

A Sociology Experiment



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A SOCIOLOGY EXPERIMENT

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

- How is our behavior affected by being in a group?
- What does it mean to think sociologically?
- How did the Industrial Revolution and growth of cities influence the development of sociology?

In May 2020, protests broke out across the U.S. in response to the killing of George Floyd. Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, was killed when a police officer kneeled on his neck for over 8 minutes, choking him. Floyd repeatedly told the officer he couldn't breathe and begged for his life; he eventually lost consciousness and died while onlookers recorded the entire scene. The video sparked large protests not only in Minneapolis, where George Floyd was killed, but across the country. And in some cities, the protests turned violent, with members of the crowds setting fires to government buildings and cars, damaging other property, and throwing water bottles at police. The police in some cities used tear gas, rubber bullets, and armored vehicles to control or disperse crowds.¹

You probably saw footage of some of the protests that turned violent. Did you sympathize with the protesters, or did you shake your head and wonder, "What's wrong with these people?" Or "There's no way I would ever behave like that"?

Maybe you're right. Maybe not.

Sociologist **Mark Granovetter** has studied a wide variety of topics in his career, like how organizations work and the way people draw on "friends of friends" to find jobs.² He has also produced important insights into the way that our individual behavior can be influenced by the actions of those around us—like, for instance, in the middle of a brawl, a wild campus party, or a riot.³

Granovetter began by imagining a scene where a group of people are together in the same place for a political protest. Most people in the crowd are there to join with others to express their opinions; they have no intention of throwing a rock through a store window, starting a fight, or burning a police car. But a couple of those in the crowd are willing to cause mayhem at the slightest provocation; maybe they didn't show up specifically hoping for the protest to turn violent, but they'll jump in pretty gleefully if an opportunity presents itself. When a police officer shows up and barks out an order to disperse, those few people suddenly begin to shout more loudly, and one of them picks up a rock and throws it.

Most people in the crowd are shocked by the troublemakers and don't join them. But as the police officers press forward, a couple more people in the crowd, with a surge of adrenaline, are inspired by the act of rebellion, pick up a rock or bottle, and throw it at the police. In response, the police shout orders more forcefully and start to push a few protesters backward. Now a larger group of people in the crowd begin to get agitated, yelling at the police to stop pushing. They had no intention of joining in any violence when they left home, but they see what is happening around them and join in. They push back against the advancing officers. The police, outfitted in riot gear, advance with their batons out; the group of peaceful protesters has become a chaotic, angry mass of people outraged by the actions of the police and inspired by those around them to fight back.

Explaining all of the individual decisions that result in the outbreak of violence within a previously peaceful protest is extremely difficult. Economists assume that individuals calculate the costs and benefits of a potential action and then decide how to act. But if everyone was thinking through the costs and benefits of their actions, violence usually *wouldn't* break out; a few of the most aggressive protesters with nothing to lose might decide to throw rocks or set a car on fire, but the rational people in the crowd would walk away. Psychologists try to understand why some individuals tend to be more prone to violence and impulsive behavior than others. But in Granovetter's scenario, most people who showed up at the protest were not particularly violent people. We would think that the small number of highly-aggressive people in the crowd would be arrested or shunned, and that would be the end of it.

To understand how violence within a protest that started out peacefully breaks out, we need to think about individual behavior differently. Staring at a television or computer screen in the comfort of our living room or dorm room, it's easy to imagine how calmly we would behave in the middle of a frantic situation. But Granovetter's crucial insight was that our actions don't take place in a social vacuum, where we can rationally and individually think through the consequences. They take place within a social context in which our own behavior is influenced by the setting and by the behavior of everyone around us. This includes other protesters, but also the police.

A crowd of protesters usually contains a diverse group of people with different identities, behavioral expectations, and priorities.⁴ There may be only a few who are willing to turn to violence first. But there are a few more who may be willing to resort to violence if they see others taking a lead.



Minneapolis police officer watching the crowd of protesters in Minneapolis. (Source: [Chad Davis Photography](#); Creative Commons)

And there is a larger group that might join in if a significant number of protesters become more aggressive. Even more don't want to take part in violence, and will do so only if they see most of their fellow protesters involved. A few more will only take part in the violence if everyone else is already doing so. Even if almost all of the protestors would prefer to avoid taking part in violence, once they are together their behavior changes.

They respond to the action around them and cues from the setting (such as police in riot gear) and the violence of the moment spreads through the crowd. While police may deter violence in some cases, in others, their actions actually make violence more likely.⁵ If people in the crowd believe the police acted in a way that was unfair or disrespectful to protesters, they're more likely to be pulled into violence if it breaks out.⁶ In the case of the George Floyd protests, witnessing police pulling down protesters' masks (worn because of the Covid-19 pandemic) and spraying them in the face with tear gas, knocking down elderly men and women, shooting rubber bullets into a crowd, and otherwise acting aggressively toward peaceful individuals led many protesters—and people watching video footage at home—to believe the police were acting unjustly. When authority figures are perceived to act unfairly, protesters are less likely to comply with their orders, and violence becomes more likely.

Crowd violence, like many forms of group behavior, can't be explained by studying individuals as if they move through the world completely isolated from each other. The outbreak of violence in these situations is the product of a collective process where people come together and experience a common set of emotions, react to the actions of others in the crowd and the police response, pick up cues from the setting, and take a course of action. A violent protest or riot is about the way we interact with each other within a specific context. It is, at a fundamental level, a social event.

Sociology

Sociology covers all aspects of social life, including many topics you might read about in psychology, economics, or political science. Like psychologists, sociologists study the brain, but we consider how the brain responds to threats and resources in our social environments. Like economists, sociologists study economic markets, but we focus on how our social networks, or connections to other people, influence the way we navigate those markets, and how those markets are altered by social forces, by culture, and by inequality. Like political scientists, sociologists study political power and elections, but we focus on how public opinion is influenced by social forces. Sociology considers how the brain responds to our environment, how our decisions are influenced by our economic circumstances (especially compared to the economic circumstances of our neighbors and friends), and how political structures shape our educational opportunities and life chances.

Sociology—the study of how societies are organized and how the organization of a society influences the behavior of people living in it—encourages you to approach these topics with a new perspective, guided by what sociologist C. Wright Mills called the “sociological imagination.”⁷ The **sociological imagination** is the capacity to think about our own personal experience in relation to a larger set of social forces that influence every aspect of our lives, whether they are visible to us or not.

For instance, how did you get your first name? Most likely, your parents chose it for you, perhaps after much agonizing and discussion of the perfect name. Perhaps you're named after a beloved grandparent. Maybe it's a name someone thought would bring you good luck. You may have chosen an entirely new name for yourself and had it legally changed. In some sense, choosing a name is a very private, individual-level decision, tied to parents' personal tastes and their hopes for their child.

But your name is also tied to the larger culture and influenced by social pressures outside your family. While your parents most likely picked your name, they probably weren't completely free to name you anything they wanted. Take the case of parents in Tennessee who wanted to name their child Messiah. A judge changed the boy's name to Martin, arguing that the name Messiah was not in the child's best interest.⁸ (The parents appealed the decision to a higher court, where it was overturned.) Some countries ban certain names. More recently, Tesla CEO Elon Musk and singer Grimes announced they had named their son X Æ A-12; California's Department of Public Health soon noted that the name wasn't allowed under state law, since numbers can't be part of an official name used on vital records such as birth certificates.⁹ The couple changed the name slightly; as of this writing, the boy's name is X Æ A-Xii (using a version of the Roman numeral XII instead of 12). It's not yet clear whether the state will accept this work-around.

The social pressures parents face when choosing a name don't come just in the form of laws. Even if a name is legal, there may be negative consequences for choosing it. In 2008, employees at a New Jersey grocery store refused to fill an order for a child's birthday cake. Why? The parents had ordered a cake decorated with their son's name: Adolf Hitler Campbell. The publicity around this incident led the Department of Youth and Family Services to investigate the child's parents.¹⁰ As the child grows up, his name is likely to cause others to make many assumptions about him—assumptions that might impact his ability to get a job, or a date, or to make friends.

While anyone who names their child Adolf Hitler probably knows there will be negative reactions, most parents worry about unanticipated problems related to a name. Parents may worry about social reactions: Will a name cause other kids to tease their child or give them an embarrassing nickname? Does it seem old-fashioned or boring? Will it seem unprofessional later in life? Will people discriminate against their child on job applications if they choose an "ethnic" name, or a name associated with a particular race?

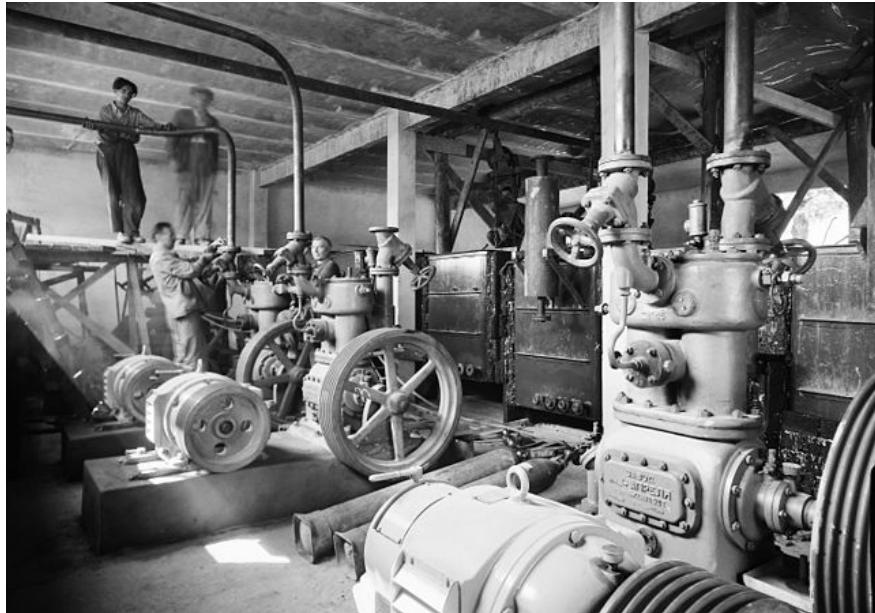
So even though choosing a child's name is a very personal decision made by individual families, it's also a social decision, and one that can have far-reaching consequences for a child's life. This is what C. Wright Mills meant by the sociological imagination: the ability to evaluate some part of your life and recognize how social forces played a role in how it came to be the way it is.

A new science for a changing world

Where did the sociological imagination come from? Like a lot of academic fields, sociology emerged in the mid-1800s. There's a reason ideas began to coalesce at that moment: there were suddenly a lot more people in the world, and all these new people meant that societies were changing

rapidly.¹¹ It took almost all of human history—tens of thousands of years—for the world population to reach one billion people.¹² We now add an additional billion people to the planet in under 20 years.¹³ More people doesn't necessarily mean more problems, but it has led to dramatic changes in the way that humans live together and the way that society is organized.

Much of this shift was driven by the **Industrial Revolution**, which began in Europe in the 1700s and spread to the U.S. in the 1800s. This revolution—the rapid development of manufacturing and industry inspired by technological changes in machinery—upended national economies. Instead of working in agriculture, more and more people worked in factories. As people moved out of rural villages with hopes of finding manufacturing jobs, cities grew rapidly. It wasn't just the economy that changed. So did our politics, the places we lived, how we survived, how much we relied upon others, how we related to others, what we did with our time, and what we believed about the world around us. This is what we mean by a “revolution.” The ways in which humans organized almost every aspect of their lives were transformed.



Factories and the use of steam-powered engines transformed the economy and, ultimately, virtually every aspect of our lives. ([Source](#))

Much of early sociology was interested in how communities rapidly changed from contexts where people had to do most things for themselves—grow their food, make their clothes, build their own shelters—to communities where people relied on others to do almost everything for them. If tomorrow there were no more grocery stores, restaurants, or cafeterias, how would you eat? If suddenly you couldn't buy clothes at a store, what would you do? For most of human history, these questions wouldn't be a problem, they'd be a daily reality. Even today, billions of people around the world live in rural areas where they are far more self-reliant than people in urban areas. But with the Industrial Revolution, this was no longer realistic for many people. If workers spent all day at a factory, where would they find the time to grow their own food or weave their own fabric for clothing? City

dwellers became increasingly dependent on each other as they specialized in various tasks.¹⁴ A factory worker's wages could buy bread from the baker, who in turn used some of that income to buy furniture from a carpenter, and so on. Writing in 1776, Adam Smith argued that this **division of labor** was the most important factor in the wealth of nations.¹⁵ If you divided jobs up, different individuals could specialize in what they were best at and trade the surplus. They'd be dependent on each other, but their community would have more products to trade as a result of that social dependency.

In addition to growing interdependence, the population boom and movement to cities caused other changes that influenced early sociologists. City life in the 1800s was pretty terrible. With large numbers of people moving into fast-growing cities, buildings were overcrowded and neighborhoods lacked basic sanitation. Waste from humans and livestock (including the thousands of horses used as transportation) covered the streets. There were no workplace safety or minimum wage laws, so people—including children—often worked long hours in unsafe conditions for extremely low wages. With so many poor workers crowded together in unsanitary housing, and streets that lacked sewage systems, disease spread easily and fires wiped out entire neighborhoods. Overall, city life was unpleasant and dangerous for many of its residents.

This rapidly changing world, with all its growing pains and struggles, was what the founders of sociology were trying to understand and explain. In this chapter we introduce you to sociology by covering some classic ideas, many written right around the time that the human population was growing rapidly, the economy was transforming, and life in industrialized cities was just beginning. While some of these ideas emerged nearly 200 years ago, they still influence how we think today. And as our society changes so rapidly around us—with new technologies fundamentally transforming how we interact with and relate to each other, work, spend our free time, and even participate in politics—we can look back to these classic ideas to learn from others who lived through a similarly revolutionary moment of their own.

Review Sheet: What is sociology?

Key Points

- Group behavior is more than the individual decisions of each separate person. Group dynamics and the setting change the decision-making process for the individuals involved.
- Mark Granovetter argued that events like riots can be viewed like a disease that breaks out among a small group but spreads through more and more people in the crowd. Research on protests and crowd behavior shows that people take cues from others, the response of authorities, and the setting.
- Sociology overlaps with other disciplines, such as political science, psychology, and economics. It takes a broad view, looking at how individuals and the social environment influence each other.

- The economic changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution affected virtually every aspect of our lives, leading to rapid social changes.
- As people moved to cities they became more dependent on one another, since workers specialized in different tasks and could no longer produce all the items they needed to survive.

Key People

- Mark Granovetter
- C. Wright Mills

Key Terms

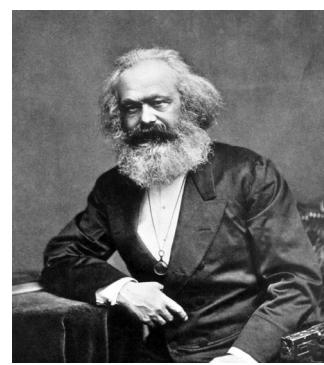
- **Sociology** – The study of how societies are organized and how the organization of a society influences the behavior of people living in it.
- **Sociological imagination** – Perspective in which we think about our own personal experience in relation to a larger set of social forces that influence every aspect of our lives.
- **Industrial Revolution** – The rapid development in the late 1700s and throughout the 1800s of manufacturing and industry, enabled by technological changes in machinery and power sources.
- **Division of labor** – Economic arrangement in which workers, and even entire communities, specialize in particular tasks or products, rather than producing everything they need themselves.

FOUNDERS OF SOCIOLOGY

- How did early thinkers view the role of conflict and cohesion in societies?
- What did each scholar see as the driving force in society?

Karl Marx

Karl Marx (1818-1883) began writing before the term “sociologist” existed. Marx’s work spanned a wide range of areas—history, economics, politics, philosophy, and psychology. Remembered today as one of the founders of socialism or communism, Marx actually spent most of his time writing about capitalism and the massively changing economic relations it brought about. He witnessed the Industrial Revolution and its world-altering consequences,



Karl Marx. ([Source](#))

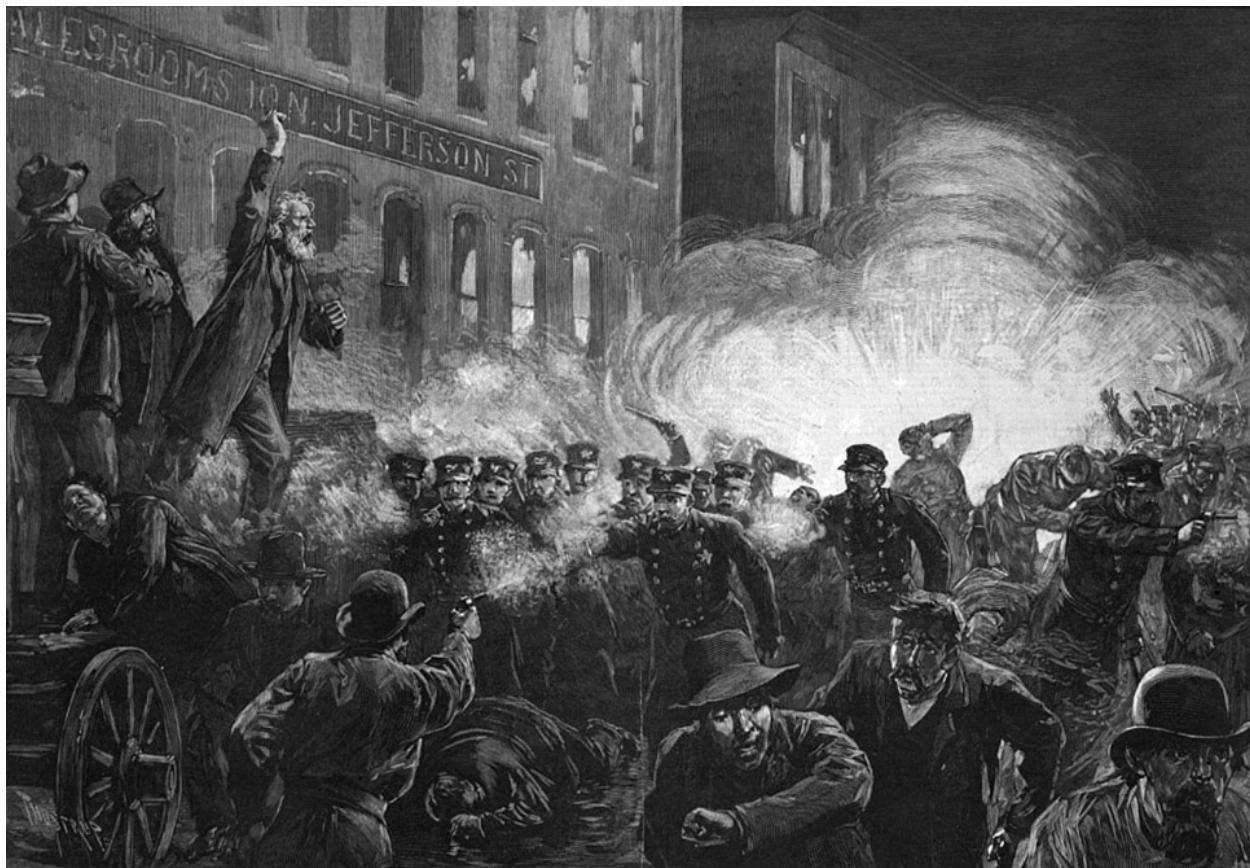
particularly the rapid growth of cities as people moved to work in the new factories. Looking at this situation, Marx struggled to understand how society was being radically re-organized. He studied the wide range of ways in which human societies had been organized throughout history and how they changed. He concluded that all societies are based on **social conflict**, a struggle between groups who have differing interests and needs.¹⁶ The basis of this conflict was the ownership and distribution of goods and resources—or more simply, economic relationships. Marx argued that if you wanted to understand a society—any society—you needed to look at how things were made. Changes to societies came about because of social conflicts over how things are made and distributed.

Marx argued that the central conflict in an industrialist capitalist society is between two key groups, or **classes**: owners (or capitalists) and workers.¹⁷ Capitalists own important resources like factories and determine how workers do their jobs. Workers only truly own their **labor**, or capacity to work; they sell this to capitalists for **wages**. Capitalists want to accumulate more and more wealth for themselves; the way to do this is to organize work in such a way that workers receive lower and lower wages for their labor. Part of the capitalists' strategy is to put workers in competition with one another, so workers view each other as enemies rather than organizing together to fight the capitalists. Workers, on the other hand, want higher wages and more control over the labor process—to be able to decide how they work. So capitalists want to pay workers less and less for their work, while workers want to be paid more for what they do. From Marx's perspective, this class conflict defines capitalist society.¹⁸ Such class conflict is so consuming, and so important, that Marx imagined that all other aspects of our lives—politics, culture, the family—were defined by the economic system and the tensions within it.

Marx was a **relational sociologist**. Instead of focusing on the properties and characteristics of individuals, he argued that individuals are defined by their relationships with others and with social institutions such as the economy.¹⁹ Being a capitalist isn't a personality type; it's a relationship that an individual is in with others—particularly workers. This isn't to say that Marx ignored psychology. In fact, a central aspect of his theory involves the concept of **alienation**, the feeling of being disconnected from others, from work, and even from our own sense of humanity. Marx suggested that one of the core problems with capitalism is that workers are alienated. Since they often have to compete with one another for jobs, they are alienated from each other. And because the capitalist tells workers *how* to make things (for instance, how fast they have to work), they are alienated by the labor process itself. Finally, they have little control over *what* they make, so workers are also alienated from the things they produce. Taken together, Marx argued that workers are alienated from their very humanity, since they are in tension with other workers and have little control over their work lives.

The name Karl Marx has come to mean very different things to different people, and is now associated with radical politics and systems of government like socialism and communism. But we encourage you to step back from the historical baggage associated with Karl Marx and think about when and how his ideas might be useful to make sense of your own experiences. Does it make sense to think **relationally**, to ask how your relationships form you? Does it make sense that how you work, and

how much control you have over what you do, is incredibly important for understanding your life? How useful is the idea of alienation in modern society? Do you ever feel disconnected from others or from the activities that take up your time? The importance of studying the ideas of someone like Marx, or any of the thinkers we discuss, is less about knowing what he said, and more about imagining ways in which those ideas, and the scholar's method of studying issues, might be useful for understanding the social world.



The Haymarket Riots, as represented by the magazine Harpers Weekly in 1886. What began as a peaceful event by labor activists protesting capitalists and advocating for an 8-hour workday turned into a violent conflict between workers and police. ([Source](#))

Émile Durkheim

French sociologist **Émile Durkheim** (1858-1917; pronounced eh-MEEL DUR-kime) played a key role in the development of sociology into a social *science*.²⁰ He insisted that the study of society should follow rigorous rules and, like other sciences, should rely on data to test whether our ideas about the world are correct. Durkheim sought to make sociology different from fields like philosophy. It isn't enough to think about the world and what others had written about it; we have to gather evidence to see if we are right, and we should use agreed-upon methods to gather that evidence in as scientific a way as possible.



Émile Durkheim. ([Source](#))

Like Marx, Durkheim was deeply interested in the emergence of capitalism and its effects on society. But instead of focusing on class conflict, he emphasized structural properties that help explain social life. Durkheim's structural approach is not opposed to Marx's relational approach, but the emphasis is slightly different. By **structure** we mean forces that both impact individual behavior and are produced by that behavior. This is one of the most important, yet most difficult, concepts in sociology. To better understand it, let's look more closely at Durkheim's work.

In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim explores how the structure of societies has changed over time.²¹ Whereas Marx thought of the division of labor as the way in which economic production was divided into more and more specialized tasks, Durkheim was more interested in society as a whole. He argued that it was important to see how people in a society were connected. He called the patterns of these connections **solidarity**. Older and simpler societies, Durkheim argued, are defined by **mechanical solidarity**. All the parts are intricately connected, the society is extremely cohesive, and people are highly integrated with one another. Think of a watch or machine made of parts that all rely on one another and are integrated together for a single purpose. Or think of a family, where every member of the family knows every other member; the family is a cohesive, integrated unit, and family members generally have clear roles and expectations for each other.

As societies become more complex—as there is an increase in the division of labor—they are increasingly defined by **organic solidarity**, where some members are only very distantly connected to one another, but members increasingly rely on each other. The U.S. is characterized by organic solidarity. Many of us have almost no connection to the people who grow the food we eat or make the clothes we wear. And yet we depend on that food and those clothes to survive.

Durkheim's fascinating insight is that mechanical societies often make people feel far more integrated and even as though we're essential. Mechanical solidarity can give us a sense of purpose and place, since we feel important to other people and even to our entire community (though such small worlds can also make us feel trapped). But mechanical societies can be quite fragile. Remove one part, and the mechanical society might not work anymore (think about what it would mean to remove one part of a watch, or the impact on a family if one member suddenly disappeared). Organic societies are far more resilient. They are less reliant on the individual members. If one small part of the society, or one individual, is removed, the society is very likely to survive. But for the individuals within these societies, there can be a sense of uselessness; you're not necessary or important to the larger community. The conundrum here is the different consequences for societies and for the people who live in them: What makes individuals feel essential makes societies fragile, and what makes societies robust makes individuals feel alone. For Durkheim, how we're tied to one another—the structure of solidarity—creates very different experiences for people.

This led Durkheim to think about two important dimensions of society: integration and regulation. **Integration** is how tied you are, as an individual, to others. One of the big challenges to the college experience, for example, is integration—feeling like you belong, that you fit in with others around you. Durkheim argued that you can have too much integration, where you feel trapped by a group, like it's inescapable. Or you can have too little integration, where you feel like you're alone, without connections to others. The important insight here is that your social ties to others have a big impact on you. You'll learn a lot more about this idea as you continue with this book.

Regulation is the idea that all groups have rules, both formal and informal. We call these rules **norms**, or expectations for our behavior. Think of the norms of a classroom for a moment. If you want to speak or ask a question, you raise your hand. If you haven't been in a classroom before, you might not know this; in fact, it's a skill many children in kindergarten have to learn. But in other settings, the norms are very different; if you're on a date and raise your hand to speak, it will almost certainly be viewed as strange. Part of being a member of a community is learning its norms. Some community norms are extremely powerful and compelling; others are fairly weak. And Durkheim thought that you could have too much regulation, or too little. He referred to the experience of too little regulation as **anomie**, a situation in which people do not have clear moral standards or social expectations to guide their behavior. The less we feel integrated into the community around us, and the faster the rules about acceptable behavior change, the more likely we are to feel anomie. If enough people experience it, entire societies can crumble, as individuals break rules, follow their own personal desires, and lose faith in the importance of the larger group.

When you read these ideas, one of the best ways to make sense of them is to apply them to your own life. How do the relationships you have with other people influence you? What are the norms of behavior in the various groups of which you are a part? Sometimes a group's norms can be so strong that it feels like a straightjacket: you can't do what you want. Sometimes norms are so weak it feels like anything goes, and you're not even sure what the group is or stands for.

Max Weber

Durkheim was particularly interested in social structures—how the forces outside us work in powerful ways. For him, sociology was the scientific study of these social influences. Other thinkers took a very different approach. **Max Weber** (1864-1920; pronounced VAY-ber) emphasized **methodological individualism**.²² Weber was not opposed to the idea of social structures, but he argued that in order to make sense of the world it was often necessary to focus on the individual.



Max Weber. ([Source](#))

Weber's own definition of sociology is one of the most famous. He thought of sociology as "a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences."²³ If that doesn't make a lot of sense to you, don't worry! What Weber meant was that, like Durkheim, he thought of sociology as a science. But where Durkheim was often most interested in the structures of a society, Weber suggested that sociology should look at **social action**, or behaviors that produce structures. And sociologists should seek to understand the *causes* of social actions ("a causal explanation of its course and consequences"). But finally—and this is the challenging part—the kind of understanding that sociologists generate is **interpretive**. Weber means that it is important to understand the subjective meaning of actions. If you want to understand someone's behavior, you can't just say there is an objective, universal law that guides it. You need to make sense of the meaning that individuals get from and assign to that behavior. Weber understands sociology as a science, but not one like physics, which has universal laws. Because humans are involved, the science of sociology is necessarily interpretive, because we have to understand how the people involved made sense of the world. In order to understand this, let's look at one of Weber's most famous arguments.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber explored one of the same questions that Marx did: where does capitalism come from?²⁴ Marx thought that capitalism emerged out of the previous economic system, feudalism. And he thought that economic relations were the most important factor in understanding a society. But Weber takes a more interpretive approach. Instead of looking for an objective rule to guide his explanation of human behavior, Weber looks at the subjective meanings behind the emergence of capitalism.

This approach is distinctly cultural. By **culture**, Weber means the values that people hold and that ultimately guide their social actions. He suggests that particular values created kinds of actions that led to the emergence of capitalism. Specifically, he argued that the cultural dynamics of Calvinism—a type of Protestantism that emerged in Europe in the 1530s—inspired church members to believe in hard work, to value economic success, and to invest what they made rather than spend it on themselves. These cultural values guided actions that resulted in capitalism. Whereas Marx believed that capitalism caused culture, Weber suggested that culture may have caused capitalism.

If we return, then, to the idea of an interpretive understanding, we see that Weber's approach to sociology means looking closely at the actions of individuals, and asking what meanings they attach to those actions.

Review Sheet: Founders of Sociology

Key Points

- Marx saw economic relationships as the key factor that determined how a society works. He argued that all societies were based on social conflict between different classes.

- In a capitalist society, social conflict was primarily between capitalists and workers. Capitalists want to pay lower wages in order to make more profit; workers want higher wages and better working conditions. According to Marx, these two groups were always in conflict because of their differing economic interests.
- Marx believed that workers experienced widespread alienation, since they competed with other workers for jobs and had little control over their work conditions or what they produced.
- Durkheim emphasized the importance of solidarity. As societies became larger and more complex, he argued that they moved from mechanical solidarity, based on personal connections and integration into the community, to organic solidarity, based on dependence caused by the division of labor.
- Mechanical solidarity can make people feel they have a place in the world, but can also make them feel trapped. Societies based on mechanical solidarity can be very fragile.
- Organic solidarity can make people feel isolated and without purpose. However, it makes societies more resilient, as they don't depend on any one individual to survive.
- Integration and regulation are essential for any society to function, according to Durkheim. Without them, we can experience anomie.
- Weber argued that instead of looking at larger structures, we should focus on individual behaviors and their interpretations of their actions.

Key People

- Karl Marx
- Émile Durkheim
- Max Weber

Key Terms

- **Social conflict** – The struggle between groups that have different interests and needs.
- **Economic relationships** – How goods and resources are owned and distributed.
- **Class** – A group of people with similar positions in the economy and similar needs and interests (for example, workers).
- **Labor** – The ability to do work.
- **Wages** – Compensation for one's labor.
- **Relational sociology** – Sociological perspective that sees individuals as defined by their relationships to others and to institutions such as the economy.
- **Alienation** – Feeling of being disconnected from others, from work, and even from one's own sense of humanity.
- **Structure** – Social forces that impact individual behavior and are produced by that behavior.
- **Solidarity** – Patterns of connections between people in a society.

- **Mechanical solidarity** – Present in simple societies, where everyone is connected and the society is highly cohesive.
- **Organic solidarity** – Present in complex societies, where many members are not connected to each other personally but depend on others due to the division of labor.
- **Integration** – How tied you are to others in your community.
- **Regulation** – A society's use of rules to monitor members' actions.
- **Norms** – Expectations for behavior.
- **Anomie** – A lack of morals or social expectations to guide behavior.
- **Methodological individualism** – Perspective that individuals should be at the center of any study of society.
- **Social action** – Behaviors that produce social structures.
- **Interpretive understanding** – Perspective that focuses on the meaning that people make of their actions.
- **Culture** – According to Weber, the values people hold that guide their behavior.

AN AMERICAN TRADITION: EXPANDING SOCIOLOGY

- What did Jane Addams and W.E.B. Du Bois see that other sociologists missed?
- How does adding gender and race to our analysis help us better understand society?

Marx, Weber, and Durkheim had many more contributions than those we outlined above. You could spend an entire class on any one of them. But you may have noticed something about all three: they were men, they were White, and all wrote from a European perspective. It's not an accident that these three became the most prominent scholars writing about social trends at the time. As we will learn in the coming chapters on gender, on race and ethnicity, and on inequality, a powerful set of social forces affects who is able to get the best education and who is not, whose voice is heard in public debates and whose is ignored, and who is remembered in history books and who is often forgotten.

It's important to recognize that the founding ideas of sociology did not come solely from White men in Europe. In fact, the Industrial Revolution which inspired all three men to write had perhaps its greatest impact in the United States. And many more thinkers affected how we understand that revolution, as well as the development of sociology. We don't have space to cover them all, but two of the most important were Jane Addams and William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Du Bois.

Jane Addams

Jane Addams (1860-1935) was an activist and sociologist and is considered the founder of the field of social work. She helped co-found the American Civil Liberties Union (in 1920) and was the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize (in 1931). She was one of the most important thinkers and activists of her day, and one of the most influential people in the early 1900s.

Addams performed much of her social work in Chicago. In 1871, Chicago was engulfed in flames.²⁵ Referred to as “the Great Fire,” a major portion of the city more than four miles long and nearly a mile wide was totally destroyed. This left a third of the city’s population—around 100,000 people—homeless. As the city was rebuilt, poorer residents found themselves pushed out of the city center into mostly poor, ethnic enclaves. And as the Industrial Revolution raged, more and more women found themselves destitute, unable to find decent-paying jobs to support themselves or their families.

Addams spent part of her early life traveling. Inspired by communal living situations she saw in England, she founded **Hull House** in Northwest Chicago. She envisioned Hull House as a center for social reform, where women could be educated, have support raising their children, and engage in social activism. Most important to sociology, Addams used this experience to scientifically study poverty and dependence.²⁶ The residents of Hull House often participated in research and teaching, inspiring the earliest members of the **Chicago School of sociology**. In fact, women from Hull House regularly taught at the University of Chicago, combining moral philosophy with social statistics and a demand for empathetic understanding of the experiences and subjective understandings of the poor. Together with Addams they wrote *Hull House Maps and Papers*, which mapped the different neighborhoods of Chicago, discussed their social dynamics, and described the populations that lived within them.²⁷ A compendium of statistical information, this work, gathered by community members as part of a participatory project, inspired scholars to use social statistics and observations to chart neighborhood dynamics. This approach would come to define the Chicago School, one of the most important traditions in sociology and one that is still important to this day.

Addams drew attention to problems experienced by women in cities, to child labor, to the struggles of laboring people, and to the moral obligation to eradicate poverty. Addams, more than Marx, Weber, or Durkheim, insisted on **socially-engaged scholarship**. This meant making the people she was working to help a fundamental part of her research practice. For Addams, scholarship was not about studying other people; it meant engaging with them and learning from that experience. While



Jane Addams ([Source](#))

she published in the leading sociological journals, Addams never held a full-time faculty position, though she was offered many.²⁸ Instead, she dedicated herself to teaching those who often could not receive a formal education.



Hull House in 1889. Eventually this complex contained more than 13 buildings dedicated to social reform, providing education, resources, and autonomy for some of Chicago's poor women and children. ([Source](#))

Addams's socially-engaged approach to understanding and helping residents (particularly women) in the ethnic neighborhoods of Chicago was not the only great American tradition of sociology. Addams's work dealt almost exclusively with White Americans. But there was another population in this nation that had long been subject to some of the worst oppression imaginable: African Americans.

W.E.B. Du Bois

Born in 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, **W.E.B. Du Bois** (pronounced doo-BOYSS) became the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard University. Du Bois was a sociology professor and, like Addams, a social reformer and activist. He was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and wrote dozens of books, many considered foundational texts in sociology.²⁹ Du Bois spent his career at colleges and universities that served Black students (who often could not attend other institutions because of segregation), in part due to his commitment to educating other African Americans and in part because racism excluded him from positions at universities that served White students.



W.E.B. Du Bois. ([Source](#))

Du Bois made countless contributions to American sociology, particularly in his investigation of the relationship between slavery and capitalism. No other thinker—Marx, Weber, Durkheim, or Addams—considered race to be central to the social organization of human communities. Several never considered it at all.

In *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois directly challenges one of Marx's central assumptions.³⁰ Marx believed that slavery was an old economic form from earlier civilizations, and largely incompatible with capitalism. Du Bois disagreed and gathered historical and statistical evidence on the ways in which slavery and capitalism mutually reinforced one another. He argued,

Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor, and a new labor problem, involving all white labor, arose both in Europe and America.

Du Bois insisted that slavery didn't just impact the economy in the South. Slavery was a global system from which northern merchants and manufacturers profited, English industrialists lived, and European capitalists made their fortunes. What's more, slavery didn't just oppress African Americans; enslaved labor impacted White workers as well.

Enslaved people clothed the world with the cotton they picked and satisfied millions of tobacco addicts with the plants they grew and harvested. They did this without getting paid. But there were massive fortunes to be made by financing these goods, by trading and shipping them to faraway factories, by turning cotton into cloth, and by selling that cloth in stores. A wide array of businesses



J.J. Smith's Plantation in South Carolina (1862). ([Source](#))

benefitted in some way from the work of enslaved workers. What's more, White workers' wages were undercut by southern plantation owners' use of enslaved labor. Du Bois argued that "the plight of the white working class throughout the world today is directly traceable to Negro slavery in America, on which modern commerce and industry was founded..."³¹

According to Marx, low-paid White workers should have united with enslaved people to overcome their oppression. In the southern U.S. before the Civil War, Du Bois noted that there were 5,000,000 Whites, of whom 2,000,000 owned at least one enslaved worker. But the vast majority of enslaved people were owned by just 8,000 White families. So why didn't enslaved African Americans and free White workers band together and overthrow this small class of capitalists?

Du Bois argued that economic wages are not the only factor that drives our behavior. Race matters. Sometimes, people receive wages that aren't economic. For example, part of the wages of being a professor are **status**, or our relative social standing. Americans value education and tend to express admiration for those engaged in educating others and who know about the world.

And race matters. Du Bois stressed that to understand White workers, you need to understand the **psychological wages** of Whiteness: that is, in a racial system, Whites get paid in things other than money. While the 8,000 southern families who owned almost all the enslaved people in the U.S. used the myth of racial inferiority to justify enslaving African Americans, White workers supported this myth because they preferred the status of being White. They accepted lower economic wages because of the psychological wages they received from feeling that they were better than African Americans:

...the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown to them.³²

Du Bois's work has three important implications. The first is that slavery and the growth of capitalism were interrelated. The second is that understanding social life requires looking at race relations. Finally, Du Bois recognized that economics is not necessarily the dominant value for people. Sometimes people value their status and receive psychological wages for holding a position above others in a status hierarchy, no matter how much they make in wages.

Again, we ask you to take a step back and ask how you might make sense of your own life with insights from Du Bois and Addams. What socially-engaged insights have you developed in your own life? How have you learned by engaging with communities around you? What kinds of status do you value? What kinds of work would you never do, no matter how much you were paid? What kinds of

work would you love to do, no matter how little you were paid? What psychological wages are important to you? And how have race and gender impacted your life?



Worker with a cotton gin. The cotton gin helped turn cotton into a massively profitable crop and supported the growth of slavery in cotton-producing states. ([Source](#))

The ideas of tomorrow: a social science at the intersections

Marx, Weber, and Durkheim were all interested, fundamentally, in the same thing: how the emergence of capitalism, or industrial society, was radically changing the world. Yet they were often silent on the experiences of the vast majority of people within that world—women, non-Whites, and non-Europeans. While the major revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries were economic and political, with the emergence of capitalism and the formation of democracy, the 20th century saw a series of revolutions of its own, more civic and social. In the rest of this book you will read about many of these, from the civil rights movement to the women’s movement to the fight for equality for LGBTQ+ people. These movements integrated increasingly diverse voices into sociology, voices that more broadly represent the human population and its interests and concerns.

Review Sheet: Expanding Sociology

Key Points

- Jane Addams combined the scientific study of poverty with social activism intended to improve the lives of the poor.

- Addams engaged residents of Hull House in research; she and the residents influenced the development of the Chicago School of sociology, which focused on studying cities and the neighborhoods within them.
- Addams was one of the first researchers to focus on the lives of women and children.
- W.E.B. Du Bois emphasized that it was impossible to understand the development of American society without taking the role of slavery and race into account. He was the first sociologist to seriously consider the role of race relations.
- Du Bois pointed out that while slavery was practiced in the southern U.S., northern states and European countries benefitted from it as well, with many northerners and European capitalists making their fortunes directly or indirectly off of slavery.
- While Marx believed workers would unite to overthrow capitalists, Du Bois argued that race separated White workers from enslaved Blacks, keeping them from uniting around their common interests.
- In a racist system, even poor Whites receive symbolic benefits from their Whiteness. As a result, they continue to support a system that ultimately benefits White elites the most.

Key People

- Jane Addams
- W.E.B. Du Bois

Key Terms

- **Hull House** – Founded by Jane Addams as a center for social reform to house, educate, and support poor women and their families.
- **Chicago School** – Influential group of sociologists at the University of Chicago who engaged in innovative research on cities and the patterns of how people live within them.
- **Socially-engaged scholarship** – Research that includes community members as researchers and data-gatherers and that focuses on their experiences.
- **Psychological wage** – Symbolic rewards Whites receive from a system that values Whiteness.
- **Status** – Our social standing relative to others.

A SOCIOLOGY EXPERIMENT

- What comes next?

We developed this resource so you can take any chapter, dive in, and help see that part of the world a little bit differently after applying the sociological imagination. But though every chapter can stand on its own, it's useful to see each chapter as part of a larger resource that contains its own logic and structure.

The first few chapters give you a lens through which to look outward, to help you start to think like sociologists. This chapter provides some orientation to what sociology is and where it came from, and the "Methods" chapter describes the tools of sociology. Methods are the approaches that sociologists take to gather evidence about how the world works, and the methods of sociology are more diverse than any other discipline in the social sciences. We then proceed with "Social Structure and the Individual," a chapter that captures perhaps the central idea of sociology: Individuals are free to make decisions and take actions, but those decisions and actions are constrained by a larger set of forces, institutions, and contexts—what the authors call the social structure. Understanding the link between the individual and social structure allows you to understand much of the core theory of sociology.

Once you're thinking like a sociologist, the next set of chapters break down how the social world works. We delve into how humans are classified, sorted, and separated into groups and categories, sometimes by choice, sometimes by force. We are sorted into occupations and groups of people with more or less power and economic resources ("Social Class, Inequality, and Poverty"), into racial and ethnic groups based on our ancestors' origins and skin tone ("Race and Ethnicity"), and into categories of "Gender and Sexuality" that are constantly changing and profoundly social in nature. All of this classification—the categories we create and our ideas, attitudes, traditions, and practices that we use to see, interpret, and change the world around us—is referred to as "Culture."

The first two parts of the book introduce you to the way sociologists think about the world and how sociology illuminates the organization of our social worlds. The remaining chapters ask you to use your sociological imagination to see our social worlds from various perspectives. We start with one of the core institutions of society, "Family"; we consider "Education," "Religion," and the economy as a whole in "Economic Sociology." These chapters reveal how social forces affect every aspect of our lives, from our belief in an all-powerful deity to our relationships with family members to the functioning of economic markets. A sociological perspective allows us to think about how the size and layout of our homes in a residential area changes the way we interact with each other ("Urban Sociology"), how we come together to create laws and rules and to generate social change ("Politics and Social Movements"), and why those laws and rules are broken, why norms are violated, why violence occurs and—perhaps more surprisingly—why it doesn't happen more often ("Deviance, Crime, and Violence").

The ideas of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Addams, Du Bois, and many others gave rise to a new way of thinking, one that sits at the intersections of many different disciplines in the social sciences. But sociology reveals something that is often missed by these other disciplines. We are confident that you

will come away with a new view of our social world, and a new set of ideas and tools with which to investigate it.

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Cover Photo: Protesters gather in Minneapolis. Source: [Chad Davis Photography; Creative Commons license](#))

Research Methods

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<input type="checkbox"/>	Often	<input type="checkbox"/>	Once in a while	<input type="checkbox"/>	Rarely	<input type="checkbox"/>	Never

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Updated 8/07/2020

Research Methods

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of being wrong

Research ethics

TYPES OF RESEARCH METHODS

Five common sociological methods

Choosing a method

DESIGNING A RESEARCH METHOD

From topic to question

Variables

Independent and dependent variables

From research question to hypothesis

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CORRELATION & CAUSATION

Validity & Reliability

CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

- How do we “know” things about the social world?
- What principles guide ethical research on people?

For decades, scholars knew that people who had served time in prison are much less likely to have a job than other people are. But we didn’t exactly know why. The answer may seem obvious, but as it turns out, there are lots of possible answers. One is discrimination: perhaps employers just don’t trust people who were incarcerated and don’t hire them. Or maybe people with criminal records are somehow different than other job applicants – perhaps they aren’t very interested in working, so they don’t search very hard for jobs or quit more quickly if they don’t like their coworkers. Maybe they missed out on getting important training and skills while they were in prison, so they aren’t as qualified as other job applicants. Or they might have trouble following rules, so they get fired.

Which explanation is correct? Are several of them accurate? How would we know?

Devah Pager studied this question as a graduate student. She conducted an **audit study** to look for an answer.¹ She sent young people to apply for jobs to see who was most likely to get an interview; two people applied for each position. She created fake resumes for them to use with fake qualifications

that were comparable, with one exception: whether or not they had a (fake) criminal record for a non-violent drug offense (she also used Black and White applicants, to see whether race mattered; you’ll learn more about that in another chapter).

The advantage of an audit study is that if everything about the applicants is carefully matched except one characteristic, then any differences you see must be explained by the one thing that was different – in this case, whether applicants said they had a criminal

history. And Pager found that it mattered: having a criminal record affected the applicants’ chances of getting an interview. Even though their qualifications were the same, applicants who revealed their criminal record were less likely to be called back for an interview.

When Pager decided to use an audit study, she was following a particular **method** – a study design that allows us to systematically investigate the world and be relatively certain that we arrive at accurate conclusions. Sociology is a social science, and a critical aspect of any science is that there are agreed-upon ways to generate knowledge. This sets science apart from other ways of explaining the



(Source)

world, such as common sense or religious faith. At the core of scientific methods is a particular research attitude: skepticism. No matter who makes a claim, and no matter whether it seems to make sense, the job of scientists is to be skeptical of the claim and to try to find problems with it.

All scientific studies of the social world share a key feature: scholars work hard to find evidence that our conclusions are wrong. This may seem confusing – don't we want to show that our conclusions are *right*? But this is how scientific knowledge advances: it's not enough to provide evidence that a claim is right; you must search for evidence that it's wrong. We're never absolutely certain that our claims about the social world are correct, but the more times we try to show that our claim is wrong and can't do it, the more comfortable we can be that our explanation is correct. Whether we're testing subjects in a lab or wandering the hallways of a school observing how students and teachers interact, the basic approach is the same: we look for other potential explanations for what we observe, or any evidence that our claim isn't accurate.

Remaining skeptical and considering other explanations can help us avoid **confirmation bias**, the tendency we all have to look for and accept information that reinforces what we already believe.² Confirmation bias is a basic part of our psychology. We don't do it on purpose, and usually we aren't aware it's happening. But confirmation bias can lead us to quickly accept information that matches our existing theories or beliefs, while we remain doubtful about, or fail to notice, evidence that contradicts what we already think. The scientific emphasis on searching for evidence that a claim is wrong can help us address this bias in our thinking as we try to explain the social world around us.

Research ethics

The most essential consideration of any research project should be ensuring the project is done safely and ethically. Research ethics are important for all research, but they are especially crucial when you are conducting research on people, or **human subjects**.³

Unfortunately, scientists haven't always agreed on what makes research ethical, and don't always design ethical research projects. The most infamous cases involve medical research. For instance, during World War II, German researchers (mostly doctors) conducted painful and often deadly experiments on people imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps;⁴ the prisoners were forced to take part, and the experiments left them with burns, wounds, and other injuries. Aside from the horrific suffering and death they caused, many of these experiments had little or no scientific value; they didn't help scientists cure diseases or otherwise benefit humanity.

After the war ended, many of these researchers were criminally charged and convicted. The international outrage at what the Nazi experimenters had done led to the establishment of the **Nuremberg Code** in 1948, which outlined basic ethical principles for research on people.⁵ The first, and perhaps most important, principle is that people who take part in research must *voluntarily consent* to do so; they cannot be forced. The Code also established other key ethical rules, including the following:

- Researchers should avoid all unnecessary physical and mental suffering and injury to subjects;

- The degree of risk to subjects has to be justified by the likely benefit to humanity of the knowledge gained from the research;
- Subjects must be free to stop participating at any time;
- If researchers discover their project poses serious risks to human subjects, they must end the project immediately.

Despite these clear principles, researchers sometimes ignored the guidelines. The **Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment**, conducted in Alabama from 1932 to 1972, looked at how the symptoms of syphilis developed over time if left untreated.⁶ Researchers from the U.S. Public Health Service used hundreds of poor Black men in rural Alabama as their subjects. They never told the men that they had syphilis – they said they had “bad blood.” Worst of all, after 1947 there was a treatment for syphilis: penicillin could completely cure it in the early stages. Even after the establishment of the Nuremberg Code in 1948 and its acceptance by the U.S. scientific community, the Tuskegee study researchers didn’t tell their subjects about the cure; they let the men’s syphilis progress so they could see what happened. Many of the men died when they could have been cured. Others gave the disease to their female partners, who transferred syphilis to their children during pregnancy, leading to lifelong complications including seizures and blindness. The study finally ended in 1972 when a whistleblower reported the unethical project.



Doctor drawing blood from a patient as part of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. (Source: National Archives, Atlanta, GA.)

There are many other examples of unethical research.⁷ As a result of such ethical failures, today federal guidelines protect research subjects.⁸ Though most of these guidelines were established primarily to cover medical research, regulations also cover social science research. A key requirement is **informed consent**. This means that all human subjects must be informed about the research project, including any likely risks, before they agree to participate. For a participant to give *informed consent*, they have to fully understand the risks (and possible benefits) of the research.

While the problems with unethical medical research can appear obvious, it can be harder to imagine how social scientists could harm participants. But social scientists often collect sensitive information about people, and it could be harmful if that information is released. For instance, imagine you were interviewing married subjects about whether they had ever had an affair. That information

could be very harmful if you released it in a way that allowed readers to figure out the identities of your participants. It could potentially harm their reputations in the community or end their marriage, and could also be very embarrassing and upsetting for their spouse, who wasn't even a participant in your study. For sociologists, protecting the privacy and identities of participants is essential; we must make sure that the research findings we publish do not put participants at risk by releasing private information that could hurt them.

Review Sheet: Introduction

Key Points

- Methods allow us to systematically study the world scientifically, giving us more confidence in our findings.
- An audit study showed that having been in prison hurt job applicants' chances of being hired, even when they were otherwise similar to other applicants.
- Skepticism is a key element of the scientific method; scholars constantly search for evidence that claims about the social world are wrong.
- For research to be ethical, those who participate must take part voluntarily, must understand the risks involved, and must be able to stop at any time.
- The Tuskegee Syphilis Study shows how researchers can cause severe harm and even death if they don't follow ethical research principles.

Key People

- Devah Pager

Key Term

- **Audit study** – Research experiment in which researchers match participants on key characteristics.
- **Method** – A systematic study design.
- **Confirmation bias** – Tendency we all have to look for and accept information that reinforces what we already believe
- **Human subject** – Person who participates in a research study.
- **Nuremberg Code** – First international guidelines establishing research ethics.
- **Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment** – Long-term experiment on Black men in Alabama that demonstrates unethical research design.
- **Informed consent** – Voluntary agreement to participate in research based on a full understanding of the potential risks and benefits.

TYPES OF RESEARCH METHODS

- What are the benefits of experiments, surveys, participant observation, historical analysis, and content analysis?
- What are the weaknesses of each of these methods?
- How do we choose a particular method?

As you plan your research project, you will decide *how* to collect your data and what types of data you'll collect. Data generally fall into two categories: quantitative and qualitative. **Quantitative** data come in the form of numbers and reflect quantities or amounts. **Qualitative data** aren't numbers; they usually reflect general themes and might include transcripts from interviews, survey questions that ask people to explain something in their own words, or detailed notes from visiting a particular place to observe it. Each of the methods we review below can produce both quantitative and qualitative data. While some researchers prefer one or the other, in reality many use a mixture of both.

Five common sociological methods

At the beginning of this chapter, we described Devah Pager's audit study. Audit studies are one type of **experiment**, a research method in which characteristics or behaviors are carefully controlled. By controlling the environment, researchers can isolate the impacts of the one characteristic that changes. Perhaps we want to know whether people feel more anxious after looking at their friends' social media accounts. We might bring people into a lab and give them a short survey to measure how anxious they are. We could then have them scroll through their friends' social media accounts for 15 minutes and give them the anxiety survey again afterward. Since nothing else happened during the study, if we find they're more anxious after looking at social media than they were before, we can presume that viewing their friends' posts increased their anxiety.

Experiments can be extremely useful because they allow us to carefully study the impact of one thing at a time. Because we can control what happens to subjects, we can make sure that the only thing that changes is the item we're interested in. But there are downsides to experiments, too. Especially for those that take place in a laboratory environment, researchers may wonder whether the situation was realistic. Would we see the same effect in the "real world" outside of the carefully-controlled lab? It's possible that a relationship that appears in an experimental setting wouldn't work the same way in our everyday lives, where we're never affected by just one factor at a time. Finally, because experiments give researchers so much control over subjects, it's especially important to think about ethical issues when designing them.



Researchers may visit public places and collect survey responses on the spot. ([Source](#))

You may never have taken part in an experiment. But there's a very good chance you've participated in **surveys**, or sets of questions that subjects answer. They may be conducted in person or sent through the mail, but increasingly surveys are completed over the phone or online. During the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign, you may receive phone calls asking you to rate how concerned you are about different issues or how likely you are to vote for a particular candidate. Or maybe you've been asked to complete a satisfaction survey after contacting a

customer service office, rating your feelings about the outcome from "very satisfied" to "very unsatisfied." Because so many groups use surveys today – including social scientists, marketers, political campaigns, companies, and more – you're likely to encounter them frequently.

Surveys are a very common method because they're a relatively cheap and quick way to get lots of information from large groups of people. That can give us a good idea of widespread patterns, as well as differences between groups (for instance, we might get different survey responses from men and women). But surveys can have problems, too. A common issue is low response rates – that is, only a small proportion of people you try to contact complete the survey (perhaps because they're frustrated from receiving so many requests to complete surveys!). Another problem is wording issues.⁹ The way you write questions can affect the answers you get. For instance, one group of political scientists found that people responded differently when asked about "gay or lesbian" rights than when asked about "homosexual" rights;¹⁰ because people tend to feel more negatively about the word "homosexual," using it can change how they respond on surveys.

As you read other chapters in this text, you'll encounter several descriptions of **participant observation**.¹¹ In this method, the researcher spends time among a group, directly observing and participating in that social world. This can mean moving to another country to live among a different culture, but you can also do participant observation closer to home. For instance, as she describes in the book *Class Acts*, sociologist Rachel Sherman worked at the front desk of two expensive hotels in the U.S. to study how the hotels ensure that their wealthy guests feel pampered.¹² The benefit of participant observation is that it allows researchers to collect a lot of extremely detailed information about social life in a particular group; we can learn what people do, how they interact, and what they think about those interactions. Sherman learned about the tactics hotel employees engaged in to create a "luxury" experience. For instance, room service waiters took notes on how hotel guests like their food served and gift store clerks kept track of any special requests from guests. This information

was entered into a computer database, allowing one guest to receive her papaya cut exactly the way she wanted without having to ask each time and another to have his favorite cigarettes waiting in his room on future visits, though the hotel didn't normally stock that brand. Observing and actively participating in life at the hotel allowed Sherman to understand the intricate ways hotel employees attended to the needs and preferences of their wealthy guests, making the guests feel valued and effortlessly pampered.

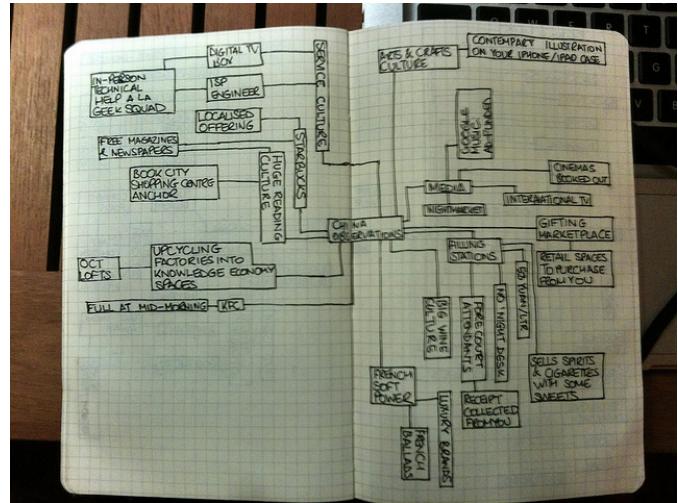
However, participant observation can be time-consuming and expensive (especially if you have to move somewhere specifically to do your research). It may take years to earn the trust of a group and feel confident that you truly understand the social world you're studying (especially if there are language barriers). And you'll only gather data on a small number of people; you can't realistically get to know and talk to thousands of people. This can lead to questions about whether your findings apply outside of that small group.¹³

Participant observation involves taking detailed notes about every aspect of the environment. ([Source](#))

Finally, two related methods are **historical analysis** and **content analysis**.¹⁴ These methods involve analyzing existing sources (such as historical records, media stories, or episodes of TV shows) to find key themes. Sociologists Erin Hatton and Mary Nell Trautner completed a content analysis of *Rolling Stone* cover photos, looking at how men and women were sexually objectified by the magazine.¹⁵ Analyzing nudity, poses, and the focus of the photography, they found that sexualization of both men and women has increased over time, but that women are still sexualized more often, and to a greater degree, than men. In his study of suicide, Émile Durkheim used historical death records from towns across France to see how frequently suicide occurred.¹⁶ Content analysis can help us identify recurring themes that are hard to see when we look at just one instance (for example, we can see patterns in objectification of women by looking at magazine covers over many years that might not be evident if we looked at just one example). A weakness of both methods is that you're stuck with the data that exists, whether or not it includes all the information you'd like. Maybe you want to look at differences among racial groups, but you're using historical documents; if those documents don't indicate the person's race, then you can't study that topic, no matter how interesting it might be.

Choosing a method

So which method is right for your research project? There's no simple answer. Any topic can be studied with any of these methods (and with others; we've only covered the most common here), and every method has strengths and weaknesses.



Participant observation involves taking detailed notes about every aspect of the environment. ([Source](#))

If you want to understand how thousands of people think about an issue, or what behaviors they engage in (say, whether cigarette taxes have reduced the number of teens who smoke¹⁷), a survey is likely the best method for your project. On the other hand, maybe you want to study smoking, but you're interested in how teens view anti-smoking campaigns and how interactions with friends and peers affect their decisions to smoke. Then you might conduct a participant observation in a high school;¹⁸ a survey probably won't get you the detailed information you need to fully capture how teens navigate the sometimes conflicting signals from friends, parents, and teachers about smoking.

Participant observation might provide richer, more informative data. Another researcher might want to know how smoking is portrayed in movies; a content analysis of how often women are shown smoking, particularly in films aimed at young audiences, would provide insights into how smoking is represented in pop culture.¹⁹ Finally, if you want to see whether those representations in pop culture affect attitudes about smoking, you could conduct an experiment where you show a scene with a famous actor smoking and then ask subjects whether they would date someone who smokes.

Each of these studies could provide you with valuable information about smoking. None of them are automatically better than the others. You have to consider what question you want to answer, what research skills you've developed, and what resources you have access to. If you don't have the time or resources to spend months or even years getting to know people and hanging out with them to observe their interactions, the participant observation study won't be realistic for you. If you don't enjoy using statistics to analyze quantitative data, or haven't developed that skill yet, then collecting a large amount of survey data won't help you find meaningful patterns.

Every sociological study you read about was designed based on the skills, resources, and limitations that the researchers faced, as well as what method they thought would best get at their question. Instead of thinking of a study on its own, it's helpful to think of it as one piece in a bigger puzzle, each contributing a small piece to completing the puzzle.

Review Sheet: Types of research methods

Key Points

- Experiments allow us to isolate the effects of one particular characteristic. However, researchers may worry whether effects seen in the controlled world of an experiment apply outside of it in normal conditions.
- Surveys (whether online, by phone, or on paper) are a common and relatively inexpensive method of studying people. They allow us to gather information from many people. However, low response rates and wording issues can affect the accuracy of the findings.
- Participant observation involves spending a lot of time among a social group, directly observing their interactions and behaviors. This provides extremely detailed information about the group, but can be expensive and time-consuming. This method also only allows us to collect data on a small group.

- Historical analysis involves evaluating existing historical sources.
- Content analysis occurs when scholars evaluate existing sources (such as newspaper stories or movies) to look for general patterns or themes. This method can identify larger themes. However, since it involves existing data, researchers are limited to whatever information the sources already contain.
- No one method is “best” for any topic. To choose a method, we have to consider our topic, what question we hope to answer, what resources we have available, and our research skills.

Key People

- Rachel Sherman
- Erin Hatton and Mary Nell Trautner
- Émile Durkheim

Key Terms

- **Quantitative data** – Data in the form of numbers that reflect amounts.
- **Qualitative data** – Non-numerical data.
- **Experiment** – Research method in which the environment is controlled to isolate the effects of one factor or characteristic.
- **Survey** – Gathering data by asking people sets of questions.
- **Participant observation** – Research method in which researcher spends time among a group, observing and participating in their daily lives.
- **Historical analysis** – Analysis of existing historical records.
- **Content analysis** – Analysis of existing sources, focusing on key themes and patterns.

DESIGNING A RESEARCH PROJECT

- What kinds of data can we collect to study the social world?
- What elements do we include when stating an hypothesis?
- What are the benefits of different types of sampling?

While the exact steps of a research project may vary somewhat, in general you can think of a research project as following several steps: 1) choose a research question, 2) state your hypothesis, 3) gather data, 4) analyze your data, and 5) use the results of your analysis to come to conclusions about what you found. We have already discussed methods you might use to gather data; in this section, we

explain other key elements of research design. However, we won't discuss the analysis stage in detail, as that is a complex topic that you will learn more about if you take a research methods or social statistics course.

From topic to question

Once you've identified a research topic, you're ready to turn that topic into a **research question**. Reading previous studies about the topic you're interested in will let you see what we already know and what you might add with your own research.

Your research question must really be a question. "I want to show that people from different cultures have different ideas about 'the family'" isn't a question. Who would disagree with you? Most people would probably agree that ideas about family life probably differ across cultures. A research question has to have more than one possible answer or outcome; the point of your study is to identify the answer that seems most accurate.

There's another problem with this example: "I want to show" is the wrong attitude for research. It sets up the project to find an answer you already have in your mind rather than a true question. Your goal isn't to have a point you want to show; your goal is to have a question you want to answer. And remember the problems with confirmation bias. The logic of science is to try to find evidence that your claim is *wrong*, not to show that what you already believed about the world was right.

Variables

Once you have a question, you have to decide what you actually want to observe – your **unit of analysis**. Sometimes we're interested in individual people, but not always. We may ask questions about groups of people, or larger units like organizations, companies, or nations. For example, we might ask how people's incomes are influenced by their education²⁰ (our unit of analysis is individual people) or how democratic nations tax their citizens compared to those ruled by royalty (our unit of analysis is the nation). There is no "correct" unit of analysis; the appropriate unit depends on what question you want to answer. Once you identify your unit of analysis, you can determine what types of data to collect and which research methods are more or less appropriate for your project.

The thing you will observe is called a **variable**, a factor or characteristic that has more than one possible value.

Independent and dependent variables

The goal of research is to identify **co-variation**, or relationships between variables. Let's say we suggest a relationship between two variables: that a person's education influences their income. In this case, education is the **independent variable** (usually represented as X), meaning it affects the variable you're trying to explain. The other variable – income – is the **dependent variable** (usually represented as Y), the one you're trying to explain; its value *depends* on the independent variable.

Sometimes when we look for a relationship, we don't observe any co-variation. Perhaps there just isn't any relationship between variables. To take a silly example, we might ask if the length of your thumb influences your income. We could observe the lengths of many people's thumbs (we have variation), and see how this characteristic is related to their income (again we have variation). But it's unlikely that we have any meaningful co-variation; our two variables aren't related to one another. And that's good to know, too! Finding out that characteristics are *not* related can be as important as finding out that they are, especially if people previously thought they were related.

From research question to hypothesis

Now that you have a sense of some of the basic building blocks of research, we're ready to make our question a little more specific by turning it into an **hypothesis**, a statement about how variables relate to one another.

To create an hypothesis, you need to define the population you're interested in studying and the variables you think are important. The general form of an hypothesis looks something like this:

For Population (P), Independent Variable (X) is related to Dependent Variable (Y)

Are you interested in people from the United States, or just people from Texas? If it's Texans, then there's no point in gathering information about people from California. We rarely want to know about the entire world; we usually want to know about a very small part of it. So we have to define who we want to know things about: our **population**.

Say we're interested in the relationship between education and income in the entire United States. Now we've got a much more specific hypothesis:

For Americans (P), their education (X) explains how much income they make (Y)

These decisions about how to measure our variables are referred to as **operationalization**. This is how we convert an idea into something concrete that we can measure. In this example, operationalizing our variables was fairly simple. But other variables can be trickier. Imagine you wanted to study the effect that stress at work has on a person's satisfaction with their marriage. How would you operationalize marital satisfaction? Would you ask spouses to fill out a survey about how satisfied they are, from "very satisfied" to "very dissatisfied"? Would you have them count how often they fight over a two-week period? Whether they have had an affair in the past year? And what about operationalizing work stress so we could measure it? We could do physical tests of the level of stress hormones in their bloodstream, or ask how often they experience behaviors associated with stress (such as difficulty sleeping). We could also ask them to rate their stress level, from "very high" to "very low."

Whenever you do research, it's likely there are multiple ways you could choose to operationalize your variables. It's essential that you are clear about what your variables are and how you will measure them. Although social research aims to answer big questions about social life,

research projects typically focus on narrow questions. When we're developing a research question, we have to narrow it to a question we can actually answer. But being more specific has its benefits: by asking a question we can actually answer, we'll know more about the world when we complete our research project than when we started.

The key lesson here is that before beginning any research project, you must be able to answer the following questions: what are the relationships I'm interested in studying? How do I decide who counts as part of my population of interest? What items do I want to study? And how will I observe those items? Whether you do participant observation, content analysis, a survey, or an experiment, these are important questions you must be able to answer.

Selecting a sample



A homeless person's belongings in Rijeka, Croatia. ([Source](#))

Once you have an operationalized hypothesis, it's time to figure out who or what you'll observe to test it. It's very rare that we can study everyone we're interested in (our population). Instead, we study a smaller group of people who represent that population. **Sampling** is how social scientists select representatives of their population.²¹ Sampling occurs in both quantitative and qualitative work. For example, sociologist Mitch Duneier was interested in homelessness. He couldn't study all homeless people in the country, or even in New York City. Instead, he conducted an **ethnography** – an in-depth

qualitative study of a social group and the group's culture – of a neighborhood in lower Manhattan where homeless people (mostly men) sold used books and magazines they retrieved from recycling bins out on the sidewalk.²² He discussed how the homeless community informally managed their sidewalk markets and how they interacted with the wealthier residents of the area. Duneier wasn't studying all homeless people; he studied a sample of them (within a particular neighborhood), with the hope that what he learned from his sample might reveal themes that applied elsewhere.

When sampling, we have to decide how to select a sample that truly represents the larger population we want to understand. This step involves creating a **sampling frame**. The sampling frame is how you determine who will be contacted to be part of your sample. Examples include randomly selecting from a telephone book, voter list, or a mailing list, or randomly dialing phone numbers.

Every sampling frame comes with challenges. If you use phone listings, you won't be able to access people who have unlisted phone numbers, people who don't have phones, or people who only have cell phones. If you use voter lists, you'll only get people who are registered to vote. With home addresses, you miss people who have moved since your mailing list was created. You will also miss those living in institutions (such as nursing homes or prisons) and people who don't have homes. Selecting a sampling frame means considering issues such as cost, time, what it is you want to know, and from whom. If you want to know what young people think about an issue, for example, using a telephone directory as your sampling frame may not be wise since many, if not most, young people only have cell phones that won't be included in the directory.

When you draw conclusions from your study, strictly speaking, you can't draw conclusions about the entire population. You can only draw them about the group of people represented by your sampling frame. For example, if we're interested in the attitude of Americans about civic engagement and we decide to use a telephone directory as our sampling frame, we can only make claims such as, "For people listed in the telephone book, their attitudes about civic engagement are..." It's important to pay attention to the limits of findings based upon the sampling frame.

Once we've defined a sampling frame, we draw a sample. This can be done randomly or non-randomly. Many scholars, particularly researchers involved with large surveys, use **random samples**. For a sample to be random, each member of the population must (1) be known and (2) have some chance of being selected. If some elements of the population can't be selected (they have no chance of selection), then the sample isn't random. An example would be if you excluded people who were in the sampling frame (say, a mailing list) because they live too far away and it would be too expensive to travel to talk to them. The goal of a random sample is to get a sample that is truly representative of the larger population. That allows you to **generalize** your conclusions, or apply them to a larger population outside of the group you studied.

If we draw a **non-random sample**, where some members of the population don't have any chance of being selected, we're very restricted in the claims we can make. However, many social scientists do use non-random samples and still make claims beyond the particular people studied, generalizing to a larger group. In these cases, scholars argue that even though their sample is non-

random, it still represents general trends. These types of samples are common in qualitative work like interviews and ethnographies, but they also appear in experiments and surveys.

When selecting a sample, a serious concern is **nonresponse bias**. If people don't respond to your attempts to include them in your research, you have to figure out if there is a systematic reason why they aren't participating. Is there anything unusual about the people who aren't responding? In other words, are particular types of people participating at lower rates, and, if so, why? And does that mean you're missing out on an important group, making your sample unrepresentative of the population? Or are the people who *do* respond unusual? Maybe they care a lot more about the topic than most people and that's why they agree to participate when others don't. If there's a systematic reason why some people don't respond and others do, you run the risk of drawing incorrect conclusions based on a sample that is biased in some way.²³

Say you're asking people their attitudes about sexual behavior. You construct a sample that is representative of the American population. And based on their responses, it looks like people have very accepting attitudes about sexual activity among teenagers. However, you see that a lot of people chose not to respond to your survey. What if those people also happen to have more conservative attitudes about teens having sex? Perhaps people who are likely to be more comfortable with teenagers being sexually active are also more likely to answer your questions, while people with conservative attitudes decline to answer. Because of the nonresponse bias – the patterns in who didn't respond to your survey – you can't be confident in claiming that your findings represent the larger population.

We end with a final word on sampling, particularly related to qualitative work. As we noted, qualitative work often uses non-random samples. So what can we learn from this work? Keep in mind that different methods have different aims. Quantitative methods seek to establish associations between variables. They answer questions like, "what is the association between education and income?" Qualitative methods also look at associations, but they often address *how* and *why* questions. What is going on inside schools or with students that their education helps them earn more? Or we might explore how people use their educations to earn more money; how do they get access to the types of internship experiences that lead to job offers? Showing these processes at work often requires digging down to specifics through ethnographic observation or interviews. Because of the ways these methods are conducted, representativeness is much harder to achieve, and sometimes it's impossible.

Qualitative researchers are sensitive to biases that might make their data unique and not generalizable.²⁴ But the potential weaknesses are often balanced by the benefits: they can provide insights into the rich texture of how social processes work that large-scale representative studies can't. Research doesn't happen in isolation. As researchers develop ideas about how the world works, these ideas can be tested and evaluated in other settings, by other researchers. Some qualitative research may be limited in its generalizability, but it can provide ideas that are critically evaluated by quantitative work that is generalizable beyond the sample. In other words, both types of methods have strengths and weaknesses, but they can complement one another.

Review Sheet: Designing a research project

Key Points

- In general, a research project follows several steps: 1) choose a research question, 2) state your hypothesis, 3) gather data, 4) analyze data, and 5) come to conclusions about what you found.
- Your variables are the factors you're trying to explain. Your independent variable (X) is the characteristic you believe causes something; your dependent variable (Y) is caused by, or depends on, the independent variable.
- When analyzing data, we're looking for co-variation between variables. Our hypothesis is a statement of what we think the relationship between the variables will look like. An hypothesis includes a statement about the population, independent variable, and dependent variable.
- Operationalization is a key element of research design. How you operationalize your variables will depend on what you're trying to study.
- Random samples allow us to study a small group and have it represent the larger population. Non-random samples may not allow us to generalize outside the study.

Key People

- Mitch Duneier

Key Terms

- **Research question** –A question about a research topic that we can reasonably answer.
- **Unit of analysis** – Item observed in a study (ex: individual people, cities, neighborhoods, apartment complexes, nations).
- **Variable** – Any characteristic that has more than one possible value.
- **Co-variation** – Relationship between variables.
- **Independent variable** – Variable that causes a change in another.
- **Dependent variable** – Variable that changes in response to another.
- **Hypothesis** – Statement about how variables are expected to relate to each other.
- **Population** – The entire group of interest in a study.
- **Operationalization** – Defining variables into measurable items.
- **Sampling** – Selecting representatives of the population to study.
- **Ethnography** – In-depth study of a group and its culture.
- **Sampling frame** – Method for choosing which members of a population will be in a sample.
- **Random sample** – A representative sample in which every member of the population has some chance of being selected.
- **Generalize** – Apply findings beyond the sample to the larger population.
- **Non-random sample** – A sample in which not every member of the population has a chance of being selected.

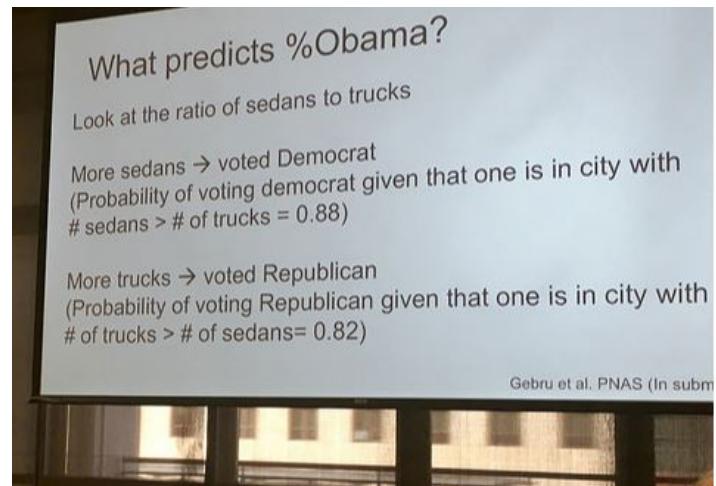
- **Nonresponse bias** – Non-representativeness in a sample caused by patterns in who does and doesn't respond.

CORRELATION AND CAUSATION

- How is correlation different from causation?
- How can we demonstrate causation?
- Why are spurious variables a challenge for social science research?

After we've designed our study, chosen our sample, and collected data, we can analyze what we've found. Imagine we collect data and find a relationship between how much time fathers spend with their children and how healthy their children are; the more time fathers spend with their kids, the healthier the children are, on average. What can we say about that relationship? Did our independent variable (X – time fathers spend with their kids) cause our dependent variable (Y – kids' health) to change? Maybe – but we don't know for sure yet. We've demonstrated a **correlation** between the variables – that they are related in some way. But that doesn't necessarily mean we've found **causation**, or evidence that the independent variable *caused* the change in the dependent variable.²⁵

First, we may not have identified the correct **direction of the relationship** (which variable affects the other). We may think that X causes Y, but maybe it's the reverse: Y could be causing X. In our example, we might think that children are healthier *because* their fathers spend time with them. This explanation seems to makes sense. But we could have the direction of the relationship completely wrong. Perhaps the health of children affects how much time fathers spend with them; maybe it's stressful to spend time with unhealthy children, so fathers don't engage with them as much as with healthy children. Or maybe unhealthy children have high medical expenses, so their fathers work more to pay for the treatments, leaving them with less time to spend with their child.



This research presentation suggests a correlation between types of vehicles (sedans vs. trucks) and voting patterns. ([Source](#))

Establishing that we've found a **causal relationship** (one where causation exists) requires considerably more work than demonstrating a correlation. One way we can prove causality is through research design – for example, by using experiments.²⁶ As we explained earlier, experiments carefully control the environment to isolate the effects of the independent variable. If we then see a change in our dependent variable, we can be more confident that it was caused by the independent variable, since that's the only thing that changed during the experiment.

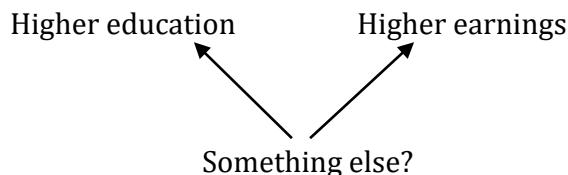
We can also identify the direction of a relationship if one variable clearly happens first, or precedes the other one; the variable that changes later can't possibly affect the variable that changed before it. To test our example, we might look for cases where children get sick and see what happens. Do fathers decrease their parenting time after their child gets sick? Or we could look in the other direction: If fathers begin to spend less time with their children, does their kids' health suffer? If we can figure out which variable comes first, we have a solid case for arguing that we know the direction of the relationship.

But even if we figure out the direction of the relationship, it's possible there isn't a true causal relationship between our variables. A **spurious relationship** exists when it looks like there's a connection between two variables, but in reality some other variable we haven't taken into account is affecting both our independent and dependent variables.

Let's look at the impact of education on income. Researchers observe a strong relationship between these two variables; people with more education make more money. Education *precedes* (it comes before) income, so we can be fairly certain of the direction: education causes higher earnings. So we have a situation that looks something like this:

$$\text{Higher education} \longrightarrow \text{Higher earnings}$$

However, we still have to worry about whether we've found a spurious relationship. What if some other variable affects both level of education and earnings?



Perhaps the “something else” we didn’t take into account is parents’ income. Maybe children of wealthier parents are likely to complete more schooling. And children of wealthier parents are also more likely to earn higher incomes. Parents’ income might explain both their kids’ education *and* earnings. In that case, the correlation between these two variables exists – they *are* related – but education wouldn’t *explain* or *cause* earnings as we initially thought. The relationship between education and earnings would be a spurious relationship, since family background (in this case, how much parents earned) affects how much education their children get *and* their children’s future

earnings (perhaps because wealthier parents are able to connect their children to hard-to-get internships that lead to future jobs, for instance).

Spuriousness is a challenge for most social science methods except experiments. Experiments isolate the effects of a single variable, so there are fewer worries about spurious results. But for all other methods, an unobserved spurious variable is always a concern. As we design research projects, scholars try to gather information on the most likely spurious variables so we can rule them out as possible explanations.

Validity and reliability

A key question for all research projects is whether we are measuring what we think we are measuring – that is, do our findings have **validity**?²⁷ This is an important consideration. Random sampling and complex statistical analysis are pointless if it turns out that you weren't actually measuring what you meant to be.

Say we studied attitudes toward different racial groups. We ask people, “Do you have racist attitudes toward other groups?” The problem we run into here is **social desirability bias** – the tendency for subjects to give answers that they think are socially acceptable.²⁸ In the U.S., most people are aware that it's generally unacceptable to be racist. This means that even if people hold extremely negative views of certain racial or ethnic groups, they are very reluctant to identify as racist.²⁹ So our question probably won't be a valid measure of racial attitudes. A better approach would be to avoid the loaded term “racist” and instead ask a series of questions about specific interactions or beliefs (such as how comfortable they would be with members of other races as neighbors, coworkers, or as in-laws).

We can encounter validity problems even when social desirability bias isn't a factor. Sometimes questions simply don't get at what we meant to measure. Maybe we're studying how satisfied spouses are with their married life, and we ask participants, “How likely are you to get divorced?” as a measure of their satisfaction. But probably only the most dissatisfied people would say they are likely to get divorced, so you may miss a lot of dissatisfaction that exists but isn't severe enough to cause people to consider divorce. Or people might be extremely unhappy with their marriages, but unlikely to get divorced; perhaps they have children that affect their decision, are members of a religious group that discourages divorce, or simply can't afford to set up their own independent household. There are lots of reasons that someone's prediction of whether they will get divorced might not be a good indicator of how satisfied they are with their marriage. Whenever social scientists design studies, we have to carefully consider what questions to ask to get at the characteristic we're hoping to learn about.

In addition to asking how valid our research is, we must ask about the **reliability** of our observations, or the consistency of the measurements. Challenges to reliability can come from problems with the instrument used to collect the data, such as when survey questions are too vague and open to interpretation. For instance, psychologists often administer surveys to identify someone's personality type; you may have taken one of these surveys yourself at some point. Since personality is seen as a stable characteristic – while your *mood* might shift quickly, someone's *personality* should be

relatively unchanged – then a person who takes a personality test two years apart should get the same results. If a person gets different results on a personality test, there's a good chance the test isn't reliable – it doesn't consistently measure the same thing in the same way each time.

CONCLUSION

We have introduced you to some of the key elements of research design and interpretation. The main points we hope you take away from this chapter are that studying social life is messy and difficult, but that careful research design can help us investigate it scientifically, giving us confidence in our findings. Nonetheless, whenever you encounter research claims, it's always good to maintain some skepticism, especially when the findings reflect what you already want to believe. Social science is an ongoing project, where studies build on those that have already been completed. Later studies, with different research designs, may alter what we think we know – or may confirm previous findings. As we slowly add to sociological research on a topic, we collectively come to a better understanding of the complex and fascinating social world around us.

Review Sheet: Correlation and causation

Key Points

- Correlation indicates that variables are related in some way. It is easier to establish than causation, in which we can claim that one variable leads to a change in another.
- One way to establish causation is to see which variable precedes the other.
- A spurious relationship exists when some outside variable we haven't thought of explains the relationship between our variables. Research design should collect data on the most likely spurious variables in order to analyze their possible effects.
- Validity relates to whether we have measured what we intended to measure. Social desirability bias is a challenge to valid measures.
- Reliability refers to whether our measurements are consistent, so that different subjects interpret the question in the same way.

Key Terms

- **Correlation** – A relationship between variables.
- **Causation** – One variable causes a change in another variable.
- **Direction of relationship** – Which variable is affecting the other when a relationship exists.
- **Causal relationship** – Relationship that includes causation between variables.
- **Spurious relationship** – When a third variable actually explains the apparent connection between two variables.
- **Validity** – Whether questions accurately measure the intended characteristic.
- **Social desirability bias** – Problems introduced to data when respondents give answers they believe are socially acceptable.

- **Reliability** – Consistency of measurements.

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Social Structure and the Individual



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SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Statuses

Roles

Networks

Institutions

THE INDIVIDUAL

Agents of socialization

INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

INTRODUCTION

- Why do people act the way they do?
- Are we forced into our actions and behaviors? Or do we freely choose how to act and behave?



A Beta Theta Pi Fraternity chapter. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

On February 4, 2017, a sophomore at Penn State University died after a night of drinking and hazing during a pledging ritual at the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house. Timothy Piazza, the nineteen-year-old engineering student who died that night, and the eighteen fraternity brothers who were charged with his death did not expect Pledge Night to end so tragically. Timothy hoped he would be joining the Beta Theta Pi brotherhood, while the fraternity thought they would be welcoming the spring 2017 class of brothers. No one expected anyone to die or to be charged with manslaughter.

In some respects, what occurred at Penn State is not very different than what occurs on many college campuses across the country, especially at fraternity parties. Students played drinking games such as beer pong; they participated in drinking challenges such as The Gauntlet, where pledges had to move from one station to the next and consume different types of alcohol; and they engaged in binge drinking, consuming excessive amounts of alcohol in a short amount of time.

But as Eric Barron, President of Penn State University, noted, the details of Timothy's death are "heart-wrenching and incomprehensible."¹ Barron's comments were based on a grand jury investigation into the death.² The details from this report, many of which came from videos captured on security cameras within the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house, point to a series of bad decisions and negligent behavior.

Most troubling was the fact that the fraternity brothers did not immediately seek medical attention for Timothy. Even after he consumed so much alcohol that he became unconscious and unresponsive, even after falling repeatedly down stairs and landing on his head, and even after his body was noticeably bruised, swollen, and bloodied, it was nearly twelve hours before someone finally called for an ambulance. By then it was too late. Timothy had a blood-alcohol level of nearly .40, a lacerated spleen, a fractured skull, and multiple brain injuries. He died soon after arriving at the emergency room.

Timothy Piazza's tragedy speaks to many of the themes we will discuss in this chapter: Where do we learn how to behave in different situations? What effect do groups have on who we are and what we choose to do? How do we develop preferences, aspirations, and attitudes? Do we have total free will to select a course of action or are our behaviors influenced by external pressures?

These questions are all relevant to what happened that night at the Beta Theta Pi house. Why, for example, did it take so long for these college students to seek help when they knew Timothy was in trouble? What was it about the situation that may have influenced their decision to wait nearly twelve hours before calling an ambulance? Was a group dynamic at work? Were there unspoken rules that interfered with the judgment of some of the brothers? If these eighteen men saw someone in Timothy's condition elsewhere on campus or in public, would they be so negligent about getting immediate help?

And what about Timothy and the other recruits? Why did they wish to join Beta Theta Pi? How did they come to see being a member of this fraternity as such a valuable resource that they were willing to participate in this hazing ritual? Assuming these young men knew about the dangers of binge drinking, why did they still consent to follow the drinking demands of the pledge leaders? What identity were they hoping to secure by participating in these dangerous acts? What might they have given up if they had refused and left early that night?

The question of why we act the way we do is complicated and multi-faceted. Throughout this chapter, we will look at how our individual actions are strongly influenced by external factors. We focus on the rules we are expected to follow and the resources we have at our disposal or seek to acquire. But as we discuss in the last section, this is not a one-way relationship. Our individual behaviors and actions emerge from these larger structural dimensions, but also help to produce and perpetuate them.

We begin by examining one of the most important sociological concepts: social structure.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

- What is social structure?
- What statuses do we hold?

- What roles do we fill?
- Why are groups, networks, and institutions important?

Imagine you are in a classroom. How can you exit the room? The only openings are doors and windows. Those are structural elements of the classroom that limit your actions. What if the doors and windows were blocked? Could you bust through the walls? Could you find a way to overcome the structure of the room?

You can think of **social structure** as the boundaries people confront as they make decisions about their individual and collective actions. Structure often limits the choices people can make, but it also enables some to have choices that others may not have. In either case, structure does not determine our actions, but it does have a significant influence on the behaviors we choose.

When we talk about structural boundaries, we are referring to the rules and resources that guide our behavior.³ Rules can be both formal (such as school dress codes and laws) and informal (such as whether you shake someone's hand to greet them or kiss them on the cheek). **Resources** are things we may have or that we acquire, such as money, education, and status, which are valuable or allow us to accomplish goals.

Even race, gender, religion, nationality, ability, and age are structural resources.

A good example of how structural boundaries influence our actions can be found in the animated film *Kung Fu Panda*. In this much-beloved blockbuster, a large and clumsy noodle-maker named Po transforms into the Dragon Warrior, challenging social expectations for giant pandas like himself.⁴ To become a martial arts master, Po must confront various structural hurdles. For example, his adoptive father, Mr. Ping the goose, could teach Po the family business of noodle-making, but lacks the knowledge to train Po in kung fu. Only by accidentally winning a contest does Po get the opportunity to train with Master Shifu at Jade Palace, a resource very few have access to. Po must convince Shifu and the skeptical martial arts students that he has the capacity to be the Dragon Warrior even though his chubby figure does not conform to the typical appearance of a kung fu fighter. Ultimately, Po transforms limitations into resources, using his large belly as a weapon, his insatiable



[\(Source\)](#)

appetite as a motivational tool to complete his training, and his perseverance to win the others' respect. In this film, we see how a character's trajectory is shaped by informal and formal rules, the resources he has and seeks to acquire, and the choices he makes each step of the way.

Rules and resources emerge in various elements of social structure, such as the social statuses, roles, groups, networks, and institutions that organize the way people go about their lives. As we discuss below, each of these elements of social structure shapes our lives in distinct ways. In some cases they work together, such as when a student whose parent is a graduate of a highly prestigious university has a better chance of being accepted to that school than a student without a family connection to it. In that case, the applicant's network (family) leads to connections with an institution (the college) that may influence future chances in the labor market. In other cases, elements of social structure may have contradictory effects on us. For instance, women in high-status professions often encounter gendered expectations that undercut their career progress. Their role as women interacts with their presence in a high-status occupation to put them at a disadvantage. To understand how social structure plays a role in behavior and outcomes, we take a closer look at each element of structure.



