

A photograph of a person sitting on a bench in a snowy, dark environment. The person is wrapped in a thick, white thermal blanket, with only their head and hands visible. Snow is falling around them. In the background, a red traffic light and a sign that says "Wall St Subway" are visible.

FOCUS ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS

A Contemporary Reader

MINDY STOMBLER AMANDA M. JUNGELS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

SECOND EDITION

FOCUS ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS

A CONTEMPORARY READER

SECOND EDITION

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DEDICATION

We dedicate this book to the tireless work of the activists, researchers, journalists, and instructors working to create change in tumultuous times. We hope their work, represented in this collection, inspires our students to enact sociologically grounded social change.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

* indicates new to this edition

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PREFACE ix

CONTRIBUTOR LIST xiii

CHAPTER 1 Introduction 1

CHAPTER 2 Wealth and Income Inequality 14

***Activist Interview:** *Sam Nelson* 16

*1. **Unequality:** Who Gets What and Why It Matters, *Michael I. Norton* 19

#2. **Income Inequality Threatens the American Dream,** *Renee M. Shelby* 25

BOX: The “Middle-Class” Myth: Here’s Why Wages Are Really So Low Today, *Edward McClelland* 35

*3. **The Ever-Growing Gap:** Without Change, African American and Latino Families Won’t Match White Wealth for Centuries, *Chuck Collins, Dedrick Asante-Muhammed, Emanuel Nieves, and Josh Hoxie* 37

***BOX: The Second Racial Wealth Gap,** *Mel Jones* 43

4. **Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%,** *Joseph E. Stiglitz* 46

*5. **The Cost of Admission:** Political Elites and the National Discourse, *Chris M. Vidmar* 49

CHAPTER 3 Poverty 53

***Activist Interview:** *Destiny Vasquez* 56

6. **Rethinking American Poverty,** *Mark R. Rank* 58

***BOX: Perceived Racial Threat and Welfare Backlash in the United States,**
Amanda M. Jungels and Jordan Forrest Miller 62

*7. \$2 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America, *Kathryn J. Edin and
H. Luke Shaefer* 65

***BOX: Americans Deepest in Poverty Lost More Ground . . . ,** *Kristen
Bialik* 71

*8. Making Bank on Tribal Gaming? Poverty and the Myth of Native
American Prosperity, *Ashley Rockwell* 72

*9. Being Poor Is Too Expensive, *Eric Ravenscraft* 85

**BOX: “I Wish I Could Eat That Well”: Misconceptions and Resentment
about Food Stamps,** *Arthur Delaney* 89

*10. The Eviction Economy, *Matthew Desmond* 92

*11. A Hand Up for Lower-Income Families, *Sarah Halpern-Meekin, Laura
Tach, Kathryn J. Edin, and Jennifer Sykes* 95

CHAPTER 4 **Racial and Ethnic Inequality** 99

***Activist Interview: Sawsan Selim** 102

12. Sociologists on the Colorblind Question, *Elaine McArdle* 105

***BOX: Racialized Space in Rentals and Rideshares,** *Dresden Lackey* 109

*13. Racial Residential Segregation and Neighborhood Disparities, *Solomon
Greene, Margery Austin Turner, and Ruth Gourevitch* 113

14. The New Jim Crow, *Michelle Alexander* 120

***BOX: When Heroin Hits the White Suburbs,** *Andrew Cohen* 134

*15. The Disproportionate Risks of Driving While Black, *Sharon LaFraniere
and Andrew W. Lehren* 136

***BOX: “Hands on the Wheel”: Disparities in Respect during Traffic
Stops,** *Moey Rojas* 143

*16. The Racialization of Islam in the United States: Islamophobia, Hate
Crimes, and “Flying While Brown,” *Craig Considine* 145

***BOX: Hate Crimes, Explained,** *Southern Poverty Law Center* 161

#17. Tomahawk Chops and “Red” Skin: Cultural Appropriation of Sport
Symbols, *Elizabeth S. Cavalier* 164

*18. White Fragility, *Robin DiAngelo* 171

**#BOX: White Americans’ Racial Attitudes and Their Effect on
Antidiscrimination Policies,** *Amanda Atwell and Amanda M. Jungels* 181

CHAPTER 5 **Gender Inequality** 183

Activist Interview: Emily May 185

19. The Problem When Sexism Just Sounds So Darn Friendly, *Melanie
Tannenbaum* 189

***BOX: The Fault in Our Scores: Gender and Racial Bias in Student Evaluations, Kiersten Kummerow 193**

***20. "You Just Accepted It": Why Older Women Kept Silent about Sexual Harassment—and Younger Ones Are Speaking Out, Anna North 196**

***21. Imagining a Better Boyhood, Sarah Rich 201**

BOX: Selling Feminism, Consuming Femininity, Amanda M. Gengler 205

#22. Transgender Discrimination in the Workplace, Elis Herman and Elroi J. Windsor 207

CHAPTER 6 Social Problems Related to Sexuality 218

#Activist Interview: Heather Corinna 220

23. Sexuality Education in the United States: Shared Cultural Ideas across a Political Divide, Jessica Fields 222

***BOX: America's Sex Education: How We Are Failing Our Students, University of Southern California, Department of Nursing 234**

24. "Children" Having Children, Stefanie Mollborn 239

#BOX: Reducing Unintended Pregnancy: The Role of Long-Acting Reversible Contraceptives, Stacy Gorman Harmon 243

***25. What Teenagers Are Learning from Online Porn, Maggie Jones 247**

26. Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment and Abuse, Heather R. Hlavka 257

***27. Sex Trafficking, Social Inequality, and Our Evolving Legal Consciousness, Renee M. Shelby 266**

CHAPTER 7 Social Problems Related to Media 278

#Activist Interview: Josh Golin 281

#28. A Modern Empire: The Concentration of Media, Desmond Goss 283

***BOX: How Shows Like *Will & Grace* and *Black-ish* Can Change Your Brain, Maanvi Singh 290**

29. Constructing Crime, Gary W. Potter and Victor E. Kappeler 292

***30. The Grim Conclusions of the Largest-Ever Study of Fake News, Robinson Meyer 304**

***BOX: A Savvy News Consumer's Guide: How Not to Get Duped, Alicia Shepard 308**

***31. The Algorithmic Rise of the "Alt-Right," Jessie Daniels 311**

***BOX: How the Internet Has Changed Bullying, Maria Konnikova 316**

***32. Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism, Nancy Wang Yuen 319**

CHAPTER 8 Social Problems Related to Education 331

- #Activist Interview: Jesse Hagopian** 334
33. Inequality and School Resources: What It Will Take to Close the Opportunity Gap, *Linda Darling-Hammond* 337
34. How Schools Really Matter, *Douglas B. Downey and Benjamin G. Gibbs* 352
- *BOX: How Limited Internet Access Can Subtract from Kids' Education, *Alina Selyukh* 356**
- *35. Why Are Our Most Important Teachers Paid the Least?** *Jeneen Interlandi* 358
- *BOX: Teaching While Afraid, *Ashley Lamb-Sinclair* 367**
- *36. Staunching the School-to-Prison Pipeline, *Mimi Kirk* 370**
- *BOX: Teachers' Implicit Bias Starts in Preschool, *Yolanda Young* 374**
- *37. The Dark Side of College (Un)Affordability: Food and Housing Insecurity in Higher Education, *Katharine Broton and Sara Goldrick-Rab* 375**
- *38. Does Investing in Knowledge Still Pay the Best Interest?, *Bailey A. Brown* 383**

CHAPTER 9 Social Problems Related to Families 389

- *Activist Interview: Ana Hernández** 391
39. Families Facing Untenable Choices, *Lisa Dodson and Wendy Luttrell* 396
- *BOX: The Diaper Dilemma, *Jennifer Randles* 401**
40. Unmarried with Children, *Kathryn J. Edin and Maria Kefalas* 403
- *41. Does It Pay to Have Kids? Not for Working Moms, *Kirstin Ralston-Coley* 408**
- *42. The Difference Between a Happy Marriage and a Miserable One: Chores, *Wendy Klein, Carolina Izquierdo, and Thomas N. Bradbury* 415**
- *43. Love Wins?** *Amanda K. Baumle and D'Lane R. Compton* 421
- *44. "Will They Take Me, Too?"** *Brooke Jarvis* 426
45. Fighting Back, *Tim Stelloh* 433

CHAPTER 10 Social Problems Related to Health and the Health Care System 439

- Activist Interview: Elba L. Saavedra** 442
- *46. They've Got a Pill for That: The Medicalization of Society, *Stephanie Medley-Rath* 445**

47. Paying Till It Hurts: The \$2.7 Trillion Medical Bill, *Elisabeth Rosenthal* 455
48. Big Pharma Comes of Age, *Rose Weitz* 461
- *49. The Addicts Next Door, *Margaret Talbot* 466
- *50. Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis, *Linda Villarosa* 481
51. What's Killing Poor White Women? *Monica Potts* 492
- *52. Mechanisms by Which Anti-Immigrant Stigma Exacerbates Racial/Ethnic Health Disparities, *Brittany N. Morey* 500
53. How We Do Harm, *Otis Webb Brawley and Paul Goldberg* 507

CHAPTER 11 Social Problems Related to Crime and the Criminal Justice System 516

- #Activist Interview:** *Nicole D. Porter* 518
- #54. Mass Shootings, Masculinity, and Gun Violence as Social Problems, *Tristan Bridges and Tara Leigh Tober* 521
- *BOX: Millions of Kids Haven't Lived through a School Shooting but Fear That They Will,** *Petula Dvorak* 531
- #55. Crimes of the Powerful: Crafting Criminality, *Miriam Konrad and Angie Luvara* 533
- *BOX: Inequality in Life and Death: The Death Penalty in the United States,** *Erin Thomas* 544
- #56. For-Profit Justice: How the Private Prison Industry and the Criminal Justice System Benefit from Mass Incarceration, *Amanda Atwell and Amanda M. Jungels* 547
- BOX: How Prisons Change the Balance of Power in America,** *Heather Ann Thompson* 558
- *57. Black Lives and Police Tactics Matter, *Rory Kramer, Brianna Remster, and Camille Z. Charles* 562
- *BOX: The Tragic Fiction of Immigrant Threat,** *Watoii Rabii* 566

CHAPTER 12 Social Problems Related to the Economy and Work 570

- #Activist Interview:** *Ai-jen Poo* 572
- *58. Americans Want to Believe Jobs Are the Solution to Poverty. They're Not, *Matthew Desmond* 575
- *59. I Delivered Packages for Amazon and It Was a Nightmare, *Alana Semuels* 582

***BOX: The Long-Term Jobs Killer Is Not China. It's Automation,** *Claire Cain Miller* 589

*60. Exploitation and Abuse at the Chicken Plant, *Michael Grabell* 591

*61. No Piece of the Pie: Food Workers in the United States, *Food Chain Workers Alliance and Solidarity Research Cooperative* 599

*62. Gender Segregation at Work, *Anastasia Prokos* 606

***BOX: About Those 79 Cents,** *Adia Harvey Wingfield* 615

63. The Case Against Racial Colorblindness in the Workplace, *Carmen Nobel* 618

#BOX: What's in a Name? Discrimination, *Erin Thomas* 620

CHAPTER 13 **Social Problems Related to the Environment and Food System** 622

Activist Interview: *Daniel R. Wildcat* 625

64. Environmental Inequalities, *Hollie Nyseth Brehm and David Pellow* 628

***BOX: Flint Isn't the Only Place with Racism in the Water,** *Tracey Ross and Danyelle Solomon* 633

*65. The Uninhabitable Earth, *David Wallace-Wells* 636

*66. More Recycling Won't Solve Plastic Pollution, *Matt Wilkins* 645

***BOX: Making a Profit on Bottled Water,** *Eleanor Cummins* 650

#67. Why Beef Is What's for Dinner: Agricultural Policy and Its Implications, *Emily Stutzman* 652

***BOX: Deserts and Swamps: Inhospitable Foodscapes and Health,** *Claudia Tillman* 663

68. The Extraordinary Science of Addictive Junk Food, *Michael Moss* 666

69. A Bug in the System: Why Last Night's Chicken Made You Sick, *Wil S. Hylton* 675

BOX: Consumers Fight Back, *Food Chain Workers Alliance* 682

CHAPTER 14 **Strategies for Social Change** 684

Activist Interview: *Alicia Garza* 686

70. Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted, *Malcolm Gladwell* 689

*71. The Real Rosa Parks, *Paul Rogat Loeb* 696

*72. Political Polarization in Contemporary American Society, *Megan M. Tesene* 699

***BOX: The Worst Voter Suppression We've Seen in the Modern Era,** *Zachary Roth and Wendy R. Weiser* 708

73. What Can We Do? Becoming Part of the Solution, *Allan G. Johnson* 711

PREFACE

Colleges and universities around the country routinely offer courses studying social problems. To get students discussing and thinking critically about how social problems are created, perpetuated, interrelated, and cumulative, faculty often seek engaging readings to spark critical discussion and evoke a sense of moral outrage. These readings, ideally, will show students how to think systemically and critically about the social problems we face today.

We approached the construction of this reader from a unique position. Combined, we've taught Social Problems to thousands of students for more than 30 years. We have worked with new graduate students who are entering the Social Problems classroom as instructors for the first time—Stomblor as the director of instruction and Jungels as the former teaching associate at Georgia State University. We have spent years listening to new instructors evaluate and ultimately lament the dearth of quality Social Problems readers. This reader comes from our own frustration with the current offerings, as well as those of our graduate student instructors who are teaching Social Problems for the first time. We share the following goals: to expose our students to a variety of social problems; to help students understand how social problems are defined, constructed, and controlled; to increase students' empirical knowledge about the causes and consequences of social problems; to develop student empathy; and to encourage students to become agents of social change.

We endeavored to compile a collection of readings that is comprehensive, so that any instructor can find readings to supplement the topics they wish to cover in their course. The reader has a strong critical constructionist foundation, so that instructors can use it as a stand-alone text or as a companion to a traditional textbook. We include articles from a wide variety of sources to illustrate how sociologists, other academics, and claims makers recognize and define social problems, conduct relevant research, illustrate the lived experience of social problems, and actively drive social change.

