

## CHAPTER 8: SOCIAL CLASS IN THE UNITED STATES

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### Interactive Map *Patterns of Poverty (Citizens Living in Poverty)*

**Annotation:** This interactive map of the U.S. displays the poverty rate of each state with states grouped into three color-coded groups based in their poverty rate. Clicking on an individual state produces a window that displays the poverty rate in that state. Viewing this map provides an image of the geographic clustering of poverty in the U.S. The map is a part of the Companion Website for Henslin's *Sociology: A Down to Earth Approach* and can be located at [http://wps.ablongman.com/ab\\_henslin\\_sociology\\_6/0,5241,209960-,00.html](http://wps.ablongman.com/ab_henslin_sociology_6/0,5241,209960-,00.html) by clicking on *Interactive Maps* in the left column and then choosing the map *Citizens Living in Poverty*.

**Learning Objective:** To develop a more detailed understanding of the social correlates of poverty and changes in the level of inequality within individual states.

**Faculty Note:** Economic conditions in an area are a dynamic social force. The exercise below will expose students to the changing quality of economic conditions, including the various dimensions of economic well being.

**Activity:** Have students click on the Interactive Map, "Patterns of Poverty". Have them choose three states, one from each of the poverty-level categories (16+%, 12-15.9%, and 8-11.9%). Next have them send their browser to the web site of the Economic Policy Institute <http://epinet.org/index.html> and scroll down the page to "State Data at a Glance." By clicking on this link they will bring up another map of the U.S. Clicking on the three states they selected previously will reveal a description of economic conditions in those states over two decades, including changes over time in: income, inequality, wages, unemployment, jobs paying poverty-level wages. At the bottom of the page describing economic conditions in the state is a link to "View or print the Table for \_\_\_\_ [state name]." Clicking on this link will bring up the data about that state in tabular form. Ask each student to prepare a report about the economic changes in the three states s/he selected.

**Additional Resources:** The Heritage Foundation offers an analysis that disputes conventional assertions about the growing inequality in the U.S. in their report "Income Inequality: How Census Data Misrepresent Income Distribution". <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Labor/CDA99-07.cfm>

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### World Wide Web Activity *How Does the U.S. Government Define Poverty?*

**Annotation:** The U.S. government's standard of poverty appears simple in dollars and cents, but it far from simple for those who live in poverty. The following web sites will help the student understand how the United States government defines poverty.

U.S. Census Bureau Historical Poverty Tables <http://www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/histpov/rdp05.html>

U.S. Census Bureau Poverty 1999 <http://www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/poverty99/table5.html>

Poverty Thresholds v. Poverty Guidelines <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/contacts.htm#a>

**Learning Objective:** To develop an understanding of the different ways that poverty can be defined and the advantages each type of definition provides people applying for assistance.

**Faculty Note:** The exercise below expands on the discussion in the textbook of the official, absolute government poverty standard. It introduces students to the advantages of a relative standard and starts students thinking about them.

**Activity:** Have students review the material in the three sites listed above. Provide reasons why this system is functional and addresses the needs of the poor. Also include the problems associated with this system and how it fails to meet the needs of the poor. By analyzing the data, what groups of people does poverty affect the most?

**Additional Resources:** Gordon Fisher's article "Is There Such a Thing as an Absolute Poverty Line over Time? Evidence from the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia on the Income Elasticity of the Poverty Line" found

at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/povmeas/papers/elastap4.html#C5> offers data about and an extended discussion of the absolute poverty lines in four countries.

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**Video Activity (Premium Resource CD Rom) *Plight of the Homeless Veteran***

**Annotation:** This video shows an interview with William, a 70 year old World War II veteran. William barely survives on the street and in a shelter in St. Paul. He feels that his country has let him down, because his military pension is inadequate. Two questions are asked about William's opinions and living situation.

**Learning Objective:** To evaluate the meaning of "deserving" and "undeserving poor," as well as the implications of this distinction for social welfare policy.

**Faculty Note:** The exercise below extends the discussion of the "deserving and undeserving poor" by including military veteran status among the considerations of which people should be classified into each group. Students are confronted with the consequences for individuals and for society as a whole by our society's sustaining this distinction. This video clip is a part of the "Premium Resource CD Rom" provided to instructors upon request.

**Activity:** Have students view the video, "Plight of the Homeless Veteran." Lead them in a discussion of whether they think the government should provide William with financial and other support so that he can live in a home of his own. Ask them whether his having served in the military during a war makes a difference in their decision. Ask them whether his willingness or ability to earn enough money on his own makes a difference in their decision. Have them develop a set of criteria that would determine whether a person should receive government support.

