



Graham Dean, *Beg*, 1991

## 10

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**Summary and Review**

# Social Class in the United States

**A**h, New Orleans, that fabled city on the Gulf. Images from its rich past floated through my head—pirates, wealth, intrigue. Memories from a pleasant vacation stirred my thoughts—the exotic French Quarter with its enticing aroma of Creole food and sounds of earthy jazz drifting through the air.

The shelter for the homeless, however, forced me back to an unwelcome reality. The shelter was the same as those I had visited in the North, West, and East—only dirtier. The dirt, in fact, was the worst that I had encountered during my research, and this shelter was the only one to insist on payment in exchange for sleeping in one of its filthy beds.

The men looked the same—disheveled and haggard, wearing that unmistakable expression of despair—just like the homeless anywhere in the country. Except for the accent, you wouldn't know what region of the country you were in. Poverty wears the same tired face, I realized. The accent may differ, but the look remains the same.

The next morning, I felt indignation swell within me. I had grown used to the sights and smells of abject poverty. Those no longer surprised me. But now, just a block or so from the shelter, I was startled by a sight so out of step with the misery and despair I had just experienced that I stopped in midtrack.

*I was startled by a sight so out of step with the misery and despair I had just experienced that I stopped in midtrack.*

I was confronted by life-size, full-color photos that were mounted on the transparent plastic shelter covering a bus stop. Staring back at me were finely dressed men and women proudly strutting about as they modeled elegant suits, dresses, diamonds, and furs.

A wave of disgust swept over me. “Something is cockeyed in this society,” I thought, my mind refusing to stop juxtaposing these images with the suffering I had just witnessed.

Occasionally the reality of social class hits home with brute force. This was one of those moments. The disjunction that I felt in New Orleans was triggered by the ads, but it was not the first time that I had experienced this sensation. Whenever my research abruptly transported me from the world of the homeless to one of another social class, I felt unfamiliar feelings of disjointed unreality. Each social class has its own way of being, and because these fundamental orientations to the world contrast so sharply, the classes do not mix well.

## What Is Social Class?

“There are the poor and the rich—and then there are you and I, neither poor nor rich.” This is just about as far as most Americans’ consciousness of social class goes. Let’s try to flesh out this idea.

Our task is made somewhat difficult because sociologists have no clear-cut, agreed-on definition of social class. As noted in the last chapter, conflict sociologists (of the Marxist orientation) see only two social classes: those who own the means of production and those who do not. The problem with this view, say most sociologists, is that it lumps too many people together. Physicians and corporate executives with incomes of \$400,000 a year are lumped together with hamburger flippers who work at McDonald’s for \$13,000 a year.

Most sociologists agree with Weber that there is more to social class than just a person’s relationship to the means of production. Consequently, most sociologists use the components Weber identified and define **social class** as a large group of people who rank close to one another in wealth, power, and prestige. These three elements separate people into different lifestyles, give them different chances in life, and provide them with distinct ways of looking at the self and the world.

Let’s look at how sociologists measure these three components of social class.

### ■ Wealth

The primary dimension of social class is wealth. **Wealth** consists of property and income. *Property* comes in many forms, such as buildings, land, animals, machinery, cars, stocks, bonds, businesses, and bank accounts. *Income* is money received as wages, rents, interest, royalties, or the proceeds from a business.

#### social class

according to Weber, a large group of people who rank close to one another in wealth, power, and prestige; according to Marx, one of two groups: capitalists who own the means of production or workers who sell their labor

#### wealth

property and income

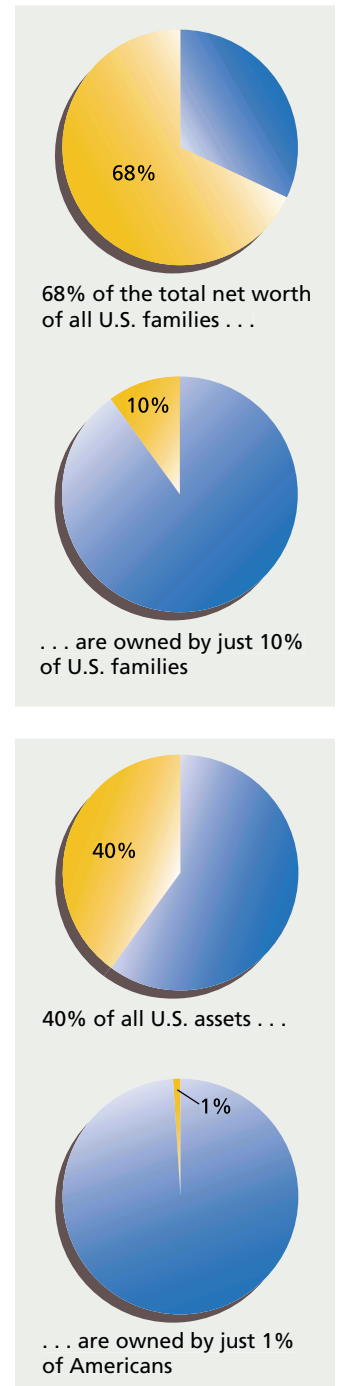


■ In the United States, a mere 0.5 percent of the population owns over a quarter of the nation's wealth. Very few minorities are numbered among this 0.5 percent. An outstanding exception is Oprah Winfrey, whose ultra-successful career in entertainment, bringing her over \$250 million a year, has made her one of the 400 richest Americans. Winfrey is shown here as she launched the premiere issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, at a press breakfast in New York City. Oprah has given millions of dollars to benefit minority children.

**Distinction Between Wealth and Income** Wealth and income are sometimes confused, but they are not the same. Some people have much wealth and little income. For example, a farmer may own much land (a form of wealth), but a little bad weather, combined with the high cost of fertilizers and machinery, can cause the income to disappear. Others have much income and little wealth. For example, an executive with a \$200,000 annual income may be debt ridden. Below the surface prosperity—exotic vacations, country club membership, private schools for the children, fancy sports cars, and an elegant home in an exclusive suburb—he or she may be overextended, the fancy cars in danger of being repossessed, and the mortgage payments “past due.” Typically, however, wealth and income go together.

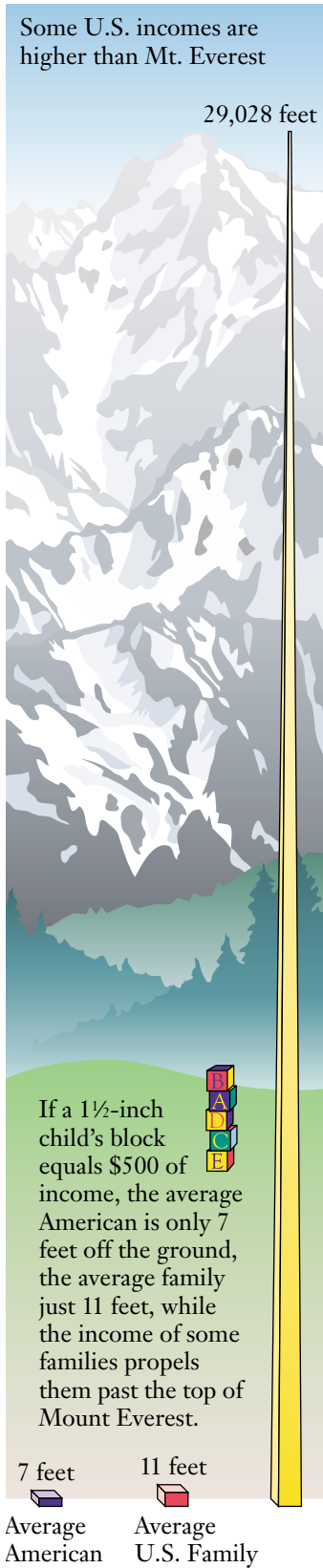
Who owns the wealth in the United States? One answer, of course, is “everyone.” Although this statement has some merit, it overlooks how the nation's wealth is divided among “everyone.” Let's look at how the two forms of wealth—property and income—are distributed among Americans.

**Distribution of Wealth** Overall, Americans are worth a hefty sum, about \$26 trillion (*Statistical Abstract 2000:Table 766*). This counts all real estate, stocks, bonds, and business assets in the entire country. Figure 10.1 shows how highly concentrated this wealth is. Most, 68 percent, is owned by only 10 percent of the nation's



**Figure 10.1**  
Distribution of Wealth of Americans

Source: Beeghley 2000.



**Figure 10.2**  
Inequality of U.S. Income

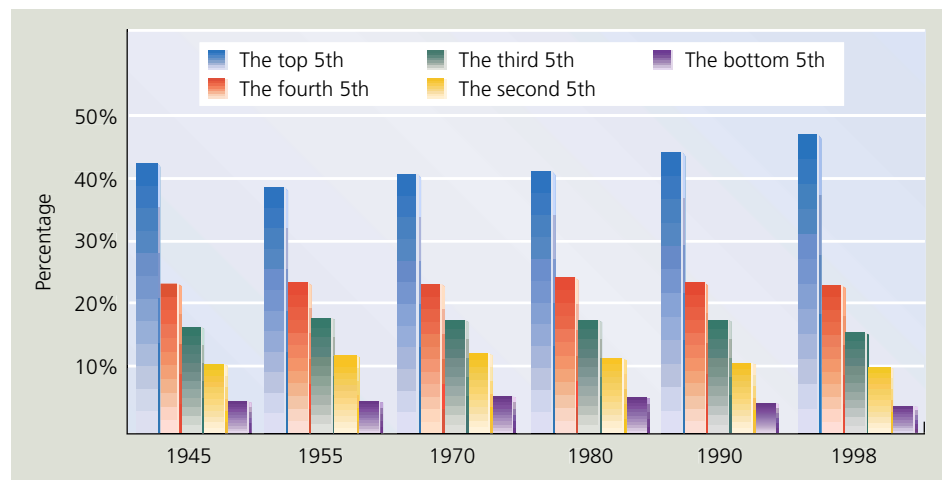
families. And the higher up the income ladder we go, the more concentrated this wealth becomes. As sociologist Leonard Beeghley (2000) observes, *the super-rich, the richest 1 percent of U.S. families, are worth more than the entire bottom 90 percent of Americans*. As you can see from Figure 10.1, this 1 percent owns 40 percent of all the wealth in the United States.

**Distribution of Income** How is income distributed in the United States? Economist Paul Samuelson (Samuelson and Nordhaus 2000) put it this way: “If we made an income pyramid out of a child’s blocks, with each layer portraying \$500 of income, the peak would be far higher than Mount Everest, but most people would be within a few feet of the ground.”

Actually, if each block were 1½ inches tall, the typical American would be just 7 feet off the ground, for the average per capita income in the United States is about \$29,000 per year. (This average income includes every American, even children.) The typical family climbs a little higher, for most families have more than one worker, and together they average about \$47,000 a year. Yet compared with the few families who are on the mountain’s peak, the average U.S. family would find itself only 12 feet off the ground (*Statistical Abstract* 2000:Tables 727, 746). Figure 10.2 portrays these differences.

The fact that some Americans enjoy the peaks of Mount Everest while most—despite their efforts—make it only 7 to 12 feet up the slope presents a striking image of income inequality in the United States. Another picture emerges if we divide the U.S. population into five equal groups and rank them from highest to lowest income. As Figure 10.3 shows, the top 20 percent of the population receives *almost half* (47.2 percent) of all income in the United States. In contrast, the bottom 20 percent of Americans receives only 4.3 percent of the nation’s income.

