, 2004). Although no factor has been singled out as the primary link between socioeconomic position and health, scholars have offered many factors—the standard of living, work conditions, housing conditions, access to better-quality food, leisure activities, and the social and psychological connections with others at work, at home, or in the community—to explain the relationship (Krieger et al., 1997). According to Nancy Krieger and her colleagues (1997), “Poor living and working conditions impair health and shorten lives” (p. 343).

Rose Weitz (2001) offered several explanations for the unhealthy relationship between poverty and illness. The type of work available to poorly educated people can cause illness or death by exposing them to hazardous conditions. Poor and middle-class individuals who live in poor neighborhoods are exposed to air, noise, water, and chemical pollution that can increase rates of morbidity and mortality. Inadequate and unsafe housing contributes to infectious and chronic diseases, injuries, and illnesses, including lead poisoning when children eat peeling paint. The diet of the poor increases the risk of illness. The poor have little time or opportunity to practice healthy activities such as exercise, and because of life stresses, they may also be encouraged to adopt behaviors that might further endanger their health. Finally, poverty limits individual access to preventative and therapeutic health care.

The relationship between health and social class afflicts those most vulnerable, the young. Children in poor or near-poor families are two to three times more likely not to have a usual source of health care than are children in nonpoor families (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2007). Access to a regular doctor or care facility for physical examinations, preventative care, screening, and immunizations can facilitate the timely and appropriate use of pediatric services for youth. Even children on public insurance (which includes Medicaid and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program) are more likely not to have a usual source of care than are children with private insurance. Children in families below the poverty level have lower rates of immunization and yearly dental checkups (both basic preventative care practices) than do children at or above the poverty level (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2007). Refer to Chapter 10, “Health and Medicine,” for more on the impact of social class on health care access and quality.



Housing is the single largest expenditure for most households. Low earnings, less wealth, and scarce housing assistance results in serious housing problems for the working poor.

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VOICES IN THE COMMUNITY

GUARANTEED INCOME PILOT PROGRAMS

In June 2020, a group of 11 U.S. city mayors established Mayors for a Guaranteed Income (MGI). The national coalition promotes a universal basic income or a guaranteed income for all Americans. The guaranteed-income movement asserts that “the most effective treatment for poverty is to simply give people money and let them to decide what to do with it, rather than impose the rules, limitations and bureaucratic hoops that come with most safety-net programs” (Newman, 2022). As of 2022, there were more than 35 guaranteed-income pilot projects in at least 17 states, distributing more than \$25 million a year to more than 7,000 families (Newman, 2022).

The Stanford Basic Income Lab and Center for Guaranteed Income Research publishes evaluation data from 30+ guaranteed pilot programs. Most initiatives support low-income families, but some programs target specific populations such as artists and creative workers in the Rondo and Frogtown neighborhoods in St. Paul, Minnesota, and formerly incarcerated individuals in Gainesville, Florida. Data from the pilot programs reveal that the majority of their monthly expenditures went to basic life necessities such as retail sales and services, food and groceries, and transportation. Some participants use the funds to pay off their debts and to accumulate savings (Guaranteed Income Pilots Dashboard, 2023a). When interviewed about the benefits of the program, recipients also identified how the funds gave them the luxury of time. According to Amy Castro, co-director of the Center for Guaranteed Income Research at the University of Pennsylvania, time scarcity keeps many families in poverty. “If you’re struggling to make ends meet and you’re knitting together two or three part-time jobs, you don’t have time to play for the future or even to think” (quoted in Newman, 2022).

Vanessa, a 28-year-old, was a participant in the Madison Forward Fund in Wisconsin. The fund distributes \$500 per month to 155 low-income families. Vanessa used her guaranteed income to cover the cost of enrolling in a paralegal program. She currently works in a large law firm in Madison and is the only one in her firm without a degree. “In my personal experience, [having a guaranteed income], put me in a place to get a really good job that I wouldn’t have gotten otherwise. I wouldn’t have been able to afford to live. It motivates me to want to do better things” (Guaranteed Income Pilots Dashboard, 2023b).

