



## Social Stratification and Class

In this chapter, you will learn about:

- social stratification and social mobility
- class structure in the United States
- poverty

Ask your classmates if they believe in equality, and most will answer “of course.” However, question them a bit further, and you may hear something else. Could it be fair for some people to have more wealth, respect, or power than others? Don’t hard work and special talents deserve reward and recognition?

Inequalities exist to some extent in every society. When we look at the people in a society from the top to the bottom, we are looking at how the society is stratified, or layered. Societies include different classes of people who have different levels of power, privilege, and resources. In some societies, people can move from one class to another. In other societies, they are stuck in the class to which they were born. In this chapter we will look at the class structure in the United States and at the characteristics of people of the lowest class, who have so few economic resources that they live in poverty.

## Social Stratification and Social Status

Sociologists use the term **social stratification** to describe a structured ranking of entire groups of people in which some have more power, prestige, and wealth than others. When people are “stratified” into ranked groups, some hold higher positions and others hold lower ones.

The concept of social **class** is useful in discussing stratification. It refers to the group of people who share economic and social position in society. People in the same social class have common values and norms and recognize each other as members of their own class.

### Three Dimensions of Stratification

About a century ago, German sociologist Max Weber observed that the nobility sometimes lacked wealth, but had enormous power. Similarly, some people with great wealth had less power and a lower position.

**EXAMPLES:** In the German society of Weber’s day, only nobles could be officers in the army. On the other hand, some citizens who owned factories or large companies lacked power and social standing because they were Jewish.

Weber proposed **three** independent dimensions on which people could be ranked in a stratification system:

**1. Wealth and Property.** Wealth, because it can be expressed in numbers, is the most easily measured dimension.

Weber used the term *class* to group people with similar “life chances” to earn income and gain property. Individuals identified as “lower class” have less opportunity to gain wealth and property than those in the “upper class.” In most societies, large assets and high income are concentrated in the hands of a small percentage of the population.

**2. Power.** Even though people with wealth often have power, Weber argued that power stands independently. He defined *power* as the ability to get one’s way despite the resistance of others.

A person’s power may be based on almost anything, from special talents, to personality characteristics, or even the use of force. A powerful person isn’t necessarily wealthy, but power often increases an individual’s wealth.

**EXAMPLE:** Former U.S. presidents and influential members of Congress often write books that sell well because of their fame. Or they may be offered high-paying consulting positions because of the powerful positions they once held and the influence they have with others in power.

**3. Prestige.** People may also be ranked by *prestige*, the respect or recognition they receive from other members of society. Weber referred to prestige as social status that people express through their lifestyles. People of similar prestige form communities, invite one another to dinner, go to the same places, and marry one another.

In some countries, such as Weber's early 20th-century Germany, prestige was often ascribed: One was born into the nobility or the peasant class. In many modern societies, prestige is often linked to occupation. Weber noted that prestige can be independent from wealth, separating its owners from those who "just" have money.

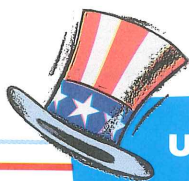
## Explaining Social Stratification

Sociologists who attempt to explain unequal distributions of wealth, power, and prestige in human societies tend to take two opposite sides. On one side are

the functionalists, who argue that stratification is necessary for societies to function efficiently. On the other side, conflict theorists maintain that stratification is the result of the selfish struggle among individuals for scarce rewards and resources.

## Functionalist Theory

In the mid-20th century, sociologists Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore first proposed that in all societies people in some positions perform functions that are, by any objective measurement, more important to the society than others—generals, judges, lawmakers. Davis and Moore reasoned that stratification would



## U.S. Culture Connection

### Status Symbols

People often communicate their high social status through outward symbols. Status symbols, such as expensive cars, homes, or clothing, show off wealth. Some status symbols reflect an individual's membership in a prestigious group. In the United States, college students often wear tee-shirts with the names of their university, identifying themselves as members of a higher education community. Class rings and bumper stickers perform the same

function. Credit card companies try to sell social status symbols with their platinum, gold, and silver levels.





not be necessary if all the necessary tasks were equally important and pleasant, and if they all required equal skills and capabilities. In reality, positions are unequal. Society offers higher rewards as incentives to ensure that people will acquire the skills to do the more important tasks. The size of the rewards must be proportional to **three** factors:

**1. The importance of the task.** The more important the task, the higher the rewards must be to guarantee that the most competent people can be encouraged to do it.