In the introduction to this book, we discuss the sociological imagination, and we develop our constructivist approach to contemporary social problems. We highlight the way that social problems are interrelated and have a cumulative effect on individual actors. We want students to focus their attention on the systems and structures that are at the core of society's issues.

Our readings provide depth but are appropriately leveled for the average undergraduate taking an introductory course. We have edited our selections judiciously, so that students are not reading an excessive amount, nor are they losing important elements or the “heart” of the selection. On occasion, some readings are a bit longer, but we feel they are engaging enough for students to be able to maintain interest. Whereas traditional textbooks are able to offer incredible breadth, our readings provide additional depth on each featured social problem. Our reader focuses predominantly on the social problems plaguing the United States.

FORMAT OF THE BOOK

The second edition of *Focus on Social Problems: A Contemporary Reader* has several features that distinguish it from other textbooks and readers on social problems. The book is composed of 14 chapters, each focusing on a different social problem (except for Chapter 1, newly expanded for the second edition). Chapter 1 introduces students to sociology, the sociological imagination, the social construction of social problems, and how American values of meritocracy, individualism, and consumption influence how we view social problems and their solution. This represents a consolidation of two chapters of readings from the first edition, a choice we made in order to offer expanded readings throughout the remaining chapters. Each chapter in the second edition consists of a selection of full-length readings and “boxes.” Full-length readings cover what we consider important topics on a given social problem and address the breadth, depth, causes of, or solutions to that problem. Full-length readings and boxes may be read together or separately. Boxes are generally briefer than readings and are intended to delve into a narrower subject or simply generate reactions and discussion related to the chapter topic without overburdening the reader with additional full-length articles. Reviewers of the first edition shared helpful ideas about new topics and articles to include, and we are grateful for their suggestions. We chose readings and boxes to engage students’ sociological imaginations and provide access to recent data and analyses relevant to current social problems. Vetted by our students, our selections are designed to be accessible to undergraduates at an introductory level and to convey information about causes, consequences, and the scope of social problems.

Full-length readings and boxes come from a diverse group of sources: edited versions of academic, peer-reviewed articles and book chapters (for example, from journals such as *Gender & Society*, *Contexts*, *Poverty and Public Policy*, and *Sociological Compass*, and books such as *Reel Inequality* and *\$2 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*), articles from the popular press (*The New York Times*, *National Public Radio*, *Vanity Fair*, *Scientific American*, and even *Teen Vogue*), blogs (*The Society Pages*, *LifeHacker*), and reports from nonprofit organizations (Pew Research Center, Urban Institute, Brennan Center for Justice, Institute for Policy Studies, and the Food Chain Workers Alliance). When we were designing this book, we thought about the weight that each type of source should receive. Although we believe academic, peer-reviewed research is critical to a thorough understanding of social problems, the popular press, investigative journalistic pieces, and research from the nonprofit sector offer important and accessible perspectives that both inform, and have been informed by, sociological research.

Previously published works are included alongside those written expressly for this book. We commissioned original pieces for several reasons. Sometimes we couldn’t find articles on a given subject that contained all the information we wanted to share with students, so we invited academics to share knowledge they had about a subject. Other times there was a plethora of material

from which to choose, and we asked an author to pull together the information that was the most salient and relevant to students. When we wanted to add updates to pieces we published in the first edition, we asked authors of original pieces to update their work, and in other cases we added editor's notes to give additional or new information on statistics or legislation. In order to support instructors, an Instructor's Manual is available through Oxford University Press.

The other feature of our book that sets it apart from others is the inclusion of Activist Interviews. Many of our social problems students complain that courses focusing on social problems, inequality, and injustice are depressing. It is hard for students to envision change; it is even harder for them to see how individuals or small groups could have any meaningful impact. The activists selected for this book represent social change work across the range of social problems covered in our book. We incorporate interviews with activists who are working within different types of organizations or collectives (from the small, local, grassroots organization to large national organizations) and who are doing a wide array of types of work (from internship to field organizing to serving as directors). For the second edition, we added some new activists that are in entry-level positions in their organizations, to help students recognize accessible pathways to participation. We hope that these interviews, as well as the variety of activist experiences contained within them, will demonstrate to students that they too can enact social change in their communities.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

- Expanded introduction: The introduction to the second edition is now a full-length written chapter by Stompler and Jungels that introduces students to the discipline of sociology, the sociological imagination, the role of American cultural values in defining and understanding social problems, the social construction of social problems, and a critical constructionist perspective.
- Each chapter has a newly composed multi-page introduction that helps students draw connections across the chapter's readings.
- Original pieces written for the first edition have been updated with the latest data.
- Activist interviews have been updated, and there are five new interviews as well, maintaining the diversity in experiences, organizations, and identities that characterized this feature in the first edition.
- Over half of the selections are new to the second edition. While maintaining a focus on social problems foundational to U.S. society, we also captured new developments and directions in research on social problems.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Soliciting, curating, and editing a reader that is so broad in scope is a challenging task. We thank our editor, Sherith Pankratz, for her enthusiasm for the second edition and for her low-pressure but unfailing support throughout both editions. Grace Li, our assistant editor, was exceptionally responsive to our needs and maintained order during chaotic times. Thanks as well to Patricia Berube and the folks at SPi Global U.S., Inc. for their patience and attention to detail during the editing process. We also extend our thanks to the following reviewers, whose detailed feedback shaped the book's format and trajectory: Cassidy Cooper, University of Mobile; Martha Copp, East Tennessee State University; Cristen Dalessandro, University of Colorado Boulder; Sarah

Epplen, Minnesota State University-Mankato; Amy Grau, Shawnee State University; Hortencia Jimenez, Hartnell College; Jeffrey Lentz, University of North Georgia; Helen Marie Miamidian, Arcadia University; Christopher Oliver, Tulane University; Erik Withers, University of South Florida; and one anonymous reviewer.

We are grateful to the activists (and their assistants) for taking time out of their incredibly busy schedules to allow us to interview them for the Activist Interview feature of this book. They offered thoughtful responses to our questions, shared heartfelt stories of their motivations, and provided concrete social change strategies for our students. We also thank the authors who wrote original pieces for this book. We know that we were demanding and that you had to endure last-minute requests to incorporate new data, provide multitudes of drafts and revisions, and meet sometimes short deadlines. We appreciate your patience and hard work to make this book the best it could be.

Focus on Social Problems was built in a supportive environment. Thanks to Katie Acosta, Maura Ryan, alithia zamantakis, Dan Pascuiti, Dresden Lackey, Alan Abramowitz, and Denise Milstein for sharing materials, thoughts, and expertise. We thank our Social Problems students (we've had many thousands, combined) for providing valuable feedback on readings and for their excitement and passion for the material we present and discuss. Finally, thanks to our wonderful subject librarian, Mandy Swygart-Hobaugh, and her colleagues, who were always a source of immediate assistance. There are also innumerable colleagues, friends, and co-workers—too many to name here—who acted as sounding boards, suggested content, and were generally supportive when we needed it.

We also thank our family and friends. In particular, Mindy thanks her husband, Nate Steiner, who was his usual sweet and supportive self, maintaining his own paid work and housework while taking over her share as well (and even reading drafts). This book was built on a foundation of his encouragement and patience during stressful times. He also introduced us to the Slack app, which helped us remain organized as we worked. She also thanks her son, Moey Rojas, for his independence (allowing her to work crazy hours) and his contributions to dinnertime discussions on the social problems in the book before he left for college. She thanks her parents, Lynne and Milton Stomblor, for their constant support of her endeavors. Finally, she thanks canine Rue for lovingly flanking her throughout the entire process.

Amanda's parents, Robin and Betty Jungels, and her sister Rebecca and brother-in-law Brandon, were constant sources of encouragement over the many months (years!) it took to create this book. She'd also like to thank her partner Jim Holland for his support, encouragement, and for many engaging discussions about the content of the book. Her friends and colleagues in Minnesota, Georgia, Maryland, and New York (and everywhere else!) were also a huge source of support, always offering help when it was needed: a sympathetic ear, a spare bedroom or much-needed break during the final days of compiling the book, or words of encouragement. She is forever grateful for their support. And, of course, she would be remiss if she failed to mention her adorable canine companion, Max Weber, who keeps things exciting, makes sure sociology is a constant presence in her life, and keeps the couch warm.

This project was completed remotely because our careers took us to different states. Thankfully, through the wonders of Internet technology and file sharing, this project was collaborative in a way that neither of us anticipated at the outset. Working on this book was a true labor of love, and we hope you enjoy the result as much as we enjoyed compiling it.

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INTRODUCTION

What Is Sociology?

If you're opening this book or enrolled in a sociology class for the first time, you might be wondering: what is sociology, and why would a sociologist study social problems? Even if you have no preexisting training in sociology or have never studied sociology before, don't worry—you are already immersed in the content of sociology on a daily basis, simply because you live in a society.

Sociology is the systematic study of human relationships (formal and informal), social interaction (between groups as small as two people or as large as many millions), and social institutions (e.g., the educational system, political system, economic system, families, health care systems, and more). The scope of what sociologists study varies from small-group dynamics like speech interruption patterns in conversations between women and men, or doctors and patients, to large-scale comparisons of the efficacy of social welfare policies and programs. According to the American Sociological Association, sociologists study “social life, social change, and the causes and consequences of human behavior.”¹ Instead of focusing on individual behavior, we explore patterns of behavior to understand how and why people behave the way they do, as well as the result of those actions.

Sociologists often boast that they can study nearly anything. Subfields within sociology include political sociology; aging, children, and youth; medical sociology; labor and labor movements; consumers and consumption; crime, law, and deviance; war, peace, and social conflict; race, gender, and class; sexualities; sociology of the family, of religion, of sport, and of the environment, just to name a few.² The number of research topics in the field is nearly limitless, and we use a wide variety of research methods to study them. Mindy Stomblor (the first editor of this book), for example, has studied the social structure of and interactions in

1 American Sociological Association. n.d. “What Is Sociology?” <http://www.asanet.org/about/sociology.cfm>.

2 American Sociological Association. n.d. “Current Sections.” <http://www.asanet.org/sections/list.cfm>.

gay fraternities and also fraternity little sister/sweetheart programs at both predominantly Black and predominantly White fraternities, whereas Amanda Jungels (the second editor) has studied men who solicit sex workers, privacy disclosures among sex toy party participants, and suicide and sexual assault among United States Army soldiers. Sociologists may conduct large-scale studies where thousands of people are surveyed; in-depth studies using interviews or observations; analyses of content (such as books or films); or some combination of methods. Just a quick glance through the table of contents of this book—or any course listing at a college or university that offers sociology classes—will give you a good idea of the areas and types of inquiry in which sociologists participate. The uniqueness of sociology is reflected not only in the endless available topics of study, but also in the perspective we use to guide our analyses: the sociological imagination.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Most sociology classes, especially at the introductory level, begin with a discussion of C. Wright Mills's concept of the *sociological imagination*. The sociological imagination is a particular lens we use to view the world, one that encourages us to think like sociologists—to focus on the role social institutions and social structure have in our everyday lives. In fact, the idea of a lens used to view the world is why we decided to name this book *Focus on Social Problems: A Contemporary Reader*. We want readers to be reminded to use the appropriate lens—just as a photographer would—to see the world around them sharply: sometimes focusing closely on a subject, other times zooming out to get a sense of the bigger picture or context.

Mills argued that individuals often have trouble connecting the events of their lives to the larger society in which they live—for instance, how an individual's inability to find a job is connected to our capitalist economic system, where a financial downturn can result in downsizing and a reduction in available jobs. Understanding the history of a society can help explain the current structure of that society, which in turn can help explain how larger social forces affect the individual circumstances of members of the society. Our individual biography is not enough to understand our life chances, according to Mills; instead, we must consider the interplay between the individual and this history. Karen Sternheimer discusses an example of this intersection of history and biography, as described by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers*:

[T]he so-called Robber Barons who became America's captains of industry in the late 1800s were mostly born within a few years of each other. People like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller were born just a few years apart in the 1830s, as were many other business titans who amassed great wealth. Was there something particularly profitable in the water back then? Lessons taught in school at that time that would have led to their incredible achievements? As Gladwell points out, their timing couldn't have been better. Yes, they likely worked hard and had brilliant business minds. But they also came of age just as the industrial revolution was exploding in America. They were able to get in on the ground floor of advanced capitalism.³

3 Sternheimer, Karen. 2009. "Biography + History = Opportunity." *Everyday Sociology*. Retrieved on March 23, 2019, from <https://nortonbooks.typepad.com/everydaysociology/2009/09/biography-history-opportunity.html>.

Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, who were both born in 1955, were similarly influenced by the circumstances of where and when they were born. They both lived near where “supercomputers” (the giant, room-sized predecessors to today’s computers and smart phones), were located when few people had access to them. Gates in particular had access to programming classes through his elite private high school, at a time when few colleges had such technology and courses.^{4,5} Of course, both Gates and Jobs worked hard and were visionaries, but without these initial advantages, would they have become two of the most influential figures of our time? The sociological imagination can be a difficult concept to grasp at first. Applying a sociological lens requires looking beyond individual circumstances and instead focusing on the social patterns that contribute to those circumstances, including historical, economic, political, familial, and global forces. Many of us have not been taught to think critically about the social structure (and social institutions) of which we are a part, to question why institutions exist the way they do, or to wonder who benefits from their continued existence or the maintenance of the status quo.