Michael Tubbs, former mayor of Stockton, California, and the founder of MGI, has continued to promote the benefits of these pilot programs. “[P]eople were better able to do the three things governments designed to allow people to do, be better parents, be better partners and be better neighbors. They said they could breathe, that they were happier, they had space to think about things other than meeting their basic necessities. And I’m incredibly proud of those findings” (quoted in PBS NewsHour, 2021). The next step, according to Tubbs and other guaranteed income advocates, is to lay the groundwork for targeted, permanent programs. The MGI mayors have supported the expanded Child Tax Credit, a guaranteed income for families with children, and advocated to the Biden administration to make it permanent (Mayors for a Guaranteed Income, 2022).

RESPONDING TO CLASS INEQUALITIES

Welfare policies—and who should benefit from them—have been long debated in American politics. In this section, we will review federal welfare policies and programs and life after welfare.

U.S. Welfare Policy

Throughout the 20th century, U.S. welfare policy has been caught between two values: the desire to help those who cannot help themselves and the concern that assistance could create

dependency (Weil & Feingold, 2002). The centerpiece of the social welfare system was established by the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935. The act endorsed a system of assistance programs that would provide for Americans who could not care for themselves: widows, the elderly, the unemployed, and the poor.

Under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, assistance was provided in four categories: general relief, work relief, social insurance, and categorical assistance. General relief was given to those who were not able to work; most of the people receiving general relief were single men. Work relief programs gave government jobs to those who were unemployed through programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration. Social insurance programs included social security and unemployment compensation. Categorical assistance was given to poor families with dependent children, to the blind, and to the elderly. To serve this group, the original welfare assistance program, Aid to Dependent Children (later renamed AFDC), was created (Cammisa, 1998).

Categorical programs became the most controversial, and social insurance programs were the most popular. It was widely believed that social insurance paid people for working, whereas categorical programs paid people for not working. Shortly after these programs were implemented, officials became concerned that individuals might become dependent on government relief (Cammisa, 1998). Even President Roosevelt (quoted in Patterson, 1981) expressed his doubts about the system he helped create: "Continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit" (p. 60).

The next great expansion of the welfare system occurred in the mid-1960s when President Lyndon Johnson (1965) declared a War on Poverty and implemented his plan to create the Great Society. Rehabilitation of the poor was the cornerstone of Johnson's policies, and what followed was an explosion of social programs: Head Start, Upward Bound, Neighborhood Youth Corps, Job Corps, public housing, and affirmative action. Although poverty was not eliminated, defenders of the Great Society say that these programs alleviated poverty, reduced racial discrimination, reduced the stigma attached to being poor, and helped standardize government assistance to the poor. Conversely, opponents claim that these programs coddled the poor and created a generation that expected entitlements from the government (Cammisa, 1998).

During the more than 50 years when the AFDC program operated, welfare rolls were increasing, and even worse, recipients were staying on government assistance for longer periods. In a strange irony, welfare, the solution for the problem of poverty became a problem itself (Norris & Thompson, 1995). Between 1986 and 1996, many states began to experiment with welfare reforms. Wisconsin was the first state to implement such a reform with a program that included work requirements, benefit limits, and employment goals.

In 1996, PRWORA was passed with a new focus on helping clients achieve self-sufficiency through employment. PRWORA was a bipartisan welfare reform plan to reduce recipients' dependence on government assistance through strict work requirements and welfare time limits. Replacing AFDC, the new welfare program is called TANF. Instead of treating assistance as an



Soup kitchens emerged in the United States during the Great Depression, operated primarily by churches and local charities. Soup and bread meals were easy to prepare and serve to the poor and unemployed.

Vintage_Space/Alamy Stock Photo

entitlement, as it was under AFDC, TANF declares that government help is temporary and has to be earned. Under TANF, there is a federal lifetime limit of 60 months (5 years) of assistance, although states may put shorter limits on benefits. PRWORA also gave states primary responsibility for designing their assistance programs and for determining eligibility and benefits.

The act had an immediate effect on the number of poor. When PRWORA became law, the poverty rate was 13.7%; 36.5 million individuals were poor by the government's definition. A year later, the rate had declined to 13.3%, and 35.6 million were poor. Rates declined to their lowest point in 2000, 11.3%, or 31.6 million. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the 2000 poverty rate was the lowest since 1979 (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2007).

PRWORA was reauthorized under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. The reauthorization requires states to engage more TANF clients in productive work activities leading to self-sufficiency. The 5-year cumulative lifetime limit for TANF recipients remains unchanged. Funding was also provided for healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood initiatives (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006).