**2. The pleasantness of the task.** If the task is enjoyable, there will be plenty of volunteers, so high rewards aren't necessary.

**3. The scarcity of the talent and ability necessary to perform the task.** When relatively few people have the ability to perform an important task (such as dentistry or legal work), high rewards are necessary to compensate practitioners for the time and expense of acquiring the skill.



### Occupational Prestige Rankings

Sociological studies have asked respondents to rank occupations according to their prestige. Probably the best-known measure of occupational prestige was

designed for the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in the 1940s. Follow-up studies from the 1960s and in 1989 found that relative rankings have remained fairly stable over time.

High Prestige	Average Prestige	Low Prestige
U.S. Supreme Court justice	Reporters for daily newspapers	Clothes pressers in laundries
Physicians	Farm owners	Garbage collectors
Scientists	Bookkeepers	Street sweepers
College professors	Carpenters	Shoe shiners
	Mail carriers	



Two Theories of Social Stratification	
Functionalist Theory	Conflict Theory
1. It is universal, necessary, and inevitable.	1. It may be universal, but it is not necessary or inevitable.
2. It is based on the need to motivate and reward people to do the most important work of society.	2. It is based on group competition for limited resources, and conflict is the natural result.
3. It is widely accepted by most members of society.	3. It is accepted by controlling groups and resented by the working class.
4. The people who have power and wealth usually deserve what they have.	4. People who have power and wealth don't deserve as much as they have because they exploit the "have-nots."

### Conflict Theory

The old saying "The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer" describes the conflict theorists' view of social stratification. They start with the principle that there are only so many resources and rewards to go around. They do not see stratification as the result of some orderly process to encourage leadership and skill development. To them, it is the result of competition for limited economic resources. Inevitably, there are winners and losers. The winners take all and remain firmly determined not to surrender any advantage. Because winners have the upper hand, the poor have few chances to advance, and the rich remain on top. To conflict theorists, this situation is inherently unfair.

In modern America, conflict theorists believe that "elites," such as CEOs of big corporations and political leaders, control their companies and the government to

protect their self-interests. Members of the working class harbor deep resentments that have inspired them to form labor unions and begin social movements that call for more equality.



"It appears you're a bit overqualified to be exploited but somewhat underqualified to exploit others."

## Systems of Stratification

Very little stratification exists in most hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies. There, status differences are based mainly on gender and age. Of course, people have little opportunity to change their stations in life.

Now think of phrases such as “Rags to riches” and “Log cabin to White House.”

In the United States, we believe in **social mobility**, the ability of individuals to change their social status during their lifetimes. Our system of stratification is relatively open. Think of a line with “closed systems” at one end and “open systems” at the other. The social systems of the world could be placed along such a line. We would call this line a **social mobility continuum**. (See the diagram below.)