Two features of Figure 10.3 are outstanding. First, notice how consistent income inequality remains through the years. Second, the changes that do occur indicate *growing inequality*. *The richest 20 percent of U.S. families have grown richer, while the poorest 20 percent have grown poorer*. Despite numerous antipoverty programs, the poorest 20 percent of Americans receive *less* of the nation’s income today than they did in the



**Figure 10.3**  
Growing Inequality: The Percentage of the Nation’s Income Received by Each Fifth of U.S. Families Since World War II

Note: The distribution of U.S. income—salaries, wages, and all other money received, except capital gains and government subsidies in the form of food stamps, health benefits, or subsidized housing.

Source: *Statistical Abstract* 1947; 2001:Table 670.

**T A B L E 10.1** Highest-Paid CEOs

Executive	Company	Annual Compensation
Sanford I. Weill	Citigroup	\$224 million
John T. Chambers	Cisco Systems	\$157 million
Kenneth L. Lay	Enron	\$140 million
L. Dennis Kozlowski	Tyco	\$125 million
John F. Welch, Jr.	GE	\$123 million
Joseph P. Nacchio	Qwest	\$97 million
W. J. Sanders	Advanced Micro Devices	\$92 million

Source: "Executive Pay," 2001.

1940s (a drop from 5.4 percent to 4.3 percent). The richest 20 percent, in contrast, receive *more* than ever (an increase from about 41 percent to just over 47 percent).

The most affluent group in the United States is the chief executive officers (CEOs) of the nation's largest corporations. The *Wall Street Journal* surveyed the 350 largest U.S. companies to find out what they paid their CEOs ("The Boss's Pay," 2001). Their median compensation (including salaries, bonuses, and stock options) came to \$2,902,000 a year. (Median means that half received more than this amount, and half less.) The CEOs' income—which does *not* include their interest, dividends, rents, and capital gains—is *90 times* higher than the average pay of U.S. workers (*Statistical Abstract* 2000:Table 694). Table 10.1 above lists the seven highest paid executives. (The bankruptcy of Enron in 2002, with the spectacle of Kenneth Lay pleading the fifth before Congress, demonstrates that the economic foundation of this income is not always secure.)

Imagine how you could live with an income like this. And this is precisely the point. Beyond cold numbers lies a dynamic reality that profoundly affects people's lives. The difference in wealth between those at the top and those at the bottom of the U.S. class structure means vastly different lifestyles. For example, a colleague of mine who was teaching at an exclusive eastern university piqued his students' curiosity when he lectured on poverty in Latin America. That weekend, one of his students borrowed his parents' corporate jet and pilot, and in class the next Monday he and his friends related their personal observations on poverty in Latin America. Americans who are at the low end of the income ladder, in contrast, lack the funds to travel even to a neighboring town for the weekend: Their choices revolve around whether to spend the little they have at the laundromat or on milk for the baby. In short, divisions of wealth represent not "mere" numbers, but choices that make vital differences in people's lives, a topic explored in the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page.



■ Bill Gates, a cofounder of Microsoft Corporation, is the wealthiest person in the world. His fortune of \$90 billion continues to increase as his company develops new products. His 40,000-square-foot home (sometimes called a "technopalace") in Seattle, Washington, is appraised at \$110 million. In addition to being the wealthiest person in history, Gates has also given more money to the poor and minorities than any individual in history.

## down-to-earth

## sociology

## How the Super-Rich Live

It's good to see how other people live. It helps give us a different perspective for viewing life. Let's take a glimpse at the life of John Castle (his real name). After earning a degree in physics at MIT and an MBA at Harvard, John went into banking and securities, where he made more than \$100 million (Lublin 1999).

Wanting to be close to someone famous, John bought President John F. Kennedy's "Winter White House," an oceanfront estate in Palm Beach, Florida. John spent \$11 million to remodel the 13,000-square-foot house so it would be more to his liking. Among those changes: adding bathrooms numbers 14 and 15. He likes to show off John F. Kennedy's bed and also the dresser that has the drawer labeled "black underwear," carefully hand-lettered by Rose Kennedy.

If John gets bored at his beachfront estate—or tired of swimming in the Olympic-size pool where JFK swam the weekend before his assassination—he entertains himself by riding one of his thoroughbred horses at his nearby 10-acre ranch. If this fails to ease his boredom, he can relax aboard his custom-built 45-foot Hinckley yacht.

The yacht is a real source of diversion. He once boarded it for an around-

- How do the super-rich live? It is difficult to even imagine their lifestyles, but this entrance to a home on Palm Island, off Miami, Florida, can give you some idea of what they are like.



the-world trip. He didn't stay on board, though—just joined the cruise from time to time. A captain and crew kept the vessel sailing in the right direction, and whenever John felt like it he would fly in and stay a few days. Then he would fly back to the States to direct his business. He did this about a dozen times, flying perhaps 150,000 miles. An interesting way to go around the world.

How much does a custom-built Hinckley yacht cost? John can't tell you. As he says, "I don't want to know what anything costs. When you've got enough money, price doesn't make a difference. That's part of the freedom of being rich."

Right. And for John, being rich also means paying \$1,000,000 to charter a private jet to fly Spot, his Appaloosa horse, back and forth to the vet. John didn't want Spot to have to endure a long trailer ride. Oh, and of course, there was the cost of Spot's medical treatment, another \$500,000.

Other wealthy people put John to shame. Wayne Huizenga, the CEO of AutoNation, bought a 2,000-acre country club, complete with an 18-hole golf course, a 55,000-square foot clubhouse, and 68 slips for visiting vessels. The club is so exclusive that its only members are Wayne and his wife.

## Power

Like many people, you may have said to yourself, "Sure, I can vote, but somehow the big decisions are always made despite what I might think. Certainly *I* don't make the decision to send soldiers to Kuwait or Afghanistan. *I* don't launch missiles against Kosovo or Baghdad. *I* don't decide to raise taxes or lower interest rates. It isn't *I* who decides to change welfare benefits."

And then another part of you may say, "But I do participate in these decisions through my representatives in Congress, and by voting for president." True enough—as far as it goes. The trouble is, it just doesn't go far enough. Such views of being a participant in the nation's "big" decisions are a playback of the ideology we learn at

an early age—an ideology that Marx said is put forward by the elites to both legitimate and perpetuate their power. Sociologists Daniel Hellinger and Dennis Judd (1991) call this the “democratic facade” that conceals the real source of power in the United States.

Back in the 1950s, sociologist C. Wright Mills (1956) was criticized for insisting that **power**—the ability to carry out your will despite resistance—was concentrated in the hands of a few, for his analysis contradicted the dominant ideology of equality. As discussed in earlier chapters, Mills coined the term **power elite** to refer to those who make the big decisions in U.S. society.

Mills and others have stressed how wealth and power coalesce in a group of like-minded individuals who share ideologies and values. They belong to the same private clubs, vacation at the same exclusive resorts, and even hire the same bands for their daughters’ debutante balls. These shared backgrounds and vested interests reinforce their view of the world and of their special place in it (Domhoff 1998, 1999). This elite wields extraordinary power in U.S. society. Although there are exceptions, *most* U.S. presidents have come from this group—millionaire white men from families with “old money” (Baltzell and Schneiderman 1988).

Continuing in the tradition of Mills, sociologist William Domhoff (1990, 1998) argues that this group is so powerful that no major decision of the U.S. government is made without its approval. He analyzed how this group works behind the scenes with elected officials to determine both the nation’s foreign and domestic policy—from setting Social Security taxes to imposing trade tariffs. Although Domhoff’s conclusions are controversial—and alarming—they certainly follow logically from the principle that wealth brings power, and extreme wealth brings extreme power.

## ■ Prestige

**Occupations and Prestige** What are you thinking about doing after college? Chances are you don’t have the option of lolling under palm trees at the beach. Almost all of us have to choose an occupation and go to work. Look at Table 10.2 on the next page to see how the one you are considering stacks up in terms of **prestige** (respect or regard). Because we are moving toward a global society, this table also shows how the rankings given by Americans compare with those of the residents of sixty other countries.

Why do people give more prestige to some jobs than to others? If you look at Table 10.2, you will notice that the jobs at the top share four features:

1. They pay more.
2. They require more education.
3. They entail more abstract thought.
4. They offer greater autonomy (freedom, or self-direction).

If we turn this around, we can see that people give less prestige to jobs that are low-paying, require less preparation or education, involve more physical labor, and are closely supervised. In short, the professions and white-collar jobs are ranked at the top of the list, blue-collar jobs at the bottom.

One of the more interesting aspects of these rankings is how consistent they are across countries and over time. For example, people in every country rank college professors higher than nurses, nurses higher than social workers, and social workers higher than janitors. Similarly, the occupations that were ranked high back in the 1970s still rank high today—and likely will rank high in the years to come.

**power**  
the ability to get your way despite the desires of other people

**power elite**  
C. Wright Mills’ term for the top people in U.S. corporations, military, and politics who make the nation’s major decisions

**prestige**  
respect or regard

TABLE 10.2

## Occupational Prestige: How the United States Compares with 60 Countries

Occupation	United States	Average of 60 Countries	Occupation	United States	Average of 60 Countries
Supreme court judge	85	82	Professional athlete	51	48
College president	82	86	Undertaker	51	34
Physician	82	78	Social worker	50	56
Astronaut	80	80	Electrician	49	44
College professor	78	78	Secretary	46	53
Lawyer	75	73	Real estate agent	44	49
Dentist	74	70	Farmer	44	47
Architect	71	72	Carpenter	43	37
Psychologist	71	66	Plumber	41	34
Airline pilot	70	66	Mail carrier	40	33
Electrical engineer	69	65	Jazz musician	37	38
Civil engineer	68	70	Bricklayer	36	34
Biologist	68	69	Barber	36	30
Clergy	67	60	Truck driver	31	33
Sociologist	65	67	Factory worker	29	29
Accountant	65	55	Store sales clerk	27	34
Banker	63	67	Bartender	25	23
High school teacher	63	64	Lives on public aid	25	16
Author	63	62	Bill collector	24	27
Registered nurse	62	54	Cab driver	22	28
Pharmacist	61	64	Gas station attendant	22	25
Chiropractor	60	62	Janitor	22	21
Veterinarian	60	61	Waiter or waitress	20	23
Classical musician	59	56	Bellhop	15	14
Police officer	59	40	Garbage collector	13	13
Actor or actress	55	52	Street sweeper	11	13
Athletic coach	53	50	Shoe shiner	9	12
Journalist	52	55			

Sources: Treiman 1977, Appendices A and D; Nakao and Treas 1991.

**Displaying Prestige** To get a sense of payoff, people want others to acknowledge their prestige. In times past, in some countries only the emperor and his family could wear purple—for it was the royal color. In France, only the nobility could wear lace. In England, no one could sit while the king was on his throne. Some kings and queens required that subjects walk backward as they left the room—so no one would “turn their back” on the “royal presence.”

