Chapter 8

Social Stratification

Sections
1. Dimensions of Stratification
2. Explanations of Stratification
3. Social Classes in America
4. Poverty in America
5. Social Mobility

Learning Objectives
After reading this chapter, you will be able to
• explain the relationship between stratification and social class.
• compare and contrast the three dimensions of stratification.
• state the differences among the three major perspectives on social stratification.
• identify the distinguishing characteristics of the major social classes in America.
• describe the measurement and extent of poverty in the United States.
• discuss social mobility in the United States.
On the streets of many American towns or cities, you will sometimes see someone who is asking for help. It might be a homeless person who has made a sort of makeshift “station” on the street corner of a big city. It might be a man or woman standing near a shopping mall entrance holding up a hand-made sign: “I Need a Job.”

How do you react if you see someone like the man pictured in the photo at left? Do you feel sorry for him and want to help? Do you think he must be responsible for his situation? Do you think he might just be lazy and looking for “easy money?” Do you wonder if he is getting any benefits from a government program supported by taxes?

Your answer depends a lot on your social class and such characteristics as age, education, politics, and income. Sociologists know that most Americans seriously overestimate the number of people who rely on government programs or charity to survive.

At the same time, negative attitudes about people who do receive any kind of government payments have become part of the American culture. This chapter will look at social stratification and the attitudes and behaviors of different social classes.
Section Preview

Stratification is the division of society into classes that have unequal amounts of wealth, power, and prestige. Karl Marx and Max Weber studied these dimensions of stratification in great detail.

Social Stratification and Social Class

In one of his best-known children’s books, Dr. Seuss writes of the Sneetches, birds whose rank depends on whether or not they have a large star on their stomachs. Star-bellied Sneetches have high status, and plain-bellied Sneetches have low status. In the classic novel Animal Farm, George Orwell creates a barnyard society where the pigs ultimately take over the previously classless animal society. The animals’ motto changes from “All animals are equal” to “All animals are equal—but some animals are more equal than others.” Both books mock the tendency of humans to form ranks.

Social stratification is the creation of layers (or strata) of people who possess unequal shares of scarce resources. The most important of these resources are income, wealth, power, and prestige (Levine, 1998).

How is social stratification related to social class? Each of the layers in a stratification system is a social class—a segment of a population whose members hold similar amounts of scarce resources and share values, norms, and an identifiable lifestyle. The number of social classes in a society varies. Technologically developed countries generally have three broad classes—upper, middle, and lower—subdivided into smaller categories. In some developing countries, there might only be an upper class and a lower class.

Karl Marx and Max Weber made the most significant early contributions to the study of social stratification. (See Chapter 1, pages 16–18 for an introduction to these two pioneers of sociology.) Marx explained the importance of the economic foundations of social classes, while Weber emphasized the prestige and power aspects of stratification.
The Economic Dimension

Marx identified several social classes in nineteenth-century industrial society, including laborers, servants, factory workers, craftspeople, proprietors of small businesses, and moneyed capitalists. He predicted, however, that capitalist societies would ultimately be reduced to two social classes. He thought that those who owned the means of production—the bourgeoisie—would be the rulers. Those who worked for wages—the proletariat—would be the ruled. Marx predicted that because the capitalists owned the means of production (factories, land, and so forth), they would both rule and exploit the working class. The working class would have nothing to sell but its labor.

Poverty and Death

Receiving basic nutrition and medical care is critical to survival in the early years of human life. Because wealth and income have a significant impact on a family’s ability to provide these necessities of life, extreme poverty matters a great deal. This map shows the probable number of deaths of children less than five years old per 1,000 live births in each country.

Interpreting the Map

1. Do you see a pattern in the death rates for children under five years old? Explain.
2. Why do you think the U.S. ranks low in early childhood deaths?
3. Imagine you have the job of reducing the world’s death rate among children under age five. What programs would you introduce?

Marx believed that control of the economy gave the capitalists control over the legal, educational, and government systems as well. For Karl Marx, the economy determined the nature of society.

**Are there extremes of income and poverty in the United States?** In his writings, Marx emphasized the unequal distribution of economic resources. How unequally are these resources distributed in the United States? When discussing this issue, economists often make a distinction between income and wealth. **Income** is the amount of money received within a given time period by an individual or group. **Wealth** refers to all the economic resources possessed by an individual or group. In brief, your income is your paycheck, and your wealth is what you own.

In 2004, approximately 37 million Americans were living in poverty. (In 2004, the poverty threshold was set at $19,484 for a family of four.) At the other extreme, there were nearly 2.5 million millionaires and around 341 billionaires in the United States. The economist Paul Samuelson described income inequality in America in these words: “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 Mt. Everest, but most people would be within a few feet of the ground” (Samuelson and Nordhaus, 1995). The truth of this statement is supported by U.S. government figures on the distribution of income. In 2004, for example, the richest 20 percent of American households received over 50 percent of the nation’s income. The poorest 20 percent received less than 4 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census).

Income inequality exists and is growing. Figure 8.1 charts percentage changes in after-tax income in the United States over a twenty-five year period. During this period, the income of the top
1 percent of the population increased by 111 percent. Compare this to a 5 percent increase for the lowest fifth of the population. How much inequality in wealth exists in the United States?

Income distribution figures reveal economic inequality, but they do not show the full extent of inequality. For that, inequality in wealth (what you own) must be considered. In the United States, there is a high concentration of wealth. The richest 20 percent of the population holds 84 percent of the wealth. The top 1 percent alone has 33 percent of the total wealth in the United States. (See Figure 8.2.)

The Power Dimension

You will recall from Chapter 1 that power is the ability to control the behavior of others, even against their will. Individuals or groups who possess power are able to use it to enhance their own interests, often—but not necessarily—at the expense of society.