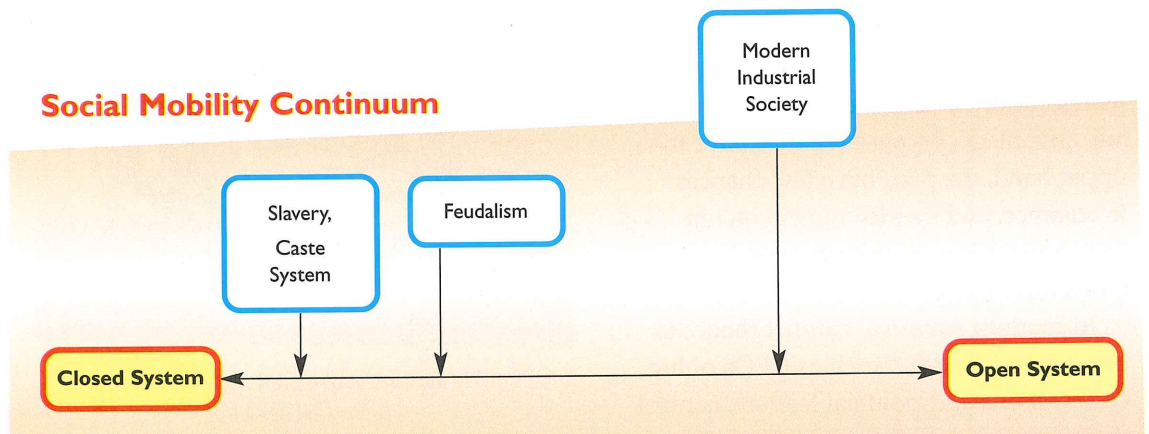
### Closed Systems

Once humans develop agricultural skills, they settle into permanent groups and begin to stratify labor, with different amounts of status attached to each layer, or **stratum** (plural *strata*). Most nonindustrial

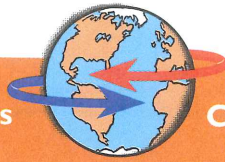
societies have developed **closed systems** in which little social mobility exists. Individuals have no opportunity to change their social status during their lifetimes.

**Three** examples of closed systems are:

1. **Slavery.** In a slave system, slaves are treated as property. Usually, the people who own slaves have complete control over them and profit from their forced labor.
2. **Caste Systems.** **Castes** are lifelong statuses determined by the status of one’s parents. Castes are rigidly stratified, and the order of superiority is clear. Individual effort and talent can affect a person’s position within a caste, but they cannot help that person move to a higher stratum. Closely governed norms define the roles of caste members and their interactions with people of other castes. Usually, *endogamy*—marriage within one’s own caste—is required. Otherwise, the social status of children would be unclear.







### Castes in India

The world's best-known caste system has its roots in ancient India. According to traditional beliefs, four original castes—the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras—have subdivided in India over the years into thousands of subcastes based on specific occupations. Below these four castes are a class of “out-castes,” or untouchables, who are shunned by others and given only the most undesirable work to do.

In the past half-century many Indians, especially in urban areas, have abandoned the caste system. India's legislature has abolished the caste system as the basis for legal rights, such as property ownership and access to public facilities. In many rural areas, however, the caste system continues its role in organizing daily life.

**3. Feudalism.** The feudal estate system is almost as restricted as the caste system in limiting the social mobility of its members. Most people spend their lives as serfs (peasants) working the land of the lord, who controls their livelihood. A few people occupy middle layers as teachers, healers, or merchants. People may occasionally change their “estates” by doing a favor for a lord or king, by

joining the priesthood, or by marrying someone of a higher position. The feudal estate system has existed in many parts of the world, including Japan, Europe, and Latin America.

### Open Systems

Modern industrialized societies depend on people with special skills and extensive education to fill various jobs. These societies tend to have **open systems** of stratification, in which people have a significant chance of moving from one level to another. Statuses are more likely to be achieved rather than ascribed, and social mobility is based on ambition, skill, and talent. However, few systems are totally open, and significantly different opportunities are available at different levels of society.

Sociologists use the concept of class to analyze stratification systems in countries with a great deal of social mobility. Members of the same social class have similar opportunities, values, goals, and ways of behaving. They share economic and social position in the society. People can be members of a given class depending on their incomes, education levels, and occupations. Usually, a society has a very small “upper class.” Most citizens are divided into a “middle class” (owners of small businesses, professionals, managers, and civil servants), a “working class” (manual workers in industries such as manufacturing, mining, and construction), and a “lower class” (unskilled laborers, those in low-paying service jobs, and the permanently unemployed).



### Karl Marx: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat

The writings of Karl Marx are the foundation of modern conflict theory. Marx believed that throughout history, social stratification has been based on economic factors. Whoever has controlled the means of production (land, factories, equipment, and money) has controlled everything else.

Marx identified two social classes: those who control and those who are controlled.

In modern capitalist societies the *bourgeoisie* control businesses and factories, and the *proletariat* provide the necessary labor. Marx believed that the bourgeoisie take advantage of the proletariat, exploiting their labor and forcing them into poverty. He urged the proletariat to use their greatest strength—their large numbers—to overthrow the bourgeoisie.

### Class Divisions and Class Consciousness

Class consciousness—personal identification with one's status group—can be complex in modern societies. Middle-class people have different interests, behaviors, child-rearing habits, and goals from those in the working class. Those who have steady, dependable jobs see themselves as different from those who don't. In the United States, social mobility tends to blur the distinctions created by class consciousness.