Kung Fu Panda, 2011. ([Source](#))

Statuses

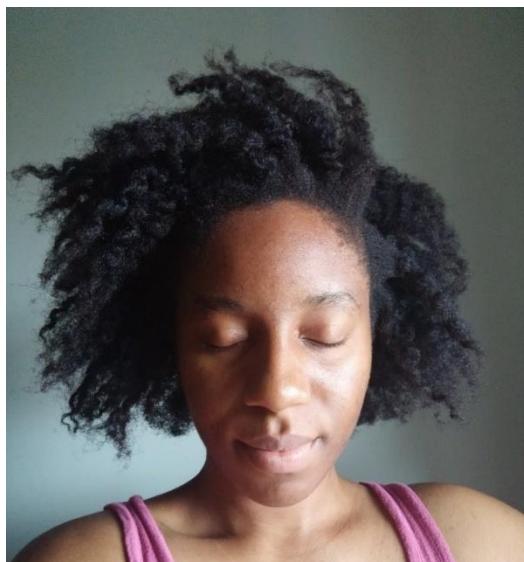
Table 1: Some Statuses of Several Famous Individuals

Status	Mark Zuckerberg	Homer Simpson	Jennifer Lopez	Neil deGrasse Tyson
Race-ethnicity	White	White	Latina	African-American
Sex	Male	Male	Female	Male
Class	Extremely wealthy	Working class	Wealthy	Wealthy
Occupation	CEO of Facebook	Nuclear power plant worker	Celebrity entertainer	Astrophysicist
Education	Some college	High school graduate	Some college	Ph.D.

What do celebrity singer-actress Jennifer Lopez, astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, and hapless cartoon dad and nuclear power plant worker Homer Simpson have in common? What sets them apart from each other? Their shared and differing identities point to **social statuses**, or a person's or group's socially-determined positions within a larger group or society. As we can see from Table 1, a person can hold more than one status at the same time.

As you look at Table 1, think about the following: How did they get these statuses? How do these statuses shape their actions? What resources do these statuses provide each of them? What other statuses do they hold?

Some of the statuses are the result of choices these individuals made, including their profession and education, while other statuses, such as race and sex, are part of their identities regardless of the choices they made. We can think about two broad categories of statuses: ascribed and achieved. An **achieved status** results at least in part from your efforts. Occupation, level of education, class, and marital status are generally achieved statuses. When a pledge is accepted as a member of a fraternity or sorority, the pledge achieves the status of "brother" or "sister" and gains an important structural resource that can be leveraged not only during college, but throughout life. For instance, their former brothers or sisters may later serve as important contacts for career opportunities. By contrast, an **ascribed status** is assigned to you by society without regard for your unique talents, efforts, or characteristics; this often happens at birth. Like achieved statuses, ascribed statuses such as race, ethnicity, sex, and age place people in **social hierarchies**, or ranking systems. Ascribed statuses also influence the resources society makes available to individuals.



Natural hair. ([Source](#))

Ascribed statuses such as race or sex are difficult to change, but their social meanings can be transformed. Consider the meanings of hairstyles and what they tell us about racial hierarchies. According to feminist scholar Cheryl Thompson, "For young Black girls, hair is not just something to play with, it is something that is laden with messages, and it has the power to dictate how others treat you, and in turn, how you feel about yourself."⁵ Do you straighten it, braid it, add weaves, get dreadlocks, or wear it natural? These choices are not simply a matter of individual taste; beauty standards are structural rules that reinforce a hierarchy based on which types of physical features are most valued. In the U.S., the market for hair straightening products has boomed for over a century, reflecting the dominance of White beauty standards in our culture.

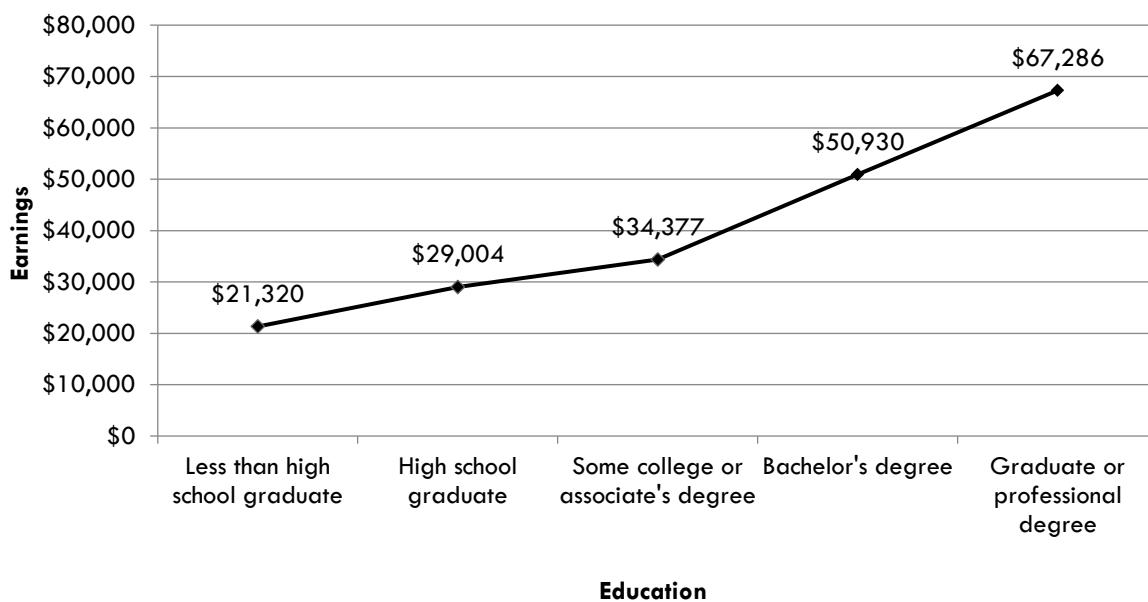
Even if a dominant beauty standard exists, not everyone will follow the structural rule. For example, by the 1960s, more Black women began to wear their hair natural, encouraged by the growing Black Is Beautiful movement. One of Cheryl Thompson's interviewees, Ruth Smith, an immigrant from Trinidad who owns a natural hair salon in Toronto, discusses this challenge to White

beauty standards: "When you can look in the mirror and you can see your natural kinky Afro or locs and it's yours and you can say, 'you know what, I like that' and you know why you have to like it, because that's what it is; when you get to the point, that's when you start to see your true beauty."⁶ By embracing their natural hair, Smith and her clients may help change beauty standards.

At the same time, many women of color recognize that hairstyles involve more than just beauty. As scholar Noliwe Rooks explains, a hairstyle "could lead to acceptance or rejection from certain groups and social classes, and its styling could provide the possibility of a career."⁷ For many years, natural hairstyles were viewed as unprofessional. This made it more difficult for women of color to enter lucrative, high-status professions such as law, finance, and business consulting unless they conformed to dominant beauty standards. These industries have an informal rule that women of color are expected to straighten their hair or wear weaves or a wig.

While this rule is increasingly flexible, it still affects women's choices since working in a prestigious profession offers access to valuable structural resources (a high salary, the ability to network with high-status colleagues who may provide leads on even better opportunities, and influence in the community). As Rooks highlights, their appearance affects how Black women are perceived, treated, and given opportunities. Appearance is an individual choice that impacts how we feel about ourselves, how we're viewed by others, and even our opportunities. As a result, an ascribed status (such as race) often influences your achieved status (such as your career).

Figure 1: Median Annual Earnings by Education Level, U.S. Population Age 25 and over, 2015



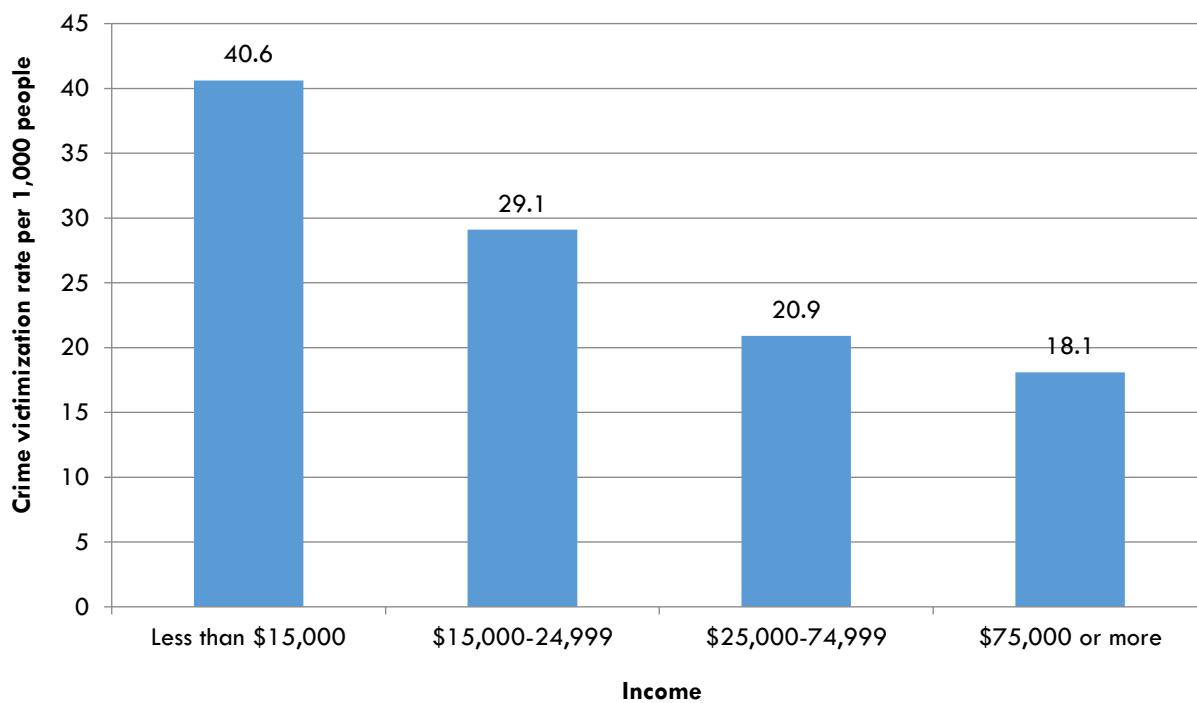
Source: American Community Survey 2015

Seeing social status as a structural resource has a long tradition in sociology. According to Max Weber, your social status is closely related to your **life chances**, or opportunities to provide yourself

with material goods, positive living conditions, and favorable life experiences.⁸ Occupying a high status in society improves your life chances, provides more structural resources, and brings greater access to social rewards.

For example, American children who do very well academically are more likely to enroll in college, complete a bachelor's degree, attend a selective institution, or get a graduate degree if they are from affluent families than if they are from low-income families.⁹ Academic ability alone does not account for their level of educational attainment, or we would expect children from poorer families to do just as well as their richer counterparts. Why does this matter? Take a look at Figure 1; college graduates typically out-earn high school graduates by a wide margin. Affluent people can afford to continue their education after high school and pass those benefits on to their children through extracurricular activities, tutoring, and travel. By contrast, people in the lower social classes must devote a larger proportion of their limited resources to necessities such as housing, food, and transportation. They have fewer resources for extra tutoring, music or athletic lessons that might help a student stand out on college applications, or to support an adult child during several years of college. For both populations, social structure influences the life chances and opportunities of individuals, even if both sets of parents are equally eager for their children to attend college and both sets of children are equally academically capable of succeeding.¹⁰

Figure 2: Violent Crime Victimization Rate per 1,000 People by Household Income, 2008-2012



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 2008-2012

Income is related to other aspects of your life chances, such as health and crime. Residents in poor neighborhoods face greater exposure to environmental hazards, which contribute to health problems. Not surprisingly, poor people suffer from serious, chronic illnesses such as asthma, diabetes,

and heart disease more frequently than wealthier people, and poor children face higher infant mortality and obesity rates than their affluent counterparts.¹¹ And according to the U.S. Department of Justice's 2015 National Crime Victimization Survey, people in low-income families are more likely to be assaulted, raped, or robbed than are affluent people.¹² These examples further demonstrate the various ways that social structure, particularly status (in this case, social class), helps some individuals and hinders others.

Roles

Each status includes expectations about how someone with that status is supposed to behave and how others are supposed to behave toward them. A **social role** is a set of expectations about the behavior and attitudes of people who occupy a particular social status.

Social roles contribute to social stability by enabling us to anticipate the behavior of others and to adapt our own actions accordingly. However, social roles can be problematic because they can limit interactions and relationships. For example, if we view a person as only a “police officer” or a “boss,” then we may have difficulty also seeing them as a neighbor or a friend.

Or consider Beyoncé, who juggles multiple, and sometimes conflicting, roles for her various statuses: singer, songwriter, dancer, actress, model, businesswoman, activist, philanthropist, parent, daughter, sister, and wife. Some of Beyoncé’s fans may be thrilled to see her transcend her role as a celebrity by engaging in political activism. Other fans may be more excited to see her in her role as singer and dancer and less enthusiastic about her activism when she speaks out against police brutality or for transgender rights, gun control, and female empowerment.

Inconsistency between two or more of the roles we fill is **role conflict**. In most instances, role conflicts result in uncomfortable or awkward situations such as when you must decide between hanging out with your friends and joining your family to celebrate a relative’s birthday. The role conflict you experience is the result of the competing structural rules you feel compelled to follow: the rules of friendship versus the rules of family.

In some situations, however, role conflicts can be more serious. One reason the young people at the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house failed to act in time to save Timothy Piazza’s life is that they were experiencing role conflict. There was an inconsistency in how they were supposed to act based on their role as frat boys at a party and their role as adults encountering someone in medical trouble. If



Beyoncé. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

they had not been in their role as fraternity pledges and came across an unconscious student while they were walking across campus in the middle of the day, it is likely that they would have called for help immediately. But at the fraternity house on Pledge Night, by calling for medical assistance, the pledges would have risked being viewed as disloyal to the frat and might not have been accepted as a brother, a role they desired. By contrast, in their role as a student outside the fraternity, they would face fewer structural rules inhibiting them from intervening in a medical emergency.

Much like the statuses we hold, our roles influence and are influenced by the social structure. Each role we fill has a set of rules that we may be expected to follow. These rules affect our actions, and often enable or constrain our behaviors. Our roles provide us with valuable resources we can use as we take action; for example, being a fraternity member provides older members authority over pledges and the ability to give them orders. The roles we fill may grant us some degree of power—or lack of it—that could make it more or less likely that we will successfully take action in a crisis. The power social roles provide is particularly apparent in hazing rituals such as those Timothy Piazza participated in.

Groups

How we act is often influenced by the values, expectations, and behavior of people around us. For example, college fraternities try to instill a lifelong sense of solidarity among their members. They build that allegiance partly by forcing pledges to endure intense psychological and physical challenges, such as step dancing, binge drinking, or violent and degrading hazing. A tight bond is formed when pledges endure these tests together. At the same time, the recruits demonstrate that they trust their older “brothers” to have their back and that they are worthy of membership. Since refusing a challenge means giving up the chance to be a member, pledges often push themselves beyond their limits, sometimes with devastating effects, as was the case for Timothy Piazza.

Fraternities give us insight into how groups operate. A **social group** consists of two or more people with similar values and expectations who interact with one another on a **regular basis**. We seek out groups to establish friendships, accomplish goals, and fulfill social roles. Much of our social interaction takes place within groups and is influenced by the group’s **norms**, or the rules and expectations by which a group guides the behavior of its members; behavior that meets these rules and expectations is **normative**. Groups provide members with valuable resources such as social support, a sense of collective identity, values, and opportunities for positive life chances.

Fraternities and sororities give first-year students at some universities a way to establish a large set of supportive friends as they transition to college life. After graduation, members gain access to other alumni affiliated with their organization, who may provide professional opportunities and mentorship. Groups may also punish people who violate social norms. In fraternities and sororities, this may include expulsion from the group and denial of the resources it provides. Other examples of social groups include families, sports teams, religious communities, and friendship circles.

Networks

We also build connections with others outside of groups. We may develop or join a **social network**, a series of social relationships that links a person directly to other individuals (such as friends) and indirectly to even more people (for instance, friends of friends). Social networks can constrain you by limiting the range of your interactions, but may also empower you by making vast resources available. Your friends on Facebook, followers on Twitter and Instagram, high school or college alumni association, or a professional organization you join form your social networks. These connections may reinforce or sway your political viewpoints, build or undermine your self-esteem, and even help you land a job.



Social media. ([Source](#))

According to sociologist Manuel Castells, digital technology has transformed social networking.¹³ We no longer need to maintain regular face-to-face contact with members of our social groups and networks. Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, and other platforms have made digital social networks commonplace. The feedback we receive on social media influences our behavior. Individuals carefully curate digital personas to amass “likes” and avoid a “swipe left” with Photoshop-enhanced selfies, exotic vacation pics, and announcements of personal and professional accomplishments.¹⁴

Institutions

The final element of social structure brings together statuses, roles, groups, and networks. **Social institutions** are enduring practices and rules (both formal and informal) that organize a central domain of social life. Examples of social institutions include mass media, government, the economy, the family, the health care system, and the education system. All institutions provide individuals with important resources while at the same time imposing rules on how we behave. For example, in the

United States the institution of the government grants us the valuable resource of voting; however, it restricts voting to those aged eighteen or older. More recently, the government legalized same-sex marriage. This change in the structural rules gave many more individuals the financial, social, and symbolic resources that heterosexual married couples have long benefited from. This governmental action also resulted in significant changes to the institution of the family.

Some sociologists argue that social institutions often maintain the existing set of social patterns, including existing social inequalities. Consider the American education system. Most public schools in the U.S. are financed largely through local property taxes. Since houses are more expensive in more affluent areas, the property taxes in these neighborhoods allow residents to provide their children with better-equipped schools and better-paid teachers than in low-income areas. As a result, children from prosperous communities are often better prepared academically than children from impoverished areas. The structure of the nation's educational system allows such unequal treatment of school children. In response, groups such as the [Campaign for Fiscal Equity](#), which advocates for more equitable educational funding policies in New York, try to address these structural inequalities.¹⁵

Social structure is one of the most important concepts in sociology. Unfortunately, it is not always well defined or clearly understood. We are not always aware of it, and we do not always see it, but all of our individual actions and behaviors are influenced by the larger social structure. And yet it is undeniable that we can still make choices about how we act in a given situation; our actions are not *determined* by social structure. For a more complete perspective, we have to consider the individual actor.



White House illuminated in rainbow colors. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Review Sheet: Social structure

Key Points

- Social structure plays a powerful role in shaping individuals' lives as well as their access to valuable social resources.
- Social structure provides a set of rules that people must navigate.
- Social status is correlated with positive life chances and access to social rewards.
- While it is difficult to change one's ascribed status, the meaning of social statuses can be transformed.
- Ascribed status can influence one's achieved status.
- Social groups and networks influence the behavior of their members.
- Social institutions often reproduce the status quo, but they can also be avenues for social change.

Key People

- Noliwe Rooks
- Max Weber
- Manuel Castells
- Cheryl Thompson

Key Terms

- **Social structure** – The set of social statuses, roles, groups, networks, and institutions that organize and influence the way people go about their lives.
- **Resources** – Things which are valuable or allow us to accomplish goals.
- **Social status** – A person or group's socially-determined positions within a larger group or society.
- **Ascribed status** – Status assigned by society without regard for the person's unique talents, efforts, or characteristics.
- **Achieved status** – Status that results from your efforts.
- **Social role** – Set of expectations concerning the behavior and attitudes of people who occupy a particular social status.
- **Role conflict** – Inconsistency between two or more roles.
- **Life chances** – Opportunities to provide yourself with material goods, positive living conditions, and favorable life experiences.
- **Social group** – Two or more people with similar values and expectations who interact with one another on a **regular basis**.
- **Norms** – Rules and expectations by which a group guides the behavior of its members.
- **Social network** – Series of social relationships that link a person directly to other individuals and indirectly to even more people.
- **Social institutions** – Central domains of social life that guide our behaviors and meet our basic social needs.

THE INDIVIDUAL

- What is agency?
- How do we construct and maintain identities?
- How are we socialized to become members of society?
- How do agents of socialization shape our identities and behaviors?

Would you be willing to give up a goal you have worked diligently toward in order to help out someone in need? What if that someone was an opposing player in a competition? Would you sacrifice your own success to allow them to succeed?

These questions came to life for members of the women's softball teams at Central Washington and Western Oregon Universities. The two schools were playing a game that could have determined which team won the conference championship and earned a spot in the NCAA tournament, something neither team had ever accomplished. In the second inning of a scoreless tie, Sara Tucholsky came to the plate for Western Oregon. With two runners on base, Sara hit her first home run of her college career. In her shock and excitement, she forgot to touch first base. When she turned back to correct her error, her right knee gave out and she crumpled to the ground, unable to walk.

According to the umpires, if her coach replaced her with another runner, the home run would be nullified and count only as a single. The only home run she ever hit and the possibility of making it to the NCAA tournament were in jeopardy. At that point, Mallory Holtman, a senior from the opposing team, Central Washington, asked the umpires if she and her teammate, Liz Wallace, could carry Sara and have her

touch each base with her left leg. The umpires agreed this was allowable, and so began one of the most heartwarming displays of sportsmanship in college sports.¹⁶

What compelled Mallory to risk her own team's success by helping a rival? Was there anything unique about this situation that might explain the actions of Mallory and her teammates? It's useful to



Softball players. ([Source](#))

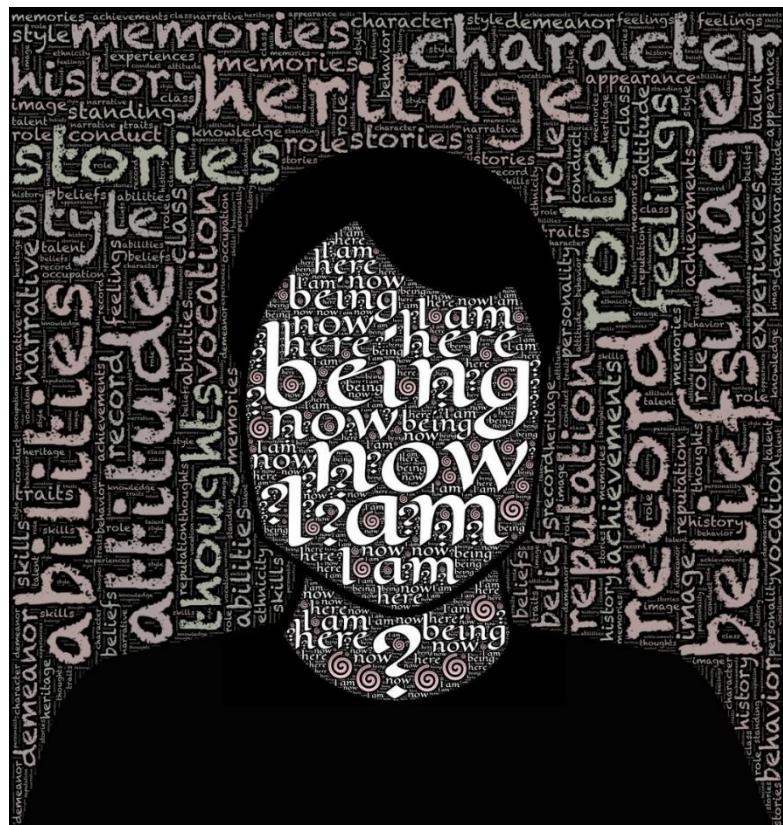
look at which rules Mallory and Liz prioritized. They followed what they saw as the rules of sportsmanship by honoring Sara's home run. As fellow competitors, they believed that Sara's achievement should not be cancelled out due to an injury. In short, their actions were governed by the rules of fair play rather than the culture of competition.

Consider how the actions of the Central Washington players compare to the actions of the college men at the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house the night Timothy Piazza died. Unlike the Central Washington softball players, the fraternity brothers at Beta Theta Pi were inhibited from suspending the rules of their group and institution and coming to Timothy's aid. Why did these two sets of college students act so differently when they were similarly confronted with one of their peers in need?

These questions get at the issue of **agency**—our ability to act given the structural rules and resources that impact our behaviors. When sociologists speak about agency we are generally referring to the choices individuals make and the actions they ultimately take. Our ability to act is always influenced by the social structure. None of us has total free will. Whether it's the rules we follow or ignore, or the resources we have or lack, our agency is affected by external structural forces.

To fully comprehend agency and how our ability to act is formed, we need to better understand who we are as individuals. Try this exercise: Number a piece of paper 1-20 and at the top of the page write the question: Who Am I? Now try to fill in an answer for each of the twenty spaces.¹⁷

What did you come up with? Your list might contain status or role classifications such as daughter, Latino, friend, or student. Or perhaps social groups you belong to such as a team, club, or organization. Ideological beliefs such as conservative, progressive, atheist, or member of a religion may also appear on your list. A few answers may reflect your interests and ambitions, such as dancer, traveler, or future lawyer. It's likely that some responses reflected your self-evaluations, such as kind, loving, funny, or



Who am I? (Source)

The Twenty-Statements Test (TST) was developed over 60 years ago by Manford Kuhn and Thomas McPartland.¹⁸ Sociologists and psychologists use it to understand how people identify themselves. It measures our self-concept, the thoughts and feelings we have of ourselves as physical, social, and emotional beings.¹⁹

A great follow-up question to the TST is to ask yourself: How did I develop my self-concept? How did I become who I am? These questions get at one of the most important sociological processes: **socialization**, the experiences that give us an identity and teach us the values, morals, beliefs, and ways of acting and thinking that are expected in our society.

One of the earliest sociologists to study the processes of identity formation and socialization was George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). In his classic book, *Mind, Self, and Society*, Mead argued that our sense of self develops from our social experiences and interactions.²⁰ Instead of assuming that we are born with our personalities already determined, Mead recognized that our identities are constructed through the social influences that we encounter in our daily lives. As we participate in social interactions we become aware of how others see us and how they expect us to act in certain situations. For Mead, a key component of how we develop a sense of self is being able to see ourselves through the eyes of others.



Preparing to face the world. ([Source](#))

Think back to your first day of high school and you should be able to understand what Mead was getting at. If you were like most teenagers, you wanted to fit in and be accepted by your peers. As you got dressed in the morning you probably imagined how other students would react to your clothes, your hairstyle, your makeup, and your demeanor. Maybe you even tried out some greetings or body postures in the mirror. According to Mead, you were using the values and norms of the larger culture, the **generalized other**, to guide your actions. Your agency was heavily

influenced by the informal dress code (or rules) of the peer group and the resources you possessed, such as the appropriate shoes, clothing, backpack, makeup, and hair style.

As you walked nervously into school that first day and started interacting with classmates and teachers, you were probably imagining how you appeared to others. You may have also imagined their judgment of you: do you seem cool, nerdy, trendy, or boring? As you digested this information, you may have developed a particular feeling—pride, shame, acceptance, rejection—which, in turn, may have affected your self-identity. This interactive process is what one of Mead's contemporaries, Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929), referred to as the **looking-glass self**, the way our perception of how others see us affects our sense of self.²¹

Agents of socialization

The example of your first day of high school focuses on two influential factors that help shape your identity: the peer group and school. We refer to these as **agents of socialization** because they are among the individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions that influence your sense of self and help you learn how to be a member of society. Besides peer groups and schools, sociologists emphasize the family and the mass media as the two other most significant agents of socialization.

At various points in our lives, different agents of socialization are most important. Our friends might be most important during high school, but coworkers might become more important when we enter the labor force. Socialization is a life-long process, and our sense of self is always evolving, as is our understanding of what it means to be a member of society. Similarly, the rules we are expected to follow and the resources we may acquire constantly change and evolve as we enter new social environments. The socialization process does not just happen to us as children or young adults; it continues throughout our lives as we learn to become different people in different contexts, such as teenagers, workers, parents, or coaches.

We are also socialized to know our roles and statuses. According to sociologist Judith Lorber, we are socialized into our gender identities, status, and roles from birth.²² Consider the clothes and toys babies and young children are given. If you encountered the baby in the picture to the right, would you assume that it's a girl? Parents often use colors to indicate their infant's gender based on the current normative interpretation of pink as feminine and blue as masculine.

Of course, some parents choose gender-neutral colors such as yellow or white, or challenge gender norms by dressing a boy in pink or a girl in blue.

Toys are also used to shape children's gender identities, status, and roles. Boys are generally offered cars, trains, blocks, balls, action figures, and toy guns, while girls are given dolls, Barbies, dollhouses, and toy makeup. These toys send messages about gender-appropriate rules of behavior and interests. They encourage boys to be mechanical, handy, athletic, and aggressive, while girls learn to be nurturing homemakers concerned with being physically attractive. Again, some parents challenge these gender norms by giving Lego blocks to girls and stuffed animals or dolls to boys, or buying gender-neutral toys such as board games.

As we grow older, we get cues about gender norms from our peers, school, work, and the media. For many years, teachers, administrators, and even parents discouraged girls from exploring math and science, instead steering them toward the social sciences, humanities, and education. The



Baby in pink. ([Source](#))

structural boundaries of what is deemed an appropriate field of study for women and men have not only influenced the choices and opportunities of generations of students; these structural rules of gender tracking have contributed to women's subordinate economic position.²³

Recently, concerted institutional efforts have challenged this educational gender tracking with computer-coding schools for girls, STEM scholarships for women, and representations of female scientists in the media. The rules about which subject areas are acceptable for specific genders are changing; as a result, women are increasingly acquiring the same educational resources and credentials as their male peers, though they remain a small minority of those earning degrees in areas such as computer science.



"Science Careers in Search of Women," Argonne National Laboratory. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

The 2016 film *Hidden Figures* focuses on a team of female African American mathematicians who played a pivotal role in the success of early space missions at NASA, where jobs were segregated by gender, with women allowed to hold only certain positions. When mathematician Katherine Johnson confronted one of the chief engineers at NASA about how job segregation hindered her ability to work, these structural barriers were removed. Other employees at NASA changed their perceptions and behaviors in response to the shifting rules by demonstrating greater respect and inclusivity toward Mrs. Johnson and other women like her.

When social expectations shift and we encounter a new set of group rules that guide our behavior, we often experience **resocialization**, the process of adopting new social norms and identities. Consider the resocialization process that young men experience when pledging a fraternity. They are encouraged to develop allegiance to a new "family," which often places great value on **heteronormative masculinity**, or the dominant, widespread ideas of what it means to be a straight man. This includes displays of endurance, toughness, strength, the ability to control emotions, and sexual success with women. How do you think this compulsory allegiance and show of masculinity influenced the events that lead to Timothy Piazza's hazing death?

Sometimes we experience dramatic resocialization, greatly changing how we behave, what we think, and how we view ourselves. This is common in what Erving Goffman called **total institutions**, where groups of people are largely cut off from the wider society and their lives are largely controlled by the institution.²⁴ Military boot camp, prisons, mental institutions, and religious training organizations all commonly function as total institutions. They have near-complete control over the people in them; the institution decides when people eat or sleep, what they do all day, and when (or if) they can talk to people outside the institution. Total institutions usually resocialize residents into values, beliefs, and behaviors that suit the needs of the institution. For instance, religious organizations training nuns or monks may resocialize them to reject pleasures or preferences from their old lives and adopt new standards of behavior. Military cadets learn to follow rigid military regulations for everything from their haircuts to how to make their beds; by doing so, the military is also training them to follow orders without question, no matter how small or seemingly unimportant the orders might be. Reducing signs of individuality—such as different hairstyles—also resocializes cadets to think of themselves as just one member of a larger unit.

Most of us like to think of ourselves as independent people who develop our own unique identities and sense of who we are. In truth, we evolve from the social worlds in which we live. We all have a strong sense of identity and we all exert our agency in each moment of our lives. But the way we come to see ourselves, the choices we make, and the behaviors we engage in are shaped by our place in the larger social structure. Whether we realize or like to admit it, our actions are deeply affected by structural rules and resources. None of us act in a vacuum devoid of societal influences.

At the same time, individuals are not robots or puppets with no control over their actions. We exert our agency and choose the actions we take, and we have some control over the structures that influence our lives. The central theme of this chapter, and one of the central themes of sociology, revolves around this dynamic interplay between individuals and social structure. As we will explain in the final section, individuals are both the products and the producers of social structure.

Review Sheet: The individual

Key Points

- Our ability to act according to our own will is shaped by the structural rules we encounter and resources at our disposal.
- Our sense of self may include classifications, social groups to which we belong, ideological beliefs, interests, ambitions, and self-evaluations.
- Our identities are constructed through the social influences that we encounter in our daily lives as well as how we see ourselves through the eyes of others.
- Our sense of self is always evolving, as is our understanding of what it means to be a member of society. The socialization process does not just happen to us as children or young adults; it occurs throughout our lives.
- The family, education, peer groups, and mass media are often identified as the four most important agents of socialization.

Key People

- Thomas McPartland
- Manford Kuhn
- George Herbert Mead
- Charles Horton Cooley
- Pierre Bourdieu
- Judith Lorber

Key Terms

- **Agency** – Acting on your own will.
- **Self-concept** – Thoughts and feelings we have of ourselves as physical, social, and emotional beings.
- **Socialization** – Experiences that give us an identity and that teach us how to be members of society.
- **Resocialization** – Socialization process by which we adopt new norms and identities.
- **Total institutions** – Institutions that exert near-total control over members' lives and engage in resocialization.
- **Generalized Other** – Values and norms of the larger culture that guide your actions.
- **Looking-Glass Self** – The way our perception of how others see us affects our sense of self.
- **Agents of socialization** – Individuals, groups, and organizations that influence your sense of self and help you learn the ways of being a member of society.

INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

- What is the relationship between individual agency and social structure?
- How are individuals constrained and enabled by external forces?
- How does our behavior contribute to the construction of society?
- How are we products of the social world in which we live?

"If you're in hijab, then someone sees you and treats you accordingly. I feel more free. Especially men, they don't look at your appearance—they appreciate your intellectual abilities. They respect you." This comment came from a 22-year-old female Muslim-American college student.²⁵

Some of you may be surprised by this young woman's perspective on **veiling**, the Muslim practice of wearing a hijab (hair covering) or veil. Yet it reflects the attitudes of some of the well-

educated, middle-class, devout Muslim women living in Austin, Texas, that Jen'Nan Ghazal Read and John Bartowski interviewed in their 2000 study.²⁶ To uncover the diverse attitudes Muslim women have toward veiling, they spoke with college students, professionals, and homemakers ranging in age from 21 to 55. Some had recently arrived to the U.S., while the majority had lived in the country for at least a decade. Half wore a hijab.



Veiled and unveiled women. ([Source](#))

The main questions the researchers explored were: How do Muslim communities expect women to behave? Should they wear a hijab or veil? And if so, why? How do these Muslim women explain their choices and decisions? In other words, the researchers were interested in learning more about the interplay between social structure and the individual.

All the interviewees noted that veiling was based on the belief that men are prone to sexual impulses, from which the hijab would supposedly protect women. Those who wore a veil had diverse attitudes toward their gender roles as Muslim women. Some felt liberated from the male gaze and more comfortable being in public among men. Some sensed that men took them more seriously as college students or professionals if they wore a veil. And some wanted to assert their Muslim identity in a visible way to forge connections with other Muslims in the community.

By contrast, many of the unveiled interviewees saw the hijab as a means for men to dominate women, assert gender differences, and reinforce patriarchy. As one unveiled woman bluntly stated, "The veil is used to control women."²⁷ They also felt that the hijab was not necessary to prove their religious piety, since they viewed veiling not as a divine commandment but as a political and cultural practice designed to differentiate Muslim women from Westerners and help men manage women's sexuality.

These women used their agency in deciding whether or not to veil, but their choices must be understood in the context of social structure, particularly the rules and resources provided by cultural expectations, religious traditions, and the political climate. Each of these women interpreted the rules of their faith individually, sorting out how to follow the rules of their religion and use these regulations as a resource to navigate the social world. For some women, that meant wearing the hijab to gain respect in a male-dominated society. For others, veiling was a way to express their religious identity. For a third group of women, not wearing the veil symbolized their challenge to male domination.

Aware of prevailing attitudes in the Muslim community and broader American society, these women faced the choice of whether to be visibly identifiable as Muslim. They had to weigh the benefits of building ties in the Muslim community against the potential risk of religious and ethnic discrimination. By making choices about veiling, they influenced the social structure, including norms and attitudes concerning veiling in communities where Muslims are a religious minority. By framing veiling as empowering and liberating, some of the veiled women changed what it means to wear a hijab. The women who chose not to wear a veil also challenged Muslim norms while tacitly reinforcing Western attitudes about veiling.

The key point is that our individual actions, our agency, can reinforce the social structure in some situations and transform it in others. There is a constant interaction between agency—the ability to act on our own will—and social structure—the resources we can tap into as well as the rules we must navigate.

When we recognize the complex interconnection between agency and social structure we are exercising our **sociological imagination**.²⁸ As C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) pointed out, all of our actions, large and small, shape the world in which we live. At the same time, the social world shapes the actions we take. It's important to understand the two sides of this relationship—the extent to which we shape the social world and the extent to which we are shaped by it—if we hope to fully understand why people behave the way they do and why society is organized as it is.

Sociologists often describe the relationship between individual action and the larger social structure in terms of micro-sociological and macro-sociological aspects of society. **Micro-sociology** focuses on individual identities and small-scale interactions with others. **Macro-sociology** takes aim at large-scale societal structures, including groups and institutions as well as social forces such as norms. Micro and macro theories help us understand the interplay between individuals and social structure, particularly in terms of our choices and actions. These theories provide different ways to view this relationship.

Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), one of the most well-known micro-sociologists, contributed to a theory called **symbolic interaction**, which studies human interaction by focusing on the words and gestures that people use and the meanings they create about the world.²⁹ From the perspective of symbolic interaction, individuals act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them. The meanings are developed through a process of socialization, and they may change over the life course. As individuals act toward things, they inevitably perpetuate or transform the meanings of the things that were influencing their actions in the first place.

We can illustrate the process of symbolic interaction by thinking about the women in Read and Bartowski's study. As young children, they learned from their parents, family members, and other adults in their community that the veil is an important religious symbol for Muslims. As these women entered adulthood, the veil took on a variety of additional cultural and political meanings, such as respectability, collective identity, and oppression. The way these women act toward the veil is dependent on the meaning the veil has for them at any given time in their lives. Sometimes, their actions can alter the meaning of veiling, such as when they wear the veil to achieve respect in school and work or when they reject the veil to call attention to patriarchy. Symbolic interactionists suggest that this process shows how individuals create social change. Through small-scale actions, individuals transform social norms and the widely-held meanings attached to people, things, and behaviors. This is how the micro influences the macro level of society.

Macro-sociologists take a different perspective, focusing first on societal influences. Robert Merton (1910-2003) argued that people make choices based on the resources available to achieve their goals.³⁰ The goals people hope to achieve often reflect social norms, such as financial security. When someone lacks access to socially acceptable pathways, they tend to seek other means to achieve culturally acceptable goals. For example, if someone does not have the financial means to attend college, they may seek other avenues to support themselves, such as becoming an entrepreneur, entering the military, or even resorting to crime. In this way, the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities across society, a macro-sociological phenomenon known as the **structure of opportunity**, shapes the choices individuals make.

Sociologists must consider both micro and macro perspectives when we analyze individual choices and actions. We should also look at both sides of this relationship when we investigate how larger social structures such as groups and institutions are established, maintained, and transformed.

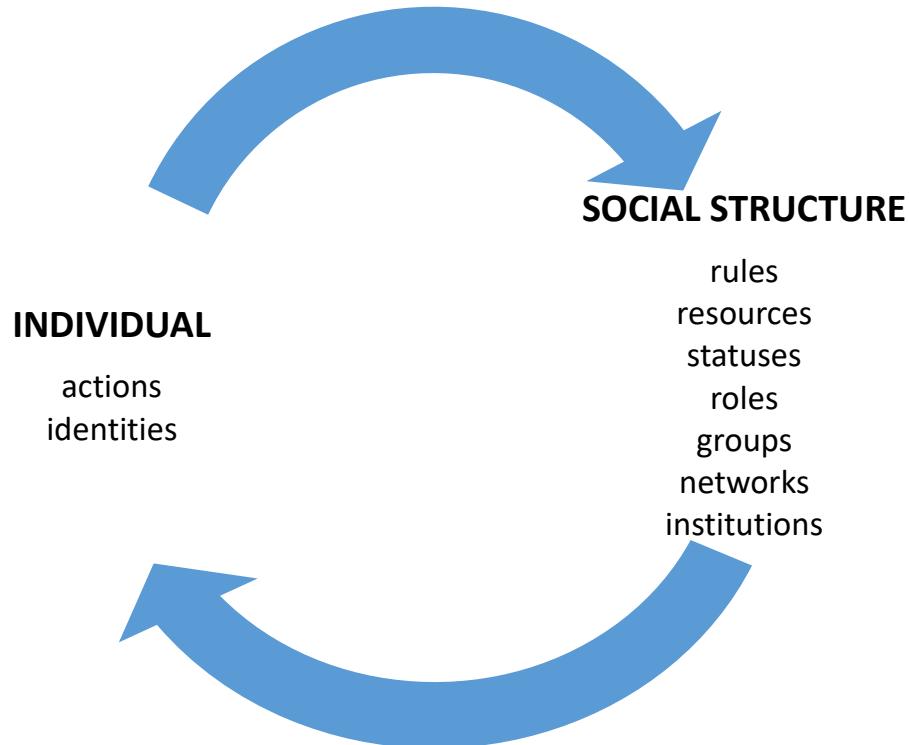
Let's revisit the example we started the chapter with to help us better understand these important points. What makes Timothy Piazza's death so tragic is that the other men attending the party did not use their agency in a way that may have saved his life. Those young men did not immediately call for help because they were following a specific set of structural rules pertaining to fraternity life and college partying. The fraternity chapter officers knew that Penn State had a zero-tolerance policy for underage drinking. Reporting the incident meant their organization could lose its charter and be banned from campus. The pledges did not want to jeopardize their own chances of gaining a valuable structural resource, membership in the fraternity. Their choice to delay calling for



Chilean Minister of Women and Gender Equity Elbow Bumping President. ([Source](#))

medical assistance was deeply affected by the social structure; it also negatively affected Timothy's chance of survival.

Figure 2: Relationship between the Individual and Social Structure



When the fraternity pledges and brothers weighed the consequences of helping Timothy, when the Muslim women contemplated whether to veil, and when the softball players considered aiding the competing team, they were all engaging in **reflexivity**—the process of evaluating our position in the social world, the rules we are expected to follow, and the resources we have or can acquire. Ultimately, we make a decision to act in a certain way and our decision has consequences. In some instances, we reinforce the social structure through our individual choices and actions; in others, we may alter the social structure.

In either case, our actions and their corresponding effects reveal how we are both products and producers of the social world. We make reflexive choices about how to act, and those choices are informed by social structural rules and resources. In this sense, the social structure only exists because of the actions of individuals, and the actions of individuals are influenced by social structure. They mutually influence each other to create our ever-changing individual and social lives.

Review Sheet: Individual agency and social structure

Key Points

- There is a dynamic interplay between individual agency and social structure. Our actions are constrained and enabled by social structural rules and resources. Our actions also contribute to the construction of society.
- When deciding on a course of action, people take into consideration their social position, risks and rewards, structural rules, and available resources.
- It is important to use both micro and macro sociological perspectives when we analyze individual choices and social structural changes.
- Individuals make reflexive choices about how to act; those choices are influenced by social structural rules and resources.

Key People

- Jen'Nan Ghazal Read
- John Bartowski
- C. Wright Mills
- Herbert Blumer
- Robert Merton

Key Terms

- **Veiling** – Muslim practice of wearing a hijab or veil.
- **Sociological imagination** – An understanding of the interplay between social structure and agency.
- **Micro-sociology** – Analysis of individual identities and interactions.
- **Macro-sociology** – Analysis of large-scale social structures and forces.
- **Symbolic interaction** – The study of human interaction by focusing on the words and gestures that people use and the meanings they create about the world.
- **Structure of opportunity** – The unequal distribution of resources and opportunities across society.
- **Reflexivity** – Process of evaluating our position in the social world, the rules we are expected to follow, and the resources we have or can acquire.

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Social Class, Inequality, & Poverty



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INTRODUCTION

SOCIAL CLASS

The social class structure of the United States

Is social class ascribed or achieved?

Social mobility

INEQUALITY

The growing gap between the poor and the rich

U.S. inequality in global context

POVERTY

What is poverty?

Characteristics of the poor

The working poor and the jobless poor

Homelessness

The importance of affordable housing

INTRODUCTION

- Why do sociologists study social class inequality?

I was raised in a poor household. My mom is a Hispanic single mother on welfare who lacks formal education. My father was an Italian immigrant who died of alcoholism. I grew up with my mom's side of the family. Among most of my family tobacco and alcohol use were prominent. Marijuana and cocaine were also used frequently. The most successful thing I ever witnessed anyone in my family do was join the army or graduate high school. Working was hardly the trend in my family. My diet consisted of mostly unhealthy foods: fried meats, sauces loaded with salt, pork fat, greasy snacks, lots of soda, and microwaveable food items. If I saw anything green on my plate I thought, "eww disgusting" and I wouldn't touch it. Not surprisingly, I was overweight for much of my childhood and adolescence. And with all of the second-hand smoke I breathed in I also developed asthma.

When I was 18, my mother kicked me out of the house and I moved in with the family of a rich, white, friend of mine. This family had a different position in life on so many levels. They had different interests, concerns, and ways of doing things. It all seemed so foreign to me. For example, they were very health conscious. They had foods and products in their home that I had never seen or heard of before. The parents even took time to exercise daily. And they had lots of books in the home which they actually read. Although the way they lived seemed strange to me I also knew that the lifestyle of this family allowed them to have many more possibilities than I could ever imagine in my upbringing.

This excerpt comes from an essay written by Alejandro (Alex) Russo, a student in one of our sociology classes.¹ This brief autobiographical sketch captures many of the themes that we discuss in this chapter. It also offers a snapshot of how social class has a significant impact on our lives. As Alex suggests, social class influences our goals and aspirations, our potential and possibilities, our lifestyle choices and habits, and even our health and well-being.

Despite its significance, social class often goes unacknowledged. We often don't recognize the effects of social class until we interact with people who have different economic resources—much like Alex didn't recognize the influence social class had on his life until he moved in with his wealthy friend. In this sense, social class is invisible in plain sight. Unlike characteristics such as race and gender, which are more obvious and easier to see and define, we can't always figure out someone's

social class just by looking at them. But if we are seeing the world sociologically, indicators of social class quickly come into focus.

Some of us, like Alex, grow up in poverty while others grow up in affluent families who may use their power and influence to ensure their children get into elite colleges (more on the “Operation Varsity Blues” college admission scandal later in the chapter).

Some students attend rat- and cockroach-infested schools with outdated and insufficient textbooks while others attend schools with state-of-the-art facilities and computers for every student.

Some adults work three jobs and over 80 hours a week just to support their families while others enjoy paid vacations, health insurance, and employer contributions to a retirement account.

And some of us live in cities like Flint, Michigan, while others live in cities like Bloomfield Hills, also in Michigan. Although these two communities are separated by only 45 miles, the life experiences of the people who live there are worlds apart. In Flint, the median household income is \$27,717, the unemployment rate is nearly twice the national average, 40% of residents live in poverty, and the city is famous for its lead-contaminated drinking water, its abandoned and boarded-up homes, and its rising homicide rate.² In contrast, Bloomfield Hills is one of the richest cities in America. The median household income is \$186,563, the value of most homes is close to \$1 million, and the community is known for its quiet, rural residential properties, its exclusive country clubs, and its world-renowned educational institutions.

In this chapter we take a journey through the landscape of social class. We meet other individuals and consider how their lives have been shaped and guided by their social class position. Some individuals are greatly supported and enabled by their social class position while others, like Alex, face many obstacles and constraints. Before examining how social class contributes to some of these inequalities, we begin with a solid understanding of what exactly we mean when we use the term social class.

SOCIAL CLASS

- How do sociologists make sense of social class?
- What is the social class structure of the United States?
- Are we assigned a social class at birth or is it something we accomplish?
- Is the American Dream alive and well or is it just a myth?

Consider these films: *Pretty Woman*, *Boyz n the Hood*, *8 Mile*, *Titanic*, *Dreamgirls*, *Pursuit of Happyness*, *Annie*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *The Hunger Games*, *Snowpiercer*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Wolf*

of Wall Street, Crazy Rich Asians, Hustlers, and Parasite. They all have one thing in common: they revolve around social class.

Social class is one of the central concepts in sociology. As you learned in the first chapter, sociology emerged when scholars began investigating the economic inequality they witnessed, particularly during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Karl Marx was an early sociologist, and one of his central concerns is no different than what many sociologists still study today: the growing economic gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Social class is just one form of **stratification**, a system that puts categories of people into a hierarchy. All societies have stratification systems, but they vary in what categories are used to sort people and how unequal those categories of people are. Religion, gender, wealth, and race are common foundations for stratification, leading to unequal access to resources, political rights, and other benefits. In other chapters, you'll learn how the U.S. is stratified according to race, ethnicity, and gender. In this chapter, we're focusing on economic stratification, and we analyze social class inequality in the U.S. as a structural problem, not as something that results from personal failing.

A **social class** is generally defined as a group of individuals who share a similar economic position based on income, wealth, education, and occupation. When referring to social class, most people rely on a simple system consisting of the upper, middle, and lower (or working) classes. This model is quick and convenient; however, as we will see, social class is much more complicated than this.

Most definitions of social class are based on **income**, the total amount of money someone earns each year. Income is a convenient indicator of social class, and it's commonly used to identify a person's class standing.

Another common indicator of social class is **wealth**—the total amount of money that a person has or could have if she sold off all her assets. If you take all the money in your bank and retirement accounts, and add the value of everything you own—cars, a home, property, anything you have invested in the stock market, and anything else you that you could sell—the resulting total amount is your wealth. Although there is often a strong connection between income and wealth (that is, people who earn high salaries also often own a lot of wealth), this is not always the case. You could have wealth from sources such as savings, investments, real estate, and inheritance, even if you don't earn a high income, or any income at all.



Factory workers, a typical working-class job. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

The amount of money we make or have is not the only factor that may determine our social class. Education and occupation are also often included in the mix. Both characteristics—how far we went in school and what kind of job we have—are linked with income and with each other.

The social class structure of the United States

Over 30 years ago, an undergraduate student at Harvard University walked into a public housing project outside of Boston and began research for his senior thesis. Little did he know that he was laying the groundwork for what was to become one of the most well-known sociological studies of social class in the United States. Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* is a story of two groups of teenagers who lived in the housing project: The Brothers, a predominantly Black peer group, and the Hallway Hangers, who were predominantly White.³

MacLeod followed the Brothers and the Hallway Hangers from their teenage years into young adulthood and then into middle age. He documents their dreams, aspirations, successes, and failures. *Ain't No Makin' It* demonstrates that social class can be a complicated concept to understand. It's often ignored and unacknowledged. Even though it had a significant impact on the life choices and chances of the Brothers and Hallway Hangers, social class was not part of their vocabulary. This is true for the majority of Americans today: Most of us do not speak about social class regularly. In the rare instances when we do talk about social class or are asked to identify our own social class position, Americans almost always say we are middle class.⁴

If we want to understand the important impact that social class has on our lives, we can't rely on the simplistic model of lower, middle, and upper classes. We need to account for multiple factors such as income, wealth, education, and occupation. We use Dennis Gilbert's model of the class structure that relies primarily on income, occupation, and education.⁵ Although Gilbert does not factor in wealth, since it is often difficult to measure, we can see how wealth is connected to these other three factors and how it might influence our social-class standing.

Gilbert's model includes six social classes that are situated within three broad categories. At the top is the first category, the **privileged classes**, made up of what he calls the capitalist class and the upper-middle class.

The **capitalist class** (commonly known as the top 1%) makes money from the things they own: businesses, real estate, stocks, and bonds. Although the 1% may work, they usually do not gain their tremendous wealth from their annual salary. Instead, they are part of the super-rich because the things they own (their wealth) bring them a continual stream of lucrative profits.

The second group in the privileged class category is the **upper-middle class**. Making up about 14% of the population, these well-educated individuals rely on their



Eye surgeon, an example of an upper-middle-class job. ([Source](#))

high incomes from jobs to catapult them into this category. Typical jobs among this group include business managers, doctors, lawyers, accountants, and some small business owners. Gilbert includes a sub-category at the top of the upper-middle class called the **working rich**. Although relatively small in size, this group includes individuals whose annual incomes are well into the six-figure range. One of the main features that distinguishes this group from the capitalist class is that the working rich rely on their salaries to maintain their class position.

The second category in Gilbert's social-class model is called the **majority classes**. Here we have about 60% of the population, evenly split between the middle class and the working class. People in the **middle class** are likely to have a high school diploma and some college experience (an increasing number even have a bachelor's degree). They work as teachers, nurses, master craftspeople (plumbers, electricians, carpenters), and lower-level managers. Just below them is the **working class**. These individuals have probably completed high school or a trade school; they typically work as office support (secretaries and administrative assistants), retail sales workers, factory workers, or low-paid craftspeople.

As you consider the distinctions between the middle class and the working class, you may be thinking of examples of people you know who don't quite fit into this model. That's not surprising. As Gilbert points out, the distinction between the middle class and the working class can be fuzzy. You may know someone who has only a high school education but works in an occupation and earns a yearly salary that puts them in the middle class. On the other hand, some people may have a higher level of education (such as a college degree) but work in jobs that place them in the working class, either by choice or because they can't find a better job. Determining social class is not an exact science. Instead of relying on just one or two factors such as income or education, we need to consider the interplay between these factors.

The third and final category in Gilbert's model is the **lower classes**. Making up about one-quarter of the U. S. population, this group includes the working poor (15%) and the underclass (10%). Both have some education, but most do not have more than a high school diploma.

The **working poor** are typically employed in insecure and low-wage jobs such as janitorial and cleaning services, manual labor, landscaping, restaurant support (including fast food, wait staff, line cooks), and other service industries. Because the jobs held by the working poor do not generally provide much in the way of benefits (medical, dental, or vision care; paid vacations; retirement accounts), the working poor are more likely than social classes above them to face financial insecurity and instability. Many workers in these jobs also encounter unpredictable and inflexible work schedules, putting them in stressful and precarious situations since their income may vary from week to week.

Author Barbara Ehrenreich tried to survive on these types of low-wage jobs in order to understand the daily struggles of the working poor, an experience described in her book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. She worked as a diner waitress, motel maid, housecleaner, and Walmart salesperson and found it nearly impossible to cover the cost of rent, gas, and meals. Benefits that the middle and upper classes may take for granted, such as paid sick leave, didn't exist at these jobs; when Ehrenreich was sick, she had to go to work anyway because she couldn't afford to lose a day's wages. As she pointed out, long days on the job, sometimes followed by a shift at a second job just to make ends meet, leave low-wage workers with little energy or spare time to look for better jobs or to attend college.

Going to work sick can even lead to death, as was the case for Augustín Rodriguez, a longtime employee at a Smithfield Foods meatpacking plant in South Dakota. His death was tied to a COVID-19 outbreak at the facility, which offered a \$500 bonus to workers who didn't miss a shift of work in the month of April, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶

At the bottom of Gilbert's model is the underclass. They may be part-time workers, unemployed, or may have inconsistent and unreliable work opportunities (such as seasonal work that is only available for part of the year). Many rely on public assistance benefits, which have been shrinking over the past twenty years. Although their financial insecurity forces this group to rely on public assistance to help pay for food, shelter, and clothing, they actually receive less in government benefits than the majority and privileged classes.⁷ While the lower classes may receive limited benefits in the way of food, housing, and tax subsidies, the wealthier classes gain significantly more valuable benefits through government policies that allow them to drastically lower the amount they owe in taxes. The ability to write off expenses such as part of their mortgage interest payments (which is most valuable for those with the most expensive homes), deposits into retirement accounts (which low-income workers are often unable to afford), and profits from certain types of stock trading or capital gains are all tax benefits provided to more privileged Americans.



Fast-food workers on strike for higher pay. ([Source](#))

Table 1: Gilbert's Model of the Social-Class Structure in the United States⁸

Class, % of Households	Source of Income, Occupation of Main Earner	Typical Education	Typical Household Income, 2012
Privileged Classes			
Capitalists, 1%	Investors, executives, heirs	Selective college or university, often graduate or professional school	\$1 million
Upper middle, 14%	Upper management and professionals, successful small business owners, including the working rich	College, often graduate or professional study	\$150,000 (working rich: \$500,000)
Majority Classes			
Middle, 30%	Lower-level managers, semiprofessionals, nonretail sales workers, craftsmen	At least high school, often some college	\$70,000
Working, 30%	Machine operators, low-paid craftsmen, clerical workers, retail sales workers	High school	\$40,000
Lower Classes			
Working poor, 15%	Most service workers, laborers, low-paid machine operators, and clerical workers	At least some high school	\$25,000
Underclass, 10%	Unemployed or part-time work; many depend on public assistance and other government programs	Some high school	\$15,000

Is social class ascribed or achieved?

As you think about the descriptions and characteristics of these various social classes, you are probably locating yourself somewhere in Gilbert's model. You may even realize that you're in a different social class than the one you thought you were in. Maybe you grew up assuming you were in the middle class (as many people do), but according to Gilbert you fit into a different category. As you ponder where

you fall on this social class spectrum you might also consider how you actually ended up in that particular social class location. Did you use your own income, education, and occupation or did you use your parents'? Did you receive your social class through birth or is it something you accomplished through your own efforts?

These questions reflect an important distinction discussed in the Social Structure and the Individual chapter: the difference between ascribed and achieved statuses. As you'll recall, an ascribed status is one you acquired when you were born or that you take on involuntarily later in life. In contrast, you gain an achieved status at least in part through your achievements, abilities, or efforts.

When you were born, you automatically entered into the social class of your parents or guardians. You did not get to choose if you were born into the capitalist class or the working poor. But the social class ascribed to us at birth is not necessarily the social class we have when we become adults. For example, nearly 30% of students entering four-year colleges and more than 50% of students who enter two-year colleges are first-generation students—neither of their parents attended college.⁹ Most of these students are probably in college because they view education as a way to achieve a higher-paying job and a higher social class than their parents.

The distinction between ascribed and achieved social class status is particularly relevant when we try to understand social inequality. There is a long-standing assumption, particularly in the United States, that social class is largely an achieved status. Most people believe that your position in the social class structure depends mostly on your own individual efforts: are you motivated, do you work hard, do you make smart financial decisions, and are you willing to go the extra mile?

But the idea that our social class standing is based our own merit is not altogether accurate. Consider the demographics of the CEOs of the Fortune 500—a list of the 500 largest and most profitable companies in the U.S. In 2019, this list contained only 37 women CEOs (7.4%) and just 5 African American CEOs (1%).¹⁰ Given that women make up nearly 51% of the U.S. population and African Americans comprise a little over 13%, we might ask why CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are overwhelmingly White men. Are women and African Americans just not working hard enough or not motivated enough to lead the biggest companies in America? Or is something about their race and gender (both ascribed characteristics) holding them back from making it to the top?

Another example might hit closer to home. You may have taken the SAT, ACT, or another standardized test at some point. Did you know that the best way to predict a student's performance on these college entrance exams is to measure their family income? As Table 2 shows, if you want to do well on the SAT, your best strategy is to be born into a wealthy family.



Children born into poverty. ([Source](#))

Table 2: SAT Scores and Family Income

Family Income	Critical Reading	Mathematics	Writing
\$0-\$20,000	435	462	429
\$20,000-40,000	465	482	455
\$40,000-60,000	487	500	474
\$60,000-80,000	500	511	486
\$80,000-100,000	512	524	499
\$100,000-120,000	522	536	511
\$120,000-140,000	526	540	515
\$140,000-160,000	533	548	523
\$160,000-200,000	539	555	531
More than \$200,000	563	565	586

Source: College Board¹¹

One reason for this relationship between social class and educational achievement is that parents with higher incomes have more resources to help their children succeed academically. As Annette Lareau demonstrates in her book, *Home Advantage*, although parents from all social classes have similar aspirations for their children, those with greater financial means can significantly boost their kids' learning by stocking their house with lots of books to read, sending their children to higher-quality daycares and schools, and paying for tutors and test preparation courses, which parents with lower incomes often can't afford.¹² And as we will see in the next section, such advantages (or disadvantages) help explain why many people reproduce their ascribed social class position.

Social mobility

"Don't let somebody ever tell you, you can't do something. If you want something, go get it. Period." These lines are from the movie *The Pursuit of Happyness*, based on the life of Chris Gardner. Gardner went from being homeless to working in the finance industry and later became an inspirational speaker. In moving from a life of poverty to an achieved social class of wealth and comfort, Chris Gardner's story exemplifies the rags-to-riches narrative of the American Dream.

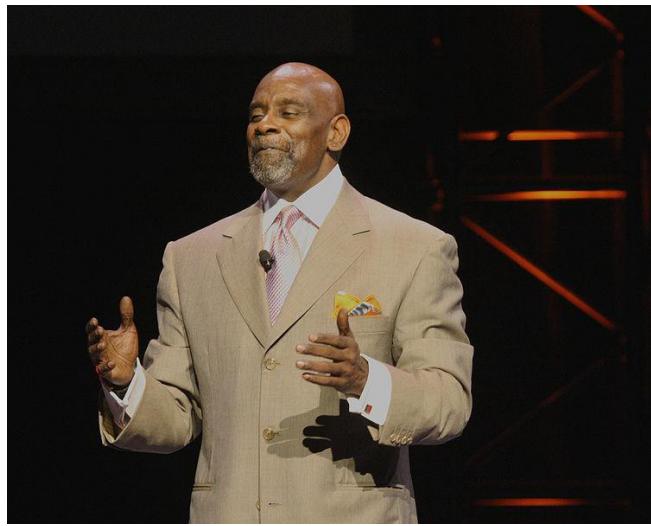
The American Dream is a strongly-held and much-cherished belief in the United States. We are told that with hard work, determination, and a “can do” spirit, it’s possible to be born into a working poor or even an underclass family and eventually make it into the more privileged classes. The American Dream suggests that an ascribed social class should not hold you back from becoming who or what you want to be. As long as you work hard, have a good attitude, and don’t give up, you can live your dreams.

When people like Chris Gardner move from an ascribed social class position to a new achieved social class position, they have experienced **social mobility**. **Upward mobility**, which is most often discussed in the context of the American Dream, occurs when someone moves from a lower social class position to a higher one. This form of mobility is obviously the one most of us would prefer.

But we can also experience **downward mobility**—dropping into a lower social class. A decline in social class standing may occur due to factors such as being laid off, choosing to pursue a less lucrative career path than your parents, making bad financial decisions, or getting divorced (a common cause of downward mobility for women).¹³ It can also be caused by issues entirely outside our control, such as entering the job market during a recession.

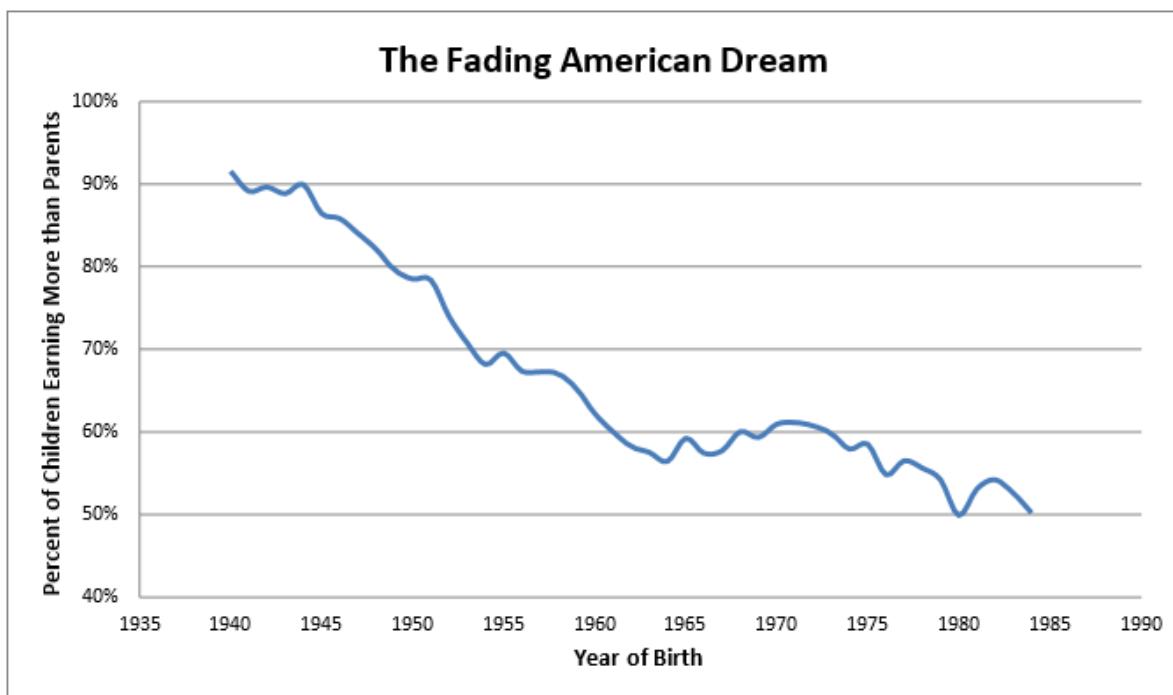
The idea of the American Dream is regularly invoked by politicians, educators, religious leaders, and media pundits. We also have shining models of the American Dream like Oprah Winfrey, who went from a childhood of poverty and abuse to become America’s first Black billionaire, and Jay-Z, who lived in a housing project and sold drugs before becoming a billionaire with impressive real estate and art collections.¹⁴ The idea that the American Dream is alive and well is so pervasive that most people don’t even question it. Many of us just assume that upward social mobility is the norm. “The sky’s the limit,” to borrow a song title from the late Notorious B.I.G.

But sociologists often refer to the American Dream as a myth—and with good reason. As you can see from Figure 1, the likelihood that individuals will earn higher incomes than their parents has been in steady decline since the 1940s. Currently, only about 50% of children will experience upward mobility. And for African-Americans who want to live the American Dream like Chris Gardner, Oprah, and Jay-Z, the odds are even lower. Compared to their White counterparts, Blacks are not only more likely to be born into poverty but also much more likely to stay in poverty throughout their lives. They are also more likely to experience downward mobility—the reverse of the American Dream.¹⁵



Chris Gardner. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Figure 1: Upward Mobility by Year of Birth



Source: *The Equality of Opportunity Project*¹⁶

The American Dream is such a powerful idea that it can feel unpatriotic to challenge it. However, inspirational examples of individuals from humble origins who battle through adversity and eventually triumph do not accurately reflect reality for most Americans. These stories of shining stars make it seem as if achieving the American Dream is equally available to everyone. But thinking back to the story of Alex that began this chapter, it should be obvious that individuals like him face many more obstacles and disadvantages in their pursuit of the American Dream than more privileged individuals do. As a result, social-class inequality is not only widespread but is also increasing at a rapid pace—both in the United States and around the globe.

Review Sheet: Social class

Key Points

- Social class is a central concept in sociology.
- Social class is often defined by a combination of income, wealth, education, and occupation.
- When most people think of social class in the United States they think of a simple, three-tiered model of upper, middle, and lower (or working) classes; however, the structure of social class in the U.S. is more complicated.

- The six social classes in Dennis Gilbert's model of the class structure are the capitalist class (1%), upper-middle class (14%), middle class (30%), working class (30%), working poor (15%), and underclass (10%).
- Research suggests that the American Dream is fading for many young people today; instead of enjoying social mobility, they will more than likely reproduce the social class position of their parents.
- Currently, only about 50% of children will earn higher incomes than their parents.
- The idea that social class is achieved based on our own merit can be called into question when we consider the demographics of Fortune 500 CEOs.
- There were 37 women (7.4%) and 5 African Americans (1%) on the 2019 list of Fortune 500 CEOs.

Key People

- Karl Marx
- Jay Macleod
- Annette Lareau
- Dennis Gilbert

Key Terms

- **Social class** – Group of individuals who share a similar socio-economic position based on income, wealth, education, and occupation.
- **Stratification** – A system that puts categories of people into a hierarchy.
- **Income** – Amount of money an individual earns from employment or investments.
- **Wealth** – Total amount of money that you have, or would have if you sold off all of your assets.
- **Capitalists** – Commonly known as the 1%; class that makes money from things they own such as businesses, real estate, stocks, and bonds.
- **Upper-middle class** – Well-educated individuals who typically have jobs as business managers, doctors, lawyers, accountants, and some small business owners.
- **Middle class** – Likely to have a high school diploma as well as some college experience; typically work as teachers, nurses, master craftspeople (plumbers, electricians, carpenters), and lower-level managers.
- **Working class** – Have probably only completed high school or a trade school; typically work as office support (secretaries and administrative assistants), retail sales workers, factory workers, and low-paid craftspeople.
- **Working poor** – Typically employed in insecure and low-wage jobs such as janitorial and cleaning staff, manual labor, landscaping, restaurant support (including fast food, wait staff, line cooks), and other service industries.
- **Underclass** – Work part-time, unemployed, or have inconsistent and unreliable work opportunities; often rely on public assistance to meet basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing.

- **Social mobility** – Movement from an ascribed social class position to a new achieved social class position.
- **Upward mobility** – Movement from a lower social class position to a higher one.
- **Downward mobility** – Movement from a higher social class position to a lower one.

INEQUALITY

- What are some indicators of inequality in the U.S.?
- How is inequality related to ascribed characteristics like race and gender?
- To what extent is inequality increasing in the U.S. and across the globe?

In 2017, Yahoo announced that Marissa Mayer, the CEO, would leave the company once its acquisition by Verizon was finalized. Mayer received a \$23 million severance payment; the full value of her severance pay and stock options was nearly \$260 million. That's not a bad sum of money for being fired.

While the amount of money Mayer received for leaving the company may be startling, it's not even close to the highest severance payments in recent history. Consider some of these final paydays: Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric, received over \$400 million; Lee Raymond, CEO of Exxon Mobile, received over \$300 million; William McGuire, CEO of UnitedHealth Group, received nearly \$300 million; and Edward Whitacre, CEO of AT&T, received well over \$200 million.



*Marissa Mayer, former CEO of Yahoo.
[\(Source\)](#)*

Consider the case of Robert Marcus. He became CEO of Time Warner at the beginning of 2014. A few months later he negotiated himself out of a job by agreeing to sell the company to Charter Communications. For those few months he worked as CEO of Time Warner, Marcus walked away with a severance package of over \$90 million.

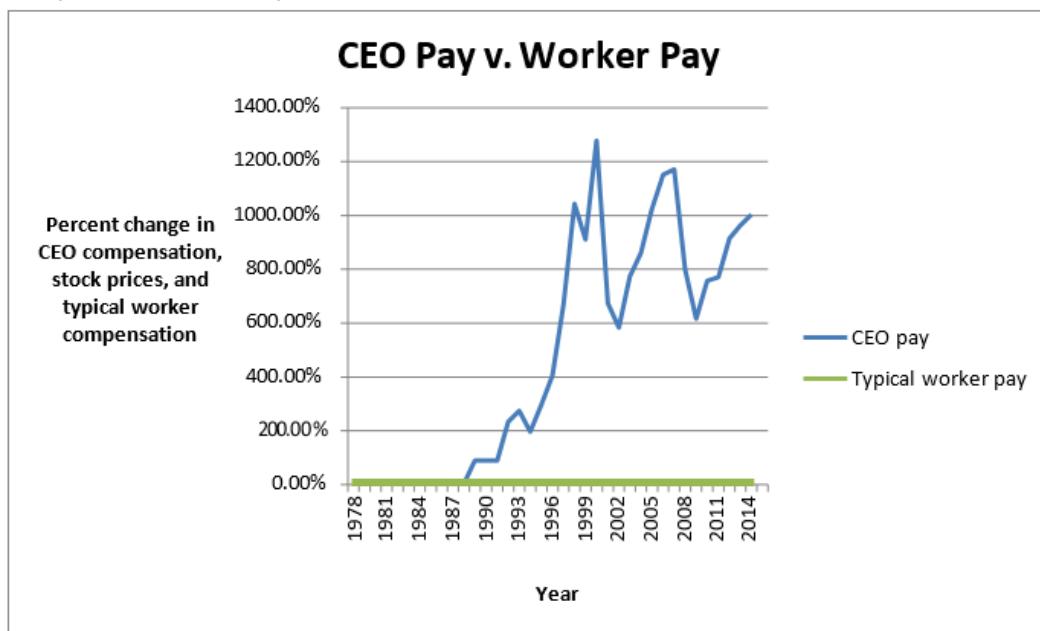
And during the COVID-19 pandemic, when millions of workers filed unemployment claims, the top CEOs actually gained wealth. The wealth of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg grew by billions of dollars.¹⁷

It might be hard to grasp what these figures actually mean. Most of us are probably more comfortable talking about hundreds of dollars than hundreds of millions of dollars. Here's a little context:

The median household income in the United States in 2018 was \$61,937; half of American households make more than this, and half make less.¹⁸ To make as much money as Robert Marcus made in just a few months as CEO of Time Warner, a typical household in the U.S. would have to work about 1,600 *years*. It would take over 7,000 years for the typical household to earn the severance payment given to former General Electric CEO Jack Welch.

What do you think of these numbers? They're just one measure of the very large and increasing class inequality in the United States. In this section we consider some common indicators of social class inequality as a way to more fully understand the growing gap between the poor and the rich. The gap between CEO pay and the incomes of average workers are a good place to begin because they highlight how large the gulf has gotten between those at the top of the economic ladder and the rest of us.

Figure 2: CEO Pay and Worker Pay, 1978-2014



Source: Economic Policy Institute¹⁹

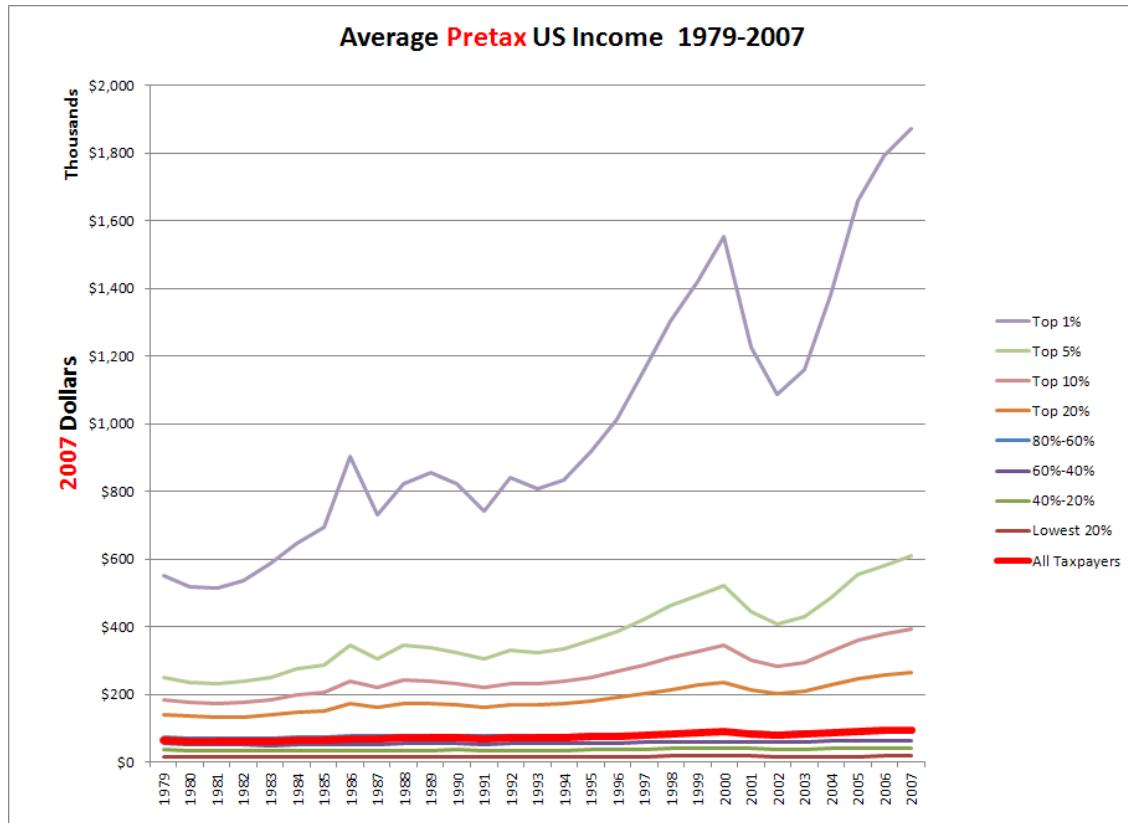
Consider Figure 2, which shows how much CEO pay has increased in the past thirty years compared to average worker salaries. Since 1987, the average CEO has seen his (and the CEO is usually a he) compensation increase 1,000%. The compensation of an average worker has barely increased at all. In 1987, the average yearly salary was a little more than \$18,000.²⁰ If a worker making that salary in 1987 enjoyed the 1,000% increase that the typical CEO has enjoyed, the worker would make \$1.8 million a year now. Instead, the typical worker today makes just under \$50,000, the equivalent of about \$24,000 in 1987. When you adjust for inflation, there has been hardly any growth in worker pay.

The growing gap between the poor and the rich

Comparing the compensation of CEOs to typical workers highlights some of the extreme levels of inequality that exist in the United States. We can gain further insight if we refer to some other patterns.

Let's begin with income inequality. We often hear that the gap between the rich and the poor is growing every year. This becomes readily apparent when we look at the change in income levels over time. For the overwhelming majority of Americans income has been more or less stagnant for nearly forty years (Figure 3). While the top 1% of the population has enjoyed a huge increase in their incomes, and the top 5% to 20% have seen modest income gains, the income of the bottom 80% of the population has remained virtually the same. Since about 1979, only the privileged classes in the United States (like the CEOs in Figure 2) have experienced income growth. For the majority classes and lower classes, wages today are more or less equal to what they were forty years ago.²¹

Figure 3: Average Pretax U.S. Income, 1979-2007



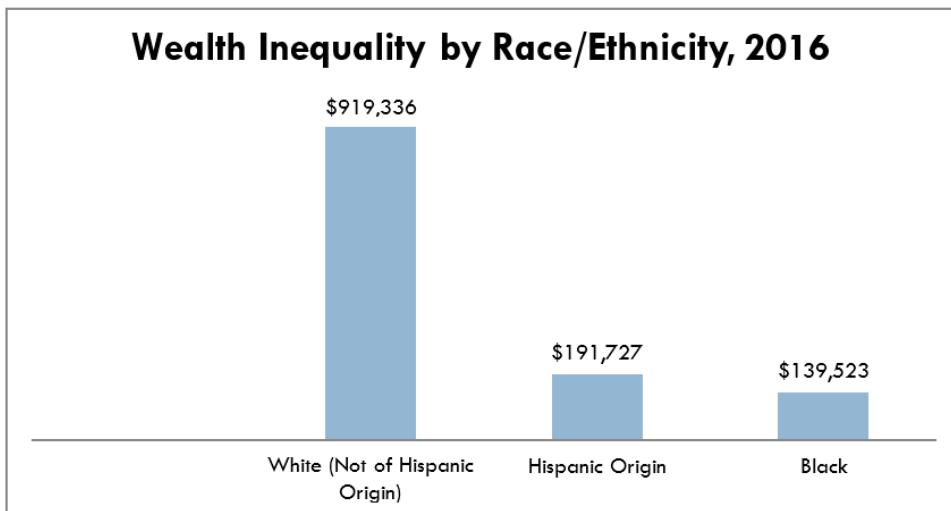
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Do you think this income inequality translates into increased wealth inequality as well? If you recall, wealth is a measure of the total worth of everything someone owns. When we talk about the rich getting richer and everyone else getting poorer, we're not only talking about income inequality; wealth inequality is just as important.

It's probably not too surprising to learn that wealth inequality is closely associated with income inequality, as Figure 4 suggests; it depicts the enormous gap between the rich and rest of society over the past 30 years. Notice how the shapes of the lines in this graph mirror the lines in the income graph (Figure 3). Once again, we see that the privileged classes are accumulating most of the wealth in the country while the financial gains for those in the majority and lower classes are modest at best.

The gap between the rich and the rest of us, or the haves and have-nots, is even more evident when we also consider race. As Figure 5 illustrates, the amount of wealth we have is strongly correlated with race and ethnicity. The wealth of Whites dwarfs the wealth of Blacks and Hispanics.

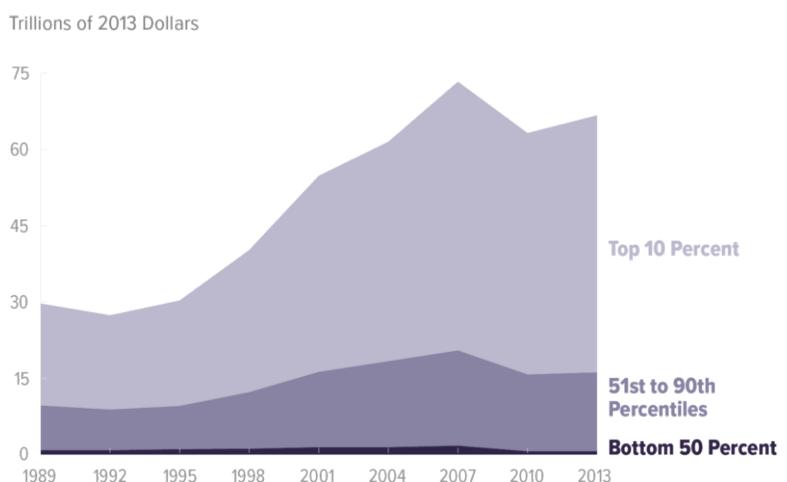
Figure 5: Average Family Wealth by Race/Ethnicity, 2016



Source: [Urban Institute](#), Survey of Consumer Finances 1983–2016

Remember, when we discuss wealth we're not focusing on income earned from employment or investments. We're talking about the amount of money and assets that someone has accumulated over time from various sources. Two individuals can have the same yearly income but drastically different levels of wealth. The more wealth you have, the more opportunities you have to increase wealth, pass that wealth on to your children, and be protected against life events that might create enduring financial

Holdings of Family Wealth

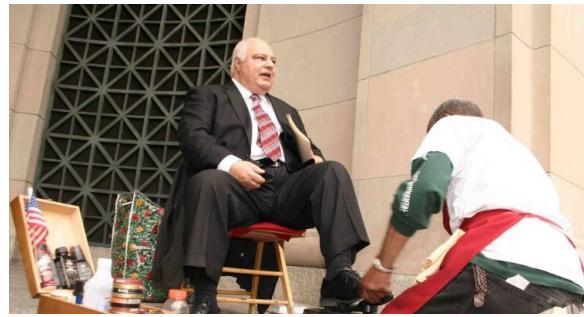


*Figure 4: Family Wealth in the United States, 1989–2013.
(Source: [Congressional Budget Office](#))*

hardships. This is a crucial point for understanding how social inequality continues to rise: having some wealth makes it easier to get more of it.

Many social scientists argue that inequalities in wealth are the most significant factor in the reproduction of inequality, particularly in regard to race and ethnicity.²² Sociologist Thomas Shapiro spent the past two decades documenting the wealth gap between Blacks and Whites. His research demonstrates quite clearly that many of the problems that Blacks face—high rates of poverty, mass incarceration, and joblessness—can be directly connected to the great wealth gaps between Black and White individuals.²³

Shapiro details the **cumulative advantages**—built up benefits and resources—that allow people to increase their wealth. On average, White individuals have been able to pass much more money to their children than Blacks have because they have not been saddled with the various types of discrimination, particularly in federal housing policies, that have severely reduced Blacks' opportunities to build wealth. Without being systematically oppressed by slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and institutional discrimination, Whites have been able to increase their family wealth generation after generation, whereas most Black families have never been able to anchor themselves financially or have done so only very recently.



Shoe-shine worker and client in Washington, D.C.
(Source)

This whole process of cumulative advantages is largely invisible to Whites who benefit from it. Most Whites cling to the notion of the American Dream and see their success as largely the product of their own doing. Even those who have undeniably benefited financially from their relatives (or from their ascribed social position) remain convinced that their social-class status is wholly achieved. This belief that personal effort and smart individual choices can overcome generations of structural inequality also contributes to the **racial wealth gap**, the difference in accumulated wealth between different races and ethnicities. As long as policymakers embrace the idea that social class is achieved, they will enact policies that reflect this belief and ignore the external factors that produce and perpetuate social inequality. Proposals to slash federal housing vouchers, food assistance, and Medicaid for low-income individuals are indicative of this type of thinking.²⁴

One idea to reduce the racial wealth gap is called “Baby Bonds,” a proposal from Darrick Hamilton and William Darity. An account would be established by the federal government for each child at birth, with the amount of money tied to the parents’ wealth. For instance, a middle-class child might receive \$20,000. Upper-class children would receive less, poorer children would receive more. When the child turns 18, the funds become available to use for college, a business venture, or to help buy a home. Over time, this program would help alleviate the racial wealth gap and improve social mobility.²⁵

The inability to recognize the existence and persistence of structural inequalities can be demonstrated when we add more characteristics to the mix. When we look at the intersecting effects of race, gender, education, and income, we see quite clearly that not everyone enjoys the same path to financial success. As much as we may want to tout our own individual efforts and accomplishments, there is no denying that some individuals are hampered by the persistence of racism and sexism in American society.

Table 3 should hit close to home for many of you. Focusing on those aged 25-34, this table shows how income is affected by gender, race, and education. You don't have to study the table very long to see some telling trends. In every category of educational attainment, men make significantly more than women. Race also has an effect, with Blacks and Hispanics almost always making less than Whites and Asians, even when they have the same level of education.

Probably the most obvious fact from Table 3 is the importance of education. As someone completes more education, their income level increases. This is true for every gender and race; however, access to higher education is not evenly distributed. Race and class play a large role in determining who attends and who graduates from college, as well as the type of college they attend. The higher you are in the social class structure, the more likely it is that you will attend and graduate from college. When we add race and ethnicity to the mix, we also see that students of color are more likely than their White peers to attend community colleges or for-profit colleges.²⁶

Table 3: Median Earnings (in 2015 Dollars) of Full-Time, Year-Round Workers Ages 25-34, by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Education Level, 2013-2015

Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Less than HS Diploma	High School Diploma	Some College, No Degree	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Advanced Degree
Asian	Female	\$21,900	\$25,900	\$32,800	\$32,200	\$52,500	\$66,400
	Male	\$26,500	\$30,500	\$35,600	\$36,200	\$61,900	\$80,200
Black	Female	\$21,100	\$25,400	\$27,500	\$31,200	\$41,200	\$50,900
	Male	\$26,700	\$27,800	\$35,300	\$36,500	\$48,500	\$52,600
Hispanic	Female	\$21,000	\$26,400	\$30,100	\$29,500	\$44,800	\$53,700
	Male	\$25,200	\$31,100	\$36,300	\$41,400	\$50,500	\$61,700
White	Female	\$21,300	\$27,400	\$31,100	\$33,200	\$46,000	\$55,500
	Male	\$31,900	\$36,700	\$40,800	\$45,000	\$56,500	\$66,900
All	Female	\$21,100	\$26,900	\$30,500	\$32,000	\$45,800	\$55,800
	Male	\$26,400	\$33,400	\$38,400	\$42,600	\$55,600	\$67,400

Source: Education Pays 2016: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society²⁷

You should see a pattern developing that helps explain the persistence of inequality. Those of us who have ascribed characteristics that are not as advantageous as others (such as being born into a lower social class, being a person of color, or being a woman) likely face more structural obstacles than those who have more privileged ascribed characteristics. Although many of us have faith in the idea of

meritocracy, or a system where personal responsibility and individual effort are the sole determinants of success, decades of research make it clear that some individuals have an easier path to financial success than others.

Think about the idea of meritocracy in the context of the “Operation Varsity Blues” scandal, which involved wealthy families paying bribes to have their children accepted by prominent universities like Yale, Stanford, and Georgetown. In one example, Lori Loughlin and Mossimo Giannulli plead guilty of paying \$500,000 so their daughters could attend the University of Southern California, as recruits for the crew team. If paying a half-million-dollar bribe isn’t egregious enough, their daughters weren’t actually involved in crew! Photographs of the daughters on rowing machines were used to make it look like they were crew athletes.²⁸

In writing about the scandal, Shamus Khan notes that it’s commonplace for rich families to spend enormous amounts of money so their children can accumulate the kinds of experiences that impress elite colleges. He writes “...almost all rich families buy their kids into elite colleges by purchasing advantages they pass off as talents, whether by way of sailing lessons or elaborate vacations planned with an eye on admissions essays. We view these vastly overrepresented children of the rich as having earned their spots. And that’s the great American delusion we call ‘meritocracy.’”²⁹

In trying to understand social class inequality in America, it’s imperative that we consider how ascribed social class, race, and gender propel some individuals forward while holding others back.

