enduring legacy of the past are public attitudes that the poor were largely responsible for their own circumstances.

**Social Class in the United States: Myth and Reality**

As noted in Chapter 3, individualism is a dominant cultural orientation in the United States. Many Americans value their independence and the chance to compete as individuals and make personal choices that are largely free of social constraints. Related to this is an ideology of personal responsibility, which maintains that each person is largely responsible for his or her own actions, successes or failures, and social standing.

American ideology also takes a distinctive approach to equality. It does not require that people have equivalent resources, only equal opportunities. According to the ideology of equal opportunity, everyone should have the chance to compete on an equal basis and to win any of society’s rewards. Because most Americans stress opportunity and a “level playing field,” they tend to see the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and prestige as inevitable and even socially beneficial, with the gifted and hard-working rising to the top and those lacking in these qualities falling to the bottom (Kerbo, 1991; Spicker, 1993).

**Life Chances and Social Class**

What evidence is there that people compete as individuals and that each must bear full responsibility for his or her own success or failure? Most sociologists would say, not much. **Life chances** are opportunities for securing such things as health, education, autonomy, leisure, and a long life, and they are directly related to social class. People at the top of the social hierarchy have resources that enable them to respond to opportunities when they arise. Their superior resources are equally important in helping them resolve personal problems, such as illnesses, lawsuits, or periods of unemployment.

Advantages begin early and persist throughout life. Childhood mortality rates are higher at the bottom of the social hierarchy. For example, “Black infants were 2.4 times as likely to die as white infants . . . and by 2000 it [was] estimated [they will die] at three times the white rate” (Scanlon, 2000:29). And impoverished children more often suffer chronic illnesses and receive inferior health care than those at higher socioeconomic levels. Life expectancy, too, is affected by class: the higher the ranking in the class system, the longer the life. Those at the top of the hierarchy also attend better schools. Teachers and administrators expect more of upper-class and upper-middle-class students and encourage them to pursue the most rigorous academic programs and to attend college. By contrast, working-class and lower-class students get less encouragement, and most find themselves placed in vocational tracks. In addition, divorce and illegitimacy occur at higher rates among the lower classes. Police scrutiny is far more common among the poor than the rich. Moreover, people have a greater chance of being labeled a criminal, being a victim of a crime, and spending time in prison if they are members of the lower classes. Add racial and ethnic stratification to the equation, and much stiffer penalties are involved, including the death penalty (Rainwater, 1974; Reiman, 1995). (In Box 8.3, two Yale professors offer a plan to boost every American’s life chances.)

**Social Mobility in the United States**

In the United States there is a long tradition that celebrates upward mobility—from Horatio Alger stories to accounts of poor boys moving from log cabins to the White House. These myths suggest that any poor but hard-working person can easily move up the social ladder, even from the very bottom to the top. Today these myths are reinforced by media stories of ghetto children becoming star athletes, Hollywood celebrities, and generals.