



8

Chapter

Social Class in the United States



Ah, New Orleans, that fabled city on the Mississippi Delta. Images from its rich past floated through my head—pirates, treasure, 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 just like 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 you were in. Poverty wears the same tired face wherever you are, I realized. The accent may differ, but the look remains the same.

I had grown used to the sights and smells of abject poverty. Those no longer surprised me. But after my fitful sleep with the homeless, I saw something that did. 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 and stared.

Indignation swelled within me. Confronting me were life-size, full-color photos mounted on the transparent Plexiglas shelter of a bus stop. Staring back at me were images of 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, as my mind refused to stop juxtaposing these images of extravagance with the suffering I had just witnessed.

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

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 experienced a sense 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?

If you ask most Americans about their country's social class system, you are likely to get a blank look. If you press the matter, you are likely to get an answer like this: "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 was 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. Teenage "order takers" at McDonald's who work for \$15,000 a year are lumped together with that company's executives who make \$500,000 a year—because they both are workers at McDonald's, not owners.

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 closely to one another in property, 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.

A mere one-half of 1 percent of Americans owns over a quarter of the entire nation's wealth. Very few minorities are numbered among this 0.5 percent. An exception is Oprah Winfrey, who has had an ultra-successful career in entertainment and investing. Worth \$1.3 billion, she is the 215th richest person in the United States. Winfrey, who has given millions of dollars to help minority children, is shown here as she talks with Tom Cruise.

Property

Property comes in many forms, such as buildings, land, animals, machinery, cars, stocks, bonds, businesses, furniture, jewelry, and bank accounts. When you add up the value of someone's property and subtract that person's debts, you have what sociologists call **wealth**. This term can be misleading, as some of us have little wealth—especially most college students. Nevertheless, if your net total comes to \$10, then that is your wealth. (Obviously, *wealth* as a sociological term does not mean *wealthy*.)

Distinguishing Between Wealth and Income Wealth and income are sometimes confused, but they are not the same. Where *wealth* is a person's net worth, **income** is a flow of money. Income has many sources: The most common is a business or wages, but other sources are rent, interest, or royalties, even alimony, an allowance, or gambling. Some people have much wealth and little income. For example, a farmer may own much land (a form of wealth), but bad weather, combined with the high cost of fertilizers and machinery, can cause the income to dry up. Others have much income and little wealth. An executive with a \$250,000 annual income may be debt-ridden. Below the surface prosperity—the exotic vacations, country club membership, private schools for the children, sports cars, and an elegant home—the credit cards may be maxed out, the sports cars in danger of being repossessed, and the mortgage payments "past due." Typically, however, wealth and income go together.

Distribution of Property Who owns the property in the United States? One answer, of course, is "everyone." Although this statement has some merit, it overlooks how the nation's property is divided among "everyone."

Overall, Americans are worth a hefty sum, about \$41 trillion (*Statistical Abstract* 2008:Table 701). This

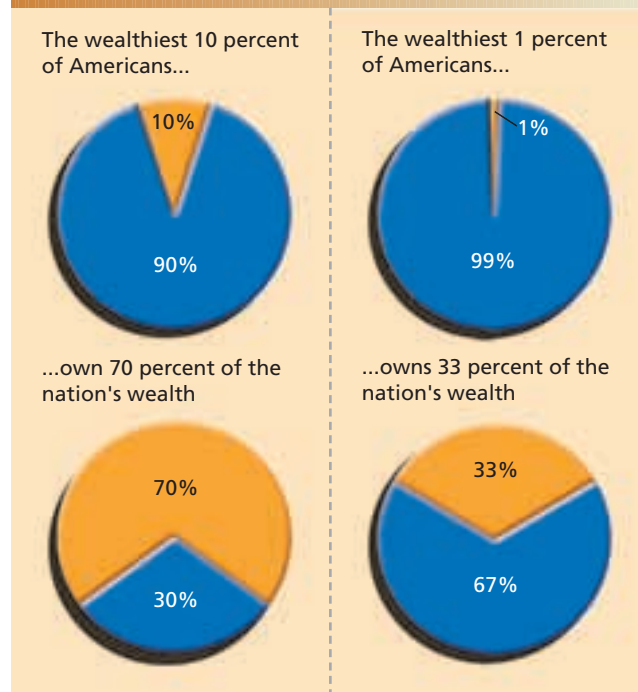


includes all real estate, stocks, bonds, and business assets in the entire country. Figure 8.1 shows how highly concentrated this wealth is. Most wealth, 70 percent, is owned by only 10 percent of the nation's families. As you can also see from this figure, 1 percent of Americans own one-third of all the U.S. assets.

Distribution of Income How is income distributed in the United States? Economist Paul Samuelson (Samuelson and Nordhaus 2005) 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."

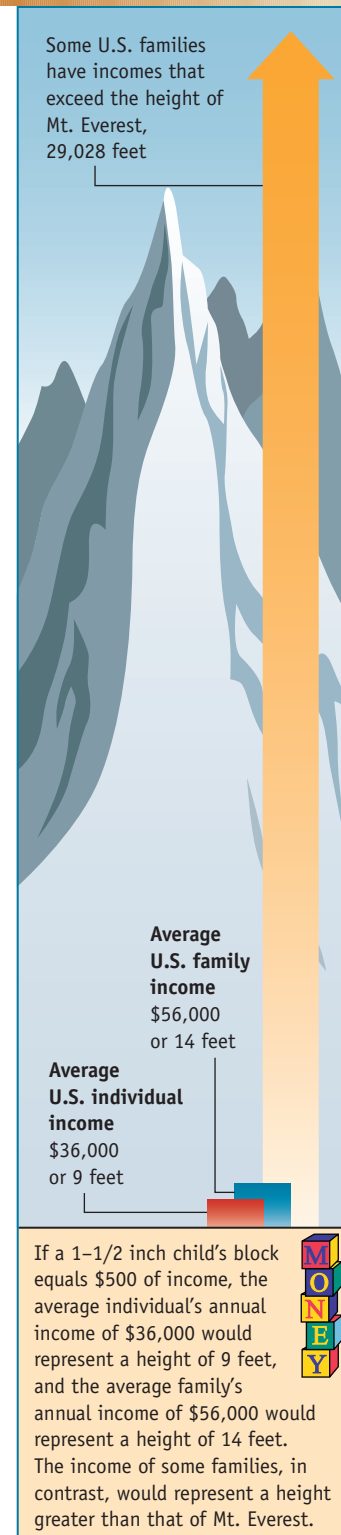
Actually, if each block were 1½ inches tall, the typical American would be just 9 feet off the ground, for the average per capita income in the United States is about \$36,000 per year. (This average income includes every American, even children.) The typical family climbs a little higher, for most families have more than one worker, and together they average about \$56,000 a year. Compared with the few families who are on the mountain's peak, the average U.S. family would find itself only 14 feet off the ground (Statistical Abstract 2008:Tables 659, 674). Figure 8.2 portrays these differences.