Concern with displaying prestige has not let up. For some, it is almost an obsession. Military manuals specify precisely who must salute whom. The U.S. president enters a room only after others are present (to show that *he* isn't the one waiting for *them*). They must also be standing when he enters. In the courtroom, bailiffs, sometimes armed, make certain that everyone stands when the judge enters.

The display of prestige permeates society. In Los Angeles, some people list their address as Beverly Hills and then add their correct ZIP code. When East Detroit changed its name to East Pointe to play off its proximity to swank Grosse Pointe, property values shot up (Fletcher 1997). Many pay more for clothing that bears a “designer” label. Prestige is often a primary factor in deciding which college to attend. Everyone knows how the prestige of a generic sheepskin from Regional State College compares with a degree from Harvard, Princeton, Yale, or Stanford.

Interestingly, status symbols vary with social class. Clearly, only the wealthy can afford certain items, such as yachts. But beyond affordability lies a class-based preference in status symbols. For example, Yuppies (young upwardly mobile professionals) are quick to flaunt labels, BMW's (“beemers”), and other material symbols to show that they have “arrived,” while the rich, more secure in their status, often downplay such images. The wealthy see designer labels of the “common” classes as cheap and showy. They, of course, flaunt their own status symbols, such as \$30,000 Rolex watches.



■ Acceptable display of prestige and high social position varies over time and from one culture to another. Shown here is Elisabeth d'Autriche, queen of France from 1554 to 1592. It certainly would be difficult to outdress her at a party.

## ■ Status Inconsistency

Ordinarily a person has a similar rank on all three dimensions of social class—wealth, power, and prestige. The homeless men in the opening vignette are an example. Such people are **status consistent**. Sometimes that match is not there, however, and someone has a mixture of high and low ranks, a condition called **status inconsistency**. This leads to some interesting situations.

Sociologist Gerhard Lenski (1954, 1966) pointed out that each of us tries to maximize our **status**, our social ranking. Thus individuals who rank high on one dimension of social class but lower on others expect people to judge them on the basis of their highest status. Others, however, trying to maximize their own position, may respond to them according to their lowest status.

A classic study of status inconsistency was done by sociologist Ray Gold (1952). He found that after apartment-house janitors unionized, they made more money than some of the tenants whose garbage they carried out. Tenants became upset when they saw their janitors driving more expensive cars than they did. Some attempted to “put the janitor in his place” by making “snotty” remarks to him. For their part, the janitors took secret pride in knowing “dirty” secrets about the tenants, gleaned from their garbage.

Individuals with status inconsistency, then, are likely to confront one frustrating situation after another. They claim the higher status, but are handed the lower. The sociological significance of this condition is that such people tend to be more politically radical (Lenski 1954, Mateju and Kreidl 2001). An example is college professors. Their prestige is very high, as we saw in Table 10.2, but their incomes are relatively low. Hardly anyone in U.S. society is more educated, and yet college

**status consistency**  
ranking high or low on all three dimensions of social class

**status inconsistency (or status discrepancy)**  
ranking high on some dimensions of social class and low on others

**status**  
social ranking



- *Status discrepancy is common for lottery winners, whose new wealth is vastly greater than their education and occupational status. Shown here are John and Sandy Jarrell of Chicago, after they learned that they were one of 13 families to share a \$295 million jackpot. How do you think their \$22 million will affect their lives?*

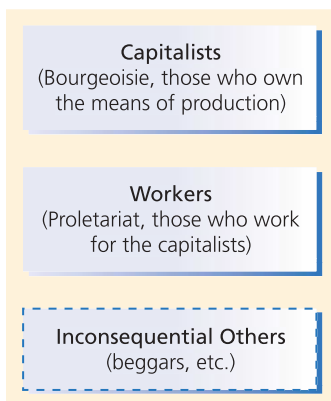
professors don't even come close to the top of the income pyramid. In line with Lenski's prediction, the politics of most college professors are left of center. This hypothesis may also hold true among academic departments; that is, the higher a department's pay, the less radical are its politics. Teachers in departments of business and medicine, for example, are among the most highly paid in the university—and they also are the most politically conservative.

## Sociological Models of Social Class

The question of how many social classes there are is a matter of debate. Sociologists have proposed several models, but no model has gained universal support. There are two main models: one that builds on Marx, the other on Weber.

### Updating Marx

Marx argued that there are just two classes—capitalists and workers—with membership based solely on a person's relationship to the means of production (see Figure 10.4). Sociologists have criticized this view because these categories are too broad. For example, because executives, managers, and supervisors don't own the means of production, they would be classified as workers. But what do these people have in common with assembly-line workers? Similarly, the category of "capitalist" takes in too many types. Some people employ a thousand workers, and their decisions directly affect a thousand families. Compare these people with a man I know in Godfrey, Illinois, who used to fix cars in his back yard. As Frank gained a following, he quit his regular job, and in a few years he put up a building with five bays and an office. Frank is now a capitalist, for he employs five or six mechanics and owns the tools and



**Figure 10.4**  
Marx's Model of Social Class

the building (the “means of production”). But what does he have in common with a factory owner who controls the lives of one thousand workers? Not only is Frank’s work different, but so are his lifestyle and the way he looks at the world.

Sociologist Erik Wright (1985) resolved this problem by regarding some people as members of more than one class at the same time. They occupy what he called **contradictory class locations**. By this, Wright means that people’s position in the class structure can generate contradictory interests. For example, the automobile-mechanic-turned-business-owner may want his mechanics to have higher wages since he, too, has experienced their working conditions. At the same time, his current interests—making profits and remaining competitive with other repair shops—lead him to resist pressures to raise wages.

Because of such contradictory class locations, Wright modified Marx’s model. As summarized in Table 10.3, Wright identified four classes: (1) *capitalists*, business owners who employ many workers; (2) *petty bourgeoisie*, small business owners, (3) *managers*, who sell their own labor but also exercise authority over other employees; and (4) *workers*, who simply sell their labor to others. As you can see, this model allows finer divisions than the one Marx proposed, yet it maintains the primary distinction between employer and employee. Problems persist, however. For example, where do the professions fit? In which category would we place college professors? And as you know, there are huge differences between managers. An executive at GM, for example, may manage a thousand workers, while a shift manager at MacDonald’s may be responsible for only a handful. They, too, have little in common.

## ■ Updating Weber

Sociologists Joseph Kahl and Dennis Gilbert (Gilbert and Kahl 1993; Gilbert 1997) developed a six-class model to portray the class structure of the United States and other capitalist countries. Think of their model—Figure 10.5 on the next page, as a ladder. Our discussion starts with the highest rung and moves downward. In line with Weber, on each lower rung you find less wealth, less power, and less prestige. Note that in this model education is also a primary measure of class.

**The Capitalist Class** Only about 1 percent of the population occupies the top rung of the class ladder. As we saw in Figure 10.1, this 1 percent is so wealthy that its members are worth more than the entire bottom 90 percent of the nation. They own 40 percent of the nation’s entire wealth. Their power is so great that their decisions open or close jobs for millions of people. They also have direct access to top politicians. This small elite even helps to shape the consciousness of the nation: They own our newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, and control the boards of directors of our colleges and universities. The super-rich perpetuate themselves in privilege by passing to their children their assets and influential social networks.

The capitalist class can be divided into “old” and “new” money. The longer that wealth has been in a family, the more it adds to the family’s prestige. Their children seldom mingle with “common” folk—instead, they attend exclusive private schools where they learn views of life that support their privileged position. They don’t work for wages; instead, many study business or enter the field of law so they can manage the family fortune. These old-money capitalists (also called “blue-bloods”) wield vast power as they use their extensive political connections to protect their huge economic empires (Persell et al. 1992; Domhoff 1990, 1999).

TABLE 10.3

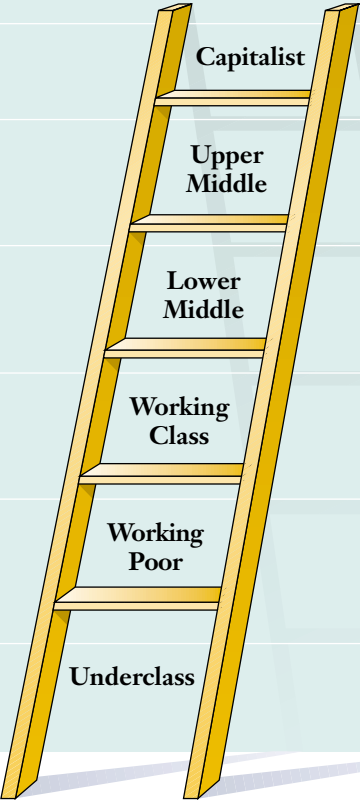
### Wright’s Modification of Marx’s Social Class Model

1. Capitalists
2. Petty bourgeoisie
3. Managers
4. Workers

**contradictory class location**  
Erik Wright’s term for a position in the class structure that generates contradictory interests



■ Sociologists use income, education, and occupational prestige to measure social class. For most people, this classification works well. But not for everyone. Entertainers sometimes are difficult to fit in. To what social class does Christine Aguilera belong?



Social Class	Education	Occupation	Income	Percentage of Population
Capitalist	Prestigious university	Investors and heirs, a few top executives	\$500,000+	1%
Upper Middle	College or university, often with postgraduate study	Professionals and upper managers	\$100,000+	15%
Lower Middle	At least high school; perhaps some college or apprenticeship	Semiprofessionals and lower managers, craftspeople, foremen	About \$40,000	32%
Working Class	High school	Factory workers, clerical workers, low-paid retail sales, and craftspeople	About \$30,000	32%
Working Poor	Some high school	Laborers, service workers, low-paid salespeople	About \$16,000	16%
Underclass	Some high school	Unemployed and part-time, on welfare	Under \$10,000	4%

**Figure 10.5****The U.S. Social Class Ladder**

Source: Based on Gilbert and Kahl 1993 and Gilbert 1997; income estimates are modified from Duff 1995.

At the lower end of the capitalist class are the *nouveau riche*, those who have “new money.” They are outsiders to this upper class. Although they have made fortunes in business, the stock market, inventions, entertainment, or sports, they have not attended the “right” schools, and they lack the influential social networks that come with old money. Not blue-bloods, they aren’t trusted to have the right orientations to life. Donald Trump, for example, is not listed in the *Social Register*, the “White Pages” of the blue-bloods that lists the most prestigious and wealthy one-tenth of 1 percent of the U.S. population. Trump says he “doesn’t care,” but he reveals his true feelings by adding that his heirs will be in it (Kaufman 1996). He probably is right, for the children of the new-moneyed can ascend into the top part of the capitalist class—if they go to the right schools *and* marry old money.

Many in the capitalist class are philanthropic. They establish foundations and give huge sums to “causes.” Their motivations vary. Some feel guilty because they have so much while others have so little. Others feel a responsibility—even a sense of fate or purpose—to use their money for doing good. Still others seek prestige, acclaim, or fame.

**The Upper Middle Class** Of all the classes, the upper middle class is the one most shaped by education. Almost all members of this class have at least a bachelor’s degree, and many have postgraduate degrees in business, management, law, or medicine. These people manage the corporations owned by the capitalist class or else operate their own business or profession. As Gilbert and Kahl (1982) say, these positions

may not grant prestige equivalent to a title of nobility in the Germany of Max Weber, but they certainly represent the sign of having “made it” in contemporary America. . . . Their income is sufficient to purchase houses and cars and travel that become public symbols for all to see and for advertisers to portray with words and pictures that connote success, glamour, and high style.