Can you exercise power without being wealthy? According to Marx, those who own and control capital have the power in a society. Weber, on the other hand, argued that while having money certainly helps, economic success and power are not the same. Money and ownership of the means of production are not the only resources that can be used as a basis for power. Expert knowledge can be used to expand power, too. For example, many lawyers convert their expertise into substantial amounts of political power. Fame is another basis for power. In 1952, for example, Albert Einstein was offered the presidency of Israel. (He refused, saying, “I know a little about nature, and hardly anything about men.”)

Power is also attached to the social positions we hold. Elected officers in organizations have more power than rank-and-file members. People in top executive positions in the mass media are powerful, even if they themselves do not have great wealth. People who are wealthy and powerful also are assumed to have characteristics they may not have. Not all of these people are as intelligent and wise as is usually assumed. Still, these attributed characteristics help them gain prestige.
Finally, we can overcome a lack of wealth if we have large numbers of people on our side or if we are skillful at organizing our resources. Hitler, for example, was able to turn the problem of limited resources into a mass political movement. He gained absolute power by promising to deliver Germany from economic hardship following World War I.

**The Prestige Dimension**

A third dimension of social stratification is **prestige**—recognition, respect, and admiration attached to social positions. Prestige is defined by your culture and society. Honor, admiration, respect, and deference are extended to

Popular celebrities such as Johnny Depp and Jennifer Lopez have considerable wealth. Their prestige rating is stronger in some circles than others, however.
dons within the Mafia, for example; but outside their own circles Mafia chiefs do not have high prestige.

Prestige must be voluntarily given, not claimed. Scientists cannot proclaim themselves Nobel Prize winners; journalists cannot award themselves Pulitzer Prizes; and corporate executives cannot grant themselves honorary doctorates. Recognition must come from others; it is socially constructed.

People with similar levels of prestige share identifiable lifestyles. The offspring of upper-class families are more likely to attend private universities and Episcopalian churches. Children from lower-class homes are less likely to attend college at all and tend to belong to fundamentalist religious groups. In fact, some sociologists view social classes as subcultures because their members participate in distinctive ways of life.

How is prestige distributed? The social positions that are considered the most important, or are valued the most highly, have the most prestige. Because Americans value the acquisition of wealth and power, they tend to assign higher prestige to persons in positions of wealth and power.

In America, most people achieve prestige because of their occupations. (See Figure 8.3.) White-collar occupations (doctors, ministers, schoolteachers) have higher prestige than blue-collar jobs (carpenters, plumbers, mechanics). Even though wealth and power usually determine prestige, that is not always the case. You may find it somewhat surprising, for example, that priests and college professors have more prestige than bankers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupations</th>
<th>Prestige Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surgeon</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astronaut</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College professor</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airline pilot</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dentist</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priest</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV anchorwoman</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret Service agent</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School principal</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical technician</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optometrist</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered nurse</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school teacher</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air traffic controller</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional athlete</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paramedic</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public grade school teacher</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising executive</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinarian</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police officer</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actor</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV anchorman</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businessperson</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actress</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery school teacher</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion designer</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firefighter</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airplane mechanic</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial artist</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funeral director</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazz musician</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail carrier</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance agent</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanic</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disc jockey</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographer</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plumber</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank teller</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Automobile dealer                   | 43             |
Deep-sea diver                      | 43             |
Landlord                           | 41             |
Prison guard                        | 40             |
Auto mechanic                       | 40             |
Roofier                             | 37             |
Barber                              | 36             |
Sales clerk in a store              | 36             |
Bus driver                          | 32             |
Dry cleaner                         | 32             |
Waitress                            | 29             |
Taxicab driver                      | 28             |
Used car salesperson                | 25             |
Bill collector                      | 24             |
Janitor                             | 22             |
Grocery bagger                      | 18             |
Street-corner drug dealer           | 13             |
Fortune teller                      | 13             |
Panhandler                          | 11             |

Figure 8.3 Prestige Rankings of Selected Occupations in the United States
Why do you think the highest listed prestige score is 87? What occupations might rate a higher score?
Associate each of these people with a prestige level. If an occupation is not obvious, choose a likely one for that person. Can the young girl even be ranked?

Section 1 Assessment

1. What is social stratification?
2. Match the dimensions of stratification with the examples below. Use (W) for wealth, (Po) for power, and (Pr) for prestige.
   a. the respect accorded doctors
   b. a politician considering the interests of a political lobby
   c. the Nobel Peace Prize
   d. stock market holdings
   e. a Supreme Court ruling
   f. real estate assets

3. The top 20 percent of U.S. households receive approximately what percentage of total U.S. income?
4. What are the most common sources of prestige in U.S. society?

Critical Thinking

5. Analyzing Information Social class level influences the likelihood of gaining political power. Can you analyze the relationship between social class level and political power?
You Are What You Wear

Social rank in Europe in the Middle Ages was reflected, as it is today, in clothing and accessories. The following excerpt describes some of the norms associated with dress and status.

Clothing [in medieval Europe] served as a kind of uniform, designating status. Lepers were required to wear gray coats and red hats, the skirts of prostitutes had to be scarlet, released heretics carried crosses sewn on both sides of their chests—you were expected to pray as you passed them—and the breast of every Jew, as [required] by law, bore a huge yellow circle.

The rest of society belonged to one of the three great classes: the nobility, the clergy, and the commons. Establishing one’s social identity was important. Each man knew his place, believed it had been [determined] in heaven, and was aware that what he wore must reflect it.

To be sure, certain fashions were shared by all. Styles had changed since Greece and Rome shivered in their glory; then garments had been wrapped on; now all classes put them on and fastened them. Most clothing—except the leather gauntlets and leggings of hunters, and the crude animal skins worn by the very poor—was now woven of wool. (Since few Europeans possessed a change of clothes, the same [dress] was worn daily; as a consequence, skin diseases were astonishingly prevalent.) But there was no mistaking the distinctions between the parson in his vestments; the toiler in his dirty cloth tunic, loose trousers, and heavy boots; and the aristocrat with his jewelry, his hairdress, and his extravagant finery. Every knight wore a signet ring, and wearing fur was as much a sign of knighthood as wearing a sword or carrying a falcon. Indeed, in some European states it was illegal for anyone not nobly born to adorn himself with fur.