FIGURE 8.1 Distribution of the Property of Americans



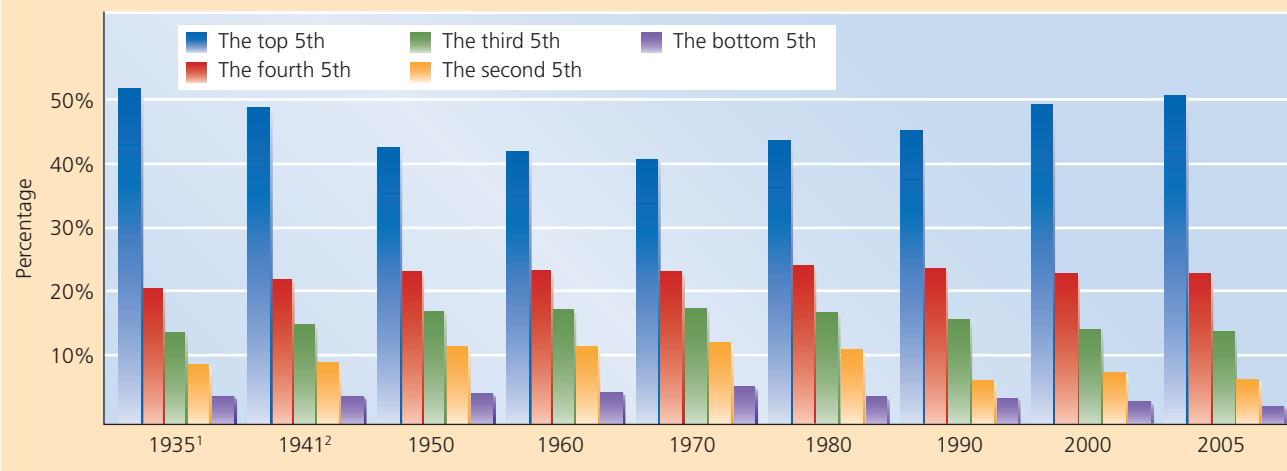
Source: By the author. Based on Beeghley 2008.

FIGURE 8.2 Distribution of the Income of Americans



Source: By the author.

FIGURE 8.3 The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: The Percentage of the Nation's Income Received by Each Fifth of U.S. Families



¹Earliest year available.

²No data for 1940.

Source: By the author. Based on *Statistical Abstract* 1960:Table 417; 1970:Table 489; 2008:Table 675.

The fact that some Americans enjoy the peaks of Mount Everest while most—despite their efforts—make it only 9 to 14 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 8.3 shows, the top 20 percent of the population receive *half* (50.4 percent) of all income in the United States. In contrast, the bottom 20 percent of Americans receive only 3.4 percent of the nation's income.

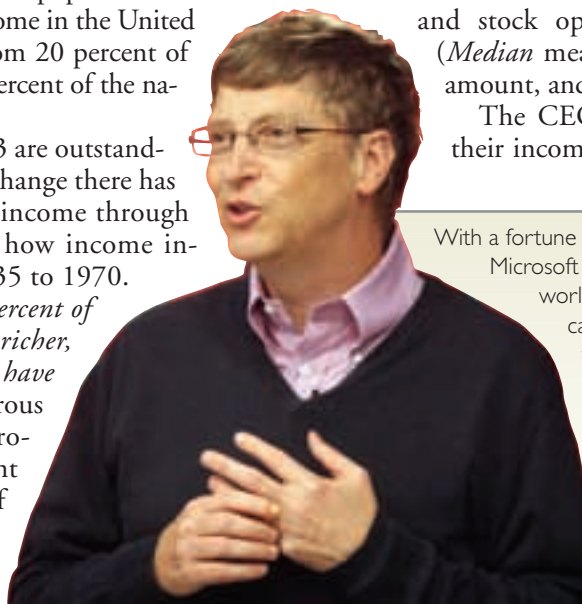
Two features of Figure 8.3 are outstanding. First, notice how little change there has been in the distribution of income through the years. Second, look at how income inequality decreased from 1935 to 1970.

Since 1970, the richest 20 percent of U.S. families have grown richer, while the poorest 20 percent have grown poorer. Despite numerous government antipoverty programs, the poorest 20 percent of Americans receive *less* of the nation's income today than they did decades ago. The richest 20 percent, in

contrast, are receiving more, almost as much as they did in 1935.

The chief executive officers (CEOs) of the nation's largest corporations are especially affluent. The *Wall Street Journal* surveyed the 350 largest U.S. companies to find out what they paid their CEOs ("The Boss's Pay" 2007). Their median compensation (including salaries, bonuses, and stock options) came to \$6,549,000 a year. (*Median* means that half received more than this amount, and half less.)

The CEOs' income—which does *not* include their income from interest, dividends, or rents, or



With a fortune of \$48 billion, Bill Gates, a cofounder of Microsoft Corporation, is the wealthiest person in the world. His 40,000-square-foot home (sometimes called a "technopalace") in Seattle, Washington, was appraised at \$110 million.

In addition to being the wealthiest person, Gates is also the most generous. He has given more money to the poor and minorities than any individual in history. His foundation is now focusing on fighting infectious diseases, developing vaccines, and improving schools.

TABLE 8.1 The Highest-Paid CEOs

Executive	Company	Compensation
1. John A. Thain	Merrill Lynch	\$79 million
2. Lloyd C. Blankfein	Goldman Sachs Group	\$69 million
3. Ray R. Irani	Occidental Petroleum	\$61 million
4. Kenneth I. Chenault	American Express	\$46 million
5. Richard S. Fuld Jr.	Lehman Brothers	\$40 million

Note: Compensation includes salary, bonuses, and stock options.
Source: "The Boss's Pay" 2008.

the value of company-paid limousines and chauffeurs, airplanes and pilots, and private boxes at the symphony and sporting events—is *166 times* higher than the average pay of U.S. workers (*Statistical Abstract* 2007:Table 629). To really see the disparity, consider this: The average U.S. worker would have to work *1,475 years* to earn the amount the highest-paid executive listed in Table 8.1 receives in *one year*.

Imagine how you could live with an income like this. And that 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 that these individuals experience 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 the students borrowed his parents' corporate jet and pilot, and in class on 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. For young parents, choices may revolve around whether to spend the little they have at the laundromat or on milk for the baby. The elderly might have to choose between purchasing the medicines they need or buying food. In short, divisions of wealth represent not "mere" numbers, but choices that make vital differences in people's lives, a topic that we explore in the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page.

Power

Like many people, you may have said to yourself, "Sure, I can vote, but the big decisions are always made despite

what I might think. Certainly *I* don't make the decision to send soldiers to Afghanistan or Iraq. *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 Social Security or Medicare 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 ide-

ology that Marx said is promoted 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 was 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, values, and world views. These individuals belong to the same private clubs, vacation at the same exclusive resorts, and even hire the same bands for their daughters' debutante balls. Their shared backgrounds and vested interests reinforce their view of both the world and their special place in it (Domhoff 1999a, 2006). This elite wields extraordinary power in U.S. society, so much so that *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, 2006) argues that this group is so powerful that the U.S. government makes no major decision without its approval. He analyzed how this group works behind the scenes with elected officials to determine both 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. Al-

most all of us have to choose an occupation and go to work. Look at Table 8.2 to see how the career 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 Ameri-

Down-to-Earth Sociology How the Super-Rich Live

It's good to see how other people live. It gives us a different perspective on 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 connected 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 that 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.