Consequently, parents and teachers push children to prepare for upper-middle-class jobs. About 15 percent of the population belong to this class.

**The Lower Middle Class** About 34 percent of the population belong to the lower middle class. Members of this class have jobs that call for them to follow orders given by those who have upper-middle-class credentials. Their technical and lower-level management positions bring them a good living, although they feel threatened by taxes and inflation. They enjoy a comfortable, mainstream lifestyle, and many anticipate being able to move up the social class ladder.

The distinctions between the lower middle class and the working class on the next lower rung are more blurred than those between other classes. In general, however, members of the lower middle class work at jobs that have slightly more prestige, and their incomes are generally higher.

**The Working Class** About 30 percent of the U.S. population belong to this class of relatively unskilled blue-collar and white-collar workers. Compared with the lower middle class, they have less education and lower incomes. Their jobs are also less secure, more routine, and more closely supervised. One of their greatest fears is being laid off during a recession. With only a high school diploma, the average member of the working class has little hope of climbing up the class ladder. Job changes usually bring “more of the same,” so most concentrate on getting ahead by achieving seniority on the job rather than by changing their type of work.

**The Working Poor** Members of this class, about 16 percent of the population, work at unskilled, low-paying, temporary and seasonal jobs, such as sharecropping, migrant farm work, housecleaning, and day labor. Most are high school dropouts. Many are functionally illiterate, finding it difficult to read even the want ads. They are not likely to vote (Gilbert and Kahl 1993; Beeghley 2000), for they feel that no matter what party is elected to office, their situation won’t change.

Although they work full time, millions of the working poor depend on help such as food stamps to supplement their meager incomes (O’Hare 1996b). It is easy to see how you can work full time and still be poor. Suppose that you are married and have a baby 3 months old and another child 3 years old. Your spouse stays home to care for them, so earning the income is up to you. But as a high-school dropout, all you can get is a minimum wage job. At \$5.25 an hour, you earn \$210 for 40 hours. In a year, this comes to \$10,920—before deductions. Your nagging fear—and daily nightmare—is of ending up “on the streets.”

**The Underclass** On the lowest rung, and with next to no chance of climbing anywhere, is the **underclass**. Concentrated in the inner city, this group has little or no connection with the job market. Those who are employed, and some are, do menial, low-paying, temporary work. Welfare, if it is available, along with food stamps and food pantries, are their main support. Most members of other classes consider these people the ne’er-do-wells of society. Life is the toughest in this class, and it is filled with despair. About 4 percent of the population fall into this class.

The homeless men described in the opening vignette of this chapter, and the women and children like them, are part of the underclass. These are the people whom most Americans wish would just go away. Their presence on our city streets bothers passersby from the more privileged social classes—which includes just about everyone. “What are those obnoxious, dirty, foul-smelling people doing here, cluttering up my city?” appears to be a common response. Some people respond with sympathy and a

**underclass**

a group of people for whom poverty persists year after year and across generations

desire to do something. But what? Almost all of us just shrug our shoulders and look the other way, despairing of a solution and somewhat intimidated by their presence.

The homeless are the “fallout” of our developing postindustrial economy. In another era, they would have had plenty of work. They would have tended horses, worked on farms, dug ditches, shoveled coal, and run the factory looms. Some would have explored and settled the West. Others would have been lured to California, Alaska, and Australia by the prospect of gold. Today, however, with no frontiers to settle, factory jobs scarce, and farms that are becoming technological marvels, we have little need for unskilled labor.

### ■ Social Class in the Automobile Industry

The automobile industry illustrates the social class ladder. The Fords, for example, own and control a manufacturing and financial empire whose net worth is truly staggering. Their power matches their wealth, for through their multinational corporation their decisions affect production and employment in many countries. The family’s vast fortune, and its accrued power, are now several generations old. Consequently, Ford children go to the “right” schools, know how to spend money in the “right” way, and can be trusted to make family and class interests paramount in life. They are without question at the top level of the *capitalist* class.

Next in line come top Ford executives. Although they may have an income of several hundred thousand dollars a year (and some, with stock options and bonuses, earn several million dollars annually), most are new to wealth and power. Consequently, they would be classified at the lower end of the capitalist class.

A husband and wife who own a Ford agency are members of the *upper middle class*. Their income clearly sets them apart from the majority of Americans, and their reputation in the community is enviable. More than likely they also exert greater-than-average influence in their community, but their capacity to wield power is limited.

A Ford salesperson, as well as people who work in the dealership office, belongs to the *lower middle class*. Although there are some exceptional salespeople, even a few who make a lot of money selling prestigious, expensive cars to the capitalist class, salespeople at a run-of-the-mill Ford agency are lower middle class. Compared with the owners of the agency, their income is less, their education is likely to be less, and their work is less prestigious.

Mechanics who repair customers’ cars are members of the *working class*. A mechanic who is promoted to supervise the repair shop joins the lower middle class.

Those who “detail” used cars (making them appear newer by washing and polishing the car, painting the tires, spraying “new car scent” into the interior, and so on) belong to the *working poor*. Their income and education are low, the prestige accorded their work minimal. They are laid off when selling slows down.

Ordinarily, the *underclass* is not represented in the automobile industry. It is conceivable, however, that the agency might hire a member of the underclass to do a specific job such as mowing the grass or cleaning up the used car lot. In general, however, personnel at the agency do not trust members of the underclass and do not want to associate with them—even for a few hours. They prefer to hire someone from the working poor for such jobs.

### ■ Consequences of Social Class

Each social class can be thought of as a broad subculture with distinct approaches to life. This means that social class affects people’s health, family life, and education. It also influences their religion and politics, even their experiences with crime and the criminal justice system. Let’s look at these consequences of social class, as well as how the new technology is related to social class.

## ■ Physical Health

Social class is so significant that it even affects our chances of living and dying. The principle is simple: The lower a person's class, the more likely that individual is to die before the expected age. This principle holds true at all ages. Infants born to the poor are more likely than other infants to die before their first birthday. In old age—whether 75 or 95—a larger proportion of the poor die each year than do the wealthy. The two primary reasons for this are lifestyle and medical care.

Social class shapes people's lifestyles, which, in turn, affect their health. Those in the lower social classes are more likely to smoke, eat more fats, abuse drugs and alcohol, exercise less, and practice unsafe sexual behavior (Chin et al. 2000). This, to understate the matter, does not increase people's health.

The second reason for the unequal death rates is unequal access to medical care. Consider this example:

Terry Takewell (his real name) was a 21-year-old diabetic who lived in a trailer park in Somerville, Tennessee. When Zettie Mae Hill, Takewell's neighbor, found the unemployed carpenter drenched with sweat from a fever, she called an ambulance. Takewell was rushed to nearby Methodist Hospital. There he had an outstanding bill of \$9,400. A notice had been posted in the emergency room telling staff members to alert supervisors if Takewell ever returned.

By the time the hospital administrator was informed of the admission, Takewell was already in a hospital bed. The administrator went to Takewell's room, helped him to his feet, and escorted him to the parking lot. There, neighbors found him under a tree and took him home.

Takewell died about twelve hours later.

Zettie Mae Hill is still torn up about it. She wonders if Takewell would be alive today if she had directed his ambulance to a different hospital. She said, "I didn't think a hospital would just let a person die like that for lack of money." (Based on Ansberry 1988)

Why was Terry Takewell denied medical treatment and his life cut short? The fundamental reason is that in the United States health care is not a citizen's right, but a commodity for sale. The result is a two-tier system of medical care—superior care for those who can afford the cost, and inferior care for those who cannot. Unlike the middle and upper classes, few poor people have a personal physician, and they often spend hours waiting in crowded public health clinics. After waiting most of a day, some don't even get to see a doctor; instead, they are told to come back the next day (Fialka 1993). And when the poor are hospitalized, they are likely to find themselves



- *The photos of these two women were taken "at home." The woman in her chateau in Geneva, Switzerland (left) and the woman at Simferopol, Crimea (right) are both shown in their living rooms. From the contrast evident in these photos, can you see how social class makes such a vital difference in people's life chances? Can you see why these women are likely to see the world in highly distinctive ways, and why their politics and even their religions are likely to differ?*

in understaffed and underfunded public hospitals, where they are treated by rotating interns who do not know them and cannot follow up on their progress.

## ■ Mental Health

Social class also affects our mental health. From the 1930s until now, sociologists have found that the mental health of the lower classes is worse than that of the higher classes (Faris and Dunham 1939; Srole et al. 1978; Lundberg 1991; Miller 1994). Greater mental problems are part of the stress that accompanies poverty. Compared with middle- and upper-class Americans, the poor have less job security, lower wages, more unpaid bills, more divorce, more alcoholism, greater vulnerability to crime, and more physical illnesses—often accompanied by the threat of eviction hanging over their heads. Such conditions deal severe blows to people’s emotional well-being.

People higher up the social class ladder experience stress, of course, but their stress is generally less and their coping resources greater. Not only can they afford vacations, psychiatrists, and counselors, but *their class position gives them greater control over their lives, a key to good mental health*. Happiness, a component of mental health, is explored in the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page.

## ■ Family Life

Social class plays an especially significant role in family life. Of its many consequences in this vital area, let’s look at choice of spouse, divorce, and child rearing.

**Choice of Husband or Wife** Members of the capitalist class place strong emphasis on family tradition. They stress the family’s ancestors, history, and even a sense of purpose or destiny in life (Baltzell 1979; Aldrich 1989). Children of this class learn that their choice of husband or wife affects not just themselves but the entire family, that their spouse will have an impact on the “family line.” Because of these background expectations, the field of “eligible” marriage partners is much narrower than it is for the children of any other social class. In effect, parents in this class play a strong role in their children’s mate selection.

**Divorce** The more difficult life of the lower social classes, especially the many tensions that come from insecure jobs and inadequate incomes, leads to higher marital friction and a greater likelihood of divorce. Consequently, children of the poor are more likely to grow up in broken homes.

**Child Rearing** As discussed on pages 00–00, sociologist Melvin Kohn (1977) found significant class differences in child rearing. Lower-class parents are more concerned that their children conform to conventional norms and obey authority figures. Middle-class parents, in contrast, encourage their children to be more creative and independent. They also tolerate a wider range of behaviors, except in speech, where they are less tolerant of bad grammar and curse words.

Kohn concluded that lower- and middle-class parents rear their children differently because their occupations give them different visions of their children’s futures. Lower-class parents are closely supervised in their jobs, and they anticipate that their children will work at similar jobs. Consequently, they try to teach their children to defer to authority. In contrast, parents from the more privileged classes enjoy greater creativity and self-expression at work. Anticipating similar work for their children, they encourage them to express greater freedom. Out of these contrasting orientations also arise different ways of enforcing discipline; lower-class parents are more likely to use the stick, while the middle classes rely more on verbal persuasion.

## ■ Education

As we saw in Figure 10.5, education increases as one goes up the social class ladder. It is not just the amount of education that changes, but also the type of education. Children of the capitalist class bypass public schools. They attend exclusive

## down-to-earth

## sociology

## Can Money Buy Happiness?

Do you think you would be happier if you didn't have to worry about paying bills? Or if you could pay cash for a new car and afford exotic vacations?