### Types and Patterns of Social Mobility

Social mobility may take different forms:

- \* **Upward mobility** and **downward mobility** occur when an individual moves up or down the ranks of social strata during his or her lifetime.

**EXAMPLES:** A son or daughter of a skilled factory worker who becomes a doctor experiences upward mobility. A child born into a prosperous upper-middle-class family who is chronically underemployed as an adult experiences downward mobility.

- \* **Intergenerational mobility** and **Intragenerational mobility** occur between (*inter-*) or within (*intra-*) generations. If a child's status as an adult is significantly different from that of his or her parent, the mobility is intergenerational.

**EXAMPLE:** A lawyer who is the child of a truck driver.

If an individual's status changes significantly as he or she ages, intragenerational mobility has taken place.

**EXAMPLE:** A person who drops out of high school and later becomes a noted author.



\* **Horizontal mobility** happens when an individual moves from one comparably ranked status to another. A person's social status may change, or may differ from that of a parent, but not be necessarily higher or lower.

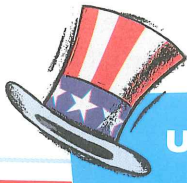
**EXAMPLE:** A lawyer's son or daughter becomes a college professor (the prestige level of the two occupations is about the same).

### Mobility in the United States

The belief that "anyone can get ahead" is a traditional American value, so social mobil-

ity is not only possible but encouraged. Yet how much social mobility really exists?

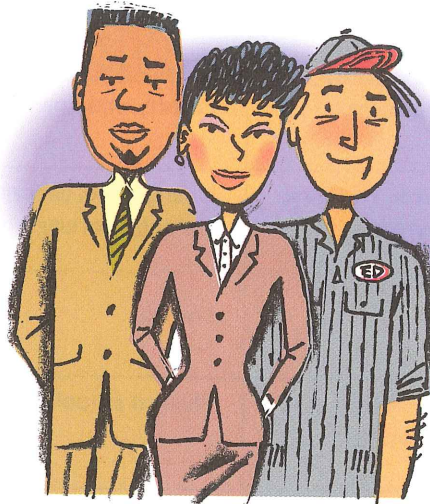
In one study of how Americans view equal opportunity, researchers found significant differences in opinion according to race and social class. In response to the question, "Do you think America is a land of opportunity?" about 80 percent of whites interviewed agreed with the statement, but only about 60 percent of blacks agreed. Even further disparities were found in answer to the question, "Does a poor boy have the same chances as a rich boy to make a given amount of money?" Almost 60 percent of the wealthy white



### U.S. Culture Connection

#### White, Pink, and Blue Collars

The terms *white collar* and *blue collar* describe jobs that reflect social class membership. Sociologists originally coined the terms, with "white-collar" jobs referring to middle-class occupations in which jobholders wear white dress shirts to work. "Blue-collar workers," such as plumbers, electricians, and other manual laborers, gained their name from the open-collar, casual blue shirts they wore. Fashions and gender roles have transformed the original distinctions, but the terms have become a part of popular culture. In recent years, a new term, *pink collar*, has been coined to refer to some jobs held by women.



people in the study said yes. Among middle-income people, however, only 21 percent said yes, and just 11 percent of poor blacks answered the question affirmatively. Are these perceptions accurate?

Studies that concentrate on intergenerational mobility show that father-to-son mobility steps are usually quite small. (The few studies on social mobility of women indicate that their patterns are similar to those of men.) Rarely does a son get a job with prestige or pay much higher or lower than that of his father. Vertical movements between the bottom and the top of the occupational structure are also rare. In other words, few sons of garbage collectors rise to become Supreme Court justices. Still, exceptions to this pattern exist, and the United States maintains a comparatively open class system.

## Class Structure in the United States

Most Americans like to think of themselves as “middle class,” no matter what their occupation, level of education, or income. When asked about their social class, very few people label themselves as “upper class” or “lower class.” After all, American culture values the ability of average people to govern their own affairs. Most of all, we value equal opportunity, the potential individuals have to change their status in life. Yet social inequality exists in the United States, and even children understand that some people have more wealth, prestige, and power than others.

