SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

POVERTY IN AMERICA
DEFINING POVERTY

Two different ways to conceptualize poverty:

• **Absolute poverty:** absence of the necessities of life (the level below which it is difficult to survive—lack of food, shelter, etc.)

• **Relative poverty:** compared to others (varies with standards—lack of sufficient space in an apartment? lack of funding for child’s college education?)
INEQUALITY

Expanding relative poverty: social inequality

• Increasing
  • Occupy and the 1%

Why is inequality important to talk about?

• Personal: effects on mental and physical health, happiness, etc.
• Social: the greater the inequality, the greater the loss of social capital, trust and the greater the rate of crime, hostility
• Questions of equity and distribution of social “bads” and “goods” (i.e., “the rich get richer”)—why does the gap widen?
Absolute poverty line

- Below this line = not enough to pay for basic necessities of life
- Based on:
  - Cost of “economy food plan” (emergency rations)
  - At time, roughly 1/3 of household income spent on food
  - “Economy food plan” of 1963 x 3 = minimum income necessary to survive
- Adopted by Johnson administration in 1964
- Adjusted annually for inflation
PROBLEMS WITH THE POVERTY LINE

The line:

• Doesn’t account for regional differences in costs
• Gross, not net, income
• Assumes a perfect budget each month
• People no longer spend 1/3 of their income on food—other costs have risen faster over the years
  • The average “thrifty” level of consumption for one individual is $172.50 per month (USDA 2013)
• “Economy food plan” is subjective—deciding how much food a family needs, what quality of food, etc.
WHAT IS THE POVERTY LINE?

For a family of 1 => $11,490/year ($957.50/month)
For a family of 4 => $23,550/year ($1,962.50/month)

• If food was 1/3, a single person would spend $320/month on food, and the other $640 on everything else.

Working full time, year round, at minimum wage

• Oregon => $18,616 ($1,551.33/month)
• Federal => $15,080 ($1,256.67/month)
• Above poverty line…but still poverty?
PROBLEMS WITH THE POVERTY LINE

Question: what are “basic needs”? What has to go in an individual’s or family’s budget each month?
THE REAL COST OF LIVING

If you made $957.50/month…

- Taxes: $170
- One-bedroom apartment in Corvallis: $550
- Utilities: $60
- Food for one: $170 (USDA “thrifty” food budget)
- =$950…budget’s gone!
THE REAL COST OF LIVING

If you made $1,551.33/month…

- Taxes: $335
- One-bedroom apartment in Corvallis: $550
- Utilities: $60
- Food for one: $170 (USDA “thrifty” food budget)
- Health insurance: $468 (vs. $102)
  - $750?!
  - Affordable Care Act
- =$1583…already over budget


*Now think: supporting a whole family?*
WHY NO NEW MEASURE?

Attempts have been made: i.e., supplemental poverty line

- Better measure based on total necessary expenditures
  - Includes benefits like SNAP; doesn’t count taxes paid, work-related expenses (i.e., childcare), and healthcare expenses as part of income
  - Altered for different parts of the country
  - Based on 33rd percentile of spending on all necessary expenses
- Adds several thousand to poverty line…and several million to those who are now considered poor
WHY NO NEW MEASURE?

Question: why might we not have changed to a new (more reasonable) measure?
WHY NO NEW MEASURE?

Supplemental poverty measure not being used—why

- **Politics**—who wants to be in charge when the poverty rate “skyrockets”?
- **Bureaucracy**—so many programs use the old measure; difficult to change
- **Apathy** from those in power—who is pushing for this issue? Who has voice?
CONSEQUENCES OF POVERTY

Not just about income

- **Material effects**: food insecurity, inadequate/unsafe housing, lack of healthcare, health hazards
- **Opportunity effects**: education (poorer schools)
- **Social effects**: crime twice as likely in low-income areas, loss of social cohesion
- **Cyclical**: can’t give your children opportunities
“EARNING IT”

One of biggest myths about poverty: people are poor because they don’t have a work ethic