At his beachfront estate, John gives what he calls "refined feasts" to the glitterati ("On History . . ." 1999). If he gets tired of such activities—or weary 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 42-foot Hinckley yacht.

The yacht is a real source of diversion. John once boarded it for an around-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 on course, 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."



How do the super-rich live? This photo helps give you an idea of how different their lifestyles are from most of ours. Shown here is Wayne Huizenga, who is featured in this box, with one of his vintage automobiles.

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 founder of Blockbuster, wanted more elbow room for his estate at Nantucket, so he added the house next door for \$2.5 million (Fabrikant 2005). He also 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.

For Your Consideration

What effects has social class had on your life? (Go beyond possessions to values, orientations, and views on life.) How do you think you would see the world differently if you were John Castle or Mrs. Wayne Huizenga?

cans 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 8.2, 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 (independence, or self-direction).

If you look at the bottom of the list, you can see that people give less prestige to jobs with the opposite characteristics: These jobs are low-paying, require less preparation or education, involve more physical labor, and are closely supervised. In short, the professions and the white-collar jobs are at the top of the list, the 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 25 years ago still rank high today—and likely will rank high in the years to come.

Displaying Prestige 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 that they would not “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 everyone else attending the function is present (to show that the president isn't the one waiting for others). Everyone must be standing when the president enters. In the courtroom, bailiffs, sometimes armed, make certain that everyone stands when the judge enters.

The display of prestige is not just something “out there.” Think about your clothing. How much more are you willing to pay for clothing that bears some hot “designer” label? Purses, shoes, jeans, and shirts—many of us pay more if they have a little symbol than if they don't. As we wear them proudly, aren't we actually proclaiming, “See, I had the money to buy this particular

TABLE 8.2 Occupational Prestige: How the United States Compares with 60 Countries

Occupation	United States	Average of 60 Countries
Physician	86	78
Supreme court judge	85	82
College president	81	86
Astronaut	80	80
Lawyer	75	73
College professor	74	78
Architect	73	72
Biologist	73	69
Dentist	72	70
Civil engineer	69	70
Clergy	69	60
Psychologist	69	66
Pharmacist	68	64
High school teacher	66	64
Registered nurse	66	54
Professional athlete	65	48
Electrical engineer	64	65
Author	63	62
Banker	63	67
Police officer	61	40
Sociologist	61	67
Actor or actress	58	52
Chiropractor	57	62
Athletic coach	53	50
Social worker	52	56
Electrician	51	44
Undertaker	49	34
Real estate agent	48	49
Mail carrier	47	33
Secretary	46	53
Plumber	45	34
Carpenter	43	37
Barber	36	30
Store sales clerk	36	34
Truck driver	30	33
Cab driver	28	28
Garbage collector	28	13
Waiter or waitress	28	23
Bartender	25	23
Lives on public aid	25	16
Bill collector	24	27
Factory worker	24	29
Janitor	22	21
Shoe shiner	17	12

Note: For four occupations not located in the 1994 source, the 1991 ratings were used: Supreme Court judge, astronaut, athletic coach, and lives on public aid.
Sources: Treiman 1977, Appendices A and D; Nakao and Treas 1991; 1994:Appendix D.

item!”? For many of us, prestige is 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.

Status symbols vary with social class. Clearly, only the wealthy can afford certain items, such as yachts and huge estates. But beyond affordability lies a class-based preference in status symbols. For example, people who are striving to be upwardly mobile are quick to flaunt labels, Hummers, Land Rovers, and other symbols to show that they have “arrived,” while the rich, more secure in their status, often downplay such images. The wealthy regard the designer labels of the “common” classes as cheap and showy. They, of course, flaunt their own status symbols, such as \$50,000 Rolex watches and \$20,000 diamond earrings. Like the other classes, they,

too, try to outdo one another; they boast about who has the longest yacht or let others know that they have a helicopter fly them to their meetings or their golf games (Fabrikant 2005).

Status Inconsistency

Ordinarily, a person has a similar rank on all three dimensions of social class—property, 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**.

Instant wealth, the topic of the Down-to-Earth Sociology box below, provides an interesting case of status inconsistency.

Down-to-Earth Sociology

The Big Win: Life After the Lottery

“If I just win the lottery, life will be good. These problems I’ve got, they’ll be gone. I can just see myself now.”

So goes the dream. And many Americans shell out megabucks every week, with the glimmering hope that “Maybe this week, I’ll hit it big.”

Most are lucky to get \$20, or maybe just win another scratch-off ticket.

But there are the big hits. What happens to these winners? Are their lives all wine, roses, and chocolate afterward?

We don’t have any systematic studies of the big winners, so I can’t tell you what life is like for the average winner. But several themes are apparent from reporters’ interviews.

The most common consequence of hitting it big is that life becomes topsy-turvy (Ross 2004). All of us are rooted somewhere. We have connections with others that provide the basis for our orientations to life and how we feel about the world. Sudden wealth can rip these moorings apart, and the resulting *status inconsistency* can lead to a condition sociologists call **anomie**.

First comes the shock. As Mary Sanderson, a telephone operator in Dover, New Hampshire, who won



Status inconsistency is common for lottery winners, whose new wealth is vastly greater than the statuses that come with their education and occupation. 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?

\$66 million, said, “I was afraid to believe it was real, and afraid to believe it wasn’t.” Mary says that she never slept worse than her first night as a multimillionaire. “I spent the whole time crying—and throwing up” (Tresniowski 1999).

Reporters and TV camera operators appear on your doorstep. “What are you going to do with all that money?” they demand. You haven’t the slightest idea, but in a daze you mumble something.

Sociologist Gerhard Lenski (1954, 1966) analyzed how people try to maximize their **status**, their position in a social group. Individuals who rank high on one dimension of social class but lower on others want people to judge them on the basis of their highest status. Others, however, who are trying to maximize their own position, may respond to status-inconsistent individuals according to their lowest ranking.

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 delight 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 (Heames et al. 2006). They claim the higher status, but others acknowledge only the lower one. The significance of this condition, said Lenski (1954), is that such people tend to be more politically radical. An example is college professors. Their prestige is very high, as we saw in Table 8.2, but their incomes are relatively low. Hardly anyone in U.S. society is more educated, and yet college 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 average pay, the less radical are the members' 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.

Then come the calls. Some are welcome. Your Mom and Dad call to congratulate you. But long-forgotten friends and distant relatives suddenly remember how close they really are to you—and strangely enough, they all have emergencies that your money can solve. You even get calls from strangers who have ailing mothers, terminally ill kids, sick dogs . . .

You have to unplug the phone and get an unlisted number.

You might be flooded with marriage proposals. You certainly didn't become more attractive or sexy overnight—or did you? Maybe money makes people sexy.

You can no longer trust people. You don't know what their real motives are. Before, no one could be after your money because you didn't have any. You may even fear kidnappers. Before, this wasn't a problem—unless some kidnapper wanted the ransom of a seven-year-old car.

The normal becomes abnormal. Even picking out a wedding gift is a problem. If you give the usual toaster, everyone will think you're stingy. But should you write a check for \$25,000? If you do, you'll be invited to every wedding in town—and everyone will expect the same.