Distinguishing between two concepts, personal troubles and public issues, may help to clarify the sociological imagination. On the one hand, a *personal trouble* refers to an incident or challenge that takes place in a person’s life; it “occurs within the character of an individual” and does not extend beyond the person’s “immediate relationship with others . . . a trouble is a private matter.”⁶ *Public issues*, on the other hand, refer to the seemingly impersonal problems that are a result of larger social forces. They “have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and . . . [instead are the result of] the institutions of an historical society as a whole . . . [that] overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life.”⁷ A classic example, as mentioned above, is unemployment. If a person in a large city is unemployed, then that person’s unemployment may be a personal trouble, and we may ask questions about that individual’s skills, education level, or work ethic to understand why they are unemployed. But in a society like the United States—with nearly 163 million people in the labor force⁸ and an additional 6.2 million unemployed⁹—we must look at the structure of the economy to understand why so many people are unemployed. Is there something about capitalist economies that makes it impossible for all people to be gainfully employed at all times? Employing a sociological imagination means looking beyond personal explanations (“that person is lazy and has a poor work

4 National Public Radio. 2008. “‘Outliers’ Puts Self-Made Success to the Test.” November 18. Retrieved on March 23, 2019, from <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97117414>.

5 Sternheimer, 2009.

6 Mills, C. Wright. 1959 [2000]. *The Sociological Imagination*, Fortieth Anniversary Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 8.

7 Mills, 1959 [2000], pp. 8–9.

8 Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. 2019. “United States Labor Force Statistics, Seasonally Adjusted.” Retrieved on March 22, 2019, from https://data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet?graph_name=LN_cpsbref1&request_action=wh.

9 As of March 2019, when the unemployment rate was 3.8 percent. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. 2019. “Labor Force Statistics from Current Population Survey, Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rate.” Retrieved on March 22, 2019, from <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/surveymost>.

ethic,” or “they didn’t study hard enough in school and that’s why they don’t have a job”) to social and institutional forces. A sociological approach may argue that capitalism requires some employable, yet currently unemployed, people to be ready to step in and take over the jobs of the currently employed (what Karl Marx called “the reserve army of the poor”). This process helps keep wage demands down (and profits high) and keeps the workers from protesting or forming unions, as there is always the threat that they will be replaced by a member of the “reserve army.” Or, rather than blaming the individual, we might look at the environment within which the person was educated and ask a series of questions about their educational experience. Were the schools they attended well funded, with caring and well-trained teachers, proper learning tools (including textbooks and technology), and in buildings that were properly maintained? Was their home life peaceful; their neighborhood safe and free of environmental contamination that can cause long-term health impacts; and did they have access to the resources that lead to successful educational outcomes, like trips to museums, zoos, libraries, after-school activities, or private tutors—the things that many middle- and upper-class children, for example, find easily accessible? Did they have the assistance many young people and their parents need in filling out financial aid forms for college; the funds for college testing preparation to raise their chances of acceptance and scholarships; the guidance and funds necessary to complete the college application and interview process; or the economic resources to secure loans necessary to attend college? Sociologists might also focus on the gatekeepers to gainful employment, inquiring whether they hold any biases based on race, gender, class, sexual identity, sex, or disabilities. These are the questions that arise when we start to think critically about the social nature and structural causes of social problems.

The sociological imagination is relevant to the social problems discussed in this reader because it encourages us to look to the system (our social institutions) as the main sources of social problems (a *system-blame* approach) as opposed to those who are suffering from the problems (a *person-blame* approach). Most of us have been taught to take the person-blame approach: to look at those who are different in some way—the poor, those who have committed crimes, those who are marginalized for one reason or another—and to think of them as the source of the problem, rather than the society itself.¹⁰ We do this despite the fact that those who experience social problems have neither constructed nor controlled the institutions or conditions under which they suffer. Using a system-blame approach requires that we look beyond the individual to see how institutions, structures, and systems of oppression have contributed to the existence and perpetuation of these conditions. A sociological lens asks us to be critical of a system from which many of us acquire our deeply held values, such as individuality and the ideas of meritocracy and freedom of choice. Moreover, it asks us to question whether we benefit from the maintenance of the status quo in any way. Questioning these deeply held assumptions can be uncomfortable and unfamiliar, but it is key to taking a critical and sociological approach to understanding social problems.

Of course, maintaining a strict adherence to either system-blame or person-blame approaches has its consequences. Focusing too much on person-blame can result in leaving the

10 Eitzen, Stanley D., Maxine Baca Zinn, and Kelly Eitzen Smith. 2014. *Social Problems*, 13th ed. New York: Pearson Higher Education.

existing power structure and systems of inequality unchallenged and unchanged. Conversely, approaching every problem from a purely system-blame approach can oversimplify social problems wherein individuals are merely the products of their environment, with no free will or responsibility for their actions. Clearly, a balanced approach is needed, and the use of the sociological imagination fosters development of the oft-ignored system-blame approach.

DEFINING A SOCIAL PROBLEM

So what are social problems? Many books and textbooks focus on the sociological study of social problems, and each seems to contain a slightly different definition. For example, Eitzen, Baca Zinn, and Smith¹¹ define social problems as “societally induced conditions that cause psychic and material suffering for any segment of the population, and acts and conditions that violate the norms and values found in a society.” Similarly, Mooney, Knox, and Schacht¹² propose that a social problem is “a social condition that a segment of society views as harmful to members of society and in need of remedy.” Treviño¹³ offers a slightly different definition, wherein a social problem is “a social condition, event, or pattern of behavior that negatively affects the well-being of a significant number of people (or a number of significant people) who believe the condition, event, or pattern needs to be changed or ameliorated.” As you can see, the definitions may vary, but there are some key similarities. At the very least, nearly all definitions include the idea that a social problem is a *social condition* (rather than a purely physical ailment, for example) that causes harm to many people.

Many definitions integrate the role of “claims makers” in bringing the social problem to the attention of the general public or those in power. Claims makers can be individuals or groups, and they can hold a variety of positions in society, including political leaders, members of the media, advocates and activists, community or religious leaders, researchers and academics, or individual people.¹⁴ Claims makers attempt to garner public attention for their social issue in the hopes that increased attention will translate to action on the part of citizens, lawmakers, or those in power, to help change the conditions that caused the problem or to help alleviate the suffering of the victims. This process, called *claims making*, essentially relies on “societal reaction and social definition. From this perspective, social problems come and go as societal reactions and responses to particular conditions change.”¹⁵

Sociologists sometimes include additional elements within their definitions, for example, that social problems need to be recognized by people with power and influence or that people need to be actively trying to correct or ameliorate the condition for it to be defined as

11 Eitzen, Baca Zinn, and Smith, 2014, p. 10.

12 Mooney, Linda A., David Knox, and Caroline Schacht. 2015. *Understanding Social Problems*, 9th ed. Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, p. 3.

13 Treviño, Javier. 2015. *Investigating Social Problems*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 6.

14 Spector, Malcolm, and John I. Kitsuse. 1977. *Constructing Social Problems*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

15 Perrin, Robin D., and Cindy L. Miller-Perrin. 2011. “Interpersonal Violence as Social Construction: The Potentially Undermining Role of Claims Making and Advocacy Statistics.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 26(15): 3033–49.

a social problem. These additions to definitions stress the importance of power in defining conditions as worthy of change, which reflects the reality that much of our understanding of social problems supports the interests of those who have power in our society. For example, a reading included in this book by Miriam Konrad and Angie Luvara questions why corporate crime is not considered as problematic as street crime, although it is arguably more costly and damaging to society (but more likely to be committed by those in power). Other readings ask why more attention is not paid to growing wealth inequality in America, to employment discrimination against minorities, to the expanding costs but declining quality of our health care system, or to the exploding prison population—all issues that are more likely to affect those with less power in society.

Many discussions of social problems include a comparison between *subjective* and *objective* components of problems. Objective components focus on measurable amounts of harm or the number of people affected by an issue, reasoning that if a large number of people are harmed, then the condition is a social problem. Claims makers often take this approach, using statistics to make the argument that the issue is serious and in need of change. While factual information is essential to understanding the scope and depth of social problems, challenges remain. The objective components rely on concepts on which there is little agreement. How many people is “a large number?” Is 10,000 enough? That might seem like a lot of people, but that is less than 0.003 percent of the population of the United States.¹⁶ Do the conditions need to affect more than 10 percent of the U.S. population (more than 32 million people)? What counts as harm, and what is the threshold we should use to establish whether someone has been harmed? Students often ask us if localized phenomena (like the Flint water crisis) are social problems in and of themselves, since they would seem to impact a smaller number of people than, say, unemployment. We tend to ask them to think more broadly and to see crises such as Flint’s as instances of larger social problems—for example, our lack of investment in infrastructure; race and class discrimination; and corporations profiting from—and in some cases causing—environmental degradation.

One of the challenges with relying solely on objective definitions of social problems is that they so often rely on numbers, statistics, and data that can have unclear origins, aren’t grounded in sociological research methods, or just don’t make sense. Joel Best offers an example in his book *Damned Lies and Statistics*¹⁷: a statistic which claimed that “every year since 1950, the number of American children gunned down has doubled.”

What makes this statistic so bad? Just for the sake of argument, let’s assume that “the number of American children gunned down” in 1950 was one. If the number doubled each year, there must have been two children gunned down in 1951, four in 1952, eight in 1953, and so on. By 1960, the number would have been 1,024. By 1965, it would

16 Based on a U.S. population in March 2019 of 328 million people (U.S. Census Bureau. U.S. and World Population Clock. Retrieved on March 22, 2019, from <http://www.census.gov/popclock>).

17 Best, Joel. 2012. *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Issues from the Media, Politicians, and Activists*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, p. 2.

have been 32,768 (in 1965, the FBI identified only 9,960 criminal homicides in the entire country, including adult as well as child victims). By 1970, the number would have passed one million; by 1980, one billion (more than four times the total U.S. population in that year). . . . By 1995 . . . the annual number of victims would have been over 35 trillion—a really big number, of a magnitude you rarely encounter outside economics or astronomy.

It's easy to accept a statistic like the one that confounded Best when we consider the fact that we are often "awestruck" by statistics, and our lack of critical thought imbues them with even more power. Statistics are indeed critical to understanding our social world and the social problems we encounter; otherwise, we would have no idea about how many people were experiencing a given problem. We should therefore approach statistics thoughtfully, rather than accepting them blindly or rejecting them all outright as attempts to manipulate us. This begins by recognizing that, as Best points out, "every social statistic reflects the choices that go into producing it. The key choices involve definition and methodology: whenever we count something, we must first define what it is we hope to count, and then choose the methods by which we will go about counting."¹⁸ When you encounter statistics about social problems—including those in the readings in this book—you should ask yourself:

What might be the sources for this number? How could one go about producing the figure? Who produced the number, and what interests might they have? What are the different ways key terms might have been defined, and which definitions have been chosen? How might the phenomena be measured, and which measurement choices have been made? What sort of sample was gathered, and how might that sample affect the result? Is the statistic being properly interpreted? Are comparisons being made, and if so, are the comparisons appropriate? Are there competing statistics? If so, what stakes do the opponents have in the issue, and how are those stakes likely to affect their use of statistics? And is it possible to figure out why the statistics seem to disagree, what the differences are in the ways the competing sides are using figures?¹⁹

In addition to understanding the objective nature of social problems, sociologists also seek to understand their subjective nature, which usually begins with a discussion about how social problems are socially constructed. Social construction is a process in which people generate meanings and understandings of their social world through interacting with one another.²⁰ Focusing on this aspect of social problems means developing an understanding of how social conditions come to be seen or "discovered" as a problem. This process begins with claims makers identifying a problem in need of resolution and then attempting to bring attention to the problem. These claims makers enter an already crowded field. After all, as

18 Best, Joel. 2001. "Promoting Bad Statistics." *Society*, 38(3): 10–15.

19 Best, 2012, p. 169.

20 Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Doubleday.

Best argued, “there are many causes and a limited amount of space on the front page of the *New York Times*. Advocates must find ways to make their claims compelling.”²¹ Claims makers essentially define a social problem: they identify an issue, bring public attention to it, and when members of the society accept these claims, the issue becomes a social problem. As Perrin and Miller-Perrin summarize it: “social problems, then, are essentially ‘discovered’ through this process of societal reaction and social definition. From this perspective, social problems come and go as societal reactions and responses to particular conditions change.”²²

A classic example of the subjective nature and process of the social construction and “discovery” of a social problem focuses on child abuse. Until the 1960s, there were no laws in the United States protecting children from abuse by their caretakers.²³ Although advances in the rights of children had been made prior to this point, there was little attention to the issue of child abuse from those in the legal, political, or social welfare fields who had “little incentive for interfering with an established power set—the parent over the child.”²⁴ Members of the general public were largely unconcerned with the issue as well, and studies at the time concluded that most people were tolerant of, and even empathetic toward, those who had been accused or convicted of abusing a child.²⁵ Attempts to deal with child abuse were framed as preventing future harm to society in the form of “future delinquents . . . it was the children, not their abusive guardians, who felt the weight of the moral crusade.”²⁶

So, although the condition and experience of child abuse had existed for thousands of years, it wasn’t until the 1940s and 1950s that pediatric radiologists—those who X-ray children admitted to the hospital with traumatic injuries—first “discovered” child abuse in the form of broken bones and skeletal traumas.²⁷ An article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* entitled “The Battered Child Syndrome” labeled child abuse as an “illness” that children might be suffering from, making it more likely that doctors would be willing to “see” abuse, as well as seeing abusive parents as people who needed help. Various social welfare organizations joined in the call for more attention to the issue, arguing that children should be examined for child abuse symptoms; law enforcement advocates argued that child abuse should be criminalized and offenders prosecuted. Buttressed by the “objective” voices of doctors and law enforcement, the media coverage of this “new” condition of child abuse was prolific. In reaction to this increased attention and public outcry, over the course of four years (beginning in 1962), all fifty states had passed legislation to deal with the new problem of child abuse.²⁸ In this case, radiologists, doctors, social welfare organizations, and law enforcement officials all became claims makers, advocating for a reframing of

21 Best, 2001.

22 Perrin, Robin D., and Cindy L. Miller-Perrin. 2011. “Interpersonal Violence as Social Construction: The Potentially Undermining Role of Claims Making and Advocacy Statistics.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 26(15): 3033–49, 3035.