If you answered yes, you are correct. The middle class are happier than the poor, and the rich are happier than the middle class.

Research also shows that:

- Women are generally happier than men.
- Whites are generally happier than African Americans.
- Married people are generally happier than unmarried people.
- Americans aren't as happy today as they were a generation ago.
- Women are especially less happy now than they were a generation ago.

Some of these findings have puzzled researchers. The finding that whites are generally happier than African Americans isn't a puzzle because it follows the principle that happiness generally increases with income. But since Americans are richer today than they were a generation ago, they should also be happier. Yet the national average of hap-



piness has declined. Researchers have suggested several solutions to this paradox. First, to get their higher incomes, Americans work more hours than they used to—and their jobs are less secure. Second, Americans divorce more and get married less than they did in the past—and the divorced and single generally aren't as happy as the married. A third explanation focuses on the finding that the decline in happiness has occurred almost entirely among women. Although women are still generally happier than men, their average level of happiness has dropped while that of men has hardly budged. The reason, suggest researchers, is the many more millions of women who have entered the work force. They face not only the

pressures of work, but also at home they shoulder about the same responsibilities that their non-employed mothers did.

Then there is this explanation: We really are happier, but we don't know it! Over the years, our expectations have increased, and we now demand more out of life than we used to. We aren't as satisfied with eating at home, for example, or having just three channels on TV to watch. We demand restaurant meals, larger houses, newer cars, gourmet food, and exotic vacations. Since happiness revolves around having our expectations met, as our expectations go up, our ability to meet those expectations has to keep pace or our happiness declines.

Oh, well, an extra ten or twenty grand a year will help.

## for your consideration

Of the four explanations for the general decline in the happiness of Americans in the face of a rising standard of living, which one do you think is the best? Why?

Based on Leonhardt 2001.



private schools where they are trained to take a commanding role in society. Prep schools such as Phillips Exeter Academy, Groton School, and Woodberry Forest School teach upper-class values and prepare their students for prestigious universities (Beeghly 2000; Higley 2001). Keenly sensitive to the significance of private schools, aspiring members of the upper middle class do their best to get their children in prestigious preschools; they even elicit letters of recommendation for their 2- and 3-year-olds. Such differences in parental expectations and resources are a major reason why

children from the more privileged classes do better in school and are more likely to enter and to graduate from college.

### ■ Religion

One area of social life that we might think would be unaffected by social class is religion. (“People are just religious, or they are not. What does social class have to do with it?”) As we shall see in Chapter 18, however, the classes tend to cluster in different denominations. Episcopalians, for example, are more likely to recruit from the middle and upper classes. Baptists draw heavily from the lower classes, and Methodists are more middle class. Patterns of worship also follow class lines: The lower classes are attracted to spontaneous worship services and louder music, while the middle and upper classes prefer more “subdued” worship.

### ■ Politics

As has been stressed throughout this text, symbolic interactionists emphasize that people see events from their own corner in life. Political views are no exception to this principle, and the rich and the poor walk different political paths. The higher people are on the social class ladder, the more likely they are to vote for Republicans. In contrast, most members of the working class believe that the government should intervene in the economy to make citizens financially secure, and most are Democrats. Although the working class is more liberal on *economic* issues (policies that increase government spending), it is more conservative on *social* issues (such as opposing abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment) (Lipset 1959; Houtman 1995). People toward the bottom of the class structure are also less likely to be politically active—to campaign for candidates, or even to vote (Gilbert and Kahl 1997; Soss 1999; Beeghley 2000).

### ■ Crime and the Criminal Justice System

If justice is supposed to be blind, it certainly is not when it comes to one’s chances of being arrested (Henslin 2000). In Chapter 8 (pages 000–000) we discussed how the upper and lower social classes have different styles of crime. The white-collar crimes of the more privileged classes are more likely to be dealt with outside the criminal justice system, while the street crimes of the lower classes are dealt with by the police and courts. One consequence of this class standard is that members of the lower classes are more likely to be in prison, on probation, or on parole. In addition, since people tend to commit crimes in or near their own neighborhoods, the lower classes are more likely to be robbed, burglarized, or murdered.

### ■ Social Class and the New Technology

If the United States does not keep pace with global change and remain competitive by producing low-cost, quality goods, its economic position will decline. Opportunities will dwindle; there will be fewer jobs and shrinking paychecks. To compete in this global economic race, the United States is incorporating advanced technology in all spheres of life.

For the capitalist class, the new technology is a dream come true: By minimizing the obstacles of national borders, capitalists can move factories to countries with cheap labor and maximize profits through global integration. Components can be produced in one country, assembled in another, and the product marketed throughout the world. The upper middle class are well prepared for the change. Their education enables them to take a leading role in managing this global system for the capitalist class, or for using the new technology to advance in their chosen professions.

Below these two most privileged classes, however, the new technology adds to the insecurity to life. As job markets shift, the skills of many in the lower middle class become outdated. This strikes fear in those who work at specialized crafts, for new technology can reduce or even eliminate the need for their narrow, specialized skills.

People in lower management are more secure, for they can transfer their skills from one job to another.

From this middle point on the ladder down, technology hits people the hardest. The working class is ill prepared to cope with the changes, and the threat of plant closings haunts them. The working poor are even more vulnerable, for they have even less to offer in the new job market. As unskilled jobs dry up, many workers are consigned to the industrial garbage bin.

The underclass, technologically illiterate, is left behind. This point was driven home to me when I saw the homeless sitting dejected in the shelters. Of what value were these high school dropouts, our technological know-nothings, to this new society that is undergoing its piercing birth pains? With no productive place, their base of social belonging and self-esteem has been pulled out from under them.

In short, the new technology opens and closes opportunities for people largely by virtue of where they are located on the social class ladder, a topic discussed in the New Technology box below.



## the new technology

### Closing the Digital Divide: The Technology Gap Facing the Poor and Minorities

Consider this:

- Ninety-one percent of children whose family has an annual income of \$75,000 or more have computers at home, compared with 22 percent of children in families with annual incomes less than \$20,000 a year (Lewin 2001a).
- A high-income urban family is 20 times more likely to have Internet access than a low-income rural family.
- A white child in a poor family is three or four times more likely to have Internet access than an African American or Latino child in a poor family.
- A child in a wealthy Asian American family is 34 times more likely to have Internet access than a child in a poor African American or Latino family (“Haves and Have-Nots” 2000).
- Of all racial-ethnic groups, Native Americans have the least access to computers. Only half have telephones at home (Romero 2000).

The term *digital divide* refers to this unequal access to computers and the

Internet. As you can see, this technology gap marks the social classes, geographical areas, and racial-ethnic groups.

Sociologists focus on the *structural* basis of wealth and poverty. That is, they examine how advantage and disadvantage are *built into society*—how birth forces some people to face many obstacles, while others face few. To level the playing field, the question is not how we can destroy the advantages that some have, but, rather, how we can reduce obstacles and increase opportunities for others.

If computers were only for playing cyber games, the digital divide would not be an issue. But in today’s technological world, children who have less access to computers and the Internet face a major hurdle in life. To have weak computer skills means to be cut off from information and work opportunities.

#### for your consideration

What do you think can be done to overcome the digital divide? For example, should the government pay to connect



every U.S. home to the Internet and buy a computer for every child, beginning in kindergarten? Why or why not?

Let’s look at the problem this way: The Internet has become a gigantic library that spans the globe. Would we ever allow our city or school libraries to let some ethnic groups in more often than others? Would we allow them to let in the wealthy, but close the door on the poor? Finally, do you think that this analogy is fair, since libraries are funded by tax dollars but home computers and Internet access are paid for by individuals?

## Social Mobility

No aspect of life, then—from marriage to education—goes untouched by social class. Because life is so much more satisfying in the more privileged classes, people strive to climb the social class ladder. What affects their chances?

### intergenerational mobility

the change that family members make in social class from one generation to the next

### upward social mobility

movement up the social class ladder

### downward social mobility

movement down the social class ladder

### structural mobility

movement up or down the social class ladder that is attributable to changes in the structure of society, not to individual efforts

### exchange mobility

about the same numbers of people moving up and down the social class ladder, such that, on balance, the social class system shows little change

## Three Types of Social Mobility

There are three basic types of social mobility: intergenerational, structural, and exchange. **Intergenerational mobility** refers to a change that occurs between generations—when grown-up children end up on a different rung of the social class ladder from the one their parents occupy. If the child of someone who sells used cars graduates from college and buys a Saturn dealership, that person experiences **upward social mobility**. Conversely, if a child of the dealership's owner parties too much, drops out of college, and ends up selling cars, he or she experiences **downward social mobility**.

We like to think that individual efforts are the reason people move up the class ladder, and their faults the reason they move down. In these examples, we can identify hard work, sacrifice, and ambition on the one hand, versus indolence and alcohol abuse on the other. Although individual factors such as these do underlie social mobility, sociologists consider **structural mobility** to be the crucial factor. This second basic type of mobility refers to changes in society that cause large numbers of people to move up or down the class ladder.

To better understand structural mobility, think of how opportunities opened when computers were invented. New types of jobs appeared overnight. Huge numbers of people took workshops and crash courses, switching from blue-collar to white-collar work. Although individual effort certainly was involved—for some seized the opportunity while others did not—the underlying cause was a change in the *structure* of work. Consider the opposite—how opportunities close during a depression, and millions of people are forced downward on the class ladder. In this instance, too, their changed status is due less to individual behavior than to *structural* changes in society.

The third type of social mobility, **exchange mobility**, occurs when large numbers of people move up and down the social class ladder, but, on balance, the proportions of the social classes remain about the same. Suppose that a million or so working-class people are trained in computers, and they move up the class ladder. Suppose also that due to a surge in imports about a million skilled workers have to take lower-status jobs. Although millions of people change their social class, there is, in effect, an *exchange* among them. The net result more or less balances out, and the class system remains basically untouched.



- The term structural mobility refers to changes in society that push large numbers of people either up or down the social class ladder. A remarkable example was the stock market crash of 1929, when thousands of people suddenly lost immense amounts of wealth. People who once “had it made” found themselves standing on street corners selling apples or, as depicted here, selling their possessions at fire-sale prices.

## Women in Studies on Social Mobility

The United States is famous worldwide for its intergenerational mobility. That children can pass up their parents on the social class ladder is one of the attrac-

tions of this country. To find out how extensive this mobility is, sociologists used to study only men. In classic studies, they concluded that about half of sons passed their fathers; about one-third stayed at the same level, and only about one-sixth fell down the class ladder (Blau and Duncan 1967; Featherman and Hauser 1978; Featherman 1979).

Fathers and sons? How about the other half of the population? Feminists pointed out this obvious omission (Davis and Robinson 1988). They also objected to the assumption that women had no class position of their own—sociologists had simply assigned them the class of their husbands. The defense was that too few women were in the labor force to make a difference.

With huge numbers of women now working for pay, more recent studies include women (Breen and Whelan 1995; Beeghley 2000). Sociologists Elizabeth Higginbotham and Lynn Weber (1992), for example, studied 200 women from working-class backgrounds who became professionals, managers, and administrators in Memphis. They found that almost without exception, the women's parents had encouraged them while they were still little girls to postpone marriage and get an education. This study confirms findings that the family is of utmost importance in the socialization process and that the primary entry to the upper middle class is a college education. At the same time, note that if there had not been a *structural* change in society, the millions of new positions that women occupy would not exist.