Social Classes in the United States		
	Lower Class	Working Class
<b>Main Feature</b>	Poverty, underprivilege.	Irregular employment.
<b>Economic Factors: Employment</b>	Unemployed, underemployed, and the “working poor.”	Blue-collar or manual labor (repair technicians, dog groomers).
<b>Income</b>	Lowest.	Low.
<b>Social Factor: Education</b>	Minimal school or job skills.	At least high school, some college attendance but no degree.
<b>Lifestyle Issues, Challenges</b>	Powerless; barely able to provide for their needs.	Insecure at work; only able to receive education at a personal sacrifice.



## Social Classes

How many social classes are there in the United States? Most people think of three: upper, middle, and lower classes. However, sociological analysis is more complex. Sociologists usually break socioeconomic status into several layers based on social factors, such as levels of education and lifestyles, and economic factors, such as income and occupation. Most researchers refer to at least five classes in U.S. society. Each class shares a cluster of status characteristics that distinguishes it from others. The **five** socioeconomic classes in U.S. society, described in the chart below:

- \* Lower class.
- \* Working class.
- \* Lower-middle class.

- \* Upper-middle class.
- \* Upper class.

## Effects of Class Differences

Class differences have profound effects on *life chances*, such as a person's access to health care, education, and housing, as well as on one's relationship with the law.

## Health and Longevity

While almost all industrial societies have some way of providing health care for everyone, the level of that care can vary enormously based on an individual's income. Good health care of the mother during pregnancy, regular checkups with doctors and dentists during the growing years, access to expensive screening tests for various forms of cancer, quality nursing care in old age—all these extend an

	Lower-Middle Class	Upper-Middle Class	Upper Class
	Steady employment.	Professional occupations with stability and prestige.	Wealth, high social status.
	"Lower-white collar" jobs (police, small business owners).	"Upper-white collar" jobs in professions and businesses.	Prestigious occupations, often professional.
	Enough to own a home.	High, enough to save and accumulate assets.	Highest combination of income and assets.
	Training beyond high school, with or without college.	Most have college education, many have advanced degrees.	College and above; may attend prestigious schools.
	Concerned about saving enough for retirement and health care.	Pressured by career demands that threaten the quality of family life.	Challenged to find ways to be socially responsible.



## U.S. Culture Connection

### The New “Ultra” Middle Class

In 2000, *Money Magazine* identified a new and growing class in the United States. Families in this “ultra” middle class were headed by adults between the ages of 35 and 55 who lived in metropolitan areas and had at least a bachelor’s degree. Family income was more than \$100,000 a year; many families had investment portfolios.

When family income increased to a “confidence zone” of \$150,000, members experienced a lifestyle change that allowed them to afford homes in the top 10 percent of the market, send 2 children to a private college without financial aid, own a high-end luxury car, and establish savings for retirement.

individual’s life. They are more readily available to those who can pay for them.

One of the most powerful influences on life expectancy in developed countries is the level of socioeconomic inequality. The greater the gap between the rich and poor within a population, the lower the country stands when ranked with other countries. This helps explain why the United States, the richest and most powerful country in the world (spending more than any other on health care), ranks below 25th in the list of countries ordered by life expectancy. Income differences between rich and poor are bigger in the United States than in any other developed nation.

Changes in a population’s income distribution appear to be associated with changes

in health. Studies have shown that reducing income disparity decreases death rates; increasing income disparity raises them.

### Education

Social class affects an individual’s level of education in two ways, through the socialization process and through the ability to pay for good education. Affluent, well-educated parents are likely to socialize their children into values compatible with future success. Their expectations and values encourage children to work hard in school and aspire to professional occupations.

Access to education is crucial to socioeconomic success because it strongly influences a person’s ability to qualify for high-paying jobs and fit into more affluent lifestyles. Children from poor families are



significantly less likely to attend college than children from prosperous families and thus are less likely to acquire the skills, knowledge, and associations that lead to higher-level positions.

### Housing

The quality of housing affects many aspects of an individual's life. In poor areas, apartments and houses are small. Sanitation is often inadequate and poses health hazards. Few poor people own their homes, so they depend on a landlord's ability or willingness to maintain adequate living conditions. The neighborhoods of the poor lack safe places for children to play or for others to walk in.