23 Pfohl, Stephen J. 1977. “The Discovery of Child Abuse.” *Social Problems* 14(3): 310–23.

24 Pfohl, 1977, p. 314.

25 Pfohl, 1977.

26 Pfohl, 1977, p. 311.

27 Pfohl, 1977.

28 Pfohl, 1977.

our understanding of child abuse from a “private” issue into a social problem that needed public legislative intervention. Because this reframing was successful, we now view child abuse as a serious social problem with individual and societal consequences.

A more contemporary example is the issue of using a cell phone while driving. Although today most people acknowledge that driving while talking on a cell phone is risky and many states have made using a cell phone while driving illegal, in the recent past this was not the case. As Parilla²⁹ demonstrates, concern about the distraction and possible fatal consequences that come from texting or talking while driving began to increase in the early 2000s, as cell phone use increased and more claims makers (including government officials, celebrities, and members of law enforcement) began to publicly warn about the dangers of distracted driving. Parilla argues that the key to the success of this movement was garnering media attention and support; after all, claims makers had to convince the public that something they did nearly every day was, in fact, dangerous. Garnering support meant relying on shifting definitions (e.g., initially focusing on handheld rather than hands-free devices; then banning cell phone use for new drivers rather than more experienced ones; and, finally, making an increased push against the broader problem of “distracted driving”). The media played an important role in guiding the public’s understanding of the issue as a problem. From 1984 to 2010, the period of time during which Parilla reviewed newspaper articles about cell phone use as the cause of traffic accidents, the vast majority of articles presented the claim that driving while on the phone caused accidents but offered no *counterclaim* or alternative discussion about or viewpoint on the issue. Parilla found that only 15 percent of the articles presented a counterclaim (for example, that eating and driving may be the cause of traffic accidents rather than cell phone use).³⁰ We frequently see counterclaims in discussions of many social problems today (e.g., global warming/climate change), where there is disagreement not only about the scope and impact of the problem, but about whether the issue is a problem at all. This highlights the importance of the media not only in disseminating claims, but also in framing how we understand an issue to be a social problem.

THE ROLE OF AMERICAN CULTURAL VALUES IN DEFINING AND UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

One of the challenges in applying a sociological lens to understanding social problems is that you may need to reconcile this lens with the cultural values many of us have absorbed since childhood. These values have become important parts of our belief systems and the way we understand the world, and they influence how we come to understand social problems, in particular, whether we are likely to take a person- or system-blame approach when thinking about causes and solutions to social problems. In this section, we discuss some common American cultural values such as individualism and meritocracy and how they influence our understanding of social problems.

29 Parilla, Peter F. 2013. “Cell Phone Use While Driving: Defining a Problem as Worthy of Action.” In *Making Sense of Social Problems: New Images, New Issues*, Joel Best and Scott R. Harris, eds. (pp. 27–46). Boulder, CO: Reiner.

30 Parilla, 2013.

American culture has long emphasized the rights and responsibilities of the individual rather than the social group, resulting in an individualistic culture that attributes what happens to individuals to their effort, will, and self-reliance rather than to their social circumstances, random fate, or the actions of others.³¹ These are the basic tenets of the American Dream, a term first coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931: “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.”³² There are religious, political, economic, historical, and social foundations for the American Dream—far more than we can discuss in this brief introduction—but the crux of the ideology (based partly on our democratic political system) is that America is a land of equality of opportunity, and the only barrier to success people face is themselves. Closely connected to the idea of individualism is the concept of meritocracy. Meritocracy is the idea that individuals’ success is based on their individual talent, ability, and desire to work hard—that you get out of the system what you put into it—and that people can move up in the society through this effort.³³

Americans have a strong belief in meritocracy and individualism. For example, the Pew Research Center found in 2012 that 75 percent of Americans believed “everyone has it in their own power to succeed”; 58 percent agreed that “most people who want to get ahead can make it if they’re willing to work hard”; and 90 percent of Americans said they “admire people who got rich through hard work.”³⁴ Americans endorse more individualistic ideologies than do most people around the globe.³⁵ For example, Americans are less likely to agree with the belief that coming from a wealthy family is “essential or very important to getting ahead” than are people from other countries, and are more likely than people from other countries to say they believe that people get rewarded for intelligence, skill, and hard work.³⁶

These beliefs about the value of hard work, individual effort, and self-reliance influence people’s perspectives on the causes of social problems and possible solutions. For example, if you believe that with hard work and effort anyone can get ahead, you may be less likely to support programs that support those in poverty, perhaps because you believe they are poor because of their own personal failings. Research on attitudes toward government support for the poor bears this out: Americans are far less likely to support social safety net programs that help support people in need compared to citizens in western Europe. For

31 Fischer, Claude S. 2008. “Paradoxes of American Individualism.” *Sociological Forum* 23(2): 2.

32 McNamee, Stephen J. 2018. *The Meritocracy Myth*, Fourth Edition. Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, p. 2.

33 McNamee, 2018.

34 PewResearchCenter. 2012. “ForthePublic, It’sNotaboutClassWarfare, butFairness.” Retrieved on March 22, 2019, from <https://www.people-press.org/2012/03/02/for-the-public-its-not-about-class-warfare-but-fairness>.

35 Pew Research Center. 2014. “Emerging and Developing Economies Much More Optimistic than Rich Countries about the Future.” Retrieved on March 22, 2019, from https://www.pewglobal.org/2014/10/09/emerging-and-developing-economies-much-more-optimistic-than-rich-countries-about-the-future/pg_14-09-04_usindividualism_640-px.

36 Pew Charitable Trusts Economic Mobility Project. “Economic Mobility: Is the American Dream Alive and Well?” Retrieved on March 22, 2019, from https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/reports/economic_mobility/empamericandreamreportpdf.pdf.

example, when asked whether it was the responsibility of the government to “care for very poor people who can’t take care of themselves,” more than 50 percent of Swedes, British, Spanish, and Germans strongly agreed, whereas only 22 percent of Americans strongly agreed.³⁷ Similarly, 58 percent of Americans said that it was more important for “people to have the freedom to pursue their life’s goals” than to have the government “guarantee nobody was in need” (35 percent); these numbers are essentially reversed for citizens of western European countries.³⁸ The influence of these cultural values can extend to social problems beyond poverty; it’s not hard to imagine how strong endorsement of the values of individualism and self-reliance and a belief in meritocracy might impact an individual’s perspective on affirmative action, affordable health care, environmental regulation, or criminal rehabilitation programs. Endorsement of the meritocracy ideology also has ramifications for an individual’s mental health and sense of self-esteem. Research published in 2017 indicated that young people from racial, ethnic, or economically marginalized backgrounds who grew up believing in the meritocratic ideals of hard work and perseverance showed a decline in self-esteem and an increase in risky behaviors when they were in their early teens. As Erin Godfrey, the lead researcher, described in an interview, kids from privileged positions (either because of their race, class, or gender) believe the system is fair and feel little conflict about whether their success was achieved fairly. But for kids who come from marginalized backgrounds, believing that the system is inherently fair can create challenging questions: “If the system is fair, why am I seeing that everybody who has brown skin is in this kind of job? You’re having to think about that . . . like you’re not as good, or your social group isn’t as good.”³⁹ As you can see, these values have consequences not only for how we view social problems and our fellow citizens, but also how we view our self-worth.

These values of individualism and meritocracy, embodied by the American Dream, act as the foundation for many Americans’ value systems. It can therefore be challenging to examine these values or to read materials that demonstrate that these closely held values are falling short of their ideal. Throughout this book, you’ll find readings that demonstrate, for example, that there are significant barriers to upward social mobility, especially for people of color; that seeking a higher education and working hard do not always guarantee economic success for individuals or their families; that the social safety net is failing many individuals and communities; and that discrimination and bias still play an active role in our society, no matter how much we strive to provide equality for everyone. We encourage you to approach these readings with an open mind and to use a sociological approach to understanding the causes and consequences of social problems by acknowledging the role that institutions and social structures play in our lives.

37 Stokes, Bruce. 2013. “Public Attitudes toward the Next Social Contract.” New America Foundation. Retrieved on March 22, 2019, from https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/pdf/Stokes_Bruce_NAF_Public_Attitudes_1_2013.pdf: 5.

38 Stokes, 2013, p. 7.

39 Anderson, Melinda D. 2017. “Why the Myth of Meritocracy Hurts Kids of Color.” *The Atlantic*, July 27. Retrieved on March 22, 2019, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/07/internalizing-the-myth-of-meritocracy/535035>.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Sociologists use different theoretical perspectives to help them explore the causes and consequences of social problems. As we selected readings to include in this book, several theoretical perspectives guided our choices. Although Mills emphasizes the importance of examining the social structure and social conditions to understand the lived experiences of one's self and others, he did not emphasize the process by which social problems come to be defined and recognized as such. When people interact, share ideas, and begin to create meaning and understandings of a particular situation⁴⁰ (as the result of claims making, for example), they are engaging in the social construction of a social problem. Social constructionism, or how we create ideas and define social problems through our interaction, helps us understand part of the "story" of social problems. But we believe that social constructionism, as a theoretical perspective, doesn't go far enough analytically.

Critical constructionism acknowledges that the process by which social problems come to be defined as such is a political process, where the desires of those who have the most power in society (political power, economic power, and so on) hold the most sway in the social problem construction process (see, for example, readings in Chapter 2 by Stiglitz and by Vidmar). This power is defined as the ability to maintain or change the social structure in society. Critical constructionism assumes that those who have the most power will generally influence social structures in such a way as to maintain their power. Furthermore, those who have the most power to shape policy and control institutions (like education, media, or government) have the most resources at their disposal to influence the ideas of everyone in the society, thereby helping shore up their own positions and maintain the status quo. Critical constructionism encourages us to acknowledge that those with the fewest resources must work significantly harder to have their voices heard and that a main avenue to creating change may be to convince those in power that it is in their own interest to solve a social problem.⁴¹

We also sought to use an intersectional perspective in our selection of readings, recognizing that race, social class, gender, sexual identity, and other categories intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and discrimination within different contexts.⁴² For example, Black women are affected by discrimination in ways that may differ from the experiences of both White women and Black men. Further, Black women's class backgrounds and sexual identities can result in different experiences of discrimination *among* Black women.⁴³ We try to capture the experience of these intersections in readings such as "The Second

40 Berger and Luckman, 1966.

41 Heiner, Robert. 2013. *Social Problems: An Introduction to Critical Constructionism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

42 Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge; Collins, Patricia Hill. 2004. *Black Sexual Politics*. New York: Routledge; Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race And Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1(8): 139–67.

43 Collins, 2000; Collins, 2004; Wingfield, Adia Harvey. 2019. "Reclaiming Our Time": Black Women, Resistance, and Rising Inequality." *Gender & Society* 33(3): 1–18.

Racial Wealth Gap," "The Eviction Economy," "The Fault in Our Scores," "Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-and-Death Crisis," and "About Those 79 Cents." These are just some examples of the ways in which the readings in this book foreground how race, class, and gender, in particular, intersect in unique and sometimes particularly virulent ways across a variety of social problems. Although there are many ways to define social problems and theoretical lenses with which to view them, this book is designed to illustrate how social problems come to be defined as such and, more importantly, to share the extent and causes of the social conditions of our society so that you, as changemakers, can approach them from a deep and broad base of sociological knowledge.

SOCIAL CHANGE

The readings in this book will highlight just how entrenched many social problems are in our society; we want you to understand the scope of the conditions (from everyday instances of discrimination and bias to more systemic ones, for example) that create suffering in the lives of those affected directly by social problems.⁴⁴ As the readings in this book (and some of the examples mentioned in this introduction) demonstrate, social problems are often interrelated and cumulative in nature. An individual born into poverty may be exposed to hazardous environmental conditions that impede physical and mental development and then go on to attend a poorly funded public school that lacks the resources to teach the vast number of skills needed to succeed in college and in the job market, all of which may damage long-term economic prospects. Individuals who live in an impoverished area with few economic opportunities may turn to petty crime to survive, resulting in arrests or time spent in jail; a criminal record may subsequently affect their ability to get and keep a good job to provide for themselves and their families.

The realization that so many social problems are interrelated and that solutions are often hard to come by may cause students to feel powerless. Yet, it is important to remember that although our actions are constrained by social institutions and the structure of our society, we retain individual and collective agency—the ability to act to create change for ourselves and others. Interviews with activists working to solve social problems begin each chapter in this book. We selected interviewees from a wide range of organizations (national, state, and local), who hold diverse kinds of positions (from interns to directors), and who tackle myriad social problems included in this book. We included these interviews to give you a glimpse into the ways that individuals and groups (small and large) can create social change on issues they are passionate about. After all, humans built the structures that reproduce our social problems, and thus they can also adapt, alter, or replace such structures.

44 Best, Joel. 2002. "Constructing the Sociology of Social Problems: Spector and Kitsuse Twenty-Five Years Later." *Sociological Forum* 17(4): 699–706.

WEALTH AND INCOME INEQUALITY

Researchers have documented how since the 1970s, the rich have gotten richer and the poor have gotten poorer as a result of policies and large-scale economic changes. They examined this increasing inequality by measuring growing gaps in income (wages) and wealth (assets like homes and investments, minus debts). For example, in the 1960s, families near the top of the economic ladder had six times the wealth of families in the middle of the ladder, but by 2016, families near the top of the economic ladder had twelve times the amount of wealth as the families in the middle.¹ Americans are concerned about this growing inequality. They know that assets (such as owning a home) offer financial stability, a safety net during emergencies, an ability to invest in education and business opportunities, and support for a healthy retirement. They also know that the costs of this inequality extend beyond individuals' net worth. Gallup surveys indicate that around 60 percent of Americans believe that current income and wealth distributions are unfair. These attitudinal data have remained relatively constant for over three decades.² In the first reading in this chapter, Michael I. Norton gauges Americans' understanding of economic inequality in the United States, asking research respondents to estimate current inequality and assess what level of inequality would be "ideal." Despite their concern about wealth inequality, Americans tend to underestimate current levels to a significant extent. While they are not seeking "total equality" as an ideal, they also consistently show support for much more equitable distributions of income and wealth than currently exist.