## ■ The Pain of Social Mobility

You know that to be knocked down the social class ladder is painful, but were you aware that climbing it also brings pain? Sociologist Steph Lawler (1999) interviewed British women who had moved to the middle class through education or marriage. The women were caught between two worlds—their working-class background and their current middle-class life. The gap in their relationship with their mothers was especially bothersome. The tension centered around their new tastes in furniture, food, and speech. Even the way they reared their children became a matter of dispute. Sociologists Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1972/1988), who studied social mobility in Boston, also found a gap between parents and children. The working-class parents had made deep sacrifices so their children could go to college, they expected their children to appreciate their sacrifices. Because the children's educated world was so distant from that of their parents, however, the children had grown aloof, and the two had difficulty even talking to one another. The parents felt betrayed and were bitter.

In short, social class separates people into worlds so distinct that communication and mutual understanding become difficult. To change one's social class is to tear oneself from one's roots. As you may recall, Richard Rodriguez, featured in the Perspectives box on page 84, found that his climb up the social class ladder had wrenching costs.

## Poverty

**M**any Americans find the “limitless possibilities” on which the American dream is based to be elusive. As illustrated in Figure 10.5 on page 286, the working poor and underclass together form about one-fifth of the U.S. population. This translates into a huge number, about 60 million people. Who are these people?

**poverty**  
lacking resources to meet your basic needs

## ■ Drawing the Poverty Line

To determine who is poor, the U.S. government uses a **poverty line**. This measure was set in the 1960s, when poor people were thought to spend about one-third of their incomes on food. Based on this assumption, each year the government computes a low-cost food budget and multiplies it by 3. Families whose incomes are less than this amount are classified as poor; those whose incomes are higher—even by a dollar—are determined to be “not poor.”

This official measure of poverty is grossly inadequate. Poor people actually spend only about 20 percent of their incomes on food, so to determine a poverty line we really ought to multiply their food budget by five instead of three (Uchitelle 2001). No political party in power wants to do this, as redrawing the line would make it appear that poverty increased under their watch. Another problem with the poverty line is that some mothers work and have to pay for child care, but they are treated the same as mothers who don't have this expense. The poverty line is also the same for everyone across the nation, even though the cost of living is higher in some states. Nor, for some reason, does the government count food stamps as income.

That a change in the poverty line would instantly make millions of people poor—or take away their poverty—would be a laughable matter, if it weren't so serious. The government uses the poverty line to decide who will receive help and who will not. Although this line is arbitrary, it is the official measure of poverty. Using it, let's see who in the United States is poor. Before we do this, though, compare your ideas of the poor with the myths explored in the Down-to-Earth Sociology box below.

### poverty line

the official measure of poverty; calculated to include those whose incomes are less than three times a low-cost food budget

## down-to-earth

### sociology

#### Exploring Myths About the Poor

##### **Myth 1 Most poor people are lazy. They are poor because they do not want to work.**

Half of the poor are either too old or too young to work. About 40 percent are under age 18, and another 10 percent are age 65 or older. About 30 percent of the working-age poor work at least half the year.

##### **Myth 2 Poor people are trapped in a cycle of poverty that few escape.**

The poverty population is *dynamic*. Most poverty lasts less than a year (Gottschalk et al. 1994). Only 12 percent remain in poverty for five or more consecutive years (O'Hare 1996a). Most children who are born in poverty are *not* poor as adults (Ruggles 1989).

##### **Myth 3 Most of the poor are African Americans and Latinos.**

As shown in Figure 10.7, the poverty rates of African Americans and Latinos are much higher than that of whites. Because there are so many more whites in the U.S. population, however, *most poor Americans are white*. Fifty-five percent of the poor are white, 21 percent African American, 19 percent Latino, 3 percent Asian American, and 1 percent Native American (*Statistical Abstract* 2000:Tables 44, 754; total is 99 percent due to rounding).

##### **Myth 4 Most of the poor are single mothers and their children.**

Although about 38 percent of the poor do match this stereotype, 34 percent of the poor live in married-couple families, 22 percent

live alone or with nonrelatives, and 6 percent live in other settings.

##### **Myth 5 Most of the poor live in the inner city.**

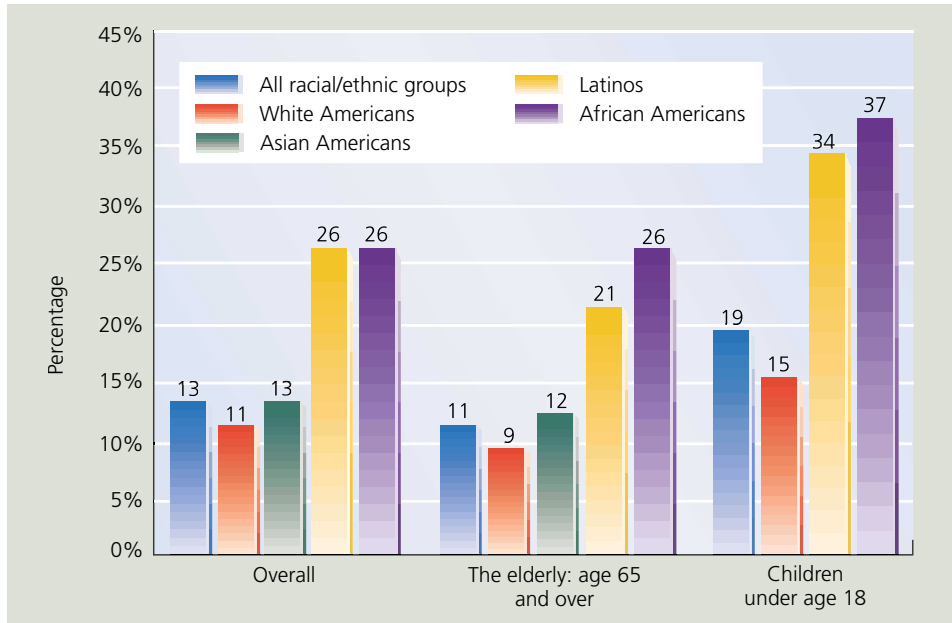
This one is close to fact, as about 42 percent do live in the inner city. But 36 percent live in the suburbs, and 22 percent live in small towns and rural areas.

##### **Myth 6 The poor live on welfare.**

About half of the income of poor adults comes from wages and pensions, about 25 percent from welfare, and about 22 percent from Social Security.

Sources: Primarily O'Hare 1996a and O'Hare 1996b, with other sources as indicated





**Figure 10.6**  
Poverty in the United States, by Age and Race-Ethnicity

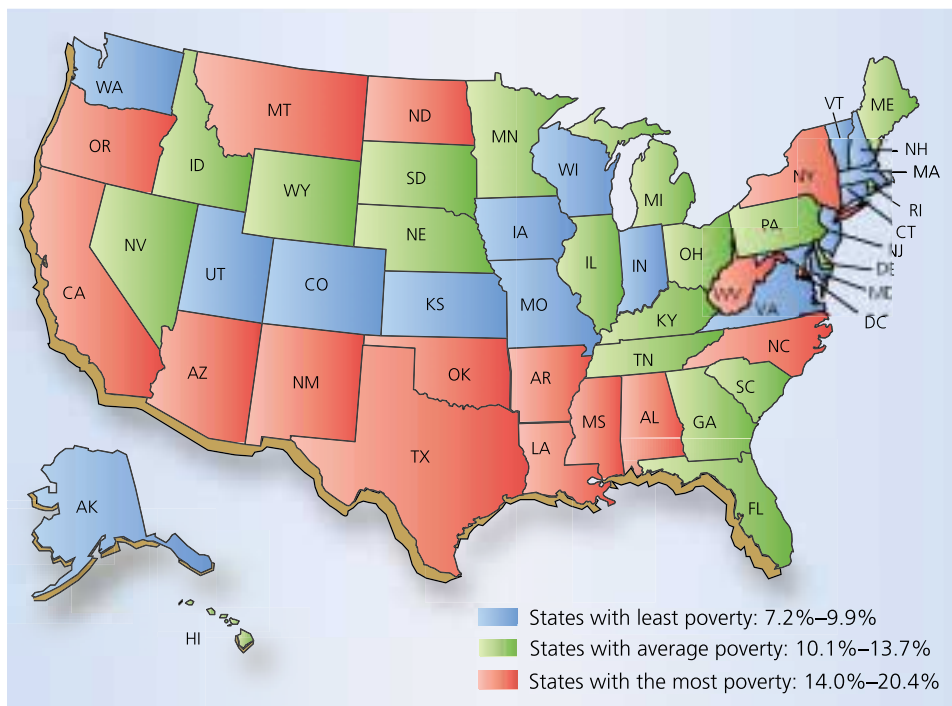
Note: The poverty line on which this figure is based is \$16,400 for a family of four. The source includes only these groups, and does not include Asian American children.

Source: *Statistical Abstract 2000*: Tables 754, 757, 758.

### Who Are the Poor?

**Geography** As you can see from the Social Map below, the poor are not evenly distributed among the states. The clustering of poverty in the South is a pattern that has prevailed for more than 100 years.

A second aspect of geography is also significant. About 56 million Americans live in rural areas. Of these, 9 million are poor. At 16 percent, their rate of poverty is



**Figure 10.7**  
Patterns of Poverty

Note: Poverty varies tremendously by state. In the extreme, poverty is about three times as common in New Mexico (20.4%) than it is in Maryland (7.2%).

Source: *Statistical Abstract 2000*: Table 759.

higher than the national average of 13 percent. The rural poor are less likely to be single parents, and more likely to be married and to have jobs. Compared with urban Americans, the rural poor are less skilled and less educated, and the jobs available to them pay less than similar jobs in urban areas (Dudenhefer 1993).

The greatest predictor of whether Americans are poor is not geography, however, but race-ethnicity, education, and the sex of the person who heads the family. Let's look at these three factors.

**Race-Ethnicity** One of the strongest factors in poverty is race-ethnicity. As Figure 10.6 on page 297 shows, only 11 percent of white Americans are poor, but 26 percent of African Americans and Latinos live in poverty. At 13 percent, the poverty rate of Asian Americans is close to that of white Americans. Although their poverty rate is the lowest, because there are so many more white Americans, most poor people are white.

**Education** As you know, education is a vital factor in poverty, but you may not have known just how powerful it is. From Figure 10.8 you can see that only 2 of 100 people who finish college end up in poverty, but one of every four or five people who drop out of high school is poor. As you can see, the chances of someone being poor decrease with each higher level of education. Although this principle applies regardless of race-ethnicity, you can see how race-ethnicity makes an impact at every level of education.

**The Feminization of Poverty** The other major predictor of poverty is the sex of the person who heads the family. Compared with men, women are more likely to be poor (*Statistical Abstract 2000:Tables 750, 751*). Women who head families average less than two-thirds the income of men who head families (*Statistical Abstract 2000:Table 748*). Consequently, most poor families are headed by women. The three major causes of this phenomenon, called the **feminization of poverty**, are divorce, births to single women, and the lower wages paid to women.