Here is what happened to some lottery winners:

As a tip, a customer gave a lottery ticket to Tonda Dickerson, a waitress at the Waffle House in Grand Bay, Alabama. She won \$10 million. (Yes, just like the Nicholas Cage movie, *It Could Happen to You*.) Her co-workers sued her, saying that they had always agreed to split such winnings (“House Divided” 1999).

Then there is Michael Klinebiel of Rahway, New Jersey. When he won \$2 million, his mother, Phyllis, said that half of it was hers, that she and her son had pooled \$20 a month for years to play the lottery. He said they had done this—but he had bought the winning ticket on his own. Phyllis sued her son (“Sticky Ticket” 1998).

When Mack Metcalf, a forklift operator in Corbin, Kentucky, hit the jackpot for \$34 million, he fulfilled a dream: He built and moved into a replica of George Washington's Mount Vernon home. Then his life fell apart—his former wife sued him, his current wife divorced him, and his new girlfriend got \$500,000 while he was drunk. Within three years of his “good” fortune, Metcalf had drunk himself to death (Dao 2005).

Winners who avoid *anomie* seem to be people who don't make sudden changes in their lifestyle or their behavior. They hold on to their old friends and routines—the anchors in life that give them identity and a sense of belonging. Some even keep their old jobs—not for the money, of course, but because the job anchors them to an identity with which they are familiar and comfortable.

Sudden wealth, in other words, poses a threat that has to be guarded against.

And I can just hear you say, “I'll take the risk!”

For Your Consideration

How do you think your life would change if you won a lottery jackpot of \$10 million?



Display of prestige and social position varies over time and from one culture to another. Shown here is Elizabeth I, Queen of England and Ireland. Elizabeth became queen in 1558 at the age of 25 and ruled for 45 years, until 1603. This painting hangs in the National Portrait Gallery.

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 single 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 8.4). Sociologists have criticized this view, saying that 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? The category of "capitalist" is also too broad. Some people, for example, 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 backyard. 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 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.

To resolve this problem, sociologist Erik Wright (1985) suggests that some people are members of more than one class at the same time. They occupy what he calls **contradictory class locations**. By this, Wright means that a person'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 because 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 their wages.

Because of such contradictory class locations, Wright modified Marx's model. As summarized in Table 8.3, Wright identifies 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

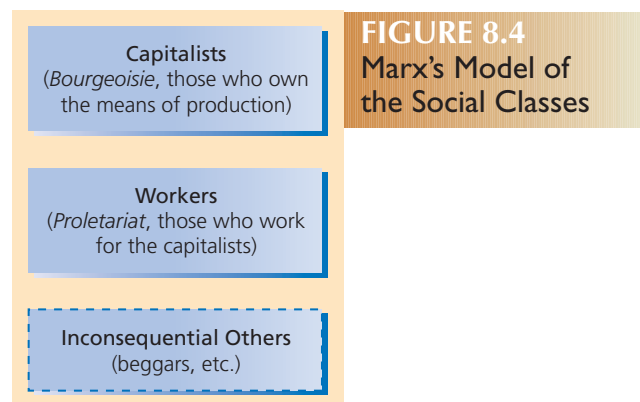


TABLE 8.3
Wright's Modification
of Marx's Model
of the Social Classes

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

maintains the primary distinction between employer and employee.

tray the class structure of the United States and other capitalist countries. Think of this model, illustrated in Figure 8.5, as a ladder. Our discussion starts with the highest rung and moves downward. In line with Weber, on each lower rung you find less property (wealth), less power, and less prestige. Note that in this model education is also a primary measure of class.

Updating Weber

Sociologists Joseph Kahl and Dennis Gilbert (Gilbert and Kahl 1998; Gilbert 2003) developed a six-tier model to por-

The Capitalist Class Sitting on the top rung of the class ladder is a powerful elite that consists of just 1 percent of the U.S. population. As you saw in Figure 8.1 on page 199, this capitalist class is so wealthy that it owns one-third of all U.S. assets. *This tiny 1 percent is worth more than the entire bottom 90 percent of the country* (Beeghly 2008).

Power and influence cling to this small elite. They have direct access to top politicians, and their decisions open or close job opportunities for millions of people. They even help to shape the consciousness of the nation: They own our major media and entertainment outlets—newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, and sports franchises. They also control the boards of directors of our most influential colleges and universities. The super-rich perpetuate themselves in privilege by passing on their assets and social networks to their children.

FIGURE 8.5 The U.S. Social Class Ladder

Social Class	Education	Occupation	Income	Percentage of Population
Capitalist	Prestigious university	Investors and heirs, a few top executives	\$1,000,000+	1%
Upper Middle	College or university, often with postgraduate study	Professionals and upper managers	\$125,000+	15%
Lower Middle	High school or college, often apprenticeship	Semiprofessionals and lower managers, craftspeople, foremen	About \$60,000	34%
Working	High school	Factory workers, clerical workers, low-paid retail sales, and craftspeople	About \$35,000	30%
Working Poor	Some high school	Laborers, service workers, low-paid salespeople	About \$17,000	16%
Underclass	Some high school	Unemployed and part-time, on welfare	Under \$10,000	4%

Source: Based on Gilbert and Kahl 1998 and Gilbert 2003; income estimates are modified from Duff 1995.

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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. The children of “old” money 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 that 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 economic empires (Sklair 2001; Domhoff 1990, 1999b, 2006).

At the lower end of the capitalist class are the *nouveau riche*, those who have “new money.” Although they have made fortunes in business, the stock market, inventions, entertainment, or sports, they are outsiders to the upper class. They have not attended the “right” schools, and they don’t share the social networks that come with old money. Not blue bloods, they aren’t trusted to have the right orientations

to life. Even their “taste” in clothing and status symbols is suspect (Fabricant 2005). Donald Trump, whose money is “new,” 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 is probably 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 seek prestige, acclaim, or fame. Still others feel a responsibility—even a sense of fate or purpose—to use their money for doing good. Bill Gates, who has given more money to the poor and to medical research than anyone else has, seems to fall into this latter category.

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 do Depp, Oh, Cruz, and James belong? Johnny Depp makes \$10 million a year; Sandra Oh around \$3 million, and Penelope Cruz \$1 to 2 million. When LeBron James got out of high school, he signed more than \$100 million in endorsement contracts, as well as a \$4 million contract to play basketball for the Cleveland Cavaliers.



Johnny Depp



Sandra Oh



Penelope Cruz



LeBron James

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 (1998) 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. With their technical and lower-level management positions, they can afford a mainstream lifestyle, and many anticipate being able to move up the social class ladder. Feelings of insecurity are common, however, with the threat of inflation, recession, and job insecurity bringing a nagging sense that they might fall down the class ladder (Kefalas 2007).

The distinctions between the lower middle class and the working class on the next rung below 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 that of 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. They tend to think of themselves as having “real jobs” and regard the “suits” above them as paper pushers who have no practical experience (Morris and Grimes 2005).

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 1998; Beeghley 2008), for they believe 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 and donations from local food pantries to survive on 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 \$7.25 an hour, you earn \$290 for 40 hours. In a year, this comes to \$15,080—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, is 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 react with sympathy and a 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 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



The homeless are classified by some sociologists as members of the *underclass*, by others as members of the lower-lower class. Whatever the name, members of this class receive the least of what society offers. Compare this photo with the one on page 202.