U.S. inequality in global context

Now that you have a better understanding of inequality in the United States, you may wonder how we stack up against other countries. Social scientists use a statistical measure called the **GINI index** to compare inequality. The GINI index looks at how family income is distributed in a country. If everyone in a country had the same income and there was total equality, the GINI score would be 0. If one person in the country had all of the income, it would cause total inequality and the GINI score would be 1. No country actually has a score of 0 or 1, but countries that have less inequality are closer to 0 and countries that have a lot of inequality are closer to 1.

Among the 31 most developed nations in the world, the United States has the second-highest GINI index, behind only Chile. This ranking is based on after-tax income, not before-tax calculations. In most countries, the tax structure reduces inequality and brings down the GINI index by taxing affluent individuals at significantly higher rates than the lower or middle classes. In fact, a number of countries rank quite a bit higher in inequality than the United States before taxes are taken into account. But because those countries have tax policies that are more favorable to the poor than the rich, their GINI index is lowered more significantly by taxes than it is in the U.S.³⁰

As drastic as inequality is in the U.S., it is nothing compared to the inequality that exists in the global context. According to a report from Oxfam International, global levels of class inequality have reached astounding levels:³¹

- The world's 8 richest men have the same amount of wealth as the bottom 50% of the world's population.
- The richest 1% of the world's population owns more wealth than the rest of the 99% combined.
- The incomes of the poorest 10% increased by less than \$3 a year between 1988 and 2011. During this same period, the incomes of the richest 1% increased by 182 times.
- 7 out of 10 people live in a country that has seen a rise in inequality in the last 30 years.
- Each of the 100 richest CEOs earns as much in a year as 10,000 people working in a garment factory in Bangladesh.

By all measures, these global inequalities are increasing every year. In fact, most estimates suggest that within the next 25 years, the world may see its first trillionaire. But as the wealth of the richest 1% increases to stratospheric levels, the world's poor continue to suffer from malnutrition and starvation, lack of access to clean water, exposure to sewage and wastewater, illiteracy, poor housing, unsafe working conditions, and shortage of health care providers and supplies. Poverty is the last topic of this chapter but in many ways it is the most important for all of us, no matter our social class, to acknowledge and address. As former South African prisoner and President Nelson Mandela once said, "As long as poverty, injustice, and gross inequality exist in our world, none of us can truly rest."



Dharavi Slum, Mumbai, India. ([Source](#))

Review Sheet: Inequality

Key Points

- Median household income in the U.S. in 2018 was \$61,937.
- The gap between the very wealthy and the rest of the country continues to grow each year.
- The income of most workers has remained relatively stagnant while the pay of CEO and others in the top 1% has skyrocketed. Since 1987, the average CEO has seen his (the CEO is usually a he) compensation increase 1,000%.

- The racial wealth gap continues to increase, with Whites on average having much more wealth than other racial groups.
- White individuals have been able to pass much more money onto their heirs than Black have because they have not been saddled with various types of discrimination.
- In every category of educational attainment, men make significantly more than women, and Whites generally make more than people of color.
- Global inequality is also increasing at an alarming rate, as more wealth is in the hands of fewer individuals. The richest 1% of the world's population owns more wealth than the rest of the 99% combined.
- Among the 31 most developed nations in the world, the United States has the second-highest GINI index, behind only Chile (a high GINI index represents greater inequality).

Key People

- Thomas Shapiro
- Darrick Hamilton
- William Darity
- Shamus Khan

Key Terms

- **Cumulative advantages** – Advantages that are built up over generations and contribute to social class inequality.
- **Racial wealth gap** – Drastic and growing difference in wealth accumulation between Black and White individuals.
- **Meritocracy** – Belief that personal responsibility and individual effort are the sole determinants of success
- **GINI Index** – Statistical measure used to compare inequality across countries.

POVERTY AND HOMELESSNESS

- What is poverty and how is it measured?
- Who is at risk of poverty?
- Who are the working poor?
- How has the homeless population changed in recent years?
- What factors increase the risk of homelessness?

Desmond Spencer is a 39-year-old resident of Beaverton, Alabama. He dropped out of school at 14 and eventually completed his GED. Before age 20, Desmond went to prison for burglary. When he was released from prison his life improved somewhat when he found a steady job as a roofer. But he suffered a knee injury when he fell off a roof on a job. He never went to the doctor for his injury because he didn't have health insurance. He eventually lost his job during a difficult period in the economy. Desperate and unable to find steady work, Desmond struggled with the decision to apply for federal disability benefits. Several people close to him collect disability benefits, including his stepfather (who broke his back in a car accident) and a cousin (who has bipolar disorder and receives \$701 per month). Desmond would prefer to work but was turned down for jobs at an upholstery factory and a horse-trailer shop. He failed a math exam that would have allowed him to enroll at a community college to take a welding class. Desmond makes \$425 a month from a friend who pays him to take care of his horses. Other than that, he relies on money from his parents and their disability support checks. His mother finally convinced him to call the Social Security office and apply for disability benefits. The question "Is this a permanent disability?" used to screen applicants for eligibility stung him, but he answered yes.

The Washington Post article featuring Desmond reports that 13 million working-age adults receive federal disability payments, an increase from 7.7 million in 1996. Rural America, including where Desmond lives, has experienced the fastest increase in disability rates.³²

Desmond's story is about poverty in America. Many of us have a specific image in mind when we think of people who are poor, but their lives are remarkably diverse. In the final section of the chapter we explore the persistent social problem of poverty and one of its most visible forms: homelessness.

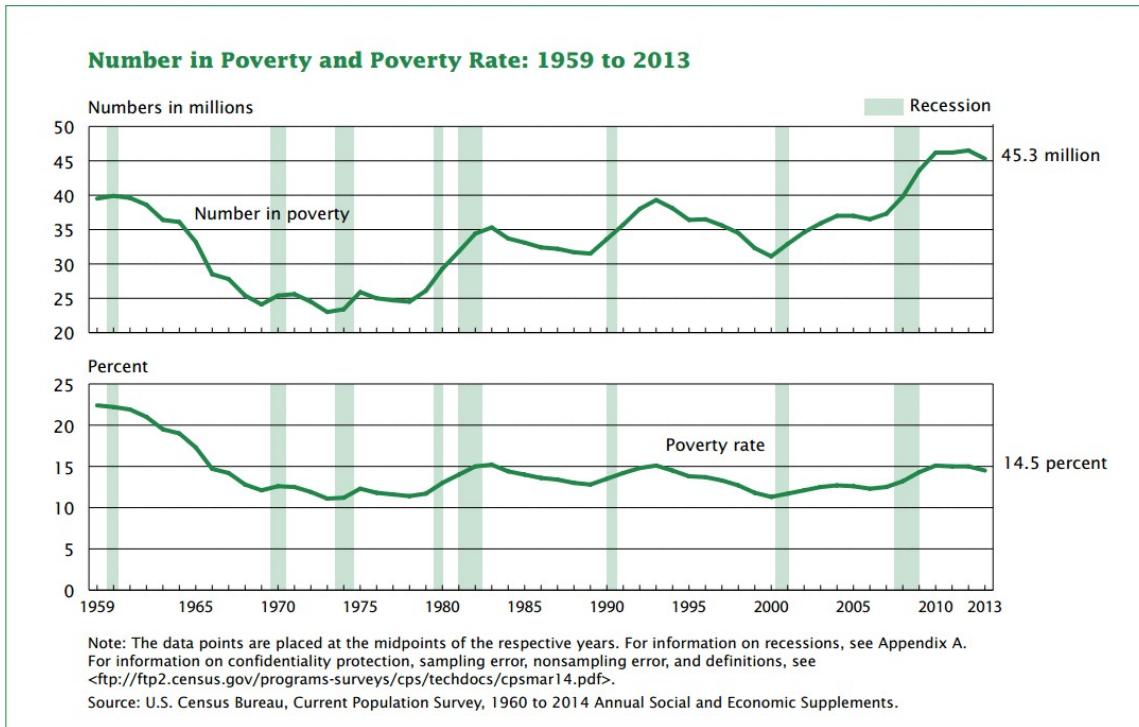
What is poverty?

There are various ways to define, and to think about, poverty.³³ One is to consider the basic necessities of life, such as food, shelter, and clothing. People without these necessities would be considered poor. This is **absolute poverty**. The U.S. Census Bureau takes this approach to measuring poverty. The Census uses poverty thresholds to estimate the number of Americans in poverty each year. For example, the official poverty threshold in 2019 was \$25,926 for a family of two adults and two children.³⁴ This **poverty threshold** (also known as the **poverty line**) establishes the minimum income level that the federal government says is required to buy the basic necessities of life. According to the Census Bureau, in 2018 there were 38.1 million Americans in poverty, for an official poverty rate of 11.8% of the population.³⁵

Another way to calculate poverty is to look at **relative poverty**. This measure takes into account the relative economic status of people in a society by looking at how income is distributed; those in the lowest income brackets would be considered poor in comparison to others in their society. Mark Rank and Thomas Hirschl focus on the likelihood of experiencing relative poverty between the ages of 25 and 60.³⁶ They find that those who are younger (ages 25-34), non-White, female, not married, with 12 years or less of education, or who have a work disability are significantly more likely to encounter poverty.

What does poverty mean to those who experience it? Being poor means having to compromise and make difficult choices about food, shelter, clothing, health care, transportation, and other needs. It means sometimes choosing between putting food on the table and paying the heating bill to stay warm. It can mean being stuck in a high-crime neighborhood with low-quality schools. As Mark Rank writes, “poverty extracts a heavy toll upon those who fall into its ranks, particularly children. Countless studies have demonstrated the physical and psychological health costs for children experiencing poverty.”³⁷

Figure 6: U.S. Poverty Levels, 1959-2013



Source: Wikimedia Commons

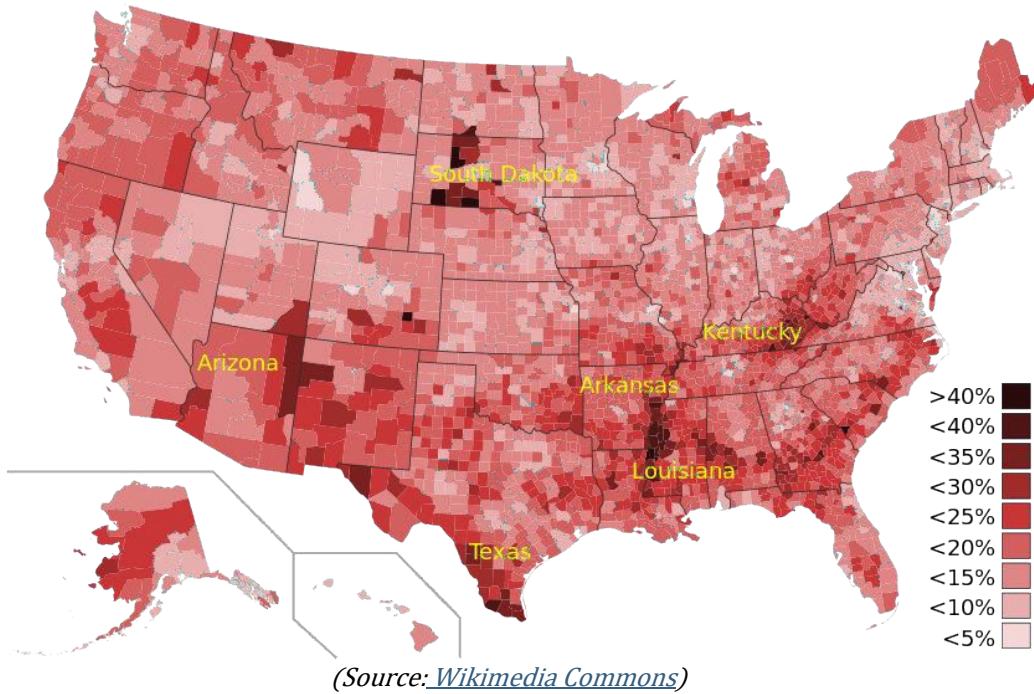
Characteristics of the poor

Poverty is not an equally shared experience. In the U.S., several characteristics place some groups at more risk of poverty than others:

- Household type** – If you are in a household headed by a single mother, you are much more likely to be poor than those in married-couple or single-father families.
- Education** – There is a high rate of poverty among adults who have not completed high school. People without high school degrees are more than six times as likely to be poor as those who have completed college.
- Paid work** – Those with no income are substantially more likely to be poor than are those who earn even low incomes. The risk of poverty falls as someone's attachment to the labor market increases. Put simply, working for pay (especially high pay) is a poverty-prevention tool.³⁸

4. **Disability status** – For people aged 18 to 64 with a disability, the 2018 poverty rate was 25.7%, which amounted to 3.8 million people living in poverty.³⁹ The unemployment rate is high for individuals with disabilities. Even if their disabilities don't prevent them from working, they may face transportation challenges getting to work or encounter employers who are hesitant to hire people with disabilities.⁴⁰
5. **Race** – The poverty rate is approximately two times higher for African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans than it is for Whites and Asian-Americans. One factor in the racial poverty gap is unemployment; the groups with higher poverty rates all have higher unemployment rates than Whites and Asian-Americans. The economic impact of COVID-19 has been especially harmful to Black workers, who have been more likely to lose jobs during the pandemic.⁴¹
6. **Region** – The South has the highest poverty rate, while the Northeast has the lowest. However, differences in poverty rates between regions are narrowing.⁴²
7. **Concentrated neighborhood poverty** – **High-poverty neighborhoods** are Census tracts where at least 40% of the population is poor. This concentration of poverty is significant in light of the various social problems that exist in high-poverty areas (for instance, crime, underfunded public schools with high dropout rates, social networks that lack connections to good jobs). Growing income inequality, and income segregation in neighborhoods as people of different classes are less likely to live in the same neighborhood, has exacerbated concentrated poverty.⁴³ Research shows that when White families live in a poor neighborhood, it is typically for a single generation; their children are able to move to a higher-income area. In contrast, neighborhood poverty is most commonly multigenerational for African-American families.⁴⁴
8. **Child poverty** – In 2018, 11.9 million children (those under 18 years old) lived in poverty; children represented 31.1% of all people in poverty.⁴⁵ Poverty levels among children have remained high since the early 1970s. A racial disparity in child poverty rates has also existed for decades, with much higher poverty rates among African-American and Hispanic children than for White and Asian-American children. Poor children have been at risk of suffering food insecurity and housing insecurity caused by financial distress during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁶

Figure 7: U.S. Poverty Rates by County



The working poor and the jobless poor

Maya Warren is one of millions of Americans who are working poor. She works as a home health aide providing care to the elderly, earning about \$300 a week. Late in her first pregnancy, she took a second job as an Uber driver. The baby's father does not have steady income. When she went into labor the doctor recommended a Caesarean section (C-section). This is major surgery that calls for 12 weeks of rest. However, six days after giving birth, she had no choice but to go back to work driving for Uber.

Maya lives with her mother and is grateful for her support. Without her mother's help, she thinks she would be homeless. Her employer doesn't provide paid family leave to home health aides. The federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) allows workers to take up to 12 weeks of leave after a birth, but it is unpaid leave. And FMLA only applies to employees who have worked at least one full year for their employer, and only if their employer has more than 50 employees. "You don't work, you don't get paid," Maya explained, summing up her situation and the reality of many low-income parents who don't have the kinds of jobs that come with paid family leave.⁴⁷

Stereotypes of poor people are that they are lazy and don't want to work. But millions of poor people do work. Approximately 10.5 million individuals can be categorized as **working poor**, defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) as people who spent at least 27 weeks (half of the last year) in the labor force but whose incomes still fell below the official poverty level.⁴⁸ A BLS report reveals the following characteristics of the working poor:

- More women than men are classified as working poor.

- Blacks and Hispanics are more than twice as likely as Whites and Asians to be working poor.
- Families headed by women are more likely to be poor than those headed by men.
- Families with children under 18 are more likely to be working poor than those without children.
- Married-couple families are less likely than families headed by a single parent to fall below the poverty level.
- Full-time workers are less likely than part-time workers to be working poor.
- People with higher levels of education are less likely to be working poor. More education means better access to higher-paying jobs.
- Low earnings and periods of unemployment are key factors in falling below the poverty line.

Service occupations account for nearly 40% of the working poor. Fast-food employees are a good example of workers who struggle in low-wage service jobs. They are featured in Katherine Newman's book *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*.⁴⁹

Nadine comes from a poor family and has not yet finished high school. Her father died during her childhood and her mother relies on public assistance. She dreams of leaving her neighborhood and describes the building where she lives as disgusting and roach-infested.

Larry struggles to finish high school while he works, but is determined to do so. He can't remember a time when his mother worked. He hopes that one day he will be able to attend college: "The only way you'll be able to survive life is to get a good education."

Roberta is a manager with a steady salary. She can make ends meet but still lives paycheck to paycheck. She knows that an emergency or an unexpected bill will put her immediately into major financial distress. She doesn't make enough to save and wonders if she'll ever be able to retire.

Newman describes working poor people like Nadine, Larry, and Roberta as one paycheck away from welfare. The working poor are constantly on the edge of getting fired (often due to unreliable transportation or childcare for their children) or evicted. Many suffer from inadequate housing, poor diet, bad schools, and lack of medical attention. It is a life of being insecure and vulnerable.

As Newman points out, the U.S. economy has drastically changed over the past several decades, with a sharp decline in high-paying jobs and a surge in low-paying jobs. The economy now favors the well-educated, and high-paying jobs are especially hard for those with lower levels of education to get.

Service workers have been deemed essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, placing grocery store, retail, and fast-food workers at risk, leading some to participate in strikes for better work conditions. Workers at one McDonald's location said they were told to make masks using coffee filters.

Delia Vargas was quoted as saying: "McDonald's is treating us like dogs. We don't want to die for their hamburgers so we are going on strike, to protect ourselves, our families and our communities."⁵⁰

The transformation of the economy has hurt people in a variety of places. William Julius Wilson addresses the decrease in job opportunities for people in urban areas, especially in the Northeast and Midwest.⁵¹ Think of Philadelphia, Chicago, and Detroit. A shift away from manufacturing in these and other cities resulted in a decline in high-paying factory jobs for people with less education. New jobs were more often located in suburban locations, creating a challenge for city residents who do not own cars and rely on public transportation. The decline of manufacturing, plus lack of access to work in the suburbs, led to more joblessness. These changes were especially damaging for African Americans in urban areas, since they often found it difficult to move to the suburbs and lacked college degrees that might allow them to pursue high-skilled jobs in cities. The rise of joblessness was also a factor in the deterioration of neighborhoods: Families with more resources were able to move, leaving behind poor families who often struggled to maintain their homes and yards.

In *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*, Kathryn Edin and H. Luke Shaefer shed light on the hardships of living in poverty in places such as Mississippi and Kentucky.⁵² The decline of coal mining in eastern Kentucky and the mechanization of farming in the Mississippi Delta are part of the reason for high rates of joblessness in these places. Imagine poverty so extreme that you would sell your children's Social Security numbers for cash (so people can use those numbers for tax benefits). Or consider Jessica Compton, who sells her plasma several times a month to cover rent. The \$30 she receives each time is the only money to count on now that her husband, Travis, no longer gets shifts to work at McDonald's. They are three months behind on rent and worried they may be evicted. Jessica and Travis are barely able to support themselves and their two children.

Homelessness

Dasani spent three years of her life at a homeless shelter in Brooklyn. The shelter's problems included spoiled food, mold, lead paint, bedbugs, roaches, discarded crack pipes, and sexual misconduct by employees. This 11-year-old is one of more than 20,000 homeless children in New York City. One room was the main living space for Dasani, her parents, and seven siblings, including a baby

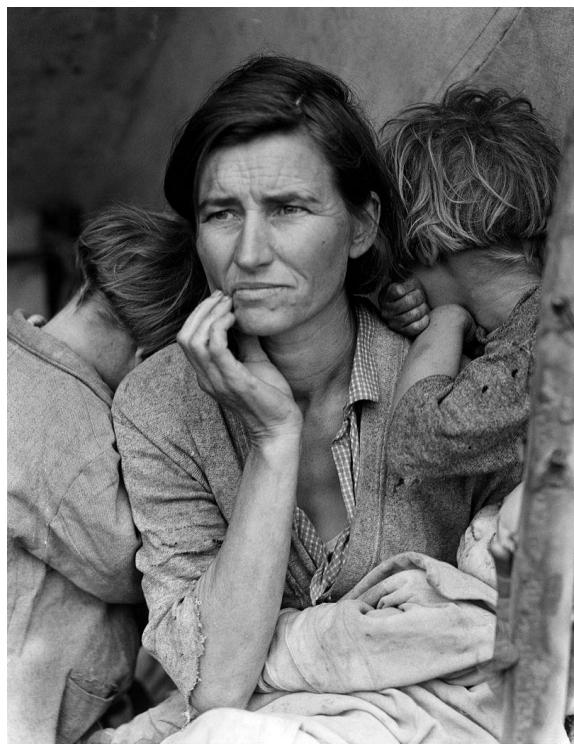


There's some protection from the rain but little from wind and cold, making for a difficult wait for transportation to work or school. (Source: Photo provided by the authors)

sister she is often responsible for feeding, changing, and caretaking. Her parents are unemployed and suffer from drug addiction. She does her best at school, admires her teachers, and made the honor roll, but is occasionally teased for where she lives and the clothes she wears. A fight with a classmate lead to a week of suspension.

Prior to the shelter, Dasani and her family lived in a duplex and before that, an apartment. They were dependent on rent subsidies that eventually expired. Rent kept going up; one-bedroom apartments cost \$1,300 a month. The demand for public housing far exceeds the supply. Families like Dasani's are desperate for affordable housing at a time when nearby condominiums sell for \$1.5 million and brownstone homes for more than \$2 million.

"If I could grant you three wishes, what would they be?" a school counselor asked Dasani. She wished for a home, a lot of money, and three more wishes. One wish came true when a space finally opened at another shelter. This shelter had an apartment with a kitchen, a full bathroom, and two bedrooms. The mattresses are in good condition, a welcome change from broken mattresses with exposed coils.



Migrant Mother by Dorothea Lange (1936).
(Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#))

Dasani's experience with homelessness provides an introduction to one of America's most devastating social problems.⁵³ Someone is **homeless** if they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.⁵⁴ The homeless population in the United States is established by what is known as the **point-in-time count**. In late January, communities across the country count the number of homeless people living in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or on the street. From this data collection, we know that 567,715 people experienced homelessness in the U.S. in 2019. One-fifth of those (107,069) were children.

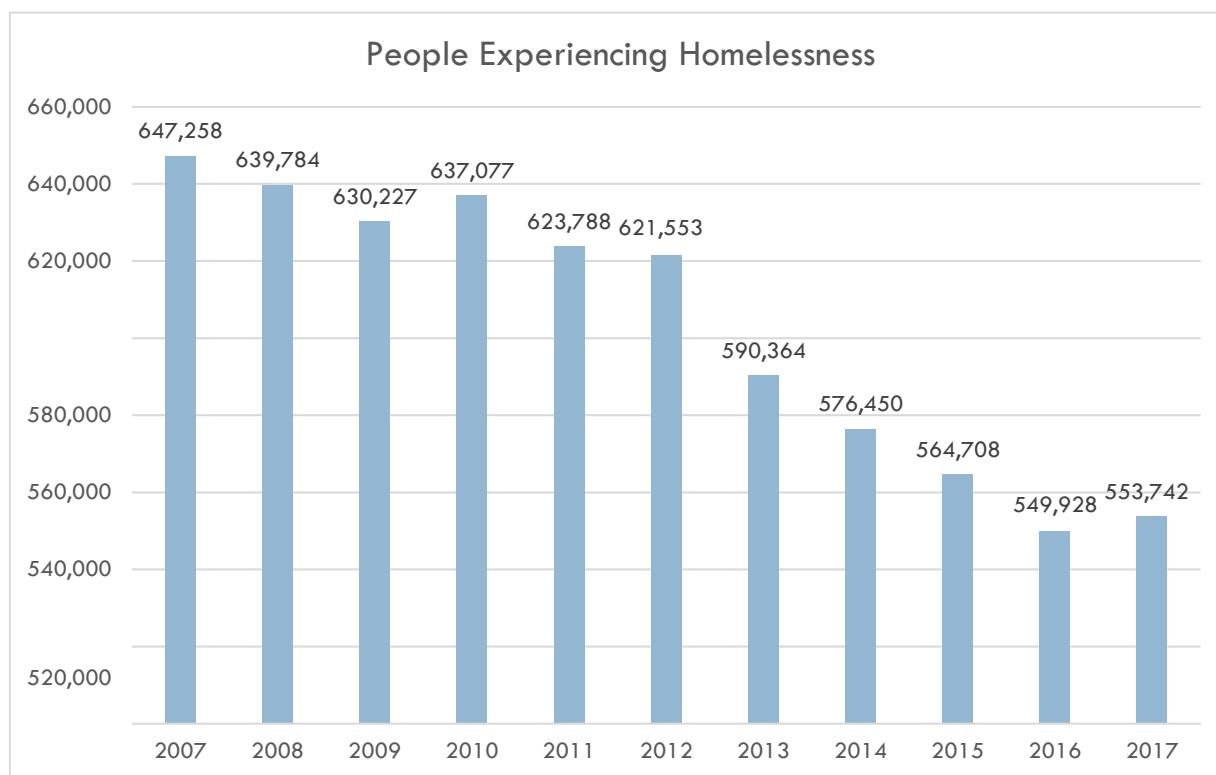
Single individuals make up 70% of the homeless population; the remaining 30% are families. When we focus on individuals experiencing homelessness on their own, approximately 70% are men. But when we look at homeless families, approximately 60% are comprised of girls and women.

In 2019, the **sheltered homeless** (people staying in emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, or safe havens) accounted for 63% of the homeless population, with the remaining 37% experiencing **unsheltered homelessness** (their primary nighttime residence is a public or private place not designated for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping space, such as the streets, vehicles, or parks). Approximately 8% (or 37,085) of people experiencing homelessness are military veterans.

Approximately 25% (or 96,141 people) of the homeless population experiences **chronic homelessness**. A chronically homeless individual is someone with a disability who has a) been continuously homeless for a year or more or b) has experienced at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years where the combined length of the homeless episodes is at least 12 months. Disabilities include substance use disorders, serious mental illness, developmental disabilities, posttraumatic stress disorder, cognitive impairments resulting from a brain injury, or chronic physical illness or disability.

Keep in mind the challenging task of counting the homeless population. Suburban and rural areas are difficult to cover. It's hard to collect information on people sleeping in makeshift locations, such as vacant lots and railway yards. These counts leave out people in marginal living situations, such as prostitutes who stay in hotels paid for by clients.⁵⁵ Young people may try to hide their homelessness due to embarrassment, and may be reluctant to report they are homeless when they encounter adults doing counts.⁵⁶ For these reasons, point-in-time counts are imprecise and may undercount the homeless population.⁵⁷

Figure 8: Number of Homeless Individuals in the U.S., 2007-2017



Source: Data from U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2017

In 2007, the homeless population was 647,258. The homeless population has decreased since then, as the economy improved after the Great Recession that began in December 2007 and officially ended in June 2009. It wasn't until 2013, several years after the end of the recession, that the number

of homeless individuals fell below 600,000. We have yet to see if the increase between 2016 and 2019 is part of a longer-term trend.

Martha Burt identifies three types of factors that create the conditions, such as extreme poverty, that increase the risk of homelessness.⁵⁸ The first type is structural factors such as changes in the housing market, employment opportunities, criminal justice policies, and institutional support for poor people and people with disabilities. The second type is individual characteristics such as disabilities, mental illness, addiction, and a felony record. The third type involves public policy. Effective policies can prevent homelessness and reduce the impact of structural and personal factors that place people at risk of homelessness. “It would not be a bad policy decision to provide every household that has a worst-case housing need with a rent subsidy for as long as possible,” she says. Recently, policy approaches have shifted away from emergency services for the homeless to a broader focus on preventing and reducing homelessness. Strategies increasingly focus on permanent housing solutions.

The importance of affordable housing

Arleen Beale and her family have no stable housing. They have lived in a homeless shelter. They have lived in an apartment where they couldn’t count on having running water. And they have lived in an apartment complex described as a haven for drug dealers. They were evicted on multiple occasions. Arleen’s son Jori attended five different schools during seventh and eighth grades. Their most recent home, the bottom unit of a duplex with a rent of \$550 a month, was better than some of the places they lived. But the rent used up nearly 90% of her welfare check. A long time ago, at age 19, Arleen rented a subsidized apartment for \$137 a month. But she left public housing to move in with a friend. She didn’t realize how hard it would be to get back into public housing; the waiting list is long and moves slowly. Looking back, she regrets leaving a place where she imagines she could still be. Unable to keep up with her current rent, she is a few days away from another eviction.

As Matthew Desmond explains in his award-winning book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in The American City*, the majority of poor renting families like Arleen’s spend more than half their income on housing; nevertheless, millions are evicted annually.⁵⁹ In Milwaukee, where Desmond conducted his research, landlords legally evict roughly 16,000 adults and children each year. A high percentage of Milwaukee’s evicted tenants are Black women. As Desmond points out, incarceration is a significant force in the life of poor Black men, while eviction is a significant factor in the life of poor Black women: “Poor Black men were locked up. Poor Black women were locked out.”⁶⁰

The eviction crisis is expected to get worse. Temporary eviction moratoriums put in place at the beginning of the U.S. COVID-19 outbreak in spring 2020 provided some protection for renters. But when those moratoriums end, low-income and unemployed renters are at high risk of eviction. Aaron Carr, founder and executive director of the Housing Rights Initiative, says, “Allowing eviction moratoriums and expanded unemployment benefits to expire will undoubtedly lead to a perfect storm of instability, homelessness, and human suffering.”⁶¹

The importance of having an affordable place to live cannot be overstated. If someone is asked to identify the main necessities of life, a likely response is food, shelter, and clothing. As Desmond explains in *Evicted*, “Without stable shelter, everything else falls apart.” A stable home supports our psychological well-being, encourages social relationships, and provides a consistent educational setting for children. When people are secure in a home, our communities are made stronger.

Desmond believes that housing is not just a need but a right. He recommends expanding the Housing Choice Voucher Program. This is a federal program for low-income families (and the elderly and disabled) to afford decent and safe housing in the private market, including single-family homes, townhouses, and apartments. Too many poor families are forced to spend most of their income on housing. Desmond calls for a universal housing voucher program for every family below a certain income level. Millions of poor families would then be able to seek housing in the private market. More families in stable homes would mean far less government money spent on the costs of homelessness.



Possessions placed on the sidewalk after an eviction. ([Source](#))

Desmond’s arguments reflect many of the larger themes we have addressed throughout this chapter. We have shown how our social class standing is not just a matter of individual efforts and initiatives; there are larger structural and institutional forces that influence our class positions and are responsible for the growing inequality in the U.S. and around the world. If we address some of these structural and institutional forces, we have a greater likelihood of reducing social class inequality and poverty.

The popular conception of social class in America is that there is a tried-and-true formula: hard work translates to success, which leads to upward mobility. If you work hard and stay on track you can achieve the American Dream. But the reality of social class is much more complicated. There are drastic levels of income and wealth inequality in America.

If we think of ourselves as contestants in a race, those who have more wealth have a head start in the race. We like to think that everyone is running in a fair race, but those with built-in advantages (high income, better schools, good health care, easy access to nutritional food, secure housing, reliable transportation) have a significantly better chance of succeeding in the race than those like Alex Russo or Desmond Spencer or Arleen Beale’s son Jori. It isn’t that those who are disadvantaged shouldn’t bother to compete or that they have no chance to succeed. But we need to be honest about social class and recognize that it greatly enables some and severely constrains others.

Review Sheet: Poverty

Key Points

- Cultural capital, fields, and habitus conceptualize culture as a kind of exchangeable resource. There are different ways to measure poverty; definitions can focus on the necessities of life, the relative economic status of people in a society, or the essence of being poor (such as the challenges and outcomes of being poor).
- The official poverty threshold in 2019 was \$25,926 for a family of two adults and two children. According to the Census Bureau, in 2018 there were 38.1 million people in poverty; 11.9 million children lived in poverty.
- Poverty is not an equally shared experience. Type of household, level of education, disability status, and race are among the characteristics that put some groups at higher risk of poverty than others.
- More than 10 million Americans can be categorized as working poor. More women than men are classified as working poor. Blacks and Hispanics are more than twice as likely as Whites and Asians to be working poor. Low earnings and periods of unemployment are key factors in workers falling below the poverty line.
- More than 500,000 people currently experience homelessness in the United States. In 2019, one-fifth of people experiencing homelessness were children.
- Policy approaches have shifted away from emergency services to a broader focus on preventing and reducing homelessness. Strategies increasingly focus on permanent housing solutions.

Key People

- Mark Rank
- Thomas Hirschl
- Katherine Newman
- Kathryn Edin and H. Luke Shaefer
- William Julius Wilson
- Martha Burt
- Matthew Desmond

Key Terms

- **Absolute poverty** – Poverty measure that considers the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, and clothing; those without these necessities are considered poor.
- **Relative poverty** – Poverty measure that takes into account the relative economic status of people in a society by looking at how income is distributed.
- **Poverty threshold** – Establishes minimum income level required to obtain the necessities of life.
- **High-poverty neighborhoods** – Census tracts where at least 40% of the population is poor.

- **Working poor** – People who spent at least 27 weeks in the labor force but whose incomes still fell below the official poverty level.
- **Homeless** – Person who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.
- **Point-in-time counts** – 1-night estimates of sheltered and unsheltered homeless populations; occur during the last week of January each year.
- **Chronically homeless individual** – Person with a disability who has been continuously homeless for 1 year or more or has experienced at least four episodes of homelessness in the last 3 years where the combined length of homelessness in those occasions is at least 12 months.
- **Sheltered homeless** – People staying in emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, or safe havens.
- **Unsheltered homeless** – People whose primary nighttime residence is a public or private place not designated for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation (for example, the streets, vehicles, or parks).

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Culture



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Culture

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WHAT IS CULTURE?

Material culture vs. symbolic culture

High culture vs. popular culture

Culture as values vs. culture as a way of life

CULTURE IS A CYCLE

The romantic image of an artist

How is culture produced?

Consuming culture

Subcultures

HOW CULTURE WORKS

How culture creates inequalities

How culture creates groups and boundaries

THE CULTURE JAM

Culture jam as a mix

Culture jam as a problem

Culture jam as a solution

INTRODUCTION

- How does music help us understand the complexity of culture?

You close your eyes and feel the music. Your head bobs up and down. You see the color of the lights through your eyelids.

Are you close to the stage, with bodies and sweat pressed to your shoulders, or do you hang back? Do you feel a connection with the strangers around you? With the band? What kind of music is it? Do the lyrics reflect your experiences or do they transport you into another perspective? Where are you? A packed underground club? A stadium? Or a library cubicle, listening on Beats headphones?

Music is a powerful force in our lives. It is also a multibillion-dollar industry, with organizational and technological changes that shape how music is made and experienced. Music is just one kind of culture, shaping our views of the world, connecting people near and far.



What kind of music is this crowd listening to? ([Source](#))

We humans produce far more than what we need for mere survival. Our intellect allows for expansive creativity, self-reflection, and communication. We transform our living environment. We share ideas and values. **Culture**, broadly, is everything we make and consume—including our ideas,

attitudes, traditions, and practices—beyond that bare necessity. Music may very well be one of the earliest forms of culture humanity produced.

“Culture” is one of the most difficult words for a sociologist to use. Sociological research on culture varies, but most work is committed to the idea that the symbolic and expressive aspects to social life—the beliefs and values we hold, as well as the practices and activities we engage in—are worth examination. Thinking in this way, burritos and Beyoncé, athleisure and college athletics, juggalos (fans of the band Insane Clown Posse) and graffiti all uncover great sociological questions.

Opening this chapter with a few questions about how you experience music illustrates how we can begin to think about culture from a sociological perspective. Émile Durkheim allows us to think about how much of social life works via culture: he notes that **symbols** (material or immaterial objects that groups affix meaning to), deployed through **rituals** (routinized and highly important group activities), give a community its specific character. In my research on festivals, for example, I walked through the Country Music Association’s CMA Fest in Nashville, cataloging common references in song lyrics (dirt roads, pickup trucks, cigarettes, Red Solo Cups) performed on stage that resonated with audiences. The annual ritual of the country music festival creates collective meanings for festivalgoers—crystalizing shared sentiments about America (small towns, simple living, reckless but “honest” fun)—through this common set of symbols.

This chapter explores how to understand culture sociologically. The first section provides a set of key tensions for making sense out of the complexity of what we mean when we use the term “culture.” Then I discuss how sociologists analyze culture as an object: how culture is made and produced. A third section explains how culture shapes social life. The final section discusses some wider issues raised in studies of culture, from globalization to cultural appropriation.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

- What is the difference between high culture and popular culture?
- How has the idea of culture changed over time, and what are the tradeoffs?
- Is culture a set of beliefs, and how are those beliefs put into practice?
- What does it mean to say that culture is a way of life?

We start by differentiating between high and popular culture, material and symbolic culture, and “culture as values” vs. “culture as activity.” Later sections discuss how culture is produced and consumed and how tastes shape groups and boundaries.

Material culture vs. symbolic culture

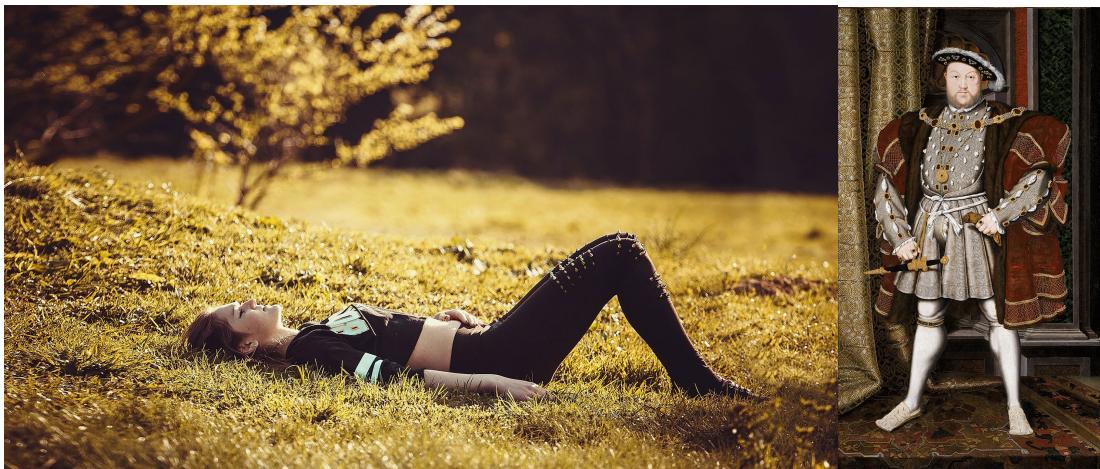
In general, humans produce clothing to stay cool in the summer and warm in the winter. But if that were its only purpose, everyone would wear the same kind of clothes—perhaps a brown tunic or blue denim overalls. People don't just use clothing in this way, however. Often, people use clothing to communicate something about themselves. There is a material component to a piece of clothing (fabric, dye, the production of clothing) and a symbolic component (words, images, style). Sociologically, we say this is **material culture**—physical goods, often placed in an economic system—and **symbolic culture**—beliefs, values, language.

Published in 1912, Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* explains how symbolic culture shapes social life. He described how a set of images and words—a bundle he called **collective representations**—can represent a particular culture; the purpose, or function, is to create social order and cohesion. For Durkheim, religion separates symbols into categories of sacred and profane, constructing social boundaries between people who recognize a set of collective representations as worthy of reverence and those who do not. Although he makes the argument primarily through religion, his work points to the importance of culture in shaping social life.

We can certainly see how collective representations work in the U.S. American collective representations might be baseball, the “Stars and Stripes,” apple pie, and the like. Similarly, college fashion might be part of the collective representations for your college or university, which could also include a mascot or a motto, colors (e.g., “Spartan Green”), an iconic campus building, or statue, all of which were created, debated, and then shape the character of your college community.

No matter the school, students tend to wear college gear a lot. Recently, I've noticed new fashion trends on my campus. I used to see a lot of jeans, mixed with an assortment of sweatpants and sweatshirts, usually with our campus logo in maroon. Increasingly, I see more leggings. They are made of material that is light, stretchable, odor-resistant, and sweat-wicking. It's useful for yoga and stretching at the gym and now, apparently, sitting in class. Athleisure, as it's called, is a growing market trend; it combines the causal style of sweatpants with a more fitted look. My campus, apparently, is becoming a large (and rather expensive) yoga studio.

Trends in the relationship between symbolic and material culture can be quite telling. Symbolically, athleisure is part of a growing tendency toward the “casualization” of fashion, intersecting with health and fitness trends to make everyday clothes less formal. And then there is the material aspect: *USA Today* notes that yoga pants (like corduroy pants and khakis before them) are cutting into the jeans market.¹ And what does it say about masculinity that men are unlikely to wear leggings, and companies sell them “luxury sweatpants” instead? For centuries, it was quite common for men to wear leggings—exemplified by the painting of Henry VIII of England, below—but today it's unlikely one of your professors would wear yoga pants to class, regardless of their gender. Sometimes controversies highlight cultural change: what do you think of three women being kicked off a United Airlines flight in 2017 because an attendant deemed their leggings to be “improper dress”?



Yoga pants with punk studs ([Source](#)); Portrait of Henry VIII by the workshop of Hans Holbein the Younger ([Source](#)).

Fashion can be profoundly meaningful, and unpacking the relationship between its symbolic and material elements produces insights into cultural change and even how groups cohere. More on this later.

High culture vs. popular culture

Most classical art was designed for the enjoyment of a few. When people used the term culture, the term once denoted only **high culture**: cultural goods made for and enjoyed by elite groups. This included oil paintings, ballet, the opera, fancy cuisine, and the like. High culture was “fine art,” often hidden from the masses.

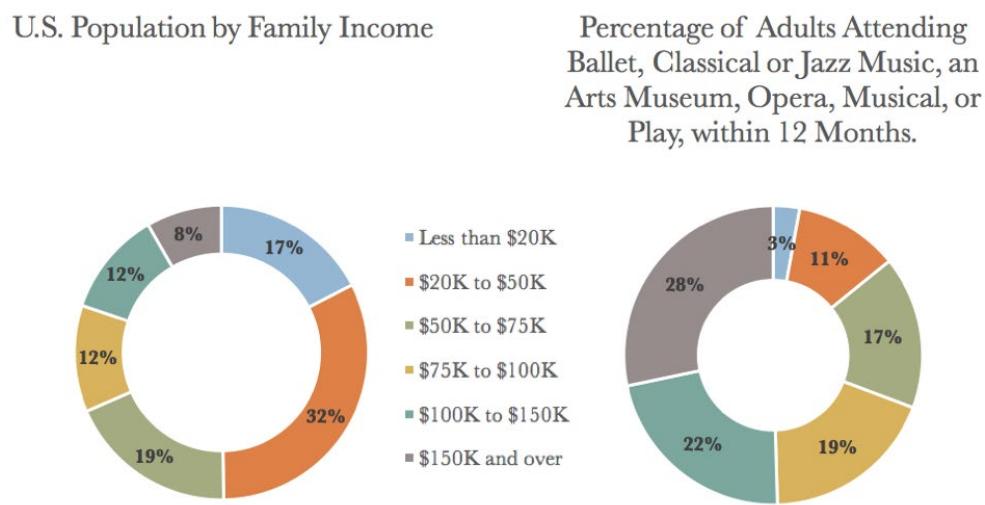
The Industrial Revolution allowed us to mechanically reproduce cultural goods for broader society. In contrast with high culture, industry manufactures **popular culture**: heavily produced and commercialized goods made for and consumed by a large audience. It is sometimes called mass culture or low culture. While high culture is attuned to elite and upper-middle class tastes, and has an aura that denotes its exceptional quality, popular culture is commonly associated with pleasure, the mundane, and the masses. Although you might hear of elites, well, being elitist about popular culture (for instance, dismissing superhero movies as frivolous and trivial) or working-class folks rejecting high culture (say, avoiding art museums), most sociological studies of culture start from the assumption that all culture has value, whether it’s Spiderman or the Mona Lisa.

The once clear lines between high and popular culture have become quite blurred. New media and technologies always challenge our notions of art and culture: whether it is the invention of paint tubes, the advent of photography, the development of wax disks for audio recording, or the use of silk-screening on canvas. Can, for example, a mass reproduced image like Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s soup cans be considered art? Increased use of computer-assistance and even Artificial Intelligence have further redefined our understanding of high art and popular culture. Are virtual reality art installations like those created by Sara Ludy to be considered art, technology, or both?

As COVID-19 shaped many aspects of our social lives, the pandemic affected our relationship with culture in illuminating ways. Severe limits on physical movement and social gathering presented

a fresh challenge to museums: how to connect with audiences in their own homes. Museums have been experimenting with virtual tours for years, and others have digitized their collections as a way to display works for educational purposes. The COVID pandemic, however, forced museums to not only augment their online collections but also develop new kinds of virtual engagements, including launching curated walk-throughs, digital festivals, and TikTok and Instagram feeds. The Smithsonian's Open Access project, for example, allows anyone to download, share, and use over three million digitized items without needing permission. (This chapter's cover photo—of a 19th-century French fan—is used through the Open Access project.) New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art asked people to post their live-acted reproductions of famous artwork on Twitter with the hashtag #MetTwinning.

Figure 1: Family Income and Attendance at Select High Culture Events



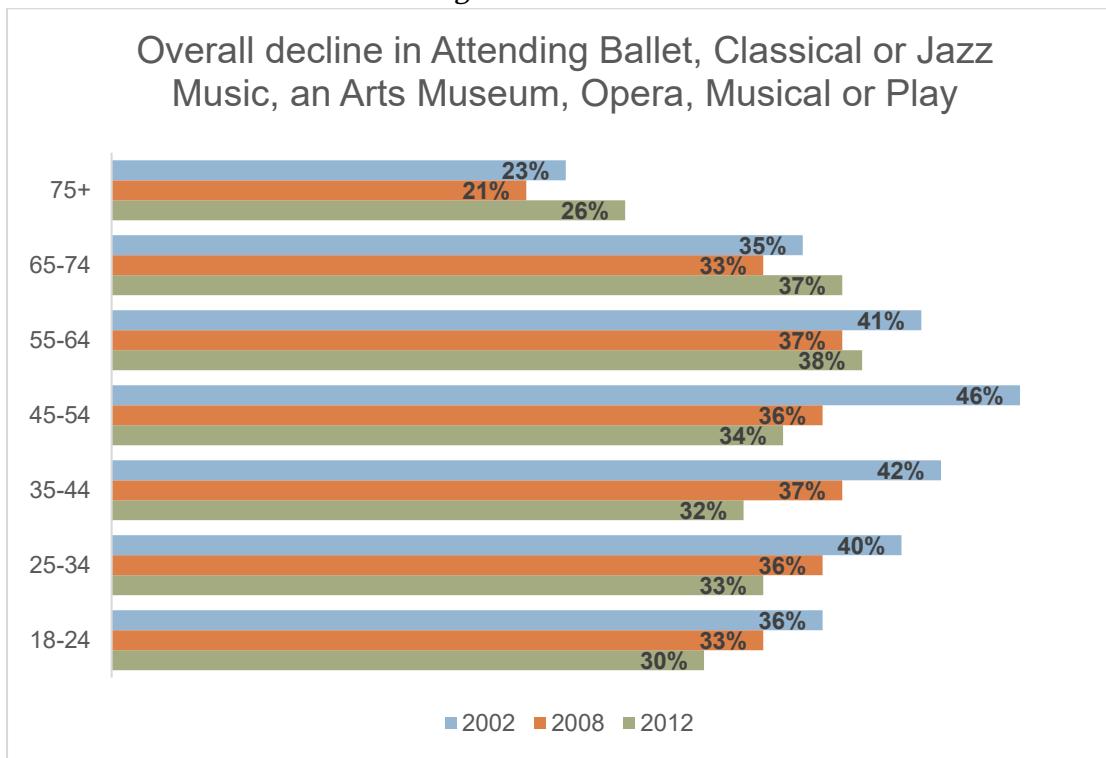
Source: Data from "A Decade of Arts Engagement: Findings from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2002-2015," p. 4

Is tearing down the wall between high and popular culture a positive development? Culture theorist Walter Benjamin noted with some melancholy that, while allowing for greater accessibility, the mass reproduction of art destroys the aura—a glow of authentic and unique creative labor—of high culture.² It is possible that Benjamin would be dismissive of the idea of a museum posting its art online. And yet, transformations in high and popular culture are complex tradeoffs. Museums can only display a tiny fraction of the art in their permanent collections—according to one estimate, an average of about 5%.³ The British Museum only displays 1% of the eight million pieces in its collection!⁴ Now, audiences can learn more about art than ever before, without having to travel to a metropolitan area or paying hefty admissions fees.

What examples successfully bridge high and low? Here's one: In 2016, Beyoncé released *Lemonade*, a chart-topping and award-winning visual art album with songs packaged along with a feature-length gritty, breathtaking, Instagram-filter-hued film. *Lemonade* is a concept album: a set of songs centered on a set of themes (infidelity, revenge, and the historical impact of race relations on intimate and social relationships in the African American community) that tell a story; the video is

divided into chapters based on themes, from intuition and denial all the way to redemption. While *Lemonade* was a chart-topping and infectiously catchy example of pop culture, the idea of the concept album originated with classical German musical compositions by Beethoven and Brahms. (Pink Floyd's *The Wall* is a famous example of a pop concept album.) *Lemonade* is high culture enough to be artistic, popular culture enough to bring down the house at the 2016 Super Bowl halftime show.

Figure 2: Decline in Attendance at Select High Culture Events



Source: Data from "A Decade of Arts Engagement: Findings from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2002-2015," p. 5

Such changes in high and popular culture spark a lot of debate: Is high culture really high culture when it's accessible to everyone? What is gained and lost? Does it matter and, if not, why not?

Culture as values vs. culture as a way of life

From Max Weber to 1950s American sociologist Talcott Parsons, social scientists learned to approach culture as a unified system of **values** (moral beliefs) and **norms** (rules and expectations by which a group guides the behavior of its members).⁵ Culture, in this way, bends our beliefs into actions.

A well-known example is the conversation around the "culture of poverty." In the 1960s, Oscar Lewis studied Mexico and Puerto Rico, finding that the conditions of poverty there created a set of widespread values and norms.⁶ In a report, U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan claimed that a "tangle of pathologies" resulted from the combined effects of slavery, economic marginalization, and racism.⁷ Although these studies argued that this culture is a *result* of poverty and inequality—that is,

that individuals who are poor develop pathological cultural values and norms—Lewis and Moynihan’s work was incorrectly interpreted as blaming the poor for their own marginalization. The debate transformed into the perception that poor folks are poor due to their own habits and preferences, their own culture.

Research has since shown that poor Americans hold values that are similar to the wider American population, even among the homeless.⁸ William Julius Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged* sought to understand how culture helps those trapped in poverty to cope with and come to understand their circumstances.⁹ He found high social isolation among urban African Americans living in areas of extreme poverty; changes in urban economies had led to declining employment rates for Black men and rising female-headed households. But Wilson found the same values among this population as among wider American society, including a strong belief in marriage and a work ethic.

Studies of organizations illustrate how values and beliefs are rather stubborn. In the middle of the last century—with the rise of an affluent middle class after World War II—sociologists turned toward understanding how organizations create their own culture, nurturing the institution’s goals and developing a world of meaning that shapes how its members think and act.¹⁰ In order to explain the 1986 Challenger disaster—when the NASA space shuttle exploded due to a structural failure in one of its booster rockets—Diane Vaughan studied how NASA’s organizational culture shaped problem-solving among engineers and scientists in a way that allowed such an event to occur. She found widespread awareness that booster rockets were faulty before 1986, and yet, even in the face of a potential catastrophe, NASA’s practices were difficult to change because the organization’s culture made such risks a normal part of their calculations.¹¹

It might appear that culture is external to us, that we are fully socialized into a culture’s ideas, language, and patterns of interaction. And yet, people also adopt and adapt culture from moment to moment. Our collective norms, values, and ideas are not as stable as they appear. Contrary to the “culture as values” approach, don’t we also think of culture as a set of practices, a way of life?

Take ethnographer Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street*, a detailed account of a primarily African American neighborhood in Philadelphia. He shows how kids were separated into groups based on cultural cues (how they dressed, the language they used, their mannerisms and gestures) that put them into two groups: “street” and “decent.” Some were successful in the contrasting spheres of the street and school because they were able to switch between those different norms, each suited to particular situations. Anderson called this skill **code switching**: adopting a set of informal rules and manners that are appropriate in a specific setting.¹² For example, some kids would embrace the slang, manner, and clothing of the street to avoid being ridiculed on their blocks, and then adopt the norms of middle-class culture at school in order to succeed in the eyes of their teachers.

While responding to the “culture as values” perspective, Ann Swidler offered an alternative understanding of how we practice culture in real life. Swidler describes culture as a **cultural toolkit**: sets of beliefs, values, and attitudes that we learn to use in different situations.¹³ We use the cultural tools that solve particular problems or help us in the specific situation we’re facing. Culture isn’t a

single system of beliefs and practices that we have all learned and accepted. It's a strategic activity: people making decisions about what might work best in a given situation.

Culture is continually practiced and repurposed in every interaction. Those in Anderson's study, for example, used culture strategically. Think about it: if culture wasn't remade and repurposed, everyone would still be wearing corduroy pants from the 1970s! (Or is that back in fashion?) Furthermore, those with a wider cultural repertoire are equipped to handle a greater variety of conditions and those who hold a "cultural tool" well matched for a particular situation are more successful.¹⁴

In thinking about culture as both a set of values and a set of practices, it becomes a kind of paradox: Culture exists outside of us as individuals, shaping our understandings of the world, yet it is also constantly remade and repurposed through everyday interactions.¹⁵

Review Sheet: What is culture?

Key Points

- Culture can be understood in a variety of ways, from a division between high and popular culture to analyzing the material and symbolic components of a cultural good.
- Culture can be seen as a system of values and norms, whether at the macro-level of a society or at the more middle (or 'meso') level of an organization.
- Culture can also be seen as a set of practices people use strategically that can change over time.

Key People

- Elijah Anderson
- Émile Durkheim
- Ann Swidler
- Diane Vaughan

Key Terms

- **Code switching** – Adopting a set of informal rules and manners attuned to a particular setting.
- **Collective representations** – A set of images and words that represent a particular culture
- **Cultural toolkit** – Using a stash of beliefs, values, and attitudes that we learn how to deploy based upon the situation at hand.
- **High culture** – Cultural goods made for and enjoyed by elite groups.
- **Material culture** – Physical goods, not necessarily essentials, often placed within an economic system.
- **Norms** – Rules for group behaviors, informed by values, specifying appropriate and inappropriate activities.

- **Popular culture** – Heavily produced and commercialized goods made for and consumed by a large audience.
- **Rituals** – Routinized and highly important group activities.
- **Symbolic culture** – Aspect of culture that includes beliefs, values, norms, and language.
- **Symbols** – Material or immaterial objects that groups affix meaning to.
- **Values** – Moral beliefs.

CULTURE IS A CYCLE

- How do sociologists study the way cultural and artistic goods are made?
- What are the culture industries and how have they changed?
- Is consuming culture an active or passive activity?
- How do subcultures and fan cultures help us think about culture as a process?

The romantic image of an artist

Author James Baldwin once wrote that “perhaps the primary distinction of the artist is that he must actively cultivate that state which most men, necessarily, must avoid: the state of being alone.”¹⁶

The image of a solitary creative artist, deep in thought, certainly sounds right. When you think of a cultural good—a song, say, or a novel—being made, do you imagine a musician and his favorite acoustic guitar, trying a new chord progression? A fiction writer in a cabin, slouched over her laptop tapping out her next novel?

Baldwin’s image is quite romantic, and yet, even in their most isolated forms, artists are always part of a vast network of groups and institutions that shape every cultural object. Those guitars and laptops were all produced in places far away from where they were used, and yet the conditions of production are quite important to the overall artistic endeavor.¹⁷ The structures of chord progressions and fiction writing were established well before he strummed G, C, and D chords and before she made the decision to describe a murder scene for the opening chapter of her mystery novel. An author like Baldwin might write alone, but he was certainly influenced by the writers he socialized with in artistic neighborhoods like New York City’s Greenwich Village and Paris’s Left Bank. And what of all the audiences who listen and read those finished products?

The artist is one part of a cultural cycle. In this section, we look at that larger circuit, which includes production, consumption, and remaking of culture.

How is culture produced?

Where do cultural goods come from, and under what conditions have they been made?

If we maintained Baldwin's romantic notion of the artist, we might believe that Elvis invented rock-and-roll. From a more sociological perspective, the rise of rock-and-roll music in the 1950s wasn't due to his individual genius, or even to a White man copying the style of Black singers, but resulted from technological advances (the electric guitar, amplification), new market demands (young and Black radio audiences with money to spend), and music label business decisions.¹⁸ Music genres are made in the studio and through a wide social system, not by a single artist.

The mass production of cultural goods requires a vast system of people and organizations called the **culture industries**. In his study of country music from its early commercialization through radio and recorded music production, Richard Peterson outlined different systems through which music was created, distributed, evaluated, and preserved. This is called the "production of culture" perspective. Using country music as a case, Peterson showed how macro-level (that is, large scale) arrangements in the culture industries (e.g., laws, technology) shape innovations and standardize cultural production; over time, changes in these macro-level forces are critical factors in making the culture that we see and hear.¹⁹ Peterson describes country music as being "fabricated" to underscore how cultural goods are subjected to this industrial process. He noted, for example, that there was a great deal of diversity and innovation in country music when many record labels competed against each other for consumers, but that the genre became increasingly homogeneous as larger labels bought smaller ones, monopolizing the production of the majority of country music.

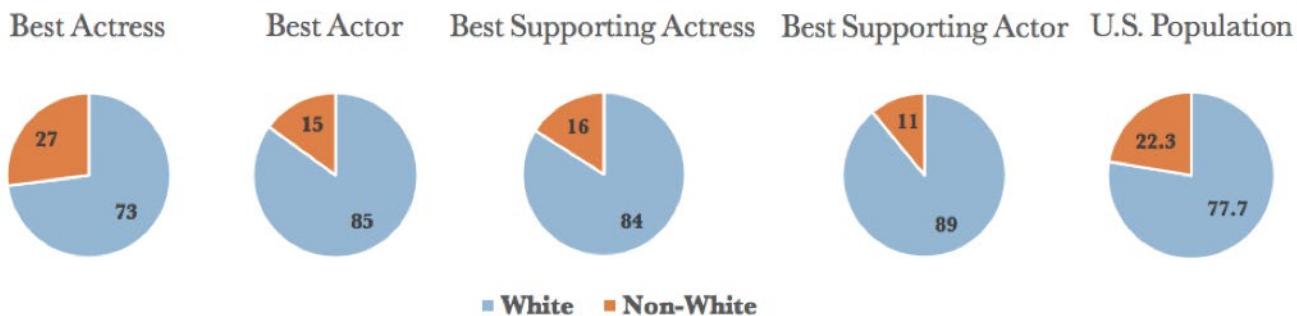
In the last few decades, a handful of companies have controlled an increasing share of the cultural industries. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 lifted limits on how many U.S. media outlets can be owned by the same group or company. The resulting **corporate consolidation**—the acquisition of smaller corporations by larger ones—has created a more uniform symbolic and material cultural landscape. In the 1980s, 50 corporations owned 90% of the media; now just six companies own over 90% of the U.S. media market: 20th Century Fox, Paramount, Disney, Universal, WB, and Sony.²⁰ The music industry consolidated in the 1960s and again in the 1990s and 2000s as larger record labels purchased smaller ones. Even large live music events are in the hands of two companies: Live Nation and AEG own major music festivals like Bonnaroo and Coachella.²¹

Who produces these cultural goods? Non-White and non-Hispanic individuals make up only 13% of writers and artists, 20% of designers, and 17% of fine artists.²² Women are just 2% of music producers, 12.3% of songwriters, and 22.4% of professional musicians.²³ In 2015 and 2016 there was a major critique of the Oscars (the most prestigious U.S. film awards ceremony) for the lack of diversity among those nominated for awards, despite the release of well-received films like *Creed*, *Selma*, and *Beasts of No Nation*, which featured diverse casts and creators. The #OscarsSoWhite hashtag trended when no person of color was nominated for an acting award; in addition, no women were nominated for Best Director or Best Cinematographer in 2016. While much of this activism has focused on nominations of Black actors and film creators (such as directors), since 2000, the

proportion of acting nominations received by African Americans has nearly matched their percentage of the overall U.S. population. Less attention has been paid to Latinos and Asian Americans in Hollywood, who remain underrepresented among Oscar nominees. The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences, which awards the Oscars, has recognized that more work is needed, including diversifying its membership: 94% of the Academy Awards voting members are White (and most are men), which may affect the types of films that are likely to win awards.

Figure 3: Academy Award Nominations by Race, 2000-2015

Academy Award Nominations from 2000-2015



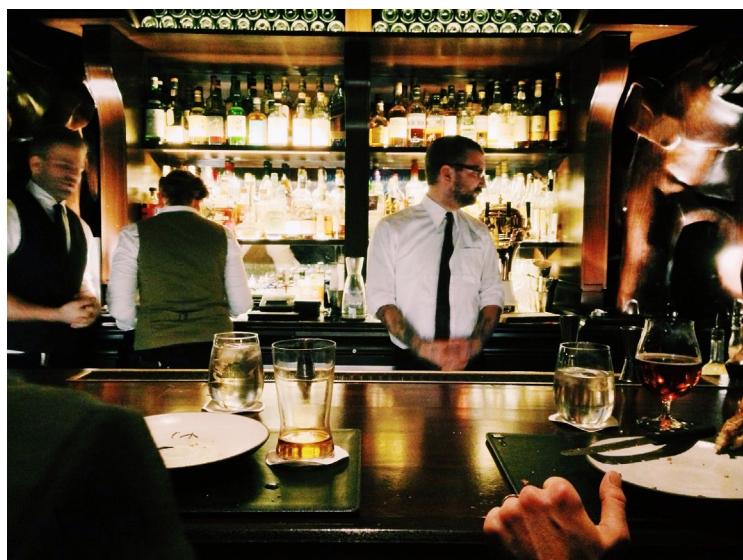
Source: 2010 U.S. Census and [Academy Awards Database](#)

Just as technology changed access to SFMOMA's art collection, technology can open greater access to cultural production. In 2015, *Tangerine*, a Do It Yourself (DIY) film about transgender sex workers in Los Angeles, made waves for being shot entirely on an iPhone 5s, edited with an \$8 app, and accompanied by music found via a free streaming service called Soundcloud. It was a hit at the Sundance Film Festival.

As an outgrowth of the production of culture approach, scholars have examined changes in work and occupations in the cultural realm. Sociologist Alexandre Frenette, for example, looks at the pivotal role of interns: the army of free and temporary labor that is essential to many cultural industries. He finds a very complex relationship between the cultural industries and higher education, demonstrating how internships limit employment opportunities in the culture industries and reproduce inequalities (for instance, only those who can afford to live in an expensive place like New York City and work for free can be music interns).²⁴ New jobs emerge across the culture industries, too. The rise of fast food created new youth labor markets,²⁵ as fast food restaurants provided part-time work for teenagers. More recently, as markets for artisanal, organic, and hand-crafted foods have grown, individuals in the middle class have regained an interest in older types of food work like cocktail bartending, butchering meat, and distilling whiskey. All of these changes provide sociologists with opportunities to study how culture shapes labor markets.²⁶

The production of cultural goods serves as one part of the cultural cycle. What about the people who listen to the music, read the books, and drink the cocktails?

Consuming culture



Fancy cocktail bar, crafted to look authentic. ([Source](#))

With the publication of his book, *A Theory of the Leisure Class*, in 1899, Thorstein Veblen (pronounced VEH-blēn) became one of the first theorists of cultural consumption.²⁷ He noted a major shift in the late 1800s. In colonial America (until the late 1700s), open displays of wealth were usually met with scorn, as they were considered vulgar. People profited economically, of course, but most people shunned the open appreciation of material possessions or leisure time. Instead, they valued the ability to delay gratification, putting off pleasure. But over time, excess wealth became something to display. Veblen

called it **conspicuous consumption**: gaining prestige by exhibiting valuable cultural goods, which implies to others that you are wealthy. Sure, a \$17,000 Hyundai Elantra can get you to the grocery store, but to display wealth, a bright yellow \$100,000 Porsche 911 Carrera Cabriolet would do the trick. Why wear \$20 college sweatpants to class when you can wear \$200 Kanye West-designed Calabasas trackpants?

Figure 4: Global Spending on Luxury Goods, 2016



Source: Bain & Company Luxury Goods Worldwide Market Study, 2016

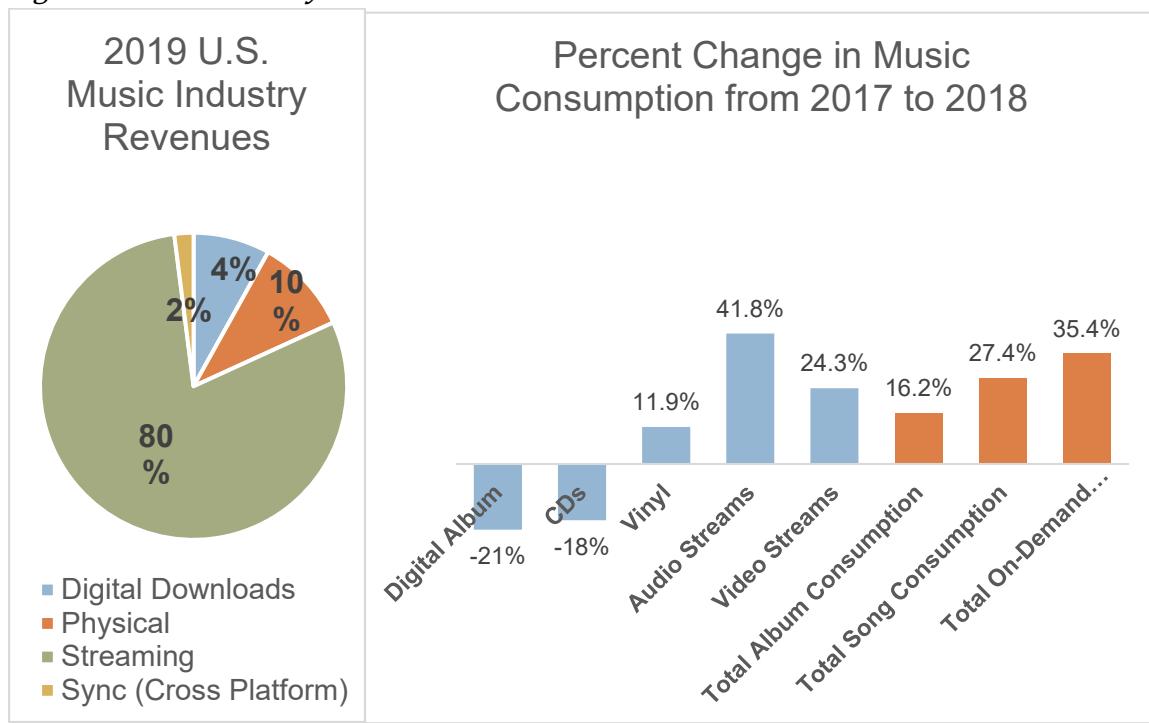
Sociologists have broadened our understanding of how people consume culture, including the effects of fast food on children²⁸ and how different consumption habits, from social media use to buying the newest fad in clothing, can create tensions within a family.²⁹ Sharon Zukin examined how the spaces of consumption have changed over time, from small mom-and-pop businesses to megamalls

and international corporations.³⁰ And Elizabeth Currid-Halkett explains how elites today are more likely to conspicuously participate in services and activities (e.g., yoga, silent meditation retreats, listening to NPR, drinking almond milk) rather than displaying luxury goods.³¹ The way we consume music is rapidly changing, too.

But is cultural consumption simply a passive activity? You might believe that the women who join romance novel book clubs internalize what many see as their oppressive and sexist messages about women, sex, and relationships. Janice Radway, however, found that book clubs are a great example of how cultural consumption can be quite complex. When reading romance novels, some women in her study inverted even the most old fashioned stories—mysterious men and damsels in distress—into narratives of adventure, female empowerment, and freedom.³² By rejecting the regressive gender norms in the books they read, another scholar concluded that female readers “press books into service for the meanings that they transmit and the conversations they generate.”³³

Are we mindless consumers, or do we bend the meanings and uses of the cultural goods to our own purposes? Sociology shows how audiences play a role in culture as much as producers do. As Radway’s research illustrates, the meaning of a cultural good is open to multiple interpretations by its varied users. Studying how people consume cultural goods illuminates another part of the cycle.

Figure 5: Music Sales by Format



Sources: RIAA Year-End 2019 Music Revenues Report and Rolling Stone 2019³⁴

Subcultures

What can goth culture teach us about the cycle of culture? While the production of culture allows us to understand that culture is fabricated just like any other product, and consumption studies

teach us how audiences are active and strategic interpreters of the culture they see and hear, subcultures like goths give us a sense for how culture is repurposed and remade.

A **subculture** is, generally, a group that holds values and engages in activities that separate members from the wider society. Based on his examination of British working class youth, professor of art and media studies Dick Hebdige differentiated subcultures based on their expressions of style: their particular forms of slang, dress, and music. Goths have their own jargon (“babybat” means a new or young goth), dress (dark clothes, boots, pale makeup), and music (Bauhaus, The Cure). Subcultures take and adapt existing cultural items and behaviors and reuse them. Goths, for example, repurpose British Victorian-era styles from the 1800s, blended with a more contemporary punk DIY sensibility.

From goths to skate punks to juggalos (fans of the band Insane Clown Posse), it's nearly impossible to think of a subculture without its characteristic style. Subcultures are not just about the symbolic content of style, however. Subcultures offer characteristic “ways of life” as well. In Amy Wilkins's study of teen subcultures, *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians*, she points to how subcultural groups offer freedom of behavior. The groups she studied allow young girls to select various sexual strategies and break taboos in ways that the more dominant culture does not.³⁵



Punk or Goth? (Source)

There are also subcultural groups based upon reusing and sharing fictional and pop cultural worlds. More than merely interpreting cultural products, these fan cultures actively change and use fictional characters and settings to write their own stories. You might think that J.K. Rowling would be upset that tens of thousands of stories have been written and published online (at www.harrypotterfanfiction.com) using characters from her Harry Potter books. Rowling, however, sees these writers as fans of her books and as a community that keeps her characters alive. Indeed, thousands of people have written, read, and reviewed each other's work—over two million times.

Subcultures allow us to see how culture is remade, but there's more to it. Subcultural activities may also be co-opted by popular culture. For example, goth was an explicit rejection of

commercialization and popular culture, yet it was eventually repackaged into consumerist culture in the form of a popular mall chain, Hot Topic, and serves as a character style on primetime TV shows like *24: Live Another Day* and *NCIS*. (Women in tech, apparently, have to be goth.) The ultra-popular *Fifty Shades of Grey* series began as *Twilight* fan fiction that was repackaged into a modern-day romance novel and a major movie series. Subcultures show us how systems of production and consumption are not discrete spheres but parts of a broader, more intertwined cultural circuit, as individuals consuming culture may then use it as the jumping-off point to produce something new.

Review Sheet: Culture is a cycle

Key Points

- Depending on whether you examine culture from the point of production or consumption, different issues emerge. Each perspective answers significant questions.
- The production of culture perspective shows how culture is made and distributed by a wide array of groups and organizations, not just individuals.
- Consuming culture is not necessarily a passive activity, but rather a thoughtful practice.
- Subcultures and fan cultures engage in cultural refashioning, cobbling together symbolic and material culture and assigning them new meanings.
- Subcultures can be coopted by popular culture, refreshing the wider cultural landscape.

Key People

- Elizabeth Currid-Halkett
- Alexandre Frenette
- Dick Hebdige
- Richard Peterson
- Janice Radway
- Thorstein Veblen
- Sharon Zukin

Key Terms

- **Conspicuous consumption** – Gaining prestige by exhibiting valuable cultural goods.
- **Corporate consolidation** – The acquisition of smaller corporations by larger ones.
- **Culture industries** – A system of organizations that produce and distribute cultural goods (e.g., music, food, art).
- **Subculture** – A group that uses alternative symbolic and material cultural goods to distinguish themselves from the wider society.

HOW CULTURE WORKS

- How does culture shape our lived social worlds?
- Why are cultural practices sometimes effective in one social sphere but not in another?
- What are the purposes of “us vs. them” feelings? How is such boundary-making nurtured and reinforced?
- What can “taste” tell us about how culture is used to distinguish different types of people, and how has this changed over time?

How culture creates inequalities

Elijah Anderson’s account of code switching provides a story of culture as it is practiced. It also shows how some beliefs and practices are useful in some contexts, but less helpful in others. Sociologists argue that no set of beliefs and practices is inherently better or more valuable than another. Rather, different kinds of culture lead to different outcomes depending upon the situation in which they are used. In Anderson’s study, there were two worlds—the school and the street—where two different kinds of culture exist and are considered appropriate. Digging deeper, sociologists have found that such cultural differences can create inequality and affect social mobility.

How? French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (pronounced boar-DEW) proposed three interlinked concepts for understanding how culture makes differences seem fair or natural and reproduces social hierarchies.

Particular cultural goods—material and symbolic—are acquired and traded. Bourdieu called this **cultural capital**: non-economic resources (knowledge, skills, behaviors) that are useful in a particular sphere of social life.³⁶ These can be institutional cultural capital (such as a degree from a particular university), embodied cultural capital (your manner, style, ways of acting), or objectified cultural capital (your clothes, material objects). For example, high school students participating in certain types of extracurricular activities (student government, chess club) have greater success getting into elite colleges, where admissions officers are likely to value that kind of cultural capital.³⁷ However, not everyone has access to those resources. Not every school has the funding to support a Model United Nations club, and if a student has to work a job after school to help support their family, there’s no time to join the chess club. Similarly, not everyone has the same kinds of knowledge. Upper-class students are far more likely to have visited a museum like SFMOMA, listened to classical composers such as Brahms, or read *Moby Dick*. That kind of cultural knowledge can be used to improve their standing in school. Gathering cultural capital can bring tangible rewards, if it is deployed under the correct circumstances.

What does it mean to say "...if it is deployed under the correct circumstances?" Well, cultural goods aren't necessarily valuable everywhere, or in the same way. Think of cultural capital like money. (That's why Bourdieu called it "capital"!) If you go to Istanbul, it would be difficult to purchase something with five U.S. dollars; you need the local currency—Turkish lira. Cultural capital works the same way. Cultural capital might function in one social sphere and not in another, just as a country's money works perfectly well in that country but isn't necessarily useful outside of it. Bourdieu called these social spheres **fields**: contexts where a particular kind of cultural capital is exchanged, like a profession, a community, or a class of people. People vary in how much control they have over who belongs and what kinds of culture are valued within the field. Bourdieu compared it to a field in a sport. Each sport has its own "rules of the game" through which players compete. The better a player learns the specific rules of the game, and how they work in the field, the better their chances for success.

Our ability to know how capital works is crucial. Using the right kind of knowledge in the right way leads to rewards. This introduces Bourdieu's third major concept, **habitus** (pronounced HA-bi-tuss). Our habitus is our learned dispositions, a set of tendencies organizing how we see the world and act within it. For example, we don't consciously think about how to cross the street. Without much thought we wait for traffic to stop, look both ways, and cross. It's a kind of second nature that is really only apparent when something goes wrong (a distracted driver) or we travel to another country with different norms (traffic comes from the right at a crosswalk, not the left as in the U.S.). Applying the concept of the habitus to issues like education, social class, and race allows us to explain how we learn, somewhat unconsciously, to think and carry ourselves in the social world—from crossing the street to how we eat a meal to what kinds of culture we appreciate.

With these three concepts—cultural capital, fields, and habitus—in mind, let's look at schooling to understand how culture creates inequalities. Education is the field, with its particular rules of the game, from raising your hand in class to instilling a belief in meritocracy (that is, that anyone can succeed if they work hard and have talent). And the education system teaches and rewards a particular kind of cultural capital: that of the dominant, White, and middle- to upper-class culture. Poorer and non-White students are disadvantaged in their attempts to gain educational credentials, such as good grades and degrees, that are forms of institutional cultural capital. Middle- and upper-class students have a habitus, or disposition, that corresponds to their social class, resonating with the teachers and education they receive. Success in education offers greater employment opportunities and better economic outcomes. By valuing and rewarding the culture of the dominant group, the educational system reproduces the existing class structure, allowing those with more economic and cultural resources to succeed more easily than their peers with fewer resources.

Code switching illustrates Bourdieu's concepts nicely. The young African Americans in Anderson's study were not being fake when they acted one way at school and another way in the street. They were being savvy cultural actors whose habitus allowed them to use the kinds of cultural capital that were valuable in the very different fields of school and the street. They had learned a set of

behaviors and values that allowed them to easily move between these two worlds, using the cultural capital that was most helpful in each one—allowing them to succeed in school while fitting in, and staying safe, on the streets. This is not an inspiring story of how disadvantaged students can succeed in school, however. Those students had to learn different ways of acting, and mistakes could be costly. Anderson’s work proves how culture places severe obstacles in front of poor and non-White students, while middle-class students have an easier path toward educational credentials and better life chances.

How culture makes groups and boundaries

Would you be willing to go on a blind date with a country music fan? What about a goth? Does the music someone listens to, or maybe a bit of extra eyeliner, say a lot about them? These seemingly superficial questions get at how culture can create groups and boundaries.

Pierre Bourdieu was influenced by classical social theorists like Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. As mentioned earlier, Durkheim showed how religion divides the symbolic world into the sacred and the profane, identifying the social origins of how we classify our world. One of Weber’s key contributions was to distinguish between a class (groups who share a similar position based on income, wealth, education, and occupation) and **status** (the social designation of honor).³⁸ For Weber, there are classes and also status groups. A **status group** is a collection of people who share similar characteristics that a community has given a certain level of prestige—a greater or lesser value when compared to other groups. In your high school, for example, there may have been a high-status clique (social group) of popular kids who wore a certain style of clothes and makeup, and a lower-status clique that listened to a particular type of music. Music and eyeliner, of course, are not the only ways to determine such groups.

Contemporary sociologists like Michèle Lamont examine how we organize ourselves through culture. Lamont differentiates between social boundaries—inequalities in access to resources (e.g., race, social class, gender)—and **symbolic boundaries**—the ways people separate each other into groups (through traditions, styles, tastes, classifications).³⁹ These boundaries generate feelings of group membership, lend an emotion-fueled sense of belonging, and help us grasp the wild diversity of social life by placing other people into categories. Lamont looked at men in France and the U.S., showing how men create group identities by contrasting themselves with the poor. In France, the middle class sees the poor as temporarily out of work, disadvantaged by the economy, but otherwise similar to other social classes; in the U.S., middle-class people generally believe they hold different values (hard work and self-sufficiency) than the poor, explaining economic inequality as a result of these supposedly different values.⁴⁰

So, on the one hand, culture shapes and binds groups. Recalling Durkheim’s contribution—that symbols, activated through rituals, foster shared meanings and create community—we know that culture “bridges”: We make friendships and social ties through our taste in music or clothes, and we are able to maintain those connections through continued cultural activities.⁴¹ If you like bands like The Cure, you might be more willing to go on a blind date with someone who dresses like a goth. In

return, our social networks also affect our tastes, introducing us to new ideas, fashions, cultural items, and classifications, which are passed along to us through our social interactions with others.⁴² Bethany Bryson, for example, explains that people use others' musical preferences—like goth vs. country music—as cues to help them decide whether to include them in or exclude them from a friendship group.

And yet, culture also creates fences. While Durkheim focused on how culture generates social cohesion, Max Weber saw that culture can also differentiate, pulling us apart.⁴³ Sports, while generating warm feelings, can also create strong negative feelings: wearing a Yankees cap in Boston almost always compels someone to say, "Go Sox!" This phenomenon occurs everywhere, from American baseball to Spanish soccer.

Culture, seen in this way, can be a bridge or a fence.⁴⁴ It allows us to establish or cross boundaries, activate differences, and maintain social proximity or distance. Symbolic boundaries, nurturing a sense of "us vs. them," shape everything from employment to politics to education: we define groups when we hire employees, when we decide who is welcome in a political movement and who isn't, and when elite culture is valued more in higher education than the cultures of poor or working-class students.⁴⁵ Creating and maintaining these distinctions—from defining a friendship group to classifying people as part of the working class—and thereby limiting membership and access to resources is called **boundary work**.

Somewhat paradoxically, boundary work—and even conflict—creates groups and solidifies group cohesion.⁴⁶ Think about how passionate sports rivalries foster a strong sense of in-group belonging. NCAA schools are divided into athletic conferences that define which programs compete against each other. When Texas A&M University left the Big 12 for a more prestigious conference, Texas Tech football was left without a strong in-state rival; the loss of this competition that allowed Texans to divide themselves into groups of fans lowered enthusiasm for Texas Tech football (and ticket sales). In the case of cricket in South Asia, where a match between India and Pakistan reflects decades of political conflict, over 60 students were expelled from their Indian university—and even threatened with criminal sedition charges—for cheering for the Pakistani team.⁴⁷ Boundary work in culture—even in



Fans at a Texas Tech football game; when Texas A&M left its athletic conference, Texas lost an in-state athletic rivalry. ([Source](#))

sports—creates groups and hierarchies, limiting or distributing resources and opportunities. Let's go us! Let's beat *them*!

Lastly, sociological research shows how cultural tastes have changed dramatically, not just in people's interests (corduroy pants vs. athleisure, disco vs. hip hop), but in how we think of taste itself. People used to gain status in their group by displaying an encyclopedic knowledge of a particular cultural genre. Think about a classical music aficionado or a wine expert. The music snob is able to differentiate Mozart from Chopin and the wine connoisseur, as a song from British punk-pop band Blur goes, "knows his claret from a Beaujolais." Both experts can use their knowledge to make claims of high status. Perhaps you know the type: Not always the person you want to be cornered by at a party. But sociologists note that today, many people differentiate themselves by knowing a lot about many different cultural spheres.⁴⁸ These **cultural omnivores** might talk about wine or classical music, but can discuss Budweiser and Beyoncé, too. Omnivores speak of high culture and popular culture with equal ease.

You should now see how culture generates inequalities and creates symbolic boundaries. The two processes work in concert. The rise of cultural "omnivorousness" as a form of cultural consumption is hardly a democratization of taste, nor an indication that symbolic boundaries have been eliminated. Knowing Beyoncé and Mozart does not give someone equal footing in the eyes of the wider culture. Rather, people find new ways to distinguish themselves. A familiarity with a wide range of cultural goods is just another form of generating status.⁴⁹

Review Sheet: How Culture Works

Key Points

- Cultural capital, fields, and habitus conceptualize culture as a kind of exchangeable good, useful depending upon the context, and a kind of learned tendency towards seeing and acting in the world.
- Culture can work as a bridge and a fence.
- Tastes help people to define groups based upon aesthetic or moral bases.
- People distinguish themselves through a deep understanding of a particular facet of culture, but nowadays people also gain status with knowledge of a wide palate of cultural goods.
- Culture can justify and reinforce inequalities.

Key People

- Pierre Bourdieu
- Michèle Lamont
- Max Weber

Key Terms

- **Boundary work** – Creating and maintaining symbolic boundaries to limit group membership and access to resources.
- **Cultural capital** – Non-economic cultural resources (e.g., knowledge, skills, behaviors) attuned to a particular sphere of social life.
- **Cultural omnivores** – People who differentiate themselves by knowing a lot about many different cultural fields.
- **Field** – A context of social relations (e.g., a profession, a community) where a particular kind of cultural capital is exchanged.
- **Habitus** – A learned disposition, based within the particular social world a person inhabits.
- **Status** – The social designation of honor, either positive or negative.
- **Status group** – Collection of people who share similar characteristics that a community has given a certain level of prestige.
- **Symbolic boundaries** – Conceptual ways people separate each other into groups (e.g., traditions, styles, tastes, classifications).

THE CULTURE JAM

- What happens when culture moves across boundaries? Who benefits, and why should it matter?
- What are the intended and unintended consequences of an increasingly globalized culture? How does global culture interact with local cultures?
- Is there room for critique in popular culture?

The final section of this chapter uses the term “jam” in three different ways to discuss a few challenging and controversial ideas. These sections look at culture as a mixture, especially in the era of globalization; discuss debates around mixing goods from different cultures; and point to ways people use culture for political and social commentary.

Culture jam as a mix

Culture moves, spreading beliefs and practices across groups. Anthropologists study the various ways this diffusion occurs (often through conflict, war, migration, or trade), and as culture crosses boundaries—whether a national border or a music genre—it changes and adapts. Culture is always a combination, where the parts can harmonize and conflict with each other, often obscuring history in the process.⁵⁰

Investigating cultural mixtures can illuminate a great deal about social life. We can look at three curious examples. While doing research on a country music festival, I found myself in a Nashville crowd, listening to an African American performer named Cowboy Troy sing and rap a county/hip hop song called “I Play Chicken with the Train.” When visiting Las Vegas, I ordered duck tongue tacos at a Chinese/Mexican restaurant called China Poblano. And recently, I was excited to see a restaurant open in my town that sells Vietnamese bánh mì sandwiches: pickled veggies and roast pork on a French baguette.

These might seem like little more than odd cultural mashups. A successful African American singing in a predominantly White music genre? Chinese Mexican food? Vietnamese sandwiches on French bread? But these mixtures are hardly haphazard. African American music was part of early country music. When Beyoncé performed at the Country Music Association Awards in 2016 to promote *Lemonade*—an album that includes samples from country, R&B, Led Zeppelin, indie rockers Vampire Weekend, soul legend Isaac Hayes, and 1950s crooner Andy Williams—she was honoring that country tradition.⁵¹ Chinese Mexican food and bánh mì sandwiches have their own histories. In 1882, the U.S. passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned Chinese immigrants from entering the U.S. to work, barred those already here from becoming citizens, and made it difficult for them to re-enter the U.S. if they returned to China to visit family. This sparked a wave of Chinese immigration from the U.S. to northwestern Mexico (and there are still Chinese Mexican restaurants in that region). And the bánh mì sandwich is the product of France’s occupation of Vietnam, starting in the late 1800s; the mashup of Vietnamese and French cuisine has become one of Vietnam’s most recognizable cultural products worldwide.

While examples like Chinese Mexican food and bánh mì sandwiches show that cultural mashups have happened for centuries, today’s exchange of culture across the world is at another magnitude. When intercultural communication and the exchange of ideas and values reaches such an international scale, integrating political and economic systems, we call it **globalization**.

As American culture becomes globalized, what is its relationship within other cultures? When U.S. corporations enter new markets, they don’t impose themselves completely. They often adapt. Whether in Tokyo, Mumbai, or Hong Kong, you can find a McDonald’s or Starbucks. However, globalizing corporations often “localize” themselves to regional tastes. In Japan and India, McDonald’s offers squid ink black burgers and Maharaja Macs, respectively, while the McDonald’s in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, serves a bánh mì. Hong Kong’s Starbucks, meanwhile, has a Red Bean Green Tea Frappuccino. The global becomes localized.

This moves us to seeing culture jams in a second, and more challenging, way.