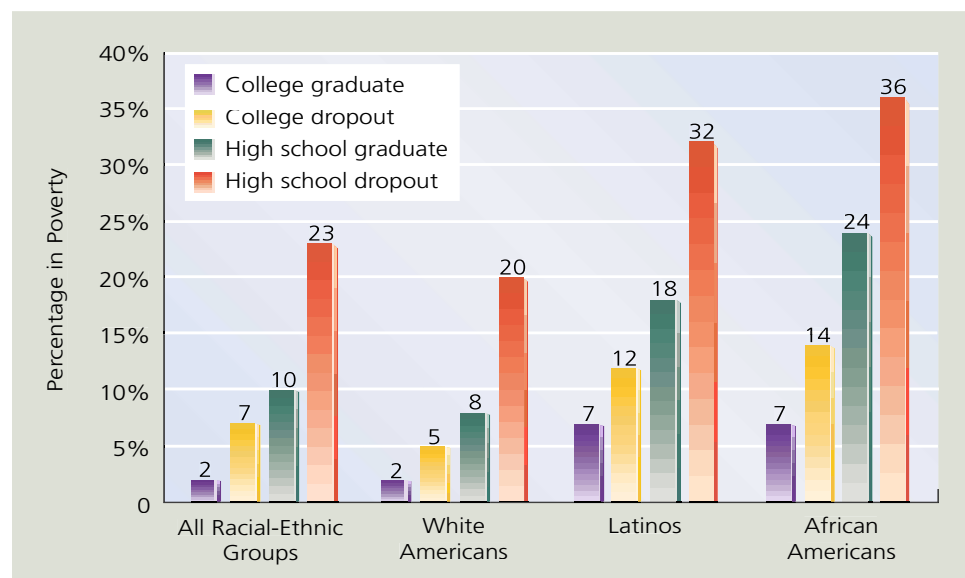
**Old Age** As Figure 10.6 on page 297 shows, the elderly are less likely than the general population to be poor. It used to be that growing old increased people's chances of being poor, but government policies to redistribute income—Social Security and subsidized housing, food, and medical care—slashed the rate of poverty among the elderly. This figure also shows how the prevailing racial-ethnic patterns carry over into old age. You can see how much more likely an elderly African American or Latino is to be poor than is an elderly white person.

**feminization of poverty**  
a trend in U.S. poverty whereby most poor families are headed by women

**Figure 10.8**

**Who Ends Up Poor?  
Poverty by Education  
and Race-Ethnicity**

Source: *Statistical Abstract 2000:Table 761*.





- Beyond the awareness of most Americans are the rural poor, such as this family in Louisiana. This family is typical of the rural poor: white and headed by a woman. What do you think the future holds for these children?

## ■ Children of Poverty

Children are more likely to live in poverty than are adults or the elderly. This holds true regardless of race-ethnicity, but from Figure 10.6 you can see how much greater poverty is among Latino and African American children. That about 14 million U.S. children are reared in poverty is shocking when one considers the wealth of this country and the supposed concern for the well-being of children. This tragic aspect of poverty is the topic of the following Thinking Critically section.

t h i n k i n g

CRITICALLY

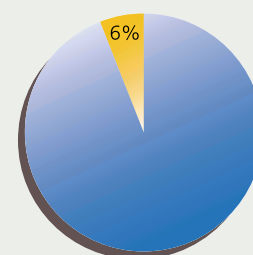
### The Nation's Shame: Children in Poverty

One of the most startling statistics in sociology is shown in Figure 10.6: One of every five U.S. children lives in poverty. About one of seven white children and one of three Latino and African American children are poor. These figures translate into incredible numbers—approximately 14 million children live in poverty: 6 million white children, 4 million Latino children, and 4 million African American children.

The main cause for this high rate of child poverty, says sociologist and former U.S. Senator Daniel Moynihan, is an increase in births outside marriage. In 1960, one of twenty U.S. children was born to a single woman. Today that total is *more than six times higher*, and single women now account for one of three (33 percent) of all U.S. births. Figure 10.9 shows the striking relationship between births to single women and social class. For women above the poverty line, only 6 percent of births are to single women; for women below the poverty line this rate is more than *seven times higher*.

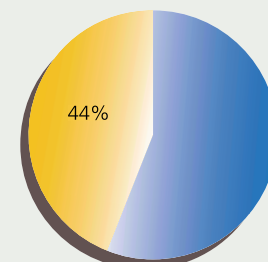
Regardless of the causes of childhood poverty—and there are many—what is most significant is that these millions of children face all of the suffering and obstacles to a satisfying life that poverty entails. They are more likely to die in infancy, to go hungry, to be malnourished, to develop more slowly, and to have more health problems. They also are more likely to drop out of school, to become involved in criminal activities, and to have children while still in their teens—thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

Births to Women Above the Poverty Line



6% = births to single women  
94% = births to married women

Births to Women Below the Poverty Line



44% = births to single women  
56% = births to married women

**Figure 10.9**

#### How Many Births to Single Mothers?

Note: Totals were available only for white women.

Source: Murray 1993.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■  
**for your consideration . . .**

Many social analysts—liberals and conservatives alike—are alarmed at this increase in child poverty. They emphasize that it is time to stop blaming the victim, and, instead, to focus on the *structural* factors that underlie child poverty. To relieve this problem, they say, we must take immediate steps to establish national programs of child nutrition and health care. Solutions will require at least three fundamental changes: (1) removing obstacles to employment; (2) improving education; and (3) strengthening the family. To achieve these changes, what specific programs would *you* recommend?

Sources: Moynihan 1991; Sandefur 1995; *Statistical Abstract* 1997:Table 1338; 2000: Tables 22, 78, 754, 757.

## ■ The Dynamics of Poverty

Some have suggested that the poor tend to get trapped in a **culture of poverty** (Harrington 1962; Lewis 1966a). They assume that the values and behaviors of the poor “make them fundamentally different from other Americans, and that these factors are largely responsible for their continued long-term poverty” (Ruggles 1989:7).

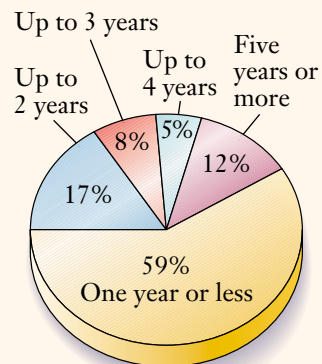
Lurking behind this concept is the idea that the poor are lazy people who bring poverty on themselves. Certainly some individuals and families match this stereotype—many of us have known them. But is a self-perpetuating culture—one that is transmitted across generations and that locks people in poverty—the basic reason for U.S. poverty?

Researchers who followed 5,000 U.S. families since 1968 uncovered some rather surprising findings. Contrary to common stereotypes, most poverty is short, lasting only a year or less. Most poverty comes about because of a dramatic life change such as divorce, the loss of a job, or even the birth of a child (O’Hare 1996a). As Figure 10.10 shows, only 12 percent of poverty lasts five years or longer. Contrary to the stereotype of lazy people content to live off the government, few poor people enjoy poverty—and they do what they can to *not* be poor.

Yet from one year to the next, the number of poor people remains about the same. This means that the people who move out of poverty are replaced by people who move *into* poverty. Most of these newly poor will also move out of poverty within a year. Some people even bounce back and forth, never quite making it securely out of poverty. Poverty, then, is dynamic, touching a lot more people than the official totals indicate. Although 13 percent of Americans may be poor at any one time, twice that number, about one-fourth of the U.S. population, is or has been poor for at least a year.

### **culture of poverty**

the assumption that the values and behaviors of the poor make them fundamentally different from other people, that these factors are largely responsible for their poverty, and that parents perpetuate poverty across generations by passing these characteristics to their children



**F**igure 10.10

How Long Does Poverty Last?

Source: Gottschalk et al. 1994:89.

## ■ Why Are People Poor?

Two explanations for poverty compete for our attention. The first, which sociologists prefer, focuses on *social structure*. Sociologists stress that *features of society* deny some people access to education or learning job skills. They emphasize racial, ethnic, age, and gender discrimination, as well as changes in the job market—the closing of plants, drying up of unskilled jobs, and an increase in marginal jobs that pay poverty wages.

A competing explanation focuses on the *characteristics of individuals* that are assumed to contribute to poverty. Individualistic explanations that sociologists reject outright as worthless stereotypes are laziness and lack of intelligence. Individualistic explanations that sociologists reluctantly acknowledge include dropping out of school, bearing children in the teen years, and averaging more children than women in the other social classes. Most sociologists are reluctant to speak of such factors in this context, for they appear to blame the victim, something that sociologists bend over backward not to do.

The tension between these competing explanations is of more than just theoretical interest. Each explanation affects our perception and has practical consequences, as is illustrated in the following Thinking Critically section.

t h i n k i n g

C R I T I C A L L Y

## The Welfare Debate: The Deserving and the Undeserving Poor

**T**hroughout U.S. history, Americans have divided the poor into two types: the deserving and the undeserving. The deserving poor are people who, in the public mind, are poor through no fault of their own. Most of the working poor, such as the Lewises, are considered deserving:

Nancy and Ted Lewis are in their early 30s and have two children. Ted works three part-time jobs, earning \$12,000 a year; Nancy takes care of the children and house and is not employed. To make ends meet, the Lewises rely on food stamps, Medicaid, and housing subsidies.

The undeserving poor, in contrast, are viewed as having brought on their own poverty. They are freeloaders who waste their lives in sloth, alcohol and drug abuse, and promiscuous sex. They don't deserve help, and, if given anything, will waste it on their dissolute lifestyles. Some would see Joan as an example:

Joan, her mother, and her three brothers and two sisters lived on welfare. Joan started having sex at 13, bore her first child at 15, and, now, at 23, is expecting her fourth child. Her first two children have the same father, the third a different father, and Joan isn't sure who fathered her coming child. Joan parties most nights, using both alcohol and whatever drugs are available. Her house is filthy, the refrigerator usually empty, and social workers have threatened to take away her children.

This division of the poor into deserving and undeserving underlies the heated debate about welfare. "Why should we use *our* hard-earned money to help *them*? They are just going to waste it. Of course, there are those who want to get on their feet, and helping them is okay."



### for your consideration . . .

Why do people make a division between deserving and undeserving poor? Should we let some people starve because they "brought poverty upon themselves"? Should we let children go hungry because their parents are unmarried and uneducated? Or because they are drug abusers? Does "unworthy" mean that we should not offer assistance to people who "squander" the help they are given?

In contrast to thinking of poor people as deserving or undeserving, use the sociological perspective to explain poverty without blaming the victim. What *social* conditions (conditions of society) create poverty? What *social* conditions produce the lifestyles that the middle class so despises?

## Welfare Reform

After decades of criticism, U.S. welfare was restructured in 1996. A federal law—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act—required states to place a lifetime cap on welfare assistance and to require welfare recipients to look for work and to take available jobs. The maximum length of time someone can collect welfare is five years. Many states have a shorter time frame. Unmarried teen parents must attend school and live at home or in some other adult-supervised setting.