During the 2007–2009 recession, there was increased concern that poverty was on the rise, straining the safety net of TANF and other government support programs. A depressed economy challenges everyone but especially those already poor. According to Austin Nichols (2011), history has shown that unemployment and poverty rates continue to rise after a recession ends. The effects of poverty deepen over time as individuals exhaust private resources and temporary benefits. The rate of deep poverty (incomes less than half the poverty level) increased from 6.3% in 2009 to 6.7% in 2010. Nichols (2011) advised, “Federal government initiatives are laudable, but cash-strapped families scarred by the labor market and housing market collapses will need more direct help, temporary or not” (p. 2).

During the 2020 pandemic, direct assistance was provided to those unable to work through the CARES Act, the \$2.2 trillion federal coronavirus relief package, which included one-time payments to most households (up to \$1,200 per adult), unemployment insurance for self-employed and gig workers, and an additional \$600 to weekly unemployment checks through July 2020. This assistance plan was credited with keeping many Americans out of official poverty status but did not make them immune to other hardships, such as housing or food insecurity, the loss of personal savings, and job insecurity.

In 2021, the American Rescue Plan, a \$1.9 trillion relief package included a \$1,400 direct payment to most Americans and funds to extend unemployment insurance and reopen schools, assistance to small businesses and landlords, and vaccine distribution. Also included under the plan was the expansion of the Child Tax Credit. Enacted in 1997, the Child Tax Credit law allows families to claim a \$2,000 tax credit for each eligible child (under the age of 17). Only for 2021, the American Rescue Plan increased the maximum credit amount to \$3,600 for children under the age of six and \$3,000 for children aged 6–17 (the first time 17-year-olds were included). The temporary increase in tax credits is credited with lifting 4.3 million people, including 2.3 million children, above the poverty line. For 2021, child poverty was at 5.2%; for 2022, child poverty increased to 12.4% (Casselmann & DePillis, 2023). Millions of individuals, including undocumented workers, were not eligible for CARES Act or American Rescue Plan benefits.

Life After Welfare

A strong economy and increased aid to low-income working families contributed to the immediate decline in welfare caseloads after PRWORA (Besharov, 2002). Welfare officials often point to how the first to leave welfare were those with the most employable skills. Under federal law, states are required to engage at least 50% of all families and 90% of two-parent families receiving

assistance in work activities (e.g., employment or job search). The law limits the degree to which education and training count toward the work participation rate. According to the Center for Women Policy Studies (2002), after PRWORA, college enrollment among low-income women declined. Yet studies have indicated that former TANF recipients with a college education are more likely to stay employed and less likely to return to welfare. For example, a study among former welfare recipients in Oregon found that only 52% of those with less than a high school diploma were employed after 2 years. In contrast, 90% of former TANF recipients with a bachelor's degree were still employed. Since 1996, all states passed legislation to allow secondary education to count as activity under PRWORA.

Although TANF evaluation studies have revealed overall increases in employment, income, and earnings of families formerly on welfare, many families remained poor or near poor and struggled to maintain employment (Hennessy, 2005). Eugenie Hildebrandt and Sheryl Kelber (2012) documented the experiences of women who were in different stages of TANF participation in a large Wisconsin urban county. Wisconsin was one of the first states to experiment with work-based welfare and program limits. Their study included women who had exhausted their time limit. Hildebrandt and Kelber discovered that the women were unable to meet the needs of their families during or after being in the TANF program. They concluded, "TANF does not have the depth, breadth, or flexibility to adequately address multiple, complex barriers to work. . . . Barriers of limited education and work skills for well-paying jobs, chronic mental and physical health problems, and personal and family challenges left them few options for escaping poverty" (pp. 138–139). Among the women in the terminated group, the majority had chronic health problems (93%) and depressive symptoms (78%).

In 2020, Ali Safawi and Ladonna Pavetti analyzed the results of 13 studies conducted in nine states that investigated the outcomes of recipients who left TANF between 2007 and 2019. They concluded that most recipients leave TANF for low-paying, unstable jobs with intermittent periods of joblessness or reduced hours and with annual incomes still below the federal poverty line. Most TANF leavers took hourly low-wage jobs in food service and child care. Although leavers continued to rely on other safety net programs, such as SNAP and Medicaid, most still faced significant hardship. The families were unable to save money for times when their job ended or their work hours were cut.