“Many a petty noble,” wrote historian W. S. Davis, “will cling to his frayed tippet of black lambskin, even in the hottest weather, merely to prove that he is not a villein [a type of serf].”


Thinking It Over

Think about how you and your classmates dress. Identify some ways in which differences in dress reflect social status in your school.
Explanations of Stratification

Functionalist Theory of Stratification

According to the functionalists, stratification assures that the most qualified people fill the most important positions, that these qualified people perform their tasks competently, and that they are rewarded for their efforts. The functionalist theory recognizes that inequality exists because certain jobs are more important than others and that these jobs often involve special talent and training. To encourage people to make the sacrifices necessary to fill these jobs (such as acquiring the necessary education), society attaches special monetary rewards and prestige to the positions. That is why, for example, doctors make more money and have more prestige than bus drivers. A higher level of skill is required in the medical profession, and our society’s need for highly qualified doctors is great.

Conflict Theory of Stratification

According to the conflict theory of stratification, inequality exists because some people are willing to exploit others. Stratification, from this perspective, is based on force rather than on people voluntarily agreeing to it.

The conflict theory of stratification is based on Marx’s ideas regarding class conflict. For Marx, all of history has been a class struggle between the powerful and the powerless, the exploiters and the exploited. Capitalist society is the final stage of the class struggle. Although the capitalists are outnumbered, they are able to control the workers. This is because the capitalists use a belief system that legitimizes the way things are. For example, the powerful contend that income and wealth are based on ability, hard work, and individual effort. Those who own the means of production are able to spread their ideas, beliefs, and values through the schools, the media, the churches, and the government. (More will be said about how this might happen in the next section.) Marx used the term false consciousness to refer to working-class acceptance of capitalist ideas and values.
Later conflict sociologists have proposed that stratification is based more on power than on property ownership. America’s legal system, for example, is used by the wealthy for their benefit, and the political system is skewed toward the interests of the powerful. Conflict theorists would point to the unequal treatment experienced by the poorer residents of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. For conflict theorists, stratification occurs through the struggle for scarce resources.

Symbolic Interactionism and Stratification

Symbolic interactionism helps us understand how people are socialized to accept the existing stratification structure. According to this perspective, American children are taught that a person’s social class is the result of talent and effort. Those “on top” have worked hard and used their abilities, whereas those “on the bottom” lack the talent or the motivation to succeed. Hence, it is not fair to challenge the system. In this way, people come to accept the existing system.

Understandably, people in the lower social classes or social strata tend to suffer from lower self-esteem. How could it be otherwise when messages from all sides tell them they are inferior? Remember that, in the symbolic interactionist view, self-esteem is based on how we think others see us. In other words, the looking-glass process is at work. Those at the top blame the victims; the victims blame themselves.

The reverse is true for the higher classes. Those profiting most from the stratification structure tend to have higher self-esteem. This, in turn, fuels their conviction that the present arrangement is just. In short, people’s self-concepts also help preserve the status quo.

Conflict theorists believe that the various groups in society compete for scarce resources. Education is one means through which people gain access to these resources. Do conflict sociologists believe that everyone has equal access to education?

It isn’t always easy being out of the “in–group.”
Figure 8.4 Social Stratification

This table summarizes what issues of social stratification might be of interest to each of the major perspectives and predictions that they would make. Why would the symbolic interactionists be more likely than the functionalists to look at issues of self-esteem?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Perspective</th>
<th>Research Topic</th>
<th>Expected Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functionalism</td>
<td>Relationship between job performance and pay</td>
<td>Pay levels increase with job performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Theory</td>
<td>Relationship between social class and the likelihood of punishment for a crime</td>
<td>The chances for prosecution decrease as the level of social class increases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Interactionism</td>
<td>Link between social class and self-esteem</td>
<td>Self-esteem is higher among the upper class than the lower class.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section 2 Assessment

1. Identify which of the major perspectives describes the examples below.
   a. Corporate executives make more money because they decide who gets what in their organizations.
   b. Engineers make more money than butlers because of their education.
   c. Poor children tend to have low self-esteem.

2. How did Marx explain the stratification of society?

3. According to the symbolic interactionists, people are socialized to accept the existing stratification structure through ______.
   a. the “I”
   b. evolution
   c. conflict
   d. the self-concept

Critical Thinking

4. Making Comparisons Compare and contrast the explanations given by functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism for the existence of poor people in the United States.
In 1995, sociologist Donna Eder and her research team studied popularity among middle-schoolers. They observed lunchtime interactions and attended extracurricular activities. After several months of observation, informal interviews were conducted with individuals and groups. To capture interaction for closer study, the researchers received student and parental permission for audio and video recordings.

Eder and her colleagues found that in the sixth grade, there were no elite groups. Seventh and eighth graders, however, did not see each other as equals; popular seventh graders were divided along gender lines. By the eighth grade, the two groups intermingled. In both grades, popularity was based on how many others knew who you were and wanted to talk with you.

Status differences could arise in the seventh and eighth grades because cheerleading and team sports existed as a way to become highly visible. Realizing the source of their prestige, male athletes took every opportunity to display symbols of their team affiliation. Team uniforms, jerseys, and athletic shoes were among the most important items of dress. Bandages, casts, and crutches were worn with pride.

Girls could not use sports to gain visibility because female athletics were not as valued by faculty, administrators, or students. Girls, therefore, used cheerleading to make themselves widely known. In addition to performing at basketball and football games, cheerleaders appeared in front of the entire student body at pep rallies and other school events.

Boys made fun of this high-status female activity by mockingly imitating cheers. One male coach joined the mockery by telling football players that either they must practice harder or he would get them cheerleading skirts. He then pretended to cheer in a falsetto voice.