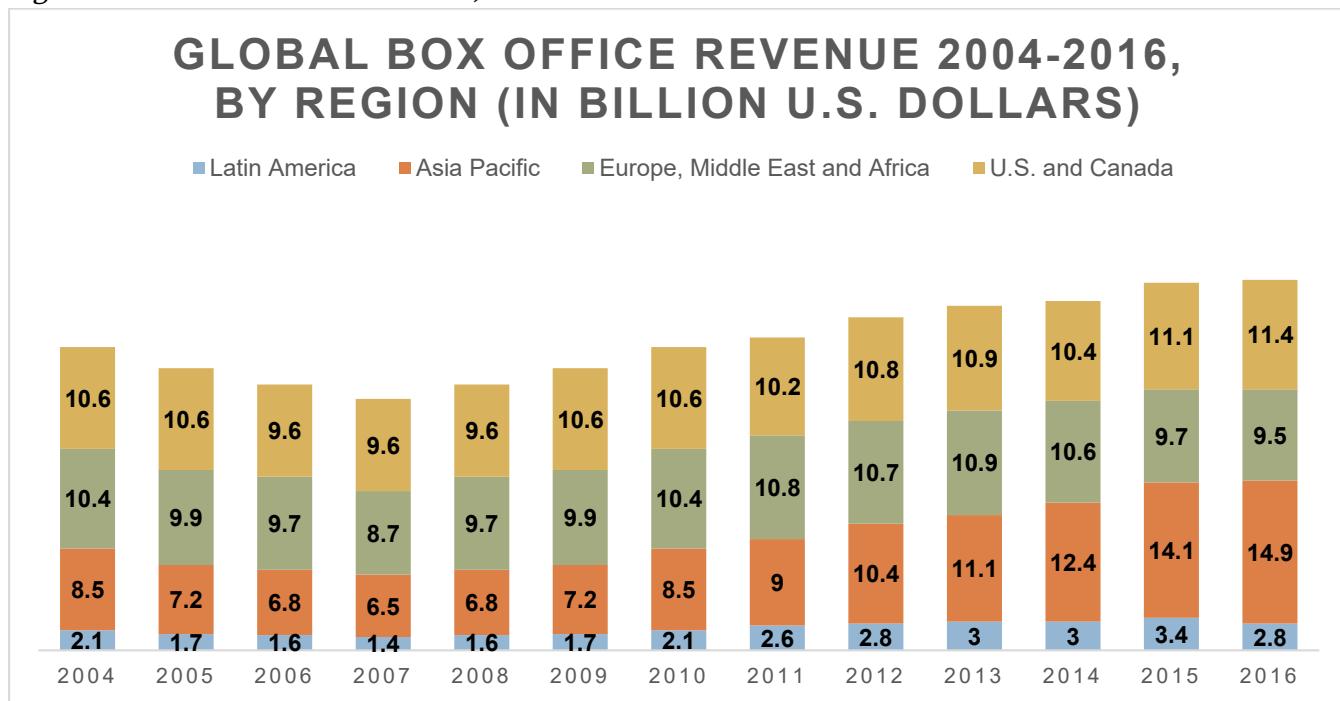
A Starbucks in China ([Source](#)); tortillas warming on a grill ([Source](#)).

Culture jam as a problem

Certainly some people are relieved to find a McDonald's everywhere. George Ritzer, however, called the mass production of culture, resulting in similar cultural goods being found everywhere, McDonaldization. Ritzer drew from Max Weber, who noted capitalism's tendency toward **rationalization**: increased efficiency, predictability, and control.⁵² While corporations do, undoubtedly, make some efforts to adapt to local cultures, McDonaldization is the broader trend toward driving out local cultures, replacing them with standardized products. Entire places can fall under a similar process. Tourist zones, like New York City's Times Square or Baltimore's Inner Harbor, lose their distinctive qualities, making seemingly distinct places more alike than different.

Multinational corporations are increasingly universal and inescapable, drowning out local ideas, beliefs, and traditions. Cultural hybrids like Maharaja Macs should not distract us from the fact that the most recognizable worldwide brands tend to be owned by American and Western corporations. This imposition of a dominant group's material and symbolic goods is called **cultural imperialism**. Recall the consolidation of the music industry? We see it on the wider global culture landscape, too: the same music companies that dominate the U.S. market—Sony BMG, EMI, Warner, and Universal Music Group—dominate the global market. The economic power of Western culture industries overwhelms competition from local culture. (At the same time, we are seeing a rise in the economic power of India's "Bollywood" and China's emerging movie production market.)

Figure 6: Global Box Office Revenue, 2014-2016



Source: Data from Motion Picture Association of America Theatrical Market Statistics 2016, p.6

On the flip side of cultural imperialism, there's **cultural appropriation**, when members of a dominant culture adopt the cultural goods (e.g., ideas, symbols, skills, expressions, intellectual property) of other groups for profit. This disconnects the product from the history and community from which it emerged, and reduces the chances that those groups can benefit from the culture they produce.⁵³

Can an ethnic group "own" culture? Let's talk about burritos. In 2017, two White chefs, operators of a food truck called Kooks Burritos, explained to a local alternative weekly newspaper in Portland, Oregon, that they went to Puerto Nuevo, Mexico, and asked local chefs to teach them how to make a flour tortilla for their breakfast burritos.⁵⁴ Their story was intended to illustrate their hard work and desire to create an "authentic" tortilla. However, it pulled them into a wider debate over how White folks use other people's cultures for their own gain. Internet commentators called this cultural appropriation, and the two quickly closed their business.

Gustavo Arellano, author of *Taco U.S.A.: How Mexican Food Conquered America*, responded to the debate by saying that appropriation happens all the time in the food industry. He says it's laughable to think of Mexican food, *comida mexicana*, as a sacred and untouchable tradition, or that "cultural appropriation is a one-way street where the evil *gabacho* steals from the poor, pathetic Mexicans yet again."⁵⁵

Are burritos Mexican or Tex Mex? Are flour tortillas traditionally Mexican? Does it matter if, as some argue, they come from Jewish immigrants to Mexico who began to make tortillas out of wheat—a European grain introduced by the Spanish—instead of the corn that was native to Mexico?⁵⁶ If, as Arellano points out, Mexicans mix and borrow from other cultures, why shouldn't Anglos borrow too?

Should it matter that these groups don't have equal opportunities to profit from a cultural trend? If Mexican food, like rock music, is a mixture of many cultural traditions (for instance, the method of preparing pork for tacos al pastor originated in the Ottoman Empire, centered in modern-day Turkey), who is being appropriated? Who has the power to control the path of a culture? Who profits?



El Luchador restaurant, South Street Seaport, NYC ([Source](#))

The owners of Kooks Burritos are rather insignificant when compared with multinational corporations adopting culture for profit. In 2016, Urban Outfitters and the Navajo Nation settled a lawsuit over the corporation using the Navajo name and symbolic culture on a line of products, from alcohol flasks to underwear. The use of Navajo imagery on a flask is culturally insensitive, even racist, when paired with the ugly stereotype of Native American peoples being prone to alcoholism. Such corporate appropriation also disconnects culture from history, from tradition, and from a community. The expansive systems of goods and ideas flowing across the world, particularly through large corporations, hides such discrimination and inequalities.

Culture jam as a solution

With these concerns, it is fair enough to feel frustrated. What can be done to address these issues?

People who participate in the culture industries are not completely unaware of the larger problems in culture. Take hip hop, for example. Rappers can be particularly self-aware and willing to critique the wider corporate and political systems they work within. Some have been doing it for a long time. Although it's more common in today's hip hop for MCs to flaunt status and engage in

conspicuous consumption (such as boasting about cars and money), many rappers in the 1990s infused their lyrics with criticisms of the corporate music production system. De la Soul rapped about the power record labels wield in their 1993 song “I Am, I Be”: “I be the new generation of slaves / Here to make papes to buy a record exec rakes / The pile of revenue I create / But I guess I don’t get a cut cuz my rent’s a month late.” Similarly, A Tribe Called Quest’s “Check the Rhime” (1991) includes the lyrics, “Industry rule number four-thousand-and-eighty / Record company people are shady.” With more scope, Mos Def’s “Hip Hop,” from 1999, outlined how the genre was part of a long tradition from exploitation to gaining some class mobility: “We went from pickin’ cotton / To chain gang line chopping / To Be-Bopping, to Hip-Hopping / Blues people got the blue-chip stock option.” These insights serve as examples of what we call culture jamming.

In her book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein explains that **culture jamming** is the practice of raising awareness around issues of McDonaldization, corporate consolidation, and cultural imperialism through informal and often illegal guerilla (independent and unauthorized) marketing campaigns.⁵⁷ These alternative or subversive media activities are a form of political communication, often using existing media to subvert a marketing strategy. Just as early hip hop illuminated the conditions under which African American culture was made and exploited, graffiti often engages with and critiques cultural industries.



Art by Shepard Fairey, a well-known graffiti artist who critiques pop culture while adopting its familiar imagery. ([Source](#))

From another cultural realm, well-known graffiti artist Shepard Fairey uses imagery similar to Soviet and Chinese propaganda and other references (e.g., images from the 1980s anti-consumerist alien-invasion movie *They Live*) to critique consumerism, promote social justice causes, and puncture

commonly-held beliefs through pop culture. At the same time, his use of imagery from African American and Latino social justice movements has led to others claiming that he is appropriating symbolic culture.

A sociological approach to culture can illuminate power, inequality, and the cycle of culture by tying together the ends of the production and consumption process. The international production, distribution, and marketing system of corporations, laborers, and consumers is called the **global commodity chain** (or global assembly line). This system is largely hidden: Few people have any idea where their products come from, leaving most consumers unconcerned by the gross inequalities between them and the laborers on the other side of the system.

To interrogate this global commodity chain, sociologist and filmmaker David Redmon made the documentary film *Mardi Gras: Made in China*, focusing on Mardi Gras beads. He unpacks the symbolic and material components of those colorful plastic beads (such as the meanings of Mardi Gras as a celebration and an escape from everyday values and norms) as well as the rituals associated with the exchange of beads (women showing their breasts, men throwing beads in return). Then he takes his camera far from New Orleans to Fuzhou, China, to uncover how those beads are produced and the working conditions the workers (mostly young women) endure at the factory. But the third component of his investigation is the documentary's best: Using a handheld camera and projector, he shows Mardi Gras revelers images of the labor conditions that create the beads they casually toss around, and shows the young Chinese factory girls what happens to the beads after they leave the factory. Redmon manages to educate both groups, scandalizing the laborers and sobering the partygoers.

For viewers of the documentary, connecting the global commodity system is a powerful reminder of how cultural goods are made and consumed and what sociology brings to the study of culture.

Review Sheet: The culture jam

Key Points

- Culture is a mixture of various beliefs and practices, but a sociological perspective requires thinking about how history and social dynamics play a powerful role.
- There are obvious and hidden consequences of a globalized culture. While Western culture “localizes” itself (e.g., McDonald’s Maharaja Mac), such examples can obscure deeper cultural imperialism and inequalities.
- Artists and activists can counter and critique mass culture at various stages of the cultural cycle.

Key People

- Naomi Klein
- George Ritzer

Key Terms

- **Cultural appropriation** – Members of a dominant culture adopting cultural goods (e.g., ideas, symbols, skills, cultural expressions, intellectual property) of other cultural groups for profit.
- **Cultural imperialism** – Imposition of a dominant group's material and symbolic culture onto another group.
- **Culture jamming** – Efforts to raise awareness around issues of hegemony through informal and often illegal guerilla marketing campaigns.
- **Global commodity chain** – International production, distribution, and marketing system of corporations, laborers, and consumers.
- **Globalization** – Integration of political and economic systems; has brought about intercultural communication and an exchange of ideas and values.
- **McDonaldization** – Ritzer's term for the increased rationalization and globalization of culture.
- **Rationalization** – Weber's term for capitalism's trend toward increased calculability, efficiency, predictability, and control.

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Gender and Sexuality



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INTRODUCTION

In 2013, retired Army veteran Jamie Shupe changed their legal identity from male to female (Shupe's preferred pronouns are their and they). Assigned male at birth, Shupe remembers their mother slapping them as a child for being "a sissy."¹ Shupe was a married father when they decided they'd had enough: "I was in a deep, dark depression because I had boxed myself into this male identity that I couldn't stand anymore."² Shupe started taking hormones and for a while lived as a transgender woman. **Transgender** refers to people whose gender identity and expression are different from what they were assigned at birth.³ But they didn't feel "fully female" either.⁴ So in 2016, Jamie Shupe petitioned to be the first person in the history of the United States to be legally recognized as **non-binary** (that is, not exclusively masculine or feminine). They won. Following that decision, Shupe's home state of Oregon became the first state to officially offer gender-neutral driver's licenses. As of July 2017, residents can have an "X" in the gender box on their state-issued ID.⁵ In court, Shupe said, "I can't divorce my male side with my female side. And you're just going to have to acknowledge that sex and gender is a spectrum, not two poles."⁶

While societies have always seen gender expressions that move beyond the male-female binary, a recent *Time* article notes that this gender flexibility has moved from being marginalized to being more widely accepted.⁷ A survey from the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) reports that "20% of millennials identify as something other than strictly straight and **cisgender** (someone whose gender matches the sex they were assigned at birth)."⁸ This is compared to just 7% of Baby Boomers, the generation born between 1946 and 1964. Social understandings of gender and sexuality continue to evolve in ways that have profound effects on our daily lives.

You could make a case that gender is the primary way people organize the social world. Before birth, parents prepare nurseries in pink or blue and use social media for elaborate reveals of whether the baby will be a boy or a girl. Elementary school teachers use gender to line students up and pit them against each other in competitions. Kids are teased by each other and even adults with a song that contains a gender-based script about marriage, family, and sexual orientation: "Rob and Mary sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in a baby carriage." Fast-forward to high school, where prom kings and queens are crowned; then to a baby shower, a space usually reserved for women, although occasionally a couple allows men and women to attend in a "Jack and Jill" format. Gender matters before the cradle and all the way to the grave.

In this chapter, we have two goals. First, we provide you with a sociological lens on gender and sexuality. We consider how, despite being firmly rooted in minds and bodies, gender and sexuality are also profoundly *social*. Second, we explore how gender and sexuality *intersect* with other social relations to create a multitude of experiences and unequal interactions and institutions.

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES OF GENDER

- What is sex? What is gender?
- What does it mean for gender to be a social construction?
- How do diverse bodies, identities, and expressions complicate social constructions of both gender and sex?

Nature, nurture, neither?



Caster Semenya. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

In 2009, runner Caster Semenya won a gold medal in the women's 800-meter race at the World Championships. Semenya smashed the previous African record and improved her own personal best by eight seconds in eight months, an almost unheard-of feat.⁹ But there were whispers: Semenya's time was *too fast*. *And just look at her*, one of the other athletes said. The track & field governing body expressed suspicion about whether she qualified to run with women. Later that year, Caster Semenya went through "gender verification testing."¹⁰ The purpose of the testing, said officials, was to determine if Semenya is "really" a woman. For almost a year, she was unable to compete while tests were administered and analyzed. While the results of the so-called gender test were never revealed, Semenya was cleared to compete with other women. She later won a silver medal at the 2012 Olympics. But why was her case so difficult? Why

did it take so long for the committee to affirm that, as she and her father maintained all along, she's a woman? Let's consider some sociological concepts of gender before returning to Caster Semenya.

We can start with a comment made by a student in one of our classes: "You are what your birth certificate says you are." In the student's eyes, you're either male or female, just as a birth certificate indicates. End of story. But it's not so simple. The certificate tells us a biological fact. It tells us nothing about society. **Sex** refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics of males and females, such as reproductive organs, chromosomes, and hormones. **Gender** refers to the socially-constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles, and relationships among and between groups of women and men.¹¹

You may be familiar with the terms **nature** and **nurture**, with nature referring to biological influences and nurture referring to social ones. Both are crucial to understanding sex and gender, but

the sociological perspective focuses on how the social world impacts our gender development. In Biology 101, you may spend a lot of time talking about the role that genes play in influencing our appearance or our behavior. But in sociology, we devote much of our attention to how the social environment shapes every aspect of us – including its impact on our genes and how they function.

Think of the phrase “boys will be boys.” The expression suggests that certain behaviors are inevitable for boys. But it doesn’t account for how the traits we attribute to boys are learned. Through **socialization**, we learn about gender from family, peers, teachers, coaches, and other influential people in our lives. We also learn gender messages from media; commercials, TV shows, movies, songs, video games, internet memes, and magazines all have something to say about gender. Perhaps you saw the Gillette commercial calling for a positive change in masculinity. Entitled “The Best Men Can Be,” it reminds us that ideas about gender are always under examination and are subject to change.¹²

Consider the link between girls and the color pink. We aren’t born with color preferences, we learn them. Believe it or not, in the early 1900s, pink was considered a boy’s color and blue a girl’s color. It wasn’t until the 1940s that the colors became gender-coded in the way we know them today.¹³ We now take the color scheme for granted because it’s in the fabric of society. Browse the toy aisles at Target and Wal-Mart and you’ll see pink products marketed toward girls. Pink is a primary Victoria’s Secret color. You can buy a pink and black Muddy Girl Bow at Cabela’s.

Meanwhile, clothes, bikes, and toys for boys are awash in blue and gray. People have choices in what they buy, of course, and many of us stray from the color norms, but the notion of “boy colors” and “girl colors” remains entrenched in American society.

Let’s think about the Caster Semenya case again. Her situation reveals a lot about social expectations regarding “what it means” to be a man or a woman: what you’re supposed to look like, how you’re supposed to sound, how strong you are, how emotional you are, what your interests are. These are **gender norms**, or social definitions of behavior assigned to particular sex categories. While gender norms can and do change through time, place, and context, the thing they have in common is that they are socially-determined and socially-enforced. Most of us are treated according to how we’re perceived. And these gender perceptions are generally assumed to match our biological sex.

But perceptions can be deceiving. The Intersex Society of North America notes, “If you ask experts at medical centers how often a child is born so noticeably atypical in terms of genitalia that a specialist in sex differentiation is called in, the number comes out to about 1 in 1500 to 1 in 2000 births.”¹⁴ And genitals are only one of many ways that we determine sex differences. In Semenya’s case, though her test results weren’t revealed, there is speculation that she had higher levels of testosterone, a hormone



"Gender reveal" cake. ([Source](#))

associated with muscular size and strength, aggression, and other traits, than most women. She remains under scrutiny, and is impacted by a 2019 ruling requiring female track athletes with naturally elevated levels of testosterone to take hormone suppressants to compete in certain women's races.¹⁵ Do you know your testosterone level? Most people don't, and so wouldn't know if they have unusually high or low levels. Below is a table of the frequency of variations in sexual development. To put the stats in perspective, consider that Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is estimated to occur in 0.2 to 1.5 infants for every 1,000 live births in certain areas of the United States;¹⁶ about one in 3,500 babies is born with cystic fibrosis;¹⁷ about one in 1,574 babies is born with a cleft palate without a cleft lip;¹⁸ and Down Syndrome is estimated to occur in about one in every 700 births. The point? Intersex conditions are relatively rare – but not as rare as we think they are.

Table 1: Frequencies of Sex Variations, by Number of Births¹⁹

SEX VARIATION	FREQUENCY
Not XX and not XY	One in 1,666 births
Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome	One in 13,000 births
Gonadal dysgenesis (abnormal growth or development)	One in 150,000 births
Vaginal agenesis (lack of development)	One in 6,000 births
Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia	One in 13,000 births
Klinefelter Syndrome	One in 1,000 births
Ovotestes	One in 83,000 births
Idiopathic (no discernable medical cause)	One in 110,000 births

For Caster Semenya, social assumptions had severe consequences – she was unable to participate in her sport for nearly a year, and, due to the recent rule change, will not be able to compete in some events in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics unless she takes testosterone-reducing drugs.²⁰ But there are everyday expectations for all of us, even if our identity matches what society assumes about us.

The social construction of gender

As Semenya's example illustrates, what is considered gender-appropriate is determined collectively. In the language of sociology, we say that these notions are socially constructed. The **social**

construction of gender refers to how meanings of gender are created through social interaction and social norms. Teaching, learning, performing, and policing gender behavior in light of expectations of appropriate conduct are also part of the ongoing process of social construction. Giving a name to a baby is one way a sex category becomes a gender status, and babies and children are then treated according to that gender status. When children learn to talk, they refer to themselves by their gender. This is all part of the social construction of gender.²¹

Here's another example: have you ever heard someone speak and noticed that the person raises his or her voice at the end of each sentence, making everything sound as if it were a question? Linguists call this *high-rising terminal*; you may know it as "uptalk" or "upspeak." What about ending sentences with words spoken in a low, almost croaky tone? That's referred to as *vocal fry*. And if modern linguistic research is any indication, you probably associate both vocal fry and uptalking with women, particularly young women.

These speech patterns have social consequences. People who use vocal fry are seen as less trustworthy, less competent, and less educated than those who don't, and their prospects for landing a job can be affected by the way they talk.²² People who use *both* vocal fry and uptalking are even more disadvantaged due to stereotypes about the kind of people who use them.

This is an example of the social construction of gender, or the ways in which we create gendered meaning through (in this case, literal) communication. Research shows that both men and women use uptalk often, and there's no evidence that women use vocal fry any more than men do.²³ But these ways of speaking are *associated* with women. The social construction of gender implies that these vocal techniques have gendered meaning attached to them. Men talk like *this*; women talk like *that*. Whether *this* and *that* are actually different in the overall population isn't what matters; the important thing is that vocal fry and uptalking are *associated* with women, affecting the way women and men who use these techniques are perceived.

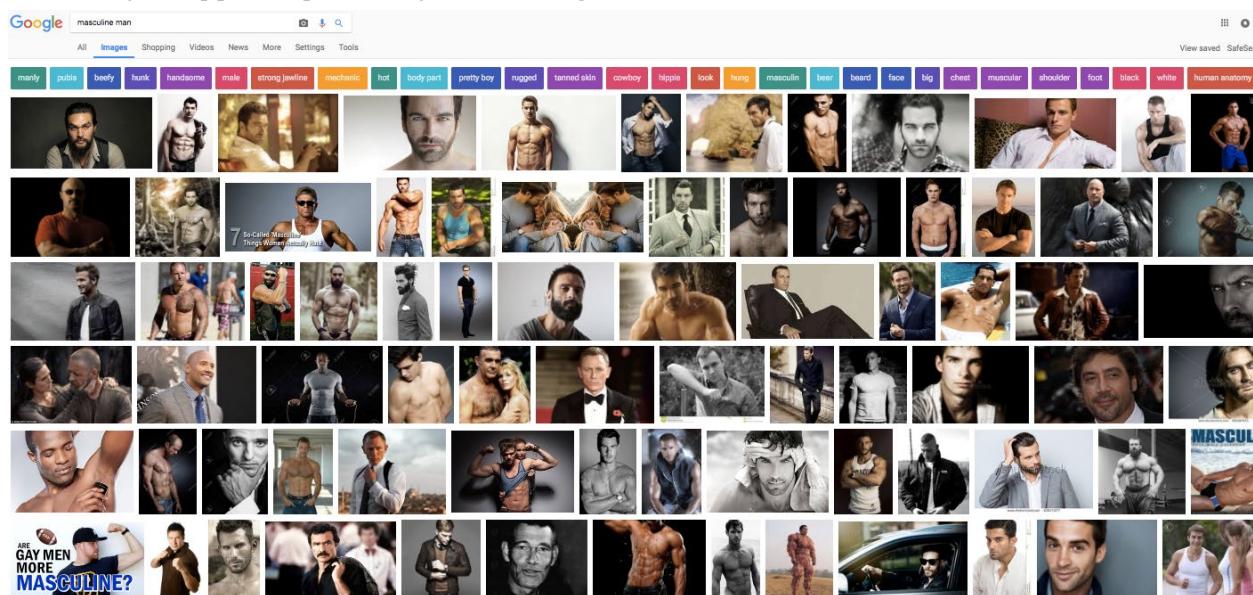
The example of speech patterns suggests that we shouldn't think of gender as something that we *are* (male or female). Instead, think of gender as something that we *do*, every single day. We do gender in the way we talk, gesture, dress, and sit. Look at Instagram and see if you observe men and women posing in different ways. Remember when the duckface selfie was popular? Girls and women used it more often. And maybe you notice that a common pose for men in pictures is to cross their arms. As you go about your day, look at how men and women take up space. You might see men with their legs extended from a couch or chair, while women may sit in ways that make their bodies take up less space.²⁴

Candace West and Don Zimmerman developed the idea that we **do gender**. They suggested that we perform actions that produce gender; we do gender in interactions with others, and we take into consideration what is believed to be appropriate for our gender.²⁵

West and Zimmerman understood that we do gender knowing that we will be judged by others; we are held accountable for our gender performances. A girl might be reprimanded for not crossing her legs when wearing a dress. "That's not ladylike," a parent might say. Men are encouraged by their

peers to “man up” if they haven’t followed norms of masculinity. A boy who shows interest in a Barbie might be told “Boys don’t play with dolls!” We’re evaluated for our gender behavior. In her research at a high school, C.J. Pascoe found that boys frequently called each other “faggot” as a way of policing each other’s masculinity.²⁶ If boys engaged in behavior that wasn’t regarded as masculine at this high school – dancing, caring about clothing, being emotional – the insult was used against them.

Sociologists, then, don’t view gender as an innate, biologically-determined characteristic. We focus on gender as socially and culturally influenced and subject to change. Gender isn’t a fact, says Judith Butler, author of *Gender Trouble*. Gender is *produced*. Think of it as an unspoken agreement to perform gender in socially acceptable ways, and our performances are so believable that gender behavior appears to be natural. The way we act sustains and reinforces the ideas we have created about gender.²⁷ Stray too far outside the lines and you risk being ostracized or ridiculed. We have words for those who perform gender out of line with our expectations. Think of the dweeb, the wimp, the dork. Perhaps you picture a skinny, awkward guy who isn’t cool, who dresses and walks in ways that make him stand out and invite ridicule. We have more words for people who are thought to be doing masculinity wrong: douchebag, dick, prick, pussy, asshole. These may be used as general insults, but often they’re applied specifically to men as gender insults.



A Google Image search for “masculine man.”

In contrast, a muscular, self-assured man may find himself being praised by others. But is this always the case? Does a man have to look and act like Channing Tatum or Taye Diggs to be considered masculine? Not always. A guy may find other types of masculinity that work for him, such as the class clown who gets by on his comedic skills. Nerds aren’t normally celebrated as models of masculinity, but it helps to invent something and become a billionaire, like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. Celebrities are more likely to stretch the boundaries of gender, perhaps because they feel more freedom to express gender with less fear of backlash. For example, the musician Young Thug wore a long ruffled dress for the cover art of his album *No, My Name Is Jeffery*. He also modeled women’s

clothing for a Calvin Klein campaign, saying: "In my world, of course, it don't matter, you know, you could be a gangster with a dress or you could be a gangster with baggy pants. I feel like there's no such thing as gender."²⁸ While we disagree with his assertion there's no such thing as gender, he certainly resists gendered clothing norms. Another example is Jaden Smith, who frequently dresses in ways that don't conform with gender norms. Talking about his fashion choices, Smith said: "So, you know, in five years when a kid goes to school wearing a skirt, he won't get beat up and kids won't get mad at him."²⁹ These are examples of widening the ideas of what Black masculinity is, says writer Mikelle Street.³⁰

Widening the boundaries of gender is one way of challenging the **gender binary**, the classification system that allows for only two separate gender categories. The gender binary is just one of many gender systems, and there's ample evidence that even within this strict binary system, there has always been some room for change, growth, and flexibility. Gender terms change over time to represent different ways of doing gender: girly-girl, tomboy, emo, metrosexual. Within show business, we have particularly seen and welcomed non-conforming expressions of gender and sexuality. Artists like David Bowie wore makeup and dresses and adopted an **androgynous** style, incorporating both feminine and masculine characteristics. In 1984, Prince's song "I Would Die 4 U" proclaimed, "I'm not a woman; I'm not a man. I am something that you'll never understand." In 1981, his "Controversy" lyrics asked, "Am I Black or White? Am I straight or gay?" Can you think of current examples of non-binary gender expression?



David Bowie. (Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#))

Let's return to the student who asserted that gender is what your birth certificate says you are. For this student, gender is fixed, and gender is binary; you are either a man or a woman. The reality is that people experience gender in complex, nuanced ways. For example, Mack Beggs is a transgender wrestler who won the Texas state high school girls' wrestling championship in 2017 and 2018. Although he identifies as male and wanted to wrestle boys, he competed against girls during his high school career because Texas law requires students to wrestle based on the gender listed on birth

certificates. He has endured slurs and insults, including being called “fag” and “it.” When he was younger, Mack struggled with suicidal thoughts and engaged in self-harm. Reflecting back to when he was younger, Mack says: “I was angry as in why I got made like this. Why do I have to feel this way? I couldn’t figure out my identity.” His mother has been supportive: “I knew that something was different when he was five he had asked why God gave him girl parts instead of boy parts,” she explained in an interview.³¹ That Mack was legally required to wrestle opponents based on his birth gender illustrates the power of the gender binary system. However, his desire to wrestle opponents based on his identity (and his family’s acceptance of him) represents a shift away from the gender binary. Mack went on to make the men’s wrestling team at Life University.³²

Institutions and organizations are also acknowledging that not everyone fits into a strict gender binary. Originally, Facebook had only two options for gender: male or female. In 2014, it expanded the gender options to 58 different labels,³³ including transgender and cisgender, the broad classifiers “neither,” “other,” and “non-binary,” and many more specific ones (for definitions of each, look at [this explainer](#) from The Daily Beast). By 2015, Facebook opened up the list even more. The company’s diversity page states, “Now, if you do not identify with the pre-populated list of gender identities, you are able to add your own. As before, you can add up to ten gender terms and also have the ability to control the audience with whom you would like to share your custom gender. We recognize that some people face challenges sharing their true gender identity with others, and this setting gives people the ability to express themselves in an authentic way.”³⁴

Public opinion data provides a glimpse into beliefs about gender identity: 55% of Americans believe there are only two genders, with men more likely than women to express a belief that only two genders exist. Comfort level with transgender people is mixed; while a majority of Americans say they’d be comfortable learning a close friend is transgender, slightly less than half would be comfortable if their child revealed they were transgender. When asked about their views of transgender rights, Americans report that their support has increased in recent years. A majority of Americans say they favor allowing transgender people to be in the U.S. military.³⁵

Intersectional perspectives on gender

When actress Patricia Arquette won the Best Actress Oscar in 2015, she used her time on the podium and backstage to highlight the wage gap between men and women, even in Hollywood. Arquette’s statements became controversial, however, because of the way she talked about various marginalized groups in America. She said:

It’s time for women. Equal means equal. The truth is the older women get, the less money they make. The highest percentage of children living in poverty are in female-headed households. It’s inexcusable that we go around the world and we talk about equal rights for women in other countries and we don’t.... It’s time for all the women in America, and all the men that love women and all the gay people and all the people of color that we’ve all fought for to fight for us now.³⁶

Her comments seem like the type of earnest expression that would garner praise from the audience, so why were they controversial? As feminist author Amanda Marcotte noted, “gay people and all the people of color” are categories that *also include women*.

Arquette’s words suggested that all women find themselves in the same position. A different perspective, called **intersectionality**, refers to the ways in which different types of social relations are linked together in complex ways, creating very different experiences for different groups of people. Developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality argues that gender, race, class, (dis)ability, sexuality, geography, and other characteristics *intersect* and *interact* to shape individual experience.³⁷ This means gender can never be examined or understood in a vacuum. We always have other identities, interactions, and relations that affect who we are and how we experience the world.



Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the idea of intersectionality.
(Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

When it comes to the intersection of race and masculinity, for example, certain ideas and images are so common we don’t think twice about them. As Mark Anthony Neal says, “The example I always use is if we see a Black man with a basketball, we don’t even have to process that. We’ve seen it so many times in our lives, we know exactly what that means.” In contrast, the sight of a Black man with a violin would give us pause and lead to questions: How did he get the violin? Does he know how to play it? His point is that some images and definitions of Black masculinity are easily defined, while others are not immediately grasped.³⁸

Consider Barack Obama’s relatively quick rise to become America’s first Black president. To do so, he had to make America comfortable with the idea of a Black man being president. Part of what made that possible, Neal argues, is that Obama represented an exceptional Black man who stood in contrast to longstanding stereotypes of African-American men as lazy and irresponsible. He describes Obama’s performance of masculinity as nearly flawless. The only stronger performance of a Black man as commander-in-chief we might imagine is Will Smith portraying an American president in a blockbuster movie.³⁹

With an intersectional lens, we must consider the mistreatment and dangers that Black men face in public space. In New York City’s Central Park, a White woman recently called the police on Christian Cooper after saying to him “I’m going to tell them there’s an African American man threatening my life” – which video footage clearly shows was not true. George Floyd died after a White police officer knelt on his neck for more than eight minutes. Ahmaud Arbery was shot to death after being pursued by two White men while he was jogging.⁴⁰ Sociologist Rashawn Ray offered this analysis

in an interview about Arbery: “Blackness becomes weaponized; a Black man doesn’t necessarily have to have a weapon on him, but instead his physical body becomes perceived as a weapon that could do bodily harm onto others. This is primarily linked to stereotypes that people have about Black men as being more aggressive, having a higher propensity to commit crimes, or being emotionally unstable. You put these together and it leads to Black men being threatened by others. And it leads to others, like in the case of Ahmaud, enacting physical violence onto Black men when they’re simply doing something like going for a jog.”⁴¹



President Obama with a staff member's daughter in the White House. (Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#))

Sociological research also shows how femininity intersects with ethnicity, religion, and nationality. In “We Don’t Sleep Around Like White Girls Do,” sociologist Yen Le Espiritu examines how immigrant families from the Philippines “claim through gender the power denied them by racism.”⁴² Espiritu’s Filipino subjects rarely identified themselves as Americans because they equated Americanness with Whiteness. Feeling marginalized and not fully American, they noted differences in gender norms between cultures. They argued that Americans – especially American women – lack sexual morality: “In America... sex is nothing.”⁴³ The “ideal Filipina” was constructed to be “everything American women were not: she is sexually modest and dedicated to her family; they are sexually promiscuous and uncaring.”⁴⁴ This created a lot of restrictions on and expectations about young Filipina-American women, who struggled between their parents’ ways and American ways. (Of course, restrictions on and expectations for young women’s sexuality is not unique to Filipino families; research on the topic spans the globe, through many generations.) These families held up these gender norms as a means to regain the power they’d been denied because of their race. The young women

were expected to uphold the image of a “good Filipino girl.” In doing this, the young women weren’t only keepers of the home; they were protectors of cultural authenticity. They were expected to maintain gendered norms *and* ethnocultural ones (cultural influences of the ethnic groups to which we belong).

Espiritu’s work is a great example of an intersectional lens on gender. To understand people’s experiences, we can’t separate out gender relations and remove race or ethnicity from the equation. We can’t eliminate the generational divide between immigrant parents and their American-born children, or forget to account for geography, language, or time period. All of these factors *together* intersect to create our everyday gendered reality. The same is true for you, whatever your story.

Review Sheet: Sociological perspectives of gender

Key Points

- The sociological perspective focuses on how the social world impacts our gender development. Gender is learned from family, peers, teachers, media, and other sources in our environment.
- Meanings of gender are created through social interaction. We socially construct ideas about appropriate gender behaviors. We’re held accountable for our gender conduct and are at risk of judgment if we challenge gender norms.
- Gender is socially and culturally influenced and is subject to change.
- Gender can’t be understood in isolation from our other identities and social relations. We must consider how gender intersects and interacts with race, class, (dis)ability, sexuality, geography, etc. to shape our experiences and treatment in society.

Key People

- Candace West & Don Zimmerman
- Judith Butler
- CJ Pascoe
- Kimberlè Crenshaw
- Mark Anthony Neal
- Rashawn Ray
- Yen Le Espiritu

Key Terms

- **Transgender** – People whose gender identity and expression are different from what they were assigned at birth.
- **Non-binary** – People whose gender identity and expression are not exclusively masculine or feminine.
- **Cisgender** – Someone whose gender is in line with the sex they were assigned at birth.

- **Gender** – Socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men.
- **Socialization** – Ongoing social process whereby we learn social norms.
- **Gender norms** – Social definitions of behavior that society assigns to particular sex categories.
- **Social construction of gender** – Process whereby meanings of gender are created through social interaction and social norms.
- **Doing gender** – Our activity that produces gender, in interaction with others and with consideration of what is thought to be appropriate for our gender category.
- **Gender binary** – System that allows only two gender categories.
- **Androgynous** – Incorporating both feminine and masculine characteristics.
- **Intersectionality** – Social theory that examines how social relations are inextricably linked.
- **Ethnocultural** – Cultural influences of the ethnic groups to which we belong that affect our behavior.

INEQUALITIES AND PROGRESS

- What are examples of feminist principles? What is intersectional feminism?
- How is inequality entrenched in social institutions like the workplace?
- What progress has been made toward gender equality? What else can we do?

Feminism

We've discussed how gender is a social construction that may change over time or context. Because gender divides people into categories, people who fall into those categories can experience the world differently, with tangible consequences for their lives and life chances.

The most notable consequence is persistent **gender inequality**, where individuals or groups are treated and perceived differently based upon their gender. Because of persistent inequality in social, political, economic, and interpersonal status, **feminism** has a long history. Feminism is usually used in the singular form, but it refers to a collection of movements that advocate for equality for all sexes and genders. In the U.S., these movements stem from a broad coalition of women who fought for the right to vote, receive an education, have custody of their children, own property, get married and divorced when they wished, and have the same career choices as men. Today there are multiple feminisms, and people of all genders call themselves feminist.



(Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

The term also often comes with negative associations. In *Bad Feminist*, Roxane Gay recalls an argument with a man she was dating in which he said to her, “Don’t raise your voice to me,” before continuing by giving his opinion about how women should talk to men. This confused Gay because she hadn’t raised her voice, nor had anyone said something like that to her before. The man concluded by asking, “You’re some kind of feminist, aren’t you?”

His “accusation” reflects the stereotypical idea that feminists are simply angry women, rather than passionate individuals or activists who are concerned with achieving equality between all genders. Some fundamental feminist principles are equal pay for equal work, reproductive freedom, reducing all forms of harassment and violence against women, and improving the treatment and status of women throughout the world.

But these principles don’t encompass all of feminism. Intersectional feminists like bell hooks remind us that we can’t divorce gender from other social relations. In her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks is critical of feminist ideas that became popular in the 1960s, such as the work of Betty Friedan.⁴⁵ Friedan spoke of “the problem that has no name” in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*.⁴⁶ The problem was being dissatisfied with the life of a stay-at-home wife. There was a yearning for something more, a longing to have a career. But this feminism focused on White women of the middle and upper classes. As hooks pointed out, it ignored poor White women and women who weren’t White; these women often *had* to work to help support the family, even if they would have loved the opportunity to stay home with their children. Middle-class and upper-class women have more choices, advantages, and opportunities than do poor White women and women of color. And the choices and opportunities for women of color are constrained not only by sexism but also racism.

Feminists of color note that reproductive rights in the U.S. are usually discussed in terms of being able to prevent pregnancy. However, the U.S. also has a long history of coerced and forcing sterilization and contraception on Native American and African American women.⁴⁷ Some women were sterilized without their knowledge or consent while having other surgical procedures. These forced sterilizations during other procedures or for unnecessary reasons were so common that civil rights legend Fannie Lou Hamer dubbed them “Mississippi Appendectomies.”⁴⁸

Another example of intersectional feminism is LGBTQ feminists noting that the discourse on coming out typically encourages people to openly acknowledge their sexuality to spread awareness and “refuse to hide.” But for some people, coming out is not only difficult, but dangerous. Alan Pelaez

Lopez explains that some undocumented LGBTQ people feel they can't come out – being undocumented is stressful enough on its own. Some LGBTQ folks live in areas where they don't have a community they can turn to when they feel alone. Others have families with religious or cultural traditions that mean choosing between coming out and having a place to live and food to eat.⁴⁹ Intersectional feminism stresses the importance of taking all social relations into consideration, so we don't erase the full set of people's experiences. An inclusive feminism takes into account the needs of all women and their differences along lines of race, nationality, social class, religion, gender expression, body type, and (dis)ability.⁵⁰

Institutional inequality

Imagine you're in a meeting at work. You make a suggestion, but no one really responds. A few minutes later, Sam from accounting makes the same suggestion and your boss says, "That's a great idea. Good work, Sam." You begin to wonder: Did the boss like Sam's suggestion because he phrased it better? Or because Sam is a man and you're a woman? Later in the meeting, someone notices the coffee pot is empty and asks you to refill it. You wonder: Is your coworker asking you because you're sitting close to the coffee? Or does the person think it's your job? At the end of the meeting, as you get up to leave, the boss tells you that you're doing a good job and rests his hand on your lower back as he tells the room that he's proud of you. Again, you wonder: Is he just being friendly? Would he make the same kind of physical contact with Sam from accounting?

This description of a work meeting might sound far-fetched, but sociologists have documented extensive work-based gender inequality. For women in corporate environments, it's not uncommon to have their authority questioned, be interrupted in meetings, face expectations that they be nice and never complain, and experience unwanted sexual advances.

An article on gender in the technology industry, "Why Is Silicon Valley So Awful to Women?", described women who had dealt with all of these issues.⁵¹ Regarding the expectation to be nice and not complain, software engineer Tracy Chou's experience was that men who worked as engineers were not held to the same standard; excuses were made for male engineers who were difficult co-workers. The tech industry is male-dominated, and gender norms have been slow to change. "I am angry that things are no better for a 22-year-old at the beginning of her career than they were for me 25 years ago when I was just starting out," says Bethanye Blount, one of the women mentioned in the article.



Intersectionality means that we should understand people as more than one thing – even conflicting things – at the same time. ([Source](#))

Results from a survey of 210 women in the technology industry (specifically Silicon Valley) indicate that the experiences of the women in the article aren't uncommon:⁵²

- 47% reported being asked to do lower-level tasks that male colleagues were not asked to do, such as taking notes and ordering food;
- 87% experienced demeaning comments from male colleagues;
- 66% felt excluded from networking opportunities because of their gender;
- 60% reported unwanted sexual advances (many coming from a superior).



The tech industry is male-dominated, which can present challenges for women. ([Source](#))

With experiences like this, it's not surprising that women leave the tech industry at more than twice the rate men do. Women hold approximately 25% of computing and mathematical jobs in the U.S., and the percentage of computer and information science majors who are women is lower now (18%) than at its peak in 1984 (37%).⁵³

Another workplace environment where women encounter inequality is the restaurant industry. Sexual harassment from owners, coworkers, and customers is a common experience for women workers, including sexualized jokes, unwanted touching, and comments on their appearance. In their research, Deborah Harris and Patti Giuffre found that a culture of harassment is a barrier to women's success in the culinary industry. They point out that there isn't always a process in place for restaurant workers to report harassment; some restaurants don't even have a Human Resources department. Moreover, women are often pressured to not report harassment. As Harris and Giuffre point out: "Such conditions make it difficult to prove when someone has a history of harassment and misbehavior. Women then have to rely on informal networks to learn if a workplace is safe. This can be especially difficult for less advantaged women, such as interns new to the industry or undocumented

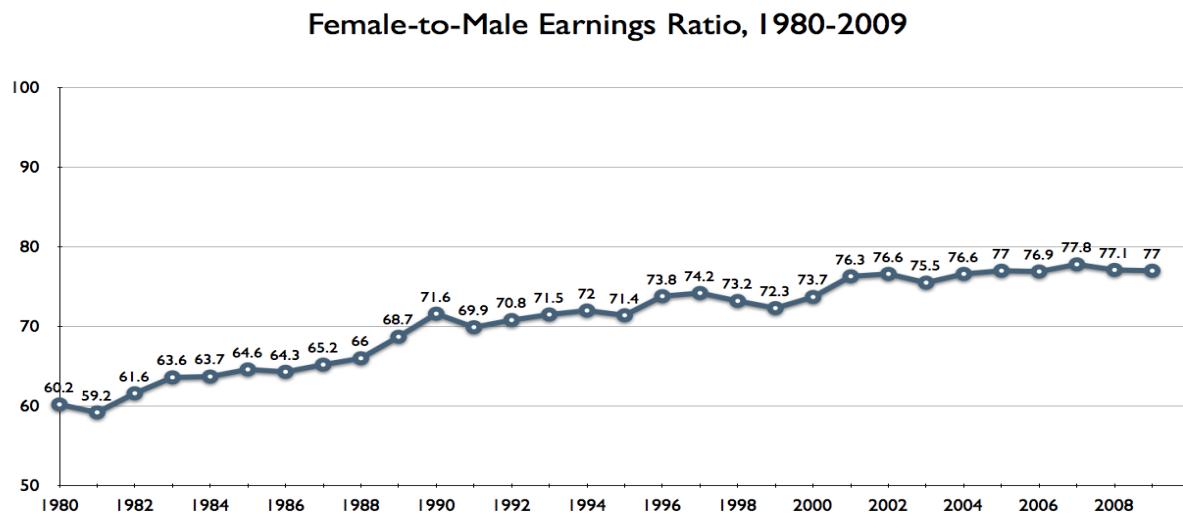
workers who make up a large portion of the lower ranks of the restaurant industry. These women may feel they have little recourse from harassment.”⁵⁴

Women are not only treated differently than men, they’re also paid less. For full-time and part-time workers in the U.S., women earned 85% as much as men in 2018.⁵⁵ This disparity in pay is amplified when we consider race and ethnicity as well. White men have higher hourly wages than women of all races, but the highest earners of all groups are Asian-American men. The wage gap has narrowed significantly in recent decades, but some groups of women have made much more progress than others. For example, White women earned 60 cents for every dollar earned by White men in 1980; it’s now 82 cents. In comparison, Black women earned 56 cents for every dollar earned by White men in 1980; this has only increased to 65 cents.⁵⁶

One reason for this wage gap is that many jobs in the U.S. economy are low-paying *and* more likely to be held by women. The low-wage jobs that women mostly do – food preparation, restaurant servers, cosmetology, cleaning, housekeeping, teaching assistants, child care, elderly care, home care aides, office work, cashiers – are projected to increase. Women of color are heavily represented in these low-wage jobs.

There are fewer low-wage jobs “for men,” and they pay more. Examples include carpet installers, construction laborers, drywall installers, janitors, painters, roofers, stock clerks, taxi drivers, butchers, head cooks, equipment cleaners, maintenance workers, and security guards.⁵⁷

Figure 1: Ratio of Women’s to Men’s Earnings, 1980-2009

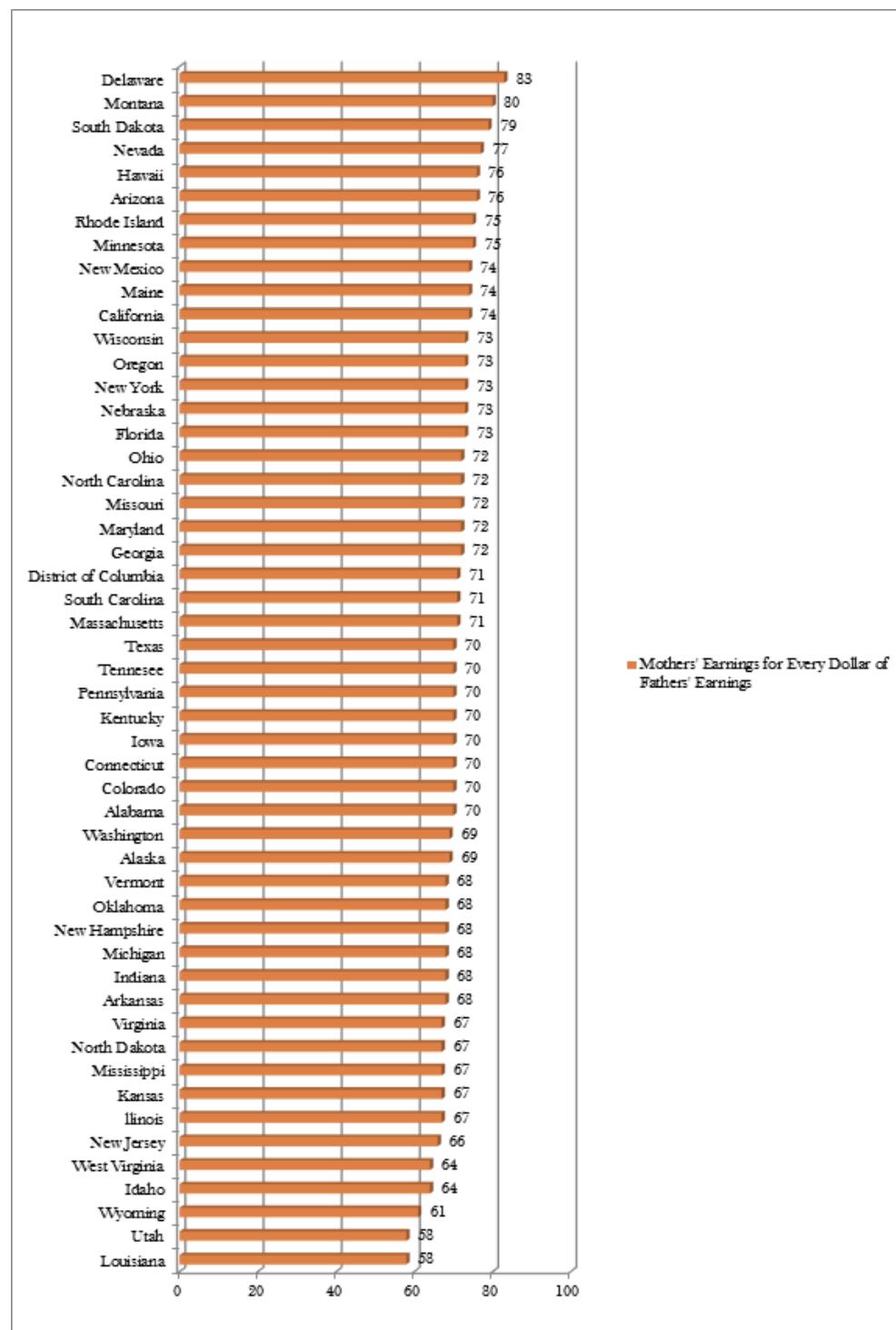


(Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#))

As Jessica Schieder and Elise Gould point out, the sorting of men and women into different occupations is partly shaped by discrimination and social norms. Ideas and expectations about what constitutes “men’s work” and “women’s work” impact our choices to pursue particular careers. Family members, peers, and mentors encourage or discourage our job interests. And when women enter a

profession in greater numbers, the pay in that field tends to decline; when greater numbers of men enter a profession, wages go up. For example, computer programming, a set of jobs initially held primarily by women, became more lucrative as it became more male-dominated.⁵⁸

Figure 2: Mothers' Earnings Compared to Fathers' Earnings, by State



Sociologists' work shows us that inequalities are more complicated than we often assume. Take the **motherhood penalty**, the systematic disadvantages in wages, benefits, and other career factors that are associated with motherhood. Studies of mothers who work show that the costs of raising a child are disproportionately felt by women.⁵⁹ Michelle Budig and Paula England showed that the wage penalty increases with the number of children, with a 7% wage penalty *per child*.⁶⁰ Further, Shelley J. Correll, Stephen Benard, and In Paik's work shows that not only were mothers perceived as less competent at their jobs, but fathers were sometimes seen as *more* competent. Fathers' paychecks sometimes even *increased* from being a parent. This benefit in wages and perceived competence is called the **fatherhood bonus**. Look back at Figure 2: there isn't a single state where mothers, on average, make as much as fathers.⁶¹

Class interacts with the motherhood penalty and fatherhood bonus. The bias is strongest at the extremes. High-income men enjoy the biggest wage bump, while poor women suffer the biggest penalty. In other words, as Michelle Budig puts it, “[f]amilies with lower resources are bearing more of the economic costs of raising kids.”⁶²

Race matters, too. Rebecca Glauber's research suggests that for married White and Latino men, having a child is associated with increased wages. But married Black men get a smaller fatherhood bonus, on average, than White and Latino men do.⁶³ Glauber also found no motherhood wage penalty for Hispanic women, and a wage penalty for Black women only after they have at least two children. However, all White mothers experienced a wage penalty. One reason for these racial differences might be that motherhood and work haven't historically been separate in Black and Hispanic families, which might increase overall motivation to work. Glauber also suggests that there might be a “floor” to the motherhood wage penalty. That is, African-American and Hispanic/Latino women already earn less than White women; there may not be much room for their wages to fall even more.⁶⁴ Overall, Glauber's work indicates that race and gender *intersect* with workplace experiences to create and support gendered inequalities.

There are indicators of American women's progress. For instance, women are more likely to enroll in college than men are.⁶⁵ Women now graduate from college at higher rates than men and are more likely to attend graduate school.⁶⁶ But despite this progress, gender inequality persists in our institutions, and perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in politics.

On June 7, 2008, Hillary Rodham Clinton gave a speech after ending her campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. She endorsed her competitor, then-Senator Barack Obama. The theme of equality was a key component of her speech. The most memorable part involved her vision of the future:

As we gather here today in this historic, magnificent building, the 50th woman to leave this Earth is orbiting overhead. If we can blast 50 women into space, we will someday launch a woman into the White House. Although we weren't able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it's got about 18 million cracks in it...and

the light is shining through like never before, filling us all with the hope and the sure knowledge that the path will be a little easier next time.⁶⁷

The **glass ceiling** is a metaphor to describe barriers that women face in the workplace that prevent them from reaching higher positions. The phrase reportedly originated in 1979 from a conversation between two women who worked for Hewlett-Packard. One of those women, Katherine Lawrence, recalled a presentation she gave that year about corporate culture: "I presented the concept of how in corporate America, the official policy is one way—the sky's the limit—but in actuality, the sky had a glass ceiling for women."⁶⁸

The term became popular after it was used in a 1986 special report in the *Wall Street Journal* that focused on obstacles women encountered in corporate America.⁶⁹ The report mentioned several problems: being excluded from an important meeting or informal networking session that takes place between men on a golf course, not being offered an executive position even after a series of promotions, blatant stereotypes about women being unfit for management, and assumptions that women would prioritize family over career.

Clinton came close again to breaking through the glass ceiling when most polls indicated she was going to beat Donald Trump in the 2016 election to become the first female president of the United States. Love him or hate him, consider this: Trump won the presidency despite it coming to light that he said that fame enabled him to treat women any way he wanted. In 2005, when he was nearly 60 years old, he was recorded saying: "You know I'm automatically attracted to beautiful...I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. I just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything... Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything." Trump released a statement describing his words as locker-room banter, saying "I apologize if anyone was offended."⁷⁰

Put all of your powers of imagination to use for a moment to consider how the American public would have reacted had Hillary Clinton been recording saying "You know I'm automatically attracted to handsome...I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. I just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything... Grab them by the dick. You can do anything." We write this not for shock value, but rather to seriously contemplate how voters would react to a woman saying this. This thought exercise reveals just how salient gender relations are in our political system.

Raw statistics reinforce the point. At the state level, just 44 women have served as governors in the United States. In 2011, Nikki Haley and Susana Martinez became the first women of color to serve as governors, in South Carolina and New Mexico, respectively.⁷¹ There hasn't yet been an African American woman governor.



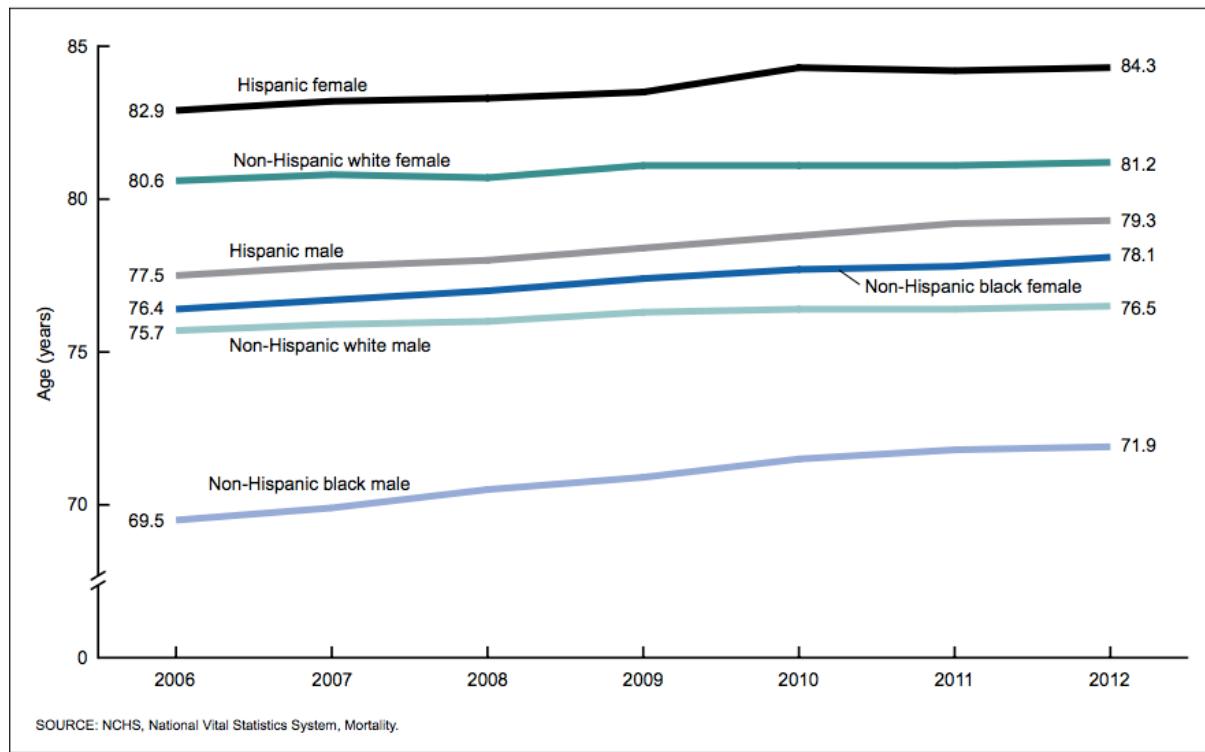
Former South Carolina governor and UN Ambassador Nikki Haley. (Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#))

A strong presence on the Supreme Court is an indicator of impressive progress for women in America. Three of the 9 current Supreme Court justices are women: Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan. Sotomayor is the first Latina to serve on the Supreme Court. Ginsburg was the first Jewish woman – and only the second woman ever – to be appointed to the Supreme Court, in 1993. Yet even on the most prestigious court in the nation, women are treated differently. A recent examination of transcripts of oral arguments before the Court showed that male justices interrupt the female justices nearly three times as often as they interrupt other male judges.⁷²

Social inequalities also affect our bodies. Take the example of life expectancy: there are well-documented differences by gender and race. First, women overall live longer than men. And second, Whites live longer than Blacks or Latinos.⁷³

Think about Figure 3. On many measures, women in the U.S. and elsewhere experience social inequalities. Women have higher rates of chronic disease, as well as higher rates of depression and anxiety.⁷⁴ And they're more likely to be victims of violence.⁷⁵ Women also generally earn less than men. So if women are systematically socially disadvantaged in multiple ways, why do they live longer than men? This is simplifying things a bit; if you look at the graph, you can see that Hispanic men have a longer life expectancy than Black women. But in general, women live longer than men. Why?

Figure 3: Life Expectancy at Birth, by Hispanic Origin, Race, and Sex, 2006–2012⁷⁶



(Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Vital Statistics Reports)

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), there may be multiple reasons. First, there could be sex-based biological reasons. For example, women's higher levels of estrogen may protect them against high cholesterol; men's higher rates of testosterone may leave them vulnerable to

cholesterol-related disease.⁷⁷ But WEF also notes that women tend to be more “health-aware”; that is, women are, on average, more in tune with physical and mental symptoms and may be more able to communicate their issues with healthcare providers. Women are also more likely to go to the doctor when something is wrong.⁷⁸ Men may feel pressure to act in “masculine” ways, which might mean holding in problems and not reaching out for help, trying to “tough it out.” It’s perhaps partly due to these reasons that men are also more likely to die by suicide.⁷⁹ As with all things human, gender inequality is complex and multi-faceted.

Gender inequality, though, isn’t the *result* of physiology, anatomy, or hormones. It is produced, maintained, and embedded in our institutions.⁸⁰ If nature caused gender inequality, then that inequality would be the same at all times and in all places. But it isn’t. We don’t all experience gender the same way. This is cause for hope. If we build inequality, we can dismantle it, too.

Gender and violence

In July 2017, author and transgender rights activist Janet Mock appeared on The Breakfast Club, a syndicated radio show that calls itself “the world’s most dangerous morning show.”⁸¹ Mock, a transgender woman, went on the show to talk about her new book. The conversation on the show, which also featured comedian Lil Duval and radio personality Charlamagne Tha God, reveals something troubling about gender and violence:



Janet Mock. ([Source](#))

[host] DJ Envy poses a hypothetical question to his guest about dating and sleeping with a woman who discloses that she’s trans after four months of courtship.

“This might sound messed up and I don’t care,” Duval says. “She dying. I can’t deal with that.”

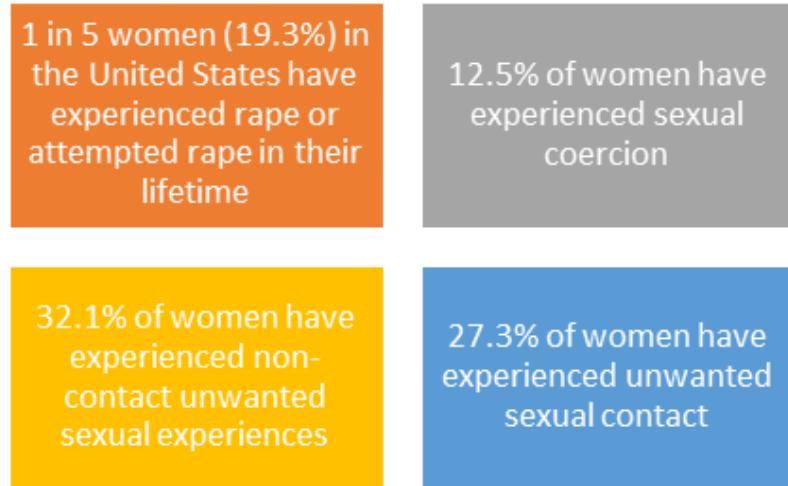
“That’s a hate crime,” Charlamagne says. “You can’t do that.”

“You manipulated me to believe in this thing,” Duval says, before continuing, “If one did that to me, and they didn’t tell me, I’mma be so mad I’m probably going to want to kill them.”⁸²

This conversation exists within a context in which violence and assault are disproportionately experienced by transgender people. In a national study of 1,876 students in grades K-12 who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming, respondents reported high rates of harassment (78%),

physical assault (35%), and sexual assault (12%). The harassment and violence experienced by these K-12 students comes not only from other students but also teachers and staff.⁸³ In fact, the Bureau of Justice Statistics Office for Victims of Crime reports that one-half to two-thirds of trans people are sexually abused or assaulted at some point in their lives.⁸⁴ According to the Human Rights Campaign, "...it is clear that fatal violence disproportionately affects transgender women of color, and that the intersections of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia conspire to deprive them of employment, housing, healthcare, and other necessities, barriers that make them vulnerable."⁸⁵ Sadly, the HRC reports that "advocates tracked at least 27 deaths of transgender or gender non-conforming people in the U.S. due to fatal violence, the majority of whom were Black transgender women."⁸⁶ HRC notes that this high rate of violence reflects anti-transgender bias as well as the social circumstances faced by a higher number of transgender people than the general population, including poverty, homelessness, and being forced into sex work.

The statistics on gender and violence are eye-opening and disturbing. As reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 1 in 5 women in the United States experiences rape or attempted rape in her lifetime. Among women who report experiencing a rape, 40% were first victimized before age 18, with more than 28% indicating they were first raped between the ages of 11 and 17. Other forms of sexual violence also occur at high rates; 12.5% of women have experienced sexual coercion (verbal, non-physical pressure that results in unwanted penetration), 27.3% have experienced unwanted sexual contact (such as fondling), and 32.1% have experienced unwanted sexual experiences that didn't involve physical contact (for example, verbal harassment).⁸⁷



(Source: CDC data)

Gender is also a key factor in school shootings. When you hear the phrase "school shooting," what comes to mind? Maybe you think of December 14, 2012, the day 20-year-old Adam Lanza shot and killed twenty children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School before shooting himself. Or maybe you're reminded of April 16, 2007, the date of one of the deadliest mass shootings in modern U.S. history;⁸⁸ 23-year old Seung-Hui Cho walked onto the Virginia Tech campus and opened fire,

killing 32 people and injuring 17 before killing himself. You might even think back to April 20, 1999, when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold stormed into Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, killing twelve students and a teacher. Then they, too, killed themselves.

Sociologist Katherine Newman argues that gender plays a significant role in these shootings. Her data show that a complex mix of social factors, such as rigid social enforcement of masculine stereotypes and being rejected and ridiculed by peers and desired romantic partners, contribute to boys' feelings of emasculation. These shooters lash out in anger and humiliation through violence, which they use to reframe themselves as powerful and masculine.⁸⁹ School shootings are overwhelmingly a male phenomenon. In fact, there are so few cases of female mass shooters that they haven't even been studied.⁹⁰ But what does that mean for our understandings of why violence occurs?

Feminist sociology of deviance is a diverse area, but scholars share the perspective that traditional understandings of crime and violence are **androcentric** – they focus mainly on the experiences of men. As sociologist Sally Simpson explains, the field "...is shaped by male experiences and understandings of the social world. Such studied realities form the core of 'general' theories of crime/deviance without taking female experience, as crime participant or victim, into account."⁹¹ So feminist work on crime and violence attempts to include women.

For example, Meda Chesney-Lind's work focuses on the experiences of young women. She argues that juvenile justice systems can criminalize the survival behaviors of young women.⁹² Girls are more likely than boys to suffer child sexual abuse. Chesney-Lind shows that some of the delinquent behavior common to young girls is survival behavior associated with sexual abuse trauma, like "running away from home, difficulties in school, truancy... early marriage," and promiscuity.⁹³ Ultimately, Chesney-Lind argues that a feminist perspective on deviance provides a fuller explanation of the causes and context of delinquency.⁹⁴

Did you know that one of the first modern-day school shooters was a teenage girl? On January 29, 1979, 16-year old Brenda Spencer went to Grover Cleveland Elementary School near her San Diego home armed with a .22 rifle and shot across the street, killing the principal and the custodian. Spencer also wounded eight children and a police officer. When the police asked Spencer why she did it, she replied, "I don't like Mondays."⁹⁵ In 2014, school administrators at Radnor High School in Wayne, Pennsylvania, found a notebook from a 17-year-old girl. She wrote that she wanted to be the first female "mass" shooter. From her notebook: "But imagine the power...The bullets leaving the gun with a loud bang, piercing kids around me, the way they collapse, their blood splattering the floor...the screams."⁹⁶ And in March 2017, 18-year-old Nicole Cevario was pulled out of her high school class by her father. He was worried about her strange behavior and read her diary. In it, she revealed plans to bomb her school and shoot teachers and students. Cevario wrote about her admiration for the Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings.⁹⁷ When the police investigated, they found that Cevario had a stockpile of bomb-making materials and a gun.⁹⁸ Her father called the school in the nick of time; she was pulled out of class on March 23rd, and had planned the attack for April 5th.

The prevailing stereotype is that school shooters are men – especially White men. But young women are also capable of planning and carrying out violence. Yet when female shooters commit violence, often these women and girls aren't recognized as school shooters.⁹⁹ Since our collective ideas about school shooters overlook those who aren't White males, our models of prevention and detection might not be as good as they could be; we risk missing important red flags for women-led mass violence.¹⁰⁰ And that has the potential to be devastating.

We also see gender differences in how we understand violence perpetrated on women. Often, these differences are intersectional as well. Take the example of Breonna Taylor, who was killed in her home by police officers after they burst into her apartment as she slept in the spring of 2020. Andrea Ritchie, a police misconduct attorney, was shocked that Taylor's name wasn't voiced along with George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, and others at the protests demanding justice for Black people killed by police that began in early summer. In her work, Ritchie argues that a lot of our understanding and discourse of the victims of police brutality center around Black (mostly cisgender and heterosexual) men. Ritchie argues that Black women and LGBTQ people have often faced multiple forms of discrimination with less representation in the national conversation. Ritchie's work contextualizes cases of women who have suffered police violence and mass incarceration, such as Taylor, Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd, Dajerria Becton, Monica Jones, Mya Hall, Eleanor Bumpurs, and Kayla Moore.¹⁰¹ She tells the *New York Times*, "We're not trying to compete with Floyd's story, we're trying to complete the story."¹⁰²

Black women have also been at the forefront of violence *prevention*: the Black Lives Matter movement was begun by three Black women, Opal Tometi, Patrisse Cullors, and Alicia Garza. Since its creation in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, the campaign has grown into a national entity, with chapters across the United States; additionally, the phrase and hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has become the rallying cry of racial justice used by people across races and backgrounds. It remains important to consider and reconsider the ways in which gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, dis/ability, geography, and more, to affect people's experiences as victims, witnesses, and agents of change.

Review Sheet: Inequalities and progress

Key Points

- Feminism is concerned with achieving equality between men and women. There are different kinds of feminisms, and people of all genders identify as feminists. Intersectional feminists take into account that gender can't be separated from other social relations.
- Gender inequality is produced, maintained, and embedded in our institutions. Sexism in the workplace is one example.
- Women make less money than men. For full-time and part-time workers in the U.S., women earned 83% as much as men in 2015.

- White men have higher wages than women of any race.
- Many jobs in the U.S. economy are low-paying *and* more likely to be held by women. Women of color are heavily represented in the low-wage job sector.
- The sorting of men and women into different occupations is partly shaped by discrimination and social norms.
- Studies of mothers who work show that the costs of raising a child are disproportionately felt by women. In no state do mothers, on average, make as much as fathers.
- There are differences in life expectancy based on gender and race. In general, women live longer than men, and Whites live longer than Blacks or Latinos.
- Violence and assault are disproportionately experienced by transgender people.
- 1 in 5 women in the U.S. has been the victim of rape or attempted rape.
- Girls are more likely than boys to suffer child sexual abuse.

Key People

- bell hooks
- Alan Pelaez Lopez
- Judith Lorber
- Katherine Newman
- Sally Simpson
- Meda Chesney-Lind
- Deborah Harris
- Patti Giuffre
- Jessica Schieder
- Elise Gould
- Michelle Budig
- Paula England
- Rebecca Glauber
- Andrea Ritchie
- Opal Tometi
- Patrisse Cullors
- Alicia Garza

Key Terms

- **Gender inequality** – Unequal treatment and perceptions of individuals or groups based on gender.
- **Feminism** – Movements that advocate for equality for all sexes and genders.
- **Glass ceiling** – Metaphor for barriers women face in the workplace that prevent them from reaching higher positions.
- **Androcentrism** – Centering the lives and experiences of men in our worldview and practices.

- **Motherhood penalty** – Systematic disadvantages in wages, benefits, and other career factors that are associated with motherhood.
- **Fatherhood bonus** – Benefits in wages and perceived competence that fathers experience in the workplace.

SEXUALITIES

- How is sexuality a social construction?
- Do our experiences of race, gender, and other social relations affect how we experience and understand sexuality?
- How do we socially regulate sexual expression?

The creation of sexuality

“I was born this way.” This is the refrain of Lady Gaga’s hugely popular 2011 hit, which asserted that the performer’s sexuality was with her from birth. Americans sang along, but did we agree with her?



Lady Gaga. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

For the past 40 years, the Gallup polling organization has asked Americans whether gay and lesbian people are “born that way” or whether their sexual preferences are due to factors such as their upbringing and environment. When Gallup first collected data on this question in 1977, 13% of Americans selected “born with it” and 56% selected “upbringing/environment” (the rest answered “both,” “neither,” or “no opinion”). In 2018, 50% of Americans thought gay and lesbians were born that way, while 30% selected “upbringing/environment.” Only 10% answered “both.”¹⁰³

The data are clear—more and more Americans agree with Lady Gaga. But are they right? Increasingly, scholars have noted issues with the “nature over nurture” idea of sexual orientation. For example, the problem with the “born this way” idea, according to sociologist Shamus Khan, is that it overstates the significance of

biology.¹⁰⁴ Khan doesn’t claim that biology has *no* influence on sexual behavior, but argues that it’s impossible to understand our sexuality without paying more attention to our culture. The 10% of

Americans who answered “both” to the Gallup poll probably got it right: sexuality is influenced by both biology and environment.

Let’s redirect our focus to ponder other questions about sexuality: What kinds of sexual behaviors are appropriate? Who is an acceptable sexual partner, and at what age? Is there a “right” age to have sex for the first time? The answers to these kinds of questions are shaped by society.

“Appropriate” sexual behavior varies historically and culturally. Khan gives the example of pederasty, in which adult men form sexual relationships with boys; it was practiced in ancient Greece. This seems shocking in our society today, but sexual behaviors and expressions, like gender, change over time and are not the same across cultures. Our understanding of sex, sexuality, and gender has always been in a state of evolution, and will continue to change.

Like gender, sociologists think of sexuality as a social construction. Rather than seeing sexuality as “natural,” Ruth Hubbard encourages us to understand it as something we’re taught to express in socially acceptable ways.¹⁰⁵ Parents may teach their children that sex is about becoming mothers and fathers, or they might teach their kids about “responsible” sexual conduct. But what does being sexually responsible actually mean? We may learn that we should avoid sexually transmitted infections, or shouldn’t get pregnant “too young.” But who – or what – determines “too young?” These ideas can be driven by religion, tradition, scientific and technological advancements, local culture, or practical health concerns. Consider the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has affected sexual behavior. During a pandemic with stay-at-home orders and mandated social distancing, some activities may be deemed too risky for strangers and acquaintances to engage in together. On the other hand, for people already living together, sexual activity may (or may not) be increasing. Data are still being collected, but one thing is for sure: our society guides (and often limits) our ideas about sexual behavior.

During adolescence, we’re introduced to different ideas about sex from our peers. Popular culture soaks us with images about sex and reinforces notions of what being sexy supposedly means. People who consume pornography are presented with a set of ideas about what sexual activity looks like. All of this information constructs our beliefs about what it means to be a sexual person in our society.

Together we construct the meaning of labels such as “gay,” “lesbian,” “homosexual,” “heterosexual,” “bisexual,” and “pansexual,” and create distinctions between sexually acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. Heterosexuality itself was invented, as there was a time that men and women weren’t thought to be sexual beings, or heterosexuals. In the first half of the 1800s, sexual activity between men and women was supposed to serve the purpose of creating children; sex was for reproduction, not pleasure. This period was characterized by a *production* economy, focused on manufacturing and otherwise producing items to sell. In this economy, the body was viewed as an instrument of work, and sex was a means for reproduction. Erotic desire and a “healthy” interest in sex didn’t exist as we know them today. As Jonathan Ned Katz explains, ideas of men and women as erotic beings emerged in the second half of the 1800s, as the economy shifted to one based on *consumption* of goods and services.¹⁰⁶ The body began to be seen differently. By the late 19th century, medical

professionals believed men and women naturally had a healthy libido (sexual desire) and sexual pleasure was considered normal, even necessary. A shift away from believing sex was primarily for reproduction and toward viewing sex as pleasurable mirrored the economic shift from a production-based economy to a consumer-based economy. In a consumer society, pleasure is valued. We seek pleasure from what we buy. This value extends to our bodies; we see our bodies as avenues to experience pleasure.

As Hanne Blank explains, there's "a difference between simply being and *being known*." In other words, acknowledgement and written documentation from authority figures changes something from simply existing into something that is socially understood to be "a real thing."¹⁰⁷ The word "heterosexual" first appeared in the United States in an 1892 medical article by Dr. James G. Kiernan. But his conception of "heterosexual" was different from how we think of it today. Kiernan, who still viewed procreation as the proper purpose of sex, regarded heterosexuals as perverted because they weren't exclusively having sex in order to get pregnant. He deemed their sexual desires to be abnormal because of their interest in sexual pleasure.¹⁰⁸ Kiernan's article was also one of the earliest to use the word "homosexual," a group he also believed were deviant. Whereas heterosexuals were deviant because they didn't always have sex for the purpose of reproduction, Kiernan considered homosexuals deviant because their sexual desire diverged from gender norms.

In the first section of the chapter, we explained how individuals "do gender" in everyday life. Just as gender can be seen as a routine, daily set of activities, so can our sexual identity. For instance, we may act in ways to deliberately project our sexual identity and let others know we are heterosexual or homosexual. Think back to the example of Donald Trump boasting about doing whatever he wants to women. It's impossible to know why a prominent individual would make that statement, but one interpretation is that bragging to another man about his behavior with women reinforced his identity as a heterosexual man.

In some cases, people deliberately distance themselves from homosexuality to cement their heterosexual status.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps you've used the phrase "no homo" or heard someone else say it. One use of this expression is as a follow-up to a compliment that one man gives to another. After saying something nice about what a friend is wearing, a man might immediately say "no homo" to make it



Olivia Chow, a former Toronto mayoral candidate, at a Pride Parade. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

clear that he has no homosexual feelings. The phrase serves the dual purpose of projecting heterosexuality while designating homosexuality as a second-class status. It's an everyday example of doing sexuality.

Intersectional sexualities

Sara "Saartjie" Baartman was one of the most famous women of the 1800s. A member of the Khoikhoi (an indigenous group from southwestern Africa), and sold into slavery by Europeans as a teenager, Baartman was taken to Europe from her home in Capetown, South Africa, to be part of the "human freak show circuit" in England. Her body was displayed mainly for White Europeans of the time, who saw her as exotic and inferior.¹¹⁰ Half-naked and displayed in a cage that was only five feet tall, Baartman was subjected to "the gaze and prodding of strangers" and was used by her captors and the public to hold up stereotypes of the inferiority and **hypersexuality** (extreme in sexual appearance or desire) of Africans.¹¹¹ She was labeled as hypersexual and "exotic" and objectified to such a degree that her genitalia and buttocks were preserved and kept on display in Paris after she died in 1816. They remained on display for more than 150 years; her body was only returned to South Africa for a proper burial in 2002. Baartman may be gone, but the lore surrounding her life became a leading stereotype of Black female sexuality and an enduring example of **colonialism**, in which one country politically and economically controls the people and resources of another geographic area.

Notions of sexuality rooted in culture have political consequences that continue for generations. One example is the way that Black sexualities, often like the kind used to exploit Sara Baartman, have been used to justify racism. The **Jezebel caricature** portrayed Black women as highly sexual and "lusty."¹¹² Similarly, the **Brute caricature** portrayed Black men as savage sexual predators.¹¹³ These sexualized caricatures were used to justify slavery and later the Jim Crow system of discrimination, which legally enforced segregation between Blacks and Whites in the southern U.S. Since Black women were convincingly portrayed as over-sexualized and tempting, their continued rape by slave owners could be justified.¹¹⁴ Once Black men were convincingly portrayed as dangerous predators, then lynching or murdering Black men for even *looking* at a White woman could be justified.¹¹⁵ Scholars like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins stress that these extremely sexualized images still exist, though in softer or subtler forms. Modern images, instead of being mobilized to justify colonialism, are used to justify capitalism: we use racialized bodies to sell stuff.¹¹⁶

We see racialized sexual stereotypes of all sorts. Take this beer ad, for example, which plays on the idea of Latinas as "hot." A recent study shows that the predominant



([Source](#))

image of Latinas in American media is highly sexualized, or “hot,”¹¹⁷ while Latino men are overwhelmingly portrayed as dominant and “macho.”¹¹⁸ Since Latinos are the most underrepresented group in American film, even a single portrayal can make a big impact.¹¹⁹

Or take the example below of a commercial for Mountain Dew. In the commercial, a goat assaults a waitress when they run out of Mountain Dew. Later, the White waitress is asked to pick her assailant in a police lineup. All of the suspects are Black men.



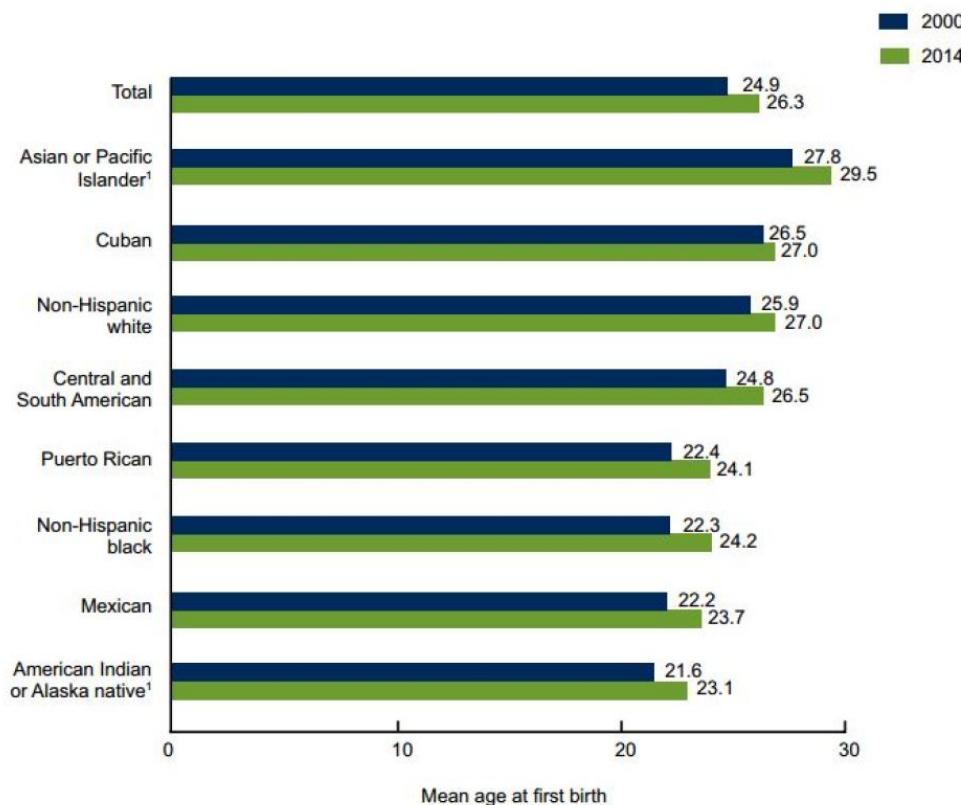
(Source)

These images and stereotypes help rationalize and reproduce social inequalities. Think about what stereotypes do: they oversimplify things. They reduce the world’s complexity and make social relations more straightforward. The trouble is, stereotypes are distorted, one-sided, and exaggerated. The more we’re surrounded by these distorted images, the more they become part of our everyday understanding. And the more they’re part of our landscape, the more likely we are to believe them. So breaking through harmful social stereotypes is an important part of creating a fairer world for everyone.

The social control of sexuality

Puberty, the process of becoming a sexually mature individual, is a biological event. Once we go through it, we’re theoretically capable of sexual reproduction (though sometimes not entirely). But in the U.S., it’s now typical for people to wait to have children until years after they are biologically able to do so. Among U.S. women who have ever had a child, their average age at first childbirth is 23; among men who ever have children, it’s almost 26.¹²⁰ And that’s only the average. We see wide variation by race, class, education level, and region. The average age has been increasing over time, as well.

Figure 4: Average Age of First-Time Moms by Race



(Source: [CDC/NCHS, National Vital Statistics System](#))

For good or ill, a number of demographic, economic, and cultural factors help determine when our potential fertility is expressed. In sociological terms, we say that social and cultural institutions exert **social control** over sexuality. Social control refers to the way we enforce normative behaviors through social interaction, values and worldviews, and laws.

In the case of sexuality, institutional social control exerts itself in multiple areas of life, many of which we don't even realize. Consider the example of erectile dysfunction (ED), a condition in which men have trouble achieving or maintaining a penile erection. Sounds pretty medical, doesn't it? But scholars like Leonore Tiefer argue that our sexuality has been **medicalized**, a process in which society understands or defines a problem in medical terms. This usually means that we use medical language to describe it and rely on medicine to treat it.¹²¹ Alcoholism, pregnancy, attention-deficit disorder, and even baldness were all initially understood as social problems, but *became* understood as medical disorders.

Tiefer argues that the medicalization of ED was helpful for some men because it led to the development and marketing of drugs that can help men get and keep a reliable erection. But medicalization also creates problems. The medicalization of erections (or lack of them) reinforces the idea that there is an *ideal* erection that all men should have. Additionally, all the attention given to ED continues to stress **phallocentrism**, or a worldview that centers the **phallus** (the symbolic ideal of the

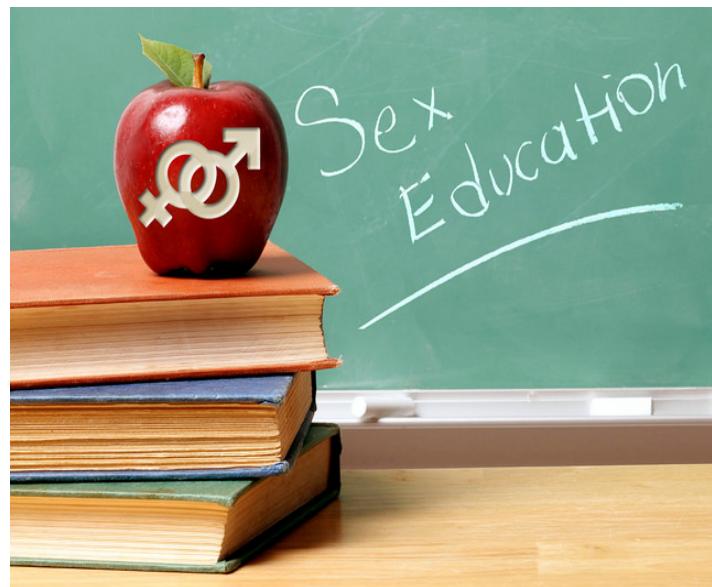
penis) in sexual acts and society more broadly. The medicalization of ED draws our attention toward it, so much so that penile-vaginal intercourse is understood as the only sex act worth our attention.¹²² Medicalization provide us with a framework of medical intervention and a framework of understanding: What's important to us? What's normal or abnormal? Who or what is responsible? What's the best way to solve it? These collective understandings are a form of social control: they enforce certain sexual behaviors and sexuality-related worldviews.

Let's take another example: sex education. An article about individuals' memories of sex ed contains the following anecdote:

...I do not remember learning much about actual "safe sex." I do remember, however... my teacher passing a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup around class, telling us to "do whatever we wanted to it." After people had licked it, thrown it on the ground, stuck their pencil into it, etc., she claimed that "having sex with more than one person is exactly the same. No one wants to eat this peanut butter cup, so why would someone want to have sex with you if you have been 'passed around.'"¹²³

This lesson, and variations of it, are taught in schools across the United States. It raises a question: what is the purpose of sex education? And what does it have to do with the social control of sexuality?

In **abstinence-only sex education**, students are taught that abstinence is expected of them. It has an eight-point legal definition outlined in Section 510(b) of Title V of the Social Security Act, but the main characteristic is that abstinence-only education "has as its *exclusive* purpose teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity."¹²⁴ Note the word "exclusive"; these programs are forbidden from including certain information. For example, they are generally not allowed to provide students with information about contraception (like condoms), other than to note failure rates.¹²⁵



([Source](#))

Comprehensive sex education generally "stresses the importance of waiting to have sex" while offering information about how contraception works, so students can avoid unwanted pregnancies and sexually-transmitted infections (STIs).¹²⁶ Information about STIs is critical; in 2018, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that rates of gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis had increased for five straight years, hitting an all-time high in 2018.¹²⁷ Comprehensive sex ed programs

typically include a wider variety of information for students and a range of ethical perspectives on sexuality.

In the case of abstinence-only education, we can see how social control works. An institution (the school system) attempts to socialize a population (kids and teens) to adopt specific behaviors. Comprehensive sex education may not stress behavioral changes up front, but it too attempts to enforce certain behaviors, like using condoms. As Émile Durkheim taught us, this type of social control exists in every society (though in different forms) as a way for societies to regulate themselves.¹²⁸ But there are struggles and disagreements over *what* or *who* needs controlling. Sexuality may be inextricably linked to our bodies, but cultural factors have a lot to do with the ways in which we express that sexuality.

As we conclude this chapter, our hope is that you've begun to think about the ways in which gender and sexuality are not simply unchanging facts of biology, but social relations that we actively construct, experience, and express. Sociologist Sam Richards once said, "My students often ask me, 'What is sociology?' And I tell them, 'It's the study of the ways in which human beings are shaped by things that they don't see'."¹²⁹ While we all experience gender and sexuality, we can't fully understand them unless we examine intersections between the smallest and largest aspects of social life. From our individual personal histories to historical power relations, from everyday interactions to large-scale institutions, our job is to study how a wide range of social forces shape us. As you continue to think about the sociology of gender and sexuality, we hope you will keep digging to discover all those factors we *don't* see.

Review Sheet: Sexualities

Key Points

- In a 2016 Gallup poll, when asked if being gay or lesbian is something a person is born with or due to factors such as upbringing and environment, 46% answered "born with," 33% answered "environment," and 12% answered "both."
- The word "heterosexual" first appeared in the U.S. in a medical journal article in 1892.
- What we deem to be sexually appropriate behavior varies historically and culturally. Sexual behaviors and expressions change through time and aren't exactly the same across cultures.
- Like gender, sexuality is a social construction.
- Similar to how we can understand gender as activity that we "do" in everyday life, we can think of sexual identity as a routine, daily accomplishment that we intentionally perform.
- Racialized sexual stereotypes perpetuate social, economic, and cultural inequalities.
- Among women who have ever had a child, the average age of first childbirth is 23 years old in the U.S.; among men who ever have children, it's almost 26 years old.
- Our social and cultural institutions exert social control over our sexuality.

- 2017 was the 4th consecutive year of increasing rates of gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis.

