# Social Class & Poverty in the US: Crash Course Sociology #24

Crash Course: Sociology
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Social Class in America can be hard to talk about.

And not just because you may find it awkward to discuss who's poor and who's rich or who has more power and who has less. As Sociologists, the difficulty for us is in pinning down exactly what we mean by social class.

There isn't just one definition of it, and the definition you use will depend on what society you're interested in. If we go by Marx's definition, we have to classes: The bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who do the labor. But this might be too simplistic for our world. If you own a small store, and you work there, which category do you belong in?

Your day-to-day life probably looks more like that of a retail employee than that of a CEO. But Marx would put you in the bourgeoisie, because you own a business and hire workiers. So let''s try another definition, one that's more in the tradition of our old friend Max Weber. His theories were more about what kinds of opportunities a person's class gives them.

The owner of a big company has different opportunities than the owner of a small shop. But they'll both have different resources available to them than someone who manages an office, or somebody who works at a factory. So in this case, a social class can be defined as a group that's fairly similar in terms of income, education, power and prestige in society.

And we can use this definition to better understand the social classes that make up society in the United States and it can help us answer some of the questions they raise.

Like: Is there more than one kind of upper class? How can the middle class fit everyone who thinks they belong in it? And what does poverty in America really look like? (Intro Music) Broadly speaking, American society can be split into five social classes: upper class, upper middle class, average middle class, working class and lower class. The upper class consists essentially of the capitalists in Marx's system. This is the top income and wealth distribution- those who earn at least 25,000$ per year and control much of the country's wealth. And as we learned last week- money talks.

This group tends to wield a lot of political power and social power. But within the upper class, there are sub classes that distinguish, by the large, between old money and new money. The upper-upper class includes those who derive their wealth from inheritance rather than work. People in this class my have jobs, but usually they take on more honorary positions such as board members or heading up philanthropic organizations.

But there's also a large part of the upper class whose wealth comes from work. Most of those we think of as wealthy- the Bill Gates, Opera Winfreys and Kanye West's of the world- fall into this group.

After upper class comes the middle class. Remember awhile back when we talked about how almost every American thinks that they're middle class? That's way to many people to fit into the middle class which is why sociologists split the mid-range of the income distribution into three groups.

Upper middle class families typically have incomes between 115,000$ and 250,000$ per year and make up about 15% of income earners. About 2/3 of the adults here have college degrees- and many post-graduate degrees. It's almost a given that their kids will attend college when they grow up.

Adults in this sector tend to have jobs that are considered prestigious- doctors, lawyers, engineers, and the like. Their families typically own homes in good school districts, and are able to afford luxuries, like travel and multiple vehicles. And it may not surprise you to learn that they're wealthy, at least compared to most Americans. This group is likely to have wealth from their home, strong 401Ks, and financial investments.

Now, families in the so-called average middle class make between 50,000$ and 115,000$ and make up about 35% of income earners. Keep in mind, the median family income in the US is 70,700$.

So, families in this group still tend to own their own homes, but the mortgages might be more cumbersome. And they have some wealth, usually tied up in their home or a modest retirement savings account. About half of this group is college-educated, thought they're more likely to have attend public universities than private schools. And average middle class jobs are typically so-called white collar jobs- think office workers, teachers, middle-managers.

In contrast, most blue-collar workers, or those whose work is primarily based on manual labor, fall into the lower-middle class. About 30% of Americans are in this category, with incomes ranging from about 25,000 to 50,000 dollars a year.

Lower middle class families are less likely to own their own homes and typically hold little to no wealth. The most defining feature of this social class is the type of jobs that are associated with it- namely, manual labor, which is why it's often referred to as the working class. Factory work, construction, manufacturing, maintenance work- all of these jobs are generally fall under working class occupations.