Girls, in contrast, regarded cheerleaders highly. Popular girls in the seventh and eighth grades were either cheerleaders or friends of cheerleaders. Flaunting their status (just as the male athletes did), cheerleaders put on their uniforms as far ahead of games as possible and wore their cheerleading skirts for extracurricular school activities.

**Working with the Research**

How is the stratification structure described in this feature similar to or different from the stratification structure found in your own school?

For adolescent males, playing sports is a way to become popular.
Class Consciousness

Americans have always been aware of inequality, but they have never developed a sense of **class consciousness**—a sense of identification with the goals and interests of the members of a particular social class. In part because the American public has shown relatively little interest in class differences, sociologists began to investigate inequality rather late. It was not until the 1920s that sociologists in the United States began systematically to identify social classes. Since that time, however, research on this subject has been plentiful. Early efforts to study stratification were mostly case studies of specific communities. Only in relatively recent times have attempts been made to describe the stratification structure of America as a whole.

Since social classes are changeable and full of exceptions, any attempt to identify the social-class structure of American society is hazardous. Nevertheless, sociologists have described some of the major classifications. (See Figure 8.5.)

**Table: Typical Occupations and Incomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Occupations</th>
<th>Typical Incomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Upper Class</strong></td>
<td>Investors, heirs, chief executive officers</td>
<td>$2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Upper Middle Class</strong></td>
<td>Upper-level managers, professionals, owners of medium-sized businesses</td>
<td>$120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle Class</strong></td>
<td>Lower-level managers, semiprofessionals, non-realt salespeople</td>
<td>$55,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working Class</strong></td>
<td>Low-paid manual, clerical, craft, and retail sales workers</td>
<td>$35,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working Poor</strong></td>
<td>Lowest-paid manual, retail, and service workers</td>
<td>$22,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Underclass</strong></td>
<td>Unemployed people, people in part-time menial jobs, people receiving public assistance</td>
<td>$12,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Upper Class

The upper class includes only 1 percent of the population (Gilbert, 2003) and may be divided into the upper-upper class and the lower-upper class. At the top is the “aristocracy.” Its members represent the old-money families whose names appear in high society—Ford, Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, and du Pont, among others. The basis for membership in this most elite of clubs is blood rather than sweat and tears. Parents in this class send their children to the best private schools and universities. People in this group seldom marry outside their class.

People are in the lower-upper class more often because of achievement and earned income than because of birth and inherited wealth. Some have made fortunes running large corporations or investing in the stock market. Members of this class may actually be better off financially than members of the upper-upper class. However, they often are not accepted into the most exclusive social circles.

The Middle Classes

Most Americans think of themselves as middle class. In reality, though, only about 40 to 50 percent of Americans fit this description. And most of these people are not in the upper-middle class.
The upper-middle class (14 percent of the population) is composed of those who have been successful in business, the professions, politics, and the military. Basically, this class is made up of individuals and families who benefited from the tremendous corporate and professional expansion following World War II. Members of this class earn enough to live well and to save money. They are typically college educated and have high educational and career goals for their children. They do not have national or international power, but they tend to be active in voluntary and political organizations in their communities.

The middle-middle class (30 percent of the population) is a very mixed bag. Its members include owners of small businesses and farms; independent professionals (small-town doctors and lawyers); other professionals (clergy, teachers, nurses, firefighters, social workers, police officers); lower-level managers; and some sales and clerical workers. Their household income level, which is above the national median income ($44,389 in 2004), does not permit them to live as well as the upper-middle class. Many have only a high school education, although many have some college, and some have college degrees. Members of this class are interested in civic affairs. They participate in political activities less than the classes above them but more than either the working class or the lower class.

The Working Class

The working class (often referred to as the lower-middle class) comprises almost one-third of the population. Working-class people include roofers, delivery truck drivers, machine operators, and salespeople and clerical workers (Rubin, 1994). Although some of these workers may earn more than some middle-class people, in general the economic resources of the working class are lower than those of the middle class.

Members of the working class have below-average income and unstable employment. They generally lack hospital insurance and retirement benefits. The threat of unemployment or illness is real and haunting. Outside of union activities, members of the working class have little opportunity to exercise power or participate in organizations. Members of the working class—even those with higher incomes—are not likely to enter the middle class.

The Working Poor

The working poor (13 percent of the population) consists of people employed in low-skill jobs with the lowest pay. Its members are typically the lowest-level clerical workers, manual workers (laborers), and service workers (fast-food servers). Lacking steady employment, the working poor do not earn enough to rise above the poverty line ($19,484 for a family of four in 2004). The working poor tend not to belong to organizations or to participate in the political process. (See also Enrichment Reading: No Shame in My Game on page 460 in Chapter 13.)

The Underclass

The underclass (12 percent of the population) is composed of people who are usually unemployed and who come from families with a history of unemployment for generations. They either work in part-time menial jobs (unloading trucks, picking up litter) or are on public assistance. In addition
to a lack of education and skills, many members of the underclass have other problems. Physical or mental disabilities are common, and many are single mothers with little or no income.

The most common shared characteristic of the working poor and the underclass is a lack of skills to obtain jobs that pay enough to meet basic needs. There are many routes into these classes—birth, old age, loss of a marriage partner, lack of education or training, drug addiction or alcoholism, physical or mental disability. There are, however, very few paths out. Poverty in the United States, another way to discuss the working poor and the underclass, is the topic of the next section.

Section 3 Assessment

1. Statistically, out of 500 people, how many would belong to the upper class?
2. What is a major distinction between members of the upper-middle and the middle-middle classes?
3. Which class is the largest segment of society?

Critical Thinking

4. Summarizing Information
   Chapter 5 discussed the concept of status. How does ascribed status relate to social class? How does achieved status relate to social class?
The World Bank, whose business it is to dispense economic advice and loans to low- and middle-income countries, continuously monitors income levels around the world. The map below displays the World Bank’s classification of countries in terms of per capita income. For example, the United States is one of the few nations with a “high-income” economy—one that has a gross national income (GNI) per capita of $10,066 or more.