The rich enjoy comfortable neighborhoods with access to better hospitals, more efficient transportation, and more effective police protection. The poor are more likely to live in areas where streets are littered with trash, shopping centers are inadequate or nonexistent, and crime rates are dangerously high.

### The Law

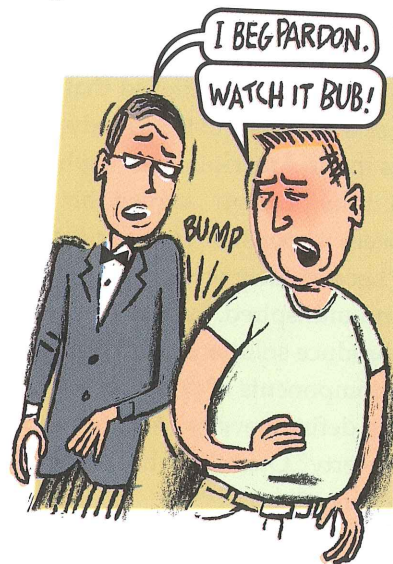
The poor are often the losers in the criminal justice system. They include more victims as well as more perpetrators. Residents of low-income neighborhoods are frequently arrested for the victimless crimes of drunkenness, vagrancy, and gambling, which together account for about 60 percent of all arrests. For crimes that carry jail sentences, the poor are more likely to be sent to jail if convicted than are the wealthier members of society.

## Did You Know?

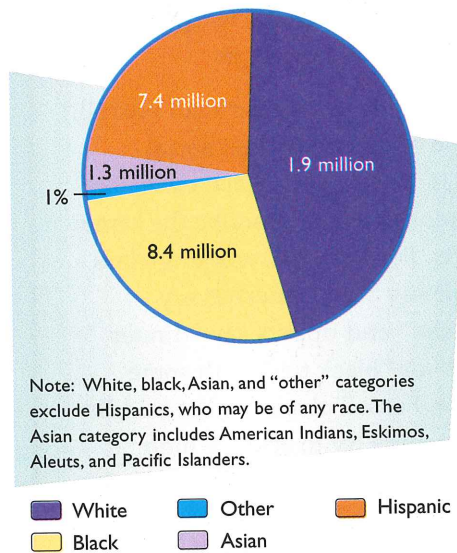


### Class and Language

According to researcher Paul Fussell, people often betray their social class in their speech. Each class uses different words to describe the same objects. For example, working-class people say "tux," middles say "tuxedo," and uppers say "dinner jacket" or "black tie." With some humor, Fussell observes that middle-class people try to achieve high status by multiplying syllables, substituting complex words for simple ones. They say "individuals" instead of "people," "position" instead of "job," "purchase" instead of "buy," and "proceed" instead of "go."



### Persons in Poverty by Race/Ethnicity



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1998)

## Poverty

What causes poverty? Many answers have been given. Karl Marx believed that the poor were the victims of the greedy rich. Believers in the American philosophy of "rugged individualism" argued that poor people were responsible for their own poverty because they were lazy, unmotivated, and uninspired. Such answers do little to produce solutions. Sociologists analyze the components of poverty: How would we define poverty? What groups live in poverty? Over time, how do these groups change?

## Defining Poverty

To start understanding poverty, we must establish a standard for identifying who we are talking about. Who are the poor?

Measuring poverty is a complex matter that must take into account many influences on costs of living. The U.S. Census Bureau uses a **poverty line** based on income and the number of members in a family. All who fall below the line are defined as "poor." The statistic is used in many ways, including determining who is eligible for public welfare and who is not.

The Census Bureau adjusts the poverty line every year for inflation. In 2001, the poverty line was defined as a household income of \$17,650 for a family of four.

The graph opposite shows how all people in poverty are distributed by race. It shows, for instance, that 45 percent of all people in poverty are white—not that 45 percent of all white people in the United States are in poverty.

## Poverty Rates and the Poor

The *poverty rate* is a measure of how many people in a particular population fall below the poverty line. It is used to look at group membership in poverty. We could compare the percent of musicians living in poverty to that of other occupations, or children living in poverty to that of other age groups. The poverty rate can reveal much about our society.