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

Let's use the automobile industry to illustrate 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 dealership 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 handsome incomes selling prestigious, expensive cars to the capitalist class—those 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, and the prestige accorded to 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 dealership 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 dealership 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. Social class affects people's health, family life, and education. It also influences

their religion and politics and even their experiences with crime and the criminal justice system. Let's look at these consequences of social class.

Physical Health

If you want to get a sense of how social class affects health, take a ride on Washington's Metro system. Start in the blighted Southeast section of downtown D.C. For every mile you travel to where the wealthy live in Montgomery County in Maryland, life expectancy rises about a year and a half. By the time you get off, you will find a twenty-year gap between the poor blacks where you started your trip and the rich whites where you ended it. (Cohen 2004).

(The foldout at the front of the book illustrates these effects of social class.)

The effects of social class on physical health are startling. The principle is simple: The lower a person's social 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.

How can social class have such dramatic effects? While there is some controversy over the reasons, there seem to be three basic explanations. First, social class opens and closes doors to medical care. Consider this example:

Terry Takewell (his real name), a 21-year-old diabetic, 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, where, it turned out, he had an outstanding bill of \$9,400. A notice posted in the emergency room told staff members to alert supervisors if Takewell ever returned.

When 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 wonders whether 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 health care in the United States is not a citizens' right but a commodity for sale. This gives us a two-tier system of medical care: superior care for those who can afford the cost and inferior care for those who cannot (Budrys 2003). 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. And when the poor are hospitalized, they are likely to find themselves in understaffed and underfunded public hospitals, treated by rotating interns who do not know them and cannot follow up on their progress.

A second reason is lifestyles, which are shaped by social class. People in the lower social classes are more likely to smoke, eat a lot of fats, be overweight, abuse drugs and alcohol, get little or no exercise, and practice unsafe sex (Chin et al. 2000; Navarro 2002; Liu 2007). This, to understate the matter, does not improve people's health.

There is a third reason, too. Life is hard on the poor. The persistent stresses they face cause their bodies to wear out faster (Spector 2007). The rich find life better. They have fewer problems and more resources to deal with the ones they have. This gives them a sense of control over their lives, a source of both physical and mental health.

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; Pratt et al. 2007). Greater mental problems are part of the higher stress that accompanies poverty. Compared with middle- and upper-class Americans, the poor have less job security and lower wages. They are more likely to divorce, to be the victims of crime, and to have more physical illnesses. Couple these conditions with bill collectors and the threat of eviction, and you can see how they can deal severe blows to people's emotional well-being.

People higher up the social class ladder experience stress in daily life, of course, but their stress is generally less, and their coping resources are greater. Not only can they afford vacations, psychiatrists, and counselors but also *their class position gives them greater control over their lives, a key to good mental health.*

As is starkly evident from the following Thinking Critically section, social class is also important when it comes to the medical care people receive for their mental problems.

ThinkingCRITICALLY

Mental Illness and Inequality in Medical Care

Standing among the police, I watched as the elderly naked man, looking confused, struggled to put on his clothing. The man had ripped the wires out of the homeless shelter's main electrical box and then led the police on a merry chase as he ran from room to room.

I asked the officers where they were going to take the man, and they replied, "To Malcolm Bliss" (the state hospital). When I commented, "I guess he'll be in there for quite a while," they said, "Probably just a day or two. We picked him up last week—he was crawling under cars at a traffic light—and they let him out in two days."

The police explained that the man must be a danger to himself or to others to be admitted as a long-term patient. Visualizing this old man crawling under cars in traffic and thinking about the possibility of electrocution as he ripped out electrical wires with his bare hands, I marveled at the definition of "danger" that the hospital psychiatrists must be using.

Stripped of its veil, the two-tier system of medical care is readily visible. The poor—such as this confused naked man—find it difficult to get into mental hospitals. If they are admitted, they are sent to the dreaded state hospitals. In contrast, private hospitals serve the wealthy and those who have good insurance. The rich are likely to be treated with "talk therapy" (forms of psychotherapy), the poor with "drug therapy" (tranquilizers to make them docile, sometimes called "medicinal straitjackets").

For Your Consideration

How can we improve the treatment of the mentally ill poor? Take into consideration that the public does not want higher taxes. What about the more fundamental issue—that of inequality in health care? Should medical care be a commodity that is sold to those who can afford it? Or do all citizens possess a fundamental right to high-quality health care?

Family Life

Social class also plays a significant role in family life. It even affects our choice of spouse, our chances of getting divorced, and how we rear our children.

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 them but also 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. As a result, 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.

Education

As we saw in Figure 8.5 on page 207, 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 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 (Cookson and Persell 2005; Beeghley 2008).

Keenly aware that private schools can be a key to upward social mobility, some upper-middle-class parents do their best to get their children into the prestigious preschools that feed into these exclusive prep schools. Although some preschools cost \$23,000 a year, they have a waiting list (Rohwedder 2007). Parents even get letters of recommendation for their 2- and 3-year-olds. Such parental expectations and resources are major reasons why children from the more privileged classes are more likely to go to college—and to graduate.

Religion

One area of social life that we might think would not be affected 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 13, however, the classes tend to cluster in different denominations. Episcopalians, for example, are more likely to attract the middle and upper classes, while Baptists draw heavily from the lower classes. Patterns of worship also follow class

lines: The lower classes are attracted to more expressive worship services and louder music, while the middle and upper classes prefer more “subdued” worship.

Politics

As I have stressed throughout this text, people perceive events from their own corner in life. Political views are no exception to this symbolic interactionist principle, and the rich and the poor walk different political paths. The higher that people are on the social class ladder, the more likely they are to vote for Republicans (Burris 2005). In contrast, most members of the working class believe that the government should intervene in the economy to provide jobs and to make citizens financially secure. They are more likely to vote for 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 (Soss 1999; Gilbert 2003; Beeghly 2008).

Crime and Criminal Justice

If justice is supposed to be blind, it certainly is not when it comes to one’s chances of being arrested (Henslin 2008). In Chapter 6 (pages 153–155), 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 police and courts deal with the street crimes of the lower classes. 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.

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 tens of 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.

Social Mobility

No aspect of life, then—from marriage to politics—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?

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 occupied by their parents. 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**. As discussed in the Cultural Diversity box on the next page, social mobility comes at a cost.

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 substance 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





Cultural Diversity in the United States

Social Class and the Upward Social Mobility of African Americans

The overview of social class presented in this chapter doesn't apply equally to all the groups that make up U.S. society. Consider geography: What constitutes the upper class of a town of 5,000 people will be quite different from that of a city of a million. The extremes of wealth and the diversity and prestige of occupations will be less in the small town, where family background and local reputation play a significant role.

So, too, there are differences within racial-ethnic groups. While all racial-ethnic groups are marked by divisions of social class, what constitutes a particular social class can differ from one group to another—as well as from one historical period to another. Consider social class among African Americans (Cole and Omari 2003).