### Interpreting the Map

1. Explain the definitions of the four income groups.
2. Identify two countries within each of the four income categories.
3. Why do you think the U.S. is one of the few countries to fall within the high-income category?

**Source:** World Bank, 2005.
Poverty in America

Section Preview

Poverty can be measured in absolute or relative terms. The poor in the U.S. are disproportionately represented by African Americans, Latinos, women, and children.

Measuring Poverty

The term absolute poverty is the absence of enough money to secure life's necessities—enough food and a safe place to live. It is possible, however, to have the things required to remain alive and still be poor. We measure relative poverty by comparing the economic condition of those at the bottom of a society with that of other members of that society. According to this measure, the definition of poverty can vary. It would not, for example, be the same in India as in the United States.

How is poverty measured in the United States? Historically, the United States government has measured poverty by setting an annual income level and considering people poor if their income is below that level. As noted earlier, in 2004 that figure was $19,484 for a family of four.

How many Americans are poor? Poverty is widespread throughout the United States. According to 2004 U.S. Census Bureau reports, the poor comprise 12.7 percent of the American population, or about 37 million people. Great poverty existed when it became a national political and social issue in the 1960s. More than forty years later, poverty in America is still a problem (Newman, 1999). (See Figure 8.6 on page 260.)

From the slums of Calcutta to a project in the United States, what do these photos say about the relativity of poverty?
Minorities, people who live in female-headed households, children under eighteen years of age, elderly people, and people with disabilities make up the most disadvantaged groups living in the United States today.

**How are race and ethnicity related to poverty?** Nearly 46 percent of the poor in America today are non-Latino white. The poverty rate for African Americans and Latinos is much higher than that for whites, however. The poverty rate for whites is 8.6 percent; for African Americans and Latinos more than 20 percent. African Americans and Latinos together account for only about one-fourth of the total population, but they make up nearly half of the poor population. (See Figure 8.7.)

**How are gender and age related to poverty?** Another large segment of the poor population is made up of female-headed households. We can look at this issue in two different ways. We can look at all poor households as a group and determine what proportion of them are headed by females. When we do this, we find that about one-half of poor households are female headed. In contrast, when we look at nonpoor households, we find that only about 14 percent are headed by females. Another approach would be to look at all female-headed households as a group and determine what proportion of them are poor. We find that the poverty rate for these households is about 28 percent, compared with just over 10 percent for all families.
By either measure, then, households headed by females are poorer than those headed by males. A related factor is the poverty rate for children under eighteen years of age. The current rate for this group is about 18 percent—the highest rate for any age group in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). The high poverty rates for women and children reflect a trend in U.S. society. Between 1960 and today, women and children make up a larger proportion of the poor. Sociologists refer to this trend as the feminization of poverty.

There are several reasons why women have a higher risk of being poor. As we discuss in more detail in Chapter 10 (see pages 323–324), women earn only about $.80 for every dollar earned by men. Women with children find it more difficult to find and keep regular, long-term employment. A lack of good child-care facilities adds to the likelihood that they will not be able to continue working.

Older Americans make up another large segment of the poor. Nearly 10 percent of people aged sixty-five or older live in poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). Another large segment of the poor are people who have disabilities. This group is three times as likely to live in poverty as people who are able-bodied. Also, people who have severe disabilities are more likely to live in poverty than are those who have less severe disabilities.

**feminization of poverty**
a trend in U.S. society in which women and children make up an increasing proportion of the poor

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**Snapshot of America**

**Percentage of Population in Poverty**

Although the U.S. economy is prosperous, some people are concerned that many have not benefited from this prosperity. In fact, many people still live in poverty. This map shows the average percentage of the poor by state for 2002 to 2004.

**Interpreting the Map**

1. Can you make any generalization about poverty from this map?
2. If you were the governor of your state, what would your platform on poverty be? Be specific.

Responses to the Problem of Poverty

Before the mid-1960s, fighting poverty was not a major goal of the federal government. Some programs, such as Social Security and Aid to Families with Dependent Children, had been enacted during the Great Depression. These measures did not usually reach the lowest levels of needy citizens, however. Finally in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson marshalled the forces of the federal government to begin a War on Poverty.

What were the goals of the War on Poverty? The philosophy behind the War on Poverty was to help poor people help themselves (Jacoby, 1997; Barry, 1999; Patterson, 2004). President Johnson’s predecessor, President John F. Kennedy, believed that if the chains of poverty were to be broken, it had to be through self-improvement, not temporary relief. Accordingly, almost 60 percent of the first poverty budget was earmarked for youth opportunity programs and the work experience program (work and job training designed primarily for welfare recipients and unemployed fathers).

Hopes for positive results from the War on Poverty were high. However, not all of the programs were as successful as predicted. Indeed, some have come under severe criticism. These criticisms center around supposed widespread abuses and the fear that the system encourages people to become dependent upon the government longer than is necessary. “Fixing” the way social welfare should be provided and payments should be distributed has been the focus of many hot political debates.

Welfare Reform

Prior to 1996, the main source of welfare assistance for the needy was a program called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The most recent legislation on welfare reform, enacted in 1996, replaced AFDC with a program known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

What is the nature of welfare reform? The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program limits the amount of time those able to work can receive welfare payments. The bill has three major elements: it reduces welfare spending, it increases state and local power to oversee
Section 4 Assessment

1. Discuss the difference between absolute and relative measures of poverty.

2. Which of the following is not one of the major categories of poor people in the United States?
   - a. children under age eighteen
   - b. able-bodied men who refuse to work
   - c. elderly people
   - d. people with disabilities
   - e. females who are single heads of households

3. How did the economic downturn of the early 2000s affect the jobs typically filled by former welfare recipients?

4. Understanding Cause and Effect Describe the feminization of poverty. How does this trend affect the motivation to have children?
During the last century, when mass production changed the way goods were produced, a favorite adage of businesspeople was “Time is money.” In today’s service economy (where most people are not producing a tangible product), information is money. Children from disadvantaged families have far less access (both at school and at home) to information technology, such as computers and the Internet, than children in wealthier families. This puts them at a disadvantage in competition for grades and in the job market.