In 2012, the Obama administration gave states more control over how they administer their TANF program, instituting an experimental program for states to "test alternative and innovative strategies, policies, and procedures that are designed to improve employment outcomes for needy families" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Safawi and Pavetti (2020) recommended investing TANF funds in training programs that prepare TANF recipients for in-demand, high-quality jobs and to provide individualized services that recognize families' individual circumstances and work with them to set goals and expectations that respond to their needs.

Earned Income Tax Credit

Enacted in 1975, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) program provides federal tax relief for low-income working families, especially those with children. The credit reduces the amount of federal tax owed and usually results in a tax refund for those who qualify. Similar programs are offered in the United Kingdom, Canada, France, and New Zealand. To qualify for the U.S. program, adults must be employed. A single parent with one child who had a family income of less than \$46,560 (or \$53,120 for a married couple with one child) in 2023 could get a credit of as much as \$3,995. The EITC can be claimed for children under age 19, or under age 24 if they are still in college.

Expansions of the program in the late 1980s and early 1990s made the credit more generous for families with two or more children. Receipt of the EITC does not affect the receipt of other programs such as food stamp benefits, Medicaid, or housing subsidies. In 2009, the EITC was expanded to low-earning single and married workers without children, noncustodial parents, and parents with adult independent children.

Supporters of the EITC argue that the program strengthens family self-sufficiency, provides families with more disposable income, and encourages work among welfare recipients. The program acts as a short-term safety net during periods of a shock to income (e.g., loss of job) or family structure (e.g., divorce) or as a long-term income support for multiple spells of income loss or poverty (Dowd & Horowitz, 2011). EITC and the Child Tax Credit are credited with lifting 10.6 million people above the poverty line and making poverty less severe for 17.5 million others in 2018 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2023). Families use their credits to cover basic necessities, such as food, clothing, and housing. Ten percent of recipients still retain some of their refund in savings after 6 months (Despard et al., 2015).

In 2023, 31 states and the District of Columbia offered a state-level earned income credit for residents, usually a percentage of the federal credit.

Changing the Definition—Redefining Poverty

The calculation of the U.S. poverty measure has been described as outdated due to how consumption patterns and the types of family needs have changed. For example, the cost of housing now constitutes a larger proportion of household expenses than it did in the 1960s (Ruggles, 1990). Due to the rising costs of goods and services other than food (the primary basis for the current poverty calculation), the poverty measure underestimates the income needed for all household necessities (Christopher, 2005).

In 1995, a panel of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) called for a new poverty measure to include the three basic categories of food, clothing, and shelter (and utilities) and a small amount to cover other needs such as household supplies, child care, personal care, and nonwork-related transportation. Because the census measure does not show how taxes, noncash benefits, and work-related childcare and medical expenses affect people's well-being, the NAS panel cautioned that the current poverty measure cannot reflect how policy changes in these areas affect the poor. In addition, the measure does not consider how the cost of basic goods (food and shelter) has changed since the 1960s. As we have already discussed, the federal poverty measurement assumes that costs are the same across most of the states, except Hawaii and Alaska. It does not make sense that a family of four in Manhattan, New York, is expected to spend the same amount of money for food, clothing, and shelter as a family of four in Manhattan, Kansas (Bhargava & Kuriansky, 2002).

The U.S. Census Bureau has been calculating experimental measures of poverty since 1999. For 2001, in measuring the overall poverty rate, the experimental measures reported higher levels of poverty, especially when accounting for geographic differences in housing costs and for medical out-of-pocket expenses. Although the official rate was 11.7%, experimental measures varied between 12.3% and 12.9%. When looking at the poverty rate for specific groups, the experimental measures tend to present a poverty population that looks more like the total population in terms of its mix of people: the elderly, White non-Hispanic individuals, and Hispanics (Short, 2001).

In 2011, the U.S. Census Bureau released the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM). Rebecca Blank (2011) explained that the SPM provides an alternative way to look at economic need among the lowest-income families. While adjusting for geographic differences, the measure considers the dollar amount spent on food, clothing, utilities and housing, medical needs,

and work-related transportation. The measure also considers household income resources, including noncash government benefits such as SNAP and the EITC. The official poverty statistics, according to Blank, are incomplete when it comes to reporting the effect of government policy on the poor. For example, when SNAP and school lunch benefits are counted as income, 5 million people are lifted above the SPM poverty line. For 2022, Social Security was the most important antipoverty program, lifting 28.9 million people above the SPM poverty line (Shrider & Creamer, 2023).