Both Michael I. Norton and Renee M. Shelby demonstrate that the costs of economic inequality go beyond inherent unfairness and diminishing the life chances of individuals,

1 Anon. 2017. "Nine Charts about Wealth Inequality in America (Updated)." Urban.org. Retrieved February 4, 2019, from <http://urbn.is/wealthcharts>.

2 Newport, Frank. 2015. "Americans Continue to Say U.S. Wealth Distribution Is Unfair." Gallup.Com. Retrieved February 4, 2019, from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/182987/americans-continue-say-wealth-distribution-unfair.aspx>.

and that the inequality itself damages our economy and society by demotivating lower-wage workers, encouraging unethical behavior, stunting economic growth, intensifying inflation, and compromising democratic principles. Shelby demonstrates how rising economic inequality has led to a society in which few people are able to move up the income and wealth ladders. As the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, the middle class, once economically strong, continues to face hardship and stagnation. Edward McClellan's reading offers a reason for the weakening middle class, arguing that as we've moved from a manufacturing economy (where workers were typically unionized) to a service economy (where they are typically nonunionized), White-collar workers—whose positions now require college degrees—earn low salaries and have no union leverage to bargain for higher wages consistent with middle-class economic stability. These large-scale economic changes in job structure certainly contribute to our increasing economic inequality.

While Americans in general suffer from increasing economic inequality, it is important to note that they do not all suffer equally. Some groups of Americans, owing to past and current patterns of exploitation, fare much worse than others. Researchers have documented a substantial racial wealth gap that has persisted for decades. A recent study of median net worth (assets minus debts) in American households found that nonimmigrant African American households in Boston had an average of \$8 in net worth compared to \$247,500 for White households!³ Another study found that the average White family had six times more liquid retirement savings compared to average African American and Latinx families.⁴ The readings in this chapter by Dedrick Asante-Muhammad et al. and Mel Jones document major gaps in income and wealth inequality by race, discussing their origins, growth, and consequences.

While some groups suffer disproportionately from economic inequality, others have benefited financially and politically as a result. The social movement Occupy Wall Street called attention to the "1 Percent" or the ultra-wealthy in society. The readings on this topic by both Joseph E. Stiglitz and Chris M. Vidmar demonstrate that with income and wealth come an interest in and the power to support policies that enhance one's own financial position, even to the detriment of others and the greater good of society. This manifests particularly in the area of political campaign contributions. Vidmar documents how a small number of ultra-wealthy donors are able to use their economic resources to sway political policies to best serve their own interests, enhancing their power and further increasing economic inequality.

Reducing economic inequality, in the face of large-scale economic changes such as the decline in manufacturing and the increase in globalization, will require political will and some creative policies. An economic system and policies that have favored the wealthy have increased our inequality over time; new policies have the capacity to counter current trends. The American public wants to see change, for the sake of our economy and our democracy.

3 Muñoz, Ana Patricia, Marlene Kim, Mariko Chang, Regine O. Jackson, Darrick Hamilton, and William A. Darity Jr. 2015. "The Color of Wealth in Boston." Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. Retrieved February 4, 2019, from <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/one-time-pubs/color-of-wealth.aspx>.

4 Anon. 2017a. "Nine Charts about Wealth Inequality in America (Updated)." Urban Institute. Retrieved February 4, 2019, from <http://urbn.is/wealthcharts>.

ACTIVIST INTERVIEW

SAM NELSON



Sam Nelson is an organizer with Jobs With Justice

What is the mission of your organization, and what types of work do you do in your position?

The mission of Jobs With Justice (JWJ) is to build the power of working-class communities across the United States and internationally. Our central focus is expanding the right to collectively bargain (for example, advocating for things like fair wages, safe working conditions, and high-quality benefits). We believe collective bargaining is central both to working-class people having the ability to control their lives and a healthy democracy. Collective bargaining should not be limited to just workers and their employer, but can be expanded to tenants and their landlords, community residents, and banks or other corporate entities, or communities and the police. We achieve this goal by running strategic campaigns around new forms of worker organization, policy formation, and building coalitions. We also do bread-and-butter solidarity work with workers and communities like turning out to pickets and helping bring community members into union fights (we've recently mobilized with Stop and Shop workers in Massachusetts, Little Big Burger, and Burgerville workers in Portland, Oregon, and University of Illinois-Chicago graduate students on strike in Chicago).

I'm on our organizing team, so I develop and maintain relationships with our local coalitions. I cover retail (scheduling and hours reform, minimum wage, retail worker organizing), e-commerce (worker organizing), and the global supply chain (working with our partners in Asia Floor Wage Alliance, who are supporting Asia workers' attempts to directly negotiate for a living wage with garment brands like Gap and H&M).

How did you first become interested in this type of activism?

It aligned with my long-held vaguely liberal politics. My parents both made sure I kept up with the news (my dad works at a newspaper). Early on, they instilled in me the importance of antiracism, being a good neighbor, etc. But when the recession hit, the material reality of work in the United States hit me. My dad's workplace shrank dramatically, and for years he came home worried about being laid off. The psychological toll of uncertainty combined with the financial toll of not getting raises for years (even though you're doing more and more work), strained everyone in the family, and our family wasn't alone. I resolved to do "activity" things in college to get over some of that feeling of helplessness the recession brought on.

I went to George Washington University (GWU) on a scholarship and loans. I joined an organization on campus called the Progressive Student Union (PSU). It was through PSU and their affiliation with DC Jobs With Justice that I learned about labor movements and workers' rights, and how GWU was violating them every day. I was given tools to actually build power with workers so they could take the lead themselves, and not rely on others to advocate for them.

How did you get your current job?

PSU was an affiliate of the Student Labor Action Project (SLAP), which at the time was the student program of Jobs With Justice. We were also a member of the local DC Jobs With Justice coalition. I had some mentors in the organization who introduced me to that wider world. The national SLAP Coordinator for JWJ at the time taught me a lot of nuts and bolts about how to organize and analyze power. It was through my work in PSU, helping build that organization over about two years, that my mentors helped me develop as a leader. After one of them graduated, he asked me to take his spot on the DC Jobs With Justice steering committee, which decides campaigns, approves new members, and helps coordinate among all the various groups. It was also during that summer that I got an internship at national Jobs With Justice and worked on student organizing around student debt and various other issues. At the time of my graduation, I was deeply integrated into JWJ's extensive national network of activists and organizers. When a job opened up for a position in the national office about a year after I graduated, I applied. I was picked both because of the relationships I had developed and my experience within the organization. I deeply understood what the organization was about and how it functioned.

What strategies do you try to use to enact social change in your area of activism?

The core of JWJ's work is relationship building. If you're not in reciprocal, long-term relationship with the people you are organizing with, you're going to have

a hard time. Also at the core is our analysis of power: What is our power? What is the opponent's power? How can we disrupt theirs? We learn this through our national training program so that JWJ activists have a common understanding of these concepts and we're all using the same playbook. From there, strategies depend on what's needed. For example, if it's a policy fight, like the Retail Workers Bill of Rights in San Francisco,¹ we organize groups of workers who would benefit from that policy to help craft it, talk to legislators about it, and integrate other members of the community who may not be directly affected. Then once it's passed, those workers can continue to organize to ensure it is enforced. All strategies are centered on workers leading on their own behalf and setting us up for the next fight through a campaign.

What are the major challenges activists in your field face?

Individual activists face "burnout" a lot. This is hard work. Because of the social justice nature of it, many of us push ourselves to our breaking points. We teach in our training program that we need to practice "self-interest," the idea that you are in a relationship with yourself and the community, so that if you are completely selfless you may burn out and actually harm campaigns.

As with any movement, racism and sexism exist to varying degrees. Some unions tend to be "male, pale and stale" as the saying goes, so it can be a challenge for women organizers and organizers of color to do the work. This is where solidarity is incredibly important within our organizations, so we can stand with our fellow organizers if they are being subjected to racism or sexism internally or externally.

Organizationally, there is the constant issue of funding. Foundation funding sometimes comes with strings attached or ebbs and flows with interest in a certain area, and grassroots funding is a whole body of work unto itself. There's also the reality that worker organizing doesn't get a lot of attention from funders in general. Actually, building power so that workers can confront their bosses and companies isn't always palatable to those with the power and money to fund our efforts.

(continued)

What would you consider to be your greatest successes as an activist in this area of activism?

Personally, it's been the work with the Asia Floor Wage Alliance. I've helped build our international program with them, so now we are working in concert, targeting brands that have their clothes manufactured by workers across South and Southeast Asia. We've been able to make interventions at the International Labor Organization, and we've gotten Gap to the table with Asia Floor Wage Alliance to discuss solutions to gender-based violence in their supply chains. We've demonstrated that we can have an international labor movement, but that it takes mutual respect and having the workers in the Global South lead.

What are major misconceptions the public has about activism in general and your issue specifically?

Around activism in general, I'd say it's that we're all trust fund kinds who don't know the real world. Yet I come from a working-class background, as do most of my colleagues. Most people I meet in this work are in it because they know what it's like to have a bad boss or to have your life thrown into disarray because of decisions made by a company you have no control over. Most people are doing this work because they know it's going to take a movement of people affected by these issues to build power collectively so we can solve them.

With the labor movement specifically, it's the idea behind the incredibly problematic term *big labor*, which implies that unions are corrupt, out of touch, or unduly influencing politics. Yet 90 percent of Americans do not belong to unions, and union political contributions pale in comparison to the many multinational companies and their lobbyists and campaign contributions that have immense influence in our political system. Labeling labor unions "just another special interest group" is disingenuous, as unions right now are the only organizations that are composed of working-class people of all faiths, races, genders, and geographies that are trying to make the world better materially. There are problems for sure, and no one will list the problems of the labor movement more readily than those of us in the labor movement, but we know that the alternative is increased power

of companies, and as I said in my experience with the recession, that leads to powerlessness.

Why should students get involved in your line of activism?

The labor movement still skews older, yet young people are the age group most likely to agree with the mission of unions. We need a generational shift that both respects those that came before and allows younger generations to take leadership and change the labor movement for the better. Movements in fast food, tech, and education are all largely led by young people.

If an individual has little money and time, are there other ways they can contribute?

Reading groups are always a good entry point. You can also turn out for a picket line or protest. Have events on campus or in the community where you have speakers come and talk about the movement. Just remember to get outside of your comfort zone.

What ways can college students enact social change in their daily lives?

Students should not simply focus on social change as individuals, but how they can play their part in a movement. At the very base level it's building relationships with your fellow students, but also the workers on your campus. Dining hall workers, bus drivers, janitors, and clerical workers all have stories that may align with yours. Your own personal consumer boycott can't do much, but if you organize your boycott like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' current boycott of Wendy's or the boycott of Driscoll's Berries last year called by farmworkers in the United States and Mexico, then you amplify your individual influence.

NOTE

1. The Retail Workers Bill of Rights in San Francisco ensured five protections for hourly retail workers in the city: "promoting full time work and access to hours . . . encouraging fair predictable schedules . . . discouraging abusive on-call scheduling practices . . . equal treatment for part-time workers . . . encouraging worker retention and job security." (<http://retailworkerrights.com/get-the-facts>)

MICHAEL I. NORTON

1. UNEQUALITY

Who Gets What and Why It Matters

How unequal do you think income and wealth are in the United States? How unequal should they be *ideally*? Norton explores the current patterns of income and wealth inequality and discusses how accurate Americans are at estimating current levels of economic inequality. Americans tend both to underestimate economic inequality and to share a common desire for a more equal (and yet not totally equal) society. Norton describes some of the psychological and behavioral costs of economic inequality that should motivate making societal changes to decrease economic inequality.

INTRODUCTION

From Occupy Wall Street to the Tea Party, from slogans like “We are the 99%” to “We are the 47%,” from debates about universal health care to the minimum wage, questions about who should get what drive many of the most heated policy debates—and debates at the kitchen table. And these debates are not limited to the United States, as evidenced by movements from Occupy Armenia to Occupy Nigeria to Occupy Seoul and worker strikes around the world demanding higher wages. How countries deal with rising inequality—and how citizens push their governments to address inequality—is a critical issue with trickle-down effects to nearly every other issue, from early childhood education to job training to immigration policy. For each, policymakers and citizens are forced to answer the question: Who should get what?

Income and wealth inequality in the United States have increased dramatically since the 1980s to levels not seen since just before the Great Depression in the 1930s (Keister, 2000; Wolff, 2002). In contrast to previous periods in American history, nearly all of the new income and wealth generated over the last decades has gone to the richest Americans. From 2009 to 2012, the incomes of the top 1% grew by 31.4%, whereas

the incomes of the bottom 99% grew only by 0.4%, such that the top 1% got 95% of the income gains in these years (Piketty & Saez, 2014). The Great Recession brought the stark differences in outcomes for rich and poor into sharp contrast. For example, research shows that, while gains in income have little positive impact on people’s well-being, losses in income have a much larger negative impact: Getting richer does not feel nearly as good as getting poorer feels bad (Boyce, Wood, Banks, Clark, & Brown, 2013; De Neve et al., 2014). Or compare the enormous bonuses paid to CEOs—even CEOs of underperforming companies—to data suggesting that nearly 50% of Americans report that they would be unable to come up with US\$2,000 in 30 days, no matter how many sources they tapped (Lusardi, Schneider, & Tufano, 2011).

But what is the right level of inequality? Economists have used historical data to attempt to determine when and why inequality has positive and negative consequences at the macroeconomic level (see Piketty, 2014). Behavioral scientists—both psychologists and behavioral economists—have taken a different and complementary approach, examining the consequences of inequality at the microlevel: How inequality affects the thoughts, emotions, and behavior of a single person in

worlds that are more or less unequal, and how that person's rank in each world—from richest to poorest—further shapes behaviors ranking from cheating to effort to generosity. People strongly believe that the current levels of inequality are unfair, but they rarely want perfect equality (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011). Moreover, people from all walks of life—rich and poor, liberal and conservative—agree far more than they disagree on what America should look like. People exhibit a desire for *unequality*—not too equal but not too unequal.