Because of this situation, educators are designing special school-based programs to provide computers in low-income schools and to train teachers in those schools to use them. Harlem-based “Playing 2 Win” is one of these programs. This computer center offers classes and workshops to both children and adults six days a week. It also provides assistance to other community groups that want to set up their own computer centers.

Another successful program is “Street-Level Youth Media” in Chicago’s inner city. Street-Level’s mission is to educate disadvantaged young people about new technologies. Street-Level began by asking inner-city youths to make videos about their everyday lives on the streets of Chicago. These videos helped residents to see the youths as real human beings trapped in desperate, life-threatening situations. Street-Level continues to work with youths who have been rejected by mainstream society, helping them find solutions to their problems, strengthen their communities, and achieve economic success. The program’s staff members are both artists and mentors who provide Chicago’s young people with formal training in the media arts (Street-Level, 2005).

**Analyzing the Trends**

Do you think the rise of computer technology is affecting the social stratification structure in America? Do you think these computer-training programs can seriously affect the cultural values and subsequent economic behavior of those who participate in them? Why or why not?

Computer training is the gateway to success in the information-based economy. Students in these classrooms will have an advantage in the job market because of their computer-based skills.
Social Mobility

Section Preview

Social mobility, the movement of individuals or groups within the stratification structure, is usually measured by changes in occupational status. Sociologists are most interested in upward or downward (vertical) mobility. Closed-class systems permit little vertical mobility; open-class systems, such as those in industrialized countries, allow considerable vertical mobility.

Types of Social Mobility

Mobility is the ability to move; social mobility is the movement of people between social classes.

What are the types of social mobility? Social mobility can be horizontal or vertical. Horizontal mobility involves changing from one occupation to another at the same social class level, as when an Army captain becomes a public school teacher, a minister becomes a psychologist, or a restaurant server becomes a taxi driver. Because horizontal mobility involves no real change in occupational status or social class, sociologists are not generally interested in investigating it. Vertical mobility, however, is another story.

With vertical mobility, a person’s occupational status or social class moves upward or downward. When the change takes place over a generation, it is called intergenerational mobility. If a plumber’s daughter becomes a physician, upward intergenerational mobility has occurred. If a lawyer’s son becomes a carpenter, downward intergenerational mobility has occurred.
Caste and Open-Class Systems

The extent of vertical mobility varies from society to society. Some societies have considerable mobility; others have little or none. This is the major difference between caste (or closed-class) systems and open-class systems.

What is a caste system? In a caste system, there is no social mobility because social status is inherited and cannot be changed. In a caste system, statuses (including occupations) are ascribed or assigned at birth. Individuals cannot change their statuses through any efforts of their own. By reason of religious, biological, superstitious, or legal justification, those in one caste are allowed to marry only within their own caste and must limit relationships of all types with those below and above them in the stratification structure. Apartheid, as practiced in South Africa before the election of Nelson Mandela, was a caste system based on race.

The caste system in India is one based on occupation and the Hindu religion. It is as complex as it is rigid. In it are four primary caste categories, ranked according to their degree of religious purity. The Brahmin, the top caste, is composed of priests and scholars. Next comes the Kshatriyas, including professional, governing, and military occupations. Merchants and businessmen form the third caste, called the Vaisyas. Finally, there is the Sudra caste, containing farmers, menial workers, and craftsmen. Actually, there is a fifth category called the “untouchables.” This group of Indians are thought to be so impure that any physical contact contaminates the religious purity of all other caste members. They are given the dirty, degrading tasks, such as collecting trash and handling dead bodies.

How is the caste system kept intact? People in urban India have become less rigid in their caste system than those in rural areas, but the system still plays a major role in daily life. Where traditional rules exist, these rules prevent movement into a higher caste. Members of different castes are not permitted to eat together, and higher-caste people will hardly accept...
anything to eat or drink from lower-caste persons. Untouchables, who must live apart from everyone else, cannot even drink water from the wells used by higher castes. Although the long-standing legal prohibition against dating or marrying someone in a higher caste no longer exists, such crossings are still extremely rare. Most important, the caste system is maintained as a result of the power, wealth, and prestige of the higher castes.

**What is an open-class system?** In an open-class system, an individual’s social class is based on merit and individual effort. Individuals move up and down the stratification structure as their abilities, education, and resources permit. Most people in the United States believe they live in an open-class system. In reality, the opportunity for upward mobility is sometimes denied individuals or groups in America today. For example, because of race or ethnicity, some members of minority groups have been denied opportunities for social mobility. Therefore, because it imposes some limitations on upward mobility, U.S. society cannot be considered truly and completely open. It is, however, a relatively open-class system.

### Upward and Downward Mobility

Few places in the world provide the opportunities for advancement that are available in the United States. Nevertheless, countless Americans fail to be upwardly mobile, despite their talents and dedication to work. This is hard for many people to accept because American tradition—both historical and fictional—is filled with examples of upward mobility. Earlier generations have been raised on the “rags to riches” Horatio Alger stories. In these books, a young, down-on-his-luck boy “makes good” through honesty, pluck, and diligence. The lesson to be learned is that the only thing standing between any American citizen and success is talent, a willingness to work, and perseverance. Teachers point to political leaders such as Abraham Lincoln and to early business leaders such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, and Henry Ford to support the idea of unlimited mobility in American society. These men, in reality, are exceptions to the rule. While considerable upward mobility has occurred, great leaps in social-class level are rare (Gilbert, 2003). Upward mobility typically involves only a small improvement over the social class situation of one’s parents.