Although the SPM will not replace the official measure, it has led to a reexamination of the extent of poverty in the United States. Results showed higher SPM poverty rates than the official measure for most groups. For 2022, according to the official poverty measure, 11.5% of the population was living in poverty. With the SPM calculation, the poverty estimate increased to 12.4%. The distribution of poverty also changes with higher proportions of poor among children under the age of 18, families with a female householder, American Indian and Alaska Natives, and individuals with no high school diploma (Shrider & Creamer, 2023).

Sanders Korenman et al. (2019) advocated for the use of a health-inclusive poverty measure (HIPM) in addition to the SPM. The HIPM adds basic health insurance needs defined as “the amount of cash needed by a family with no public or private health benefits of any kind to purchase insurance to meet their basic need for preventative care, or for physical or mental health care should they become injured or suffer from physical or mental illness” (p. 437). Although there is not much difference between SPM and HIPM poverty estimates, according to Korenman and his colleagues, the HIPM allows analysts to better understand the poverty-reducing effects of health insurance benefits, similar to the impact of SNAP benefits.

CHAPTER REVIEW

2.1 Explain the difference between income and wealth.

Income is the money received by a person or household, usually in the form of a wage or salary. Wealth is defined as the value of assets (checking and savings accounts, property, vehicles, and stocks) owned by a household at a point in time. Wealth, rather than income, may be more important in determining one’s economic inequality.

2.2 Compare the four sociological perspectives on social class and poverty.

Functionalists observe that class inequality is a product of our social structure. Lower wages and poverty are natural consequences of this system of stratification. Conflict theorists assert that poverty exists because those in power want to maintain and expand their base of power and interests, with little left to share with others. Welfare bureaucracies—local, state, and national—represent important interest groups that influence the creation and implementation of welfare policies. Feminist scholars have argued that the welfare state is an arena of political struggle. The drive to maintain male dominance and the patriarchal family is assumed to be the principal force shaping the formation, implementation, and outcomes of U.S. welfare policy. Interactionists explain how poverty is a learned phenomenon. This perspective also focuses on the public’s perceptions of poverty.

2.3 Identify the major consequences of poverty.

Food insecurity is defined as food insufficient for all family members to enjoy active and healthy lives for at least some time during the year. For a variety of reasons, poor families encounter higher food prices and a smaller selection of food than other families. Housing

is another problem; the combination of low earnings and scarce housing assistance results in serious housing problems for the working poor. Social class is a major determinant of one's health and life expectancy. Those lower on the socioeconomic ladder have worse health than those above them.

2.4 Explain the evolution of U.S. welfare policy.

The centerpiece of the social welfare system was established by the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935. The act endorsed a system of assistance programs that would provide for Americans who could not care for themselves: widows, the elderly, the unemployed, and the poor. Welfare policies and programs were expanded under Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society reforms, yet policymakers grew concerned about increasing dependence on social welfare programming. A new era of social welfare began with the 1996 PRWORA. PRWORA was a bipartisan welfare reform plan to reduce recipients' dependence on government assistance through strict work requirements and welfare time limits.

KEY TERMS

Absolute poverty	Power
Culture of poverty	Power elite
Distributive power	Prestige
Food insecure	Relative poverty
Income	Social inequality
Life chances	Social stratification
Poverty guidelines	Wealth
Poverty threshold	

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Examine the difference between income and wealth. Which do you think is the better measure of social class?
2. How would you describe a middle-class lifestyle? What are its characteristics—housing, vacations, cars, and lifestyle? Estimate the amount of income and wealth it takes to lead this middle-class life.
3. Review the different definitions of poverty (from sociologists and according to federal policy). What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
4. Functionalists assume that not everyone in society can and should be equal. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
5. How would Marx and Weber define your social status, that of Microsoft's Bill Gates, and that of your sociology professor?
6. How has the welfare system (past and present) discriminated against women?
7. The chapter reviews three consequences of poverty—health care, food insecurity, and housing. Which do you think is most serious and why? How did the coronavirus pandemic alter the experience of poverty?