Key People

- Shamus Khan
- Ruth Hubbard
- Hanne Blank
- Jonathan Ned Katz
- Sara Baartman
- Patricia Hill Collins
- Leonore Tiefer

Key Terms

- **Hypersexual:** Depicted as extreme in sexual appearance or desire.
- **Jezebel caricature** – Stereotypical image that portrays Black women as extremely sexualized.
- **Brute caricature** – Stereotypical image that portrays Black men as savage sexual predators, especially of White women.
- **Puberty** – Process of becoming sexually mature.
- **Social control** – The way we enforce normative behaviors through social interactions, values and worldviews, and laws.
- **Medicalized** – When society understands a problem in medical terms.
- **Phallocentrism** – Worldview that centers the phallus in both sexual acts and society more broadly.
- **Phallus** – Symbolic societal idea of the penis.

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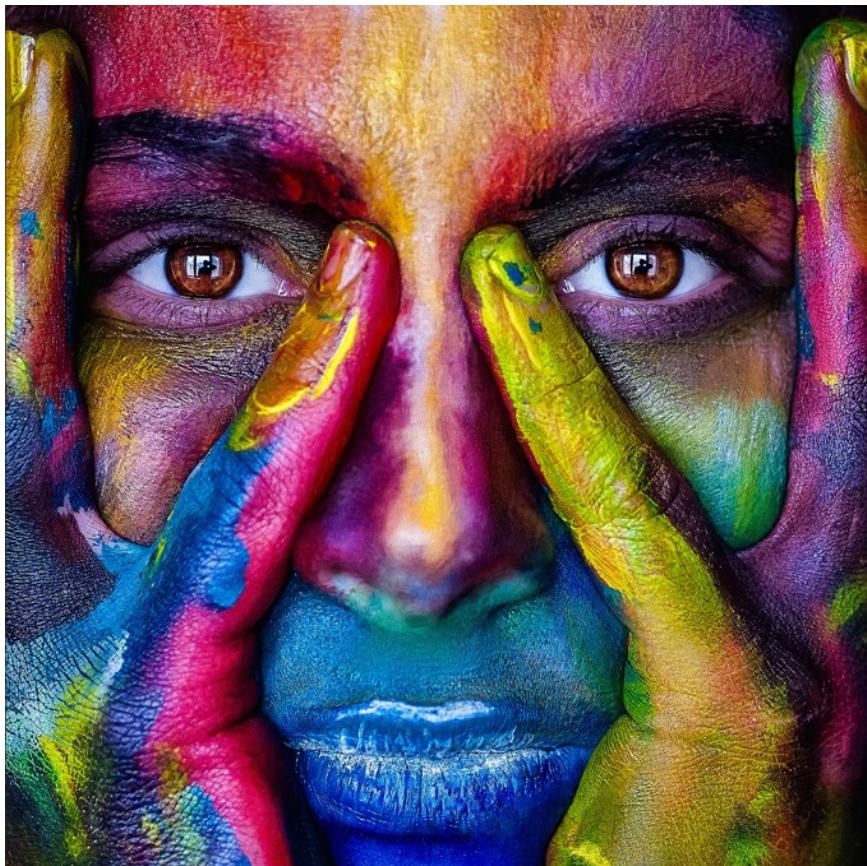
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Race and Ethnicity



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Race and Ethnicity

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WHY ARE WE STILL TALKING ABOUT RACE?

Race and ethnicity

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President Barack Obama. ([Source](#))

WHY ARE WE STILL TALKING ABOUT RACE?

- Is race still important in the U.S.?
- What do we mean by race and ethnicity?
- What is the racial and ethnic composition of the United States?
- Is race a biological feature of humans?
- When did the idea of race first emerge?

On November 2nd, 2008, racism in the United States died. At least, that's what some people thought.

On the first Tuesday of November 2008, Barack Obama was elected to be the 44th President of the United States. It was a momentous event in American history, and many political pundits and journalists considered President Obama's election to be the end of racism as we know it, and wondered if America had moved beyond race and racism to become "post-racial." So why are we still talking about race?

In the eight years that President Obama was in office, he faced continuous questions about whether he was born in the United States and whether he was lying about his religion and was actually a Muslim. He was criticized by conservatives for bringing too much attention to race, and criticized by liberals for failing to do enough to help Black Americans. At the start of his presidency, the Tea Party emerged as a major conservative social movement, and toward the end of his presidency, the Black Lives Matter movement developed in response to police killings of Blacks and Latinos.

Eight years after Barack Obama was elected, Donald Trump—the man who had led the call for proof that President Obama was an American citizen—became the 45th President of the United States. Following President Trump’s election, hate crimes against racial and religious minorities increased throughout the country, and white supremacist groups that used to be on the fringes of society grew bolder and garnered more and more attention.

And then, in May of 2020, a video from Minneapolis showed a police officer kneeling on the neck of George Floyd until he lost consciousness and died. The video, which emerged in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, led to a massive mobilization against police violence and other forms of racial injustice. Demonstrations were held in cities and towns across the country, as millions of Americans expressed their support for a national reckoning on race.

A lot has happened since November 2, 2008, and there is no simple way to interpret everything that’s changed since the day American voters elected the first Black president. But one thing is clear: the United States did not turn into a colorblind nation and we are not living in a post-racial era. Race remains crucial to every aspect of life in the United States. This chapter explores why.

Race and ethnicity

Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution requires an “enumeration” of the population, otherwise known as a **census**, every ten years. The first Census occurred in 1790, and every ten years since, the federal government has undertaken a massive project to find out how many people live in the United States. Race has always been a central part of the effort.

Race is a system that humans created to classify and stratify groups of people based mostly on skin tone.¹ Race has been used to create, maintain, and enhance group distinctions and disparities.² The first Census included only three racial categories: people were classified as either “free white males or free white females,” “all other free persons,” or “slaves.” As the nation has grown and become more diverse, these categories have changed again and again. Before 1950, Census-takers visited people in their homes and typically assigned everyone there to a race, usually just by looking at them; since then, Census procedures have changed and Americans are able to choose our race for ourselves. The terms used for African Americans have included “colored,” “Negro,” “Black,” and “African American.” Starting in 2000, respondents could choose multiple racial categories instead of being forced to choose just one. And along the way, a new question was added to the Census: in addition to identifying our race, Americans are now asked to identify another characteristic – our ethnicity.



During the Middle Passage transport from Africa to the Americas, Blacks were held in shackles and chains inside ships. ([Source](#))

Ethnicity refers to common culture, religion, history, or ancestry shared by a group of people. Ethnic groups in the United States include different groups of Hispanic Americans (such as Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, and Puerto Ricans), Irish Americans, and Jewish Americans. Ethnicity is an aspect of identity that can be central to your life or one that only matters in certain situations, like religious services or family parties. It can fade away over time, as people assimilate into the wider culture. It can be the basis for stigma and discrimination, like race, but it usually doesn't imply a clear hierarchy the way racial categories do.

Now that we have a working definition of race and ethnicity, we can better understand what the American population looks like. The latest information is available from the American Community Survey, which runs every other year in between the ten-year Census. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the U.S. population in 2016.

The most common way to classify race and ethnicity is to first ask people whether they are Hispanic or Latino, which is considered an ethnicity rather than a race. Roughly 18% of the U.S. population is Hispanic or Latino, and most Hispanics are of Mexican descent. The remainder of the population, about 82%, is not Hispanic or Latino. Just over 61% of the population identifies as non-Hispanic White, 12% identifies as non-Hispanic Black or African American, 5% identifies as Asian, and less than 1% identifies as either American Indian/Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. A tiny percentage are members of some other racial group, and another 2% identify as members of at least two racial groups.

Table 1: Race and Ethnicity in the United States as of 2016

Racial/Ethnic Group	Number	% of Total Population
Total U.S. Population	323,127,515	100%
Not Hispanic or Latino (total)	265,728,796	82%
White alone	197,479,450	61%
Black or African American alone	39,717,127	12%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	2,125,635	1%
Asian alone	17,345,193	5%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	533,675	Less than 1%
Some other race alone	758,275	Less than 1%
Two or more races	7,769,441	2%
Hispanic or Latino (total)	57,398,719	18%
White alone	37,164,589	12%
Black or African American alone	1,176,242	Less than 1%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	550,764	Less than 1%
Asian alone	211,742	Less than 1%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	62,311	Less than 1%
Some other race alone	15,576,077	5%
Two or more races	2,656,994	1%

Source: [American Community Survey](#)

But even this detailed breakdown of the population doesn't tell the whole story. Because respondents answer questions about both race and Hispanic ethnicity, it's possible for people who identify as Hispanic to also select a racial group. If we consider both race and ethnicity, we find that about 12% of the population (and the vast majority of all Hispanics) identifies as Hispanic (their ethnicity) and White (their race); 5% of Americans consider themselves Hispanic and "some other race."

Two lessons are clear from this exercise in classifying the U.S. population. First, Americans are extremely diverse, and a sizable share are not content with classifying themselves in a single racial or ethnic category. Second, we don't really know the "true" racial and ethnic makeup of the country. Our understanding of race and ethnicity is affected by the categories we've selected to officially measure race and ethnicity, and by individuals' own ideas about their identity and ancestry. As an example, many state laws used to declare that any person with any African ancestry at all was Black, a custom known as the **one-drop rule**. Although this is no longer written in law, the custom hasn't gone away. Many well-known public figures, like Tiger Woods and President Barack Obama, had parents with diverse ancestries, but they identify—and are described by others—as Black.

Similarly, the groups of people who count as White have changed over time.³ In the 1800s, Greeks, Irish, Italians, Poles, and Jews from different countries were all seen as members of different races, inferior to Americans of English descent. Slowly, individuals from these groups began to assimilate into the culture of the United States, and their close connection to their homelands weakened over generations. As they began to speak English and moved out of the highly-segregated

neighborhoods where they lived when they first arrived in the U.S., the boundaries between different European ethnic groups became less sharp.

Estimates indicate that Whites may no longer make up a majority of the U.S. population at some point in the next few decades. While it's undeniable that the country is getting more ethnically diverse, it's also true that various groups of Americans may see themselves differently over time. Just as ethnic groups like the Irish, Italians, and Jews came to be seen as White over time, it's possible that other groups, like some Hispanics or Asians, may begin to identify as White. The categories that we use to classify the population may also change. As an example, there were extensive conversations about whether a new Middle Eastern/North African category would be added to the 2020 Census as an ethnicity. Ultimately, Middle Eastern/North African was not added as an ethnic option, and the millions of people in this category continue to be classified as White, without any ethnic marker.

The categories we create to classify race are sometimes quite persistent, but they can be interpreted in many different ways and—as the Census example shows—the categories can change. These changes show that race and ethnicity are not fixed, biological attributes. They are ideas that are created and revised by humans as a means to classify ourselves. But as we'll see in the remainder of the chapter, these concepts have very real consequences.

Are race and ethnicity real?

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is a well-known and highly-respected professor of African American Studies at Harvard University. He has written dozens of books and made fifteen documentary films, one of which won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Historical Program. In 2006, Gates produced and hosted *African American Lives*, a groundbreaking show on PBS that traced the family background of some of the most notable African Americans through historical research and DNA testing.

While doing research for the show, Gates made a startling discovery. He knew that not all of his ancestors were from Africa, but when he investigated his history in more depth, he learned that his ancestry was about half African and half European. One of the most prominent scholars of the African American experience had a much more complex family history than he realized.

A few years later, his story got even more complicated. On July 16, 2009, Gates was returning home to Cambridge, Massachusetts, from a trip overseas and was unable to open the door to his house. A neighbor in the mostly-White neighborhood noticed Gates and his driver attempting to force the door open and called the police. The officer who responded ordered Gates to come out of the house and asked him to prove that he was a professor at Harvard and owned the house. Gates eventually complied, but repeatedly asked the officer for his badge number and name. The officer warned Gates that he was acting in a disorderly manner and ultimately handcuffed and arrested him. While charges against Gates were dropped, the mugshot of the world-renowned professor revealed something very deep and disturbing about race in the United States.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., may have an equal number of ancestors from Europe and from Africa—he may technically be just as much White as he is Black—but his African descent seemed to matter most that day in Cambridge. Although it's impossible to know for certain, Gates was convinced that

neighbors would not have called the police, and officers would not have been so aggressive, if his skin was white.

The consequences of race in daily life are very real, but the science and genetics of race are messy.⁴ Despite the search by many scientists over several centuries, there has been no discovery of a gene for race—that is, there is no gene biologists can find that determines which racial category someone falls into or that clearly separates members of one race from members of another. In fact, a White person and a Black person can be genetically more similar to each other than two White people or two Black people.

If race is not real in a scientific sense, then how do we understand its importance? Sociologists typically think of race as a **social construct**, a concept that humans invented and gave meaning to in order to understand or justify some dimension of the social world. Differences in skin tone or other physical markers have been used for centuries to explain differences or inequalities between groups and to justify treating groups of people differently.⁵ And the idea of race has been justified, for centuries, on the basis of science.



Despite research showing no genetic differences by race, DNA is often used to justify racial differences. ([Source](#))

The “science” of race

Even if the best research reveals no biological or genetic differences exist that cause significant psychological, mental, or physical distinctions among races, many people believe there are innate differences between racial groups.⁶ Stereotypes lead people to think of Asians as short and intelligent, Blacks as physically superior but intellectually inferior, and Whites as the standard and epitome of the human ideal.

These types of beliefs are present even among the best-educated professionals. One study compared attitudes about race and genetics among first-year medical students to attitudes among those who had completed medical school and were doing their medical residency. Nearly 30% of first-year medical students, compared to only 4% of medical residents, believed that the blood of Blacks clots faster than the blood of Whites. Over 20% of first-year medical students (but only 4% of medical residents) believed that Blacks have stronger immune systems than Whites. Some racial stereotypes

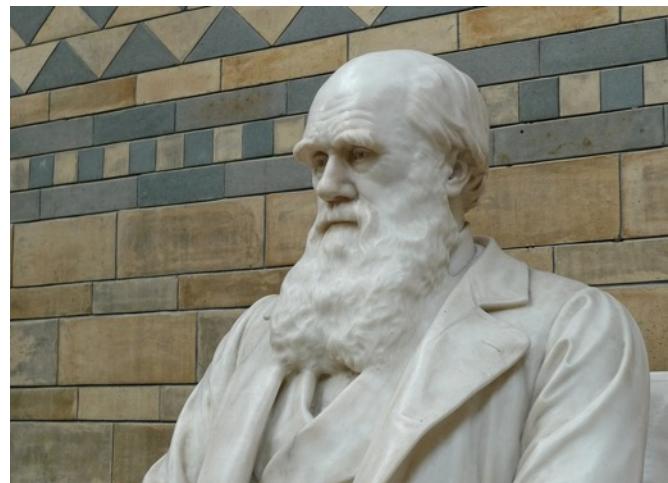
persisted even after medical residents underwent training on race and health; 40% of medical students and one-quarter of medical residents believed that Blacks have thicker skin than Whites.

As some of these medical students failed to realize, humans are one species regardless of skin color, language, eye shape, or hair texture. While there are differences between racial and ethnic groups in health, cognitive ability scores, and athletic achievements, most of these differences are driven by socialization, environmental factors, culture, and opportunities.⁷ Scientists across many disciplines reject the idea that race is rooted in biology.

So if race is indeed a social construct, an idea made up by humans, then who invented it? In the mid-1700s, Carolus (Carl) Linnaeus, a Swedish taxonomist, started with the simple observation that people looked very different from each other.⁸ Linnaeus argued that there had to be psychological traits associated with these physical differences in skin color. He split humans into four subspecies, each associated with a major continent.

The classification of humans into racial groups had just begun. The German naturalist Johann Blumenbach introduced five racial categories—American, Caucasoid, Malay, Mongoloid, and Ethiopian—with each race associated with a color (white, yellow, red, brown, and black). Later, the term Negroid, which means black, replaced the term Ethiopian. These “scientific” classifications of racial groups were arbitrary, and were made by White Europeans and Americans. Some scholars argue that this explains why Whites were placed on top of the racial hierarchy and why Whiteness was used as the marker of perfection.⁹ Other groups were placed into a hierarchy below Whites, ordered by skin color from lightest (at the top) to darkest (at the bottom).

As the science of evolution progressed, theories of race and biology were reinforced. In *The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin showed how the survival of the fittest leads to a superior species that evolves and adapts to its environment. Sir Francis Galton, Darwin’s cousin, argued that selective breeding of the fittest people, genetic engineering, in vitro fertilization, and forced sterilization of those he viewed as unfit would allow humans to develop enhanced intelligence while saving society’s resources and reducing human suffering.¹⁰ **Eugenics**, the idea that we can actively improve the genetic profile of humans, led to forced sterilizations of groups of people labeled as unfit to reproduce.



A statue of Charles Darwin. ([Source](#))

As a result of these theories from the 1700s and 1800s, external physical characteristics (such as skin color, hair color and texture, and eye color) were believed to reflect psychological and mental abilities that made some races superior to others.¹¹ Pseudo-scientists (people without proper training or credentials) used data, often fabricated, on anatomical features like skull weight and facial angles to shape public opinion and government policies about race and inequality.

Through the development of theories and concepts that described and categorized humans, race became a social reality—an idea that, because people believed in it, had real consequences. And it became a means to separate and stratify groups. Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection became the scientific justification for the idea that differences naturally exist among racial groups. Galton's eugenics theory provided the scientific basis to justify the attempt to preserve the "purity" of the superior White race. Racial prejudices became linked with biological theories of human inequality, ensuring that race would continue to be a crucial part of social life in the centuries to come.

Review Sheet: Race and ethnicity

Key Points

- The concept of race implies a hierarchy among groups of people and has been used to create, maintain, and enhance group distinctions and disparities.
- Ethnicity can be central to an individual's life, or may only matter in certain situations; it can also fade away over time, as individuals assimilate into the wider culture.
- Sociologists typically think of race as a social construct.
- Research reveals no biological or genetic basis for the concept of race, yet there continues to be widespread belief in the existence of innate differences between racial groups.

Key People

- Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
- Carolus (Carl) Linnaeus
- Charles Darwin
- Sir Francis Galton

Key Terms

- **Census** – A count of the entire population.
- **Race** – System humans created to classify groups of people based mostly on skin tone.
- **Ethnicity** – Common culture, religion, history, or ancestry shared by a group of people.
- **One-drop rule** – A custom that a person who had any African ancestry was classified as Black.
- **Social construct** – A concept humans invent and give meaning to in order to understand or justify the social world.
- **Eugenics** – Idea that we can actively improve the genetic profile of humans.

EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT BIAS

- Why are most of us biased in our judgments about different groups of people?
- Where do stereotypes come from and why do they persist?
- Sociologically, how should we think about differences between racial and ethnic groups?

Has your hair color changed since you were born? What about your eye color? Does your skin or hair color change from season to season with exposure to the sun?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you're not alone. In a quick survey of a class of 120 students, nearly 100% said their skin tone changes with exposure to the sun. Roughly 15% said their hair color has changed since they were born, and a similar percentage said their eye color has changed since birth. About 20% of students said their hair or eye color changes with the seasons.

The human **phenotype** is the set of our visible features or characteristics, like the color of our skin, hair, and eyes. The phenotype is affected by both genetics and our environment, and most individuals' phenotypic features change over their lives. And yet, the same features that change within each of us have been used as justifications for racial classification and exploitation.

The connection between phenotype and the value, quality, or goodness of human beings is ingrained in society. Think about words that pop into your head when you hear the colors yellow, red, black, and white. In another in-class survey of students, some words commonly associated with the color yellow included docile, cowardly, cautious, and sunny. Red triggered words such as fire, stop, blood, and aggressive. The color white brought to mind words such as purity, cleanliness, and innocence. In contrast, black triggered words like evil, bad, and satanic. Black is the color people wear at funerals and symbolizes death, while white is the color worn by brides, doctors, and nurses. White is the absence of color and represents being good, positive, and pure.

These associations may seem meaningless, but there is evidence that they can affect the way we see other people. In famous experiments carried out in the early 1940s, Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark presented children with identical dolls, one with white skin and yellow hair and the other with brown skin and black hair. They asked the children which doll was nice, which one was bad, which they preferred to play with, and other questions. Both White and Black children favored the "White" doll. They preferred to play with the White doll and thought it was nicer, and were more likely to say that the Black doll was "bad." The preference for the White doll was particularly strong among Black children who attended highly-segregated schools in Washington, D.C.

The Clarks concluded that racial identity and self-awareness develop as early as age three, and that segregation damaged Black children's self-esteem and self-concept. Their research was later cited in the U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, in which the Court ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional because they were inherently harmful.

Sadly, these impacts on Black children's sense of self aren't a thing of the past. In the 2005 documentary *A Girl Like Me*, Kiri Davis replicated the doll study, with similar results. As we will see, our internalized ideas about race affect the ways we think about different groups of people and ourselves, and none of us are immune.



In studies, both White and Black children prefer to play with White dolls. In 2005, Kiri Davis replicated the study, with similar results. ([Source](#))

Implicit bias

A **bias** is a tendency to view things in a particular way, regardless of the details of the specific situation. **Implicit bias** is the association our minds make between seemingly unrelated things; it is subconscious, and we may be entirely unaware of our implicit biases. Implicit bias is ingrained in all of us, regardless of our race or ethnicity, through socialization in family and neighborhood settings and media exposure. In our daily lives, we are continuously exposed to oversimplified beliefs about different groups, which lead us to form mental associations.

Until recently, research on racial disparities focused primarily on **explicit bias**: bias that we are openly and consciously aware of. Explicit racial bias—that is, openly viewing racial groups in particular ways—has declined over time, as it has generally become less acceptable to hold overtly negative views of certain races (though such attitudes certainly still exist).¹² However, implicit bias exists whether people hold explicit racial attitudes or not.

Implicit bias gained national prominence with video and audio showing how unconscious biases can affect the way individuals from different racial groups interact with one another. One of the saddest, and most controversial, examples is the case of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman.¹³ Martin was returning to his father's home from a nearby convenience store when Zimmerman began to follow him. Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood watchperson, called 911 to report a suspicious person walking around the neighborhood. An altercation ensued between the two; it left Zimmerman bruised and bloodied and Martin dead from a gunshot wound. Zimmerman was charged with second-degree murder but a jury found him not guilty of Trayvon Martin's murder.

We will likely never know exactly why Zimmerman thought that this young man was a criminal, why he followed him, confronted him, and killed him. It may have been the hoodie Martin was wearing, although it was raining when the incident happened, so wearing a hoodie with the hood up would not be unreasonable or even unusual. Perhaps Zimmerman would have stopped any young person walking through the neighborhood, no matter their clothing or skin color. It may have been explicit racism and prejudice, or it may have been an unconscious feeling that made Zimmerman think this African American young man had to be a criminal.

Although implicit bias has become associated with high-profile incidents like Trayvon Martin's killing, it is much broader than that.¹⁴ Everyone has implicit biases about almost everything, from which store has the best fruit to assumptions that taller people are better basketball players. Implicit bias is the human mind's way of quickly making sense of our social interactions. Even academics are not immune to implicit bias. Corinne Moss-Racusin and her colleagues gave science professors resumes to evaluate; the resumes were all the same except that half of the professors received ones with a woman's name and half received one with a man's name. Faculty members were more likely to say they would hire the resumes with male-sounding names, compared to female-sounding names, and to recommend a higher starting salary for them.¹⁵ Other studies show that professors are less likely to respond to an email sent from a person with an Asian-sounding name. Although our biases may at times simply be preferences and may not directly impact our behavior, at other times they have grave consequences for how we treat others.¹⁶



The hoodie has become synonymous with the killing of Trayvon Martin, and for some, criminality. ([Source](#))

Stereotypes and prejudice

Stereotypes are widely-shared perceptions about the personal characteristics, tendencies, or abilities of members of a particular group, like intelligence, personality, physical features, preferences, aggressiveness, or criminality. The Irish are rowdy drunks. Jews are good with money but cheap. Asians are studious and good at math. African Americans are athletic and aggressive. All of these are stereotypes about groups of people. Stereotypes can arise for a number of reasons: They can be myths

made up about a group, historical relics from the past, or superficial associations that are reinforced by the media or politicians.

They can also change over time. Consider the idea that African Americans are naturally good at basketball. In the first half of the 1900s, the same stereotype was applied to a different group: Jewish Americans. Basketball has always been a city game, played on concrete courts by kids who needed a ball, a hoop, and nothing else. At that time, American Jews were concentrated in urban neighborhoods. According to a well-known sportswriter in the 1930s, Jews excelled at basketball because it required “an alert, scheming mind, flashy trickiness, artful dodging and general smart aleckness.”¹⁷ This kind of stereotypical language seems absurd now. But at the time, many readers likely agreed with the sportswriter, since he played on stereotypes of Jewish Americans as intelligent but sneaky and untrustworthy.

Media representations of stereotypes are less explicit these days, but they haven’t disappeared. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, one of the deadliest hurricanes in U.S. history, tens of thousands of people in New Orleans were stranded for days, without basic supplies or assistance. Two photographs captured the desperate attempts of residents to find water and food in the days after the storm, when much of the city was underwater. However, the media framed the residents completely differently by race. A Black boy (who was described as a “man” in the caption) is said to be “looting a grocery store.” The caption of the other photo described two White residents “finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.”

Stereotypes are not only perpetuated by the media. During the 1976 presidential campaign, candidate Ronald Reagan coined the term “welfare queen” to refer to Black women he said were conning the government by living luxuriously on generous welfare checks. Reagan exploited well-known stereotypes to appeal to White voters, ignoring the fact that most welfare recipients were White and that there was no evidence of this type of fraud. Sociologists Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein conducted interviews with nearly 400 single mothers in several cities, most of whom received welfare, and found that they were remarkably careful with money and had to find creative ways to make enough just to survive from month to month.¹⁸

These examples reveal how stereotypes are used to appeal to our **prejudices**, or preconceived beliefs, attitudes, and opinions about members of a group. Those beliefs, attitudes, and opinions are usually not based on personal experience or evidence, and they are usually negative. Scholars have shown that individual prejudices are often driven by our views about different social groups and where those groups rank, relative to our own, in the social and economic hierarchy.¹⁹ Prejudices can grow stronger if we begin to think of another group as an economic, political, or cultural threat—for instance, if the size of a racial or ethnic minority group begins to grow in a neighborhood or a city. This is the idea behind the **group threat theory** of prejudice.

Once established, prejudices toward other groups of people are difficult to break, even if we see examples of individuals who don’t match our stereotypes. This is partly due to a psychological concept called **ultimate attribution error**, or a tendency to perceive undesirable characteristics or behaviors exhibited by members of another group as an innate or inherent part of their personality or essence—

that is, any negative behavior is seen as just who they are.²⁰ On the other hand, positive characteristics exhibited by members of other groups are more likely to be attributed to external factors like going to a good school, receiving opportunities, or just plain luck. Seeing positive behaviors from people we think of negatively can produce **cognitive dissonance**, a psychological state in which our preexisting ideas do not match what we see with our own eyes.²¹ When we experience cognitive dissonance, our natural tendency is to avoid the mental conflict and find a way to explain the anomaly. Thus, if someone from a group we view negatively does something we view as positive, we interpret them as exceptions; their existence doesn't undermine our prejudiced beliefs about their group.



Black and Latino neighborhoods are more likely to be in floodplains that are exposed to natural disasters. ([Source](#))

But if we simply spend more time around individuals from other backgrounds, races, and ethnicities, our stereotypical beliefs will fade away, right? Psychologist Gordon Allport's **contact theory** helps explain how interaction with members of other groups affects prejudices. Allport argues that interaction and exposure can be beneficial, but only under specific conditions: the interaction has to occur in a collaborative, voluntary, and non-competitive space; we must interact multiple times, not just once; our interaction must be personal, informal, and one-on-one; the interaction should be legal; and the setting must allow participants to interact as equals.

The problem is that most interracial contact does not take place in these conditions. Interactions with people from other races often takes place in situations that are not equal (such as when a member of one race performs low-wage work for a person of another race) or where at least one side does not welcome the interaction (for instance, if residents of a neighborhood are unhappy

about people from another race moving onto their street). Robert Putnam analyzed data from across the U.S. to examine the relationship between racial and ethnic diversity and social trust and found that people in more diverse communities tend to “withdraw from collective life, to distrust their neighbors, regardless of the color of their skin.”²² This problem is common in diverse communities: people face challenges in developing a united community, they may not appreciate cultural or political changes that arise when a new group enters their neighborhood, and they may resent the changes taking place around them. Given this, it’s not shocking that more diverse places are not always friendlier or more welcoming. But Putnam also points to examples showing that diversity can work over the long-run. During World War II, White soldiers in the U.S. military were asked what they thought about having Black and White soldiers in the same company. A majority were opposed. But among soldiers who were already serving in an integrated unit that included Black and White soldiers, less than a quarter were opposed to the idea. Stereotypes and prejudices can, in fact, break down—but integration sometimes comes with conflict and mistrust, and it often takes great effort and time to work.



Interacting or living with a more diverse group of people can break down stereotypes, but only under certain conditions.
[\(Source\)](#)

A sociological approach toward stereotypes

All of this information about stereotypes may explain where they come from and why they persist, but we don’t want to give the impression that there are no differences between racial and ethnic groups in behavior, personality, tastes, or talents. One look at a typical NBA roster tells us very clearly that African Americans are disproportionately represented at the highest level of basketball, for instance. So how should we think about differences between racial and ethnic groups?

Our suggestion is to take a sociological perspective. Look for data on behaviors or characteristics of different groups; don't simply accept what you might hear about them. Be suspicious of the idea that stereotypical behaviors or characteristics are "natural" or inherent to specific groups of people, and think about potential explanations for common behaviors or characteristics. Think of people as individuals, instead of projecting stereotypes onto them. Recognize that most of us, from every race and ethnicity, have unconscious biases that affect how we perceive others. And finally, be aware of the consequences of stereotypes, a topic we'll turn to next.

Review Sheet: Explicit and implicit bias

Key Points

- Research from Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark concluded that the conditions of segregation damaged Black children's self-esteem and self-concept, and that racial identity and self-awareness develop as early as age 3.
- Implicit bias is the mind's way of quickly making sense of our social interactions.
- Individual prejudices are often driven by our views about the groups to which people belong and where those groups rank, relative to our own, within the social and economic hierarchy.
- *Positive* characteristics exhibited by members of a group we see negatively are more likely to be attributed to external factors like exceptional schooling.
- Be suspicious of the idea that stereotypical behavior or characteristics are "natural" or inherent; think about potential explanations for common behaviors or characteristics.

Key People

- Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark
- Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman
- Gordon Allport
- Robert Putnam
- Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein
- Corinne Moss-Racusin

Key Terms

- **Phenotype** – The set of our visible features or characteristics, like the color of our skin, hair, and eyes.
- **Implicit bias** – Associations our minds make between seemingly unrelated things.
- **Stereotypes** – Widely-shared perceptions about the personal characteristics, tendencies, or abilities of individual member of a particular group, like intellectual ability, personality, physical features, preferences, aggressiveness, or criminality.
- **Prejudices** – Preconceived beliefs, attitudes, or opinions about members of another group.
- **Group threat theory** – Argues that prejudices grow stronger if we begin to think of another group as an economic, political, or cultural threat.

- **Ultimate attribution error** – Psychological phenomenon in which undesirable characteristics exhibited by members of another group are perceived as innate.
- **Cognitive dissonance** – Psychological state in which preconceived ideas do not align with what we see with our own eyes.
- **Contact theory** – Helps explain how interaction with members of other groups affects prejudicial beliefs.

RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

- What is discrimination?
- What is individual and institutional racism?
- Where did affirmative action come from and what does it do?

In 2002, almost 400 pairs of people were sent out across eight cities in Minnesota, Montana, and New Mexico to ask about renting an apartment.²³ The two members of each pair had almost identical backgrounds—they were the same gender and roughly the same age, had the same number of children, and had similar incomes and jobs. But they looked different: one member of each pair was White, the other was Native American. In these three states, where many Native Americans live, that difference had a substantial impact on how they were treated as they searched for a place to live.

In one case, a 43-year-old White woman asked about a two-bedroom apartment in Billings, Montana. She was told that the unit was open and available, was given a form to complete and a business card, and was shown two other units that looked similar to the one that was advertised. A day later, her Native American teammate, a woman with the same characteristics, asked about the same unit. She was given the same form and a business card, but was told that the agent was too busy to talk. She was not shown any apartments, and was asked to come back a few days later.

This case was not an exception. The White applicant was favored in at least a quarter of cases in each city. The careful design of the research project—an example of an **audit study**—meant that the applicants were perfectly matched according to all characteristics that would make them more or less attractive renters; the only thing that differed was their race. In other words, something about the real estate agents, the firms for which they worked, or perhaps the real estate industry as a whole led to the different treatment of Whites and Native Americans.

With this example, we move into an investigation of **discrimination**, the unjust treatment of different groups of people. While prejudices are about our thoughts and feelings, discrimination is an action. This section discusses several types of race-based discrimination—part of a larger system of racism—and some efforts to address them.



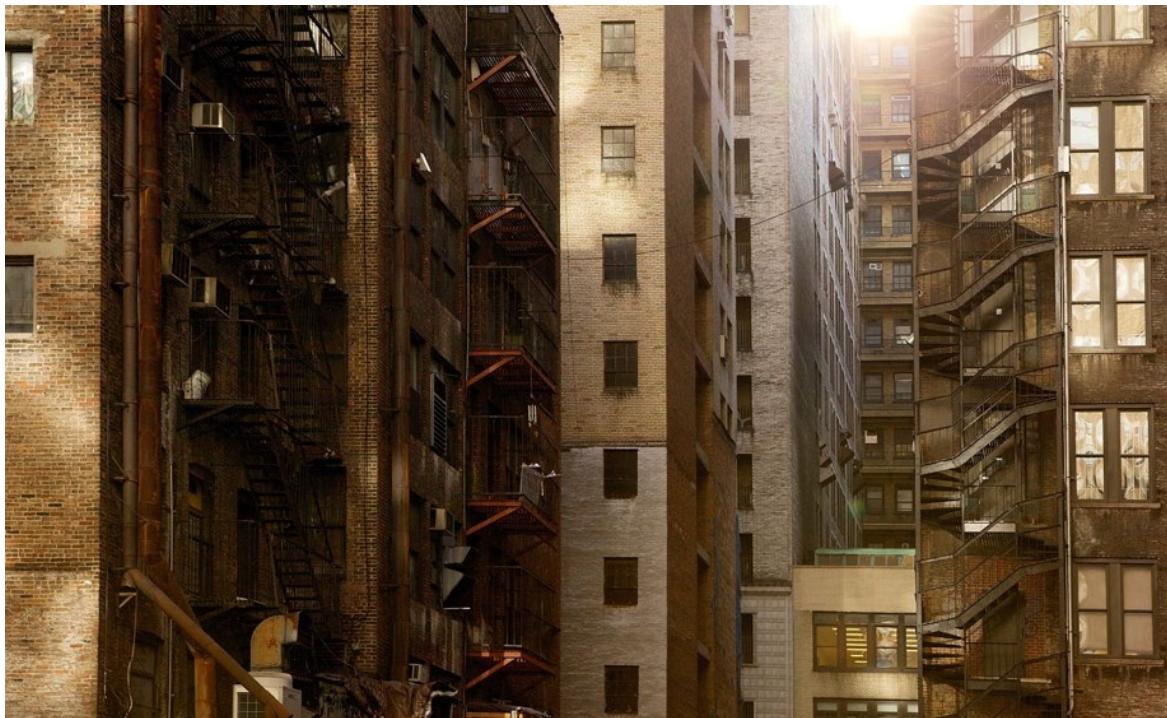
Before 1964, in many states Blacks could not drink from the same water fountains or attend the same public places as Whites; many also could not vote. ([Source](#))

Racism in individuals and institutions

Drawing on the work of sociologists Lawrence Bobo and Cybelle Fox, we define **racism** as a set of beliefs, ideologies, or institutional practices that are based on the idea that one racial group is biologically or culturally inferior to another group.²⁴ Since racism generally involves beliefs and actions, it combines prejudice and discrimination. And while some of us are able to ignore racism, others are forced to deal with it on a daily basis. Racism doesn't just exist in individuals; it lives in institutions like schools, workplaces, our housing market, our criminal justice system, and our political system. For racial minority groups, it can lead to worse outcomes in school, lower-status jobs, unequal treatment by police officers and doctors,²⁵ and worse mental and physical health.²⁶

Decades ago, real estate agents developed a money-making scheme based on racial fears. They would go to White homeowners and warn them that Black families were about to move into their neighborhood (whether or not this was true). Whites, panicked at the thought of integrated neighborhoods or falling home prices, often wanted to sell quickly and move. The real estate agents would buy houses cheaply from the White families they had frightened into a quick sale and then sell them at well above market value to Black families eager for a share of the American Dream. More recently, in 2012, Wells Fargo Bank settled a lawsuit with the U.S. Department of Justice alleging that the bank targeted Blacks and Latinos with the subprime loans that led to the collapse of the housing market in 2008, even when those clients qualified for lower-risk, lower-cost loans. As this example shows, discrimination hasn't gone away. Even if explicitly racist beliefs and attitudes have become much less common, racism persists in many institutions. **Institutional racism** refers to the ways that

core institutions, like the legal, educational, and criminal justice systems, are embedded with racial biases and practices that reproduce racial inequality.



Due to redlining and restrictive covenants, Blacks were often forced to live in crowded urban project housing. ([Source](#))

Institutional racism has existed since the formation of the United States and its founding documents. The inspiring words of the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” were written by Thomas Jefferson, a slaveowner. Enslaved people were counted as only three-fifths of a person in the Constitution. And although the Bill of Rights protected the rights and liberties of minority groups in the United States, African Americans were not considered to be full citizens in the great national experiment described in our founding documents.

We don’t have to go back to the country’s origins to see how race is enmeshed within our institutions and laws. Historian Ira Katznelson has documented how the most important social programs implemented in the 1900s were designed specifically to provide assistance to White Americans and to exclude, as much as possible, Black Americans. Social Security is arguably the most influential and long-lasting social program in U.S. history; it created retirement benefits for the elderly, unemployment benefits, and programs to assist low-income women and children. But the 1935 legislation that created it covered only certain jobs, mainly in industry and commerce; it specifically excluded many jobs held by the Black population at the time, such as farm and domestic work. As a result, in the 1930s over 60% of all Black workers, and nearly 75% of Black workers in the South, didn’t qualify for Social Security benefits. Additionally, federal funds that supported the poor and veterans were controlled by local officials, who frequently discriminated against Blacks. Funds intended to help people train for stable jobs, ensure financial stability in retirement, and build wealth were often only available to Whites. Katznelson says this created a form of “policy apartheid” that

mainly benefited Whites.²⁷ (Apartheid is the formal policy or practice of political, legal, economic, and/or social discrimination against a particular group.)

The Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program, generally referred to as “welfare,” was established in 1935 for families that generally had only one parent or caretaker; yet funds were withheld from Black families who qualified.²⁸ In fact, about one-third of Black children who qualified for ADC did not receive assistance. In the 1940s, Texas, Kentucky, and Mississippi didn’t participate in the program at all, so children in these states didn’t receive any assistance.

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill, aimed to reintegrate veterans returning from World War II. Massive numbers of young people were deployed during the War, and the GI Bill applied to roughly 80% of men who were in their 30s and had families. Because of the bill, millions of families were able to purchase homes, start businesses, and send themselves and their children to college. But Black veterans struggled to access the benefits they were owed. The GI Bill was distributed federally but controlled locally, and Black veterans, particularly in the South, were often denied GI Bill funds that were available to White veterans.



Soldiers board a military plane. ([Source](#))

Affirmative action

In the 1960s, the longstanding pattern of social policies explicitly favoring Whites began to change. A large-scale social movement centered around protest, civil disobedience, and legal battles laid the groundwork for major advances in voting and civil rights, and the legal basis for segregated neighborhoods and schools finally began to break down with the passage of legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which banned discrimination based on characteristics including race and sex) and, later, the Fair Housing Act of 1968 (which banned discrimination in the housing market). But earlier in the decade, President John F. Kennedy started a program that used a different mechanism to address injustices in the labor market, housing market, and in social policy: he instructed federal contractors to take “affirmative action to ensure that applicants are treated equally without regard to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.”

Affirmative action refers to policies or programs that seek to address past discrimination through active measures to ensure equal opportunity now. It openly acknowledges that unjust policies and decisions historically limited the opportunities of disadvantaged groups and benefitted advantaged groups, and tries to make up for such injustices. Affirmative action has been used to encourage or require organizations, universities, and public agencies to consider factors like race in decisions about which contractors to use, which job applicants to hire, or which students to admit. It has been most widely used in university admissions and government hiring, and has provided non-White groups that have been discriminated against with equal access to occupations that were previously unavailable to them.

Affirmative action has also generated substantial controversy. Critics argue that it attempts to remedy discrimination in the past through “reverse discrimination.” Others say that affirmative action doesn’t necessarily benefit the people who are truly the victims of discrimination, and suggest that it should be based on poverty rather than race or gender. And others believe that all social policy or admissions decisions should be “color blind,” with no advantages or considerations for any group based on race, ethnicity, or any other criteria other than achievement. These arguments overlook the many subtle ways in which individuals from advantaged backgrounds receive a boost on their way to elite schools or sought-after jobs by drawing on networks of friends or family for referrals, internships, letters of recommendation, and so on. They also ignore the not-so-subtle ways that factors other than achievement enter into admissions decisions—for example, elite universities commonly set aside a substantial portion of their admissions slots for “legacies,” applicants whose parents attended the institution. Every few years the Supreme Court hears another case about the use of race in university admissions, but rarely do we hear objections about the tremendous advantage that students automatically have if they’re applying to an elite school that their parents were fortunate enough to previously attend.

Review Sheet: Racism and discrimination

Key Points

- Racism doesn’t just live in individuals; it lives in institutions like schools, workplaces, our housing market, our criminal justice system, and our political system.
- Although the Bill of Rights protected the rights and liberties of minority groups in the United States, Black people were not considered to be full citizens according to our founding documents.
- Government programs designed to provide educational opportunities, jobs, home mortgages, economic security, and a secure retirement were often targeted toward the White population and often excluded non-White.
- A large-scale social movement centered around protest, civil disobedience, and legal battles laid the groundwork for major advances in voting and civil rights. The legal basis for segregated neighborhoods and schools finally began to break down with

- the passage of major legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.
- Affirmative action has been used to encourage or require organizations, universities, and public agencies to consider factors like race in decisions about which contractors to use, job candidates to hire, or students to admit.

Key People

- Ira Katznelson
- President John F. Kennedy

Key Terms

- Audit study** – Sociological method in which applicants are matched according to all characteristics that would make them more or less attractive and then sent out as pairs to apply for various services or products.
- Racism** – A set of beliefs, ideologies, or institutional practices that are based on the idea that a specific racial group is biologically or culturally inferior to another racial group.
- Discrimination** – Unjust treatment of groups of people.
- Institutional racism** – Idea that our nation's core institutions, like the legal, educational, and criminal justice systems, are embedded with racial biases and preferences that recreate and maintain racial inequality.
- Affirmative action** – Policies or programs that seek to rectify past discrimination through active measures to ensure equal opportunity now.

THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIAL INEQUALITY

- How much racial inequality is there in the U.S.?
- What does a sociological perspective on racial inequality look like?

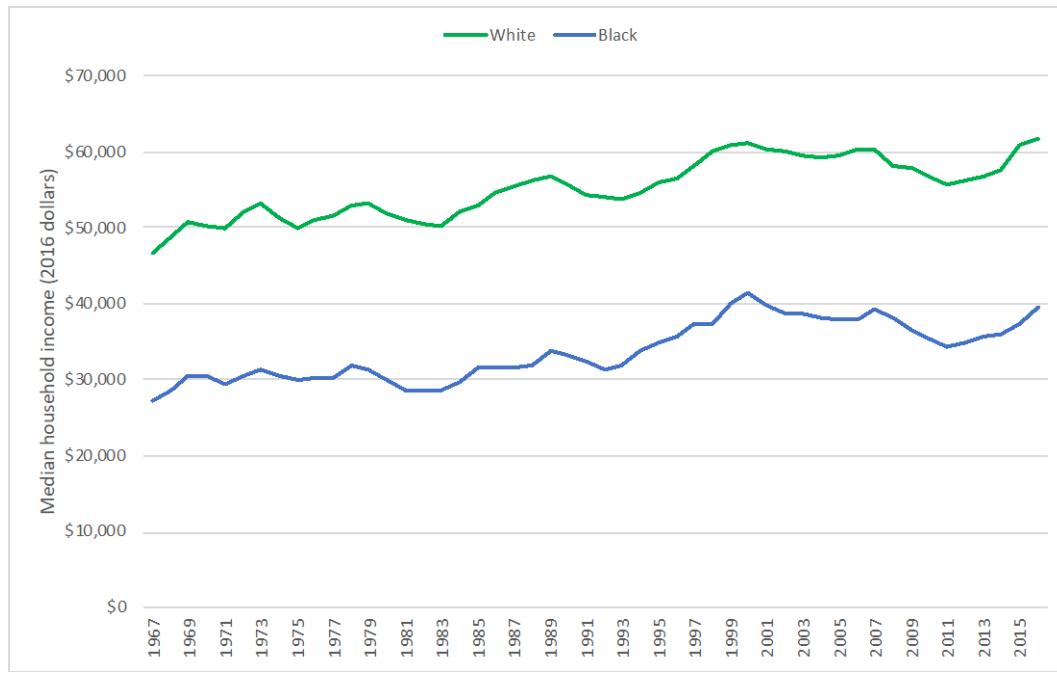
Trends in racial inequality

During the 1960s, African Americans began to move into professional occupations and into the middle class on a large scale, schools started to integrate, and there was great hope that racial inequality would fade away. What has happened since then?

The answer depends on the dimension of inequality we consider. Perhaps the most basic measures of inequality focus on family income and wealth. As shown in Figure 1, the gap in household incomes between Blacks and Whites remained virtually the same between 1967 and 2016. As of 2014, about 25% of Black and Latino families lived in poverty, compared to 10% of Whites. And Whites are not at the top of the economic hierarchy in the United States; certain groups of Asian Americans have

higher incomes than any other racial or ethnic group, largely due to higher levels of education and where they live (high-cost states such as California, New York, and Hawaii). Racial gaps in wealth are even more severe than gaps in income. Whites had thirteen times as much wealth as Black Americans in the years after the Great Recession, the largest gap since the late 1980s.

Figure 1: Median Household Income of Black and White Households, 1967-2016



Source: [United States Census Bureau, Historical Income Tables: Households](#)

Other dimensions of inequality have improved considerably over time, the most notable example being educational attainment. In 1996, the high school dropout rate among Latinos was 34%, more than four times as high as for Whites. The rate for African Americans was 16%, twice as high as Whites (8%). In the next ten years, the dropout rate for Latinos fell to 10%, and the rate for African Americans fell to 7%, only slightly higher than the rate for Whites (5%).²⁹

There are other signs of modest progress. Residential segregation of Black Americans from White Americans peaked in 1980 but has fallen steadily since then. And there has been substantial improvement on one of the most basic measures of health: **life expectancy**, a statistical measure of how long people can expect to live, on average. The gap in life expectancy between Whites and Blacks has been gradually shrinking over time, though there are still enormous differences. In 2015, White women could expect to live more than two years longer than Black women, on average, and White men could expect to live more than four years longer than Black men. Even on the dimensions of racial inequality that have improved, in other words, there are still severe discrepancies.

This pattern reflects the complex nature of racial inequality in the United States. On some measures of economic status, there has been no progress toward racial equality since the 1970s. On other measures, there has been substantial progress. But on virtually every measure available, even

those that have improved over time, we can still observe a disturbing degree of inequality between Black and White Americans. Why?

Understanding the persistence of racial inequality

Throughout American history, race has been used to justify a hierarchy based on skin color and ancestry. It has fooled people into thinking that success and failure are driven by psychological, genetic, intellectual, biological, and cultural differences between racial or ethnic groups.³⁰ These beliefs persist today. Surveys of Whites in the U.S. show that they are more likely to attribute racial gaps in education and labor market success to differences in motivation, cultural inferiority, or genetics. Blacks and Latinos, on the other hand, are more likely to attribute racial differences in achievement and economic success to discrimination. One study examined responses to a national survey asking why “Blacks (are) in their current state?” Only 31% of Whites responded that discrimination was a central reason for continuing racial disparities, compared to 61% of Blacks.³¹

And yet we know, with certainty, that race directly affects the way people are treated in many different settings, and these differences are most pronounced when comparing Whites and Blacks. We described an audit study focusing on the treatment of Native Americans; similar studies have shown stark differences in the treatment of White and Black individuals who have inquired about apartments, home loans, or jobs. One study advertised iPhones on a common online marketplace and showed pictures of either a Black or a White hand holding the phone. The ads with White hands were much more likely to receive a response. Another study sent resumes to employers with distinctively “Black” names like Lakisha or Jamal or White-sounding names like Emily or Greg. Applicants named Emily and Greg were much more likely to be contacted.³²

The persistence of discrimination is undoubtedly one reason racial inequality has not gone away. But we hope that this chapter leads you to think even more broadly about factors that have contributed to racial inequality not only in the present, but over long periods of our history. As we’ve shown, the most important government programs of the past century, like Social Security and the GI Bill, were designed to largely exclude Black Americans. When a whole generation of returning veterans were given subsidies to get college degrees and establish a foothold in the labor market, Black American veterans were not given the same chance to use these benefits. When the federal government first began to subsidize home mortgages, providing a government-supported “push” that led to the massive growth of suburbs, non-White Americans were almost completely left out of the program. In the decades since, homeownership has been the most reliable way for Americans to accumulate assets (since for most people, their home is the single most valuable item they own), but African Americans have often been systematically excluded from buying real estate or taking out low-interest loans that allow families to build up wealth in the form of homes.

Black Americans have been treated differently than any other racial or ethnic group throughout the course of U.S. history, and it’s impossible to understand racial inequality today without considering this history. Many Americans point to differences between Black Americans and other groups on

characteristics like academic achievement and family structure to argue that there is something about the culture of the Black population that impairs their outcomes in life or their ability to get ahead.

Sociologists have taken this argument seriously. They have found that some dimensions of culture and behavior do help to explain the outcomes of different groups. For example, Black Americans have higher rates of single parenthood than other racial and ethnic groups, and children raised by single parents are much more likely to grow up in poverty. But it's a mistake to think of culture as a natural, unchanging feature of a group. A sociological perspective takes group differences in culture seriously, but attempts to connect these differences to a larger set of historical forces. Nowhere is this approach clearer than in the work of sociologist William Julius Wilson, who analyzed historical data on urban labor markets to show how shifts in the jobs available to African American men from the 1950s to the 1980s created widespread economic dislocation, leading to fewer "marriageable" men who could support their families with steady employment. As jobs disappeared from central city neighborhoods, much of the African American population remained stuck in neighborhoods that offered few economic opportunities. Over time, rates of joblessness rose and the rate of single-parent families skyrocketed, along with use of welfare benefits. This happened to all racial and ethnic groups, but it was particularly severe for African Americans because they had fewer alternative job options when manufacturing jobs disappeared.



People visit the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C. King is the first African American, and the fourth non-U.S. President, to have a monument on the National Mall. ([Source](#))

We can learn lessons from Wilson's classic analysis of the link between changes in urban labor markets and cultural adaptations among African Americans. The first lesson is that group differences in culture do not arise out of nowhere; they are often linked to broader economic or political forces. When we study cultural or behavioral differences between groups, we must focus on how culture emerges, and how larger forces help explain behaviors that may seem counterproductive, or even destructive, from the outside. The second lesson is that a sociological perspective on inequality should not be driven by politics or ideology, and sociologists should not ignore or downplay behaviors that might contribute to group differences. Instead, our goal is to explain such differences, and to do so by linking them with larger social forces—in other words, we should wade into even the most controversial issues, and we should do so armed with a robust sociological imagination.

A moment of change

Many of the themes in this chapter became visible, once again, in the spring and summer of 2020. In March, COVID-19 began to spread across the United States, and communities of color were hit hardest. After adjusting for age, death rates for Latinos are two and a half times higher than for Whites, and death rates for Black Americans are three and a half times higher than for Whites.³³ A series of horrific murders of Black men and women—Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd—all at the hands of current or former police officers, provided a brutal reminder of what institutional racism looks like.

As they have many times before, Americans took to the streets to protest police violence and racial injustice. But this year, the demonstrations had more energy, and more people, than ever before. Some have turned violent, and some looting has taken place—but the vast majority of protests have been remarkably peaceful. They have occurred in hundreds of towns and cities, despite police crackdowns that have, in some cities, been ugly and violent. The demonstrations have persisted over time even as the news cycle has moved on.

As the demonstrations have continued, the basic message of the Black Lives Matter movement has filtered through the population. Companies that are usually silent on race have openly voiced their support, and organizations like the National Football League have changed their positions in response. And Americans have changed their views. A few years ago, more Americans said they disapproved of Black Lives Matter than approved. Since then, a sea change has taken place, and Black Lives Matter is more popular than it has ever been.³⁴

As we write, it is too early to tell whether these developments will turn into tangible policies or programs designed to confront the nation's history of racism and the continuing pattern of racial injustice. But even in the midst of a worldwide pandemic and large-scale social unrest, this feels like a moment when change is possible.

Review Sheet: The persistence of racial inequality

Key Points

- Whites had thirteen times as much wealth as Black Americans in the years after the Great Recession, the largest gap since the late 1980s.
- Despite improvements in some areas like educational attainment, there is still tremendous racial inequality in the U.S., exemplified by persistent gaps in the life expectancy of African Americans and Whites.
- Throughout U.S. history, race has been used to justify a hierarchy based on skin color and heritage.
- The persistence of discrimination is undoubtedly one reason why racial inequality has not gone away over time.
- Black Americans have been treated differently than any other racial or ethnic group throughout U.S. history, and it's impossible to understand racial inequality today without considering this history.

- When we study cultural or behavioral differences between groups, we must focus on how culture emerges and how larger forces help explain behaviors that may seem counterproductive, or even destructive, from the outside.

Key People

- William Julius Wilson
- Ahmaud Arbery
- Breonna Taylor
- George Floyd

Key Terms

- **Life expectancy** – Statistical measure indicating how long people can expect to live, on average.

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Sociology of Families



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Sociology of Families

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WHAT MAKES A FAMILY?

'Traditional families' & the nostalgia trap

Evolution of the American family

Divorce and the typical American family

MEETING, MATING, & MULTIPLYING – OR NOT

Mate selection in the 21st century

The cohabitation revolution

The wedding industrial complex

Fertility and reproduction

INSTITUTIONAL & INTERPERSONAL CHALLENGES TO FAMILIES

The division of household labor

Parenting in the modern world

Intimate-partner violence

Divorce and remarriage

THE FUTURE OF FAMILIES

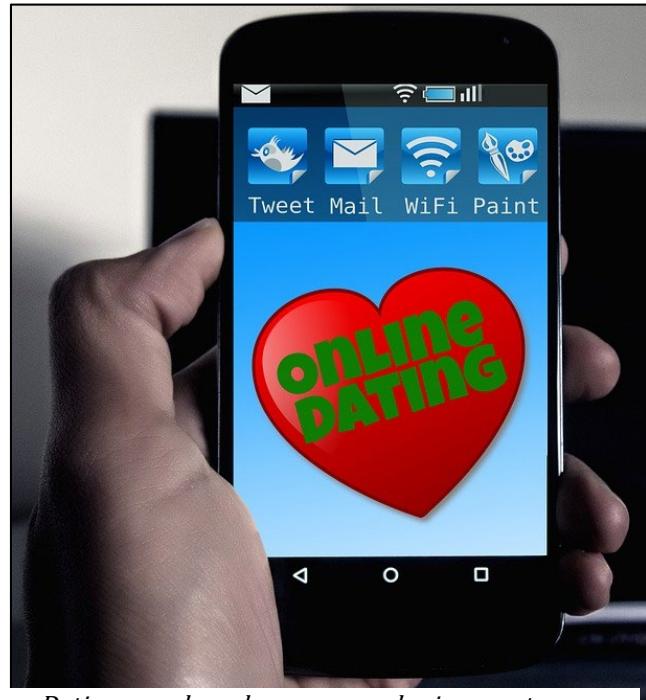
INTRODUCTION

- How do you make a family?

Sebastian Stadil was single. After a breakup with his girlfriend, he was eager to move on and find “the one.” But as “a fat, bald, short guy whose only quality is that he isn’t an ax murderer,” Sebastian decided to try to increase his chances of finding a mate. He went to the dating app Tinder and wrote a program that would “swipe right” on everyone. In other words, Sebastian expressed interest in *every single person* who passed by his phone’s screen. By the time he finished his experiment at “engineering love,” Sebastian went on 150 dates in four months. Despite all these dates, he says he didn’t find his soul mate through his Tinder experiment.¹ Sebastian Stadil is still single.

Even though Sebastian failed in his quest, a recent study showed that the number of couples who meet online has soared. More people now meet online than through family, church, or even college.² In fact, for both same-sex and heterosexual couples, more people meet online than any other method.³ But is this really that different from older, more “traditional” ways of finding a partner? What *is* traditional in terms of families, anyway? How do families come together — and come apart? And how do societies shape even the most personal aspects of our lives, like love and marriage? These are the types of questions family sociologists investigate.

In this chapter, we’ll explore these questions and more by looking at the work of a wide range of scholars, social commentators, and critics. Some of them study family structure and formation over hundreds of years and across the globe. Some investigate how housework gets divided. Some are interested in how race, class, and gender affect who we marry and how our children are raised. Some study how family traditions we take for granted can result in social control and domination. But all of these researchers stress that the family isn’t a rigid, unchanging institution, always and everywhere the same. Instead, it’s a dynamic, constantly evolving social institution, interpreted through the lens of lived experience and shaped by power dynamics.



Dating apps have become popular in recent years.
[\(Source\)](#)



[\(Source\)](#)

I have two goals for this chapter. The first is to introduce you to the ways that the institution of the family changes us. This “cornerstone of American society”⁴ shapes how we live and relate to one another. What family forms are most common, and where? What is a “traditional” family? How do we meet our spouses? How can we explain that the U.S. currently has the lowest teen pregnancy rate in over three decades? Do rich and poor parents raise their children differently? These are some of the questions we’ll tackle.

The second goal of the chapter is to consider how the family changes. People don’t always follow social norms, so “the family” is constantly changing, in sometimes inconsistent, contradictory ways. Why are there more single women than married women in the U.S. now, for the first time in history? Is the legalization of same-sex marriage comparable to the legalization of interracial marriage? Why do Baby Boomers have the highest divorce rates?

So as you read, imagine how individuals and social structure *intersect* to create the families we know — and love.

WHAT MAKES A FAMILY?

- What are some different ways of defining the family?
- How did different family systems throughout history interact to create what we currently understand to be a family?
- What do American families look like today?

What makes a family? The answer depends on *when* and *where* you’re asking the question. In North America, children are less likely to live with two parents than they are in parts of the Middle East or Asia.⁵ In Europe in the 1600s, “family” sometimes referred to a man and his children – but not his wife.⁶ And the Mosuo people of China, an ethnic group living close to the border of Tibet, don’t necessarily consider marriage to be a part of a family at all; in their tradition of *zuo hun*, or “walking



The Mosuo, who often call themselves Na, practice “walking marriages.” [\(Source\)](#)

marriages,” women and their lovers may have children, but sibling groups raise them.⁷ All men in the family are referred to as “uncles.”⁸ Clearly, there is no one definition of family. But in modern America, we can say that a **family** refers to a group of people who are connected by blood, a sexual relationship, or the law.

A number of traditions contribute to what we call a family. In the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the character Jem says, “You can choose your friends but you sho’ can’t choose your family.”⁹ Jem is *sort of* correct; you can’t control who is born into your family. But we do have some control over who makes up our family: The most basic form of human relationship is referred to as **kinship**, and it includes relationships defined by blood, affinity (affection), and adoption. In other words, our kin are made up of people like our parents, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles, and also people to whom we choose to be related.



How do we create a family? One way is through **marriage**, a socially sanctioned union that includes legal rights and responsibilities of the spouses to each other, their children, and the larger society. Another is through **adoption**, the process of parents voluntarily choosing to have a legal parent-child relationship with a child who isn’t related to them by blood. In the last 50 years in the U.S., the number of **blended families**, a family with a step-parent, step-sibling, or half-sibling, has been on the rise. Almost 40% of new marriages involve a partner who has been married before.¹⁰ At the same time, the number of two-parent families is declining. In fact, we’ve made so many changes that in the United States, there is no longer a single dominant family form.¹¹

Societies exert control over how families form and grow through social norms that evolve over time and place. For example, some societies are **matrilineal**; they determine kinship between generations through the mother’s line. In these societies, women may get their names from their mothers, as well as property and titles. Remember the Mosuo? They are a matrilineal society: lineage is traced through female ancestors, and property is passed down through women.¹² Conversely, **patrilineal** societies determine kinship, names, property, and titles through the male line. The broader Chinese family system is patrilineal: names, kinship, and property pass from father to son. The Chinese family system also practices *patrilocal residence*, a system in which a wife moves in with her husband’s family after getting married.¹³

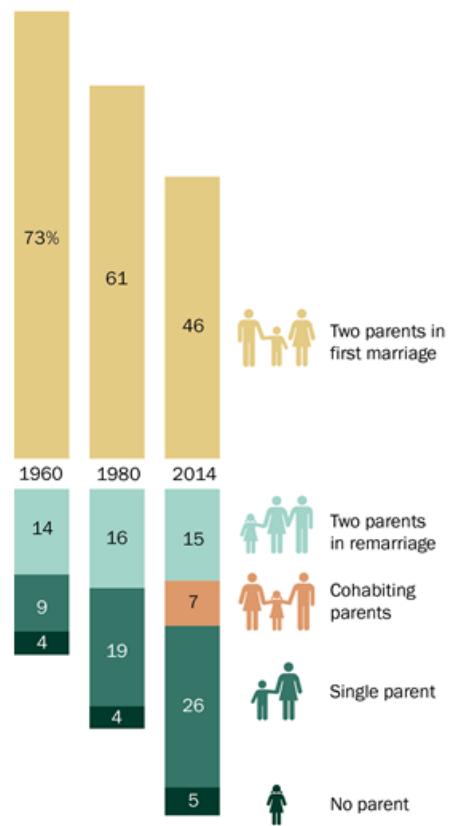
Some norms are considered **universal** – that is, they exist in virtually all societies. One of these is the **incest taboo**, the cultural prohibition against sexual activity between relatives. According to anthropologists who gathered **longitudinal data** (gathered at different points in time) on family formation around the globe, the incest taboo is one of only a few universal taboos. All cultures have rules about which kinship relations are appropriate and inappropriate as sexual partners. But that

doesn't mean the content of the rules is the same. For example, while contemporary Americans would never consider marrying their siblings, Cleopatra, who ruled Egypt from 51 to 30 BCE, was married to two of her younger brothers (at different times).¹⁴

Figure 1: Diversity in Family Forms¹⁵

For children, growing diversity in family living arrangements

% of children living with ...



Source: Pew Research Center, 2015

'Traditional' families & the nostalgia trap

When you hear "the traditional family," what image comes to mind? Who are the people? What do they look like? If you imagined an old TV show (perhaps *Leave It to Beaver*) with a **nuclear family** – a married couple and their dependent children – you wouldn't be alone. That is one of the most popular understandings of a "traditional" American family: a working father, a stay-at-home mother, and two children. Often, this popular image of the family is White and middle-class as well.

Or maybe your image was different, like the Pritchett family in the TV show *Modern Family*, a family that is not only blended but has adopted children, a May-December relationship (a relationship with a large age gap between partners), and same-sex marriage.

Other family variations that may seem strange or "wrong" to us were exceedingly common at other times and in other places. For example, though societies have been more disapproving in the past century or so, **polygamy**, or having multiple spouses at the same time, used to be much more common. The more frequent type of polygamy is **polygyny**, in which one man has multiple wives. Less common is **polyandry**, where one woman has multiple husbands; it is still practiced in Tibet.¹⁶ Before the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, polygyny was accepted in 75% of the upper classes in traditional societies.¹⁷ This makes polygamy the most common form of marriage found in world history! While in contemporary American society, the idea of having multiple spouses at once might sound unusual or even immoral, in other cultures, people find it completely normal. Have you ever heard the saying, "a woman's work is never done?" In Botswana, they say, "Without co-wives, a woman's work is never done."¹⁸

The point? Defining "the family" is much more complicated than it seems at first, and there is no single, universal, unchanging version of it.

The image of the traditional, eternally happy nuclear family is shaped in part by popular culture, politics, and news media. But this image is mostly a fiction. Widely varying formal and informal norms guided what is considered appropriate behavior in families at various times and places:

- In Europe in the 1700s, the age of sexual consent was ten.¹⁹
- During the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, American cultural anxieties linked “deviant” sexual behavior to treason, or an act against the state.²⁰ This included being gay, having children out of wedlock, and simply not getting married by the time it was expected!
- In colonial America, stepfamilies were pretty common, mostly because people died from diseases, leaving their spouses to remarry.²¹
- Until fairly recently, husbands in the U.S. were believed to have a right to have sex with their wives, and so could not be prosecuted for raping their spouse. Marital rape didn’t become a crime in all 50 states until 1993.
- In late-1800s America, many parents sent their children to work 12-hour shifts in hot and crowded sweatshops, mines, and factories. Some of these children were as young as six years old.²²
- In the 1800s and early 1900s, doctors *encouraged* pregnant women to drink alcohol for morning sickness, to calm their nerves, and to help invigorate and strengthen them for labor and childbirth.²³
- Until fairly recently, American married couples couldn’t get divorced without proving that one (and only one) of the spouses had violated the vows of marriage by committing adultery, mental cruelty, or other such acts.²⁴ If the judge found that *both* spouses had acted improperly and so were both “at fault,” the judge could deny the divorce.
- For the last 150 years, the American family has been slowly but steadily shrinking. But the coming decade will probably be the first in a while to buck that trend; households are now *increasing* in size for the first time since 1850–60.²⁵

Typically, what people mean when they talk about the “traditional” family is 1950s America. But even this image of the happy 1950s nuclear family is largely a fiction. For example, while stay-at-home moms might *seem* to have been the rule in 1950s and 1960s America,²⁶ there were important differences by race and class. Dual-earner partnerships, where both spouses work for income, have been common in African American families going back hundreds of years. In fact, Blacks were at the

forefront of creating what we now know as a “modern egalitarian marriage,” where both spouses work outside the home and do housework and childcare.²⁷ From the 1800s through today, the financial challenges facing working-class and poor families dictated that *everyone* had to contribute to running the household.²⁸ As family historian Stephanie Coontz noted, “Contrary to popular belief, *Leave it to Beaver* was not a documentary.”²⁹

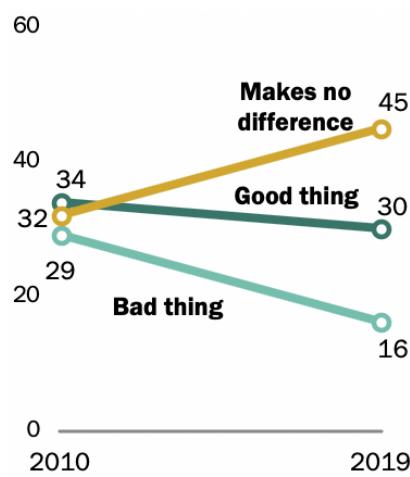
Obviously, one of the biggest problems with longing for a “return to a simpler time” is that this perfect family never really existed. Indeed, *some* families looked like the family in *Leave It to Beaver*. But the



The cast of *Leave It to Beaver*, a TV show that aired from 1957-1963. ([Source](#))

Shifting views on the growing variety in family living arrangements

% saying the growing variety in the types of family arrangements that people live in is a ...



Note: “Don’t know/Refused” responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 25-30, 2019.

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American family has never taken only one form. Families have always been changing and adapting – and often struggling – and connections between people tend to help families during these struggles. Imagining that it was all so much easier “back then” blinds us to the strategies families have used for generations that have made them so resilient.

In addition, there is evidence that Americans are just fine with the changing American family. According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in June 2019, “three-in-ten U.S. adults think it’s a good thing that there is growing variety in the types of family arrangements people live in, while about half as many (16%) say this is a bad thing. The largest share (45%) don’t think it makes a difference.”³⁰ As you can see in the chart on the left, this represents a change over the course of the last decade: in general Americans are moving away from concern and toward acceptance.

Evolution of the American family

“Love and marriage, love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage. This I tell you, brother: you can’t have one without the other.” So goes [the old Frank Sinatra song](#).³¹ In order to get married, should you be in love with your partner? That may

sound like a stupid question. Americans today tend to choose our partners based on feelings of affection and connection. Cultural notions even regard love as the *primary* driver of a successful relationship. The saying “love conquers all,” common in popular culture, reflects a belief that the existence of **companionate affection**, based on a deep emotional commitment, can help a couple weather any storm.

But according to family sociologist Andrew Cherlin, we may take the link between love and marriage for granted. Before the 20th century a lot of people would have been puzzled by our modern belief that “you can’t have one without the other.”³² At that time, Americans needed their spouses for financial security – to tend to the homestead, to care for children, to bring home money. And while you may fall out of love, you never fall out of the need to feed and clothe yourself. So at that time, marrying for love seemed risky and foolish.³³ As Stephanie Coontz says in *How Love Conquered Marriage*, “[f]or most of history it was inconceivable that people would choose their mates on the basis of something as fragile and irrational as love....” Depending upon the culture and time period, love in a marriage was seen as a pleasant by-product, a distraction, or even a threat to society itself.³⁴ But just because people didn’t marry for love, it didn’t mean they didn’t fall in love. For many societies, love was and is important. It just wasn’t considered necessary for a successful marriage.

Moral concerns about family forms and how they affect society are as old as families themselves. In the U.S., a narrative has emerged that the family is in a cultural and moral crisis. This isn’t a new argument. For decades, some politicians, journalists, and sociologists have held up the family as a central social institution through which we can gauge cultural values. For example, in 1986, President Ronald Reagan reflected upon the importance of families in a radio address, saying, “all those aspects of civilized life that we most deeply cherish—freedom, the rule of law, economic prosperity and opportunity—...all these depend upon the strength and integrity of the family.”³⁵

Advocates for the so-called traditional family point out ways families are changing. They have noted that as cultural values changed, traditional nuclear families have become less common. They argue these changes in family form indicate cultural, social, and moral decline. For example, in a 2008 op-ed, then-Senator from Kansas Sam Brownback wrote:

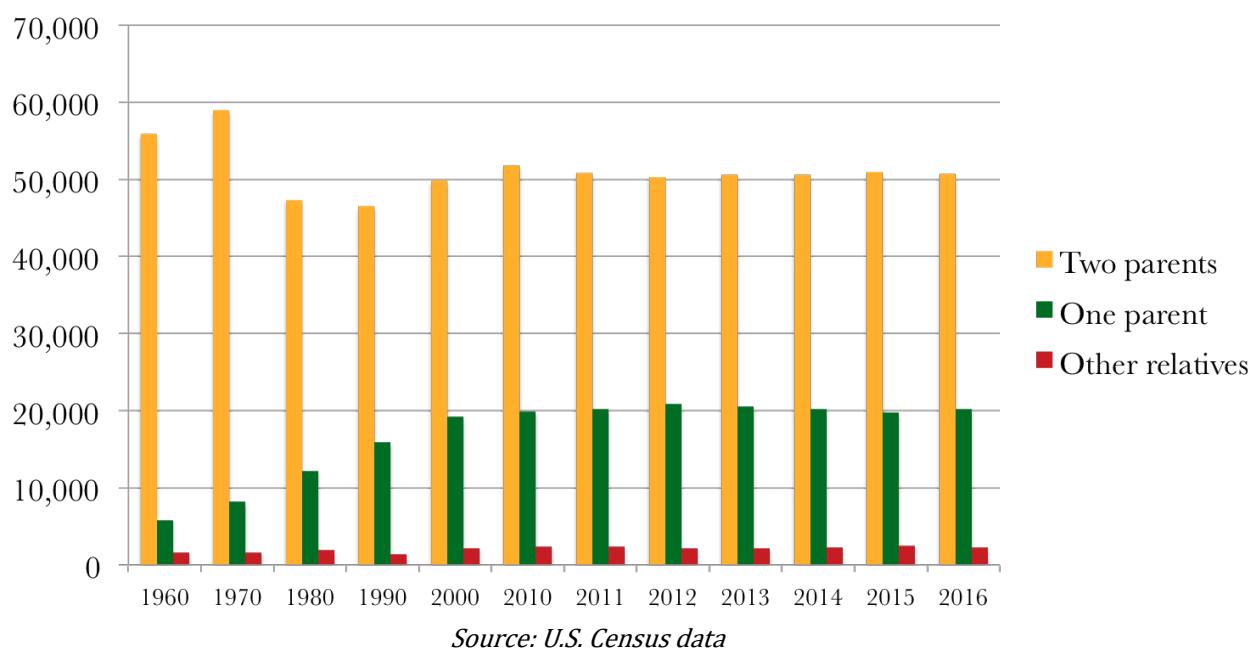
...[W]e need to rebuild the family and renew the culture in America...Marriage is in crisis. Divorce and adultery, cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births, and a mentality that views children as a burden are all part of the problem...The best way to reduce poverty, fight crime and improve education is to rebuild the family...We need a culture that knows right from wrong, encourages virtue and discourages vice.³⁶

For their part, sociologists debate how to interpret family change. Take the fact that more kids are growing up in single-parent households. According to the U.S. Census, while the majority (69%) of America’s children live in families with two parents, 23% live with a single mother, making it “[t]he second most common family arrangement.” This is a change from 1960, when 87% of children lived with two married parents and only 9% lived with a single parent.³⁷ How do sociologists interpret this fact? What are its effects?

It’s more complicated than it may seem at first. Single parents are more likely than married parents to be younger, to have less education, and to be from more disadvantaged backgrounds. The challenge for researchers is to determine whether single parenthood itself has any impact on children’s outcomes, or whether it is all of those background factors that are truly important to

children's successful development.³⁸ In other words, is single parenthood simply *correlated* (that is, associated) with worse outcomes for children, or does it *cause* worse outcomes? Sociologist Sara McLanahan argues that even when controlling for a wide range of background factors, there is evidence that growing up without a father results in a number of disadvantages for children. These disadvantages include increased likelihood of dropping out of college, having a child before turning 20, and being neither employed nor in school in their teens and 20s. McLanahan and other researchers argue that children who grow up with a single parent are denied a number of important social and economic resources. This impedes their chances of success.³⁹

Figure 2: Children Living with Two Parents, One Parent, and Other Relatives, 1960-2016



Other scholars make a case for the negative consequences of family changes. David Popenoe has argued that the family as an institution continues to weaken. He claims that our culture no longer places a central focus on the importance of the family, and that self-fulfillment has taken its place; we're investing less time, money, and energy into our families and investing more in ourselves. Popenoe suggests that this harms children and families in catastrophic ways that signal the "end-of-the-line" for families as we know them.⁴⁰

But this interpretation is debated. Sociologists like Judith Stacey share a concern for the fate of children but see a different source for the family distress we see today. Stacey argues that our society has failed to support the family. She points to economic decline and reductions to many public assistance programs, resulting in a less secure safety net for struggling families. Stacey suggests that scholars like Popenoe confuse the impacts of this lack of social support with cultural decline, and that the nuclear family is not natural – in fact, no single family is the "natural" form.⁴¹ Instead, *diversity* is natural.⁴² Despite this, we idealize the nuclear family both in policy and rhetoric. According to Stacey, instead of preferring one family form over all others, we should support what works for each family.⁴³



Unmarried fathers face stereotypes about their commitment to their families. ([Source](#))

Often, “absentee fathers” are blamed for the rise of single-parent families; Kathryn Edin and Timothy Nelson note, “...unwed fatherhood is denounced as one of the leading social problems of our day.”⁴⁴ Unmarried fathers are portrayed as irresponsible men who are only interested in sex. The stereotype of these men is that they “flee the scene” when their partners get pregnant, that they simply don’t care. These stereotypes often intersect with race, as African American men are often viewed as being primarily responsible for the situation.

However, a lot of these “absentee fathers” may play a larger role in their child’s life than previous generations of fathers who were present physically, but not emotionally or otherwise. Edin and Nelson’s study of 110 White and Black inner-city fathers shows that fathers’ involvement is highly dynamic; most of the fathers were in relationships of some degree of seriousness when their partners got pregnant, and most took the pregnancy very seriously. Many were eager to be fathers and showed a strong longing to parent their children and be a good example for them. While many of the fathers didn’t provide a lot in the way of financial support, they rejected the idea that this should be the primary way of judging them as fathers. These men meant well – as many noted, they were “doing the best they can” – but for some of them, cultural changes in the idea of the family, financial difficulties, and a lack of institutionalized support such as guaranteed visitation rights made it difficult to stay involved in their children’s lives.⁴⁵

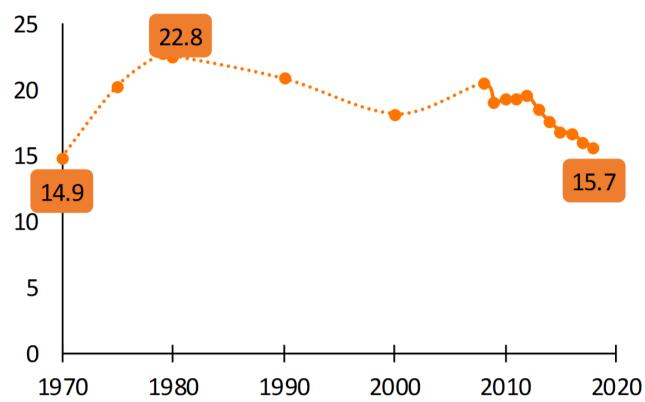
Divorce and the typical American family

Have you ever heard that half of all marriages end in divorce? As it turns out, that's only part of the story. It's no longer true that 50% of all marriages end in **divorce**, the legally recognized termination of a marriage; in fact, it hasn't been true for some time. The U.S. divorce rate actually hit a 40-year *low* in 2018, with 15.7 divorces per 1000 married women, down from a high of 22.8 divorces per 1000 married women in 1980.⁴⁶ This decline occurred across racial groups, educational levels, and total years married.⁴⁷

What happened? The divorce rate peaked during the 1970s and early 1980s. That means Baby Boomers, the generation born after World War II, have divorced the most. There are multiple reasons for this. The 1970s saw the emergence of **no-fault divorce**, which allowed couples to divorce without having to prove that one of them broke their marriage vows or acted irresponsibly. This made it much easier to get a divorce. At the same time, feminist consciousness-raising groups became popular. These groups led some women to challenge longstanding divisions of housework and childcare that resulted in gender inequality. Additionally, as women increasingly entered the workforce, more married women became economically independent. This economic independence made it more likely that women could leave an unhappy, unequal, or abusive marriage. Each of these factors may have contributed to higher divorce rates in the 1970s and 1980s.

Though the divorce rate in the U.S. has declined overall, among those over 50 years old, the rate has doubled in the last 30 years, a phenomenon researchers refer to as **gray divorce**.⁴⁸ Jocelyn Crowley argues that many of these divorces happen after decades together. She attributes this phenomenon to a couple of factors. First, changes in individual priorities led Americans to understand marriage through a different lens than previous generations and to focus more on personal contentment and fulfillment than previous generations. Second, Crowley notes that there has been a dramatic increase in life expectancy among Americans, so couples have more years to spend together than in the past. Divorce affects older men and women differently: in general, divorced men over 50 may have a better financial situation to lean on; on the other hand, women enjoy a greater amount of social support to lean on after a gray divorce. Ultimately, Crowley argues that these costs are not a given. Instead, they reflect the social and political realities we have constructed; smart public policy can help lessen the strain — financial, social, or otherwise — that divorcees over 50 experience.⁴⁹

Figure 1. Women's Adjusted Divorce Rate, 1990-2018



Source: National Center for Family & Marriage Research

In sum, declarations of “the decline of the American family” may be eternal — and eternally premature. That doesn’t mean families haven’t changed. As economies, demographics, and ideologies change, families change too, and these changes shape our individual family experiences. So what does a “typical American family” look like now? Today, the typical family is smaller than in previous generations. Forty percent of babies are born to parents who are not married, and 40% of mothers are now the primary breadwinners of their families.⁵⁰ Parents have more schooling than they used to, and they’re older.

Andrew Cherlin argues that in the U.S., “people partner, unpartner, and repartner faster than do people in any other Western nation.”⁵¹ His observation, and the changes that I’ve outlined, may simply reflect the ongoing evolution of the family – an evolution that really is eternal, but that is moving especially quickly in the United States.

Review Sheet: What makes a family?

Key Points

- The configuration of a family varies over time and across cultures.
- There is no such thing as a “traditional” family – throughout history people have lived in diverse family forms.
- Marrying for love is a modern idea, and by no means a cultural universal.
- As societies change, so do families; family diversity is on the rise. There is no longer a single, dominant family form.
- 69% of American children now live in families with two parents, making it the most common family arrangement.
- The second-most-common family arrangement is children with a single mother (23%).
- The divorce rate has been declining for the last 40 years, and hit a low in 2018.

Key People

- Stephanie Coontz
- Kathryn Edin
- Timothy Nelson
- Andrew Cherlin
- David Popenoe
- Judith Stacey
- Jocelyn Crowley

Key Terms

- **Family** – A group connected by blood, sexual relationship, or the law.
- **Marriage** – Socially-sanctioned union that includes rights and responsibilities of the spouses to each other, their children, and the larger society.

- **Adoption** – Process of parents voluntarily choosing to have a legal parent-child relationship with a child that is not related by blood.
- **Blended family** – Family with a step-parent, step-sibling or half-sibling.
- **Matrilineal society** – Determines kinship, names, property, and titles through the female line.
- **Patrilineal society** – Determines kinship, names, property, and titles through the male line.
- **Universal norm** – A norm that exist in virtually every society.
- **Incest taboo** – Cultural prohibition against sexual relations between people who are related to one another.
- **Longitudinal data** – Data gathered at different points in time.
- **Polygamy** – Having multiple spouses at the same time.
- **Polygyny** – One man has multiple wives at the same time.
- **Polyandry** – One woman has multiple husbands at the same time.
- **Nuclear family** – A married couple and their dependent children.
- **May-December relationship** – Relationship in which there is a large age gap between partners.
- **Companionate affection** – Deep emotional commitment.
- **Divorce** – Legally-recognized termination of a marriage.
- **No-fault divorce** – marriage dissolutions in which neither spouse is required to prove the fault of the other
- **Gray divorce** – Divorce over the age of 50

MEETING, MATING, & MULTIPLYING – OR NOT

- How do Americans meet and partner up in the 21st century?
- What types of partnerships are common, and why?
- How do capitalism and consumption habits affect cultural traditions surrounding marriage?
- Under what circumstances are people having – or not having – children?

Mate selection in the 21st century

Remember Sebastian, the guy who tried to find a partner by swiping right on *everyone* on Tinder? His method may have been extreme, but finding a partner online is becoming more and more common in our complicated, spatially scattered society.

Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology, argued that as societies grow more economically complex and diffuse, and as our daily environment involves fewer close connections and more strangers, we lose bonds to family and community. In previous generations, people lived close to one another and had more regular face-to-face interactions. Advancements in internet technology have expanded our society a great deal, making our connections more geographically dispersed. Many of us now spend more time in virtual contact with each other than in face-to-face contact. In other words, we may be losing **social integration**, or the degree to which people are connected to each other and to social institutions. Social integration is important in part because it provides us with connections to potential mates.

Many people still meet their partner through friends, which has been the most common method for the last 75 years. But in the last decade, online dating has grown exponentially. This makes sense; the internet permeates nearly everything we do. We can do our schooling, working, banking, and socializing online. Technology and society scholar Danah Boyd argues that in large U.S. cities where people don't have the same kind of close-knit social connections their ancestors did, dating apps can help them find someone to date.⁵² This assistance comes in very specialized forms: there are dating websites and apps for specific groups like Grindr for gay or bisexual men, Match.com and eHarmony for those who want long-term partners, BlackPeopleMeet for African Americans, JDate for Jewish people, and even Farmers Only for the rural set.

According to Rosenfeld and Rubin, online dating has been particularly useful for LGBTQ+ people, who may face a **thin market** for partners (one in which the cost of finding potential partners presents a barrier to forming relationships). Gay, lesbian, trans, and other queer people are almost always in thin markets. Additionally, they are less likely to be set up on dates by family members and are often reluctant to meet people at school or work because of very real fears of discrimination once their sexual orientation or gender identity is known. So it's unsurprising that they meet and couple up online at especially high rates.⁵³

Online dating may be a relatively new frontier, but preferences, prejudices, and other social relations are still very much in play. The people at dating site OKCupid have been doing research on their users' habits for years, including who sends messages of interest and who responds to those messages. What they found among heterosexual users is that the biases and stigmas that exist in the



LGBTQ folks are more likely to use dating apps and websites than their straight counterparts. ([Source](#))

physical world don't disappear when we go online. In their own words, "The takeaway here is that although race shouldn't matter in messaging, it does. A lot."⁵⁴

OKCupid matches people through an algorithm that measures their interests, habits, and personalities. The algorithm matches people pretty evenly throughout all races; users aren't more likely to match with people of their own race than any other. Because matches are evenly spread out across racial groups, we could reasonably expect that responses to messages of interest would be, too.

But they're not. In fact, the OkCupid data point to clear racial preferences in responses. When men do the asking, White men are more likely to get responses from women of all races; Black and Asian men are far less likely. When women do the asking, men are dramatically less likely to respond to Black women. The OkCupid data also echoes what we see more broadly in American relationships: all groups say they think interracial relationships are theoretically acceptable, but Whites are the least likely to actually be in an interracial relationship.⁵⁵ Overall, the data indicate that online dating both modifies and reflects our larger social concerns about relationships.

But have OkCupid and other online dating sites changed the nature of our romantic relationships – that is, the way we interact with each other once we meet in person? One Reddit user's story, which he told jokingly in response to a question about the worst experiences with online dating, suggests that our face-to-face experiences are sometimes very different than our best-laid plans online: "I joined OKC [OkCupid] four years ago hoping to hook up with a bunch of girls. I spent a week messaging a few girls and decided to meet the first of these girls to put my plan into action. We ended up hitting it off and started dating exclusively. Four years later, and we are still dating. She completely ruined my plan."

This user's "plan" reflects another hallmark of the modern meet-up culture: the **hook-up**, a sexual encounter characterized by a lack of longstanding commitment. Kathleen Bogle's *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* suggests that two factors have led to increases in casual

sexual encounters: first, people (especially Millennials) are delaying marriage, and second, an increasing number of people spend their early adulthood in college – and on college campuses, a lot of young people are in close proximity, with fewer rules than they've ever had before. Instead of panicking about the existence of hook-ups, Bogle argues that students tend to overestimate the amount of sex their friends are actually having.



College campuses have a lot of young people in close quarters, with few rules. ([Source](#))

However, she notes that even in the hook-up scene, which is *potentially* less dependent on gendered norms and old-fashioned roles, there is still a **double-standard** for sexual behavior: women's reputations still suffer more for engaging in

hook-ups than men's do. And Bogle's female respondents frequently said they wanted relationships, because hook-ups usually led to "nothing."⁵⁶ Additionally, research shows that heterosexual hook-ups are less likely to lead to an orgasm for women than sex in relationships does, in part because both partners are more dismissive of women's pleasure in hook-ups, but believe strongly in women's entitlement to sexual pleasure within a relationship.⁵⁷

Despite the attention given to hook-ups, casual encounters may become less common. An OkCupid report from February 2017 showed that "most singles are interested in deeper connections...And the number of people who feel this way is increasing year after year."⁵⁸ The percentage of the site's users who say they enjoy "meaningless sex" has fallen since 2008, slowly for men and more sharply for women. The report suggests that more people are using the site for long-term matches rather than hook-ups. So, technology affects our romantic relationships in large and small ways. But it also presents us with an opportunity. We have relationships with each other, but we *all* have a social relationship with technology. We have a choice in how to respond to technological advancements. Whether those responses increase or decrease our social integration is up to us.

The cohabitation revolution

Despite Beyoncé's claim that "if you liked it, then you should've put a ring on it," increasingly couples are skipping the wedding altogether. Scholars refer to this as the "cohabitation revolution." **Cohabitation** – or, simply, living together – was relatively rare even 30 years ago; now, it's downright typical. According to the National Center for Family & Marriage Research, more than 14.5 million unmarried partners live together in the United States.⁵⁹

According to Pamela Smock and Wendy Manning's extensive research on cohabitating heterosexual couples, cohabitation is now the most common form of romantic relationship where people live together.

There are some common factors we can use to predict whether someone will cohabit. For example, compared to married couples, cohabiting couples have lower incomes, are less likely to have college degrees, and their unemployment levels are almost twice as high.