The earliest class divisions can be traced to slavery—to slaves who worked in the fields and those who worked in the “big house.” Those who worked in the plantation home were exposed to more “genteel” manners and forms of speech. Their more privileged position—which brought with it better food and clothing, as well as lighter work—was often based on skin color. Mulattos, lighter-skinned slaves, were often chosen for this more desirable work. One result was the development of a “mulatto elite,” a segment of the slave population that, proud of its distinctiveness, distanced itself from the other slaves. At this time, there also were free blacks. Not only were they able to own property but some of them even owned black slaves.

After the War Between the States (as the Civil War is known in the South), these two groups, the mulatto elite and the free blacks, became the basis of an upper class. Proud of their earlier status, they distanced them-



selves from other blacks. From these groups came most of the black professionals.

After World War II, just as with whites, the expansion of the black middle class opened access to a wider range of occupations and residential neighborhoods. Beginning about 1960, the numbers of African Americans who were middle class surged. Today, more than half of all African American adults work at white-collar jobs, with 22 percent working at the professional or managerial level (Beeghly 2008). African Americans who move

up the social class ladder experience a hidden cost: They feel an uncomfortable distancing from their roots, a separation from significant others—parents, siblings, and childhood friends (hooks 2000). The upwardly mobile individual has entered a world unknown to those left behind.

Trying to straddle two worlds makes anyone uncomfortable. The

dominant culture is demanding: Anyone entering its domain must leave the old ways behind. Beyond such changes as those of appearance and speech, which in themselves are challenging, there is the much deeper threat to the self. Social mobility exposes the individual to a world of different values, aspirations, and ways of viewing the world. Social mobility often brings not just more contact with whites but also a sense of deprivation. As whites become a primary reference group, racism, mostly subtle, lurks beneath the surface, poisoning what should be easy interaction among people who respect one another. Awareness that one is still perceived as different, as “the other,” engenders frustration, dissatisfaction, and, ultimately, cynicism.

For Your Consideration

If you review the box on upward social mobility on page 76, you will find that Latinos face a similar situation. Why do you think this is? What connections do you see among upward mobility, frustration, and strong racial-ethnic identity? How do you think that the upward mobility of whites is different? Why?

people attended workshops and took 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 disappear during a depression, which forces millions of people 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 some new technology, and they move up the class ladder. Suppose also that because of 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.

Women in Studies of Social Mobility

In classic studies, sociologists concluded that about half of sons passed their fathers on the social class ladder, about one-third stayed at the same level, and about one-sixth moved down (Blau and Duncan 1967; Featherman and Hauser 1978; Featherman 1979).

Feminists objected that it wasn't good science to focus on sons and ignore daughters (Davis and Robinson 1988). They also pointed out that it was wrong to assume that women had no social class position of their own, that wives should not simply be assigned the class of their husbands. The defense made by male sociologists of the time was that too few women were in the labor force to make a difference.

With the huge numbers of women now working for pay, more recent studies include women (Gofen 2007; Beeghley 2008). 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 how important the family is in the socialization process. It also supports the observation that the primary entry to the upper middle class is a college education. At the same time, if there had not been a *structural* change in society, the millions of new positions that women occupy would not exist.

Poverty

Many Americans find that the “limitless possibilities” on which the American dream is based are quite elusive. As illustrated in Figure 8.5 on page 207, 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?

Drawing the Poverty Line

To determine who is poor, the U.S. government draws 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. On the basis of 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.”



By permission of Johnny Hart and Creators Syndicate.

This cartoon pinpoints the arbitrary nature of the poverty line. This almost makes me think that the creators of the Wizard of Id have been studying sociology.

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 ought to multiply their food budget by 5 instead of 3 (Uchitelle 2001). No political party in power wants to do this, as re-drawing the line in this way would make it appear that poverty increased under their watch. Another problem with the poverty line is that some mothers work outside the home 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 much higher in New York than in Alabama. In addition, the government does not 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 absurdity has not been lost on Parker and Hart, as you can see from their sarcastic cartoon on page 215.) Although this line is arbitrary, it is the official measure of poverty, and the government uses it to decide who will receive help and who will not. On the basis of this line, let's see who in the United States is poor. Before we do this, though, com-

pare your ideas of the poor with the myths explored in the Down-to-Earth Sociology box below.

Who Are the Poor?

Geography As you can see from the Social Map on page 217, the poor are not distributed evenly among the states. Notice the clustering of poverty in the South, a pattern that has prevailed for more than 150 years.

A second aspect of geography is also significant. About 59 million Americans live in rural areas. Of these, 9 million are poor. At 16 percent, the rate of poverty of rural Americans is 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 educated, and the jobs available to them pay less than similar jobs in urban areas (Lichter and Crowley 2002; Arsneault 2006).

Geography, however, is not the main factor in poverty. The greatest predictors of poverty are race–ethnicity, education, and the sex of the person who heads the family. Let's look at these factors.

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. Long-term poverty is rare. Most poverty lasts less than a year (Lichter and Crowley 2002). 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; Corcoran 2001).

Myth 3 Most of the poor are African Americans and Latinos. As shown in Figure 8.7, the poverty rates of African Americans and Latinos are much higher than the poverty rate of whites. Because there

are so many more whites in the U.S. population, however, *most of the poor are white*. Of the U.S. poor, about 56 percent are white, 20 percent African American, 20 percent Latino, and 1 percent Native American (*Statistical Abstract* 2008:Tables 36, 691).

Myth 4 Most of the poor are single mothers and their children. Although about 38 percent of the poor 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. This stereotype is far from reality. Only about 25 percent of the income of poor adults comes from welfare. About half comes from wages and pensions, and about 22 percent from Social Security.

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

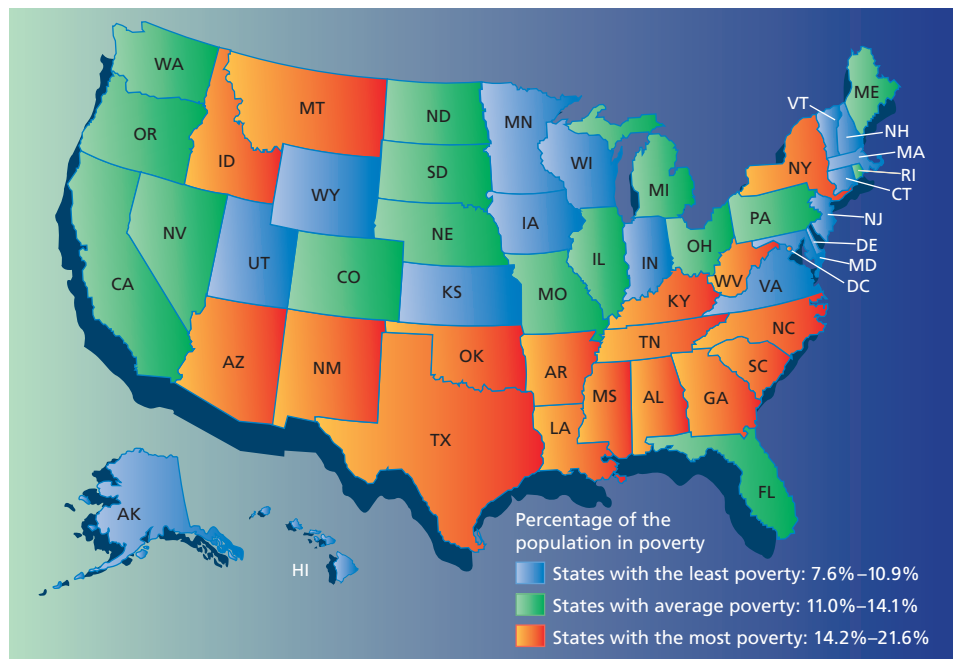


FIGURE 8.6
Patterns of Poverty

Note: Poverty varies tremendously from one state to another. In the extreme, poverty is about three times greater in Mississippi (21.6%) than in Connecticut and New Hampshire (7.6% each).