And while some working class jobs require technical skills, they don't usually require a college education. It's important to note that working class jobs are more sensitive to how the economy is doing, because these jobs tend to be built around making stuff. When a recession hits, factories need fewer workers to meet demands. Or the plant's owner might decide that it's cheaper to use machines rather than workers to produce their goods.

And just as vulnerable to economic downturns, if not more so, is the lower class. Lower class Americans are blue-collar workers at the bottom of the income distribution. They make less than 25,000$ per year and tend to work hourly jobs that are part-time with unpredictable schedules and no benefits, like health insurance or pensions. About 20% of Americans, or the bottom quintile, fall into this group.

The majority of these families don't own their own homes and are more likely to live in neighborhoods with higher rates of poverty, lower quality school districts, and higher crime rates.

In contrast to an upper- middle class family, whose children are likely to go to college, only 9% of children born in the bottom income quartile complete a four-year college degree.

And the lower class also includes many Americans who are living in poverty. The US government sets an income benchmark called the federal poverty level, a threshold that's used, in part, to determine who's eligible for public assistance programs, like food stamps or help with health care. As of 2017, the federal poverty level for a family of four is 24,600$. And 13.5% of Americans live in house holds below that.

The government arrives at this figure by estimating the minimum annual pre-tax income that's needed to pay-food, shelter, transportation and clothing costs for a given household size. Of course, what's poor in the US won't be the same as in another country- the US federal poverty line is a measure of relative poverty, based on a standard of living in the US. Relative poverty is

used to describe a lack of resources compared to others who have more. But absolute poverty is a lack of resources that threatens your ability to survive.

The federal poverty level gives us an indicator for which Americans have the fewest resources and lets us examine trends in groups that are the most economically vulnerable.

For example, groups that can't work, like children, the severely disabled, and the frail elderly are particularly vulnerable to poverty. But many working Americans are vulnerable to poverty, too- 12% of working-age adults in poverty work full-time, and another 29% work part time. These are the working poor.

You can see how it's quite possible to work full time and still live in poverty, when you do the math. The federal minimum wage in the united states is 7.25$ per hour. A 40 hour work week for 50weeks a year would net an income of 14,000$, which is well below the poverty line for a family of four.

It's hard enough to pull yourself out of poverty on a low-wage income, which is partly why more than half of families in poverty are headed by single mothers.

Higher rates of poverty among women, known as the feminization of poverty, is related to the increasing number of women who are raising children on their own and who work low-wage jobs. But in addition to gender, you can also look at poverty by race.

Contrary to popular belief, most poor Americans are not black; in fact, two-thirds of the poor in the US are white. Black Americans are. however. more likely to be poor than white- Americans: 24.1% of Black Americans, who make up about 13% of the total American population, were living in poverty in 2015. Compare that to 11.6% of white Americans who make up about 77% of the total population.

Now the causes of poverty are many. And it's not easy to understand why some groups are more vulnerable than others. America likes to think of itself as a nation that values self-reliance, where anyone can succeed.

And this view is partly when some argue that poverty is the result of an individual's own failing, or a certain cultural attitudes. One of the most famous proponents of his idea was Daniel Patrick Moynihan- former US senator, ambassador to the UN, and, by trade, a sociologist.

A report he wrote while Secretary of Labor in the Kennedy Administration, known as the Moynihan report, blamed high rates of poverty among African Americans not on a lack of economic opportunity, but on cultural factors in the black community, like high rates of birth outside of marriage.

By contrast, American sociologist Wlliam Julius Wilson- who you might remember from episode 7- has provided a counter to this idea. Wilson has documented how Black Americans are much more likely to face institutional barriers to achieving economic success, and are more likely to live in areas where jobs are scarce.

He argues that in order to understand poverty, we have to look at wider economic and social structures, as well as the history and culture of racism in the US.

Next week, we'll talk more about how social class structures affects how Americans live their own lives.

But for now, you learned about the five different social classes in the US: The upper class, the upper middle class. the average middle class, the working class and the lower class. And we discussed what poverty looks like in the US.

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