Why do cohabiting couples struggle more financially? Smock and Manning's respondents often said they wanted their finances "in place" before they got married. Younger people thought of cohabiting as sensible and pragmatic; living together means they can spend more time together, pool financial resources, and evaluate their marriage compatibility. They were also aware of high divorce rates. This made them wary of stepping into a marriage without having the relationship experience that living together brings.⁶⁰

Scholars used to argue that cohabitation before marriage meant that couples were more likely to break up. There's some truth to this claim. National survey data have documented a **cohabitation effect**; marriages that begin with cohabitation are more likely to end in divorce.⁶¹ We know the effect is divorce, but what is the cause? Are cohabiting couples more likely to get divorced because cohabiting

itself eventually leads to divorce? Or are there personality and cultural factors that make some people more likely to consider cohabitation, *and* more likely to consider divorce?

No single, straightforward factor accounts for the cohabitation effect. Some research points to the idea that cohabitation creates a sort of **relationship inertia**: cohabitation encourages people to “slide” into marriage, rather than “decide” to marry.⁶² Couples who otherwise wouldn’t get married can end up doing so because living together makes it easier to stay together.⁶³ Another factor may be the result of social change. Since relationship types and boundaries are becoming more ambiguous, couples may not be on the same page about what cohabiting means for them.⁶⁴ This can reduce their feelings of commitment toward each other, and obscures the transition that occurs when “you and I” become “us.”⁶⁵



Cardinals mate for life. Humans? It depends.
(Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Attitudes may play a role as well. Feelings and expectations about being a couple are present in both the decision to live together and the decision to get married. Imagine someone who believes that living together before marriage is absolutely unacceptable, even immoral. That person is likely to be less accepting of divorce, too.⁶⁶ On the other hand, couples who cohabit before marriage do have a lower chance of staying together, but it may not be living together itself that causes the breakup; perhaps the very fact that they were willing to live together meant they were more likely to get divorced as well, even if they *hadn't* lived together first.

The wedding industrial complex

What do you think the average wedding costs? Consider the venue. Food and drinks. Music. The dress. The cake. Photography. Flowers. Adds up fast, right? [The Wedding Report](#), an industry website, provides widely reported statistics on wedding costs. They say the average cost of a wedding in 2017 was almost \$26,000, with the median hovering around \$14,000 (so half of weddings cost more than \$14,000 and half cost less). That’s a lot of money. In recent generations we’ve seen a change from weddings as a community-based event to a consumer-driven one. We’ve seen the emergence of the **wedding-industrial complex**, the merging of industry with social rituals surrounding marriage.

The wedding-industrial complex has resulted in the dramatic expansion of a wedding industry that has **commoditized** the social ritual of the wedding, turning weddings into events that have economic value because of the products and services we purchase for them. This results in a blurring of the line between profit and cultural customs. The extent of the bridal market today and the wide range of businesses that cater to this market suggest that consumers readily accept the commercialization of their marriage rituals. Simply put, Americans love big weddings. The rise in wedding-related consumption has been accompanied by a seemingly endless appetite for weddings in

popular culture. We see this on reality shows, in magazines and newspaper features on celebrity weddings, and in a host of wedding-themed movies and toys for young girls.



The average cost of a wedding gown is over a thousand dollars. ([Source](#))

Vicki Howard shows that as the 20th century progressed, weddings became increasingly surrounded by **consumer rites**, or elaborations of older customs as businesses attempted to create new markets for their services and products. Over the course of the 1900s, the wedding industry developed a tremendous amount of power in shaping what we now understand to be “typical” for a wedding. But this consumerist turn wasn’t always the accepted way to do things. And the fact that we have such elaborate and expensive weddings in the 21st century wasn’t inevitable.⁶⁷

In the early United States, weddings were mainly a community project. In some cases, it took weeks to get everything together. There was sewing and foraging to do. People had to make the booze and food. But these early weddings had no professionals, no commercial services. The labor was expensive, to be sure, but not in the way we might think today. Weddings took a lot of time and family labor (or, for the wealthy, servants’ labor). But as our economy grew more complex, some of the tasks and products associated with weddings became commoditized, even for the middle class.⁶⁸ Instead of sewing dresses, having a community potluck, or having cousins play music, we started *buying* dresses, *ordering* food, and *hiring* deejays.

The commercialization of weddings coincided with a new tradition, the wedding gift. This custom began among elites and, like many elite customs, trickled down to the rest of us. Howard argues that the tradition of obligatory wedding presents took hold because of mid-19th century gendered relations. Gifts were a more modern form of monetary exchange, replacing a dowry (a negotiated payment between the bride and groom’s parents). As far back as the 1800s, there are records of couples’ families inviting many more people to the wedding than they knew could be there – to increase the number of wedding gifts they received.⁶⁹

Of course, not everyone was in favor of wedding gifts, especially if they were used for social climbing. Critics believed these exchanges of wealth put consumption on display and turned sacred marriage rites into a marketplace where “sentiment was for sale.” Howard notes that at that time, we begin to see fictional accounts of out-of-control brides. Yes, you read that correctly: the concept of the “bridezilla” began in the 1800s.⁷⁰

Both then and now, a lot of the organizational work involved with a wedding falls to women: entire industries rely on the notion that a wedding is all about the bride and it had better be The Best Day of Her Life. This is a considerable amount of social pressure. Sociologically, it’s worth noting just how much the wedding industry (not to mention Instagram) supports the idea of “one perfect day.”

As a result, there is a “constant string of events taking place that calls for... merchandise that does not end until the last anniversary of the wedding is celebrated.”⁷¹ And it begins with a ring.

In the 1930s, an ad campaign argued that a *diamond* ring was really necessary to show your love. As with many of the traditions surrounding weddings, the account of its importance is both gendered and **heteronormative** – that is, reflecting the attitude and assumption that heterosexuality is normal and natural. As the website for the American Gem Society notes, “A diamond's purity and sparkle have now become symbols of the depth of a man's commitment to the woman he loves in practically all corners of the world.... Diamonds still signify the celebration of a union and cherished memory.”⁷²



A diamond ring. ([Source](#))

Ever hear of the tradition that a diamond engagement ring should cost a few months' salary? This “tradition” is the result of yet another wildly successful ad campaign, this one running as late as 1980. The “diamond is forever” ad states, “You can't look at Jane and tell me she's not worth 2 months' salary.”

The history of the American wedding reveals how capitalism and our national culture of consumption helped define and shape the institution of marriage. Our conceptions of what marriage and relationships mean are absorbed

and reflected in the things we buy and sell and the ways we buy and sell them. Because of the efforts of advertisers and marketers, Americans who may be thinking of popping the question are now considered a key market.

Fertility and reproduction

On the subject of not having children, feminist Gloria Steinem once said, “I accepted it for a long time and I thought that ‘OK, I’m getting married. I’m having children. I’m definitely doing that, just not

right now....' I'd put in in the future and then, fortunately, the women's movement came along and made me realize I was actually happy and that there were more ways to live than one."⁷³

One of the ironies of fertility is that many women in the United States spend most of their sexually active lives trying *not* to get pregnant. Most women, unlike Steinem, do eventually have children – the share of women who never have children is at its lowest point in nearly 20 years.⁷⁴ But women are also having children later than ever: from 1970 to 2006, the average age of first childbirth for U.S. women rose from just over 21 years old to 25.⁷⁵ What are some of the factors that affect if, when, and how we have babies? And how does that affect families?

For one thing, families now are smaller than they were in previous generations. In 1976, 40% of mothers had four or more kids. Now, only 14% do. This is likely due to three factors: First, women have increased their educational attainment and labor force participation, and more time spent in school and at work may reduce their willingness to have children. Second, improvements in the reliability of contraceptives, including increased use of long-term, very effective contraceptive forms like the Intra-Uterine Device (IUD), may allow women to control their fertility more effectively. Third, the marriage rate is also at an all-time low⁷⁶ – and decreased marriage may lead to decreased fertility.⁷⁷ It's not that women aren't having children *at all* anymore. But they're having fewer children and waiting longer than ever to have them.

There is also evidence that some of these factors are shaping young people's experiences. For example, the teen pregnancy rate has reached its lowest point in nearly 40 years. Once again, a combination of factors is at play. The percentage of teens who say they're having sex has declined slightly (about five to six percentage points). Teens also report having fewer partners.⁷⁸ And teens who *are* having sex are using birth control more reliably and effectively.⁷⁹



Today, most American families are smaller than this happy bunch. ([Source](#))

There may be media effects as well. By analyzing Google Trends data and social media mentions against birth data, Melissa Kearney and Phillip Levine looked at the MTV reality show *16 and*

Pregnant and what, if any, effect the show had on teens' perceptions and behavior. *16 and Pregnant* follows a few teenagers through their pregnancy and motherhood. While the Parents Television Council criticized the show for what they see as glamourizing teen pregnancy, Kearney and Levine's research found that *16 and Pregnant* "ultimately led to a 5.7 percent reduction in teen births in the 18 months following its introduction. This accounts for around one-third of the overall decline in teen births in the United States during that period."⁸⁰ Shows like *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* might make teen parenthood look so difficult that they deter young adults from having children.

In fact, overall **fertility rates**, or births per woman, have declined steadily for decades in many countries around the world. The global fertility rate is so low that Harvard sociologist Mary Brinton argues that the threshold at which the population will replace itself isn't being met anymore.⁸¹ Brinton suggests that intersections between the economy and gendered norms contribute to the trend. If societies don't have effective policies that support having both a career *and* children, more and more families will choose a career over children. Relevant policies include flexible work hours, allowing employees to work from home, family leave, and gender equality in childcare. Another factor is that when economic conditions are uncertain, people delay childbirth. All of this adds up to declining birthrates worldwide.⁸² Thus, while some norms and cultural traditions are persistent, complexity and change marks the ways we meet, mate, and multiply – or not.



Many moms are forced to choose between work and children. ([Source](#))

Review Sheet: Meeting, mating, and multiplying – or not

Key Points

- Finding a mate through face-to-face means is getting more difficult due to increasing societal complexity.
- Mate selection in the 21st century is characterized by online dating apps.
- Mating responses online are subject to the same sets of prejudices and preferences that sociologists have noted for generations.
- OKCupid reports that among their users, only 43% of men and 17% of women say they enjoy meaningless sex compared to 48% of men and 27% of women in 2008.
- Increasing numbers of couples are choosing to live together instead of marrying.
- Over 12 million unmarried partners live together in the United States.
- Many of the modern rituals we associate with weddings stem from commercial, rather than cultural, interests. The mean cost of a wedding is nearly \$26,000.
- Families are smaller than ever before, and more women are having children later than ever.
- The teen birth rate has hit historic lows due to more consistent and effective use of birth control.

Key People

- Kathleen Bogle
- Pamela Smock and Wendy Manning
- Vicki Howard
- Melissa Kearney and Phillip Levine
- Mary Brinton

Key Terms

- **Social integration** – Degree to which people in a community have connections to one another's daily lives.
- **Double standard** for sexual behavior – Women are judged more harshly than men are for the same sexual behavior.
- **Cohabitation revolution** – Growth in number of couples living together instead of getting married.
- **Cohabitation effect** – Phenomenon in which couples who cohabit before marriage are more likely to divorce.
- **Wedding industrial complex** – Merging of capitalist industries with social and cultural marriage rituals.
- **Consumer rites** – Elaborations of older customs as businesses attempted to create new markets for their goods and services.
- **Heteronormativity** – Assumption or attitude that heterosexuality is the normal and natural form of sexuality.
- **Fertility rate** – Births per woman.

INSTITUTIONAL & INTERPERSONAL CHALLENGES TO FAMILIES

- How do families divide up housework?
- What challenges are unique to parents of different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds?
- What is intimate-partner violence, and under what conditions does it occur?
- How have social norms of divorce changed over time?

In the 1970s in Iceland, women were responsible for the lion's share of housework and childcare. Many grew frustrated that this household labor left them without enough time to get decent jobs outside the home. Those who did work outside the home were tired of making less than 60% of what Icelandic men did for the same jobs.⁸³ So on October 24, 1975, Icelandic women went on strike for a day. They did no housework, no childcare, and no wage-earning work. In all, 90% of Icelandic women participated in the "day off" (named because labor laws dictated that the women could have been fired for striking, but not for taking a day off) to protest the household and wage-earning labor arrangements. The strike had an immediate impact:

There was no telephone service. Newspapers were not printed because all the typesetters were women. Theaters shut down because actresses refused to work. Schools closed, or operated at limited capacity, because the majority of teachers were female. Airline flights were cancelled because flight attendants did not work that day. Bank executives had to work as tellers to keep the banks open because the female tellers had taken the day off.

Meanwhile the men had to take their kids to work and provide them with food because daycares were closed and women would not do any of the work they normally did at home.⁸⁴

The shockwaves generated by the national day off didn't fade away once women went back to work. Since the strike, Iceland has become known as "the world's most feminist country." It is one of the few nations to have had a woman as a long-term leader (Vigdis Finnbogadottir, a divorced single mother who led the country for 16 years). It introduced paid paternal leave for fathers in 2000.⁸⁵ And in 2010, Iceland became the first nation to ban the stripping lap dance for feminist (rather than religious) reasons.⁸⁶ Of course, things aren't perfect in Iceland, but the country has been recognized for promoting specifically woman-friendly policies.

Sociologists seek to understand how power relations play a role in how we live our lives, including challenges that families face in their day-to-day lives. Power relations act on an individual level, shaping our daily decision-making. But they also affect groups and institutions, like the family,

the economy, and politics. And individuals can disrupt power relations in institutions. As the Icelandic women's strike shows us, resistance is one way that institutions change. In this section, we'll examine these individual, group-level, and institutional power relations that challenge the family in profound ways.

The division of household labor

Think back to when you were growing up. Who did the cooking, the cleaning, the yardwork? Who got you dressed in the morning when you were a little kid? Who made sure you did your homework at night? The primary understanding of family structure in the past was a **breadwinner-homemaker model**, a gendered labor arrangement in which one partner (usually the man) worked outside the home to earn money, and another partner (usually the woman) stayed at home to do the housework, childcare, and other household labor. But in the last 30 years, we've seen a transformation in the roles that men and women play in the family. Now, many families have a **dual-earner arrangement**, in which both spouses have wage-earning jobs. Feminist family sociologists have called this a revolution in the division of household labor. But they warn us that in some ways, this revolution may be "stalled," or at least incomplete. Think of it this way: if both partners are working outside the home earning money, who is doing the housework and childcare?

Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild set out to answer just that question in her landmark study, *The Second Shift*. Hochschild knew that falling wages for male breadwinners led more women than ever to join the workforce. So she and her research associates conducted in-depth interviews with 50 couples over multiple meetings. They also closely observed a dozen households. They asked questions about who does what in each household, including cooking, cleaning, doing taxes, household repairs, and even tasks like writing thank-you cards.

Hochschild found that the working women in her study performed a *second shift* of work. Once the husband and wife came home from their wage-earning jobs, the wife bore the brunt of performing the childcare and housework. These housework hours added up to an extra *month* of work each year for working women – a significant burden that resulted in their being tired more often and more likely to get sick. But the women interviewed perceived their second shift as being a *micro-level*, or individually-experienced, difficulty, rather than the institutional-level challenge that Icelandic women did in 1975.⁸⁷ The perception that problems are unique to individuals, and not collective social challenges, may be one of the reasons the gendered division of household labor persists and the revolution has stalled.



[\(Source\)](#)

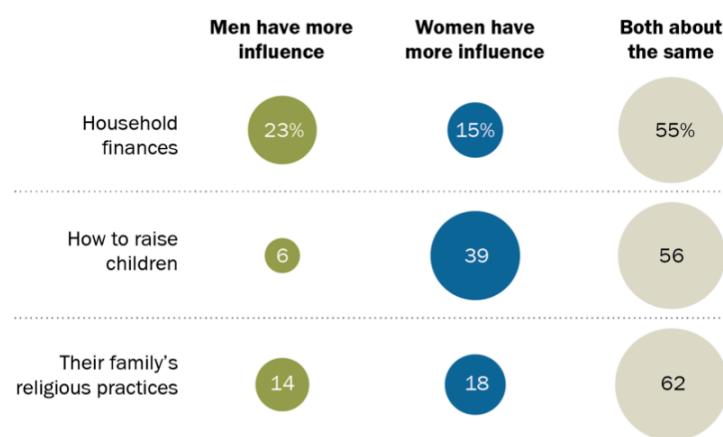
More recent research follows up on Hochschild's classic study. Sarah Thébaud analyzed data from 18 countries to understand how the relative amount of income earned by a man and woman within a couple affects how much housework the man does. Her research indicated that the second shift is magnified the more successful the woman is at work: men whose wives earned more money than them actually did *less* housework than men who earned more than their wives. Thébaud argued that social understandings of masculinity played a significant role. Since our culture values the ability to make money as a duty and hallmark of manhood, making less money than their wives felt like a threat to the husbands' masculinity. Feeling threatened, the men did less household labor to re-assert this threatened masculinity. Thébaud's results highlight the importance of cultural context in working toward an equitable division of household labor.⁸⁸

For same-sex couples, the picture is more egalitarian, especially in lesbian relationships. A study of 80 gay and lesbian partners showed that lesbian partners reported more tasks were done equally by both women, compared to households with two male partners. Overall, same-sex partners did household labor simply when they found it needed to be done. This matters for their relationships, because the fairer the share of housework is perceived to be, the happier the couple is.⁸⁹

An equal division of household labor takes work. But evidence shows that this effort pays off.

Majorities think men and women have about the same influence in making important family decisions

% who say that, in a family, ____ when it comes to making important decisions about ...



Note: Percentages are medians based on 34 countries. Don't know responses not shown.
Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q64a-c.

"Worldwide Optimism About Future of Gender Equality, Even as Many See Advantages for Men"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

[Source](#)

Couples who consciously work toward an equal division of labor are more successful at achieving it. Research explicitly links couples' household labor arrangement satisfaction with their commitment to discussing how they want to divide up the work.⁹⁰ There is also good news for those concerned about the gender imbalance: in each generation, the division of household labor becomes more equal. Dads are now doing more housework and childcare, and the majority of young people say they want an equal division of labor in their household. In fact, a 2019 Pew Center survey conducted among 38,426 people in 34 countries shows that the majority of men and women think that overall there is roughly gender equality in household decision-making, and "[i]n nearly every country surveyed, majorities say that a

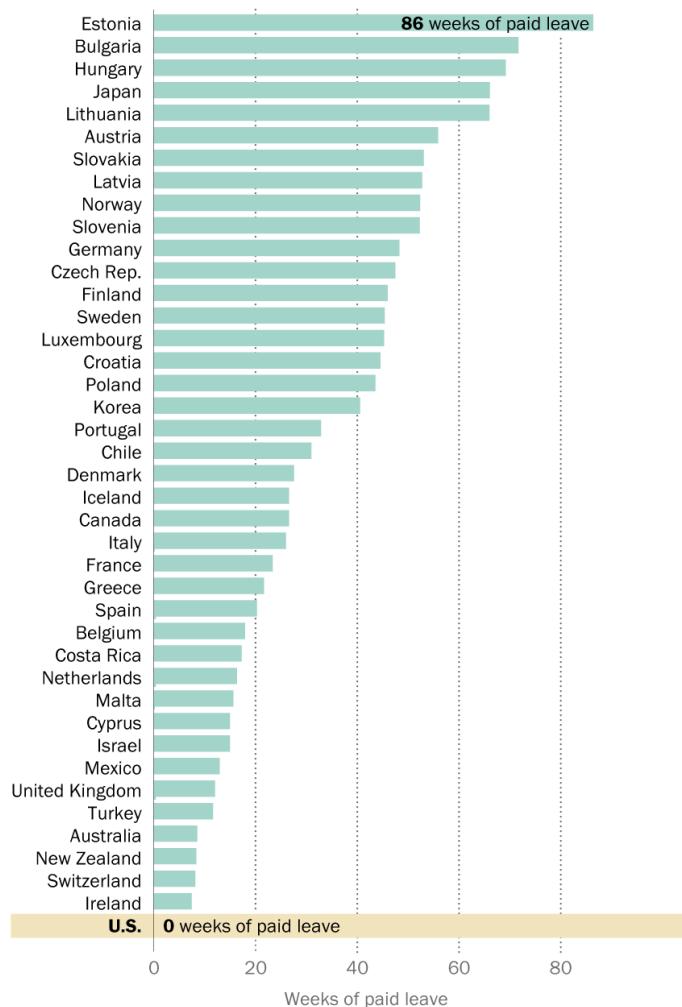
marriage where both the husband and wife have jobs and take care of the home is more satisfying than one where the husband provides for the family and the wife takes care of the house and children.”⁹¹

Parenting in the modern world

Figure 4: Maternity Leave in Select Countries

U.S. ranks last in government-mandated paid leave for new parents

Total weeks of paid leave mandated by national government to new parents



Note: Includes maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave entitlements in place as of April 2018. Estimates based on a “full-rate equivalent,” calculated as total number of weeks of any paid leave available to a new parent, multiplied by average rate of earnings reimbursement for those weeks of leave.

Source: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Family Database.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Have you ever heard someone say that parenting is “the toughest job in the world?” What makes it so tough? Of course, parents have to feed, clothe, and care for their children. Increasingly, more of them are working outside the home. And there’s that housework we just talked about. But when we look at parenting with a sociological lens, we can see that challenges to parents aren’t simply individual-level. Institutional realities can pose formidable challenges for parents.

In addition to parents, the state also plays a role in childcare. Public policy can support parenting, or it can provide hurdles to raising children. These policies powerfully affect parenting choices, especially for women. Let’s look at an example.

As we discussed, more American women hold jobs outside the home than ever before, and a growing share of women are their family’s primary breadwinner. But scholars have argued that even now, U.S. policies assume that a parent stays at home with the children. A study of 41 developed nations found that the United States is the only one that has no mandated paid leave for new parents.⁹² In fact, of the 193 countries in the United Nations, the only ones without national paid leave are New Guinea, Suriname, “a few South Pacific island nations,” and the United States.⁹³

([Source](#))

Family leave policy affects how people parent. In the U.S., the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) requires that people who have worked for at least 12 months at certain businesses are entitled “to take unpaid, job-protected leave for specified family and medical reasons with continuation of group health insurance coverage under the same terms and conditions as if the employee had not taken leave.”⁹⁴ Notice that the law guarantees *unpaid* leave. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports that roughly 13% of U.S. workers have access to paid family leave.⁹⁵ (Paid family leave includes parental leave as well as time off to care for ill or aging parents or spouses.) This leaves out a lot of parents. And the effects are even stronger for women, because mothers are still more likely to be responsible for childcare.

So what do the 87% of parents without paid leave do? Some quit their jobs.⁹⁶ This can have devastating effects on future earnings, since it can be difficult to get a job after a period of unemployment. Many women cobble together a combination of vacation time and sick days.⁹⁷ But nearly a quarter of moms simply go back to work earlier than they'd hoped. In fact, almost a quarter of new mothers go back to work within two weeks of giving birth.⁹⁸

In other countries, parental leave varies. **Parental leave** may be provided for both or either parent, depending upon the country. **Maternity leave** provides protected leave for women who have just given birth (or adopted children, in some countries). In Sweden, Iceland, and other countries, new dads can take **paternity leave**, which is usually shorter than maternity leave.

For children to succeed, parents matter too. Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods* found that parents of different social classes use different approaches to raise their children. Middle-class families engage in concerted cultivation, nurturing their child's talent and educational development. This is markedly different than the parenting style of working-class and poor families. Lower-income parents give kids free time and trust schools to foster their child's success. Lareau calls this approach the accomplishment of natural growth. You'll learn more about these parenting methods in the chapter on education.

Intimate-partner violence

Some family challenges are so serious, they threaten our physical and mental health. One such problem is **intimate partner violence** (IPV), or “physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive acts) by a current or former intimate partner.”⁹⁹ IPV is often thought of as a private problem experienced by individuals in abusive relationships. But we can also think about IPV as a **public health crisis**, a complex phenomenon that arises because of cultural norms and social policies around gender, inequality, and violence. Intimate partner violence is a worldwide problem. The World Health Organization estimates that globally, about 35% of women have experienced IPV.¹⁰⁰ In the United States alone, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) note that “[o]n average, 24 people per minute are victims of rape,



Concerted cultivation pays off for children.
(Source)

physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner." That means over 12 million people a year are hurt by intimate partner violence in the U.S.¹⁰¹ Individuals may experience the effects of violence, but the causes, consequences, and solutions implicate all of us.

There are four main types of IPV:

1. *Physical violence*, or "intentional use of physical force with the potential for causing death, disability, injury, or harm." This includes things like punching and hitting, scratching, burning, and choking, or coercing someone to engage in violence.
2. *Sexual violence*, sexual acts that occur without consent (including being unable to consent due to being drunk or unconscious through drug or alcohol use), and threats of or intimidation or pressure to engage in unwanted sexual acts.
3. *Stalking*, "a pattern of repeated, unwanted, attention and contact that causes fear or concern for one's own safety or the safety of someone else." This includes continually showing up where the victim is, repeatedly sending unwanted gifts, repeated unwanted texts or calls, and spying.
4. *Psychological aggression*, or communicating with a person (by speaking to them or otherwise) with the purpose of hurting or controlling them, including name-calling, coercion, exploitation, and *gaslighting*, a means of psychological manipulation in which a victim is lied to, with the intent that they question their own sanity.¹⁰²



[\(Source\)](#)

The CDC estimates that about 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men have experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner, and almost half of American women and men have experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner. Almost one in ten women have been raped by a partner.¹⁰³ The high number of victims of IPV means that the consequences are also widespread. These health consequences are serious. They include emotional problems like depression and anxiety. They also include physical complications like chronic headaches, pain, and difficulty sleeping. Even asthma, irritable bowel syndrome, and diabetes are more likely in people who have suffered abuse.¹⁰⁴ What's worse, these mental and physical health issues can persist over the course of the victim's life, long after the IPV ends.

In general, the World Health Organization says effectively reducing IPV will require a combination of efforts. Criminal reform, strengthening women's civil rights globally, providing early interventions in families at risk, and creating community-based programs that offer resources can all help reduce rates of IPV, and provide support to those affected.¹⁰⁵

Divorce and remarriage

Divorce is one of the biggest disruptions for a family. Divorce is associated with a number of negative consequences. Some of these problems are mental, like increased stress. Increased stress has the short-term effect of increasing emotional suffering, as well as increasing long-term mental and physical health problems.¹⁰⁶ For children, divorce can be especially disruptive. Children of divorced parents are more likely to suffer lower levels of psychological well-being all the way into adulthood.¹⁰⁷ Children's own accounts of their parents' divorce shows that they suffer from fear, shame, aggression, and resentment toward their parents, as well as declining academic success.¹⁰⁸

Can divorce ever be a *good* thing? Sociologist Virginia Rutter asked just this question in her research on divorce. Her evidence indicates that under certain conditions, divorce may *reduce* unhappiness and stress.¹⁰⁹ How? Think of it this way: we imagine the stress of divorce in comparison to a happy, healthy marriage. But many marriages about to end in divorce already have extremely high levels of stress. When someone is in a miserable marriage, divorce may be the best decision.¹¹⁰ Ultimately, the effects of divorce vary from person to person. As family researcher Paul Amato notes, “[d]ivorce benefits some individuals, leads others to experience temporary decrements in well-being that improve over time, and forces others on a downward spiral from which they might never fully recover.”¹¹¹



More couples are remarrying at older ages. ([Source](#))

Perhaps due to the relatively high number of divorces, remarriage is on the rise. Census data show that most men and women remarry within five years of divorce.¹¹² The trend in remarriage is especially strong for those over 55, in part because of extended lifespans. The longer you have to live after a divorce, the more likely you are to remarry. In fact, 67% of divorced people 55 and older remarry.¹¹³

Recent cultural trends may be lending evidence to Rutter's claim that divorce isn't always catastrophic. One example is the “divorce party.” Some parties are tongue-in-cheek, but others are sincere, even including the couple's children and friends. This is intended to emphasize to the child that despite the divorce, the parents love their children and are committed to them. This trend may seem silly at first. But think about other major family events like weddings and anniversary parties, birthday parties, and funerals: happy or sad, we observe their importance through social rituals. These social rituals can provide a sense of community and closure to those who may be struggling through the end of a relationship.

All families have their challenges. Some threaten partnerships. Others threaten the health and happiness of family members. Some are created or complicated by individual factors. Others are institutional in nature. In all cases, solving them will take sustained collective effort.

Review Sheet: Institutional & interpersonal challenges to families

Key Points

- Studies have consistently found that women in heterosexual relationships do a disproportionate share of housework on top of their wage-earning jobs.
- Same-sex couples generally have a more equitable division of household labor.
- National-level policies on family leave affect how people parent: since the U.S. has no guaranteed paid parental leave, parents tend to go back to work sooner than they'd like.
- Globally, about 35% of women have experienced IPV.
- In the U.S., about 24 people per minute are victims of rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner.
- In unhappy or abusive marriages, divorce may result in better emotional outcomes for former spouses.
- 67% of divorced people over 55 get remarried.

Key People

- Arlie Russell Hochschild
- Sarah Thébaud
- Virginia Rutter

Key Terms

- **Breadwinner-homemaker model** – One partner (usually the man) worked outside the home to earn money, and another partner (usually the woman) stayed at home to do the housework, child care, and other household labor.
- **Dual-earner arrangement** – Both partners have wage-earning jobs outside the home.
- **The Second Shift** – The extra amount of household work a woman does when returning home from her wage-earning job.
- **Maternity leave** – Leave for women who have just given birth (or adopted children, in some countries).
- **Paternity leave** – Leave for new fathers.
- **Parental leave** – Leave for both or either parent(s), depending upon the country.
- **Intimate-partner violence** – Physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression (including coercive acts) by a current or former intimate partner.
- **Public health crisis** – Complex health-related problem that affects people over broad geographical areas.
- **Divorce** – Legally-recognized termination of a marriage.

THE FUTURE OF FAMILIES

- What areas of social change will affect families most?
- What will the future of the family look like?

In this chapter we've talked about families of the past and present. But societies are in a constant state of change. These changes affect individual families and institutions alike. What about the future? How will social change affect families to come? Even though demographers Ann Berrington and Agnese Vitali argue "only the foolhardy would try and predict the future of family groups," there are some trends that point to interesting ways in which family structure and relations will continue to change.¹¹⁴ Since 2009, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has studied these trends. They predict four big areas of change.¹¹⁵

One rapidly changing area of social life is *economic*. In the U.S., economists and sociologists note that **socioeconomic disparities** have been rising in the last four decades, and we currently have the most severe inequality in generations. Economic inequality is **entrenched**, meaning it is deeply ingrained in our social institutions and thus unlikely to change without large-scale efforts.

While those Americans at the very top have seen their wealth increase in the last 40 years, those at the bottom have lost ground, and many argue that the middle class is disappearing. Sociologist Theda Skocpol referred to this as the **missing middle**. She claims that politicians primarily talk about policies that affect the very rich and the very poor. This leaves "average working people" out of the conversation. Ignoring this group obviously hurts the middle class. And Skocpol argues that leaving their voices off the table could have even more dire consequences for the nation: eliminating the voice of working people in political decision-making threatens the strength of American democracy.¹¹⁶

As work hours, the cost of college tuition and subsequent student loan debt, and health care costs rise and real wages fall, how will families get by? Take the example of Millennials. They're fast becoming the largest demographic group in the U.S. and make up a huge segment of the American workforce. But many can't afford to buy homes. In fact, they're the generation most likely to live in multi-generational households. Politicians, pundits, and scholars disagree about precisely *how* this will affect families. But they all agree: this is big.

A second area of change is *demographic*. Recent research notes marriage between mixed-race couples is at an all-time high. Additionally, the number of immigrants in the U.S. continues to rise. One of the most widely debated aspects of the 2016 Presidential election was the way the U.S. should handle immigration. Discussion has centered on undocumented immigrant families in particular. In recent years, undocumented immigrants who were deemed to pose no threat to public safety or national security may have found themselves under surveillance, but were generally low priority for **deportation**, or being forced to leave the country.



Recent discussion has centered on the rights of immigrants. ([Source](#))¹¹⁷

But this may be changing. Guadalupe Garcia de Rayos came to America in the 1990s, when she was 14 years old. She's been living in Arizona since then, and is now a 35-year-old mother of two American children. Ever since she was caught using a fake Social Security number in 2008, she has checked in with authorities at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). She was always questioned a bit and then went back home. But in February 2017, Garcia de Rayos was deported to Mexico. This shocked many in the community. As she was driven away, her children and others protested the deportation, holding signs that read, "No human being is illegal."

Since deportations are expected to increase, it's important to think about what effects they have on families. What happens to children when their parents are deported? Recent evidence shows that kids of deported parents suffer extreme stress, which is related to a host of mental and physical health problems such as headaches, anxiety, and even digestive issues.

On the other hand, a recent Supreme Court decision upheld Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, allowing thousands to stay in the U.S. without fear of deportation – at least for now. According to the Center for American Progress, a quarter of a million U.S.-born children have at least one parent with DACA status, and one and a half million Americans reside in households with a DACA recipient.¹¹⁸ It is important to consider how immigration policy affects families, both undocumented individuals and citizens.

A third area of change affecting families is *sociocultural*. Interpersonal relationships and boundaries are evolving. As Kathleen Gerson notes in *The Unfinished Revolution*:

[s]ince marriage has become just one among many options, [children] must decide not only what kind of lasting intimate bond to create but whether they want one at all. Since work and family life both demand more time, they must decide how to balance earning

a living with caring for others. And since gender boundaries are no longer clear, they must decide how to apportion work and family tasks.¹¹⁹



Public opinion on same-sex marriage changed relatively quickly. ([Source](#))

This cultural evolution has also changed public opinion on sexuality. Compared to opinions about interracial marriage, U.S. public opinion on same-sex marriage changed quickly. A majority of Americans now support same-sex marriage, and it became the law of the land through a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2014. We've already seen some cultural movement, but what will the long-term changes be in, for example, child adoption? Television shows like *Modern Family* have made new family forms more visible to a wide audience. Will that lead to more support for anti-discrimination legislation? Will increases in same-sex marriage change the economy? (In 2015, when same-sex marriage became legal, New York state's economy got a \$260 million boost from all the goods and services purchased for weddings, honeymoons, and the like.)¹²⁰ What other changes might we see in the future, as cultures continue to shift?

A fourth area of social change is *technological*. Americans are living longer and having fewer children than ever before. The population is getting older, and older people have different needs than the young. Will these trends usher in an increase in **multi-generational households**, families in which multiple generations live under the same roof? Will Social Security be sufficient to support them? We've already seen evidence of a **sandwich generation**, a group of people who are responsible for the care of both their children and their elderly parents. Will that increase? Will advances in technology allow working conditions to become more flexible, providing some relief for the child- and elder-care conundrum? Will we one day see robot caregivers that take blood pressure, dispense medication at

correct times, and even read to people? (Here's a hint: we're already there!) The invention of the birth control pill has been called the most significant advancement in gender equality of the 20th century. Will the 21st century see new technologies, including a birth control pill for men?

One thing is sure: family change is inevitable. As Andrew Cherlin writes, "This churning, this turnover in our intimate partnerships is creating complex families on a scale we've not seen before... It's a mistake to think this is the endpoint of enormous change. We are still very much in the midst of it."¹²¹

My hope is that in reading this chapter, you've begun to think about the ways in which societies shape families, and also about the ways families shape society. Part of the task of sociology is to understand the whys, hows, and "under what circumstances" of social relations. While we all experience families as individuals, we can't fully comprehend their impact without an appreciation of the institutional and historical power relations that intersect to create them. As you continue to think about the family sociologically, I hope you keep in mind how families are dynamic, constantly evolving, and shaped by forces larger than any one of us.



[\(Source\)](#)

Review Sheet: The future of families

Key Points

- Families are constantly changing.
- The OECD identifies four key areas of change: economic, demographic, sociocultural, and technological.
- In the last 40 years, those with the most wealth saw their net worth rise; it fell for everyone else.
- Same-sex marriage became legal throughout the U.S. in 2014.
- Families are dynamic, constantly evolving, and shaped by power dynamics.

Key People

- Theda Skocpol
- Kathleen Gerson

Key Terms

- **Socioeconomic disparities** – Inequality rooted in social and economic conditions such as income and wealth, social mobility, access to affordable health care and childcare, and other factors.

- **Entrenched inequality** – Inequality deeply ingrained in social, economic, and political institutions.
- **Missing middle** – Tendency of American politics to focus on socioeconomic extremes, leaving out the middle class.
- **Deportation** – When a non-citizen is legally forced to leave a country.
- **Multi-generational households** – Multiple generations live under the same roof.
- **Sandwich generation** – People responsible for the care of both their children and their elderly parents.

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Sociology of Education



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Sociology of Education

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UNDERSTANDING SCHOOLS AND SOCIETY
REFLECTING AND REPRODUCING INEQUALITY

Class and schools

Race, ethnicity, and schools

Gender and schools

SOCIALIZING AND SORTING

Hidden curriculum

Tracking

IMPROVING SCHOOLS, INCREASING OPPORTUNITY

Testing and accountability

School choice

Fixing urban schools

Sociology and educational opportunity

INTRODUCTION

- How can sociology help us understand schools?

Do you remember your first experience in school? Close your eyes and try to picture your first day. What did it feel like? Look like? Sound like? What do you remember most clearly?

I remember my kindergarten classroom vividly. It seemed huge. There were brightly colored plastic chairs, a big circular rug, and a smiling teacher. We studied Japan (because our teacher had traveled there) and practiced bowing to one another solemnly. We had mandatory nap time—wriggling on our mats as the teacher walked around the room shushing us—and lots of read-alouds. I remember the last day of kindergarten, too. The teacher, still smiling, arranged us in two lines. One group of students (“the golden students,” she said) would go to the first grade. Another, smaller group (“the great readers”) would go to the combination first *and* second grade classroom.



The yellow school bus is a classic American symbol. ([Source](#))

At the time, I knew nothing about tracking or stratification or inequality, but even then, I knew it was better to be a *great reader* than a *golden student*, and that the great readers—the same ones who went on to be in the high groups all through school—were really the *smart kids*. I didn’t question the teacher’s decision or wonder why my best friend was in the other group. I was five. But to a sociologist of education, a process like this, of sorting students and setting them up for very different school experiences, is exactly the kind of thing we should question.

Going to school is a central part of growing up. We spend years in schools, going to classes, hanging out with friends, talking to teachers, or simply counting the minutes until the bell rings. But we frequently take what happens in schools for granted and don’t think about what education is for or how it fits into our society. At the same time, Americans like to think that we live in the “land of opportunity” and that schools give Americans of all backgrounds an equal chance at success. This is central to the American Dream. But is it really true?

In fact, there’s much more going on in schools than we often acknowledge. Schools shape us in many ways, and the relationship between schools and society is complex and ever-changing. There are also all sorts of inequalities in education—from the skills and knowledge students have when they

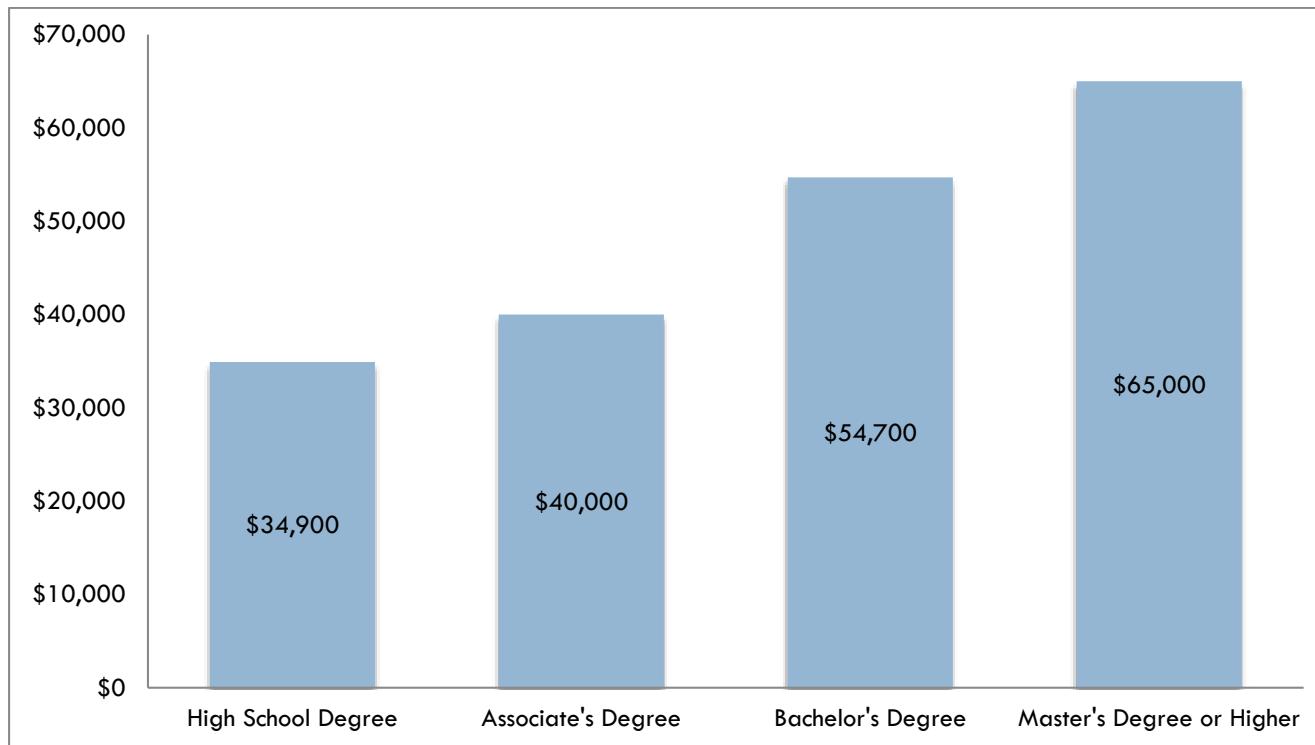
start kindergarten, to the types of schools they attend, to what happens to them in the classroom—that matter a great deal.

In the United States, sociologists of education ask three very basic questions: How do schools recreate society? How do existing inequalities (such as differences in race or class) affect students' educational achievement? And do schools make society more or less fair?

Before we dig into these questions, let's start with a simpler one. What is education? And why does it matter? At the most basic level, **education** is the process of gaining knowledge and skills. Education happens in many places—homes, playgrounds, online, and more—but the sociology of education tends to focus on schools. There are over 130,000 public, private, and charter schools in the U.S. serving over 59 million students. Americans differ from one another in many ways, but nearly all of us went to school.

Decades of research show that people with more years of schooling have higher incomes; better cognitive, problem-solving, and literacy skills; better jobs; and lower rates of unemployment. They are also physically and mentally healthier, more involved in their communities, better informed about current events, less likely to divorce, and more likely to vote.¹ While not all of these things can be directly attributed to education, this association certainly suggests that education is a positive force. However, its benefits do not reach everyone equally.

Figure 1: Income by Education Level (Adults Aged 25-34)



Source: NCES 2020²

UNDERSTANDING SCHOOLS AND SOCIETY

- What theoretical perspectives can help us understand the relationship between schools and society?
- How do different perspectives shape sociologists' research and findings?

Picture society as a large, complicated machine and schools as a critical part of that machine. If schools don't do their part, the machine stops working and society as a whole breaks down. This perspective, the **functionalist view**, emphasizes the smooth working of the machine and, by extension, the maintenance of the social order. Functionalists ask: How do societies make sure children learn to follow rules, become citizens, and feel they are part of something bigger than themselves and their families? How do societies make sure that children have the skills we need them to have? The answer, in large part, is schools.



Functionalists see society as a large, complicated machine in which all parts work together. ([Source](#))

Socialization is critical here. As you learned in the Social Structure and the Individual chapter, socialization is the process by which people come to share the values, morals, beliefs, and ways of acting that are expected in their society.

To Emile Durkheim, schools are essential sites of socialization. They help instill shared norms and values in each generation. According to Durkheim, children learn to adhere to society's rules by first learning to adhere to school rules. As you may recall from the introduction chapter, without strong, shared norms, Durkheim argued, societies fall into a state of anomie and cannot hold together. Thus, the survival of a society depends on its ability to instill and maintain a sense of morality among its members, and that depends on schools. From a functionalist perspective, when schools do their work well, society as a whole benefits: it runs smoothly and conflicts are kept to a minimum.

Functionalists also emphasize the **sorting** that schools do. Societies need leaders and followers, executives and workers, doctors and orderlies. According to this perspective, schools help by sorting students—identifying those who seem best suited to be, say, doctors or teachers, and those who are not.

Sociologist Robert Merton expanded on Durkheim's functionalist view of society by pointing out that institutions such as schools have both manifest and latent functions.³ **Manifest functions** are the obvious, intended ones; these are what we openly create an institution to do. One of the manifest functions of schools is to provide students with the skills and knowledge that society needs them to have. For instance, industrial economies need skilled workers with the ability to read, write, and perform basic math; the school system expanded and evolved to meet that need. As computers have become essential to the economy, schools have added topics like computer science and coding to the curriculum.

Latent functions are unintended or unrecognized. For instance, in addition to the manifest function of educating students, schools fulfill the latent function of providing childcare during much of the year. As became apparent when many schools had to temporarily close due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, many parents, especially those whose jobs require them to work during the day, count on the childcare that schools provide, and families often struggle to find appropriate, affordable supervision for children during school holidays or when a child is sick and unable to attend school. While “providing free childcare” isn’t officially listed in teachers’ job descriptions, it’s an unacknowledged task that schools perform.

The functionalist perspective is less concerned about inequality and more with making sure society—the big machine—keeps working. In contrast, the **conflict perspective** begins with the idea that society is a struggle over power and that those who have power will work very hard, and in complex ways, to hold onto it.

Where functionalists see a machine, conflict theorists see a battlefield, or, at least, a chessboard. From a functionalist perspective, the growth of higher education is an example of the school system responding to the needs of an increasingly industrialized economy. Writing from a conflict perspective, Randall Collins saw things differently. He argued that as a certain level of education (like a high school diploma in the first half of the 1900s) becomes widespread, people seeking status must earn higher degrees to set themselves apart. If more people go to college, people seeking higher status must then go to graduate school. And so this process continues.⁴

To conflict theorists, schools are sites of a larger struggle between groups. Schools decide who gets the best grades or the most prestigious degrees, who is prepared to be a leader, and who is not. Importantly, conflict theorists argue that this is not a fair contest. Some of us come to school with a host of advantages that others don't have. Not surprisingly, the advantaged students tend to win the prizes. Such advantages can take many forms, from family wealth and education, to particular racial or gender identities, to early experiences and habits influenced by social class status.

Yet most people don't recognize these advantages. We tend to see schools as ultimately fair places where the smartest and hardest-working earn the greatest rewards. Conflict theorists think this is an illusion, that the **achievement ideology** disguises how unfair things really are. Rather than seeing school as a meritocracy, as many Americans are taught to believe, conflict theorists see it as a contest that favors the powerful.

In fact, most people leave school prepared for a position in the same social class that they were in when they started their education. As you'll recall from the Social Class, Inequality, and Poverty chapter, it's much more likely that children born to middle class families will remain middle class than that they will become rich or poor. And children who start out poor tend to stay that way. Sociologists call this process **social reproduction**. They argue that this process serves the interests of the powerful (the middle and upper classes) because it ensures that their children do well in school and remain at the top of the class hierarchy while making it *seem* like the system is actually rewarding talent and hard work.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (pronounced boar-DEW) work on social reproduction has been particularly influential. According to Bourdieu, people have access to power, resources, and opportunity because they are able to activate four types of capital: social, cultural, economic, and symbolic. We will focus on the first two here.

Social capital refers to the ways people can use their social connections to gain knowledge, access, and other benefits. Imagine you have applied for a special sports program. The head of the organization is a friend of a friend of your mother's. Another person, with the same qualifications but no connections, also applies. Your mother asks her friend to put in a good word for you. The next day you get a call offering you a spot. The other person is told the program is full. That's social capital in action.

Our **cultural capital** is the knowledge and skills we possess that are 1) in short supply (not everyone has them) and 2) valued by schools and other institutions. What children learn from their families is heavily shaped by social class; it affects where we spend our time, what we eat, what our families do together, and which activities we participate in. All of these experiences, in turn, provide children with a storehouse of knowledge and skills. Though the things middle- and upper-class children learn (such as knowledge of art or classic literature or how to advocate for themselves) are not inherently superior to the cultural knowledge of poorer children, they are valued in school because they are associated with higher social class status. They become cultural capital. Low-income students often don't have this cultural capital. While they may be equally smart and have learned other

important things from their families, their knowledge and practices are not as valued by the school and do not get them ahead in the same way.

Social and cultural capital help explain how schools contribute to social reproduction. Middle- and upper-class families are more likely to possess and pass along social and cultural capital to their children. This capital can then be converted to educational success, such as good grades or access to special programs. The school appears to be offering everyone the same chance at success. But there are a limited number of spots at the top, and the school values middle- and upper-class knowledge and practices more. As a result, students from lower-class backgrounds, whose parents lack the social and cultural capital that society values, are at a disadvantage. Schools reproduce the social system—keeping the top at the top and the bottom at the bottom.



These students are learning to appreciate modern art. Knowledge of art is a form of cultural capital. ([Source](#))

Critical race theory (CRT) has much in common with conflict theory but focuses on race as the major source of oppression. Critical race theorists argue that racism and ideologies of Whiteness are deeply ingrained in U.S. society and that traditional power structures uphold White supremacy and marginalize people of color. CRT further holds that no one can be “color blind” or “race neutral,” and pretending or trying to be neutral ignores the reality of racial inequality. Legal scholars coined the term CRT in the 1980s, but many of the ideas, especially viewing race as *the* primary form of inequality, can be traced to W.E.B. DuBois, who famously proclaimed, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”

Later in this chapter, we will see that students of color are much more likely than White students to attend highly-segregated and poorly-funded schools. CRT, with its emphasis on racism as systemic and **institutionalized** (or built into the practices of schools, political systems, and other

institutions), helps explain why this pattern has been so enduring. Institutionalized racism shapes who attends which schools, how schools are funded, and who benefits from education policies. Racism as it exists in the U.S. not only disadvantages people of color but also *systematically advantages* Whites.

Arguing from this perspective, education researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings reframed the “achievement gap” (differences in academic achievement between Blacks and Whites) as an “education debt.” Given the racial history of the U.S., Ladson-Billings argues that gaps in achievement are not the result of *individual failures* on the part of Black students. Instead, they are evidence of the debt society owes to communities of color for systematically depriving African Americans of their fair share of resources and opportunities.⁵

Finally, social interactionist theories look closely at what actually happens in schools, particularly everyday interactions in classrooms, hallways, and playgrounds. Researchers examine behaviors that are often taken for granted, such as how teachers talk to students or how rules are enforced. Even small interactions shape the development of students’ identities, how teachers and students understand who is “smart” or a “good student,” and how students approach their schoolwork.

Researchers studying social interactions have paid particular attention to teachers’ expectations. Teachers often treat students differently based on their perceptions of the students’ talents or potential. Teachers may be more encouraging to students they see as especially intelligent, giving them extra attention and motivating them to achieve at high levels. In contrast, teachers may pay less attention to or be more critical of students they believe have less potential, ultimately causing those students to behave in ways that match their teachers’ expectations, such as being disruptive in class or no longer trying to do well at school.



A science teacher demonstrates dissection techniques. Everyday interactions can have a lasting impact. ([Source](#))

Some people are intimidated by theories, expecting anything theoretical to be too abstract or hard to understand; others see theory as useless or irrelevant. In reality, theories are just ideas about how things fit together. They allow us to interpret facts and help us make predictions. In the sociology of education, theories help us understand the relationship between schools and society and why things happen the way they do. Take high school graduation. The national high school graduation rate rose from about 79% in 2011 to 85% in 2018.⁶ That's a big change in a fairly short period of time. Why did it happen? Will this trend continue? A theory that envisions schools as part of a larger machine (the functionalist approach) might say this is happening because the economy needs more educated workers and schools are meeting that need. This theory would predict that educational levels will continue to increase in response to technological advances and the needs of the workplace. In contrast, a theory that emphasizes institutional racism (such as Critical Race Theory) might point to the continued existence of highly segregated schools where less than 60% of students graduate. This theory calls attention to the connections between race, class, school funding, and other education policies and the ways they disadvantage students of color. Though they highlight different things, both approaches can help us make sense of data about graduation rates. The same goes for student achievement, school discipline, segregation, education policy, and many other issues we will discuss in this chapter.

Review Sheet: Understanding schools and society

Key Points

- There are multiple ways to think about the relationship between schools and society.
- Functionalist theories emphasize schools' role in keeping society running smoothly.
- Conflict theories highlight struggles for power within and across groups and how schools reproduce the class structure.
- Critical Race Theory (CRT) points to the institutionalized nature of racism and its manifestation in schools.
- Interactionist theories pay close attention to what happens in schools, especially everyday interactions.

Key People

- Emile Durkheim
- Randall Collins
- Pierre Bourdieu
- W.E.B. DuBois
- Gloria Ladson-Billings

Key Terms

- **Socialization** – Process through which people come to share the values and practices of a society.
- **Sorting** – Process of dividing students into groups, often based on ideas about intelligence or achievement.
- **Achievement ideology** – Belief that anyone can succeed through education and hard work.
- **Social reproduction** – Process through which schools perpetuate the class structure.
- **Social capital** – Resources people access through their relationships or social networks.
- **Cultural capital** – Knowledge, habits, and skills valued by institutions.
- **Institutionalized racism** – Racism that is built into policies and practices.

REFLECTING AND REPRODUCING INEQUALITY

- How do class, race, and gender affect students' educational experiences?
- What are the particular impacts of growing up poor?
- What role does the history of racial segregation play?
- How are schools responding to changing conceptions of gender?

In the spring of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic altered daily life in profound ways. Schools around the world were shut down for much of the spring semester, leaving educators, students, and families struggling to navigate the new world of remote learning. This was challenging for families at all income levels and of all races and ethnic groups. Suddenly, students had to learn at home, parents faced new expectations that they monitor their children's education, and teachers grappled with new technology as they attempted to provide online instruction. In the midst of all these changes, gaps between schools and homes in the U.S. with resources and those without became immediately apparent. Some schools were able to easily move instruction online. Their students' families generally had computers and access to the internet; the schools had money to buy laptops and help with internet access for families that needed it; and support staff could help teachers plan their online lessons. In other schools, things were very different. For example, in Michigan, one affluent school district had its students completing full-length school days online less than a week after the schools closed. Meanwhile, in Detroit and many rural areas, so many students lacked internet access that instruction

essentially halted for several weeks. Similar patterns emerged across the country. Even when online instruction was available, students who did not have computers or reliable internet, or who had extensive responsibilities at home during the shutdown, missed out on learning. Educational inequalities and their consequences had perhaps never been so stark.

Education has long been central to the American Dream, the idea that anyone in America can succeed through hard work and education. Yet decades of sociological research have shown that the reality is more complicated. We ask schools to decrease inequality, but, as social institutions, they generally reflect—and sometimes increase—inequality instead. This is exactly what happened when Covid-19 hit.

One of the most striking findings in educational research is the existence of large and enduring gaps in achievement between different groups. The Black-White **achievement gap** gets the most attention, but scholars have also found gaps based on social class, ethnicity, gender, and other characteristics. In fact, as Sean Reardon has shown, the gap between rich and poor children has grown dramatically over the past several decades, far surpassing the gap between Blacks and Whites.⁷

Figure 2: Achievement Gaps by Race and Income, 1950s through 2010

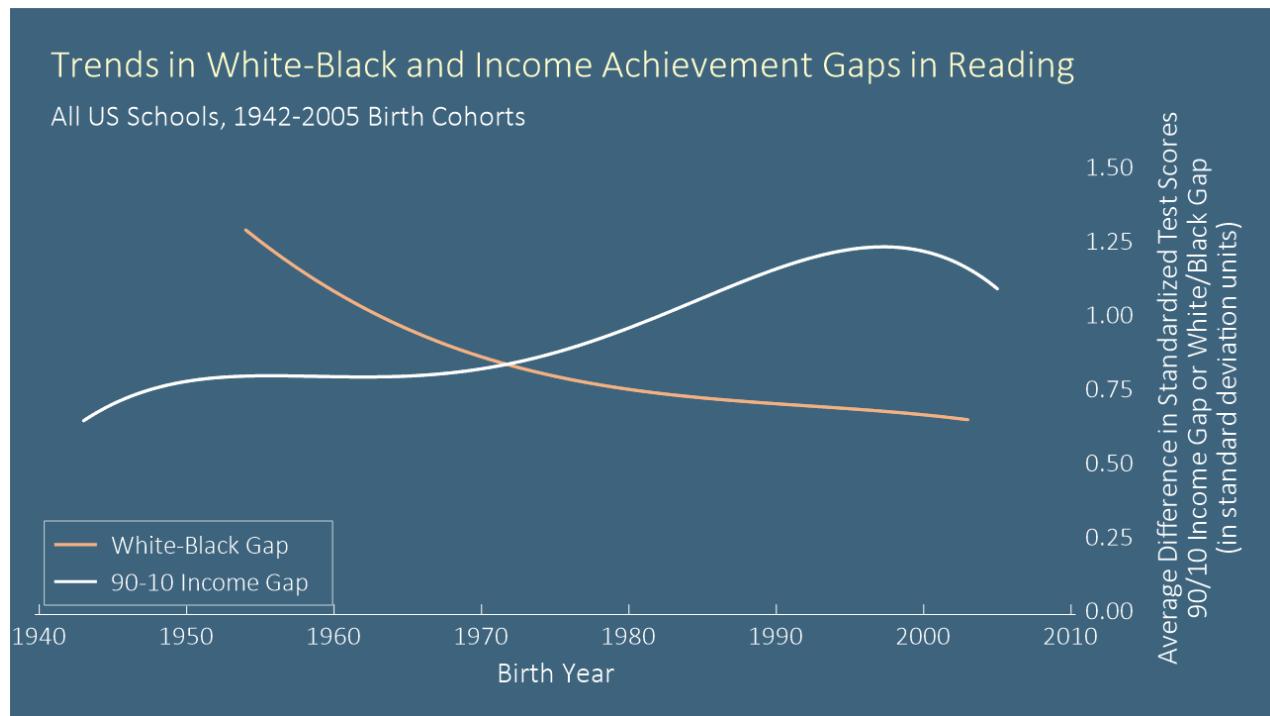


Figure courtesy of Sean Reardon

These differences, whether by race, social class, gender, or other categories, are unsettling, especially because doing poorly in school means fewer opportunities later in life. As a result, many educational programs and policies are designed to “close the gap.”

Recently, however, scholars have argued that the term “achievement gap” is misleading: it calls attention to unequal outcomes without addressing the differences in opportunities that caused these gaps in the first place.⁸ These scholars put forward a new term, the **opportunity gap**, that focuses not

on what students do or don't achieve but on the access they have to resources (such as healthy food, reliable health care, good schools, qualified teachers, and high expectations) that lead to academic achievement. Here, I focus on three types of inequality—class, race, and gender—and how they shape students' educational opportunities, experiences, and outcomes.

Social class and schools

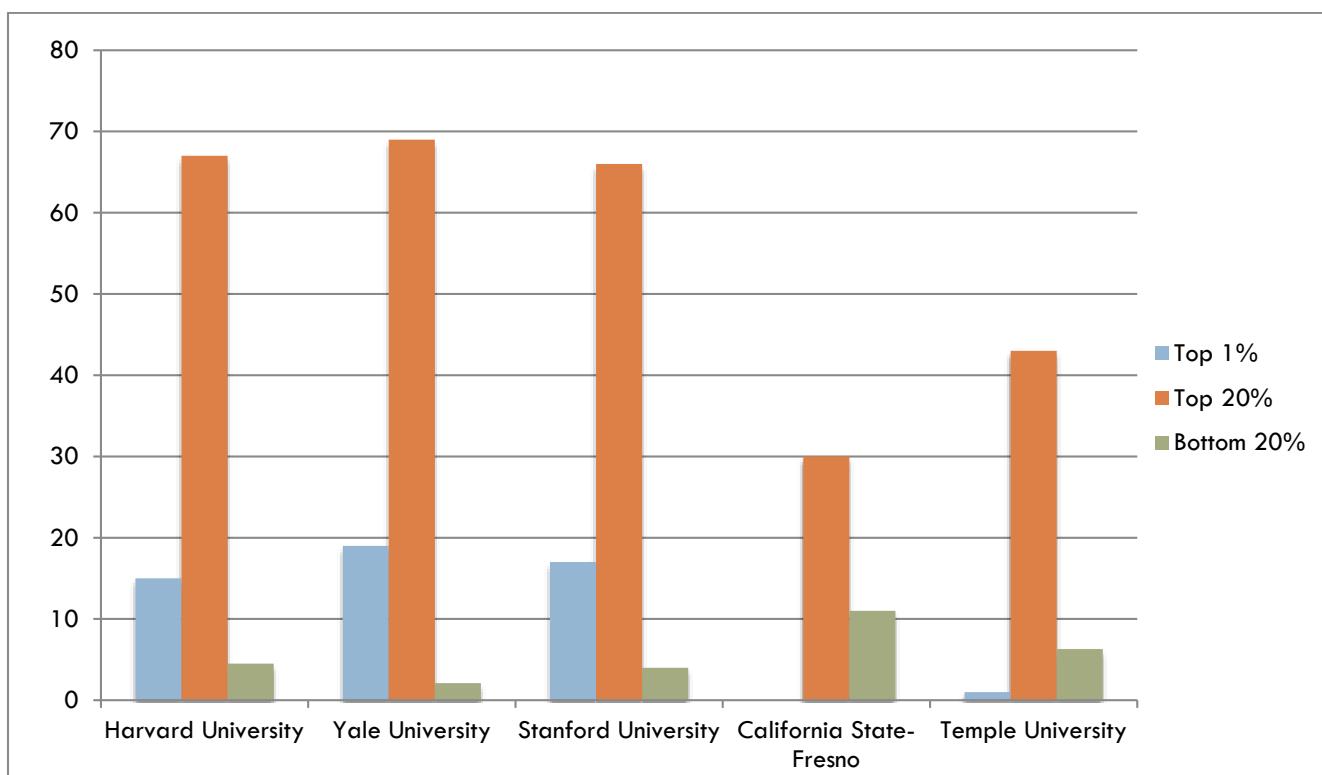
In the early 1960s, as the federal government grappled with school segregation and its consequences, it hired James Coleman to conduct a large study on educational opportunity in the U.S. The result, known as the Coleman Report, surprised many by showing that family background, especially social class, was the biggest contributor to differences in student achievement—larger even than school resources. Numerous other studies have affirmed the importance of class in shaping student achievement. On average, children from higher-income families do better than those from lower-income families when it comes to test scores, graduation rates, and other outcomes. Of course, we cannot know how much of this may be due to factors like work ethic, culture, personality traits, or intelligence, which could be associated with income. But research on social class and schools suggests that part of these achievement differences is tied to the fact that higher-income children get the resources they need to perform well and lower-income children don't.

Some of the most profound differences are between children living in poverty and those who are not. In 2018, 17.5% of all children in the U.S. lived at or below the poverty level. Research shows that these children face a variety of challenges, both in and out of school.

First, consider health and well-being. Compared to middle-class children, poor children have more vision and hearing problems, less access to medical and dental care, and—because they often live in older homes that are poorly maintained by landlords—higher levels of lead poisoning. These issues affect kids' ability to learn: students who are sick or cannot see or hear well miss out on academic material, students with toothaches cannot focus and are more likely to misbehave, and lead poisoning decreases students' cognitive abilities. Many children living in poor families are **food insecure**, meaning they don't have consistent access to nutritious food. We all know how hard it is to pay attention when we're hungry; for food insecure children, this is a problem that, like lead poisoning, can do long-term damage to cognitive abilities.⁹

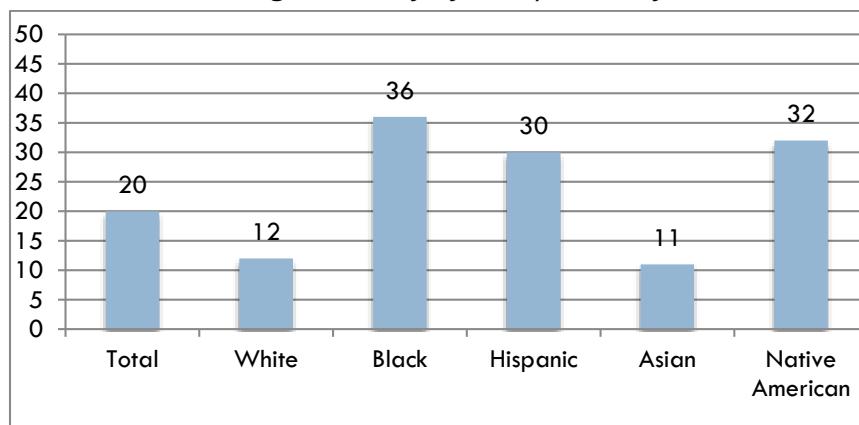
Second, poverty affects students' home lives, as parents deal with stress and often struggle to find safe and affordable housing. Poor children are more likely to move frequently, often switching schools in the process. Parents distracted by basic issues of survival or working long hours may not be available to help with homework or meet with teachers.

Figure 3: Percent of Students at Five Universities from Top 1%, Top 20%, and Bottom 20% Income Brackets



Elite schools enroll more students from the top 1% income bracket than from the bottom 20%, and the vast majority of students come from families in the top 20%. The contrast with Temple and Cal State-Fresno, less elite schools, is striking.¹⁰

Figure 4: Percent of U.S. Children Living in Poverty by Race/Ethnicity, 2018



Source: NCES 2020¹¹

A third set of differences is tied to parents' education levels. College-educated parents are more likely to fill their homes with books, read to their children, and model reading for pleasure. They also talk to their children more than less-educated parents do, and use larger vocabularies. One famous

study compared families from three social classes (professional class, working class, and those receiving public assistance), recording the number and type of words parents used each day. Children from families receiving welfare heard 616 words per hour, children from working-class families heard 1,251, and children from professional families heard 2,153. By age 4, children from professional families were exposed to over 30 million more words than children from families receiving public assistance.¹² Research on “summer setback,” or the decline of low-income children’s academic skills over the summer, further indicates that low-income children generally do not have access to academically enriching activities at home.¹³

Does this mean *all*/higher-income students do better than *all*/lower-income students? No. Some low-income students will out-perform their more advantaged peers and some high-income students will perform worse than many low-income students. It’s important not to make assumptions about an individual based on larger patterns.

Studying class and parenting is challenging because it is hard to know what people do in the privacy of their own homes. This is why Annette Lareau’s study of family life—in which she and her research team spent extensive periods of time observing families, including sharing family meals, spending the night in their homes, and going to doctor’s visits—was so important.¹⁴

Lareau (pronounced la-ROE) looked at how parents’ practices varied by social class; how parents talked with their children, how they spent time with them, and the activities they enrolled them in all differed by class. Middle-class families were deliberate about preparing their children for future success, a practice she called **concerted cultivation**. They reasoned with their children and encouraged them to think for themselves; enrolled them in many organized activities; and contacted teachers, coaches, and other professionals with questions and concerns. For example, the parents of Alexander Williams, a middle-class African American boy, discouraged him from passive activities like watching television and, instead, pursued a rigorous schedule of music and sports, all designed to develop his talents and confidence.

In contrast, working-class and poor parents, though equally concerned about their children’s well-being, did things differently. They had fewer resources, so their parenting style relied less on investing lots of time and money. They were more direct in telling their children what to do (instead of reasoning with them), enrolled them in fewer organized activities, and did not question educators or health care professionals about what was best for their children. Thus, White, working-class Billy



Organized sports are central to the middle-class practice of concerted cultivation. ([Source](#))

Yanelli spent a good deal of time playing outside, watching television, or visiting relatives. Lareau called the working-class approach the **accomplishment of natural growth**, highlighting its less intensive nature.

Lareau concludes that there is nothing inherently superior about concerted cultivation. Many of the middle-class children in her study seemed entitled, were easily bored, and fought with their siblings, while the working-class children were more polite and independent and had stronger family relationships. However, the middle-class approach paid off in school and beyond, because it helped the children develop cultural capital. The middle-class children did well in school, becoming increasingly accomplished and confident. A follow-up study 10 years later showed that while all but one of the middle-class children were enrolled in college and optimistic about their future careers, none of the working-class or poor students were.

Unequal resources at the school and district level also contribute to the opportunity gap. Because schools are funded largely by property taxes, wealthier districts generally raise and spend more money than poor districts. And money matters when it comes to education: more funds mean better-qualified teachers, smaller class sizes, better facilities, more opportunities for enrichment, and many other benefits. Recent research confirms that better school funding leads to significant increases in achievement in poor districts.¹⁵



Strawberry Mansion High School in North Philadelphia. During the 2018-19 school year, 100% of students were low-income and only 57% of students graduated within four years. The school offers 2 Advanced Placement (AP) classes and just 27% of students go to college. (Photo by author)

Philadelphia is a case in point. In 2015-16, the median household income was just under \$37,000, and about 80% of the 130,000 students in the school district were low income. In Lower

Merion, a nearby suburban district, the 2013 median household income was over \$120,000, and just 10% of its students lived below the poverty level. Philadelphia spent \$15,590 per student that year; Lower Merion spent \$27,747. Assuming a class of 25, that means Lower Merion spent \$303,675 more *per classroom* in one year than Philadelphia did—despite having a population with fewer educational needs. Philadelphia's schools struggle mightily. Their teachers are underpaid, buildings need major repairs, and class sizes are much too large. In Lower Merion, teachers are paid well, buildings are in excellent shape, and students get individualized attention and support.



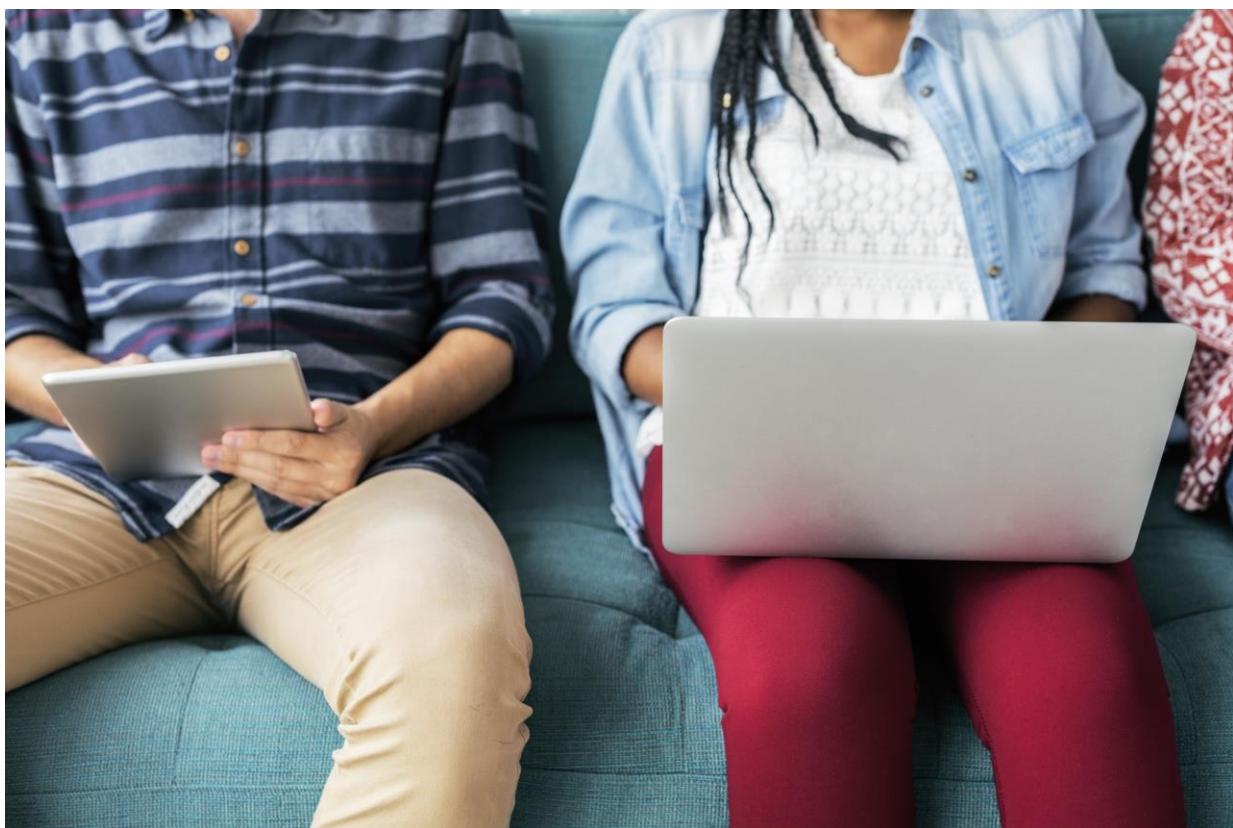
Lower Merion High School, just outside of Philadelphia; 13% of students were low-income in 2014-15. The school offers 22 AP classes and 94% of students go to college. (Photo by author)

Race, ethnicity, and schools

How do you think your race has shaped your educational experiences? If you think, “it hasn’t,” think again.

Race plays a complicated role in our society—and our schools. On the one hand, science tell us that skin color is just one of the many ways people vary and that our traditional understanding of race as a biological “fact” has no scientific basis. On the other hand, race is certainly “real” in terms of how we see ourselves and one another and in terms of our experiences and opportunities. Thus, race is a **social construct**, or a concept people have developed and used, and its meaning can change over time and space. Understood in this way, race is central to the sociology of education because it has so many consequences for students and schools.

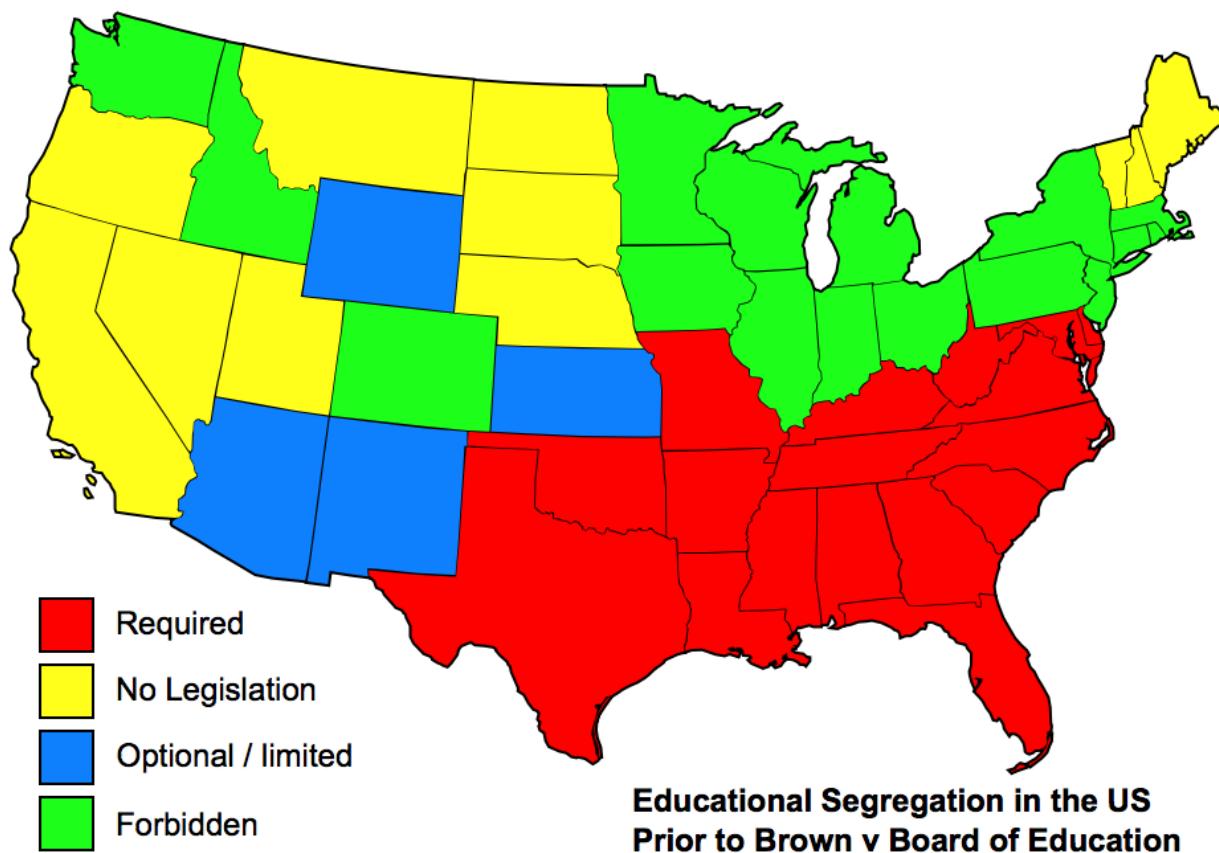
In 2017, 51% of U.S. school-age children were White, 25% were Hispanic, 14% were Black, 5% were Asian, and 4% were categorized as “two or more races.”¹⁶ Of course, students are not distributed equally across all schools. Some schools in the U.S. are almost all White, while others serve only students of color.



(Source) Curious about racial demographics at your school? Check them out at the [National Center for Education Statistics](#)

Most research on race and schools has focused on two groups: Whites and Blacks. This is because, for much of U.S. history, Whites were the majority group and African Americans were the largest minority group. (Today, at over 18% of the population, Hispanics are the largest minority group in the U.S., followed by non-Hispanic Blacks at 13%.) Because of space limitations, this section will mostly follow in that tradition. However, be aware that there is a wealth of research to explore on the experiences of Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, and other groups, as well as a growing body of work on how Whiteness is constructed and experienced in schools.¹⁷ If you take an entire class on the sociology of education, you’ll learn about the different educational experiences of all of these groups.

Between the end of the Civil War (in 1865) and the 1950s, most schools in the U.S. were segregated, with children of different races rarely attending the same school together. In the South, schools were segregated by law (***de jure segregation***), as districts essentially ran two separate systems, one for Whites and one for Blacks. In the North, schools were also segregated, as a result of residential segregation: Blacks and Whites lived in different areas, so they attended different schools (***de facto segregation***).



(Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

In 1954, the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed segregated schools. This ruling ushered in several decades of desegregation lawsuits and policy that, at least for a while, significantly reshaped U.S. schools. The *Brown* decision was based on the assumption that "separate" was not "equal." Research on segregated schools has proven that assumption to be correct. While some segregated schools, especially in the days before *Brown*, served students and communities well, for the most part, segregation is associated with fewer resources, lower expectations, and worse outcomes for students of color.

Implementation of the *Brown* decision was slow at first. When the 1964 Civil Rights Act passed, withholding federal funding from districts that were not desegregating, its pace picked up. In 1988, integration reached its peak, with almost 45% of Black students in the South attending majority-White schools. In the 1980s and '90s, however, federal courts rolled back desegregation plans, arguing they were never intended to be permanent and allowing districts more control over school enrollment. By 2011, only 23% of Black students in the South attended majority-White schools. In fact, segregation has been on the rise across the country, undoing much of the progress that occurred in the 1970s and '80s.¹⁸ Measuring segregation levels is complicated, but one method is to look at the number of schools that are "intensely segregated" (schools in which 90-100% of students are Black or Latino). In

1988, at the peak of integration, 5.7% of schools in the U.S. were in this category. By 2016, this number had more than tripled, to 18.2%.¹⁹



With the National Guard protecting them from angry mobs, nine African American students, known as the Little Rock Nine, attempt to integrate Central High School in Arkansas in 1957. (Source: New York Public Library, Digital Collection)

This is unfortunate, because decades of research have shown that, while segregated schools have a negative impact on all students (and especially students of color), *everyone* does better when schools are integrated. Black students who attend integrated schools have higher test scores, stay in school longer, and do better in the workforce than students in segregated schools.²⁰ In fact, the achievement gap has a great deal to do with segregation: the gap in test scores between White and Black students declined steadily in the 1970s and was smallest in the 1980s, at the height of integration. Since then, progress in shrinking the gap has slowed. Yet the academic performance of White students does not decline in integrated settings, and research has shown that going to an integrated school makes *all* students less prejudiced, more open-minded, and more comfortable in diverse settings.

Often when people talk about school segregation, they are referring to Blacks and Whites. However, Latinos have also been heavily segregated in U.S. schools, especially in the Southwest, where

some districts ran separate schools. As the Latino population in the U.S. has grown, the clustering of Latinos in particular areas (and the decline in the number of Whites in those areas) has led to increased residential segregation. This, in turn, creates *de facto* school segregation. By 2014, Latino students were more segregated than Black or Asian students.



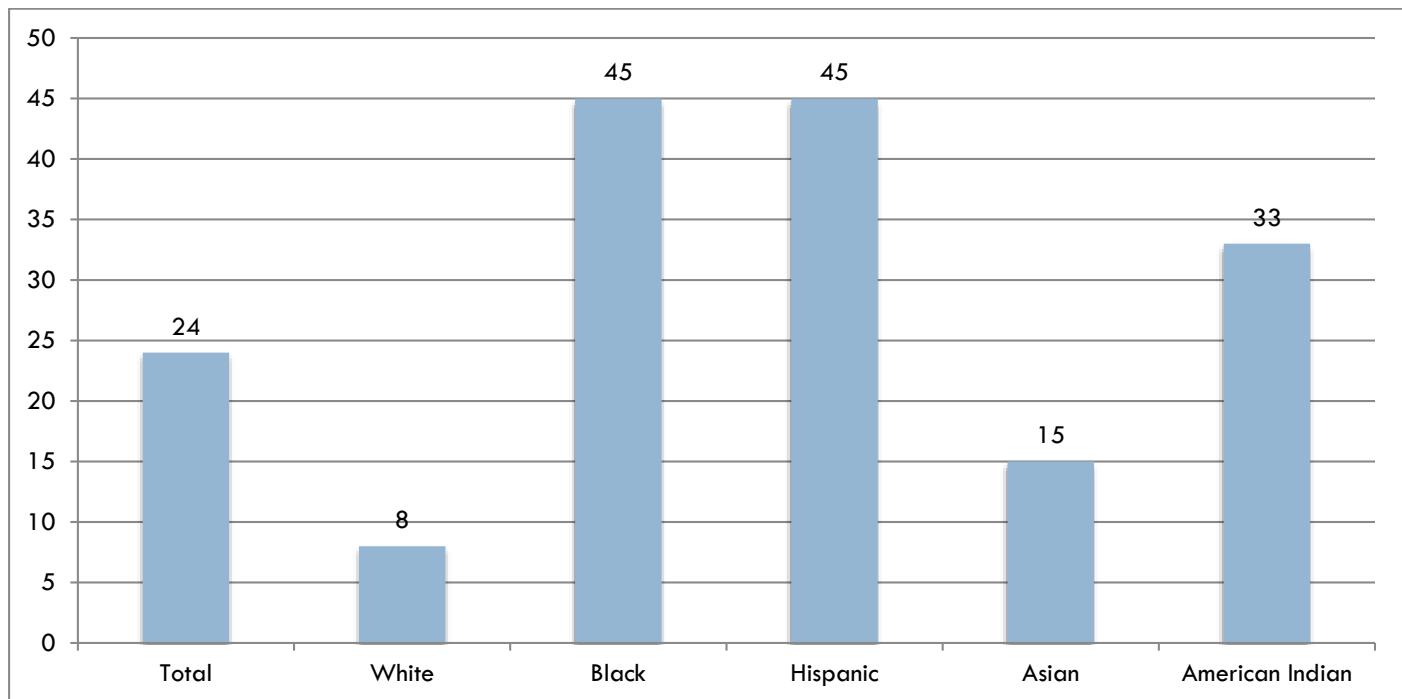
In 2017, 58% of African-American children in the U.S. attended schools that were at least three-fourths Black or Latino. ([Source](#))

Schools with large numbers of Black and Latino students are also more likely to have large numbers of low-income students, a pattern known as **double segregation**. The rise of high-poverty, racially-isolated schools is a major problem, as these schools generally have fewer resources and less qualified teachers, are located in poorer neighborhoods, and serve more students facing significant challenges.

In addition to examining the causes and consequences of segregation, sociologists have looked at how racial inequality surfaces inside schools. This happens primarily through discipline. Black students are much more likely than White and Asian students to receive harsh punishments, such as suspension or expulsion—even in the early grades. According to U.S. Department of Education data, in 2013-14, 14% of Black students were suspended, compared to 4.5% of Hispanic students, 3% of White students, and 1% of Asian students.²¹ We can't be sure how much of this difference is due to discrimination and how much is due to other factors. But evidence that Black and Latino students receive harsher punishments than Whites *even for the same infractions* suggests that discrimination plays an important role.²²

Students who are suspended or expelled miss out on learning time. Some researchers argue that unequal punishments are one contributor to the Black-White opportunity gap. School punishments also help create the “school-to-prison pipeline,” as children move out of schools into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Why might this pattern of harsher discipline exist?

Figure 5: Percentage of Public School Students in High-Poverty Schools, by Race/Ethnicity

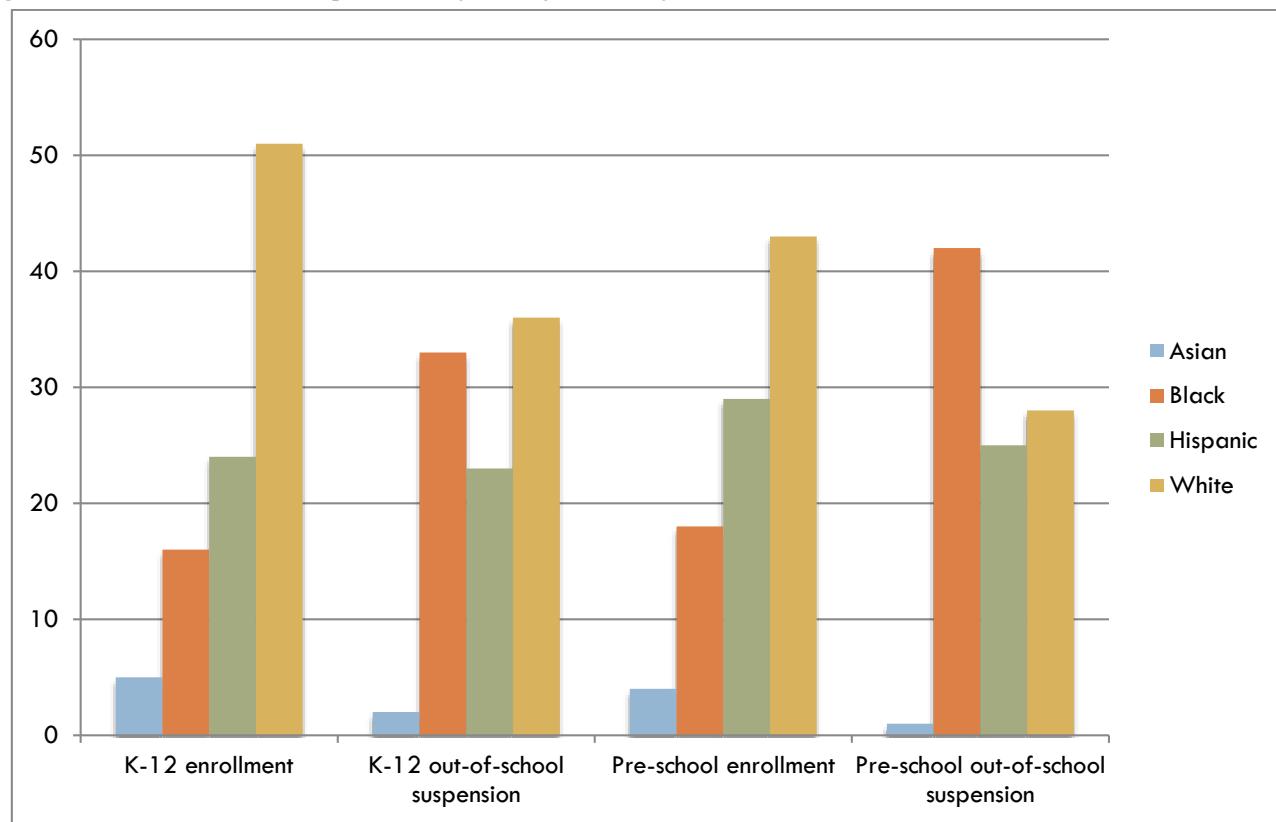


Black and Hispanic students are much more likely to attend high-poverty schools—where at least 75% of the students are low-income—than White or Asian students are. (Source: National Center for Education Statistics)²³

When Ann Ferguson began spending time at a diverse middle school she called Rosa Parks, she was surprised to see that while the school was only half African American, *all* the children in the special program for “at risk” students were Black (and nearly all were boys).²⁴ She spent three years at Rosa Parks, observing classrooms, talking to students and educators, and trying to understand why so many of the students identified as “behavior problems” were Black boys. She found that educators monitored African American students more closely and punished them more severely than other children. In fact, they often punished African American children for behaviors that they ignored in White children.