- Truths behind the myth:
  - 1/3 of the poor are either too young or old to be in the labor force
  - Among those working age, only 5% were unemployed for a full year or more
- Power of story (the “welfare queen”)
“EARNING IT”

The “Protestant work ethic” (Weber) and the self-made man

- God’s favor upon those who work hard; roots of capitalism
- The “moral fiber” of working hard
  - 19th century lodging houses: required “work test” for assistance
- Horatio Alger stories: rags to riches by hard work (and a bit of luck)
- Really hard work?
  - Both favored able-bodied single white men
  - More than just hard work, even in the “glory days” of the “self-made man”
“EARNING IT”

Question: is it really just about hard work? What other forces might be at work?
“EARNING IT”

Cyclical, from parents to children—opportunities, wealth
Social forces: discrimination on race, gender, disability, etc.
  • Everything is connected

Another cycle at work as well
"EARNING IT"

Social construction theory: our decisions on who gets "goods" and "bads" in society is guided by their level of power and their level of "deservedness"

- If poverty is a result of not working hard enough, which is a moral deficiency...the poor are “undeserving”
- If wealth is a sign of God’s favor or moral fiber...the rich are very deserving!
- A political and cultural system that favors money (creates power)
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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Why do millionaires get tax credits?
Why aren’t homeless people housed?

*What are their levels of “power” and “deservedness” (think Protestant work ethic)?*

- Oil company subsidies: $4 billion per year
- Average family’s SNAP benefit: $133.41 (2012) (less than “thrifty” food plan for one!)
- *Point: it’s not about the money*
Importance of this theory?

- A way for us to try to understand *why* wealth and power are distributed the way they are—insights into inequality and link between personal biography and social processes (sociology!)

*One big question of social construction: are we creating what we expect to see?*
TWO EXAMPLES

Felons’ rights: denying the “goods” of voting, student aid, welfare

- What does this accomplish?
- Rehabilitation, ability to better your life? Or more punishment?
TWO EXAMPLES

Nature: cute fuzzy critters vs. creepy-crawlies at fundraisers (it’s a thing!)
NORMATIVE QUESTIONS IN SOCIAL PROCESSES

Normative: values-based; not objective, empirical data; *prescriptive*, not *descriptive*

- Sociology is a descriptive science, but often has normative applications

Normative questions from social processes
NORMATIVE QUESTIONS IN SOCIAL PROCESSES

Should we have to earn assistance, or do we have a basic human right to some things?

• UN Declaration on Human Rights
  • “right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control”

• Treatment First versus Housing First
NORMATIVE QUESTIONS IN SOCIAL PROCESSES

Should you have to be of able body and mind to receive the basic necessities of life? Conform to certain patterns of behavior?

- Disabilities?
- Crime?
- *Is addiction a disability or a chosen behavior? Does that matter?*

And an often-asked political question: *who* should provide those basic necessities? (government, churches, nonprofits, nobody...)
Why are these important questions for sociology?

- Defining problems as personal issues or social issues
- Example: the creation of programs targeting “chronic homelessness”—collision of sociology and politics
  - Substance abuse, mental illness
  - 10% of population/90% of resources
  - Economic problem
NORMATIVE QUESTIONS IN SOCIAL PROCESSES

The image of the homeless

- Is homelessness a personal “pathology”, or part of a bigger structural or social process? *What do we want it to be*
- Chronic homelessness has decreased—what about family homelessness?
- A population of convenience
  - Personal issues—their problem—we’re just being benevolent by “helping”
  - Social issues—our problem—makes us uncomfortable; we don’t like to see our own privilege and how we’re part of a bigger system
  - “I’m not here to make racism comfortable for you.” Mia McKenzie
NORMATIVE QUESTIONS IN SOCIAL PROCESSES

Problems as personal issues or social issues (continued)

• Can apply to poverty, crime, homelessness, dropping out of school...sociology is linking biography to social processes
• Society’s role in actively shaping individuals (Durkheim)
• What comes first? (Is there a first?)

Get it?