Two approaches inform what the ideal level of inequality might be. First, my research with my colleagues simply asks citizens directly what they think the right level is: In other words, if people in the United States and all over the world are asked how they think resources such as wealth and income should be distributed among people, what do they think is ideal? These data—laypeople's sense of an ideal distribution—offer one input into understanding the ideal level of inequality. Second, experimental research varies levels of inequality and people's rank in those more-and-less equal distributions, revealing that too much inequality can exert a negative impact on crucial outcomes: overall productivity, decision making (including people's tendency to gamble), and likelihood of engaging in both ethical and unethical behavior. On each of these metrics, inequality comes with costs not just to poor and middle-class Americans, but to the rich as well.

BUILDING A BETTER AMERICA—ONE WEALTH QUINTILE AND WAGE GAP AT A TIME

My recent research takes a novel approach to inequality, focusing not on what is bad about inequality and the bitter debates surrounding inequality, but attempting to show that people all over the world in fact have a strong shared vision of who should get what.

People volunteer to play the “desert island game.” Here's how it works: In some domain of inequality—say, wealth—people are asked to step back from the current political climate and from their notions about what policies should be implemented right now, and join a desert island thought experiment—where they get to play the dictator (or social engineer). People consider what they would do if they got to start over

from scratch and decide how things should ideally be distributed among people. How much would you give to the wealthy in your new ideal society? To the middle class? To the poor? These data are the first input to determining who should get what.

Think about the richest 20%—the “top quintile”—of Americans for a moment. In other words, rank all Americans in order and count down from the richest person until you are one-fifth of the way down that list.

Now answer this question:

Of all the wealth in the United States, what percent do you think the richest 20% of Americans own? _____%

Now play the desert island game. How would you answer if you could start over from scratch and build your ideal society?

Of all the wealth in the United States, what percent do you think the richest 20% of Americans should own? _____%

Now compare your two answers. Did you (hypothetically) write the same numbers for both questions? If you are like the vast majority of people who have completed surveys all around the world, you very likely gave a lower percentage for the second question than the first. You may have estimated that the richest 20% owned 60% of the wealth, but felt that ideally they should own 40%.

Before learning what the richest 20% actually own, answer two more questions. This time, think about the poorest 20% of Americans. In other words, rank all Americans in order again but count up from the poorest person until you are one-fifth of the way up the list.

Now answer the same two questions:

Of all the wealth in the United States, what percent do you think the poorest 20% of Americans own? _____%

Of all the wealth in the United States, what percent do you think the poorest 20% of Americans should own? _____%

If you are like most people surveyed, you probably estimated that the poorest 20% of Americans had about 5% of the wealth—and you wanted them to have about 10%.

Now for the answers, according to the latest estimates. Compare these with your answers above. The

richest 20% of Americans have about 85% of all the wealth. And the bottom 20%? They have about 0.1%. That is not a typo—not 1% of the wealth, one-tenth of 1%.

In research with more than 5,000 Americans, people dramatically underestimated the current level of wealth inequality, and they wanted greater equality than even these estimates (Norton & Ariely, 2011). In other words, they thought that things were more equal than they are, and they wanted things to be even more equal than they thought they were. Americans believed that the richest 20% had about 60% of the wealth, they wanted them to have about 30%, and in reality, as noted, they have 85%. At the other end, Americans estimated that the poorest 20% had about 4%, they wanted them to have 10%, and in reality they have 0.1%. Note, however, that despite this desire for greater equality, Americans still want some level of inequality: The richest should have more than the poor, just a smaller gap. Australians show the same pattern: a consensus desire for inequality—not too equal, not too unequal (Norton, Neal, Govan, Ariely, & Holland, 2014).

Perhaps importantly from a public policy viewpoint, Americans consistently express a strong—and unexpected—consensus on their views of the right levels of inequality in wealth. Despite a belief that rich and poor Americans, and especially liberal and conservative Americans, would disagree in their ideal levels of who gets what, every group—from richest to poorest, across the entire political spectrum—finds the current level of wealth inequality to be dramatically higher than their ideal level. Every group surveyed desires a more equal America—but again, an unequal America such that the rich have more than the poor.

This same general pattern holds true when examining not wealth but income, in data from thousands of people from 16 countries (including the United States). Respondents estimated the gap in pay between CEOs and unskilled workers and reported what they thought that gap ideally should be (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014). The questions are again simple:

How much income do you think the average CEO makes each year? US\$_____

How much income do you think the average unskilled worker makes each year? US\$_____

And

How much income do you think the average CEO should make each year? US\$_____

How much income do you think the average unskilled worker should make each year? US\$_____

For each pair of questions, we calculated a pay ratio by dividing the first number by the second, which shows how much more people think CEOs currently make, and how much more people think CEOs *should* make.

As with wealth, ideal income gaps between CEOs and unskilled workers are significantly smaller than estimated gaps, and people drastically underestimate actual pay inequality. In each of 16 countries, people's ideal gap was smaller than their estimated gap. Moreover, as with wealth, the actual pay gaps for the 16 countries are dramatically larger than people's estimates and ideals.

Underestimation was larger in the United States than in any other country: The actual pay ratio of CEOs to unskilled workers was 354:1 (meaning that CEOs on average earned 354 times more income), whereas Americans estimated the gap to be 30:1 and reported an ideal ratio of 7:1. As with wealth, people underestimate actual pay gaps, and their ideal pay gaps are even farther from reality than their erroneous estimates. Note also, however, that Americans again express a desire for inequality: CEOs should still make more money than unskilled workers, but the gap should be much smaller than it currently is.

As with wealth inequality, the desire for smaller pay gaps between the rich and poor was a consensus desire. Rich and poor, left wing and right wing, highly educated and less educated—each group believed that smaller gaps in pay were more ideal than the current gaps in the United States and around the world.

THE (NEGATIVE) CONSEQUENCES OF INEQUALITY

Of course, just because Americans report desiring more equal distributions of wealth and income does not necessarily mean that these are the levels policymakers should pursue. In fact, one argument for higher levels of inequality is that inequality can be a motivating positive force in people's lives: People may work harder and better if they know that doing

so can improve their outcomes in life and their children's future outcomes. Indeed, the fact that when surveyed, Americans unanimously support some level of inequality offers support for the notion that they, too, believe that complete equality is not the best solution. However, research shows that increasing levels of inequality can have negative consequences for people's behavior, suggesting that while some inequality may be desirable, too much can have negative repercussions. Below are some key findings about the effects of inequality on productivity, decision making, and ethical and unethical behavior.

INEQUALITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

One of the truisms of the benefits of inequality is that higher salaries attract better workers and motivate people to work harder and perform better to reach those incentives. However, research shows that when pay inequality is made public—when workers know where they stand in the distribution—lower paid workers report less job satisfaction, but higher paid workers do not experience any benefit (Card, Mas, Moretti, & Saez, 2012). Similarly, one field experiment showed that when workers are paired and one of them experiences a pay cut—such that one is now making more pay than the other—the lower paid worker exhibits less effort, but the higher paid worker does not increase effort (Cohn, Fehr, & Götte, 2015). If anything, research shows that really large incentives (think of the enormous compensation packages for CEOs) can actually undermine performance. Why? Faced with the opportunity to earn—but simultaneously faced with the threat of squandering—huge bonuses, people choke at very high levels of compensation, performing worse than they did when working toward a more reasonable bonus (Ariely, Gneezy, Loewenstein, & Mazar, 2009). Taken together, these results suggest that pay inequality is demotivating for lower paid workers and is not offset by increases in motivation for higher paid workers—and may even lead to worse performance in both groups.

INEQUALITY AND DECISION MAKING

An emerging body of research also suggests that inequality has negative consequences for decision making, with a particular focus on how the scarcity

experienced by the poor contributes to (understandable) decisions to borrow more and save less (e.g., Shah, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2012). But research shows that the negative effects of inequality on decision making do not accrue merely to the poor.

Take the example of gambling. Research on “last-place aversion” shows that being near the bottom of the distribution can lead people to take unwise risks in an effort to get out of, or avoid being in, last place—such as playing the lottery or forgoing sure cash for the chance at bigger cash that moves them out of last place (Kuziemko, Buell, Reich, & Norton, 2014). In one experiment, people received different amounts of money (from US\$1 to US\$8) and learned their rank in an “income distribution,” with each rank separated by US\$1. Then, they had to choose between getting US\$0.50 for sure or taking a (very low) chance at winning US\$2. Because ranks were separated by just US\$1, taking US\$0.50 meant staying in your current rank, but gambling for US\$2 allowed you the possibility of “leapfrogging” the person above you. People in last place—desperate to escape—were most likely to take this unwise gamble (see also Haisley, Mostafa, & Loewenstein, 2008). But it is not only the experience of being poor that leads to gambling: The experience of being rich can have the same effects on risk-taking. Research has revealed a “house money effect,” whereby people who have just experienced a big win are more likely to make risky decisions going forward (Thaler & Johnson, 1990). In sum, research shows that the experience of being both too high and too low in a distribution can impair decision making.

INEQUALITY AND UNETHICAL AND ETHICAL BEHAVIOR

Poor people give a higher percentage of income to charity than people in the middle class, and only the very rich give the same percentage as the poor (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010). Why? The data suggest that even feeling temporarily rich can lead people to feel less empathy for others, driving their decreased generosity. At the same time, people in the lower middle class can be less generous to the very poor than others and even less generous to the poor than they are to the rich. Why? As with gambling, this behavior is driven by last-place aversion: People in

the middle class or just below want to make sure that someone stays below them (Kuziemko et al., 2014). This desire does not just play out in the laboratory. Why do people with wages just above the minimum wage often oppose increasing it? On one hand, they may receive a small raise, but now would have the “last-place” wage. Kuziemko et al. (2014) find exactly this pattern in survey data: Americans making between US\$7.26 and US\$8.25 are the least likely to support increasing the current minimum wage of US\$7.25.

Inequality can lead not only to less generous behavior but also to more unethical behavior. In one experiment, people who discovered they were paid less than others for completing a task were more likely to cheat to make more money (John, Loewenstein, & Rick, 2014). Moreover, the ease with which they could compare their lower wages with the “rich workers” predicted how much they were willing to cheat. And inequality can even make the rich cheat more, in an effort to restore equity. When given a lucky outcome that gives them more cash than someone else, the “rich” will fudge their grading of the “poor” person’s test to compensate that poor person more than deserved (Gino & Pierce, 2009). In other words, people who end up at the top sometimes cheat on behalf of the poor because they feel badly about their relative advantage. Taken together, this research suggests that

inequality can lead to less generosity and more unethical behavior across the income distribution.

CONCLUSION

The extreme disagreements in the political arena—also reflected in debates among academics—about the optimal level of inequality suggest the importance of determining who gets what. While a number of lenses must be brought to bear on the issue, the illustrative sample of behavioral research summarized here offers some crucial guidance. First, clearly, as inequality increases, a number of negative outcomes occur, both psychological (Norton, 2013) and behavioral—from worse performance to impaired decision making to increased cheating. Second, also clearly, unlike politicians and academics, laypeople from all over the world exhibit a remarkable consensus on what they believe the “right amount” of inequality is, at least for wealth and income: not equal, but much more equal than the current state of affairs. Policies that come closer to achieving this optimal level of *unequality* offer the promise of not only minimizing the negative psychological and behavioral effects of inequality but also creating a set of outcomes for citizens that more closely match the outcomes they desire.

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2. INCOME INEQUALITY THREATENS THE AMERICAN DREAM

Shelby documents the rise in income and wealth inequality and how, despite our belief in the American Dream, the United States is more economically unequal than comparable nations. Increasing economic inequality clearly hurts individuals, as their life chances are diminished, but Shelby demonstrates how the entire society suffers, as rising inequality stunts economic growth, intensifies inflation, and even compromises democratic principles. The middle class, once economically strong, continues to face hardship and stagnation. The public is becoming increasingly aware of the costs of economic inequality, but it will be challenging to break the current patterns of accumulation.

The American Dream holds that if we work hard, each generation will enjoy a higher standard of living than the one before it. But is your generation going to enjoy a better life than your parents' generation? Perhaps not. According to a 2018 study by the Federal Reserve, Americans born during the 1980s are at risk of becoming a "lost generation" for wealth accumulation.¹ The wealth of households headed by someone born in the 1980s is 34% lower than is expected based on the experiences of earlier generations. Although the Great Recession imposed severe financial losses, the intergenerational gains of Americans born after the 1980s have also stalled due to long-term income and wealth inequality. While the nation has undoubtedly prospered since the 1970s,² an increasingly smaller portion of the U.S. population reaps the economic rewards.

INCOME INEQUALITY

When most people think of economic success, they think of income. *Income* is the money a person receives for work, transfers (e.g., gifts, inheritances, government assistance), or from returns on investments.

In the United States, income is highly concentrated among a small group of people. In 2015, the highest earning 10% of Americans received nearly half of all available income (50.5%)—almost as much as the bottom 80% of Americans combined. Yet, the distribution of income is even more densely concentrated than you may think. In 2015, the top 1% of earners took home 22% of all available income.³ In 1980, the 1% earned only 11% of all income.⁴ In just a few decades, the 1% doubled their share of total income. Moreover, a considerable share of the nation's income has gone not just to the top 1%, but to the top 0.01% of earners, who now earn, on average, over \$35.1 million per year!⁵ When compared to the average income for the bottom 80%—a mere \$45,500 by comparison—the level of inequality becomes even more apparent.⁶

Despite consistent increases in national productivity, since the 1970s, real wages have stagnated for the majority of Americans. *Real wages* are current wages adjusted for inflation. They provide a valuable measure for comparison because they reflect the actual purchasing power of goods over time. Taking inflation into account is critical because the cost of living has steadily

increased almost every year since 1960,⁷ making it difficult for individuals to maintain their standard of living without a corresponding wage increase.⁸ When we look at real wages over the past 45 years, earnings have had practically zero growth.⁹ In 1979, the median income (50th percentile) for male and female workers was \$20.27.¹⁰ By 2017, that number increased a whopping 6.1% to a median of \$21.50.¹¹ According to a 2014 study by the Pew Research Center, a little over half of Americans (56%) report that their family's income is "falling behind" the cost of living, and only a mere 5% say their salaries are staying ahead of inflation.¹² And as incomes have stalled, annual work hours have increased. In 1979, the average employee worked 1,687 hours; however, by 2017, annual work hours had crept up to 1,780—an extra 93 hours per year.¹³ Despite these extra hours, on average, workers are not receiving much additional economic benefit.