The Rosa Parks teachers did not do this consciously or intentionally. Instead, they treated African American students, especially boys, differently because their perceptions were shaped by the popular media and widely-held stereotypes of “criminal” Black men. They “adultified” Black students, viewing them as though they were older, and therefore more responsible for their behavior, than other children of the same age. As a result, behaviors that were dismissed as harmless on the part of White children became “evidence” of criminal tendencies among Black boys.

Figure 6: Out-of-School Suspension by Race/Ethnicity for K-12 and Pre-School



African Americans and Hispanics make up about 30% of all K-12 students but 56% of all students suspended. Black preschoolers make up only 18% of all preschool enrollment, but 42% of all suspended pre-school students are Black. (Source: U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights)²⁵

Other researchers have used large datasets collected at the state or national level to study punishment patterns. With these datasets, researchers cannot get to know individuals, but they can paint a picture of larger trends and how they affect thousands of students. One study used a dataset of over 30,000 Kentucky students to examine how race and gender intersect, making African American girls especially likely to be sent to the principal's office for behavior problems. Black girls were over three times more likely than White girls to be sent to the office—an even wider gap than the one between Black and White boys. Race and gender do not seem to make a difference when it comes to clear-cut violations, like drug or weapon possession. Instead, Black girls tended to get into trouble for behaviors termed "disruptive" or "aggressive." Unlike weapons possession, whether or not a student is "disruptive" depends a lot on the educator's interpretation, which is shaped by race.²⁶

Gender and schools

What words come to mind when you think of "masculine"? What about "feminine"? If your masculine words were things like *strong, aggressive, and big*, and your feminine words included *pretty, nice, and caring*, you aren't alone. I ask my students these questions every year, and every year

their answers are pretty much the same. Despite the many advances in gender equality, gendered stereotypes have staying power.

As you learned in the Gender and Sexuality chapter, gender is a social construct. It is a way of seeing ourselves and one another that has everything to do with society, history, and culture; what it means to be masculine or feminine is constantly being redefined. And your gender is not something you are; it's something that you *do*. Schools are primary sites of gender socialization, where children learn what it means to perform a certain gender identity, where they are punished or rewarded for behaving in particular ways, and where their gender identities shape their educational paths.



This young girl, with her white dress, long hair, and demure pose, is already performing traditional femininity. ([Source](#))

In the 1970s, Barrie Thorne observed children's interactions in the hallways, classrooms, and playgrounds of two elementary schools.²⁷ Her work helped a generation of sociologists understand how children performed gender in school. Many people assumed that children simply absorbed adults' messages about what it means to be a boy or a girl, and Thorne found plenty of that happening. But she also found that children played a role in creating gender identities, using various activities inside and outside of the classroom to demonstrate and highlight the differences between boys and girls.

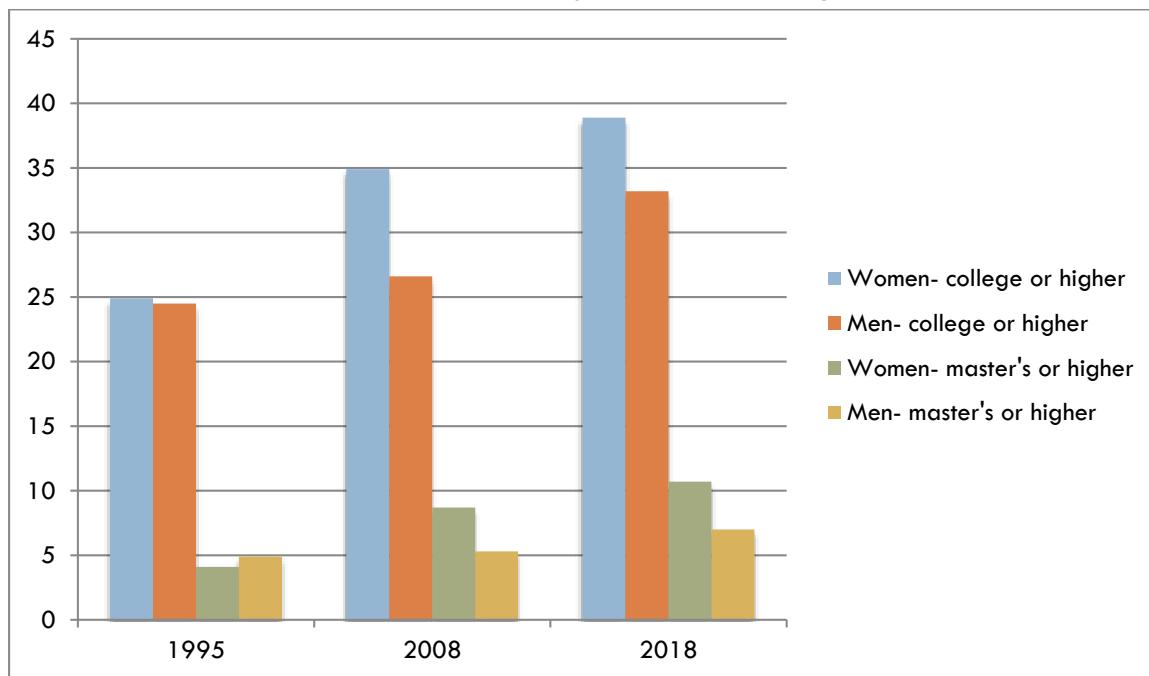
Essentially, messages about what it means to be a girl or a boy came from adults *and* peers. For example, girls and boys tended to separate themselves whenever possible, sitting at different tables, lining up in separate lines, and using different spaces on the playground. Children enforced this segregation, teasing boys who played with girls and vice versa. Gender play, in Thorne's view, also enforces **heteronormativity**, or the assumption that individuals are heterosexual and that biological sex and gender identity are aligned. This explains the frequency of the "chase and kiss" game, which boys and girls only played with members of the other sex. Behaviors that did not conform to this norm could lead to teasing or ostracism.

For several decades, scholars interested in gender and schools focused on the ways schools limited girls' opportunities. Myra and David Sadker spent years looking closely at dynamics within schools and classrooms, documenting how educators, consciously or not, treated boys and girls differently.²⁸ They found that boys were allowed to call out in class and dominate class discussions in a way that girls were not, that boys received more attention from teachers, and that boys' opinions were taken more seriously. Girls were discouraged from studying traditionally "male" subjects, such as math

and science, and their confidence in those areas declined as they moved through school. In addition, textbooks and other materials tended to reinforce gender stereotypes.

Yet the story of gender and school does not end there. Girls have long excelled in school, often performing better than boys. Since the 1980s, women have attended college at higher rates. They tend to get better grades, equal or better test scores (except in math, where boys still often outperform girls), and drop out less frequently. Though there are still gaps when it comes to taking courses and choosing careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, the trend of increasing female achievement is clear.

Figure 7: Select Levels of Educational Attainment by Gender, Adults Aged 25-29, 1995, 2008, and 2018



(Source: National Center for Education Statistics)²⁹

Some worry about why it seems easier for girls to succeed in school than boys. Others see women's higher levels of education as a sign of progress, noting that women still earn less than men and are underrepresented in many professional and leadership positions. Think about your own experience in school. Was being a good student seen as a masculine or feminine characteristic? Given that gender norms and expectations are always changing, what trends do you expect to see in the next ten years?

Much of the preceding discussion treated gender as a binary concept, as though the world can be easily divided into "boys" and "girls." In fact, this binary is misleading and, increasingly, irrelevant. It has been challenged by the rise of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Allies (LGBTQIA+) movement, which has opened up new fields of study and new

courses of action. As places where students struggle to understand and perform their gender identity, schools have historically valued binary, socially-accepted gender expressions. Peer culture can be hostile to students whose sexual orientation or gender identity differs from the mainstream. The viciousness—and frequency—with which students use homophobic slurs is but one example.³⁰ In response to calls from students, their families, and educators, some schools are striving to create more inclusive environments for all students. Students of tomorrow are much less likely to be bound by traditional ideas of gender than are those of today.



This “gender neutral” restroom in a K-8 school is open to all students. (Photo by author)

Review Sheet: Reflecting and reproducing inequality

Key Points

- Students from higher-income families generally do better in school, at least in part because of their increased access to educational opportunities.
- In 2017, 45% of Black students and 45% of Hispanic students attended schools where at least 75% of the students were low-income; by contrast, only 8% of White and 15% of Asian students attended such schools.
- Because school funding comes mostly from local property taxes, districts serving large numbers of low-income students raise less money than higher-income districts.
- The Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* made it illegal to have separate school systems for Black and White children.
- Progress toward integrating schools peaked in the late 1980s and has declined since then. The number of intensely segregated schools serving students of color tripled between 1988 and 2016.
- On average, students of color receive harsher punishments than White students, even for the same infractions. In preschool, Black students are twice as likely as Whites to receive out-of-school suspensions.
- Schools are important sites for the performance of gender.
- In recent decades, women have outpaced men in high school and college graduation. In 2018, 33% of men ages 25-29 had at least a college degree, whereas 39% of women did.
- The rise of the LGBTQIA+ movement is reshaping gender norms and challenging schools to be more inclusive.

Key People

- Sean Reardon
- James Coleman
- Annette Lareau
- Ann Ferguson
- Barrie Thorne
- Myra and David Sadker

Key Terms

- **Achievement gap** – Differences in academic outcomes between groups of students.
- **Opportunity gap** – Differences in opportunities and resources available to groups of students.
- **Coleman Report** – Study of U.S. schooling that identified student background as the most powerful influence on achievement.
- **Social construct** – A category that can take on the appearance of “scientific fact,” but is actually the product of society and culture.
- **De jure segregation** – Segregation of schools enforced by law.
- **De facto segregation** – Segregation of schools created by residential segregation.
- **Double segregation** – Concentration of large numbers of low-income students of color in particular schools.
- **Heteronormativity** – Assumption that individuals are heterosexual and that biological sex and gender expressions are aligned.

SOCIALIZING AND SORTING

- What can sociology tell us about what happens in schools?
- How do schools socialize students? What lessons do they teach?
- How do schools sort students? What are the consequences?

In 2016, a video of a first-grade teacher in New York City went viral. In it, about 20 six-year-olds sit in a circle on a rug. Their hands are clasped in their laps and their bodies are rigid. Their eyes are on the teacher, a young woman seated in a chair next to an easel displaying some math work. She is speaking angrily to a little girl, who has apparently answered a question incorrectly. With furious movements, the teacher reaches out and grabs the student's paper, ripping it in half. The other students do not move. The teacher berates the student, sending her away from the circle. The girl walks off and sits alone in a chair along the wall, head lowered. The teacher continues her rant, telling the other

students that nothing “infuriates her more” than this student’s mistake and asking for another volunteer to show the correct answer. The video immediately created controversy, with some arguing it was an isolated incident and others seeing it as part of a pattern of abusive behavior. While the video is disturbing, it is also illuminating. It reminds us that life in schools is complex—sometimes wonderful, sometimes painful, and often consequential.

Before the 1960s, few sociologists of education actually spent time in schools. In 1968, Philip Jackson published *Life in Classrooms*, a book based on his years of observation in elementary schools.³¹ Jackson’s book inspired a new line of research aimed at understanding what “really happens” inside schools. Since then, sociologists have studied many aspects of life in schools, from the organization of schools to the dynamics within students’ peer groups. I will focus on two: the hidden curriculum and tracking.

Hidden curriculum

Think of two high school classrooms, both studying the start of the American Civil War. In one, students sit at desks arranged in rows, facing forward. They sit quietly, watching the teacher and taking notes. The teacher stands at the front of the room, lecturing to the students. In the other classroom, students prepare for a role-play. They take on the perspective of different members of U.S. society (farmers, plantation owners, enslaved people, factory workers) and research the particular needs and concerns of their group. This classroom is noisy. Students’ desks are pushed together in groups, they look through books, and they talk to one another, sometimes arguing.

While these classes may share the same official curriculum, their **hidden curriculum** is very different. Unlike the official curriculum, which involves subjects like English, math, science, and history, the hidden curriculum is about socialization. It teaches students how they should behave, how they should expect to be treated, and whose ideas are important.

The lessons of the hidden curriculum are communicated, for instance, through rules about how to act in class or walk down the hallways, classroom routines and structure, how adults talk to students, and displays of student work. Sociologists have shown that some of the most important messages of the hidden curriculum relate to authority and power.

In addition to facts about the start of the Civil War, students in the first class are learning that they should adhere to strict rules about behaving in class, that the teacher is the source of knowledge, and that their own perspectives are not very important. In the second classroom, students are learning they can take responsibility for their own behavior without strict monitoring, that their ideas and perspectives are valuable, and that cooperating with one another—instead of just interacting with the teacher—is part of learning. To sociologists, the hidden curriculum is important because it is one way schools socialize students, preparing them for life as members of society.

The hidden curriculum offers an excellent opportunity to examine how the theoretical perspectives discussed at the beginning of the chapter illuminate different aspects of life in schools. From a functionalist perspective, the lessons schools teach through their rules and routines help

students learn to behave responsibly, follow rules, and interact with people and institutions beyond their families. This is necessary and important.

While the functionalist perspective emphasizes the positive or “functional” consequences of the hidden curriculum, other sociologists, informed by conflict theory, argue that the hidden curriculum can negatively impact students and, ultimately, make society less fair. For example, the hidden curriculum of a school or classroom can vary depending on the social class of the students. In her classic study of five elementary classrooms, Jean Anyon found that the classrooms serving working-class students were much stricter.³² Students learned to follow rules and procedures and not to question the teacher’s authority—habits that would serve them well as factory or other blue-collar workers. In contrast, classrooms serving upper-class students had more flexible rules and emphasized independent thinking, teaching the students that they were problem-solvers and leaders. Anyon concludes that, by preparing children for the same work their parents do—with working-class students at the bottom and students whose parents are executives at the top—the hidden curriculum ultimately helps keep society unequal.



The arrangement of desks in a classroom sends messages to students about power, authority, and their own status. ([Source](#))

The hidden curriculum also teaches students about racial hierarchies—the relative importance and value of different racial or ethnic groups. This can be especially powerful when it comes to discipline. As discussed earlier, students of color are more likely than White students to be disciplined, even for the same offenses. When this happens, students of color and White students learn very different lessons. John Diamond and Amanda Lewis studied a diverse, affluent school and showed how racial inequalities can persist even in high-achieving schools with plenty of resources and staff committed to treating everyone equally.³³ Despite educators’ claims that they were objective and neutral, Black and Latino students in the school were heavily monitored, and their misbehavior was more likely than Whites’ to be noticed and punished. These practices essentially taught Whites that they were entitled to free rein in the school and taught students of color that they did not fully belong. As Lewis and Diamond argue, the fact that such rules and routines were supposedly race-neutral—yet still led to racially unequal outcomes—also made the process seem legitimate, telling students that a system that benefits White students is fair.

Sociological insights about the hidden curriculum can also help us understand the strengths and weaknesses of particular reform models as students experience them. In the last section of this chapter, you will learn about charter schools, a popular solution to failing schools. Some of the most prominent charters are “no excuses” schools, or schools serving mostly low-income students of color that have extremely strict rules and high expectations for academic achievement. While many “no excuses” charter schools have significantly improved student achievement and graduation rates, their strict discipline has also raised questions about what else students learn. Joann Golann’s study of one such school helps answer these questions. Informed by a social interactionist perspective, Golann analyzed how school rules and routines shaped relationships between students and adults. At this charter school, students faced detention (an hour of silence after school) for talking in the hallway, chewing gum, and other infractions. Golann found that the hidden curriculum taught students that they were not responsible enough to make their own decisions, that their opinions were not important, and that they should defer to teachers’ authority. While the school intended to prepare all students for college, these implicit lessons conflicted with college norms, where students would be expected to think for themselves and take responsibility for their own behavior and learning. She argues that this conflict ultimately undermines the effectiveness of the “no excuses” model.

Tracking

Think back to your own high school. Did all students take the same classes? Or were there classes for “fast” or “slow” learners, or “advanced” or “basic” skills? For most of you, the answer to the second question will be yes. Most high schools use **tracking**—assigning students to classes based on their achievement levels—and have for decades.

Table 1: Sample Listing of Academic Tracks for High School Math

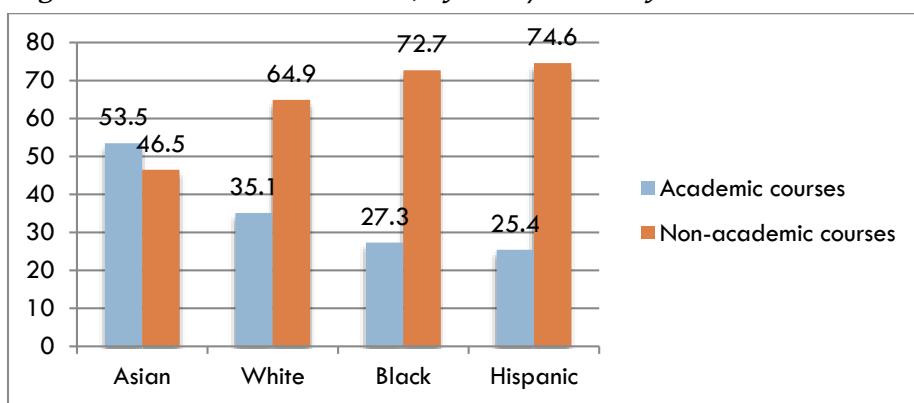
	Remedial	Basic	Academic	Honors
9 th Grade	Introduction to Algebra	Algebra	Geometry	Honors Geometry
10 th Grade	Algebra	Geometry	Algebra 2 / Trigonometry	Honors Algebra 2 / Trigonometry
11 th Grade	Geometry	Algebra 2	Introduction to Calculus	Honors Introduction to Calculus
12 th Grade	Algebra 2	Pre-Calculus	AP Calculus (AB)	AP Calculus (BC)

The idea behind tracking is that by dividing students into groups based on ability or achievement levels, schools can target instruction more efficiently, identify students’ natural talents, and help them develop the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed. This sounds reasonable and

efficient—especially because, in theory, everyone has the same opportunity to be in every track. However, research on tracking has shown that the reality is much more complicated.

Sociologists have studied how students get placed in particular tracks, what happens in classes at different levels, and how students' learning and opportunities are affected by their track placement. In general, poor and working-class students are much more likely to be placed in lower tracks, while middle-class and affluent students are more likely to be in higher tracks. Race is also a major factor in tracking: upper-track classes serve disproportionate numbers of Whites and Asians, while lower-track classes serve more Black and Latino students. Blacks and Latinos are more likely than White or Asian students with the same test scores to be placed in lower tracks. In fact, it is not uncommon for White or Asian students to be placed in higher tracks than Black or Latino students who have better academic records.³⁴ The patterns in many schools are so profound they result in **second-generation segregation**, or segregation inside schools that are supposedly desegregated.

Figure 8: Percent of High School Students in Tracks, by Race/Ethnicity

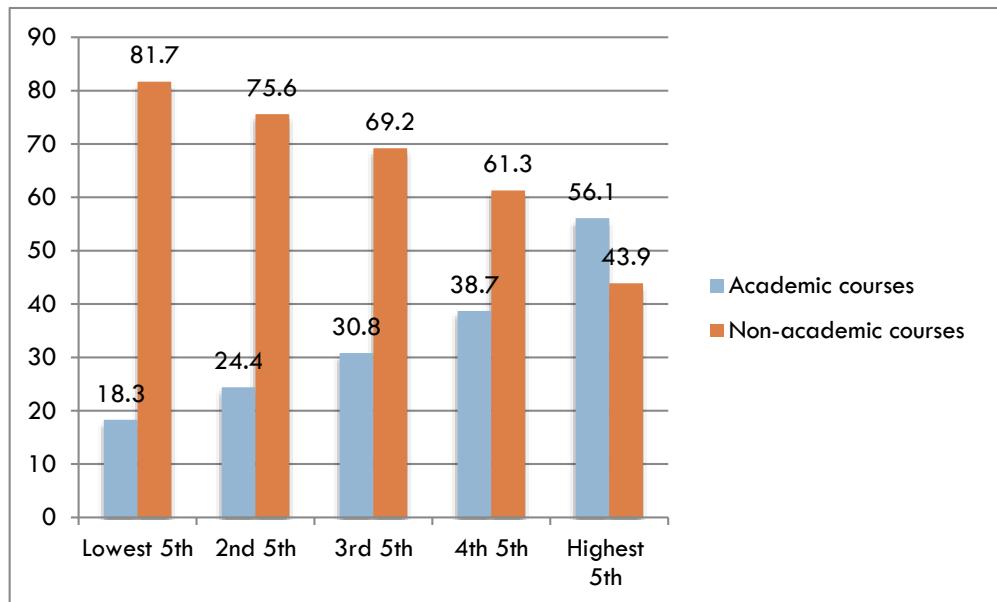


35% of White students and 54% of Asian students are in higher-track ("academic") courses, compared to 27% of Black students and 25% of Hispanic students. (Source: National Center for Education Statistics)³⁵

Deciding who lands in which track varies from school to school and can be fairly subjective. In some schools, the choice is up to students and their parents; in others, it depends on grades or test scores; in still others, school officials decide. Often a student's track placement is determined by previous courses they've taken or earlier placement in an ability group. This means that a student who is placed in the low reading group in elementary school (which often happens to low-income students who come to school with fewer literacy skills than middle-class students) can end up in a low track in middle and high school. Small differences related to social class get exaggerated as a child moves through school, going from one low group to another.

There are striking differences across tracks in what and how students learn. For example, Jeannie Oakes and her team studied low- and high-track classes in 25 schools. They found that the students in high-track classes had access to a rich, engaging curriculum; in the low track, the curriculum covered basic topics in less interesting ways. High-track students reported being excited and inspired by their classes, while low-track students described boredom and felt the coursework was irrelevant.³⁶

Figure 9: Percent of High School Students in Tracks, by Family Income



High school students' placement in higher-track ("academic") courses, by family income. As family income goes up, so does the likelihood of being placed in a higher track; 56% of students from the highest fifth of family incomes were in high-track classes, compared to only 18% of students from the lowest fifth of family incomes. (Source: National Center for Education Statistics)³⁷

Racial patterns in track placements can also affect students' attitudes and achievement.

Karolyn Tyson studied the relationship between race, tracking, and attitudes toward achievement—especially the claim that Black students do not try hard in school because that would be “acting White.”³⁸ Tyson’s data on schools and students in North Carolina show that, contrary to the “acting White” theory, African American students valued education highly and wanted to do well in school. They were no more likely than Whites to see high achievement as “uncool.” However, in schools where most high-track students were White and Black students were generally in lower tracks, students came to associate doing well in school with Whiteness, and African American students felt pressure not to take hard classes or get good grades. Findings like these, which show that tracking makes school less fair, are one reason sociologists have been integral to efforts in many schools and districts to move away from the practice.

Review Sheet: Socializing and sorting

Key Points

- The hidden curriculum is a key mechanism of socialization within schools, teaching students about power, appropriate behavior, and their place in the world.
- Schools use tracking to sort students into different groups, which then affects their learning opportunities.
- Race is a major factor in track placement, with students of color often ending up in classes below their ability levels.

- Class is also a major factor in track placement. Students from the highest fifth of family incomes are about three times more likely than students from the lowest fifth of family incomes to be in high-track classes.

Key People

- Philip Jackson
- Jean Anyon
- Amanda Lewis
- John Diamond
- Joanne Golann

Key Terms

- **Hidden curriculum** – Unofficial messages to students that are communicated through rules, routines, arrangements of classrooms, and interactions.
- **Tracking** – Process of sorting students into different groups based on ideas about ability, achievement, or prospects.
- **Second-generation segregation** – Racial segregation within schools because of racialized patterns in tracking assignments.

IMPROVING SCHOOLS, INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES

- Who makes decisions about education policy?
- What types of reforms are being implemented today and what are the consequences?
- Why are some schools so hard to fix?

Is it the schools' job to teach students about sex? What should they teach? And who gets to decide? Since the 1970s, schools across the country have offered students some sort of education about sex and reproductive health. But what is offered varies widely, with some states, like California and New Mexico, covering contraception, sexual orientation, and other topics, while others, such as Florida and Texas, emphasize abstinence and the negative consequences of teenage sex.³⁹ Debates about sex ed can be quite contentious, with proponents arguing it provides essential health and safety information, and critics asserting it promotes sexual activity and undermines traditional values. For example, when the Tucson, Arizona, school board considered expanding its program to include sexual orientation, gender identity, and the meaning of consent, protestors closed down a number of public meetings and accused supporters of sexualizing and indoctrinating children.⁴⁰ While debates about sex ed certainly

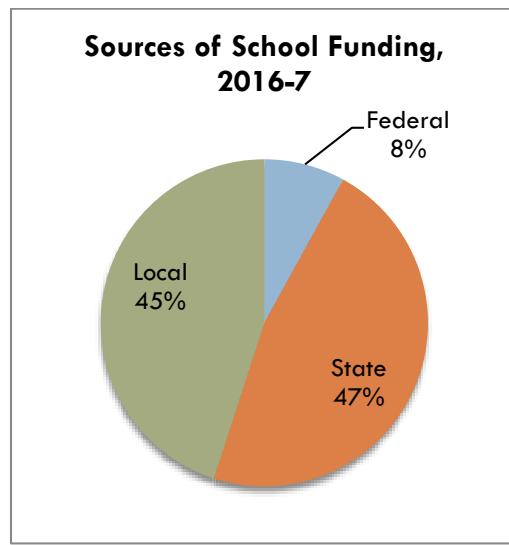
bring to the surface different beliefs about sexuality, morality, and religion, they are also, and perhaps most importantly, debates about education policy.

Education policy refers to decisions about a range of school issues, including funding, operations, curriculum, student assignment, and staffing. It is easy to think of education policy as a product of government bureaucracies or uneventful school board meetings. But as the controversy over sex ed reminds us, debates about education policy also happen in schools and communities, where emotions can run high and the impact is immediate.

Education policy matters deeply to sociologists because it touches on one of our core questions: *Do schools make society more or less fair?* Elected officials; federal, state, and school district employees; and educators make thousands of decisions every year about key policy issues. Sociologists can help us understand how and why these decisions are made and, perhaps most importantly, what the consequences are.

Historically, decisions about school funding and other issues were left up to local and state governments. Increasing federal involvement began in the 1950s due to the push to integrate schools. With the passage of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the federal government took on an even larger role, mandating that states establish standards for the curriculum, test students frequently, and intervene if student scores do not increase. Despite this growing influence, federal spending accounts for only 9% of total education spending. The money for K-12 education generally comes from local property taxes. As noted earlier, this is a major source of inequality, as districts where residents are wealthier (and property is more valuable) are able to raise more money than high-poverty districts.

Figure 10: Sources of School Funding, 2013-14



(Source: National Center for Education Statistics 2020)⁴¹

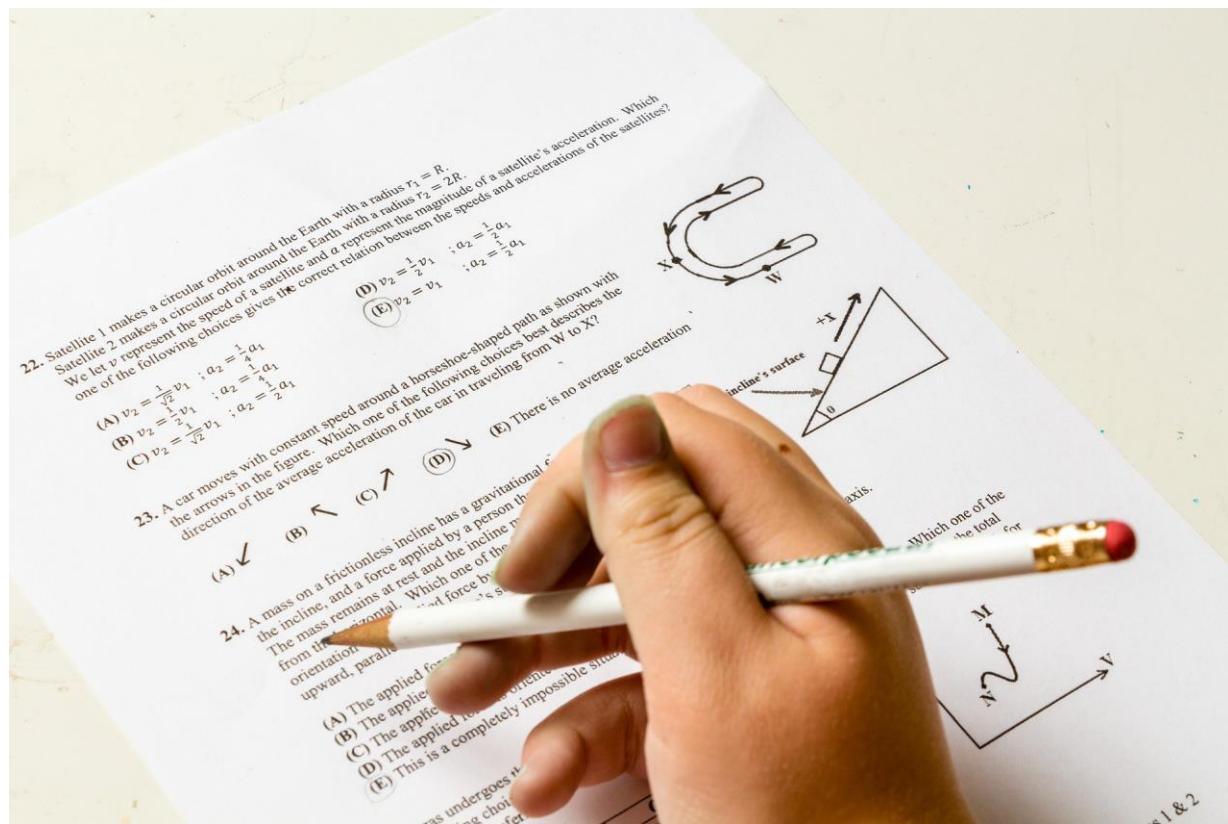
Debates about education policy have been especially contentious in recent years, with critics of public schools arguing that failure is widespread; they use the chronic low performance of students in

high-poverty schools as evidence of schools' inability to improve. Policy conversations today tend to focus on three areas: accountability and testing, school choice, and fixing urban schools.

Accountability and testing

For several years, Atlanta's public schools seemed to be on the rise. Test scores increased, and the superintendent was named Superintendent of the Year. Inside the system's schools, though, pressure to raise test scores was intense, and teachers and administrators worried that the consequences for failure would be extreme. Bowing to pressure from school district administrators and a system-wide emphasis on scores, teachers and administrators at dozens of Atlanta schools altered students' answer sheets, looked at test questions in advance, and used other strategies to make sure their students did well on the tests. Reports of cheating surfaced, the local newspaper investigated, and soon the system was caught in the largest cheating scandal in the country. In the end, eleven educators were convicted of racketeering, a charge usually reserved for organized crime.

Why did teachers and administrators go to such lengths to raise scores? While some viewed the educators involved as simply unethical, to others they were victims of a system that had gone terribly awry. In many schools and school districts across the country, standardized testing drives teaching to an extent that would have been unimaginable a generation ago.



Standardized tests have become a hallmark of U.S. schooling in the 21st century. ([Source](#))

This emphasis on standardized testing can be traced to the federal **No Child Left Behind Act of 2001**. NCLB mandated that schools test all students in most grades every year in math, reading, and

science. Schools whose students did not make sufficient progress in improving scores face a variety of consequences, including replacing teachers or being turned over to a private manager.

Supporters of NCLB put much of the blame for low student achievement on educators. Looking at how they believe private businesses are run, they argued that setting clear, measurable expectations for performance and holding educators accountable was the best way to motivate people. To them, testing students frequently—and reporting scores by race/ethnicity and other categories—would push schools to do a better job serving all students. Some policies use “carrots” (rewards) to motivate people. Others use “sticks” (punishments). NCLB relied on sticks. Both Democrats and Republicans have largely supported this approach of using test scores to hold schools accountable, and federal and state policies since 2001 have emphasized standardized testing.

Research on the effects of this trend has been mixed. On the one hand, there is evidence that scores have improved and achievement gaps have narrowed in some areas—though not as rapidly or consistently as supporters expected.⁴² On the other hand, there are a lot of unintended consequences. For example, the curriculum has narrowed in many schools, especially those where students often score poorly, replaced by an emphasis on test preparation. Schools also tend to focus on the “bubble” students (those closest to passing the standardized exams) and to give less attention to those who are way ahead or behind, and cheating has been a problem in many school districts. In addition, standardized tests are not necessarily accurate measures of student learning. This leads sociologists and other scholars to argue that important decisions about students and schools should never be made on the basis of test scores alone.⁴³

School choice

Growing up, did you go to your neighborhood elementary or high school? Or did you go somewhere else, maybe to a magnet, charter, or private school? While most Americans still go to their local public schools, today’s students have far more options than they did a generation ago.

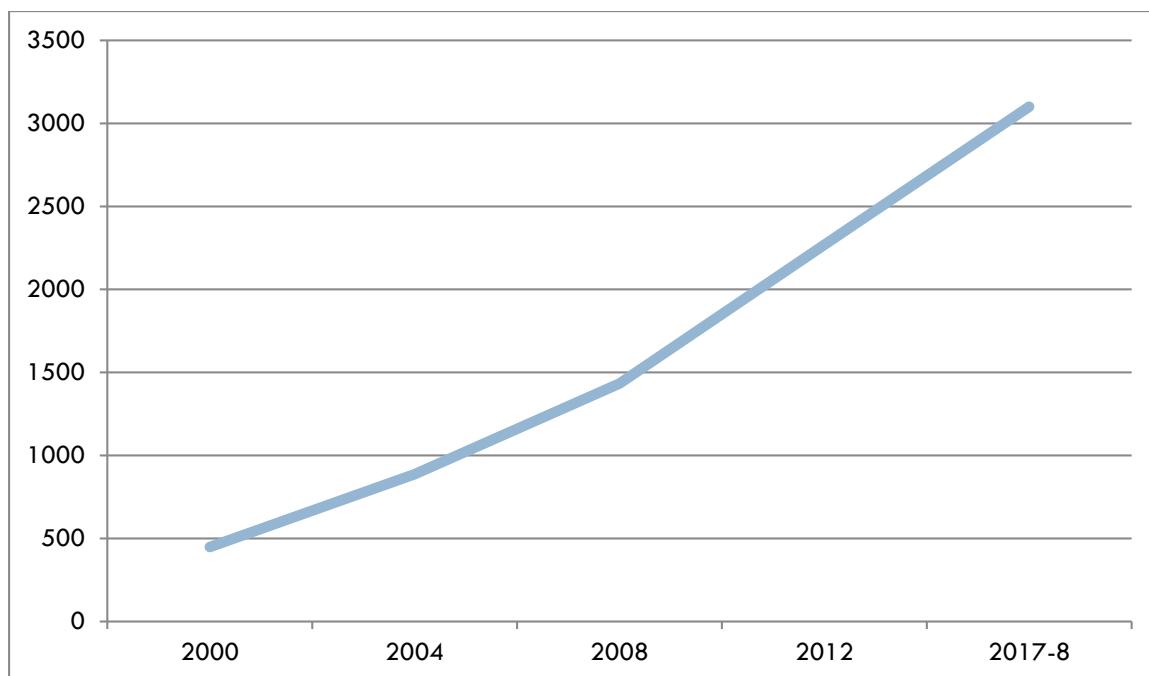
Like testing and accountability, the movement toward school choice was heavily influenced by ideas from the business sector. Think about the cereal aisle at the grocery store. Because cereal companies have to compete with each other, they make different varieties to appeal to different people, and they have an incentive to ensure that each box of cereal is high quality. Supporters of school choice argue that for too long, students and families could only choose one kind of school—imagine grocery stores shelves lined with boxes of the same cereal. From this perspective, when students can choose from a variety of options, schools must provide a high-quality “product” or they will lose “customers” and have to close.

Inspired by this line of thinking, states and districts across the country have embraced school choice policies. Sometimes this means magnet or other specialized schools, but the most popular way to increase school choice is through charter schools. **Charter schools**, which are privately run but publicly funded, are especially common in struggling urban districts, where frustrations with low-performing schools leave parents eager for alternatives. The school has a “charter” (or agreement)

with the district or state, laying out its plans and making specific commitments related to student achievement and financial stability. Theoretically, if the school does not live up to these commitments, the charter will be revoked. However, relatively few charter schools end up closing, despite, in many cases, financial problems and poor student achievement.

Sociologists and other scholars have studied charter schools intensively, interested in understanding how increased school choice affects students and schools, who chooses them and who does not, and what distinguishes charter schools from traditional public schools. Parents who choose charters tend to be somewhat more advantaged, in terms of income and education, than those who don't. Research has also shown that, in choosing schools, parents often take race into account, with White parents often seeking out schools with more White students. As a result, charter schools are, on average, more segregated than traditional public schools. In fact, one study found that 15% of Black students in public schools attended extremely segregated schools (where all or nearly all students were students of color), while 43% of Black charter school students did. Latinos also experience high levels of segregation at charter schools: 9% of Latino public school students attended extremely segregated schools, but 20% of Latino charter students did.⁴⁴

Figure 11: Charter School Enrollment, in Thousands, 2000-2018



The number of students attending charter schools increased dramatically between 2004 and 2018, from just below 500,000 to over 3 million. (Source: NCES 2020)⁴⁵

How well do charter schools do, especially compared with traditional public schools? The findings are mixed. Some charter schools do better, some do about the same, and some do worse. Research has been inconclusive for two main reasons. First, it is very hard to separate the effects of charter schools from other characteristics of students and families that could be responsible for differences in achievement. For instance, perhaps the parents choosing to send their children to

charter schools are more actively engaged in their children's education, which could be the real reason their children might do better in school. Second, charter schools vary widely; some are excellent and some are terrible. Promise Academy in New York City was so successful in raising achievement for its low-income students of color that it effectively closed the achievement gap in reading and math.⁴⁶ On the other hand, not only was student achievement at one Philadelphia charter school quite low, the school was also used as a nightclub on weekends! In other words, there is nothing about the charter model that makes them inherently better (or worse) than other schools.

Meanwhile, conversations about charter schools can get very heated, with some people using examples of strong charters to claim that they are a solution to school failure and others arguing that they drain resources from public school systems, leaving the neediest students behind. In addition, the frequency of charter school scandals—reports of schools misusing funds or closing down in the middle of the year—raises questions about how well charters are using public money.

Fixing urban schools



Teachers in under-performing schools often feel overwhelmed by frequent reforms and distrustful of administrators, other teachers, and parents. ([Source](#))

It's hard to find good news about Booker T. Washington Middle School. Located in a high-poverty neighborhood in Baltimore, Washington Middle School served 309 students in 2016. The school struggles to maintain order and keep students safe; its 147 suspensions that year were actually an improvement over the past. According to the Baltimore Public Schools, not a single student at Washington met state expectations in reading or math. Not one.⁴⁷ While Washington may be an extreme example, there are schools across the U.S. that, like Washington, just cannot seem to improve.

For the most part, such schools are racially isolated and high-poverty. Test scores are terrible, hallways and bathrooms are dirty and unsafe, families are angry, and teachers are demoralized (and often looking for another job). These schools, and the districts that run them, seem incapable of improvement, despite the efforts of policymakers, administrators, and educators.

Sociologist Charles Payne has a theory about why.⁴⁸ He argues that reform efforts are too often disconnected from the realities of urban schools. These realities include a lack of trusting relationships; frequent changes in policy, curriculum, and instructional programs; demoralization; insufficient resources; under-qualified teachers; and bureaucratic dysfunction. While Payne credits the testing and accountability movement with pushing educators to work harder than ever before, he notes that their efforts often fail because of toxic conditions in the schools. Reforms that pay attention to local conditions and, particularly, the quality of relationships, are more likely to be successful.

One of the most important studies on this topic seems to support Payne's ideas. Using seven years of data from hundreds of elementary schools in Chicago, Anthony Bryk and his colleagues identified a recipe of sorts for improving schools.⁴⁹ Students learned the most in schools where five "essential elements" were in place: a student-centered learning environment, positive ties between families and educators, professional capacity, ambitious instruction, and a strong leader. These elements have been taken up by districts across the country trying to improve struggling schools. Whether or not they are pursued with the patience and focus on relationships Payne advocates remains to be seen.

Sociology and educational opportunity

In this chapter, we have discussed how sociologists think about education, the questions they ask, what their research tells us about schools, and the implications for education policy. Education is a complicated and deeply human process. It's also central to how societies ensure their survival and, in America, to our beliefs about equal opportunity. Sociologists can help us understand this in multiple ways and at multiple levels—from what happens in the classroom or playground, to which schools students attend, to how decisions about education policy are made.

It's easy to think of schooling as an *individual* process—after all, schools are collections of individual people teaching and learning. It's also easy to think of the outcomes of schools as the result of *individual* characteristics, such as whether or not people are smart, hard-working, or good students. But sociology shows us this ignores much of what really matters. Let's return now to the sociological imagination, or the ability to make connections between individual experiences and the larger social and historical context.⁵⁰ A goal for this chapter was for you to apply your own sociological imagination to schools. In what ways does this change how you think about your educational experiences and opportunities? How does it change how you think about these things for other people?

Another goal was for you to understand the importance of research—asking good questions, designing studies to answer the questions, and analyzing data carefully. Sociologists use a range of research methods, from ethnographies of classrooms to analysis of large datasets. Yet there is much

more to learn. What else would you like to know about schooling and society? How could you find the answers?

Review Sheet: Improving schools, increasing opportunity

Key Points

- The federal government contributes less than 10% of school funding.
- Standardized testing has increased dramatically since the passage of NCLB, with mixed consequences.
- Charter schools are the most popular form of public school choice. The number of students in charter schools more than quadrupled between 2004 and 2018.
- Some charter schools do better than traditional public schools and others do worse.
- Charter schools are generally more segregated than traditional public schools. Black charter school students are nearly three times more likely than Black public school students to attend a school where all or nearly all students were members of minority groups.
- School reform efforts should pay closer attention to social relations in low-performing schools.

Key People

- Charles Payne
- Anthony Bryk

Key Terms

- **Education policy** – Decisions about school-related issues, including funding, operations, curriculum, student assignment, and staffing.
- **No Child Left Behind Act** – 2001 federal law that mandated regular standardized testing and set consequences for low-performing schools.
- **Charter schools** – Privately run but publicly funded schools.

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Deviance, Crime, and Violence



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Deviance, Crime, and Violence

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INTERPRETING DEVIANCE

What does it mean to be deviant?

Social control, stigma, and labeling

THEORIES AND PERSPECTIVES ON DEVIANCE

Functionalist theories

Conflict theories

Social bonds, lovable freaks, and criminals

CRIME AND VIOLENCE

What is a crime? Who is a criminal?

The context of crime

VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES AND BEYOND

The rise and fall of American violence

Why is the United States more violent than similar nations?

The Great American Crime Decline

CRIME, PUNISHMENT, AND THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE

Mass incarceration

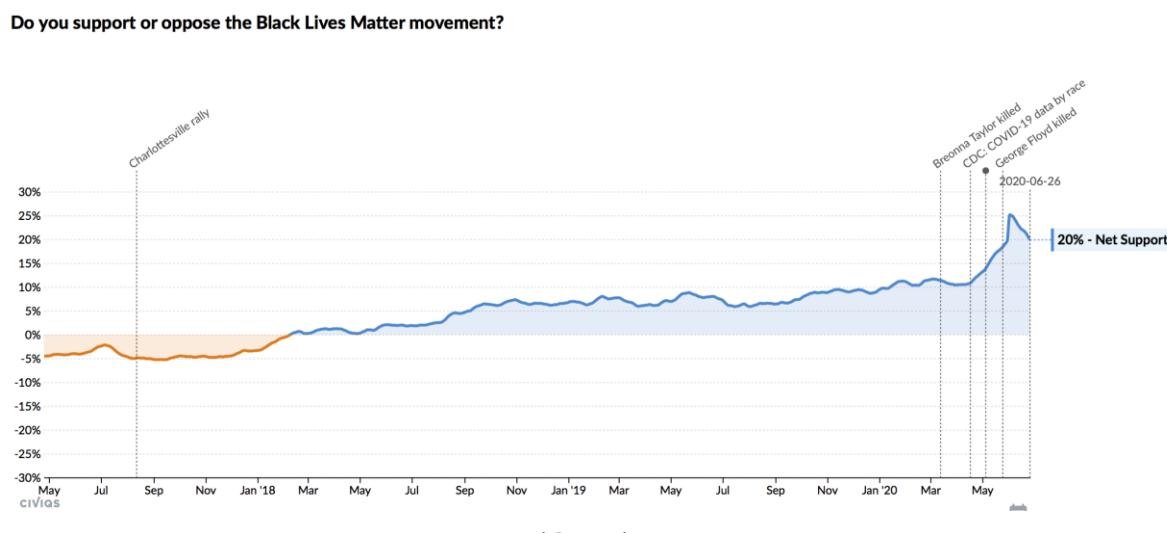
The past, present, and future of policing in the United States

INTRODUCTION

In August 2017, white supremacists and neo-Nazis held a rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. This Unite the Right Rally was held to promote racist, white separatist ideologies and to protest the removal of a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. At this time, support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the United States was at -5%, meaning more Americans disapproved of BLM than approved of it.¹ While BLM was well-supported among Black Americans at this time, it was rare to see any White public figure, news agency, social media platform, or corporation openly support the movement.

Now consider more recent events. Since 2017, public opinion has changed fairly rapidly. After the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, as well as data showing the health effects of COVID-19 were far worse for African Americans than other groups in the U.S., support for Black Lives Matter grew even more sharply. As mass protests occurred around the country, support for BLM grew among Americans — even White Americans — while opposition fell. Individuals, public figures, and corporations from [Coca-Cola](#) to [Netflix](#) to [Amazon](#) to even [Gushers](#) candy expressed public support for Black Lives Matter. Many Confederate monuments are being removed.² The Mississippi legislature voted to change their state flag to remove the Confederate symbol from it.³ Of course, some Americans always supported the BLM movement. But for many, voicing public support for BLM changed from being *against* the norm, to being the norm.

Figure 1: Public Opinion of the Black Lives Matter Movement



([Source](#))

Why? What makes any behavior deviant or not? And what about criminal behavior? Is there some objective line for normative versus deviant versus criminal behavior? Does it depend upon the number of people who engage in it? Or the written law where you live? Does it depend on where—or when—you live?

We'll investigate these questions in this chapter. We start with the concept of **deviance**, or behaviors that violate social norms. We'll discuss who violates societal rules, under what circumstances, and how.

We then move from deviance to the issue of crime, with a specific focus on one form of deviance and crime: violence. We'll trace the history of how society has explained and responded to criminal behavior and provide a sociological perspective on crime and violence. In the conclusion, we move from the abstract to the concrete: How has violence changed over time, and what can be done to prevent it?

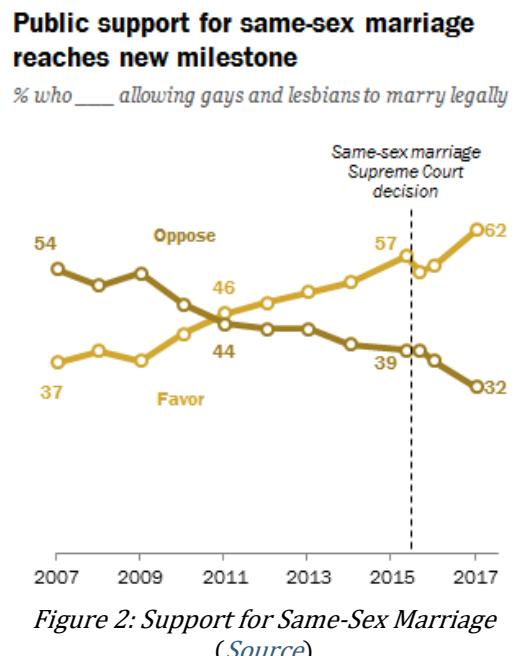
INTERPRETING DEVIANCE

- What is the definition of deviance?
- How do we collectively decide what is deviant and what isn't?
- How do societies attempt to enforce certain behaviors among members?

What does it mean to be deviant?

In 2007, the majority of Americans said they opposed same-sex marriage. Many states passed gay marriage bans, and it was only fully legal in one state (Massachusetts). But since then, public opinion has moved toward acceptance. One way we can see this is in positive depictions of gay and lesbian characters, which have proliferated in the media since 2007. By 2013, over three-quarters of Americans said that a family member, friend, or coworker had come out to them.⁴ In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that all states must recognize same-sex marriages. And in the last decade, public opinion has more than reversed itself: Americans now favor allowing gay marriage two-to-one.⁵

We can reasonably say that public opinion about same-sex marriage is a reflection of public opinion about gay people. That means for some people in the U.S., being gay *used* to be considered deviant, but now isn't. The point here is that understandings of deviant behavior rely on social agreement. So what does it mean to be deviant?



As we noted in the introduction, deviance refers to behaviors that violate social norms, or common expectations for behavior. Norms are connected to the values and beliefs of the culture in which they exist. In some cultures it's considered too informal to remove your shoes when entering someone's house. In others, it's considered offensive *not* to remove them. Norms vary in importance; some violations are extremely serious, others go unnoticed. Sociologist William Graham Sumner developed a typology that can help us understand different types of norms. **Folkways** are the least serious norms. They mainly refer to customs, traditions, and etiquette. Social sanctions for violating them are also the least severe.⁶ Imagine someone eating a Snickers bar with a knife and fork, as in the *Seinfeld* episode "The Pledge Drive" (search YouTube for a clip). While we might think it's odd for someone to eat a Snickers this way, there aren't likely to be any long-term consequences if someone does so.

Mores (pronounced *MORE-ays*) are more seriously protected norms. They reflect a deeper sense of morals and values, and sanctions for violating them are often much stronger.⁷ Take the example of Amy Robertson, a Kansas high school principal who invented the name of a fake university and used it on her resume. When the high school newspaper researched her for a story and discovered she had lied about her credentials, Robertson resigned in shame. Finally, **laws** represent the most highly codified level of norm; they are usually written down, and there are serious consequences if you don't follow them. These norms are important enough that the community agrees that violating them requires binding punishment. We'll cover laws in more depth in the second half of the chapter.

Social control, stigma, and labeling

A common fashion tip is that horizontal stripes should only be worn by thin people, since they make people look wider. There are a lot of fashion "dos" and "don'ts" based on body shape and size. But there's also a burgeoning "fatshionista" movement for fat people who want to explicitly break rules of what you "can" and "can't" wear. One example is the attention recording artist Lizzo has gotten for her body. She routinely wears bodysuits onstage, posts nude photos of herself on social media, and refuses to apologize for her body, which has drawn controversy. Also controversial was a TikTok video montage she posted of herself working out, with a voiceover that said in part, "So, I've been working out consistently for the last five years. It may come as a surprise to some of y'all that I'm not working out to have your ideal body type. I'm working out to have *my* ideal body type."

Rules may be made to be broken, but no one can deny they exist. Rules govern what we can and can't do, what we can and can't



[Source](#)

say, what we can and can't wear. But we might ask, *says who?* Who makes the rules? And who enforces them?

Most rules aren't enforced through the formal legal system, but rather through informal **social control**, or the ways societies try to influence members'



Fatshionistas like to break societal fashion rules. [\(Source\)](#)

behavior to maintain social order. Societies can exert this social control in many ways. One is through **moral panics** – over-heated, short-lived periods of intense social concern over an issue.⁸ Sociologist Howard S. Becker argued that in a moral panic, **moral entrepreneurs** push for increased awareness of and concern over an issue.⁹ There's usually heightened social concern over it, increased hostility toward those believed to be responsible, and some degree of agreement over both the problem and who's responsible.¹⁰ In addition, moral panics burn hot, but quick. There is usually outsized concern over the problem, given its actual threat to society, and as a result, the concern usually passes.¹¹

One recent example of a moral panic occurred in 2013, when mass media outlets began covering the then-new app Snapchat. Because snaps disappeared after a certain amount of time, moral entrepreneurs raised concern that it could be used as a "sexting app." To these entrepreneurs, Snapchat typified what they called "sexting culture." News stories routinely shared instances of teens sending and receiving (and screen-shooting) lurid images. Stories even circulated about teenagers who were charged with child pornography for sending nude images *of themselves*. In reality, very few teens actually sext; the number is probably around 7%.¹² Eventually, the sexting

aspect of Snapchat received less and less coverage. This moral panic burned hot, but burned out quickly.

Despite the panicked nature of sexting coverage, it's important to acknowledge that some teens have suffered after sending nude images of themselves over the internet. Some teens caught sexting had to put themselves on a sex-offender registry, a designation that sticks literally for life and can impact where people can live or what jobs they can get.¹³ In the language of sociologist Erving Goffman, those teens bear social stigma. **Stigma** occurs when some characteristic of an individual or group is seen as inferior or undesirable and leads to social rejection.¹⁴

Which attributes are stigmatized varies greatly by context. For instance, in Mauritania, fatness is so admired in women that little girls are force-fed so they gain weight.¹⁵ But in modern American culture, obesity is so stigmatized that people may make sure to eat only "healthy" foods in public, or

pay for expensive weight-loss bootcamps. After years of trying to “cover” their stigma, some fat people even feel the need to “come out” to their friends and family.¹⁶ “Coming out” for fat people isn’t a simple declaration of their weight; it’s a “refusal to cover.”¹⁷ As Kathleen Lebesco writes, coming out as fat is making a public declaration of “choosing to no longer pass as on-the-way-to thin,” and acknowledging their stigmatized status.¹⁸



Moral panics about Snapchat have largely subsided.
(Source)

The reaction to our behavior can change the way we see ourselves and our identity, possibly even reinforcing the behavior. **Labeling theory** argues that deviance isn’t really about the act itself, but is *negotiated* socially through reactions to the act.¹⁹

When someone is labeled as an “outsider,” they are treated differently. Smoking marijuana may not change someone much, but being labeled a pothead may shift how a person is treated and how she sees herself.²⁰ Selling drugs happens in almost every city and town across the U.S., but in some communities the police more actively target drug distribution, prosecutors more aggressively punish offenders, and the criminal justice system delivers harsher sentences. Even if the behavior is the same in a wealthy suburb and a poor city neighborhood, the treatment of the behavior may lead to very different consequences.

Taking all of this into account, how do we determine what is deviant? The key sociological point is that in any society, deviance is a *relationship* between individuals and larger social landscapes. As morality shifts (and it always does), enforcement of norms shifts, too.

Review Sheet: Interpreting deviance

Key Points

- Determining what is deviant relies on social agreements between community members.
- Lines between deviant and non-deviant behavior are upheld through enforcement of social norms.
- Social norms vary in degree of importance and how severely violations are punished.
- Societies enforce norms through processes of social control.
- One way to exert social control is through moral panics.
- Deviance is a relationship between individuals and larger social landscapes.

Key People

- William Graham Sumner

- Karl Mannheim
- Erich Goode & Nachman Ben-Yehuda
- Howard S. Becker
- Erving Goffman

Key Terms

- **Deviance** – Behaviors that violate social norms.
- **Norms** – Expectations for behavior.
- **Folkways** – Norms about customs, traditions, and etiquette.
- **Mores** – More seriously protected norms that reflect the morals and values of a social group.
- **Laws** – Most seriously protected norms; codified and require specific enforcements.
- **Social control** – Ways societies try to influence members' behavior to maintain social order.
- **Moral panics** – Overheated, short-lived periods of intense social concern about an issue.
- **Moral entrepreneurs** – People who try to influence societies toward increased awareness of and concern over the violation of social norms.

THEORIES & PERSPECTIVES ON DEVIANCE

- Why do some people engage in deviance, but others don't?
- When we do engage in deviance, what forms does it take?

On July 15, 1974, a Florida television morning-show host named Christine Chubbuck decided to start her broadcast of *Suncoast Digest* with footage of a shooting that occurred at a restaurant the previous night.²¹ When the film footage wouldn't roll, she smiled strangely. She looked down at her desk and read: "In keeping with Channel 40's policy of bringing you the latest in blood and guts—and in living color—you are going to see another first: attempted suicide." She then pulled a .38 caliber revolver from under her desk and shot herself in the back of the head.²² Christine Chubbuck killed herself on live television.

Why did she do it? According to news reports, she was extremely depressed.²³ But they also reported that it was more complicated than that. She didn't have any friends or romantic partners.²⁴ She was socially awkward and had trouble connecting with others. She felt that the fact that she was a



A reporter gives an on-location report.
[\(Source\)](#)

29-year-old virgin reflected poorly on her as a woman. At the time of her death, she lived at home with her mother and brother.²⁵ And she was often angry about the sensationalistic focus of the news; her stories would get bumped to make room for what employees at the station called “blood and guts” stories.²⁶ This hurt her career and put her at odds with the station manager.

Christine Chubbuck’s suicide could have been spurred by personal and psychological problems. But it could also have been caused by Chubbuck’s disconnection from the larger community, her hopelessness about the future, or a mismatch between her goals and the available means to achieve them. She may have taken on the identity of outsider, further disconnecting her from society. A number of sociological theories of deviance could help explain this kind

of incident. Though they come from different perspectives, all seek to understand the role social relations play in why and how people engage in deviant behavior.

Functionalist theories of deviance

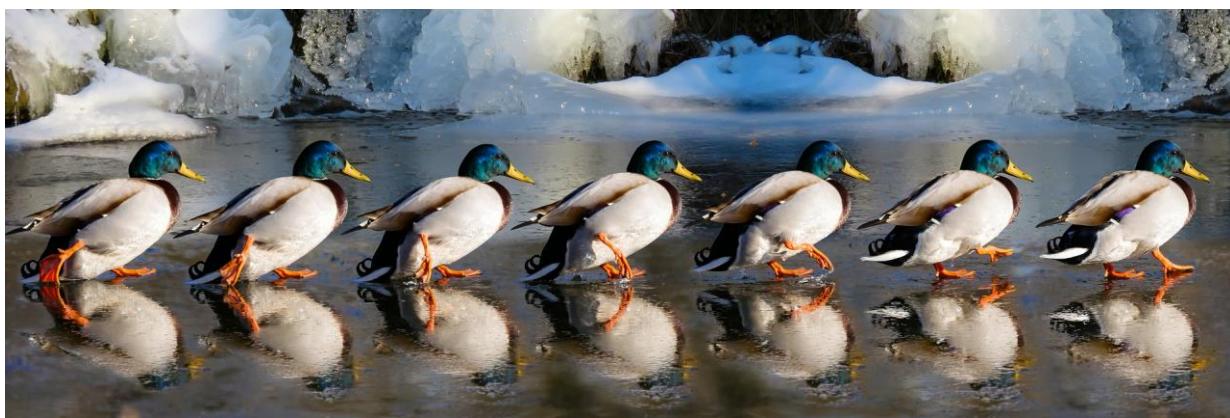
Émile Durkheim argued that deviance is a social fact that is inevitable and stable in societies.²⁷ Deviance is a constant, and stabilizing, element of social life. This may seem counter-intuitive, but **functionalist theories of deviance** begin with the idea that deviance serves a social purpose, a function. One of these purposes is affirming our social agreements about right and wrong. For example, how do you know it’s not okay to loudly pass gas in a crowded elevator? You weren’t born with this knowledge. You learned it. And for a lot of us, we learned it because we ourselves were once in a crowded space where someone loudly passed gas. What happens next? Others in the area shoot each other looks. They may roll their eyes or look shocked, laugh, or frown. Whatever it is, they communicate disapproval. And that communication, according to functionalist sociologists, is instructive. It shows us social limits of acceptable behavior. Further, when we publicly condemn someone who has violated social rules, we aren’t necessarily doing it for them; we’re doing it for *us*. By shooting *each other* looks, we’re all coming together to affirm that passing gas wasn’t okay. We’re repairing the temporary societal rift that happens when someone breaks the rules. We’re putting the societal fabric back together. This, Durkheim argued, strengthens **social cohesion**, the degree to which we identify with and maintain social rules and connections.

But what if everyone thinks a deviant behavior is just fine? Durkheim recognized that sometimes, deviant behavior isn’t met with disdain, but is tolerated or even welcomed. Functionalism argues that this is one of the primary ways social change occurs. Think about women wearing pants, interracial marriage, and openly gay legislators. While **normative** (that is, accepted and expected) in

many communities today, all of these were considered deviant at some point. When people push social boundaries, sometimes they spur change.

Robert K. Merton borrowed from Durkheim's concept of social cohesion and **anomie** to explain deviance. Durkheim defined anomie as a situation in which we do not have clear morals or social expectations to guide our behavior. Merton believed that anomie, and ultimately deviance, occurs when there is a mismatch between socially-endorsed *goals* and the socially-endorsed *means* to achieve these goals.²⁸ In an ideal society, there would be legitimate, accepted means for everyone to reach their goals. In reality, acceptable means aren't equally available; not everyone has the same chances to succeed. Imagine a group of high school students who want to go to college so they can get good jobs. Some will find a relatively easy path, but others will have significant roadblocks. Some went to underfunded schools that couldn't afford computers or even books; others went to schools with state-of-the-art technology. Some are undocumented; others have citizenship. Some have to take care of sick family members; some don't. Some just can't afford it. Others have their tuition and living expenses paid for by parents. These students all have the same goal. They just don't have the same access to resources. And this can cause significant stress.

The stress that results from anomie, this mismatch of goals and means, may lead some to adapt by engaging in deviant behavior. Merton calls this *strain*; it forms the basis of **strain theory**. Merton understood that deviant behavior can be a function of the social situations in which people find themselves. But he also understood that individuals adapt to these situations differently. He described five adaptations to strain, based on the possible mismatch between goals and the means a person has available.²⁹ *Conformity* is an adaptation in which individuals accept both the socially-approved goals (and the values that come with them) *and* have the means to achieve them (so they can follow norms). Think about the person voted "Most Likely to Succeed" at your high school. Those people usually worked toward success, and did so in the way that society deems legitimate. Most people are conformists.



Conforming ducks. [\(Source\)](#)

A second adaptation is *innovation*, which can arise if someone shares socially-approved values and goals, but rejects the means to achieve them. They may use new, unapproved methods to achieve the same goals. In the documentary *Crips & Bloods: Made in America*, many former gang members

talked about being locked out of traditional clubs and groups as children in the 1960s. As one gang member says:

The most significant thing was when I went to join the Boy Scouts.... My mother takes me up. The scoutmaster—uh, he was nice. But he tells my mother, “well, I don't know.” ‘Cause it was a white troop.... We couldn't be Cub Scouts, couldn't be Boy Scouts, couldn't be Explorer Scouts, we couldn't get involved in organized activity that would take us anywhere that would bear us any kind of good fruit, you see. So, we built an auxiliary alternative.

These young men shared socially-approved goals: they sought a group to call their own, skills development, self-sufficiency, and wealth. Deprived of socially-approved means to achieve this, they created street gangs that achieved the same goals, but in illegitimate ways.

Table 1: Adaptations in Merton's Strain Theory

Mode of Adaptation	Cultural Goals	Institutionalized Means
Conformity	+	+
Innovation	+	-
Ritualism	-	+
Retreatism	-	-
Rebellion	+/-	+/-

A third adaptation is *ritualism*, in which people follow socially-approved means to success, but reject the goals. Consider someone who wants to be an actor, but acts primarily in local stage productions that aren't very well-attended. The actor accepts that making it in Hollywood and winning an Oscar are probably not in his future, but he still behaves in normative ways by continuing to audition and do the best he can to succeed. This is ritualism.

Fourth is *retreatism*. Retreatists reject *both* the socially-prescribed goals *and* the normative means to achieve those goals. They simply withdraw. A common example is the hippie of the 1960s. Hippies rejected both social goals (making lots of money, a 9-to-5 job, a spouse and kids with a house in the suburbs) and the means to achieve them (wearing a suit and tie every day, following the boss's orders, waiting until marriage to have sex). However, a lot of hippies didn't retreat forever. Many went on to lead very normative lives and pursue socially-approved success. Take businessman Richard Branson. There's a rumor this high-school dropout spent two years squatting in a London basement with 20 other people.³⁰ Now, as the co-founder of the multinational Virgin Empire, he's worth over \$5 billion and has been knighted by the Queen of England. Not quite a retreat from goals *or* means, in the end.

Last is *rebellion*. Some people reject both social goals and means, but instead of retreating, they try to disrupt the system—what Merton calls rebellion. This adaptation is the most threatening to existing social arrangements, and is often associated with people we view as dangerous. One example is Ted Kaczynski. A child prodigy who went to Harvard when he was 16, he eventually quit his job as a professor and went to live alone in the woods in Montana. While there, he developed an anti-society manifesto. He also started sending homemade bombs through the mail. Not knowing his identity, the FBI called him the Unabomber. He sent letter bombs over the course of 20 years, killing three people. Finally arrested in 1996, Kaczynski now lives in a federal penitentiary.³¹

Why do people solve their problems (or adapt) in one way, but not others? Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin's **opportunity theory** attempts to provide an answer.³² Cloward and Ohlin focus on illegitimate means.

Consider an example: many people are frustrated by a lack of opportunity to succeed through legitimate means, like the formal labor market. A lot of people face barriers to a good education, a poor job market, and other hardships. And many might think of engaging in deviant acts as a result. But not all of them do. Why? Cloward and Ohlin argue that we don't all have the same *opportunity* to act in deviant ways.³³ Opportunity theory states that some people (those living in poverty in highly-populated cities, for example) may be more likely than others to be exposed to deviant subcultures. The deviant subculture's proximity and norms of delinquency provide an **illegitimate opportunity** to take on the role of deviant.³⁴ So, what separates the deviant from the non-deviant? Cloward and Ohlin suggest that in many ways, it comes down to access.³⁵

Conflict theories of deviance

Have you ever come up against a rule or norm that you thought was unfair? Have you ever thought about who has the power to enforce these rules? Are those in power always right, and so-called deviants always wrong? Who do the rules and norms benefit, anyway? Rather than focus on why people engage in deviant behavior, **conflict theories of deviance** ask how rules and norms are shaped by power relations in a society.

Here's a classic example. In 1963, civil rights leaders were busy strategizing about how to bring racial discrimination to the attention of a reluctant White public. Reverend James Bevel had the idea that children should publicly march in Birmingham, Alabama, to better show the horrors of racial segregation.³⁶ In May 1963, the Children's Crusade began; children marched with picket signs. Birmingham's commissioner of public safety at the time was Eugene "Bull" Connor, a notorious supporter of segregation, the legally-enforced separation of Blacks and Whites. As the children marched, Connor ordered the police to bring out fire hoses, batons, and attack dogs and turn them on the children before arresting them.³⁷ Some of these children were as young as six.³⁸ The Children's Crusade was one of many turning points in the Civil Rights Movement. News coverage of children being beaten with clubs and sprayed with fire hoses sparked a gradual change in public opinion among



A segregated drinking fountain. ([Source](#))

time. But most people today would say it was the morally correct stance, and courageous as well. So, who created these laws? Who upheld the norms, and why? Who did these laws and norms benefit, and at whose expense? These are key questions for conflict theorists of deviance.

For a more current example, consider the debates over wearing face masks to protect the public against COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and public health scientists say masks control the spread of the virus and could save lives.⁴² Yet there are no national laws compelling people to wear face masks. While some localities do have laws that mandate wearing face masks, at least 18 states and Washington, D.C. have laws that *penalize* those who wear masks. Though "...[m]any of these face-covering laws were enacted to target the Ku Klux Klan's use of masks and hoods to conceal their identity," some local leaders repurposed them to outlaw wearing masks in public more generally. As a result, wearing a mask has been strongly politicized by some: witness the woman in this photo throwing her groceries out of her cart after being asked to wear a face mask in a store. The questions a conflict theorist would ask in this situation is, who benefits from these anti-masking laws, and at whose expense?

Karl Marx didn't specifically write about the sociology of deviance. Nevertheless, his work laid the basis for conflict theorists who are interested in how deviance and crime are a

Whites. President Kennedy announced his intention to pursue national civil rights legislation.³⁹ Pressure mounted, and the city of Birmingham negotiated a "truce" with Martin Luther King.⁴⁰ The city also fired Bull Connor.⁴¹

At the time, segregation was the norm in Birmingham, as well as the law. This march broke the law because the children didn't have permits to march (of course, Connor's commission wouldn't have granted permits even if they had applied for one). The Children's Crusade also violated social norms of its place and



(Source: [Screenshot from Twitter](#))

function of wealth and power. Marx argued that the wealthy class of “owners” in society centralizes its power and influence. One way they secure this power is by occupying leadership positions in government and other “authority institutions.” This allows the wealthy to be the primary creators of laws, which are designed to maintain and build their power and influence.

In *The Power Elite*, C. Wright Mills expands on and modernizes this idea. Mills argued that power lies in the hands of a few political, corporate, and military leaders.⁴³ These leaders operate in the same social and professional circles, Mills says. They come from similar backgrounds, go to the same schools together, play golf together. The group is so homogeneous that they tend to share values and beliefs, or a **worldview**.⁴⁴ One result is remarkable levels of cooperation and agreement about policymaking. Mills argued that these elites assume *their* interests are also society’s best interests.

Conflict theories of deviance argue that people who have the power to define and police deviance will do so with the specific intent of maintaining their class status. That is, dominant groups in society define as deviant any behavior or activity that threatens their power or conflicts with their class interests.⁴⁵ Every stage in the system, from defining behavior as deviant to enforcement and punishment, is influenced by the interests of the powerful. This creates a collectively-understood **ideology**, or set of beliefs, values, and assumptions we use to view and understand the world, about what constitutes deviance and what doesn’t. And this ideology supports the dominant group’s **hegemony**, a particular type of domination in which the powerful get the consent (and sometimes outright support) of everyone else.⁴⁶ A conflict theorist might argue that segregationist laws in southern states after the Civil War were *designed* to concentrate power and money in the hands of White elites. This system preserved economic, legal, and social advantages for Whites long after slavery was officially abolished.



Mills argues that societies are run by a small group of the wealthiest, most well-connected people. ([Source](#))

Social bonds, lovable freaks, and criminals

In the 1980s, a public service announcement on TV featured a father confronting his young son about the drug paraphernalia he’s found. “Who taught you how to do this?” the father asks. The son dramatically yells back, “*You*, alright? I learned it by watching *you!*” Since then, the PSA has lived on in

pop culture and comedic parody. The phrase “I learned it by watching *you*” entered the American lexicon.



A little *IT* humor, in cross-stitch. ([Source](#))

deviance, as well as *motivations* for behaving in certain ways. In social groups, we’re surrounded by ideologies that make it desirable or undesirable to violate norms and rules. When we’re exposed largely to attitudes that encourage rule-breaking, we’re more likely to become delinquent.⁴⁸

While Sutherland’s theory focuses on how our social networks may lead us to break rules, **control theory** focuses on how ties to mainstream social groups and societal institutions make us less likely to become deviant.⁴⁹ If we’re attached and committed to our jobs, to our romantic partners or families, or to institutions like the military, we’re less likely to veer off track and take part in deviant, delinquent, or criminal activity. This is a topic we’ll discuss in more depth when we look at crime.

Importantly, not all deviance is bad. Social critics like Seth Godin claim that technological change has made it easier for “weird” people to create things, get noticed, and join up with other weird people. Through the internet, if you’re interested in the television show *Dr. Who*, you can buy a hand-crocheted mini Doctor.⁵⁰ You can share photos on Facebook of Mid-Century Modern-style lamps.⁵¹ You can have eight certified-platinum singles, and perform in front of thousands of people on tour, all while wearing a wig that completely obscures your face (at least, if you’re recording artist Sia, who has been described as “weird” and “polarizing” but remains tremendously successful at doing something she loves, on “her own terms”).⁵²

But favoring some deviants isn’t new. Societies often worship the strangest among us. Think about fashion models, elite athletes, artistic or scientific geniuses. These are people who look unusual or can do unusual things with their bodies or minds. They are, as Godin would say, weird. And we love them for it.

Then there’s the other side of deviance: not the kind that features lovable freaks, but the kind that features dangerous criminals. Many of the theories of deviance we have covered translate directly to the study of crime and violence, and yet there are some key differences as well. Crime and violence

Despite the unintended comedy in that PSA, some theorists argue there is substance to the claim. Edwin Sutherland’s **theory of differential association** suggests that deviance is a learned behavior, just like any other. Sutherland’s theory describes a process through which we engage in deviant behavior.⁴⁷ In this process, we learn behavior through *intimate* personal contacts, such as family and friends. This is a clear contrast with the commonly-held belief that we learn deviant behaviors from impersonal sources such as movies, video games, and music.

Sutherland argued that we learn *how* to engage in

are certainly forms of deviance, but they are usually defined more formally and measured more precisely because they are codified into law. They are seen as serious social problems, and they sometimes have severe social consequences.

Review Sheet: Theories and perspectives on deviance

Key Points

- When a so-called deviant act occurs, there are multiple overlapping ways to explain it. Thus, there are many theories of deviance and crime. Their usefulness varies depending upon the context, but all seek to understand deviance.
- Functionalist theories focus primarily on the social purposes of deviance. They seek to understand why people engage in deviance.
- Conflict theories of deviance focus primarily upon power relations in society, and the ways in which the powerful understand deviance in ways that benefit themselves. They seek to understand how norms, rules, and laws are created and shaped through processes of social, political, and economic power.
- Not all deviance is negative; deviance can solve problems through innovation.

Key People

- Émile Durkheim
- Robert K. Merton
- Richard Cloward & Lloyd Ohlin
- Karl Marx
- C. Wright Mills
- Edwin Sutherland

Key Terms

- **Functionalist theories of deviance** – Theories that focus on potential social purposes that deviance serves.
- **Social cohesion** – Degree to which we identify with and maintain social rules and connections.
- **Normative** – Accepted and expected behavior.
- **Anomie** – A social lack of morals and expectations for behavior that can lead to deviance.
- **Strain** – Stress that results from anomie.
- **Strain theory** – Functionalist theory that describes five adaptations to strain: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion.
- **Opportunity theory of deviance** – Functionalist theory that says delinquency is a function of opportunity and access to delinquent behavior.
- **Conflict theories of deviance** – Theories that ask about how rules and norms are shaped by power relations in society.

- **Worldview** – Set of shared values, beliefs, and understandings about how the world should be.
- **Hegemony** – Type of domination in which the powerful obtain the consent or support of the subordinated.
- **Stigma** – A phenomenon in which a person is discredited and/or rejected by society because of an attribute they have.
- **Differential association** – Theory that deviance is learned through intimate personal contacts.
- **Control theory** – Theory that claims deviance arises from a weakening of social connections.
- **Labeling theory** – Theory that deviance is created through reactions to an act.

CRIME AND VIOLENCE

- What is a crime and who is a criminal?
- Why do people commit crime?
- What makes crime more or less likely?

Cesare Lombroso was a physician and scientist who worked in the Italian army, in asylums for the insane, and in prisons during the late 1800s. Through his work, he came to know a notorious Italian criminal, a man who boasted of robbery and theft, named Giuseppe Villella. When Villella died at the age of 70, Lombroso carried out a post-mortem anatomical observation. He noticed an indentation on the base of Villella's skull, which reminded Lombroso of a similar feature in the skulls of apes and our human ancestors. This led Lombroso to carry out more extensive research on the skulls of humans, 66 in total. He focused his observations on the skulls of criminals and the insane, and he published his research in one of the most famous books on criminals ever written.

In the first chapter of *The Criminal Man*, Lombroso documented the features of the skulls he had observed:

Criminals have the following rates of abnormality: 61 percent exhibit fusion of the cranial bones; 92 percent, prognathism or an ape-like forward thrust of the lower face; 63 percent, overdevelopment of the sinuses; 27 percent, cranial thickness; 9 percent, an open medio-frontal suture; 20 percent, a large jawbone; 25 percent, a receding fore-head; 74 percent, wide or overdeveloped

cheekbones; 45 percent, overly large wisdom teeth; 59 percent, small cranial capacity, among which 10 percent show true microcephaly; and 14 percent, too many wormian bones...These abnormalities are almost always found in large clusters in individual criminals like Villella. Is it possible that individuals with such an enormous variety of cranial anomalies can have the same level of intelligence and sense of responsibility as men with perfectly normal skulls?⁵³

Lombroso's question was rhetorical. He thought it was not possible, and he used his data to conclude that criminals were people whose anatomy contained abnormalities from humans' primitive ancestors, before our species had fully evolved.

Lombroso's observations about the skulls of dead criminals may seem absurd today. His method of observing the anatomy of criminals and making conclusions based on what he saw violates virtually every principle of scientific inquiry. His simplistic conclusions are one of the best examples of a historical tradition in which pseudo-scientific research is used to reinforce commonly-held stereotypes while justifying views about the superiority of Whites. His research has since been dismissed.

But in some ways, Lombroso's ideas remain critically important in the study of crime and violence. *The Criminal Man* is one of the classics of **criminology**, the study of crime and criminal behavior, because it was an extremely influential example of a perspective that assumes that crime and violence can be explained by studying the characteristics of individual people, or groups of people, who commit crimes. From this perspective, crime exists because criminals have something wrong with them—a biological abnormality, a lack of intelligence, or a deficient culture. We can still find high-profile examples of researchers who argue that criminal behavior is primarily explained by biology.⁵⁴

This approach to understanding crime isn't always driven by racism, and it's not always useless or completely misguided. Certain risk factors, like low self-control, are powerful predictors of a person's probability of engaging in violence. But if this approach to understanding crime isn't entirely useless, it *is* incomplete. A sociological perspective on crime and violence leads us to think more broadly about the problem of crime, asking more expansive questions: What features of our environment make crime more or less likely? Why is crime more common in some societies than others? Why do crime rates rise or fall?

A sociological perspective forces us to think beyond individual criminals to consider the social forces that affect individual behavior and the way that deviant or criminal behavior is defined and punished in different societies at different times. When we're thinking like sociologists, we begin to see crime differently—we see it within a wider social context.

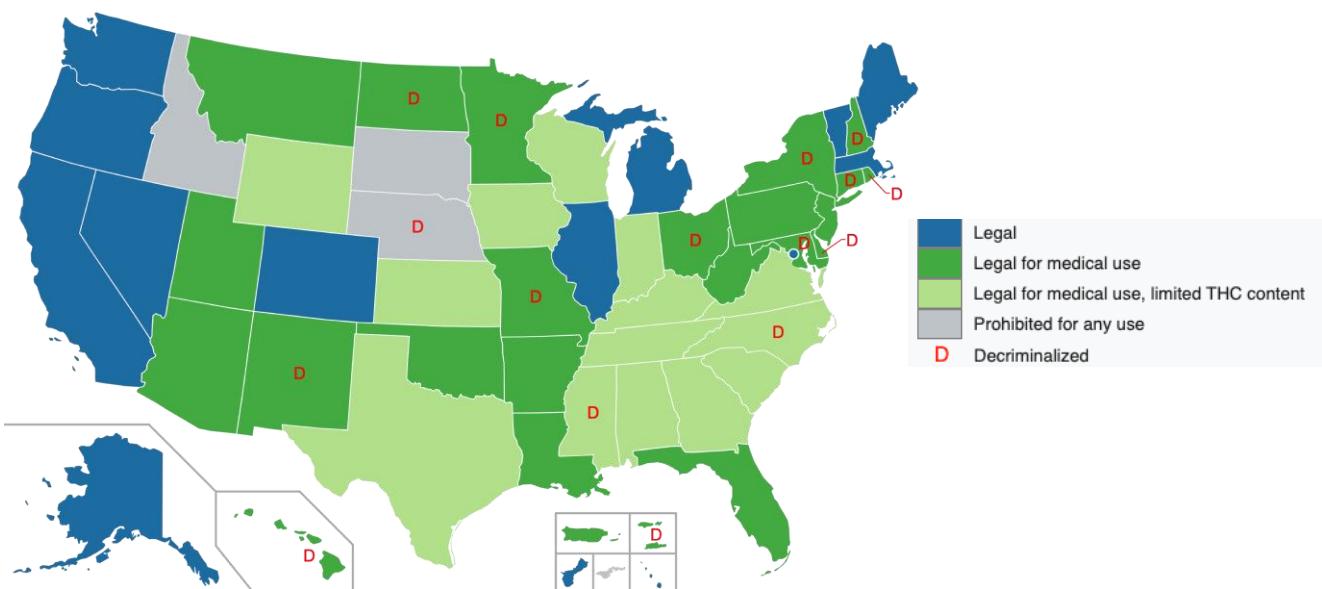
What is a crime? Who is a criminal?

Just like all deviant behavior, a criminal act is defined within a specific social setting and a particular time period. The most formal definition of a **crime** is an act that violates the **penal code**, or

the written laws that govern behavior in a particular jurisdiction. But this is only a starting point. What counts as a crime can change as you travel from one state to the next, and it can change over time as laws are amended or repealed. The map in Figure 3 was made in late 2018 and shows the states where marijuana is illegal (prohibited for any use), where it's legal only for medical purposes, and where it's legal for medical and recreational use. In most of the southeastern United States, you can't legally smoke marijuana even as a medical treatment, but can use certain cannabis-based products such as cannabidiol, known as CBD oil. Along the entire West Coast, on the other hand, if you're an adult, you can walk into a shop on a main street and buy marijuana about as easily as a can of soda.

Despite the variation in what counts as a criminal act, a small number of crimes are close to universal. Murder is the best example: virtually every society treats murder as a crime. In the United States, murder is tracked by police departments, which report crimes to the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the FBI then calculates national statistics on crime throughout the country. Murder is also tracked through vital records collected by state health departments, which rely on coroners and medical examiners to document the cause of every death. National trends in the murder rate as measured by both police departments and health departments look almost identical. Because we have multiple sources of information on murder, and because bodies are hard to hide, it's the crime that is counted most reliably.

Figure 3: Marijuana Legalization as of May, 2020



(Source: [Lokal Profil](#), Wikimedia Commons)

Murder is only the most extreme form of **violent crime**, a category that also includes crimes like robbery (a theft that takes place in person through use of force), assault, and sexual assault or rape. **Property crime** involves theft that isn't carried out through force, including acts like motor vehicle theft or the burglary of a home. All of these crimes are typically referred to as **street crime**, while crimes like

fraud, embezzlement, and other unethical acts or business practices are typically thought of as corporate or **white-collar crime**.⁵⁵ Although the attention of law enforcement and the public is almost always focused on street crime, white-collar crime can affect not only its victims, but all employees of a firm, investors, and even the economy as a whole.

Now that we know the formal definition of a crime, we can ask a follow-up question: Who is a criminal? The most straightforward definition of a **criminal** is a person who has violated a criminal law. Deviant behavior, as we learned, is a violation of common norms; but criminal behavior is a violation of the formal penal code. But we need to push further to develop a better understanding of why some people, and some groups of people, get tied up in the criminal justice system while others don't. Contrary to the perspective of theorists like Lombroso, few individuals can truly be thought of as "natural-born criminals."

The context of crime

Chicago often has more shooting victims and homicides than any other city in the country, including New York and Los Angeles, which both have millions more residents. From the outside, the violence in Chicago appears to be random and senseless, and the threat of being shot seems ever-present. The truth is, for most Chicago residents, the likelihood of being shot is extremely low. For a very small segment of the population, however, the odds are shockingly high.

Sociologists Andrew Papachristos and Chris Wildeman studied shooting victims in Chicago, focusing on a social network of high-risk young people who had come into contact with the law at some point.⁵⁶ A **social network** is a group of people (or organizations, nations, etc.) that are linked to each other in a specific way. In this case, the members of the network were linked together because all of them had been arrested with at least one other member of the network at some point.

The two researchers argued that violence in Chicago should be treated in the same way as other epidemics, like the spread of HIV, which moves through networks of people engaged in risky behaviors like sharing needles or unprotected sex. Being a victim of gun violence didn't necessarily mean that a person had been actively engaged in any criminal activity, but that individual could still be vulnerable if he was somehow linked to the network of people at greatest risk—if he was walking down the street with a gang member, for instance, or ended up at a party with a friend or cousin engaged in violent activity. Being in this network turned out to be the strongest predictor of becoming a shooting victim. Only 4% of the community's population was part of the network, but the network accounted for 40% of all shooting victims. For the young people within this network, being the victim of a shooting was "tragic, but not random."

The extraordinary findings from this study lead us to consider how criminal activity is partially about who we spend our time with. One of the strongest findings in criminology is that our attachments to other people, like a partner or spouse, and to institutions and organizations like school, a job, or the military, play an extremely important role in influencing whether or not we will become actively involved in crime. These types of **social bonds**, or connections and attachments to people and institutions, often serve as a pathway leading us away from a life of criminal activity. You may think

twice about committing a crime if you worry about going to prison and leaving your family alone, or you may decide not to take part in risky activities with friends if you are worried about losing a good, stable job.⁵⁷ Criminal behavior isn't only about what's inside us; it's also about the links that we have to other people and to the outside world.

As research on crime and violence has evolved, theories of criminality have shifted attention away from individual offenders and toward the features of streets, neighborhoods, and cities that make crime more or less likely. Criminologists have shown that violent crime is much less likely in communities where there is greater social cohesion (unity) and trust among residents.⁵⁸ Urban planners and architects have identified how the design of city streets and housing can reduce crime by limiting the number of dark, isolated, or unsupervised spaces where potential criminals might seek out victims, an approach called **crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED)**.⁵⁹ And police departments all over the country have adapted their practices because of an extremely influential theory of crime arguing that small signs of disorder on the street, like a broken window, provide a hint to offenders that the area is outside the control of authorities. This idea, called **broken windows theory**, suggests that if the police respond to very small violations of public order, they will make major crimes less likely.⁶⁰

A sociological perspective doesn't suggest that individual characteristics have nothing to do with crime. However, it does suggest that studying individual criminals isn't sufficient. Instead of examining individual traits or features, we have to understand how individuals interact with other people and with their environments. Rather than trying to reduce crime by medicating, executing, or imprisoning those most likely to commit crime, research shows that violence can be reduced with interventions that target the physical and social environment.

Review Sheet: Crime and violence

Key Points

- A sociological perspective on crime and violence expands beyond the focus on individual characteristics and considers the features of environments and societies that make crime more or less likely.
- Murder is the crime that is measured most precisely because it's tracked by both police departments and health departments.
- A large portion of all violent crime is committed by a small network of individuals.
- Individuals' ties to other people and institutions have a large impact on their involvement with violence.

Key People

- Cesare Lombroso – One of the founders of criminology; scientist who argued that crime is explained by biological abnormalities.

Key Terms

- **Criminology** – Study of crime and criminal behavior.
- **Crime** – Act that violates the penal code.
- **Penal code** – Written laws that govern behavior in a particular jurisdiction.
- **Violent crime** – Crimes like homicide, robbery, assault, and sexual assault, which involve the use of physical force.
- **Property crime** – Theft that doesn't involve the use of direct physical force.
- **Street crime** – Violent crimes and property crimes that are more common in public spaces and often involve the police.
- **White-collar crime** – Crimes like fraud, embezzlement, and other unethical acts or business practices that are typically not carried out on the street or in public spaces and don't use physical force.
- **Criminal** – Person who violates the penal code.
- **Social network** – Group of people linked together in a specific way.
- **Social bonds** – Connections and attachments to people and institutions in mainstream society.
- **Crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED)** – Strategy to reduce crime through the design of buildings and physical space.
- **Broken windows theory** – Theory of policing that argues that small signs of disorder lead to outbreaks of more serious crimes.

VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES AND BEYOND

- Is violence in the United States rising or falling?
- Is the U.S. more or less violent than the rest of the world?
- What factors have led to the decline in violence in the U.S.?

Anyone who follows the news faces a constant barrage of stories about terrorism, war, mass shootings, and horrific murders. A few days of steady news coverage might lead you to think that we are living through the most violent period in world history. The reality, if you take a long-term perspective, is just the opposite.