Source: By the author. Based on *Statistical Abstract of the United States* 2007:Table 690.

Race–Ethnicity One of the strongest factors in poverty is race–ethnicity. As Figure 8.7 on the next page shows, only 11 percent of Asian Americans and whites are poor. In contrast, 22 percent of Latinos live in poverty, while the total jumps even higher, to 25 percent, for African Americans and Native Americans. The stereotype that most poor people are African Americans and Latinos is untrue. Because there are so many more whites in U.S. society, their much lower rate of poverty translates into larger numbers. As a result, most poor people are white.

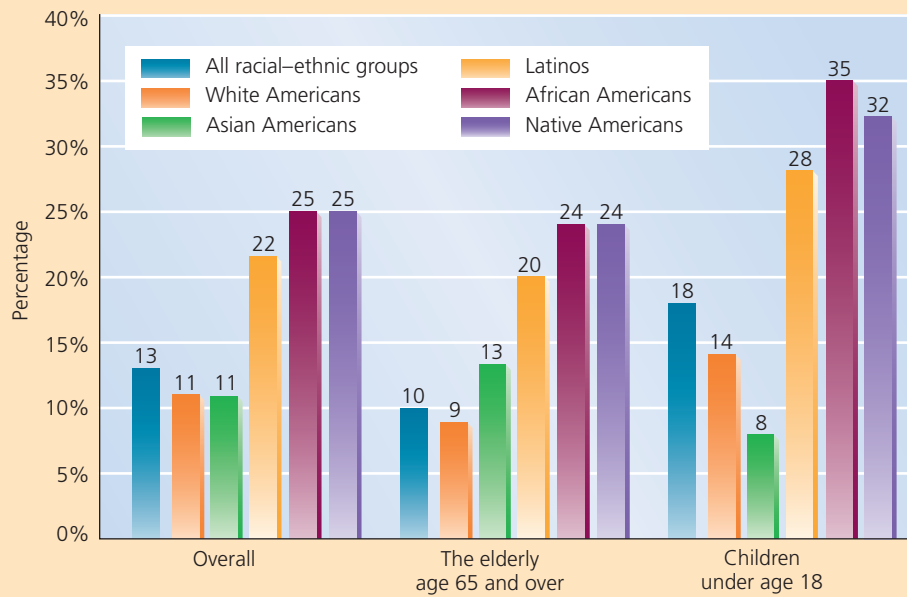
Education You are aware that education is a vital factor in poverty, but you may not know just how powerful it is. Figure 8.8 on the next page shows that 3 of 100 people who finish college end up in poverty, but 1 of every 4 people who drop out of high school is poor. As you can see, the chances that someone will be poor become less with each higher level of education. Although this principle applies regardless of race–ethnicity, this figure shows that at every level of education, race–ethnicity makes an impact.

The Feminization of Poverty One of the best indicators of whether or not a family is poor is family structure. Families headed by both a mother and father are the least likely to be poor. Families headed by only a father or a mother are more likely to be poor, with poverty the most common among mother-headed families. The reason for this can be summed up in this one statistic: On average, women who head families earn only 70 percent of the income of men who head families (*Statistical Abstract* 2007:Table 679). With our high rate of divorce combined with our high



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

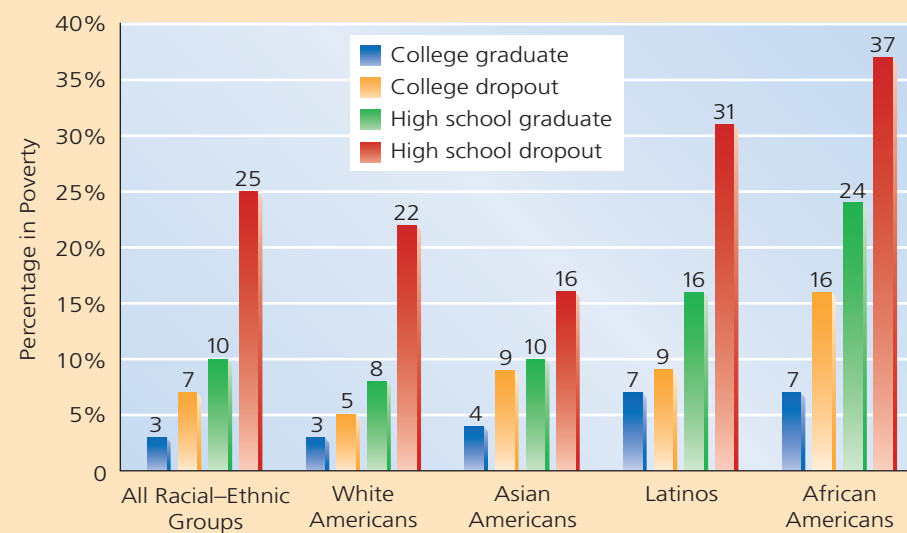
FIGURE 8.7 Poverty in the United States, by Age and Race–Ethnicity



Note: Only these groups are listed in the source. The poverty line on which this figure is based is \$19,971 for a family of four.

Source: By the author. Based on *Statistical Abstract* 2005:Table 682; 2008:Tables 36, 658, 691.

FIGURE 8.8 Who Ends Up Poor? Poverty by Education and Race–Ethnicity



Source: By the author. Based on *Statistical Abstract of the United States* 2007:Table 697.

number of births to single women, mother-headed families have become more common. This association of poverty with women has come to be known by sociologists as the **feminization of poverty**.

Old Age As Figure 8.7 on page 218 shows, the elderly are *less* likely than the general population to be poor. This is quite a change. 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, Latino, or Native American is to be poor than an elderly white or Asian American.

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 8.7 on page 218, you can see how much greater poverty is among Latino, African American, and Native American children. That millions of 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.

ThinkingCRITICALLY

The Nation's Shame: Children in Poverty

One of the most startling statistics in sociology is shown in Figure 8.7 on page 218. Look at the rate of childhood poverty: For Asian Americans, 1 of 12 children is poor; for whites, 1 of 7; for Latinos, 1 of 3 or 4; and for African Americans and Native Americans, an astounding 1 of 3. These percentages translate into incredible numbers—approximately 13 million children live in poverty.