Although we tend to see ourselves as a land of equal economic opportunity, globally, the United States ranks as one of the most economically unequal countries. Income inequality is often measured and compared with the Gini Index—a statistic that represents a nation's income distribution. A Gini coefficient of zero represents perfect equality (everyone in the society earns the same amount), whereas a coefficient of 100 represents extreme inequality (one person earns all the money, and everyone else earns none).¹⁴ In 1979, America's Gini Index coefficient was 34.6.¹⁵ By 2016, it increased to 41.5.¹⁶ In fact, since the 1970s, America's Gini Index coefficient has risen steadily, making U.S. income concentration by far the highest of any other wealthy Western country. For example, compare America's 2016 score to the Gini coefficients of Australia (34.0), Germany (29.0), Canada (32.0), or Sweden (28.0).¹⁷

In recent years, economists have adopted an additional measure of inequality—the Palma ratio—which illustrates more explicitly the differences between high- and low-income earners. This measure is the ratio of the income of the richest 10% of earners divided by the income of the poorest 40% of earners. It is named for Cambridge economist Jose Gabriel Palma who found that middle-class incomes tend to account for half of gross national incomes, while the remaining half is split between the richest 10% and the poorest 40%. A lower Palma ratio closer to

zero indicates that the country has a balance between high and low earners, whereas a Palma ratio greater than zero indicates that income is skewed toward the top. The higher the ratio, the greater the inequality. In 2014, the Palma ratio for the United States was 2.0, which indicates that the richest 10% earned roughly twice as much as the bottom 40%. Contrast this number to the Palma ratios of Australia (1.34), Canada (1.16), Germany (1.03), and Sweden (0.97), all of which have a much more equitable distribution of income. Worldwide, the United States ranks near the middle of all countries worldwide and at the bottom of OECD (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) member countries—a consortium of 36 countries dedicated to "help governments foster prosperity and fight poverty through, economic growth and financial stability."^{18,19}

Beyond our comparison to other nations, income inequality has many negative sociopolitical consequences. Often, these are direct and tangible, meaning that when a person experiences an economic gain, that person can access more social and political resources. Conversely, when a person suffers a financial loss, social and political resources become more limited. As fewer individuals experience economic gain, their *life chances*—or the number of opportunities a person has to live a good life—shrink. Consequently, examining the broad effects of income inequality is a critical site of investigation.

WEALTH INEQUALITY

Foremost, persistent income inequality drives *wealth inequality*. *Wealth* is the value of a person's assets (cash savings, house, car, etc.) minus their debts (outstanding loans). The United States measures wealth every 10 years through the Census. In 2010, the wealthiest 20% of Americans possessed 84% of all wealth, while the bottom 60% possessed less than 6% of all wealth.²⁰ While wealth inequality is highly skewed toward the top, it is also highly skewed in terms of race. Within the middle-income quintile—those Americans who earn between \$37,201 and \$61,328 each year—White households own 8 times as much wealth (\$86,100) as Black households (\$11,000)²¹ and 10 times more wealth than Latino families (\$8,600). As wealth may be the most important marker of financial well-being,

if we redefined the middle class through wealth, households would need to own between \$68,000 and \$204,000 of wealth to be classified as middle class. Under these guidelines, a shocking 70% of Black and Latino households would fail to meet the middle-class minimum, while only 40% of White households would fail to meet the middle-class minimum. As most wealth is transferred between generations through inheritances and cash transfers, an increasing number of Americans are being financially left behind as the racial wealth gap persists.

Being able to accumulate wealth is beneficial in that it provides individuals with a cushion against income shocks (such as a job loss or serious injury/illness) and access to desirable neighborhoods and schools. Amassed wealth also increases a person's social status and political influence. Further, if an individual accrues enough wealth, they can live comfortably off dividends (income earned from investments) and will no longer need to work. However, fewer and fewer Americans can do this, while those who are able to do so can continue accumulating their wealth.

STUNTED ECONOMY

On a broader scale, income and wealth inequality also hinder overall economic growth, are linked to rising interest rates, and create unstable and volatile economic conditions.^{22,23,24} Since the 1960s, conservative economists and politicians have argued that inequality is unimportant and that it propels the economy forward, a theory colloquially called “trickle-down” or supply-side economics.^{25,26} This theory argues that economic growth is achieved by making it easier to produce goods and services and invest in capital. Essentially, when those at the top of the income ladder do well economically, the economic rewards “trickle down” to those at the bottom. Reducing taxes, particularly for the wealthy, has been a cornerstone of supply-side economics. However, new research using Census data has found the supposed benefits of trickle-down economics, such as job creation and the idea that “the rising tide floats all boats,” are not supported by data and that economic inequality actually benefits only the super-rich.²⁷

This is evident in the recent case study of Kansas, where Governor Sam Brownback reduced the tax rate

for the top 30% of earners in 2012. In 2013, he also reduced the business tax rate for certain types of profits to zero.²⁸ As some of the largest cuts ever enacted by a state, the Kansas Department of Commerce promoted them nationally with print media ads declaring, “Cut the taxes, cut the cost of doing business and you are left in a perfect state . . . Kansas” and “With one of the most pro-growth tax policies in the country, it’s not hard to [become the best].”²⁹ Brownback claimed the cuts would act as a “shot of adrenaline into the heart of the Kansas economy.”³⁰ At the time, Arthur Laffer, a supply-side economist and member of Ronald Reagan’s Economic Policy Advisory Board (1981–1989), asserted that Brownback’s policies would benefit the Kansan economy, leading to immediate and long-term growth. In fact, Brownback even hired Laffer to promote the new policies and cited his work as justification for the tax cuts.³¹

Although Brownback asserted on MSNBC’s *Morning Joe* (June 19, 2014) that he wanted Kansas to be a “real, live experiment” for supply-side economics, most Kansans have not benefited from this experiment, and the state continues to lag in its recovery from the Great Recession.³² Indeed, the cuts have not boosted the Kansan economy, and as of 2017, they have generated a \$280 million budget deficit from a historic budget surplus.^{33,34} Fewer jobs have been added compared to the national trend (the job growth of the United States was 9.4% between 2012 and 2017, and only 4.2% in Kansas), and the Kansas economy also grew more slowly than other Midwestern states and even more slowly than Kansas had grown in previous years. The incomes and earnings of Kansans are now below the national average, and because income tax cuts were aimed at high-income households, the taxes for low-income families were raised to compensate for the state’s revenue loss. As revenues have sharply declined, Kansas has had to make cuts in school, health care, and public service funding—critical programs used primarily by lower- and middle-class citizens. As Brownback’s experiment clearly failed the state, in June of 2017, the Kansas state legislature passed a bill to raise taxes.³⁵ Although Brownback vetoed the bill, the legislature persisted and voted to override his veto. The Kansas experiment reveals that supply-side economics produce economic and social inequalities

that may persist for years. As the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities declared, "Kansas is a cautionary tale, not a model."

INTENSIFYING INFLATION AND DEBT

In addition to chilling economic growth, rising inequality is positively correlated with inflation.³⁶ That is, as inequality rises, so does inflation, devaluing the money already in circulation and making it more difficult for the majority of Americans to buy the things they need. When incomes fail to keep pace with inflation and interest rates, families increasingly have to rely on credit, tap into savings and retirement accounts, or take out loans against their current assets to stay afloat. However, while most families own something, their overall amount of debt often cancels out the worth of their property, leaving around 20% of Americans with zero or negative net worth.³⁷ For Latino households, that number increases to 27%, and for Black households it increases to 30%. In contrast, only 14% of White households have zero net worth. Consequently, many families are forced to live paycheck-to-paycheck, devoting most or all of their income to meeting regular household expenses.³⁸

Being "financially vulnerable" is defined as being unable to come up with \$2,000 for an emergency within 30 days.³⁹ A 2016 Federal Reserve survey found that 44% of Americans could not afford an unexpected \$400 emergency expense without borrowing money or selling something.⁴⁰ This is an improvement from the first 2013 survey, in which a full 50% of Americans could not afford a \$400 emergency expense.⁴¹ Consequently, many Americans are unable to accumulate the three-month savings cushion suggested by financial planners (as a protection in the event of job loss, medical emergency, or other financial challenges).

Increasingly, Americans have turned to "payday loans" as a strategy to survive. A payday loan is typically a small loan borrowed at a high interest rate with the expectation that it will be repaid with the borrower's next paycheck. Of the 12 million Americans with a payday loan, 69% reported borrowing to cover basic necessities, such as groceries or rent, and another 16% borrowed to cover an emergency.⁴² The average

payday loan borrower earns \$30,000 per year⁴³ and is in the second lowest household income quintile. While payday loans are marketed as being short term, the standard two-week payday loan has an interest rate between 391% and 521%! Given the extremely short repayment period, nearly every borrower must take out subsequent loans just to pay off the initial loan. Consequently, 98% of borrowers get trapped in a cycle of payday debt, taking an average of seven or more loans per year.^{44,45}

THE MIDDLE CLASS AND RISING DEBT

Increasingly, the impact of persistent income inequality is affecting middle-class Americans—a group long considered the epitome of upward mobility and a hopeful economic future. Historically, joining the middle class meant having a secure job, owning a home and car, having comprehensive health care, accruing retirement and college savings, and earning enough surplus income to enjoy an annual vacation. Looking at Census data between 2000 and 2014, we see that the proportion of adults in middle-class households shrank in 203 of the 229 U.S. metropolitan areas.⁴⁶ During this same time, the number of adults in lower-income households increased in 160 of the 229 areas, and the number of adults in high-income households increased in 172 metropolitan areas. Despite these changes, since 2013, when middle-class optimism was at a clear low,⁴⁷ an increasing number of Americans report that their economic well-being has improved, according to a 2018 Federal Reserve Report.⁴⁸ Overall, 40% of Americans report they are doing at least "okay" financially—a 10% increase from 2013. While this is a marked improvement, there are important disparities in terms of race. Less than two-thirds of Black and Latino families report they are doing financially "okay" compared to three-fourths of White families.

This shift is remarkable, as self-identification with an economic class is an identity people tend to consider permanent.⁴⁹ Further, identification with either the middle or lower classes is highly psychological, given, for example, the language usage and stereotypes common to each. A content analysis of common word associations with the terms "middle" and "lower class" reveals key distinctions. The *Corpus of Contemporary*

American English is a database of speeches, media, and academic texts from 1990 to 2017, totaling more than 560 million words.⁵⁰ Notably, statements about the “middle class” are most likely to contain the words “emerging,” “burgeoning,” “burdened,” and “squeezed.” In contrast, statements about the “lower class” are likely to include the terms “control,” “judgment,” “disapproval,” and “help.” The words associated with the middle class express challenges experienced by external influences, whereas the words associated with the lower class reflect negative views toward the group. Consequently, the cognitive shift required to change one’s self-identity from the middle class (whose experience is seen, at worst, as burdened or squeezed) toward the lower class (whose experience is commonly associated with judgment and disapproval) is extraordinary.

While the middle class’s waning optimism offers a bleak image of the state of the American Dream, recent data from the Federal Reserve Bank indicate that it is not unwarranted. For the majority of Americans, opportunities to grow earnings wane as workers grow older. Using data from U.S. Social Security Administration records, the Federal Reserve Bank found that, by age 40, most individuals are within about \$1,000 of peak lifetime earnings, in which real wages tend to plateau, and the “average earnings growth from ages 35 to 55 is zero.”⁵¹ Only one group of Americans defies this trend: the top 20%, who show moderate growth beyond age 40, and the top 1%, who experience wage growth at every age bracket.⁵²

Even for young Americans, economic prospects may be dimming, although employment opportunities are improving to their pre-2007 levels. As wages continue to stagnate, this problem is exacerbated for college graduates with student loan debt. In 2003, student loan debt totaled around \$240 billion. By 2017, this number swelled to \$1.3 trillion, with over 44 million Americans holding outstanding student debt.⁵³ While increasing student debt is driven by the fact that there are more college students than ever before, the cost of a college education has also far outpaced the standard rate of inflation, particularly at four-year institutions. In real wages, in 1971, the average price of a year of college at a public college was \$8,734.⁵⁴ By 2016, this number increased 140.1% to \$20,967.⁵⁵ As more students rely on loans to attend college, out-

standing student debt now exceeds credit card, auto loan, and home-equity debt. A substantial number of student debtors come from middle- and lower-income families who have access to fewer resources. In Sallie Mae’s national survey, *How America Saves for College 2017*,⁵⁶ low-income households pay for 22% of total education costs with loans; middle-income households pay 21% of total education costs with loans; while high-income households only pay 15% of total education costs with loans. It is perhaps no wonder that the bottom 50% of the income distribution currently holds 75% of total student loan debt.⁵⁷

While college is an important investment, as of 2017, the average borrower now leaves with \$37,172 in debt. Consequently, beginning in 2012, student loan borrowers are now less likely than nonstudent loan borrowers to purchase a home by age 30.⁵⁸ In part, waning home purchases among those with student debt may be attributed to poor labor markets, whereby graduates expect to earn less and choose not to make large purchases. However, as creditors have tightened their lending restrictions, graduates with student loan debt may also fail to meet new debt-to-income ratio standards and are thus not credit-qualified to make these purchases. According to the Federal Reserve, the credit scores of non-student loan borrowers are on average 15 points higher than those of student loan borrowers at age 25 and 24 points higher at age 30.⁵⁹ While some members of Congress (such as Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts) have tried to reform student loan debt and ease the economic burden to student borrowers and their families, new measures have yet to be adopted. This is in part due to polarized legislative processes that have stalled political solutions to economic inequality. As more and more Americans face economic hardship, those at the top of the income ladder continue to shape the political process in ways that prevent positive change for working and middle-class families.