**Additional Resources:** Surveys conducted by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs provide evidence of general satisfaction with veterans' benefits <http://www.vba.va.gov/surveys/index.htm>. Herbert J. Gans article in the *Washington Post*, "The War Against the Poor; The Underclass and Antipoverty Policy" provides a history of the origin of the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. It can be found at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/waragain.htm>.

**Test Question:** (Essay) The video, "Plight of the Homeless Veteran," shows William complaining about his condition. Specifically, what is he complaining about?

*Answers might include:* Having almost gotten killed while working, sleeping in a dumpster, his inadequate pension, having given up his job and family as a consequence of serving his country, the inadequacy of support for veterans and old people.

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**Web Link**                      *U.S. Census Bureau: Poverty Areas*  
**Census 2000**                    *Exercise #5: Poverty in America*

**Annotation:** This exercise combines an exercise from *Web Links* and one from *Census 2000*. The *Web Link* contains a statistical brief describing the demographic characteristics of people who live in census tracts or block numbering areas (BNAs) where at least 20% of the residents were poor. Sponsored by the United States Census Bureau, this extensive, easy-to-use site includes many tables and graphs on the definition of poverty, current levels of poverty, as well as trends over time and demographic variations. *Census 2000* directs the students to construct a table that combines variables related to poverty with data from selected states.

**Learning Objective:** To understand the concentration of poverty at the local level, and the characteristics of areas where poor people live. To recognize variables associated with poverty.

**Faculty Note:** Students may assume that poor people reside in areas where only other poor people live. This exercise extends the text's discussion of the geography of poverty at the state level, down to the neighborhood level.

**Activity:** Have students click on the web link "U.S. Census Bureau: Poverty Areas," and have them read the article. Ask students to use the information in this article to create a profile of the residents of poverty areas. Also have them complete the table in Exercise #5 of *Census 2000*.

**Additional Resources:** "Fifty Facts About Poverty" is a subtitle to the Introduction to Hunger website found at [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/World\\_Hunger\\_Program/hungerweb/intro.html](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/World_Hunger_Program/hungerweb/intro.html). This site can be used to direct or stimulate more discussion about the distribution and localized impact of poverty.

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### World Wide Web Activity     *The University of Michigan Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy*

**Annotation:** The University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy includes a Program on Poverty and Social Welfare Policy. It is located at <http://www.fordschool.umich.edu/poverty/fellowship.htm>. The School focuses on a variety of issues including research and publication, reports, projects, doctoral fellowships, and links to other programs and efforts that examine labor markets and the causes of inequality, family functioning and the well-being of children, the impact of concentrated urban poverty; and the effects in these domains of changing policy and programs. The School's homepage offers links to publications written by affiliated scholars.

**Learning Objective:** To make students aware of intervention strategies and programs that can reduce the harmful consequences of poverty to children.

**Faculty Note:** Learning about all the harmful consequences of poverty can lead students to a defeatist conclusion: Not only will "the poor always be with us," but also "we can't do anything to help them and their children counteract those harmful effects." The exercise below will offer students hope by exposing them to information about successful interventions.

**Activity:** Have students click on the web link, "Joint Center for Poverty Research," found at <http://www.jcpr.org/> Then click on "Publications" followed by "Click Here for complete listing", then Vol.2; No.10 "What We Know about Early Childhood Interventions." Ask students to read this article and write about the benefits of the Abecedarian Project, the Perry Preschool Project, and Head Start. Ask them to identify which groups benefit most from intervention, and at what age intervention has the greatest benefit.

**Additional Resources:** The Rand Corporation Research Brief, "Early Childhood Interventions: Benefits, Costs, and Savings" <http://www.rand.org/publications/RB/RB5014/> provides additional information on the same topic.

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### The Video Professor     *For Richer or Poorer*

**Annotation:** Tim Allen and Kirstie Alley play rich New Yorkers whose marriage is on the rocks. Because of a dishonest accountant they must flee their lives of luxury. They go on the lam in Amish country in Pennsylvania. The film offers stereotypes of not only rich and poor but also of the Amish community in a light humored story line.

**Learning Objective:** To demonstrate vertical mobility as it pertains to social class.

**Faculty Note:** This film is available for rental in most movie houses. It may be also be available in the university library or a local public library.

**Activity:** Assign students to write an essay on the stereotypes of the rich and the poor as illustrated in the film. Then, have them develop a set of objective criteria to qualify what makes someone a member of the six social classes found in the United States according to the text (capitalist class, upper middle class, lower middle class, working class, working poor, and underclass). Include in the essay a section on how the Amish are incorrectly portrayed in the film.

**Additional Resources:** "The Amish Country" <http://www.theamishcountry.com/main.html> will be helpful to understand the Amish. Other web sites can also be found by using any search engine and key words.

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