**Is upward mobility increasing?** After World War II, an explosion in the availability of high-paying manufacturing jobs made it relatively easy for people to move upward. Americans came to expect that their children would have more than they had, but this may not be the case for future generations. This change is the result of new technology and the globalization of business. With computer-driven production, improved means of communication, and better transportation, it is possible for U.S. companies seeking to lower their costs to move their manufacturing operations overseas. And they are doing so often. As a result, high-paying U.S. manufacturing jobs are being transferred to lower-paid foreign workers. U.S. workers, then, who lack the education needed to perform the more technologically sophisticated jobs are being forced to take lower-paying jobs.
Compared to their parents, more U.S. workers are experiencing downward mobility (Newman, 1999).

**What are the social and psychological costs of downward mobility?** In *Falling from Grace*, sociologist Katherine Newman (1999) describes America’s enduring belief in the rewards of hard work. This belief, she fears, prevents recognition of a major problem: downward mobility for many middle-class people. And, she argues, the consequences are enormous for people in a society that measures self-worth by occupational status. Downwardly mobile people experience lowered self-esteem, despair, depression, feelings of powerlessness, and a loss of a sense of honor.

**Section 5 Assessment**

1. What is social mobility?
2. Match the major types of social mobility with the examples. Use (IM) for inter-generational mobility, (VM) for vertical mobility, and (HM) for horizontal mobility.
   a. a restaurant waiter becomes a taxi driver
   b. an auto worker becomes a manager
   c. the daughter of a hairdresser becomes a college professor
3. How do you think that the cultural values associated with a caste and an open-class system differently affect economic behavior?
4. Why is the United States not a completely open-class system?

**Critical Thinking**

5. **Analyzing Information** Analyze the social mobility that has occurred in your family for the last two generations (or more, if you prefer). Use sociological concepts in your analysis.
Chapter 8 Social Stratification

Summary

Section 1: Dimensions of Stratification

Main Idea: Stratification is the division of society into classes that have unequal amounts of wealth, power, and prestige.

Section 2: Explanations of Stratification

Main Idea: Each of the three perspectives—functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism—explains stratification in society.

Section 3: Social Classes in America

Main Idea: In the United States, sociologists see five classes: the upper class, the middle class, the working class, the working poor, and an underclass.

Section 4: Poverty in America

Main Idea: Poverty can be measured in absolute or relative terms.

Section 5: Social Mobility

Main Idea: Social mobility, the movement of individuals or groups within the stratification structure, is usually measured by changes in occupational status. Sociologists are most interested in upward or downward (vertical) mobility.

Reviewing Vocabulary

Complete each sentence using each term once.

- a. social stratification
- b. feminization of poverty
- c. social class
- d. social mobility
- e. bourgeoisie
- f. vertical mobility
- g. proletariat
- h. intergenerational mobility
- i. wealth
- j. horizontal mobility
- k. income
- l. open-class system
- m. prestige
- n. absolute poverty
- o. relative poverty
- p. caste system

1. A class system with no social mobility is called ________.
2. ________ is movement among social classes based on merit and individual effort.
3. ________ is upward or downward mobility based on occupational status.
4. Changing from one occupation to another at the same general status is called ________.
5. ________ is the movement of individuals or groups within social classes.
6. The trend for more women and children to live in poverty is called ________.
7. The recognition, respect, and admiration attached to social positions are known as ____.
8. ________ is the amount of money received by an individual or group.
9. The economic resources possessed by an individual or group is called ________.
10. ________ is the name given to those who are ruled; the worker class.
11. ________ is the name given to rulers; or those who own the means of production.
12. The measure defining poverty by reference to others’ economic positions is called ________.

Self-Check Quiz

Visit the Sociology and You Web site at glencoe.com and click on Chapter 8—Self-Check Quizzes to prepare for the chapter test.
13. The creation of layers, or strata, of people who possess unequal shares of scarce resources is called _______.

14. _______ is the absence of enough money to secure life’s necessities.

15. A segment of the population whose members hold similar amounts of resources and share values, norms, and an identifiable lifestyle is called _______.

16. The mobility that occurs from one generation to the next is known as _______.

**Reviewing the Facts**

17. Examine the graph in Figure 8.7 on page 260 of your text. The graph illustrates that just under 46 percent of all poor people in the United States are white, while only 12% of the population is poor. What can you conclude from the graph about the representation of white people in terms of the total population of poor people?

18. According to Figure 8.8 on page 263, where does the federal government spend the largest share of the federal budget?

19. Describe false consciousness.

20. Explain how a sociologist determines relative poverty.

21. Bill Gates has an estimated net worth of $51 billion. How would sociologists label Gates in terms of social class?

**Thinking Critically**

22. **Analyzing Information**
   As suggested by the photo on page 241, Americans develop certain attitudes about the existence of poverty in our society and how important it is for government to alleviate it. Why do Americans seem to complain less about military expenditures than those for poverty programs?

23. **Interpreting Visuals**
   In the image above, the cartoonist is making a statement about attitudes to poverty. What is the cartoonist suggesting about government programs for the poor? Is the cartoonist negative or positive toward poverty programs?

24. **Analyzing Information**
   Herbert Gans, a noted sociologist, has written about the functions of poverty. He says that poverty serves many useful purposes in society. For example, the poor act as dishwashers, maids, and parking attendants. What are some other ways in which poverty might benefit society? What are some conflicts that poverty causes?

25. **Summarizing Information**
   Can you describe the cultural values underlying the federal government’s philosophy in the War on Poverty in the 1960s?
26. Making Inferences
The sinking of the luxury liner Titanic offers some insights into social class. Among first-class passengers, only 3 percent of the women died, and none of the children died. Among third-class passengers, 45 percent of the women died, and 70 percent of the children died. In all, 76 percent of the third-class passengers died, compared with 40 percent of the first-class passengers. What implications would you draw from these numbers? Is it important to know that the third-class passengers were restricted to the lower decks and thus farther away from the lifeboats?