UPPER-CLASS POLITICAL GAINS

While rising income inequality has limited many families’ economic prospects, it also gives the upper class more influence over the political process via major contributions to think-tanks, political campaigns, and lobbying groups. Further, a growing portion of congressional representatives are super-rich themselves,

giving elite earners increased, direct control over economic policies. Nearly 50% of congressional members are millionaires, compared to only about 1% of Americans in general; and in 2016, the median net worth of congressional members was \$511,000. The 115th Congress (2017–2018) was an astounding 20% richer than the 114th Congress, and 10 of the top 50 richest legislators sit on the Senate Finance or House Ways and Means committees—committees responsible for drafting tax cuts and code changes.⁶⁰ It is perhaps no surprise that the tax cuts pushed by President Trump and enacted at the end of 2017 overwhelmingly benefited wealthy Americans—including the super-wealthy members of his cabinet and Congress.

Notably, the increase in the number of congressional millionaires has correlated with a decreasing tax burden for the wealthy over time. Since the 1940s, the tax rates for the super-rich have plummeted. In 1945, a millionaire's tax rate was 66.4%. With Lyndon B. Johnson's tax cuts, it dropped to 55.3%, and it further decreased to 47.7% with Ronald Reagan's cuts. Through 2017, with George W. Bush's cuts still in effect, a millionaire's tax rate was just 32.4%.^{61, 62} However, this tax rate is only for payroll wages and differs substantially from minimally taxed *capital gains* (income generated from long-term investments, such as homes, stocks, or bonds). When you sell an investment, the difference between the price you initially paid for the asset and the price you sold the asset for is your capital gain (if the change is positive) or capital loss (if the change is negative). Beginning in the early 1990s, earnings from capital gains began to concentrate toward the top of the income scale, whereby capital gains now comprise a significant portion of wealthier taxpayers' incomes.⁶³ As payroll wages have stagnated across the nation, earnings from capital gains have skyrocketed. Between 2001 and 2014, the top 0.01% of taxpayers (those with incomes over \$10 million) earned 52.6% of their income through capital gains.⁶⁴ And with separate tax rates for income and capital gains, top earners can use this loophole to avoid paying their assigned income tax rates. In fact, most of the earnings of individuals on the *Forbes Richest 400* list⁶⁵ come from non-job-creating capital gains, with the top tax rate for capital gains capped at a mere 15%.⁶⁶ Thus, when capital gains taxes are factored in, the tax rates for the rich and everyone else converge;

so much so, in fact, that the effective tax rate for those earning between \$43,000 and \$69,000 is nearly the same as for those earning more than \$370,000 per year.⁶⁷

THE FADING AMERICAN DREAM

Given that our government is supposed to be of the people, by the people, and for the people, one would think there would be more public outrage over policies that benefit very few at the expense of many. While the Occupy Wall Street movement helped raise awareness of the growing inequality and the policies that support its growth, it has not resulted in new economic policies and regulations that foster equality. However, Americans are beginning to take notice. In a 2011 survey, researchers found that many Americans—Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives—support a more egalitarian model of income distribution in which income is more fairly distributed between upper, middle, and lower classes.⁶⁸ This does not mean that every American wants a system in which everyone makes the same amount of money; it just means that Americans are not in favor of the current, clearly skewed system.

In 2014, Princeton survey analysts found that 65% of adults recognize there is a growing gap between rich Americans and everyone else,⁶⁹ and 60% feel the economic system unfairly favors the wealthy.⁷⁰ However, Americans are not only discouraged about the current economic outlook, but also believe the next generation's prospects are grim. According to a 2017 Pew Research Center survey, 58% of Americans now believe the next generation will be financially worse off than their parents.⁷¹ Yet constituents continue to vote for politicians who do not share their economic interests—leaving few opportunities to change the economic state of affairs. Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich has argued that with sinking wages and growing economic insecurity, many people are so desperate for a job that they are unwilling to cause trouble, such as going on strike, protesting, or voting out politicians who do not support the middle and lower classes, leaving a substantial portion of the country without a political voice.⁷² The consequence of this inactive approach has been 40 years of rising inequality.

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THE “MIDDLE-CLASS” MYTH: HERE’S WHY WAGES ARE REALLY SO LOW TODAY

EDWARD MCCLELLAND

Let me tell you the story of an “unskilled” worker in America who lived better than most of today’s college graduates. In the winter of 1965, Rob Stanley graduated from Chicago Vocational High School, on the city’s Far South Side. Pay rent, his father told him, or get out of the house. So Stanley walked over to Interlake Steel, where he was immediately hired to shovel taconite into the blast furnace on the midnight shift. It was the crummiest job in the mill, mindless grunt work, but it paid \$2.32 an hour—enough for an apartment and a car. That was enough for Stanley, whose main ambition was playing football with the local sandlot all-stars, the Bonivirs.

Stanley’s wages would be the equivalent of \$17.17 today—more than the “Fight For 15” movement is demanding for fast-food workers. Stanley’s job was more difficult, more dangerous, and more unpleasant than working the fryer at KFC (the blast furnace could heat up to 2,000 degrees). According to the laws of the free market, though, none of that is supposed to matter. All that is supposed to matter is how many people are capable of doing your job. And anyone with two arms could shovel taconite. It required even less skill than preparing dozens of finger lickin’ good menu items, or keeping straight the orders of 10 customers waiting at the counter. Shovelers didn’t need to speak English. In the early days of the steel industry, the job was often assigned to immigrants off the boat from Poland or Bohemia.

“You’d just sort of go on automatic pilot, shoveling ore balls all night,” is how Stanley remembers the work. Stanley’s ore-shoveling gig was also considered an entry-level position. After a year in Vietnam, he came home to Chicago and enrolled in a pipefitters’ apprenticeship program at Wisconsin Steel.

So why did Rob Stanley, an unskilled high school graduate, live so much better than someone with similar qualifications could even dream of today? Because the workers at Interlake Steel were represented by the United Steelworkers of America, who demanded a decent salary for all jobs. The workers at KFC are represented by nobody but themselves, so they have to accept a wage a few cents above what Congress has decided is criminal.

The argument given against paying a living wage in fast-food restaurants is that workers are paid according to their skills, and if the teenager cleaning the grease trap wants more money, he should get an education. Like most conservative arguments, it makes sense logically, but it has little connection to economic reality. Workers are not simply paid according to their skills, they’re paid according to what they can negotiate with their employers. And in an era when only 6 percent of private-sector workers belong to a union, and when going on strike is almost certain to result in losing your job, low-skill workers have no negotiating power whatsoever.

Granted, Interlake Steel produced a much more useful, much more profitable product than KFC. Steel built the Brooklyn Bridge, the U.S. Navy, and the Saturn rocket program. KFC spares people the hassle of frying chicken at home. So let’s look at how wages have declined from middle-class to minimum-wage in a single industry: meat processing.

Slaughterhouses insist they hire immigrants because the work is so unpleasant that Americans won’t do it. They hired European immigrants when Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle*, and they hire Latin American immigrants today. But it’s a canard that Americans won’t slaughter pigs, sheep, and cows. How do we know this? Because immigration to the United States was more or less banned from 1925 to 1965, and millions of pigs, sheep, and cows were slaughtered during those years. But they were slaughtered by American-born workers, earning middle-class wages. *Mother Jones* magazine explains what changed:

[S]tarting in the early 1960s, a company called Iowa Beef Packers (IBP) began to revolutionize the industry, opening plants in rural areas far from union strongholds, recruiting immigrant workers from Mexico, introducing a new division of labor that eliminated the need for skilled butchers, and ruthlessly battling unions. By the late 1970s, meatpacking companies that wanted to compete with IBP had to adopt its business methods—or go out of business. Wages in the meatpacking industry soon fell by as much as 50 percent.¹

In Nick Reding’s book *Methland*, he interviews Roland Jarvis, who earned \$18 an hour throwing hocks at Iowa Ham . . . until 1992, when the slaughterhouse was bought out by a company that broke the union, cut wages to \$6.20 an hour, and eliminated all benefits. Jarvis began taking meth so he could work extra shifts, and then began dealing the drug to make up for his lost income.

Would Americans kill pigs for \$18 an hour? Hell, yes, they would. There would be a line from Sioux City to Dubuque for those jobs. But Big Meat’s defeat of Big Labor means it can now negotiate the lowest possible wages with the most desperate workers: usually, Mexican immigrants who are willing to endure dangerous conditions for what would be considered a huge pile of money in their home country. Slaughterhouses hire immigrants not because they’re the only workers willing to kill and cut apart

1 Schlosser, Eric. 2001. “The Most Dangerous Job in America.” *Mother Jones*. Retrieved February 4, 2019, from <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2001/07/dangerous-meatpacking-jobs-eric-schlosser>.

(continued)

pigs, but because they're the only workers willing to kill and cut apart pigs for low wages, in unsafe conditions.

In Rob Stanley's native South Side, there is more than one monument to the violence that resulted when the right of industry to bargain without the interference of labor unions was backed up by government force. In 1894, President Cleveland sent 2,500 troops to break a strike² at the Pullman Palace Car Factory. On Memorial Day 1937, Chicago police killed 10 striking workers outside the Republic Steel plant. The names of those dead are cast on a brass plaque bolted to a flagpole outside a defunct steelworkers' hall. They were as polyglot as a platoon in a World War II movie: Anderson, Causey, Francisco, Popovich, Handley, Jones, Reed, Tagliori, Tisdale, Rothmund.

I first saw those sites on a labor history tour led by "Oil Can Eddie" Sadlowski, a retired labor leader who lost a race for the presidency of the USW in 1977. Sadlowski was teaching a group of ironworkers' apprentices about their blue-collar heritage and invited me to ride along on the bus. Oil Can Eddie had spent his life agitating for a labor movement that transcended class boundaries. He wanted laborers to think of themselves as poets, and poets to think of themselves as laborers.

"How many Mozarts are working in steel mills?" he once asked an interviewer.

In the parking lot of the ironworkers' hall, I noticed that most of the apprentices were driving brand-new pickup trucks—Dodge Rams with swollen hoods and quarter panels, a young man's first purchase with jackpot union wages. Meanwhile, I knew college graduates who earned \$9.50 an hour as editorial assistants or worked in bookstores for even less. None seemed interested in forming a union. So I asked Sadlowski why White-collar workers had never embraced the labor movement as avidly as blue-collar workers.

"The White-collar worker has kind of a Bob Cratchit attitude," he explained. "He feels he's a half-step below the boss. The boss says, 'Call me Harry.' He feels he's made it. You go to a shoe store, they got six managers. They call everybody a manager, but they pay 'em all shit."

The greatest victory of the anti-labor movement has not been in busting industries traditionally organized by unions. That's unnecessary. Those jobs have disappeared as a result of automation and outsourcing to foreign countries. In the United States, steel industry employment has declined from 521,000 in 1974 to 150,000 today.

"When I joined the company, it had 28,000 employees," said George Ranney, a former executive at Inland Steel, an Indiana mill that was bought out by ArcelorMittal in 1998. "When I left, it had between 5,000 and 6,000. We were making the same

amount of steel, 5 million tons a year, with higher quality and lower cost."

The anti-labor movement's greatest victory has been in preventing the unionization of the jobs that have replaced well-paying industrial work. Stanley was lucky: After Wisconsin Steel shut down in 1980,³ a casualty of obsolescence, he bounced through ill-paying gigs hanging sheetrock and tending bar before finally catching on as a plumber for the federal government. The public sector is the last bastion of the labor movement, with a 35.9 percent unionization rate. But I know other laid-off steelworkers who ended their working lives delivering soda pop or working as security guards.

Where would high school graduates go today if they were told to pay rent or get out of the house? They might go to KFC, where the average team member earns \$7.62 an hour—57 percent less, in real dollars, than Stanley earned for shoveling taco-nite. (No hourly worker at KFC earns as much⁴ as Stanley did.) The reasons given for the low pay—that fast-food work is an entry-level job that was never meant to support a family or lead to a career—are ex post facto justifications for the reality that KFC can get away with paying low wages because it doesn't fear unionization. It's a lot harder to organize workers spread across dozens of franchises than it is to organize a single steel mill.

As Oil Can Eddie pointed out, class consciousness discourages office workers from unionizing. There's a popular discounting company in Chicago called Groupon, where the account executives—who are all expected to have bachelor's degrees—earn \$37,800 a year. Adjusted for modern dollars, that's about Stanley's starting wage, without overtime. Because they're educated and sit safely at desks, they don't think of themselves as blue-collar mopes who need to strike for higher pay and better working conditions.

The fact that many of today's college graduates have the same standard of living as the lowest-skilled workers of the 1960s proves that attitude is wrong, wrong, wrong. If we want to restore what we've traditionally thought of as the middle class, we have to stop thinking of ourselves as middle class, no matter how much we earn or what we do to earn it. "Working class" should be defined by your relationship to your employer, not by whether you perform physical labor. Unless you own the business, you're working class.

"The smartest people I ever met were guys who ran cranes in the mill," Oil Can Eddie once said.

They were smart enough, at least, to get their fair share of the company's profits.

2 Smith, Carl. n.d. "Pullman Strike." *Encyclopedia of Chicago*. Retrieved February 4, 2019, from <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1029.html>.

3 Brown, Terry. 2008. "The Closing of Wisconsin Steel." *Chicagotribune.Com*. Retrieved February 4, 2019, from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/chi-chicagoday-wisconsinsteel-story-story.html>.

4 Anon. n.d. "KFC Hourly Pay." *Glassdoor*. Retrieved February 4, 2019, from <https://www.glassdoor.com/Hourly-Pay/KFC-Hourly-Pay-E7860.htm>.