Studies of poverty rates have shown that **five** factors are strongly related to poverty levels:

- 1. Race and ethnicity.** Most of the poor are white, however, Latinos and African Americans are *more likely* to be poor than whites.
- 2. Female head-of-household.** Of all population categories, female-headed households produce the greatest number of poor people. Especially hard-hit are women living without husbands and with one or more children.
- 3. Region.** Some areas of the country present fewer economic opportunities than others and, as a result, have a higher percent of impoverished people.
- 4. Age.** Older people are an unusual economic group because they include such a range of income and wealth. But even though some older people have accumulated wealth, overall the aged are more likely to live in poverty than the rest of the population.
- 5. Disabilities.** Disabilities often mean that people cannot be employed full-time, and as a result, about a fifth of all disabled people live below the poverty line.

## Sociologist's Perspective



### Income Disparity

According to an analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the gap between rich and poor in the United States grew much wider between 1977 and 1999. In 1999, the richest 2.7 million citizens (the top one percent) collectively had as many after-tax dollars to spend as the bottom 100 million. The ratio has more than

doubled since 1977. The data show that income disparity has grown so much that four out of five households—about 217 million people—took home a thinner slice of the economic pie in 1999 than in 1977. It should be pointed out, however, that the “pie” had become much larger. The poorer families had more buying power in 1990 than in 1977.



### Declining Poverty Rates

According to research by the Census Bureau, the percentage of households living in poverty in 2000 dropped to the lowest point in more than two decades. The bureau noted that 11.8 percent of the population lived below the poverty line in 2000, down from 12.7 percent the year before. The bureau also reported sharp gains for those far down the income scale:

- \* Median income for African-American, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic white households reached the highest levels ever recorded.
- \* Households in the bottom fifth of the income scale saw their household earnings rise by 5.4 percent, the largest increase of any income group.
- \* While several states and the District of Columbia saw an overall decrease in poverty rates, no state saw a statistically significant rise in poverty.

## Chapter 6 Wrap-up

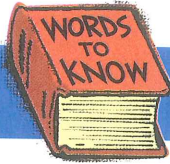
### SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND CLASS

*Social stratification appears in every society. The strata are made up of social classes, each with a different degree of power, wealth, and prestige. A person is born into a social class. Societies can be ranked on a continuum between open and closed systems. The more open societies permit people to move from one class to another.*

*In the United States, sociologists recognize five social classes: the lower class, the working class, the lower-middle class, the upper-middle class, and the upper class. Economic and social factors differentiate these classes. Class differences influence people's life chances in such areas as health care, housing, education, and treatment under the law.*

*Poverty is related to low incomes and inadequate living conditions. The poverty line defines the combination of income and family size that makes people "poor." The poverty rate indicates what percentage of a given population lives in poverty. One's risk of living in poverty is influenced by race and ethnicity, household composition, region of the country, age, and level of disability.*





**castes**—lifelong statuses determined by the status of one's parents. *p.108*

**class**—group of people who share economic and social position in society. *p.104*

**closed system**—stratification system that allows little or no social mobility. *p.108*

**continuum**—continuous, uninterrupted extent, like a line, that has opposite concepts at either end of it, used to show relative position of institutions to each other with respect to the ideas conveyed at the ends. *p.108*

**downward mobility**—movement from a higher to a lower rank of the social strata. *p.110*

**horizontal mobility**—movement from one level of society to another of the same rank. *p.111*

**intergenerational mobility**—movement of a son or daughter up or down the social strata from the position of the parents. *p.110*

**intragenerational mobility**—movement up or down the social strata within one's lifetime. *p.110*

**open system**—stratification system that allows some significant degree of social mobility. *p.109*

**poverty line**—measure by the United States Census that divides people into poor and non-poor groups on the basis of income. *p.116*

**social mobility**—ability of individuals to change their social status during their lifetimes. *p.108*

**social stratification**—structured ranking of entire groups of people within a society based on differences in power, prestige, and wealth. *p.104*

**stratum** (plural *strata*)—layer; in sociology, a level of society comprised of people with similar social, cultural, or economic status. *p.108*

**upward mobility**—movement from a lower to a higher rank of the social strata. *p.110*