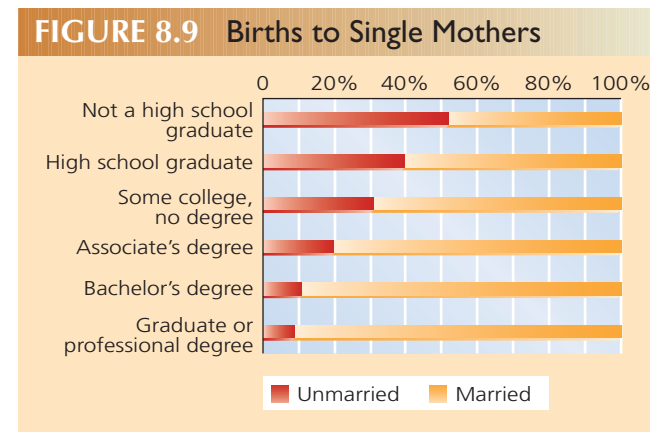
Why do so many U.S. children live in poverty? The main reason, said sociologist and former U.S. Senator Daniel Moynihan (1991), is an increase in births outside

marriage. In 1960, 1 of 20 U.S. children was born to a single woman. Today that total is about *seven times higher*, and single women now account for 1 of 3 (36 percent) of all U.S. births (*Statistical Abstract 2007:Table 84*). Sociologists Lee Rainwater and Timothy Smeeding (2003), who note that *the poverty rate of U.S. children is the highest in the industrialized world*, point to another cause: the lack of government support to children.

Births to single women follow patterns that are significant for their children's welfare. The less education a woman has, the more likely she is to bear children when she is not married. As you can see from Figure 8.9, births to single women drop with each gain in education. Because people with lower education earn less, this means that the single women who can least afford children are those most likely to give birth. Their children are likely to live in poverty and to face 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.

For Your Consideration

With education so important to obtain jobs that pay better, in light of Figure 8.9, what programs would you suggest for helping women attain more education? Be specific and practical.



Note: Based on a national U.S. sample of all births in the preceding 12 months.

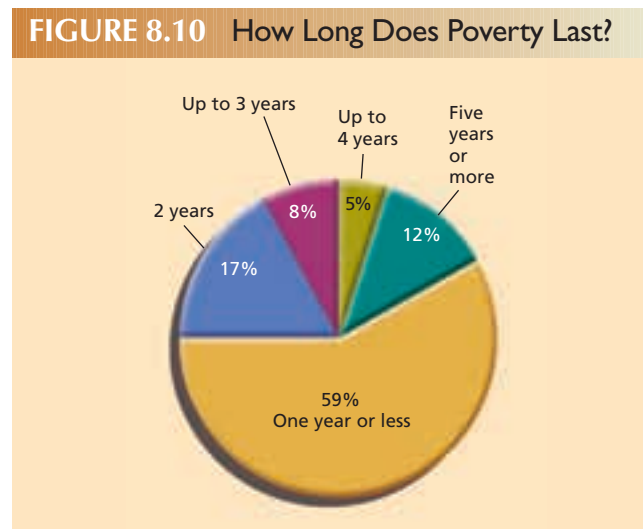
The Dynamics of Poverty

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 began following 5,000 U.S. families in 1968 uncovered some surprising findings. Contrary to common stereotypes, most poverty is short-lived, lasting only a year or less. The researchers found that 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 8.10 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 avoid being 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.



Source: Gottschalk et al. 1994:89.

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.

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 the learning of job skills. They emphasize racial–ethnic, age, and gender discrimination, as well as changes in the job market—the closing of plants, the elimination of unskilled jobs, and the increase in marginal jobs that pay poverty wages. In short, some people find their escape routes to a better life blocked.

A competing explanation focuses on the *characteristics of individuals* that are assumed to contribute to poverty. Sociologists reject individualistic explanations such as laziness and lack of intelligence, viewing these as worthless stereotypes. 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.

Welfare Reform

After decades of criticism, the U.S. welfare system was restructured in 1996. A federal law—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act—requires states to place a lifetime cap on welfare assistance and compels welfare recipients to look for work and to take available jobs. The maximum length of time that someone can collect welfare is five years. In some states, it is less. 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. National welfare rolls plummeted, dropping by about 60 percent (Urban Institute 2006). Two out of five who left welfare also moved out of poverty (Hofferth 2002).

This is only the rosy part of the picture, however. Three of five are still in poverty or are back on welfare. A third of those who were forced off welfare have no jobs (Hage



A society's dominant ideologies are reinforced throughout the society, including its literature. 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. (Girls did not strive for financial success, but were dependent on fathers and husbands.)

Where Is Horatio Alger? The Social Functions of a Myth

In the late 1800s, Horatio Alger was one of the country's most popular authors. The rags-to-riches exploits of his fictional boy heroes and their amazing 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 of humble origin who climbed the social class ladder, Americans know that anyone who really tries can get ahead. 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: 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 unpredictable forces will batter their lives. 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 fish that don't notice the water, people tend not to perceive the effects of social class on their own lives.

2004; Urban Institute 2006). Some can't work because they have health problems. Others lack transportation. Some are addicted to drugs and alcohol. Still others are trapped in economically depressed communities where there are no jobs. Then there are those who have jobs, but earn so little that they remain in poverty. 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 \$7.25 an hour as a cook for Head Start. Her 37-hour week brings \$268 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; earnings updated)

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

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**: a large group of people who rank closely to one another in terms of property (wealth), power, and prestige. **Wealth**—consisting of the value of property and income—is concentrated in the upper classes. From the 1930s to the 1970s, the trend in the distribution of wealth in the United States was toward greater equality. Since that time, it has been toward greater inequality. Pp. 198–201.

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 linked to occupational status. 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 are those that pay more, require more education and abstract thought, and offer greater independence. Pp. 201–204.

What is meant by the term status inconsistency?

Status is social position. 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. 204–205.

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 of large businesses), (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. 205–210.

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 dying early, becoming ill, receiving good health care, and getting divorced. Social class membership also affects educational attainment, religious affiliation, political participation, the crimes people commit, and contact with the criminal justice system. Pp. 210–213.

Social Mobility

What are three types of social mobility?

The term **intergenerational mobility** refers to changes in social class from one generation to the next. **Structural mobility** refers to changes in society that lead large numbers of people to change their social class. **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. Pp. 213–215.

Poverty

Who are the poor?

Poverty is unequally distributed in the United States. Racial-ethnic minorities (except Asian Americans), 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. 215–220.

Why are people poor?

Some social analysts believe that characteristics of *individuals* 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. 220–221.

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. P. 221.


THINKING CRITICALLY *about* Chapter 8

1. The belief that the United States is the land of opportunity draws millions of legal and illegal immigrants to the United States each year. How do the materials in this chapter support or undermine this belief?
2. How does social class affect people's lives?
3. What social mobility has your own family experienced? In what ways has this affected your life?

BY THE NUMBERS: Changes Over Time

- Percentage of the nation's income received by the richest 20% of Americans in 1970: **41%**
- Percentage of the nation's income received by the richest 20% of Americans today: **50%**
- Percentage of the nation's income received by the poorest 20% of Americans in 1970: **6%**
- Percentage of the nation's income received by the poorest 20% of Americans today: **3%**
- Frequency of births outside of marriage in 1960: **1 in 20**
- Frequency of births outside of marriage today: **1 in 3**
- Amount that the national welfare rolls dropped from 1996 to today: **60%**

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

What can you find in MySocLab?  www.mysoclab.com

- **Complete Ebook**
- **Practice Tests and Video and Audio activities**
- **Mapping and Data Analysis exercises**
- **Sociology in the News**
- **Classic Readings in Sociology**
- **Research and Writing advice**

Where Can I Read More on This Topic?

Suggested readings for this chapter are listed at the back of this book.