27. Understanding Disadvantaged Groups
In the table below, data about expenditures of American households are presented. By studying the table, you can draw certain inferences about the income level and budgets of different groups. Based on this table, what research questions would you create to further study income and expenditure differences in American society?

| Average Annual Household Expenditures by Race/Ethnicity, 2003 (in dollars) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                | All             | Black           | Hispanic        |
| Food           | 5,340           | 4,007           | 5,717           |
| Housing        | 13,432          | 10,622          | 12,300          |
| Apparel and Services | 1,640       | 1,601           | 1,756           |
| Transportation | 7,781           | 5,074           | 6,780           |
| Healthcare     | 2,416           | 1,309           | 1,439           |
| Education      | 783             | 442             | 477             |
| Personal insurance and Pension | 2,532 | 996             | 680             |

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

28. Perception and Reality
One of the themes of sociology is the difference between perception and reality. Write down five perceptions that you have heard people say about others based on their social class. Next to each, describe the reality based on information in this text or additional research. If not sure, write “unknown–needs further research.” For example, a common perception of wealthy people is that they consider themselves superior to other people (snobbery). The reality is that no one has ever found a correlation between how much money you have and how nice you are.

Technology Activity

a. From the home page, click on the Economic Security link, then on “Child Poverty in 21st Century America.” When you go there, select “Who Are America’s Poor Children.”

b. What is meant by the term extreme child poverty? What is the extreme poverty level for a family of four?

c. Now examine the map entitled “Child poverty rates across the states, 2004.” How does your state compare to the other states in the nation? How does your state compare to neighboring states?

d. In which region of the United States are the highest rates of extreme child poverty concentrated?

e. Now examine the bar graph entitled “Child poverty nationwide, by race, 2004.” What groups are included in the bar graph? Which group of children had the highest poverty rate in 2004? Which group of children had the lowest poverty rate in 2004?
On the street or in a shelter, homelessness is hard living. . . . How do they manage to slog through day after day, with no end in sight? How, in a world of unremitting grimness, do they manage to laugh, love, enjoy friends, even dance and play the fool? . . .

Simple physical survival is within the grasp of almost everyone willing and able to reach out for it. As the women thrash about, awash in a sea of need, emergency shelters, along with public assistance in the form of cash, food stamps, and medical assistance, make it just possible for many of the women to keep their heads above water. Through the use of shelters, soup kitchens, and hospital emergency rooms, it is even possible for most homeless people who do not get public assistance to survive at some minimal level without benefit of a structured assistance program.

At their very best, however, these bare-boned elements of a life-support system merely make life possible, not necessarily tolerable or livable. Serious problems remain. Homelessness can transform what for others are little things into insurmountable hurdles. Indeed, homelessness in general puts a premium on “little things.” Just as some homeless women seem to have learned (more than most of us, perhaps) to value a small gesture of friendship, a nice day, a bus token, or a little courtesy that others might take for granted or not notice at all, so too can events or circumstances that would be trivial irritants to others approach catastrophic proportions for the homeless person.

For homeless women on the street, the struggle for subsistence begins at the animal level—for food, water, shelter, security, and safe sleep. In contrast, homeless women in shelters usually have these things; their struggle begins at the level of human rather than animal needs—protection of one’s property, health care, and avoidance of boredom. The struggle then moves rapidly to the search for companionship, modest measures of independence, dignity, and self-respect, and some hope and faith in the future. . . .

For some of the women, day-by-day hardships begin with the problem of getting enough sleep. A few women complained they could never get any sleep in a shelter. Grace was one of them. “There’s no getting sleep in a shelter,” she said. “Only rest. . . .”

There was indeed much night noise and movement. There was snoring, coughing, sneezing, wheezing, retching, . . . Grace was complaining about noise, and she found a partial remedy in ear plugs. But Kathleen [was] . . . kept awake not by noise but by questions: Is this for me? How did I end up here? How will I get out? . . .

Having to get up at 5:30 a.m. and be out of the shelter by 7:00 was a major hardship of shelter life. It was not simply the fact of having to get up and out, but rather that the women had to do this every day of the week, every day of the year (Thanksgiving and Christmas Day excepted), no matter
what the weather or how they felt. On any given morning, as the women drifted onto the street, one might see two or three ailing women . . . pick up their bags and walk silently into the weather. . . .

Along with perpetual fatigue, boredom was one of the great trials of homelessness. Killing time was not a major problem for everyone but it was high on most women’s lists of hardships. Betty could have been speaking for most of them when she talked about the problem. On a social visit to the state psychiatric hospital where, four years earlier, she had been an inpatient in an alcoholic program, Betty sought out a nurse named Lou. They embraced and Lou asked Betty what she was doing these days. Betty said she was living in a shelter. Lou said that was a shame, and asked Betty how she spent her time.

“I walk the streets,” said Betty. “Twelve hours and 15 minutes a day, every day, I walk the streets. Is that what I got sober for? To walk the streets?” Betty went on to say that she sits on a lot of park benches looking for someone to talk to. Many times there is no one, so she talks to the birds. She and the birds have done a lot of talking in her day, she said. . . .

. . . It is all too easy to think of homeless people as having few or no possessions . . . , but one of the major and most talked-about problems was storage—how to keep one’s clothing, essential documents, and other belongings secure and accessible . . . . Stealing was believed to be common: “You’ve got to expect these things in shelters” was heard from staff and women alike. The end result was that many homeless women who would have left their belongings behind had they had a safe place to store them were forced to take most of their belongings with them. Some wore them in layers. Others carried them. They had become, in short, bag ladies.

During a discussion of Luther Place, one of the best-run shelters in downtown Washington, one of the women said Luther Place was OK but she didn’t like the women there—they were all bag ladies. One of the other women objected that the women at Luther Place were no different from women in other shelters. They were bag ladies, she said, because Luther Place had no storage space. . . .

Past and future . . . and even one’s self were embedded in one’s belongings. When Louise could no longer pay for storage and lost her belongings to auction, she was surprised at her own reaction to the loss. Her belongings had been so much a part of her, she said, that now that she’s lost them, she’s not sure who she is.


Read and React

1. What are the two major problems for the homeless discussed here?
2. Did this article change any of your ideas about the homeless? Explain.