This law set off a storm of criticism. Some called it an attack on the poor. Defenders replied that the new rules would rescue people from poverty. They would transform welfare recipients into self-supporting and hard-working citizens—and reduce welfare

costs. Some states put up new signs, changing “Welfare Center” to “Job Placement Center.” National welfare rolls plummeted, dropping by half (Bernstein 2000). This is only the rosy part of the picture, however. Some former welfare recipients have no job, but they are not on welfare because they have used up their time limit. Many are barely getting by, living with the fear of losing their jobs in an economic downturn. Some skip meals because there isn’t enough money for food (Sengupta 2001).

Consider one of the “success stories”:

JoAnne Sims, 37, lives in Erie, New York, with her 7-year-old daughter Jamine. JoAnne left welfare, and now earns \$6.75 an hour as a cook for Head Start. Her 37-hour week brings \$239.75 before deductions. With the help of medical benefits and a mother who provides child care, JoAnne “gets by.” She says, “From what I hear, a lot of us who went off welfare are still poor . . . let me tell you, it’s not easy.” (Peterson 2000)

Conflict theorists have an interesting interpretation of welfare. They say that its purpose is not to help people, but, rather to maintain an army of reserve workers. It is designed to keep the unemployed alive during economic downturns until they are needed during the next economic boom. Reducing the welfare rolls through the 1996 law fits this model, as it occurred during the longest economic boom in U.S. history. Recessions are inevitable, however, and just as inevitable, surging unemployment. In line with conflict theory, we can predict that with each recession welfare rules will be softened—in order to keep the reserve army of the unemployed ready for the next time they are needed.

## ■ Deferred Gratification

One consequence of a life of deprivation punctuated by emergencies—and of *seeing the future as more of the same*—is a lack of **deferred gratification**, giving up things in the present for the sake of greater gains in the future. It is difficult to practice this middle-class virtue if one does not have a middle-class surplus—or middle-class hope.

Back in 1967, sociologist Elliot Liebow noted this precise problem among black street-corner men. Their jobs were low-paying and insecure, their lives pitted with emergencies. With the future looking exactly like the present, and any savings they did manage gobbled up by emergencies—either theirs or their friends’ and relatives’—saving for the future was pointless. The only thing that made sense from their perspective was to enjoy what they could at the moment. Immediate gratification, then, was not the cause of their poverty, but its consequence. Cause and consequence loop together, however, for their immediate gratification helped perpetuate their poverty. For another look at this “looping,” see the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page, in which I share my personal experiences with poverty.

If both causes are at work, why do sociologists emphasize the structural explanation? Reverse the situation for a moment. Suppose that members of the middle class drove old cars that ran only half the time, faced threats from the utility company to shut off the electricity and heat, and had to make a choice between buying medicine and food and diapers or paying the rent. How long would they practice deferred gratification? Their orientations to life would likely make a sharp U-turn.

Sociologists, then, do not view the behaviors of the poor as the cause of their poverty, but, rather, as the result of their poverty. Poor people would welcome the middle-class opportunities that would allow them the chance to practice the middle-class virtue of deferred gratification. Without those opportunities, though, they just can’t afford it.

## ■ Where Is Horatio Alger? The Social Functions of a Myth

In the late 1800s, Horatio Alger was one of the country’s most talked-about authors. The rags-to-riches exploits of his fictional boy heroes and their startling successes in overcoming severe odds motivated thousands of boys of that period. Although Alger’s characters have disappeared from U.S. literature, they remain alive and well in the psyche of Americans. From real-life examples of people from humble

**deferred gratification**  
forgoing something in the present in the hope of achieving greater gains in the future



■ A culture’s dominant ideology is reinforced in many ways, including in its literature. As discussed in the text, Horatio Alger provided inspirational heroes for thousands of boys. The central theme of these many novels, immensely popular in their time, was rags to riches. Through rugged determination and self-sacrifice, a boy could overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles to reach the pinnacle of success.

## down-to-earth

## sociology

## Poverty: A Personal Journey

I was born in poverty. My parents, who could not afford to rent a house or apartment, rented the tiny office in their minister's house. That is where I was born.

My father began to slowly climb the social class ladder. His fitful odyssey took him from laborer to truck driver to the owner of a series of small businesses (tire repair shop, bar, hotel), then to vacuum cleaner salesman, and back to bar owner. He converted a garage into a house. Although it had no indoor plumbing or insulation (in northern Minnesota!), it was a start. Later, he bought a house, and then he built a new home. After that we moved into a trailer, and then back to a house. My father's seventh grade education was always an obstacle. Although he never became wealthy, poverty did become a distant memory for him.

My social class took a leap—from working to upper middle—when, after attending college and graduate school, I became a university professor. I entered a world that was unknown to my parents, a world much more pampered and privileged. I had opportunities to do research, to publish, and to travel to exotic

places. My reading centered on sociological research, and I read books in Spanish as well as in English. My father, in contrast, never read a book in his life, and my mother read only detective stories and romance paperbacks. One set of experiences isn't "better" than the other, just significantly different in determining what windows of perception it opens onto the world.

My interest in poverty, which was rooted in my own childhood experiences, stayed with me. I traveled to a dozen or so skid rows across the United States and Canada, talking to homeless people and staying in their shelters. In my own town, I spent considerable time with people on welfare, observing how they lived. I constantly marveled at the connections between *structural* causes of poverty (low education and skills, undependable transportation, the lack of unskilled jobs) and its *personal* causes (the *culture of poverty*—alcohol and drug abuse, multiple out-of-wedlock births, frivolous spending, all-night partying, and a seeming incapacity to keep appointments—except to pick up the welfare check).

Sociologists haven't unraveled this connection, and as much as we might *like* for only the structural causes to apply, clearly *both* are at work (Duneier 1999:122). The situation can be illustrated by looking at the perennial health problems I observed among the poor—the constant colds, runny noses, back aches, and injuries. The health problems stemmed from the *social structure* (less access to medical care, lesser trained or less capable physicians, drafty houses, lack of education regarding nutrition, and more dangerous jobs). At the same time, *personal* characteristics—hygiene, eating habits, and overdrinking—caused health problems. Which was the cause and which the effect? Both, of course, for one fed into the other. The medical problems (which were based on both personal and structural causes) fed into the poverty these people experienced, making them less able to perform their jobs successfully—or even to show up at work regularly. What an intricate puzzle for sociologists!

origins who climbed far up the social class ladder, Americans know that anyone can get ahead if they really try. In fact, they believe that most Americans, including minorities and the working poor, have an average or better-than-average chance of getting ahead—obviously a statistical impossibility (Kluegel and Smith 1986).

The accuracy of the **Horatio Alger myth** is less important than the belief that limitless possibilities exist for everyone. Functionalists would stress that this belief is functional for society. On the one hand, it encourages people to compete for higher positions, or, as the song says, "to reach for the highest star." On the other hand, it places blame for failure squarely on the individual. If you don't make it—in the face of ample opportunities to get ahead—the fault must be your own. The Horatio Alger myth helps to stabilize society, then, for since the fault is viewed as the individual's, not society's, current social arrangements can be regarded as satisfactory. This reduces pressures to change the system.

As Marx and Weber pointed out, social class penetrates our consciousness, shaping our ideas of life and our "proper" place in society. When the rich look at the world around them, they sense superiority and anticipate control over their own destiny. When the poor look around them, they are more likely to sense defeat, and to anticipate that their lives will be buffeted by unpredictable forces. Both rich and poor know the dominant ideology, that their particular niche in life is due to their own efforts, that the reasons for success—or failure—lie solely with the self. Like the fish that don't notice the water, people tend not to perceive the effects of social class on their own lives.

**Horatio Alger myth**

the belief that due to limitless possibilities anyone can get ahead if he or she tries hard enough

## Summary and Review

### What Is Social Class?

#### ■ What is meant by the term social class?

Most sociologists have adopted Weber's definition of **social class** as a large group of people who rank close to one another in terms of wealth, power, and prestige. **Wealth**, consisting of property and income, is concentrated in the upper classes. The distribution of wealth in the United States has changed little since World War II, but the changes that have occurred have been toward greater inequality. **Power** is the ability to get one's way even though others resist. C. Wright Mills coined the term **power elite** to refer to the small group that holds the reins of power in business, government, and the military. **Prestige** is often linked to occupational status. Pp. 276–281.

People's rankings of occupational prestige have changed little over the decades and are similar from country to country. Globally, the occupations that bring greater prestige pay more, require more education and abstract thought, and offer greater autonomy. Pp. 281–283.

#### ■ What is meant by the term status inconsistency?

**Status** is social ranking. Most people are **status consistent**; that is, they rank high or low on all three dimensions of social class. People who rank higher on some dimensions than on others are status inconsistent. The frustrations of **status inconsistency** tend to produce political radicalism. Pp. 283–284.

### Sociological Models of Social Class

#### ■ What models are used to portray the social classes?

Erik Wright developed a four-class model based on Marx: (1) capitalists (owners); (2) petty bourgeoisie (small business owners); (3) managers; and (4) workers. Kahl and Gilbert developed a six-class model based on Weber. At the top is the capitalist class. In descending order are the upper middle class, the lower middle class, the working class, the working poor, and the **underclass**. Pp. 284–288.

### Consequences of Social Class

#### ■ How does social class affect people's lives?

Social class leaves no aspect of life untouched. It affects our chances of benefiting from the new technology, dying early, becoming ill, receiving good health

care, and getting divorced. Social class membership also affects child rearing, educational attainment, religious affiliation, political participation, and contact with the criminal justice system. Pp. 288–293.

### Social Mobility

#### ■ What are the three types of social mobility?

The term **intergenerational mobility** refers to changes in social class from one generation to the next. **Exchange mobility** is the movement of large numbers of people from one class to another, with the net result that the relative proportions of the population in the classes remain about the same. The term **structural mobility** refers to changes in society that lead large numbers of people to change their social class. Pp. 294–295.

### Poverty

#### ■ Who are the poor?

Poverty is unequally distributed in the United States. Minorities, children, women-headed households, and rural Americans are more likely than others to be poor. The poverty rate of the elderly is less than that of the general population. Pp. 295–300.

#### ■ Why are people poor?

Some social analysts believe that characteristics of *individuals*, such as the desire for immediate gratification, cause poverty. Sociologists, in contrast, examine *structural* features of society, such as employment opportunities, to find the causes of poverty. Sociologists generally conclude that life orientations are a consequence, not the cause, of people's position in the social class structure. Pp. 300–302.

#### ■ How is the Horatio Alger myth functional for society?

The **Horatio Alger myth**—the belief that anyone can get ahead if only he or she tries hard enough—encourages people to strive to get ahead. It also deflects blame for failure from society to the individual. Pp. 302–303.

#### ■ Where can I read more on this topic?

Suggested readings for this chapter are at the end of this book.

All URLs listed are current as of the printing of this book. URLs often change. Please check our Web site, <http://www.abacon.com/henslin>, for updates.

### Additional Online Resources for This Chapter

[www.ablongman.com/henslin6e](http://www.ablongman.com/henslin6e)

- *Content Select* Research Database for Sociology, with suggested key terms and annotated references
- Link to 2000 Census, with activities
- Flashcards of key terms and concepts
- Practice Tests
- Weblinks
- Interactive Maps

### using . . .

#### ContentSelect

##### Research Database for Sociology

culture of poverty  
feminization  
of poverty

poverty line  
social class  
social mobility

the capitalist class  
underclass  
wealth and income

welfare reform  
working poor