In 2011, psychologist Steven Pinker published *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, a remarkable book about the decline of violence over the course of modern human history.⁶¹ Although most of us think of modern society as violent, Pinker shows that murder, rape, torture, mutilation, and slavery

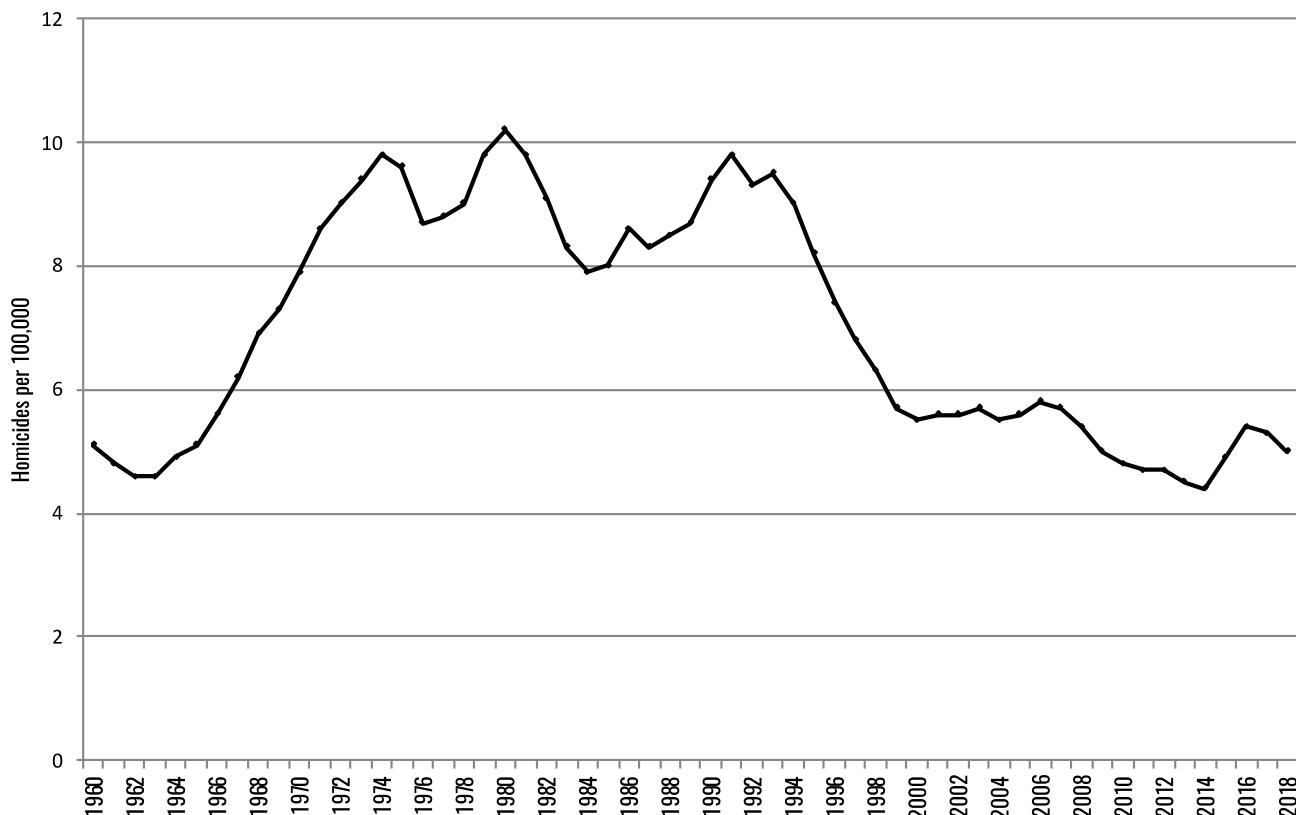
were common and accepted throughout most of human history, but have become more and more uncommon over time. As warring tribes were organized into nation states, as government institutions expanded their reach, and as the value of human rights came to be recognized around the world, the brutality of our species began to subside. We now live in the most humane, and the least violent, era in the world's history.

But even if the world has become less violent over time, the problem of violence hasn't become any less severe in the United States—right?

The rise and fall of American violence

The **homicide rate** is the most common measure of violence in a society; it measures the number of murders for every 100,000 residents. The homicide rate in the United States doubled from 1963 to 1974, a period of unrest in urban America when funding for cities was slashed and urban neighborhoods began to fall apart. For the two decades after 1974, cities continued to experience intense violence, and the national homicide rate fluctuated between roughly 8 and 10 murders per 100,000 residents.

Figure 4: U.S. Homicide Rate, 1960-2018



Source: F.B.I. Uniform Crime Reports

By the early 1990s, many experts on violent crime thought violence was only going to get worse. James Alan Fox, a criminologist at Northeastern University who wrote widely on trends in violent crime,

offered an urgent warning: “unless we act now, when our children are still young and impressionable, we may indeed have a bloodbath of teen violence by the year 2005.”⁶² Fortunately, he was wrong. As shown in Figure 4, the homicide rate dropped from 1993 to 1994, and fell sharply through the rest of the decade. By the end of the 1990s, there were about 6 murders for every 100,000 Americans, a level that hadn’t been seen since the late 1960s. Then violent crime fell further, to 4.4 murders for every 100,000 Americans in 2014.⁶³ Based on historical records, 2014 was probably one of the safest years in U.S. history.⁶⁴ The homicide rate rose in 2015 and 2016, then stabilized, and fell slightly in 2017 and 2018. As we update this chapter in the summer of 2020, many cities are again worried about a recent rise in shootings and murders.⁶⁵ But it is important to distinguish between short-term fluctuations and long-term trends. Over a period of a few months or even a couple of years, the level of violence can rise or fall quickly. When we take a longer view, however, it becomes clear that we are still living in one of the safest eras of our nation’s history.

If violent crime has been falling for most of the past two decades, however, many Americans don’t seem to know it. Polls asking Americans whether they think crime is getting better or worse show that they often think it’s getting worse; this was true even in the years when violent crime was plummeting. So how can we be so sure that they’re wrong? How confident can we be that the statistics are right, that crime has actually been falling since the early 1990s?

First, let’s focus on murders. As we noted, homicide is the most reliable measure of extreme violence in a society. And the trends in the murder rate reported by the FBI, which show a dramatic decline since the early 1990s, match almost perfectly with data from medical reports gathered by state health departments and the National Center on Health Statistics.⁶⁶ What about Americans’ own reports of how often they are victims of violence? The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) was designed to count criminal victimization experienced by a national sample of Americans; it has been administered every year since the early 1970s.⁶⁷ The NCVS provides a useful complement to official statistics compiled by the FBI, because the survey isn’t affected by changes in how crime is monitored or reported by the police.

NCVS data confirm the patterns documented by the FBI, and even suggest that the decline in violent crime may be under-reported in official statistics. In 1993, about 80 out of every 1,000 Americans reported being the victim of a violent crime in the past six months. By 2015, only 19 out of every 1,000 Americans reported being the victim of a violent crime. The FBI’s official statistics on murder and other violent crimes tell us that violence has been cut roughly in half. Americans’ own reports of whether they have recently been assaulted or otherwise violently attacked suggest that violent victimization has dropped by more than 75%.

Even though there are some discrepancies in reports on *how much* violence has fallen, all of the best sources of data on American violence—the national survey of victimization, figures from vital statistics, and reports from police departments—tell the same basic story: the level of violence in the U.S. has fallen dramatically from its peak in the early 1990s. No matter which data source you look at, the

nation is safer than it was 25 years ago. Despite this good news, the fact that we are living during one of the safest periods in the nation's history doesn't mean that we're living in a particularly safe nation.

Why is the United States more violent than similar nations?

Compared to the entire world, the United States has a relatively low rate of violent crime and homicide. According to estimates from the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, there are more than 30 homicides for every 100,000 residents in nations like Honduras, Venezuela, and Jamaica, a rate six times higher than in the U.S.⁶⁸ In some regions of the world, extreme violence is a common aspect of daily life for most people. This isn't the case in most communities across the United States.

But when we compare the U.S. to other developed countries, the U.S. has an extremely high rate of homicides and a fairly high rate of violent crime. The U.S. homicide rate is more than twice as high as it is in Canada, Japan, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and many other countries, where there are fewer than 2 homicides per 100,000 residents.

Why is there so much violence in the United States? There is no single definitive answer, but

there are several theories. Some scholars believe that America's high rate of violence is a cultural heritage from the time of the frontier, when Americans were forced to resolve disputes by force, without any official authority or strong institutions set up to enforce the law.⁶⁹ Settlers knew they couldn't rely on law enforcement in areas that were beyond the reach of any formal government institutions, so they developed an alternative system in



A rally against gun violence in Annapolis, Maryland. [\(Source\)](#)

which people protected themselves, their families, and their property by force when necessary. When the institutions of formal government eventually emerged on the frontier, the culture of self-reliance had already been firmly established. Unlike most other nations, the government didn't impose its will on the people, confiscate all guns, and closely regulate social life. The culture of self-reliance, and the **culture of violence** that went with it, persisted over time.⁷⁰

Closely related to this "cultural" explanation of U.S. violence is another, even more controversial, potential answer: guns. About 70% of homicides in the United States are committed with a firearm, and the U.S. is the most heavily armed nation in the world, with more guns per person than any other developed country. Despite the passionate rhetoric on both sides of the issue, however, the truth is we don't have great evidence about the impact of guns on rates of violent crime. And

politicians, supported by gun rights organizations like the National Rifle Association (NRA), have made it hard to get that evidence. Because of legislation supported by the NRA, the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health, the two government agencies that fund most research on health, disease, and causes of death, are prohibited by law from funding studies or programs that can be interpreted to “advocate or promote gun control.”⁷¹ This prohibition has been applied broadly, effectively discouraging these agencies from providing funds for any research related to gun violence.

The NRA hasn’t stopped all research on gun violence or gun control. But the research on gun control policies that has been completed doesn’t lead to clear conclusions about whether these policies are effective in reducing all forms of crime. There is stronger evidence that the availability of guns is related to a specific kind of violent crime: homicide.⁷² In other words, guns don’t necessarily lead to more violence, but they do make violence more lethal when it occurs.

A third possible explanation is that America’s unique brand of inequality is the reason for its high level of murder. In an individualistic society that celebrates the achievements of the wealthy and promotes the ideologies of meritocracy (that success is based on hard work and talent) and capitalism, failing to achieve economic success can generate psychological strain that may lead to criminal activity or violence. Robert Merton’s strain theory, which we discussed earlier in the chapter, argues that it’s not just poverty that makes people more likely to commit crime; it’s a feeling that they are losing out while others achieve vast riches, that they’re falling behind while others live the good life.⁷³ Merton called this **relative deprivation**.

The theory of relative deprivation suggests that inequality, not poverty, may be the crucial dimension of a society that predicts how much crime and violence there will be. The available evidence provides some support for this view. States with higher murder rates tend to be those with higher levels of inequality, and nations with greater gaps between the rich and the poor have higher rates of violence.⁷⁴ The U.S. has one of the highest levels of inequality in the developed world. According to the theory of relative deprivation, this may be a central reason why this country has such high rates of violence.

The Great American Crime Decline

The reality of violence in the United States leads to a complex set of conclusions. On the one hand, the U.S. still has a level of lethal violence that is higher than almost all other nations in the developed world. On the other hand, violence in the United States has fallen sharply, cut in half from the early 1990s to the present. How can we learn from what has taken place over the past few decades and use it to reduce violence further? To come up with an answer, we must first grapple with an even more difficult question: Why has violence fallen?

Scholars have proposed a wide range of theories for the decline in violence, including all of the following:

- The economy improved in the 1990s, reducing unemployment and poverty and, therefore, crime.

- The intensely violent epidemic of crack cocaine that hit U.S. cities in the 1980s began to die down in the 1990s.
- Environmental regulations led to the removal of lead, a toxin that impairs children's cognitive development and affects behavior, from gasoline and indoor house paint. This improved children's behavior and impulse control, and reduced violent crime.
- The legalization of abortion meant that many children were never born. The parents who chose to have abortions may have been unable or unwilling to devote the necessary resources and attention to raise children; if they'd had children, their kids might have been more likely to become criminals.
- Police departments grew in the 1990s because of enhanced funding from the federal government, and more law enforcement reduced crime.
- Police departments adopted more effective tactics beginning in the 1990s, using advanced data on the location and timing of criminal activity and more aggressive responses to minor crimes.
- The rate of incarceration began to rise in the 1970s, as more and more Americans were imprisoned due to aggressive policing and prosecution as well as longer sentences. With a greater share of criminals off the streets, the crime rate fell.
- Rates of immigration to the United States have risen over time. Immigrants tend to commit less violence than other groups, so the rise in immigration may have led to the drop in crime.
- Medication for conditions like depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) became more accessible, reducing impulsive, destructive, and criminal behavior.
- Americans' consumption of alcohol has declined over time. A high proportion of all criminal activity is carried out under the influence of alcohol, so the drop in consumption could have led to less crime.
- Local community organizations mobilized to confront the problem of violence in the 1980s and 1990s, and their efforts helped to reduce crime.

Although all of these theories (and more) have been proposed as contributors to the drop in crime, not all of them have much evidence behind them. Some are purely speculative, with no evidence to back them up; others are supported by some evidence but remain extremely controversial; still others have more solid evidence behind them but have still generated intense debate. The best evaluations of available research conclude that the decline in violence wasn't driven by any single factor, but was the result of many different social forces and policy changes that came together to reduce violent crime.

Economist Steven Levitt argued that it was likely a combination of expanded incarceration, growth of police departments, the end of the crack epidemic, and the legalization of abortion that explained the drop in crime.⁷⁵ Criminologist Franklin Zimring, who has written extensively on the crime decline, argues that a range of social conditions (an improving economy, a decrease in the proportion of the population at the peak age for criminal behavior, the growth of the incarcerated

population, and the growth in police forces) converged in the 1990s and combined with new, more effective policing to bring about the crime decline.⁷⁶ A recent, comprehensive report looks at 13 different factors that have been proposed as explanations for the crime reduction, providing support for some common theories, such as the growth of police departments, and pointing to the importance of other factors that are more rarely mentioned, such as the decline in alcohol consumption.⁷⁷ Others, including one of the authors of this chapter, have argued that the expansion of local community organizations created to make neighborhoods safe and to provide supports for residents also played a central role in contributing to the crime drop.⁷⁸

Debates about the factors that led to the crime decline are controversial and remain unsettled. The most contentious debates revolve around two core institutions in the United States: law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

Review Sheet: Violence in the United States and beyond

Key Points

- Violence has fallen steadily over the last several centuries of human history.
- The rate of homicides and all violent crimes in the U.S. has been cut in half since the early 1990s.
- In 2018, there were 5 homicides per every 100,000 residents.
- The homicide rate in the U.S. is more than twice as high as in many nations in the developed world, including Canada, Japan, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and many others.
- Three possible explanations for the high rate of violence in the U.S. are our historical culture of violence, the large number of guns, and the high level of inequality.
- There is no single answer as to why violence fell in the United States, but several factors played at least some role, including the growth of police, improvements in policing tactics, the rise of incarceration, and the end of the crack epidemic.
- Other factors, like the decline in alcohol consumption and lead poisoning, may also have played a role in reducing violence but don't yet have sufficient evidence to come to a clear conclusion.

Key People

- James Alan Fox
- Steven Pinker
- Franklin Zimring
- Steven Levitt

Key Terms

- **Homicide rate** –Number of homicides per 100,000 residents.

- **Culture of violence** – The idea that the United States has a unique heritage in which settlers had to resort to violence to protect their property and themselves, creating a longstanding norm of violent behavior.
- **Relative deprivation** – A feeling of falling behind while other people do better and better. Merton argued that this feeling creates strain, leading to crime.

CRIME, PUNISHMENT AND THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE

- What are the costs of aggressive policing and mass incarceration?
- How do incarceration and policing affect violence?
- What should a new model of policing and criminal justice look like?

On May 25th, 2020, a teenage clerk in a Minneapolis grocery store suspected that a customer had used a counterfeit \$20 bill, and called the police.⁷⁹ The customer was George Floyd, a regular at the store whom the owner knew well. But the owner wasn't around that day, and officers were called to the scene. The officers who responded to the call found Mr. Floyd in a car around the corner. With his gun drawn, one officer ordered Floyd out of the car and handcuffed him. Floyd was cooperative, but when the officers attempted to push him into the police car, he struggled, explaining that he was claustrophobic. They eventually pushed him to the ground, with his face down.

With Floyd subdued on the ground, one of the officers put his knee between Floyd's head and neck and knelt down, pressing him into the ground. The officer remained in that position for almost eight minutes, while Floyd lay face-down and repeatedly told the officer he couldn't breathe. Floyd became unresponsive, and died.

The sickening video of George Floyd's murder led to massive protests against police brutality and racial injustice in hundreds of cities across the country. It has added new energy and new urgency to the movement to end the style of aggressive, often violent, policing that has become common in many cities, and to consider new approaches to confronting violent crime. Before we consider what comes next, however, it is worth considering how did we get here.

Mass incarceration

In the 1970s, the rate of incarceration in the United States wasn't much different than in many similar countries. At that time, about 200,000 Americans were locked up in state and federal prisons. But then the incarceration rate rose quickly. States passed increasingly severe sentencing laws, the federal government carried out a new War on Drugs, and prosecutors became more aggressive, putting more and more criminal offenders behind bars. Over time, the number of people in American prisons and jails exploded to more than 2.3 million.⁸⁰

The rise in imprisonment wasn't spread evenly across the American population; it was targeted toward young, non-White males, especially African Americans. Sociologist Bruce Western has written extensively on **mass incarceration**, or the expansion of imprisonment to a level that isn't matched elsewhere in the world or at any previous point in U.S. history. Western argues that for some segments of the population, such as young African American men with minimal education, prison has become a more common institution than college or the military. About 60% of Black, male, high school dropouts who were born near the end of the 1960s will go to prison at some point in their lives, according to Western.

Did the expansion of the prison system contribute to the crime decline? The answer is complicated. Most rigorous research on the topic has concluded that the growth of incarceration had some impact on crime, although many researchers argue that the impact is small. But even those who argue that mass incarceration has reduced crime acknowledge that as the scale of incarceration grew, its impact on crime became smaller and smaller. A recent committee of scholars reviewed the best available evidence and concluded that the increase in incarceration in the 1970s and 1980s likely reduced violent crime, but as the incarceration rate continued to grow higher, it's less clear that there was any impact after the 1990s.⁸¹

While research on the impact of incarceration on crime is mixed and uncertain, the costs of our nation's expansive prison system are very clear. Being incarcerated makes it exceedingly difficult for individuals to return to society, form healthy relationships, support a family, maintain a stable job, and take part in civic life. The impact of imprisonment extends to the next generation, as a growing share of children now experience a period of life in which a parent is incarcerated.⁸²

Beyond these tangible impacts of incarceration, an expanding group of activists, researchers, and politicians argue that the prison system conflicts with the core American value of liberty, that it systematically targets racial and ethnic minorities, and that it costs taxpayers too much to sustain. Perhaps the most influential voice against mass incarceration is Michelle Alexander, a civil rights lawyer and legal scholar who argues that mass incarceration represents the latest in a series of institutions and policies designed to reinforce a racialized caste system in the United States.⁸³ Her argument aligns with the writings of Ta-Nehisi Coates, who points toward the systems of law enforcement and criminal justice as part of a broader structure built on the ideology of white supremacy.⁸⁴ The prison, according to both writers, is something more than a tool used to improve public safety. It is part of a system designed to maintain racial inequality.

Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow*, reached a wider audience than any previous scholarship on incarceration, and it resonated with readers in a way that is extremely rare for an academic book. After years in which these arguments had little impact, laws designed to scale back the criminal justice system have started to be implemented, and the rate of incarceration has begun to decline very slowly.

The past, present, and future of policing in the United States

Debates about policing often devote little attention to an important question: Do police actually reduce crime and violence? After a long period in which most criminologists believed that police were powerless to control crime, recent evidence has led to a new conclusion.

During the 1990s, federal funding enabled cities to hire more than 60,000 new officers, increasing the number of police officers per each American (the per capita rate) by around 14%.⁸⁵ The funds were distributed at different times, which allowed researchers to look at *when* new officers were hired and whether there was any noticeable impact on crime. They found strong evidence suggesting that the influx of new officers on the street led to a clear decline in violence. In fact, experimental studies of policing tactics have shown that when police officers focus their attention and resources on "hot spots" of criminal activity, they're very successful in reducing the overall amount of crime and violence.⁸⁶

The accumulation of evidence has led to the conclusion that more police on the street typically translates into less crime. Economist Steven Levitt looked at how much crime falls with each additional officer and estimated that the growth of police forces throughout the 1990s can account for between 10% and 20% of the crime decline during that decade.⁸⁷

While this evidence is important, it ignores the staggering costs of policing. Now that we have cellphones with video cameras, those costs have become much more visible to a larger segment of the public. Millions of Americans watched the video of Eric Garner choked to death in Staten Island and the video of 12-year-old Tamir Rice shot and killed in a park in Cleveland. Millions more saw a former police officer and his son track down and kill Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, and then watched the officer in Minneapolis kill George Floyd. These are the incidents caught on video, but there are thousands of less extreme routine interactions that we don't see. And this has been going on for a long time.

Historian Kahlil Gibran Muhammad documents how the institution of law enforcement has suppressed and inflicted violence on Black people from its origins, when the first "police" forces in the American South were formed as slave patrols used to find runaway slaves and return them to their owners. Muhammad shows how Black Americans' attempts to achieve freedom, to obtain fair employment, to resist injustice, and to function in society without discrimination have repeatedly been defined as criminal from the time of slavery to the present. Research in cities like New York has provided conclusive evidence that the most aggressive forms of policing have targeted non-White communities, particularly African Americans.⁸⁸ Other research shows that surges of aggressive policing have a negative effect on educational outcomes for African Americans, and the shock and

stress caused by [police shootings](#) lead to tangible, negative educational outcomes for children throughout a community.⁸⁹

Even if most interactions between police officers and residents are polite and respectful, videos showing officers choking, abusing, or killing citizens have shed light on a pattern that is unacceptable to most Americans. And the video of George Floyd's murder was the last straw. After protests throughout the country, change is happening. In Minneapolis, the city government voted to "dismantle" its police department and rethink the role of police in the city. Elsewhere, cities like Los Angeles have moved to "**defund the police**" by shifting resources from police budgets to other agencies that provide services, like jobs programs or mental health treatment, to residents of the city. **Black Lives Matter**, a movement to end police violence against Black Americans and to work against all forms of racial injustice, has emerged as one of the largest and most successful social movements of our time.



Front pages from New York City tabloids after the officer who killed Eric Garner during an arrest was acquitted. ([Source](#))

The next model for how to confront violence and crime in the U.S. is unsettled. Protests against police violence and mass incarceration reached a peak in the summer of 2020, and reforms of policing and criminal justice policy began to be implemented across the country. At the same time, President Donald Trump has continued to voice unequivocal support for law enforcement, and is campaigning for reelection on a platform of "law and order." We live in a moment of change, and it is a fascinating time to study and take part in debates about policing and criminal justice policy, to consider the theories we've covered in this chapter, and to think hard about what the next model to control violence should look like.

Review Sheet: Crime, punishment, and the prevention of violence

Key Points

- The U.S. imprisonment rate is higher than any other country in the world. More than 2 million Americans are in prison or jail, and almost 5 million are on probation or parole.
- About 60% of African American men born near the end of the 1960s will go to prison at some point in their lives.
- Research shows that more police on the street does tend to reduce violence, but also has substantial costs.
- Slave patrols were the first institutions of law enforcement in the American south, providing an example of how Black Americans' attempts to achieve freedom and full citizenship have often been labeled "criminal."

Key People

- George Floyd
- Bruce Western
- Michelle Alexander
- Ta-Nehisi Coates
- Kahlil Gibran Muhammad

Key Terms

- **Mass incarceration** – Expansion of imprisonment to a level not matched elsewhere in the world or at any previous point in U.S. history.
- **The New Jim Crow** – A book written by Michelle Alexander arguing that mass incarceration represents the latest in a series of institutions and policies designed to reinforce a racialized caste system in the United States.
- **Defund the police** – The slogan of a movement to shift resources from police budgets to other agencies that provide services, like jobs programs or mental health treatment, to residents of a city.
- **Black Lives Matter** – Movement devoted to, among other things, reducing police violence against African Americans.

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Health & Illness



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Health & Illness

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INTRODUCTION

Defining the Boundaries of health & illness

Early sociological studies of health

Social control and definitions of health & illness

HEALTH CARE IN THE U.S.

Health care as a system

Current debates about health care

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH & HEALTH INEQUITIES

Perspectives for studying health

THE FUTURE OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH & ILLNESS

INTRODUCTION

- Why should sociologists care about health?
- How does the study of health differ for sociologists and epidemiologists?

Nandi Edmonds was 31 when she became pregnant for the first time. She and her husband, Miles, were so excited about welcoming their twins into the world. On July 11, 2010, at 30 weeks into her pregnancy, she and Miles were at a childbirth class when Nandi developed a severe headache and started vomiting. They went home so she could rest; she woke in the middle of the night in a pool of blood and then passed out. Miles called 911 and Nandi and their twins were rushed to the emergency room with placental abruption (when the placenta separates from the uterus too early in the pregnancy) and pre-eclampsia (a set of symptoms that includes high blood pressure, headache, dizziness, and protein in the urine). Their son was stillborn; their daughter died three days later.

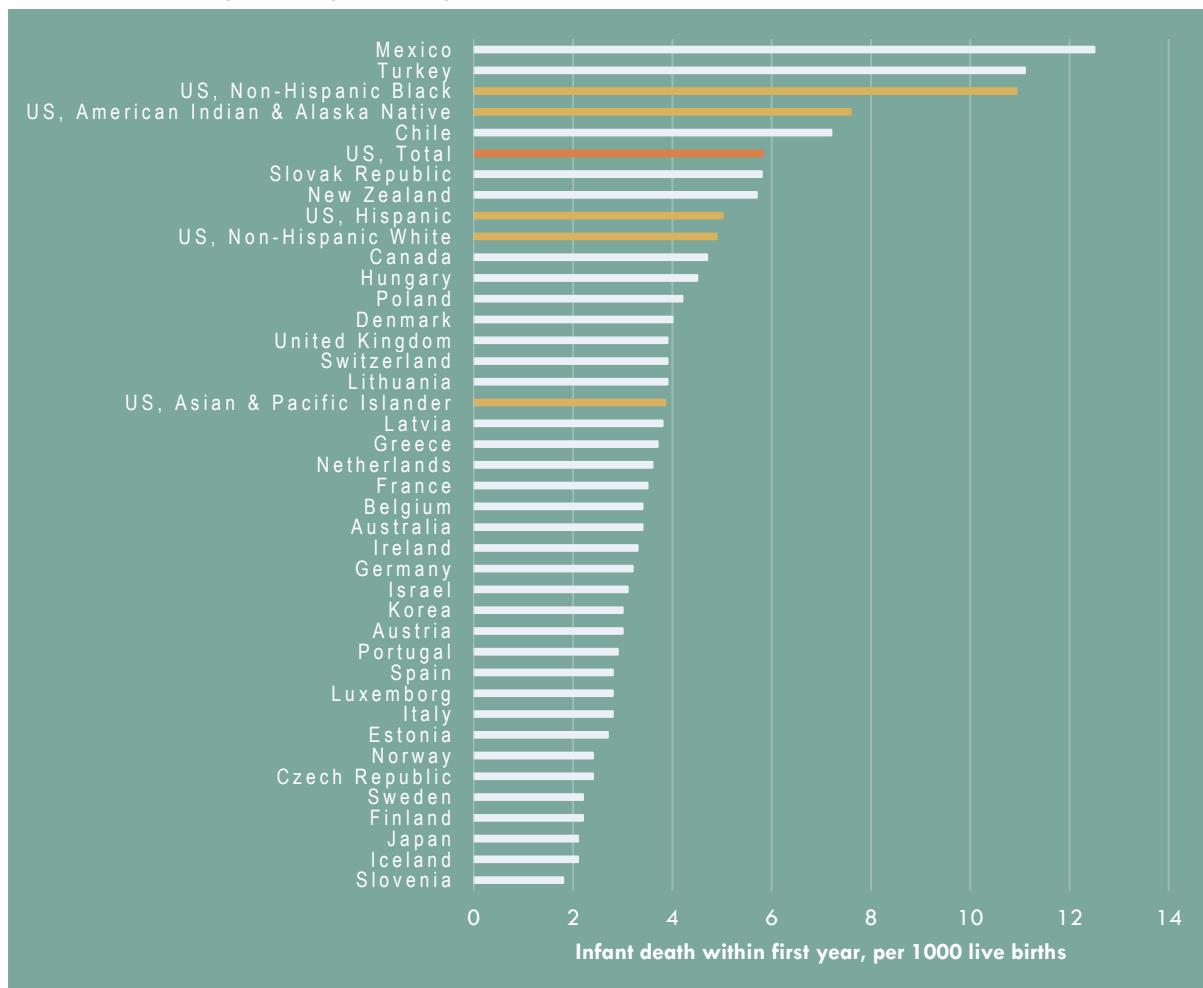
Nandi was discharged from the intensive care unit (ICU) only four days after this traumatic birth experience, even though she had nearly died herself during the birth. At home, her health didn't improve, but her doctor told her to take her prescribed medication and rest. When she told her long-time friend, an internal medicine resident, about her symptoms, he immediately picked her up and took her to the hospital. Nandi had extremely high blood pressure and likely would have suffered a stroke had she followed her doctor's orders and remained at home.

Discussions of health are generally the purview of medicine or **public health**, which focuses on describing and preventing disease and illness. We think of doctors and **epidemiologists** (who study the frequency, patterns, and causes of health and illness) as the health experts. Indeed, on the surface, Nandi's experience appears to be medical in nature. However, in this chapter, we will show how sociology provides unique and critically important information about health and illness. While both epidemiology and sociology can describe who is more likely to become ill or die, epidemiology focuses on biomedical mechanisms and individual health behaviors; sociology, on the other hand, can clarify the aspects of society that lead to social patterns in **morbidity** (having a disease) and **mortality** (death).

Nandi and Miles are Black Americans, which has social meaning that is reflected in health. For example, infants born to Black women are substantially more likely to die before their first birthday than infants born to White women. Figure 1 shows the **infant mortality rate** (a measure of deaths during a child's first year) for the United States and the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a group of countries committed to global trade and economic development. We also included the infant mortality rate for different racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. Epidemiologists may first note that the rate for the total U.S. is by far the highest among the wealthy OECD countries; even the rate for U.S. infants born to White women is high. Second, they may note that the mortality rate for infants born to Black women is more than twice the rate for infants born to White women. As sociologists, we will discuss these **health inequities** – differences in health

that are due to unequal social patterns – and focus on the social forces that are likely responsible for them.

Figure 1: Infant Mortality Rate by Country, 2014



(Source: [OECD](#) and National Center for Health Statistics)

Sociology can also help us understand how society shapes the definition and experience of **illness** (the subjective experience of a disease, condition, or set of symptoms). In recent years, growing media attention has focused on **maternal morbidity**, or illnesses and disabilities related to pregnancy or childbirth, and, in particular, the treatment of Black women during pregnancy, labor, and the postpartum period. These stories are supported by data showing that physicians construct their views of who requires medical attention (in other words, who is sick) around race and gender.¹

Viewed through a medical lens, we might focus on the **pre-existing conditions** or health behaviors of pregnant woman during the perinatal period (the time immediately before and after birth) to explain health inequities. Black women do, in fact, have higher rates of high blood pressure and diabetes compared to White women. However, neither these pre-existing conditions, nor any health behaviors such as alcohol use or smoking, fully explain the different rates of infant mortality.²

Viewed through a public health lens, we might focus on racial inequities in access to high-quality prenatal care or adequate health insurance. However, research indicates that these conventional public health concerns also don't explain racial inequities in infant mortality.



*Left to right: Tressie McMillian Cottom, PhD; her baby girl died during her preterm labor delivery ([Source](#)).
Serena Williams; she nearly died after returning home after delivering her baby girl ([Source](#)).*

Using a sociological lens, we widen the scope of our questions to understand how Nandi's and Miles's **life course** social circumstances – the interconnected sequence and timing of socially-defined life events that unfold over a person's through their own actions and behaviors – and the circumstances of their family and friends and even of their broader racial group, impacted their chances of experiencing the death of their babies.

Public health and medicine can benefit from sociological insights into the social forces that drive patterns in **health** – a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease. Sociologists also benefit from studying health. Health is essential for quality of life and a sensitive indicator of the social forces in a society. In a statement to the National Commission to Prevent Infant Mortality, pediatrician Marsden Wagner outlined the interconnected nature of social forces and the health of our most vulnerable citizens, our children:

Infant mortality is not a health problem. Infant mortality is a social problem with health consequences. It is analogous to traffic accident mortality in children: the first priority for improving traffic accident mortality in children is not to build more and better medical facilities, but rather to change traffic laws and better educate drivers and children. In other words, the solution is not primarily medical but environmental, social and educational. The same is true for infant mortality: the first priority is not more obstetricians or pediatricians or hospitals, nor even more prenatal clinics or well-baby clinics, but rather to provide more social, financial and educational support to families with pregnant women and infants.³

In this chapter, we share layers of Nandi's experiences that are mirrored in data to show that her pregnancy experiences can be linked to how American society is structured. We focus on specific examples from **maternal and child health**, the field of public health focused specifically on the health of mothers, infants, children, and adolescents; however, the concepts we discuss are relevant to any area of disease or illness throughout the life span.

We have three goals for this chapter. We hope to show you that health and illness are socially constructed concepts; the meanings of health and illness are created through social norms and interactions. We will also give you the tools to understand why this is the case. We illustrate the social nature of the medical profession and the health care system, which are constantly shifting. Indeed, the medical profession has only recently begun to recognize the role of society in health; in 2015, new sections on the social and behavioral sciences, including sociology, were added to the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). Finally, we show that health and health inequities are not just shaped by differences in access to health care and health behaviors, but are also determined by social forces embedded in where we live, learn, work, play, and pray. We hope to convey that sociology provides a critically important lens through which we can view health and illness.

Review Sheet: Introduction

Key Points

- While both public health and sociology can describe who is more likely to become ill or die, epidemiology focuses on biomedical mechanisms and health behaviors, while sociology examines the aspects of society responsible for social patterns in morbidity and mortality.
- Health is a sensitive indicator of social, economic, and political forces in a society.
- The infant mortality rate for the U.S. is one of the highest among wealthy countries.
- Infants born to Black women are substantially more likely to die before their first birthday than infants born to White women.

Key Terms

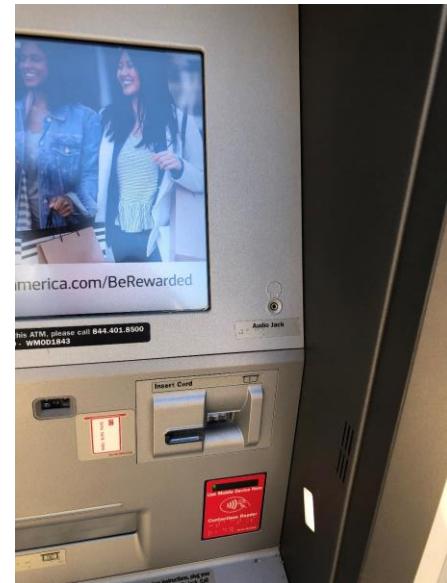
- **Epidemiology** – Study of the frequency, patterns, and determinants of health-related states and events.
- **Health** – State of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease.
- **Health inequities** – Differences in health that arise due to unfair and unequal social forces.
- **Illness** – The subjective experience of a disease, condition, or set of symptoms.
- **Infant mortality rate** – Number of deaths occurring before one year of age per 1,000 live births.
- **Life course** – Interconnected sequence and timing of socially-defined life events that unfold over a person's through their own actions and behaviors.

- **Maternal and child health** – Subset of public health focused on mothers, infants, children, and adolescents.
- **Maternal morbidity** – Illness or disability directly related to pregnancy or childbirth.
- **Morbidity** – A disease condition.
- **Mortality** – Death.
- **Pre-existing condition** – Disease or condition that exists prior to a particular event, such as pregnancy, or before a person enrolled in a health insurance plan.
- **Public health** – Field of study focused on the description and prevention of disease and illness.

DEFINING THE BOUNDARIES OF HEALTH & ILLNESS

- How is disease different from illness?
- What does it mean to say that illness is socially constructed?

Health and illness are not objective states; their definitions and experiences are socially constructed. While a person may be diagnosed with a physical or mental **disease** (a disorder) or **impairment** (a loss of function), social and cultural values and norms give meaning to the illness experience. Diseases and other medical conditions are not inherently illnesses; rather, illnesses are the *subjective experiences* of the person with the disease, condition, or impairment. For example, a person may receive a diagnosis of high blood pressure (also called hypertension), but this diagnosis doesn't reveal anything about their experience with hypertension. Perhaps they haven't had any major changes in their daily life with this diagnosis and may not consider themselves ill at all. In fact, many people who take medication and are able to control their hypertension don't consider themselves to actively have high blood pressure.⁴ Similarly, mental and physical impairments are not inherently **disabilities**, or limitations created when an impairment isn't accommodated in the physical and social environment. They *become* disabilities when a society doesn't provide such accommodations, and therefore prevents people with impairments from fully engaging in everyday life. For example, people with visual impairments may not have difficulty carrying out their everyday tasks as long as accommodations



ATM with a headphone port for people with visual impairments. (Source: Authors)

such as audio tracks are available. In this section, we discuss how health is socially constructed by examining spatial patterns in health and how the definitions and experiences of illness function as forms of social control.

Early sociological studies of health

Nandi grew up in the 1980s and 1990s on First Street in Washington, D.C., in a neighborhood noted for two infamous sites: the Sursum Corda low-income housing development and Hanover Place, a street that functioned as an open-air drug market. At the time, Washington, D.C. was in the middle of a major crack cocaine and violent crime epidemic, much of it centered in Nandi's neighborhood. Drug use and violent crime (which are also socially constructed, as discussed in the Deviance and Crime chapter) are social and public health issues that are not evenly distributed across all neighborhoods, cities, states, or even countries.

In fact, early studies in **demography** (the study of patterns in human populations, such as births, deaths, aging, and migration) and sociology demonstrated that many health concerns have a spatial pattern. **Émile Durkheim**, studied suicide rates in France and several other European countries and showed that different countries, and even different areas within France, exhibited vastly different suicide rates.⁵ He argued against the dominant understanding that suicide was caused by mental illness or personal shortcomings. Instead, he suggested that social factors outside the individual affect suicide rates.



"The Ward." Philadelphia mural honoring W.E.B. Du Bois; painted by Willis Humphrey in 2008. ([Source](#))

Similarly, in 1899, **W.E.B. Du Bois** (pronounced doo-BOYSS) published *The Philadelphia Negro*, a study of Black Americans in Philadelphia that included a detailed discussion of health.⁶ In 1906, he expanded this study in *The Health and Physique of the Negro American*.⁷ Du Bois argued that the poor health of Black Americans

compared to White Americans wasn't due to any individual biological limitations among African Americans but rather to social conditions. He supported his argument by showing that mortality rates for Black Philadelphians varied widely by area, explaining that the high mortality rates occurred specifically in neighborhoods with poor housing and substantial crowding.

We continue to see that our health depends on where we live and work, and sociology can help us understand why. As discussed in the Urban Sociology chapter, the U.S. is **racially and economically segregated**, meaning families of different racial or ethnic groups and different **socioeconomic status (SES)** – a measure of social and economic standing – live in different neighborhoods of unequal quality.⁸ Living in racially-segregated cities is harmful for the health of Black infants, but generally not

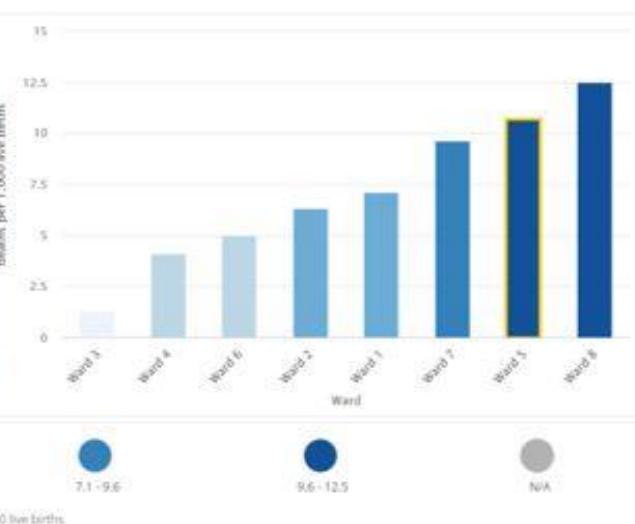
for White infants, even after accounting for the poverty level of their neighborhoods.⁹ This suggests that segregation is about more than just the unequal distribution of poverty; it leads to the unequal distribution of other resources that are important for health.¹⁰

Let's return to Nandi's neighborhood on First Street, in Ward 5. When her mother passed away in 2008 at the age of 58, Nandi inherited her childhood home; she and Miles lived there during her pregnancy and childbirth. While her neighborhood has experienced some influx of White residents and the demolition of several racially-segregated low-income housing developments, it continues to be highly racially segregated. Nandi's neighborhood also has some of the highest rates of infant mortality in Washington, D.C. (Figures 2a and 2b).

Figure 2a: Infant Mortality Rates in Washington, D.C., by Ward, Highlighting Ward 5, 2014



Figure 2b: Infant Mortality Rates by Ward in Washington, D.C., Highlighting Ward 5, 2014

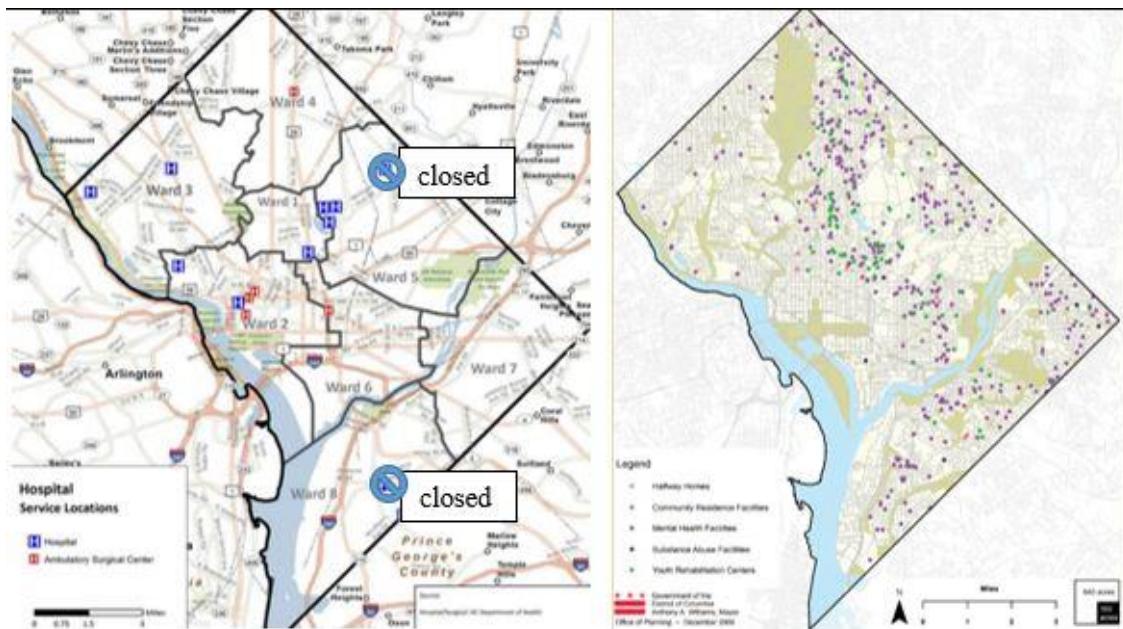


(Source: [DC Health Matters](#))

In Ward 5, 65% of residents are Black. We also see spatial patterns in the availability of resources. For example, after several of the few remaining hospital maternity wards in Wards 5 and 8 closed in 2018, many women who live there must now travel long distances for their prenatal care and delivery (Figure 3a). On the other hand, group homes (Figure 3b) and other social services such as methadone clinics (which treat those addicted to opiates) are over-represented in these wards. All of these social and health services are important resources, and ideally they would all be more equally distributed across the city.

Figure 3a: Distribution of Washington, D.C., Hospitals and Ambulatory Surgical Centers as of 2014, along with Two Maternity Wards Closed in 2018

Figure 3b: Distribution of Group Residences in Washington D.C., 2014



Social control and definitions of health & illness

Think about the last time you or one of your close friends or family members were very sick. Did you visit a doctor? Was there a clear diagnosis? A clear treatment plan? Did your friends and family understand your illness? Were you embarrassed to share your diagnosis? Did you wonder if your illness was your fault? Sociologists argue that illness doesn't reside in the biological disease, condition, or impairment itself. Rather, social and cultural norms shape their definitions, meanings, and experiences. This perspective is central to the field of **medical sociology**, which focuses on how **social control** – a society's efforts to influence behavior and maintain social order – operates through the medical profession, both directly and indirectly.

When you think of schizophrenia, what comes to mind? Currently, the American Psychiatric Association defines schizophrenia in biological terms as a chronic brain disorder. However, there is also a subjective component, as it is characterized by an inability to distinguish between real and unreal experiences. This makes the label of schizophrenia vulnerable to being influenced by social and cultural norms. After reviewing hundreds of patient charts at the infamous (and now closed) Ionia State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, in Michigan, Jonathan Metzl found that the definition of schizophrenia changed over the 20th century in ways that coincided with social changes in the U.S.¹¹ Before the 1960s, schizophrenia was associated with White housewives who weren't able to adequately fulfill their duties as wives and mothers. During the 1960s, as the Civil Rights Movement emerged, schizophrenia became associated with violence and Black men.

The social shift in how schizophrenia was diagnosed and described shows how the medical profession can label a set of symptoms as a disease – labels that reflect what is and isn't socially acceptable. **Eliot Freidson** argued that **labeling**, the process of assigning a disease or medical condition

to a set of symptoms, is a form of power exerted by the medical profession that can impact the illness experience.¹²

Indeed, people with **contested illnesses** that are disputed or questioned by medical experts, such as chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, or Gulf War syndrome, are often met with skepticism. Their illness experiences are dismissed as **psychosomatic**, caused by mental factors such as stress or anxiety.¹³ While each of these conditions represents a collection of recognizable symptoms such as muscle pain, headaches, or fatigue, they don't have a known underlying biological explanation.

Social control is also exerted through the medicalization of everyday events.¹⁴ **Irving Zola** argued that **medicalization** is the description of an aspect of cultural or social life in medical or biological terms.¹⁵

Medicalization erases the cultural or social forces involved in the situation,

reducing it to individual choices and behaviors or biological processes. From this perspective, health-

NURSES AND MIDWIVES
A vital resource for health in the WHO European Region

Nurses and midwives play key roles in all aspects of health care and in society's efforts to tackle public health challenges.

- Provide safe, high-quality, cost-effective care and services
- Empower people to manage their own health
- Ensure equal access and continuity of care
- Manage chronic conditions and long-term care
- Promote health throughout all stages of life

Growing and changing health needs raise challenges for nurses and midwives.

- Ageing populations
- Economic pressure
- Mobile workforce
- Migration
- Workforce shortages
- Health inequalities

Strategies for strengthening nursing and midwifery towards Health 2020 goals

- Scale up and transform education
- Plan workforce and optimize skill mix
- Create positive work environments
- Promote evidence-based practice and innovation

Nurses and midwives improve people's health and well-being and reduce health inequalities.

<http://www.euro.who.int/nursingmidwifery>

 World Health Organization
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EUROPE

(Source)

related problems can be solved not by changing society, but by changing the individual's behaviors or discovering a cure.

Pregnancy and childbirth aren't illnesses or disabilities, but ordinary life experiences. However, the medical model dominates discussions of them in the U.S. In the medical model, the obstetrician – not the pregnant woman – is the expert about the woman's body. Childbirth is no longer a natural event but a medical circumstance requiring a highly-trained physician. Of course, there are circumstances that do require medical intervention, such as Nandi's situation. However, pregnancy and childbirth are natural events that most often don't require medical intervention. In countries such as the U.S., "obstetrician involvement and medical interventions have become routine in normal childbirth, *without evidence of effectiveness*" (emphasis added).¹⁶ On the other hand, in many European countries, the midwife-led model of pregnancy and childbirth is often just as common as the medical model. For example, half of all babies in Great Britain are delivered by midwives. In the midwife-led model, midwives provide individualized prenatal and postnatal care and support for women in labor. Research shows that having a midwife present results in positive birth experiences.¹⁷

Social control can also be exerted by dictating how we should behave when we are sick. American cultural norms dictate that we should work hard and be financially responsible for our families without relying on public assistance. Those who are ill or disabled, however, may not be able to fulfill these social obligations. For example, a person who is undergoing chemotherapy for cancer may not be able to continue working or fully caring for their family. They may be excused from their usual social obligations if they meet certain criteria and fulfill new social obligations, as outlined by the **sick role** – a set of rights and responsibilities granted to some ill people – described by **Talcott Parsons**.¹⁸

In order to be considered sick or disabled in a **socially legitimate** way that conforms to social norms and values, the illness cannot be the person's own fault. Some illnesses are considered socially legitimate while others aren't. In the U.S., illnesses and disabilities that are perceived to stem from a person's poor lifestyle choices are often **delegitimized** and **stigmatized**. For example, cigarette smoking is known to cause lung cancer, and though smoking is both physically and psychologically addictive, in the U.S. it is often considered to be a moral weakness and a personal choice.¹⁹ The health consequences are then considered the smoker's fault and those with lung cancer, but not, say, leukemia – which is considered outside of an individual's control – are often stigmatized.²⁰

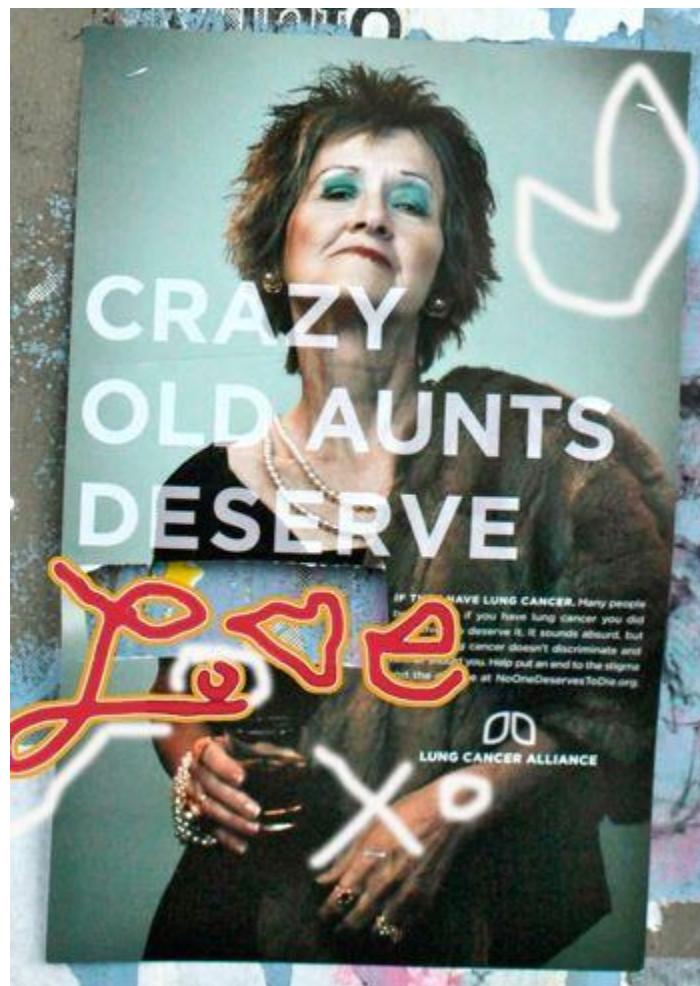
Similarly, a common form of cervical cancer is caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV), a **sexually transmitted infection** (STI). In the U.S., the sexual behavior of women is highly stigmatized and under social control.²¹ American women are socialized to avoid appearing highly sexual, and terms like "slut" are used to punish those who break this rule. Health problems linked to sexual behaviors are delegitimized and, as the public learned of the connection between earlier sexual behavior and cervical cancer, women with cervical cancer have been stigmatized and may not receive the sympathy and understanding offered to women with other types of cancer.²²

Susan Sontag argued that illness is often explicitly seen as a reflection of personal shortcomings or moral weaknesses.²³ While both lung cancer and cervical cancer may be delegitimized and stigmatized because they are seen as the person's fault, Sontag explains that these diseases may also be viewed as the result of a personal shortcoming such as low self-control. From this perspective, it's not just that a person *could* have avoided the disease; they *should* have avoided it, and it's a moral failure on their part that they didn't.

If a person has a socially legitimate illness (meaning it isn't believed to be their own fault), they must take on two responsibilities before they can adopt the sick role and be excused from their social responsibilities. First, they must seek expert advice on how to either overcome their illness (if it can be cured) or reduce the impact it has on their social responsibilities (if it's a chronic condition that can't be cured). Second, they must follow the expert advice and try to overcome their disease or condition.

Nandi's story demonstrates that the sick role doesn't apply equally to all social groups. After the death of her babies and her own near death, she spent four days in the ICU and then was discharged from the hospital. Soon after she returned home, she experienced dizziness, nausea, vomiting, and severe headaches, and she was seeing spots. Her doctor told her to continue taking her medication and rest. When her friend who worked at the hospital took Nandi to the ER, her blood pressure was extremely high. If her friend had not brought her in for immediate treatment, she would have likely suffered a stroke at home. Nandi fulfilled the responsibilities of a sick person: she sought expert medical advice from her original doctor and followed it by taking her medication and staying in bed to rest. However, her story highlights the complexity around who is allowed to fully adopt the sick role; her doctor failed to recognize her as having a serious medical condition, and the expert advice she received didn't help her get better.

Nandi isn't alone. Currently, Black women are more than twice as likely to have severe pregnancy-related complications and nearly four times as likely to die due to these complications than



Edited poster from a 2012 anti-stigma campaign by the Lung Cancer Alliance. Original text: "Crazy old aunts deserve to die if they have lung cancer. Many people believe that if you have lung cancer you did something to deserve it...Lung cancer doesn't discriminate and neither should you..."

White women.²⁴ These inequities persist even after we take into account health insurance coverage and health problems that existed before the pregnancy.

Figure 4: Inaccurate Information on the Death Certificate for Infant Son of Nandi and Miles

Government of the District of Columbia Department of Health, Vital Records Division Report of Fetal Death					
File Date					
FETUS	1. NAME OF FETUS (Indicate sex/gender of the fetus) Baby Boy (Twin B)	2. TIME OF DELIVERY (24hr) 1:09 AM	3. SEX (M/F/M): Male	4. DATE OF DELIVERY (Mo/Day/Yr) July 12, 2010	5. STATE FILE NUMBER: 108-
PLACE OF DELIVERY	5a. CITY, TOWN, OR LOCATION OF DELIVERY Washington, DC	5b. ZIP CODE OF DELIVERY 20010	5c. PLACE WHERE DELIVERY OCCURRED (Check one) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hospital <input type="checkbox"/> Freestanding birthing center <input type="checkbox"/> Home Delivery: Planned to deliver at home? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Child/Birth's office <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify)	5d. MOTHER'S MEDICAL RECORD NUMBER:	5e. FACILITY NAME (if not institution, give street and number) Washington Hospital Center
ATTENDANT AND REGISTRATION INFORMATION	6. ATTENDANT'S NAME, TITLE, AND NPI NAME: _____ NPI: _____ TITLE: <input type="checkbox"/> GND <input type="checkbox"/> DO <input type="checkbox"/> CRNHCN <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER MIDWIFE <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (Specify)	7. NAME AND TITLE OF PERSON COMPLETING REPORT Name: _____ Title: Health Information Specialist	12. DATE REPORT COMPLETED 07 / 20 2010	13. DATE RECEIVED 07	
14. MOTHER TRANSFERRED FOR MATERNAL MEDICAL OR FETAL INDICATIONS FOR DELIVERY? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No					
15. ENTER NAME OF FACILITY MOTHER TRANSFERRED FROM: MOTHER'S CURRENT LEGAL NAME (First, Middle, Last, Suffix): _____					
15a. MOTHER MARRIED? (At delivery, conception, or anytime between) <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No 1979					
15b. MOTHER'S NAME PRIOR TO FIRST MARRIAGE (First, Middle, Last, Suffix): _____					
15c. BIRTHPLACE (State, Territory, or Foreign Country) Washington, DC					
15d. INSIDE CITY LIMITS? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No					
16. MOTHER'S EDUCATION (Check the box that best describes the highest degree or level of school completed at the time of delivery) <input type="checkbox"/> 8th grade or less <input type="checkbox"/> 9th - 12th grade, no diploma <input type="checkbox"/> High school graduate or GED completed <input type="checkbox"/> Some college credit but no degree <input type="checkbox"/> Associate degree (e.g., AA, AS) <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, AB, BS) Other degrees (e.g., MA, MS, MEng, MEd, PhD) or Professional (e.g., CPA, LLM, JD) <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown					
17. MOTHER OF SPANISH/REPUBLICAN? (Check the box that best describes whether the mother is Spanish/República Latina. Check the "No" box if mother is not Spanish/República Latina) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No, not Spanish/República Latina <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Puerto Rican <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Cuban <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, other Spanish/República Latina (Specify) <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown					
18. MOTHER'S RACE (Check one or more boxes to indicate what the mother considers herself to be) <input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Black or African American <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Alaska Native (Name of enrolled or principal tribe) <input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese <input type="checkbox"/> Filipino <input type="checkbox"/> Japanese <input type="checkbox"/> Korean <input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese <input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian (Specify) <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian <input type="checkbox"/> Samoan <input type="checkbox"/> Other Pacific Islander (Specify) <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify)					
19. FATHER'S CURRENT LEGAL NAME (First, Middle, Last, Suffix): _____					
19a. DATE OF BIRTH (Mo/Day/Yr) 1976					
19b. BIRTHPLACE (State, Territory, or Foreign Country) Pennsylvania					
20. DATE OF FIRST PREGNATAL CARE VISIT 02 / 2010 <input type="checkbox"/> No Prenatal Care					
20a. DATE OF LAST PREGNATAL CARE VISIT 07 / 08 / 2010					
21. TOTAL NUMBER OF PREGNATAL VISITS FOR THIS PREGNANCY 6 (If none, enter "0")					
22. MOTHER'S HEIGHT PREPREGNANCY 5' 5" (inches)					
22a. MOTHER'S WEIGHT AT DELIVERY 169 (pounds)					
22b. DID MOTHER GET WIC FOOD FOR HERSELF DURING THIS PREGNANCY? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No					
23. NUMBER OF PREVIOUS LIVE BIRTHS					
23a. NUMBER OF OTHER PREGNANCY OUTCOMES (spontaneous or induced losses or ectopic pregnancies)					
23b. Now Living Now Dead Other Outcomes Number _____ Number _____ Number (Do not include this field) _____					
23c. Now Living Now Dead Other Outcomes <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> None					
24. DATE OF LAST LIVE BIRTH MM / YYYY					
24a. DATE OF LAST OTHER PREGNANCY OUTCOME MM / YYYY					
24b. DATE LAST NORMAL PERIODIC EXAM 12/7/2009					
24c. PLURALITY (Single, Twin, Triple, etc.) Twin "B" (Specify)					
25. RISK FACTORS IN THIS PREGNANCY (Check all that apply)					
25a. Diabetes <input type="checkbox"/> Pregnancy (Diagnosis prior to this pregnancy) <input type="checkbox"/> Gestational (Diagnosis in this pregnancy) Hypertension <input type="checkbox"/> Pregnancy (Ovarian) <input type="checkbox"/> Gestational (PMT, preeclampsia) <input type="checkbox"/> Eclampsia <input type="checkbox"/> Previous preterm birth <input type="checkbox"/> Other previous poor pregnancy outcome (Includes perinatal death, small-for-gestational age/birthweight growth restricted birth)					
25b. INFECTIONS PRESENT AND/OR TREATED DURING THIS PREGNANCY (Check all that apply) <input type="checkbox"/> Gonococci <input type="checkbox"/> Syphilis <input type="checkbox"/> Chlamydia <input type="checkbox"/> Uterine <input type="checkbox"/> Group B Streptococcus <input type="checkbox"/> Cytomegalovirus <input type="checkbox"/> Parvovirus					

(Source: Provided to authors by Nandi)

Political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry explains that society often burdens Black women with crude stereotypes that obscure their true selves, making it difficult to recognize and treat them as

individuals.²⁵ Writing about the death of her baby, Tressie McMillan Cottom said, "I was pregnant and in crisis. All the doctors and nurses saw was an incompetent Black woman".²⁶ When Nandi received the death certificates for her twins (Figure 4), she was listed as unmarried, having less than an 8th-grade education, and having attended only six of the standard 12 prenatal medical visits – none of which was true. Nandi was married, completing her doctoral degree at a highly prestigious university, and had attended all of her prenatal care visits. The level of inaccuracy of her certificate reflects studies showing that pregnant Black women are stereotyped as unmarried, uneducated, and poor.²⁷

To have a socially legitimate illness, medical experts must recognize the illness. While Black women – and others facing pregnancy-related complications – may require medical technologies, the medicalization of pregnancy has placed the expertise about women's bodies and experiences into the hands of highly-specialized medical doctors. If those doctors don't recognize symptoms as a condition in need of medical attention – either because of racial stereotypes or because a doctor thinks the symptoms are psychosomatic – women may be unable to get the medical help they need.

In this section, we discussed the ways in which illnesses and the illness experience are socially constructed. By examining the spatial patterns of morbidity and mortality, we can understand that diseases are not conditions inherent in the individual but reflections of society. Through labeling diseases, medicalizing ordinary phenomena, and dictating the behaviors of a sick person through the sick role, the experience of illness is socially controlled to fit cultural norms and values. These forms of social control can operate differently in different social groups. By questioning their social construction, sociologists can contribute to public health and medicine, clarifying the underlying social forces that result in poor health.

Review sheet: Defining the boundaries of health & illness

Key Points

- Health and illness are not objective states, but are defined and experienced through social construction and reflect social control.
- Early sociological studies of health focused on the spatial distribution of certain conditions to demonstrate that morbidity and mortality are not inherent in the individual but reflect social forces.
- As the field of medical sociology developed in the mid-20th century, sociologists studied how the definition, meaning, and experiences of illness are socially constructed.
- If a person is ill, they may be exempt from social responsibilities and take on the sick role. This role requires that the person seek and follow advice from a medical expert, and that the illness isn't believed to be their own fault.
- Ordinary experiences can become medicalized if they are framed using medical language. The focus of treatment then become the individual person rather than society.

- Race, gender, and class intersect with all aspects of health and illness to yield different experiences.

Key People

- Eliot Freidson
- Émile Durkheim
- Irving Zola
- Susan Sontag
- Talcott Parsons
- W.E.B. Du Bois

Key Terms

- **Contested illness** – Illness that is disputed or questioned by medical experts.
- **Demography** – Study of features of human populations such as births, deaths, aging, and migration.
- **Disease** – Physical or mental disorder in the structure or function of the body.
- **Economic segregation** – Degree to which the poor live apart from wealthier groups.
- **Impairment** – Loss or diminishment of physical or mental function.
- **Labeling** – Assigning a disease or medical condition to an illness or set of symptoms.
- **Psychosomatic illness** – Illness that is considered the physical manifestation of a mental illness or stress.
- **Socially legitimate** – Consistent with the norms and values within a society.
- **Medical sociology** – Branch of sociology that deals with social and cultural features of health, illness, and medicine.
- **Medicalization** – Process by which ordinary experiences are defined in medical terms, or by which circumstances previously regulated by religion or the law come to be defined in medical terms.
- **Racial segregation** – Degree to which different racial and ethnic groups live apart.
- **Sick role** – Rights and responsibilities of a person who has a socially legitimate illness.
- **Social control** – Ways societies try to influence members' behavior to maintain social order.
- **Socioeconomic status** – Social and economic standing, often measured through education, income, occupation, and wealth.
- **Stigma** – Characteristic of an individual or group that is seen as inferior or undesirable.

HEALTH CARE IN THE U.S.

- What is a health care system?
- What are the health care debates in the U.S. about?

Throughout Nandi's pregnancy, she and Miles went to all of their prenatal care visits and created a plan for their delivery. Because Miles had good health insurance through his employer, these prenatal visits didn't cost them anything. They were relieved that the costs of labor and delivery were also covered by their insurance. You may not question the need for health insurance or that their health insurance came through Miles's workplace because this is standard in the U.S. However, it

wasn't always this way, and many other wealthy countries don't have the same approach to paying for health care.

The importance of insurance in the U.S. health care system is illustrated by Nandi's delivery experience. When Nandi and Miles arrived at the ER, with Nandi bleeding uncontrollably, Nandi was asked for her insurance card. Despite passage of the **Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act (EMTALA)**, which states that women in active labor cannot be denied care regardless of their ability to pay if they are at a hospital that takes federal insurance such as Medicaid, she wasn't admitted until she provided her card. In fact, many hospitals do not comply with this law.²⁸

The American health care system is embedded in the broader society and reflects the same underlying sociological themes. Health care systems are organized around

It's the Law

If you have a medical emergency or are in labor

You have the right to receive, within the capabilities of this hospital's staff and facilities:

- An appropriate medical screening examination;
- Necessary stabilizing treatment (including treatment for an unborn child); and
- If necessary, an appropriate transfer to another facility — even if you cannot pay, you do not have medical insurance or you are not entitled to Medicare or Medi-Cal.

This hospital [does/does not] participate in the Medi-Cal program.

This sign must remain posted at all times. Do not remove.

Example of ER sign required by EMTALA. ([Source](#))

social structures and political institutions.²⁹ They also incorporate our larger values and ideologies.

Disagreements about how we should deliver health care in the U.S. stem from differing ideologies about whether health care is a right or a commodity. Do we view all citizens as worthy of a healthy life? Or are only some deserving of this privilege? Does it depend on their ability to pay, or how they behave?

In May 2017, late-night talk show host Jimmy Kimmel discussed his infant son. His monologue sums up the idea that health care is a right:

We were brought up to believe that we live in the greatest country in the world, but until a few years ago, millions and millions of us had no access to healthcare at all.

Before 2014, if you were born with congenital heart disease like my son was, there was a good chance you'd never be able to get health insurance because you had a pre-existing condition. You were born with a pre-existing condition. And if your parents didn't have medical insurance, you might not live long enough to even get denied because of a pre-existing condition. If your baby is going to die and it doesn't have to, it shouldn't matter how much money you make. I think that's something that whether you're a Republican or a Democrat or something else, we all agree on that, right? I mean, we do.

Whatever your party, whatever you believe, whoever you support, we need to make sure that the people who are supposed to represent us, the people who are meeting about this right now in Washington, understand that very clearly. Let's stop with the nonsense. This isn't football. There are no teams. We are the team. It's the United States. Don't let their partisan squabbles divide us on something every decent person wants. We need to take care of each other. I saw a lot of families there and no parent should ever have to decide if they can afford to save their child's life. It just shouldn't happen. Not here.

In an interview on CNN, Republican congressman Mo Brooks from Alabama summed up the counterargument. Instead of seeing health care as a right, from this perspective only those who have led "good lives" and are sick through no fault of their own deserve affordable health care coverage:

My understanding is that [a proposed health care law] will allow insurance companies to require people who have higher health care costs to contribute more to the insurance pool. That helps offset all these costs, thereby reducing the cost to those people who lead good lives, they're healthy, they've done the things to keep their bodies healthy. And right now, those are the people – who've done things the right way – that are seeing their costs skyrocketing.

In fairness, a lot of these people with pre-existing conditions, they have those conditions through no fault of their own and I think our society, under those circumstances, needs to help.



Left: Jimmy Kimmel, host of "Jimmy Kimmel Live," with former President Barack Obama. ([Source](#));

Right: Republican Congressman Mo Brooks of Alabama with former Alabama Republican Senator Luther Strange. ([Source](#))

As we discuss health care systems and health care debates, keep these underlying opposing ideologies in mind. Who deserves to live a healthy life? Who deserves to receive high-quality health care when they need it? Should your ability to pay or your past behavior affect whether you can get care? How you answer these questions will affect the type of health care system you might support.

Health care as a system

Health care systems include the organizations that deliver care (e.g. health care providers, hospitals) and fund that care (such as governmental programs and private insurers). For over 100 years, the U.S. has tried to figure out the best way to deliver health care. Because it's expensive, many countries, including the United States, have created health insurance systems. Without health insurance, we would pay "out of pocket" for all health needs. Health care, and the method of paying for it, are so intertwined that to speak of health care, particularly in the U.S., is also to speak of paying for health care.

Globally, health care systems can be classified based on the roles of health care providers and the medical profession, the government, and the payer:³⁰

- *Out-of-pocket model:* The patient pays all health care costs personally; there is no health insurance. This model isn't used by wealthy countries.
- *Beveridge model:* The government pays all health care costs and funds it through taxes. Health care providers, including hospitals and doctors, can be employed by the government or have their own private practice. It is named after economist William Beveridge, who designed Great Britain's National Health Service.
- *Bismarck model:* Everyone is required to have health insurance, which is funded jointly by employers and employees and isn't intended to make a profit. While health insurance operates through employers, the government provides oversight of costs. Health care providers are

generally private. It is named after Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, who designed the German welfare state.

- *National Health Insurance model:* Combines the Beveridge and Bismarck models. The government provides insurance funded through taxes or premiums, but supplemental private insurance may be needed. Health care providers are generally private.
- *Semashko model:* All parts of the health care system are controlled by the government. This model was developed in the Soviet Union and is still used, in some form, by countries in eastern Europe.

Many countries combine features from different models. The U.S. operates with a patchwork of these models.³¹ We have two broad categories of health insurance: publicly-funded and privately-funded. The major types of public or governmental health care coverage include **Medicare**, which covers certain health care costs for Americans aged 65 and older, and **Medicaid**, which covers certain health care costs for low-income Americans. Other programs cover specific groups, such as the Indian Health Services (for eligible Native Americans) and the Veterans Administration (for eligible military veterans). People get private health care coverage for themselves and/or their families through their employers or by purchasing coverage directly from an insurance company.

Health care costs in the U.S. have reached \$3.5 trillion each year – nearly 18% of the total value of all goods and services produced in the U.S. We spend two to three times as much per person on health care as any other wealthy nation. Yet our health falls far behind other countries. In other words, while our health care is expensive, this higher cost doesn't lead to better health. This has resulted in many attempts to change our health care system, including health care delivery and particularly health insurance.

Current debates about health care

In a recent report, sociologists Jason Beckfield and colleagues stated:

Boundaries and construction of exclusion and inclusion regarding healthcare systems are key issues that are debated within and across countries. ... [T]he threat of illness is universal. Consequently, observing which individuals and groups are considered worthy of assistance...provides researchers with insight into the broader culture of a society and into what its members expect of their healthcare system (e.g., how it should provide services and to whom).³²

On March 23, 2010, the Patient Protection and **Affordable Care Act** (PPACA; commonly known as ACA or Obamacare) was signed into law. The goal was to make health care more affordable and accessible for more Americans, particularly those who couldn't easily cover the costs themselves. Before the ACA was passed, 18% of Americans under 65 years old didn't have insurance, only 50% of poor Americans were covered by Medicaid, and most people with pre-existing conditions (a condition

you had before you enrolled with a particular health plan) couldn't afford the high premiums charged by insurance companies.³³ The ACA required a number of changes:

- It established “health exchange” marketplaces where people could shop for health insurance.
- Insurers are required to cover ten essential services: ambulatory (outpatient) services, emergency services, hospitalization, maternity and newborn care, mental health and substance use services, prescription drugs, rehabilitative services and devices (such as speech-language therapy or physical therapy), laboratory services, preventive and wellness services and chronic disease management, and pediatric services, including oral and vision care.³⁴ There are higher premiums (the annual cost for an insurance plan) for greater coverage.
- Insurers are required to cover people regardless of their health status. In other words, relatively affordable health insurance was available to those with pre-existing conditions (which in the past might have made them ineligible for health insurance or limited what was covered).
- Income-based subsidies are provided for people who can’t afford the premiums.
- Medicaid was expanded to cover more people. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that requiring states to expand Medicaid was unconstitutional, so the expansion is voluntary for states. Thirty-one states expanded Medicaid to cover more of their residents.³⁵
- All Americans were required to have health insurance, similar to the requirement that drivers have car insurance. This element was removed by Congress in 2019, so the “individual mandate” in the ACA is no longer enforced.
- Employers with more than 50 employees are required to provide health insurance and to extend the coverage to employees’ families and their children until they are 26 years old.

However, the ACA did not achieve **universal coverage** (coverage for everyone) for several reasons. First, the Supreme Court ruling that states could choose not to participate in the Medicaid expansion means that roughly 4.5 million poor and near-poor people are still uninsured.³⁶ And undocumented immigrants aren’t allowed to purchase insurance on the marketplace or to receive subsidies to help pay for coverage, so roughly 40% of this group are estimated to be uninsured.³⁷

Just as with political disagreements about other American institutions such as the criminal justice system, debates about health care reflect underlying ideological differences. It may seem that the debates center on how we can pay for health care. What should the government’s role be in covering health care costs? This divides the nation based on some who believe that it is the government’s role to pay for health care versus those who believe that these costs should be left to the market and individual consumers. More fundamentally, these debates reflect differences in ideologies about who is worthy. The question isn’t simply, “Is health care a right or a commodity?” because

viewing health care as a right or a commodity for sale may reflect an underlying value system. Thus the question is: "Who has the right to live a healthy life?"

Since it was signed into law, the ACA has been the topic of political and dinner table debates; some political groups have attempted to change the ACA or repeal it entirely. Several left-leaning proposals attempted to expand the ACA to cover all Americans and reduce or eliminate individual premiums, while several right-leaning proposals tried to remove some features. This includes proposals to create separate high-risk pools (where people with certain conditions would pay more

for coverage) so that healthy people who "lead good lives," as Congressman Mo Brooks said, don't share the costs of those with higher health risks.

These disagreements and the many protests on all sides of this issue reflect underlying ideological differences. Policymakers have fueled the disagreements through political rhetoric such as calling the ACA "Obamacare," which was intended by opponents to link the bill to President Obama and to people's ideas about him and about who deserves a healthy life. In fact,



Former President Barack Obama at an Affordable Care Act event in 2013. ([Source](#))

while the ACA was championed at the national level by former President Obama, a Democrat, it was modeled after "Romney Care," developed by former Massachusetts Governor, and Republican, Mitt Romney. But in opinion polls, people are more supportive of the ACA than of "Obamacare" – even though they're the exact same program. A key role for the sociological study of health care is to understand these types of connections between political discussions about features of our health care system and larger societal norms, values, and ideologies.

Review sheet: Health care in the U.S.

Key Points

- Our health care system and the debates around health care reform are embedded in larger social and cultural norms, values, and ideologies around who deserves to live a healthy and fulfilling life.
- The American health care system is a patchwork of several different types of health care systems.
- The Affordable Care Act (ACA) attempted to increase the number of people with health insurance while decreasing health care costs.
- Numerous attempts at partially or entirely repealing the ACA have been a focus of political debates.

Key Terms

- **Affordable Care Act** – Federal health care law, signed by President Obama, that expanded health insurance coverage.
- **Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act** – Federal law requiring hospital emergency departments to stabilize or transfer people with medical emergencies or in labor, regardless of their health insurance status or ability to pay.
- **Health care system** – Collection of institutions and organizations that deliver and fund health care.
- **Medicaid** – Joint federal and state government program that provides health insurance for low-income families or individuals.
- **Medicare** – Federal program that provides health insurance to adults 65 years and older and people under 65 who have certain conditions.
- **Universal coverage** – All people have affordable access to the medical services they need.

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH & HEALTH INEQUITIES

- What are the major social determinants of health?
- How can the socioecological framework and life course perspective help us understand social patterns in health?

Figure 5 is a map of life expectancy in different parts of Chicago for 2009-2010. Average life expectancy for residents of the Loop area of downtown Chicago is 85 years. Residents of Washington Park, just a few miles away, have a life expectancy of only 69 years. What might account for this dramatic difference in life expectancy for people who only live a few miles from each other? In the Loop, 15% of residents live in poverty and only 6% are unemployed. In Washington Park, 48% of residents are poor and 29% are unemployed.³⁸ These patterns in Chicago mirror those in other cities, including Washington, D.C., where Nandi and Miles live.

Economic characteristics such as poverty and unemployment are **social determinants of health**, a broad category of factors, including “a society’s past and present economic, political, and legal systems [and] its material and technological resources...”, that drive social patterns in health.³⁹ The social determinants of health are often described as the “upstream” determinants of health because they then impact “downstream” determinants, such as behaviors like smoking and diet. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the health of individuals is embedded within a larger social context. This embeddedness can be considered in a few different ways. First, sociologists have focused particularly

on three interrelated characteristics when studying health: race and ethnicity, gender, and class (also called socioeconomic status, or SES). More recently, the focus has shifted toward how racism, sexism, and class inequality make these characteristics relevant to health. A second way that individual health is socially embedded is illustrated by the **socio-ecological model**. According to this model, a person is embedded within their social networks and relationships, which are then embedded within their neighborhoods and communities, which are embedded within larger socio-political contexts. Finally, people are embedded in their life course. Examples of life course events include graduation, marriage, parenthood, divorce, and other key milestones or transitions. Living in a poor neighborhood for many years will have a different impact on the health of a child than on a young adult or an older adult. And living in poverty for five years before finding stable life-long financial security has a different impact on health than living in poverty for your entire life.

Figure 5: Life expectancy in Chicago, 2009-2010



(Source: [Center on Society and Health](#))

Many of these social determinants of health result in health inequities; the differences in health that result from these social patterns are often due to unequal and unfair social conditions. For example, race, ethnicity, and class are considered **fundamental causes** of health because they can result in health inequities due to the unequal distribution of resources such as adequate housing or food and also through stigma and stress.⁴⁰ While we focus on the most studied determinants, social scientists are beginning to study other social determinants of health including sexual identity, religious affiliation, skin tone, and immigrant status.⁴¹

Race, ethnicity, structural

racism, and health. Race and ethnicity are socially constructed; race is “a system that humans created to classify and stratify groups of people based mostly on skin tone” and ethnicity is “a common culture, religion, history, or ancestry shared by a group of people”.⁴² In the U.S., racial and ethnic categories are developed based on social norms of who is fundamentally American and seen as worthy of inclusion in American society.⁴³ Given this, it isn’t surprising that there are racial and ethnic inequities in health, as

different groups experience unequal social, economic, and political contexts. It's not race and ethnicity, themselves, that result in health inequities, but **structural racism** – a set of beliefs and ideologies and the social structure that they create based on the idea that a specific racial group is biologically or culturally superior to other groups – that drives these unequal contexts.

Let's return to racial inequities in infant mortality. In recent decades, technological advances, such as the development of pulmonary surfactant therapy, have made it possible for infants born prematurely to survive life-threatening conditions such as respiratory distress syndrome (RDS). However, fundamental causes theory predicts that access to this life-saving technology would differ along racial lines, as structural racism leads to unequal access to the resources needed for a healthy life – and that is in fact what we see. Before the development of pulmonary surfactant therapy, there were no racial inequities in infant mortality due to RDS. However, after this technological advancement, infants born to Black mothers were more likely to die of RDS than infants born to White mothers, because White parents have greater access to this medical therapy.⁴⁴ This suggests that in order to improve the health of all babies, we need to focus more fundamentally on how our society is socially structured rather than on medical advances alone.

Gender, structural sexism, and health. Sex and gender are also socially constructed. Sex refers to the “biological and physiological characteristics of males and females” while gender refers to the “norms, roles, and relationships among and between groups of women and men”.⁴⁵ Some sex-based *differences* in health, such as differences in breast or prostate cancer, don’t reflect *inequities* because breast cancer is extremely rare in men, while only men can get prostate cancer. Differences between men and women in who gets these cancers don’t reflect unfair or unequal social patterns. However, there are gender inequities related to chronic diseases. While women have longer life expectancies than men, they tend to experience more disabilities, poorer mental health, and a lower quality of life.⁴⁶ Sociologists suggest that it isn’t gender itself that drives these health patterns, but structural sexism. **Structural sexism** is a set of beliefs and ideologies, and the social structure that they create through policies and institutions, based on the idea that men are superior to women; it is distinct from, and perhaps more important for health than, sex discrimination by individuals.⁴⁷ Sociologist Patricia Homan measured structural sexism as, for example, the size of the pay gap between men and women in a state, how many women versus men hold seats in the state legislature, and how many abortion providers there are in a state. These indicators capture the extent to which women’s lives are valued. While it may not be surprising that the wage gap would be bad for women’s health because health is related to income, it may not be clear why other measures of structural sexism are related to women’s



A yawning newborn can breathe due to lung surfactants. ([Source](#))

health. It's not necessarily that women legislators always support gender equality or that there are so many women requiring access to safe abortions. Rather, these indicators of structural sexism represent a lot of similar policies and programs that promote gender equality. Homan's work showed that women who lived in states with less structural sexism had better health than women who lived in other states.⁴⁸ What may be surprising is that men also benefitted from less structural sexism. It's likely that empowering women comes with many institutional improvements such as better education and more social programs, which can improve the health of everyone in the state.

Socioeconomic status (SES). SES, or social class, is one of the most studied social determinants of health. Features of SES include education, occupation, income, and wealth. Each represents a different aspect of SES and is related to health along a gradient. It's not just that there are health inequities between the rich and poor, but that health declines along the entire income spectrum; at each level, people have better health than those with lower SES. Roughly 50 years ago, sociologists **Evelyn Kitagawa** and **Phillip Hauser** showed that college-educated adults had lower mortality than adults with less education.⁴⁹ Since then, numerous studies in the U.S. and around the world have shown a strong association between the level and quality of education and health.

While we know that education and health are linked, it still isn't clear *what* about education is important for health. Public health researchers have focused on a lack of knowledge about healthy lifestyles. For example, a recent epidemiology text states, "...schooling may [develop] a set of enduring cognitive or emotional skills that foster health-promoting decisions through life. Literacy [the ability to read] and numeracy [the ability to work with numbers] are likely to help individuals make health decisions."⁵⁰

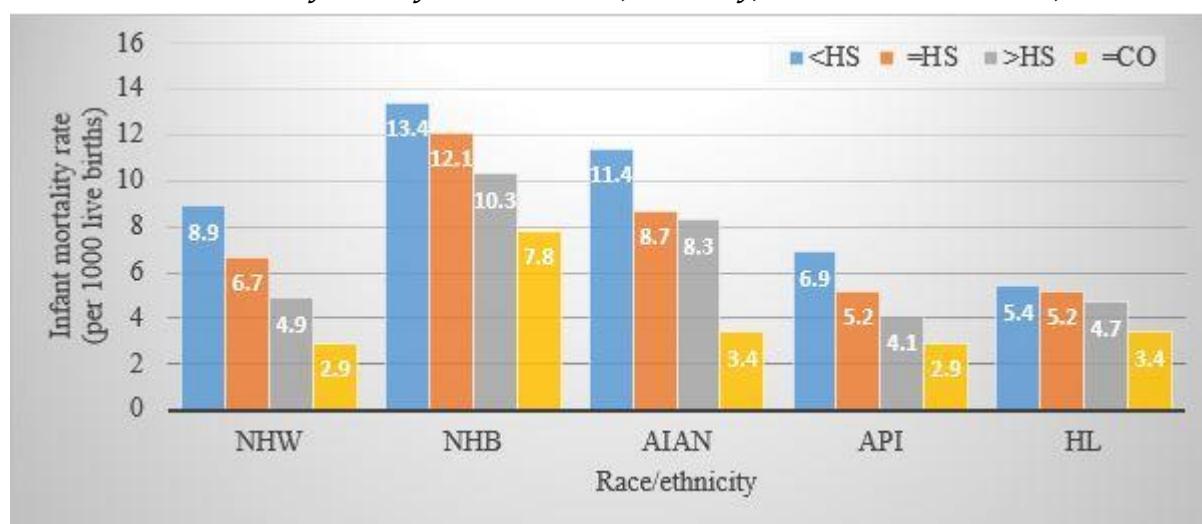
Sociologists have focused on a default American lifestyle that has become dependent upon conveniences such as, for example, driving (replacing physical activity to get around) and highly-processed and high-calorie food (replacing fresh food, particularly fruits and vegetables). This American lifestyle also depends on medical interventions to address diseases rather than focusing on preventing disease in the first place.⁵¹ More education may provide access to power, prestige, and resources that allow people to avoid the default American lifestyle. For example, people with higher education may be able to live in neighborhoods and have workplaces that support walking and biking through walking paths, bike lanes, and places to park bikes, and may live within safe walking or biking distance of stores, businesses, and workplaces. They may also be able to afford higher-quality fresh produce and other healthy food options.

Increased education is also related to higher **occupational prestige** and income or wealth. Some occupations have more social prestige than others, giving people with that occupation higher social standing. Both education and occupation are related to income and wealth. Higher incomes and wealth give people greater access to resources such as high-quality housing and neighborhoods with key resources.

In reality, race and ethnicity, gender, and class intersect in many ways that create complex health patterns. When Nandi was pregnant, she was working on her doctoral degree in public health at

a prestigious university; her husband already had a Master's degree in education and taught at a private middle school. Nandi's mother earned her college degree before she died at 58 years old, and Nandi's grandmother was a nurse, a skilled and generally highly-respected profession. Nandi and Miles owned their home, which they inherited from Nandi's mother. In fact, many recent media stories are about Black women with high levels of education and prestige who still experience poor maternal health.

Figure 6: U.S. Infant Mortality Rate by Mother's Race, Ethnicity, and Educational Level, 2016



Abbreviations: AIAN, American Indian or Alaska native; API, Asian or Pacific islander; CO, college; HL, Hispanic or Latino; HS, high school; NHB, non-Hispanic Black; NHW, non-Hispanic White.

(Source: Calculations from Singh & Yu [2019].⁵² Data derived from the 2016 National Linked Birth/Infant Death Period File.)

These stories are reflected in national data. Even with a college degree, Black adults have poorer health than White adults. More education is beneficial to the health of all groups, but not as beneficial for Black Americans as it is for White Americans. Figure 6 shows infant mortality rates by the mother's race, ethnicity, and educational level. Higher levels of education are related to lower infant mortality for all racial and ethnic groups. However, there are racial inequities, with Black and American Indian/Alaska Native women experiencing the highest rates. In fact, Black women have the least payoff for higher education; Black women with a college degree or more have an infant mortality rate that is higher than White women with only a high school diploma – and only slightly lower than White women who have not even completed high school. Black women simply have to earn much more education to attain the health outcomes that White women have.

Social networks and health. In Durkheim's study of suicide, he noted that we are integrated into society in two ways: through attachment to others and by accepting and complying with society's values, beliefs, and norms. Think about the people you know – your family, friends, neighbors, classmates, coworkers. They make up your **social network** (a structure of socially interrelated people) and likely affect your health. The growth of social media platforms has changed the size and potential influence of our networks.⁵³ Your social network can affect your health in several ways. One of the

more obvious is through contact with a pathogen (such as a cold virus) or other health risk (for instance, second-hand cigarette smoke). And through your attachment to the members of your social network, you may receive **social support**, opportunities for social engagement, money, and access to information on jobs or health care that can ultimately lead to better health. Your social network also exerts social influence through its values, beliefs, and norms, which may or may not match those of the broader society; your network may support healthy behaviors or might encourage you to take risks that can harm your health (such as excessive drinking).

Neighborhoods and health. Your neighborhood can also affect your health. Neighborhoods are more than the collection of residents; while neighborhood poverty, for example, is made up of all residents who have an income below the poverty line, neighborhood poverty can have impacts on health that go beyond a person's own poverty. Even if your family isn't poor, if you live in a neighborhood where many of your neighbors are poor, the larger city and private businesses may not invest resources in your neighborhood. These resources are part of the social and physical environment that affect your health, and may impact you and your family regardless of your income – that is, the poverty of the neighborhood has an effect that is separate from the income of individual families, and affects even those who aren't poor. The **social environment** – the social elements of your work, school, or neighborhood – includes norms, local institutions, social connections, trust, and

safety. The **physical environment** includes built features of the neighborhood such as housing, green spaces such as parks, services and amenities such as grocery stores, and toxic substances like air pollution. Research suggests that chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes are related to numerous features of the social and physical environment.⁵⁴

Neighborhoods don't occur naturally. They are planned and built, meaning neighborhood quality is subject to the same power dynamics as other social determinants of health. While the U.S. has always been racially segregated, certain policies have increased and reinforced segregation, concentrated poverty, and increased racial inequities in wealth and neighborhood quality. For example, a new system of home



Color-coded residential map of Atlanta developed by the Homeowners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), 1939. ([Source](#))

mortgages was created as part of the New Deal in the 1930s. However, these programs were available almost exclusively to White Americans. Maps assigned color-coded grades to different areas of the city based on their racial composition and other characteristics. Areas of the city that included mostly Black residents were graded “D” and coded red. Residents in those “redlined” areas couldn’t secure government-insured mortgages and weren’t able to take part in the upward mobility offered to residents of White neighborhoods.⁵⁵ The impact of those historical policies can be seen in health today. For example, the racial composition of a neighborhood continues to be the primary determinant of where industrial polluters are located, and historically redlined neighborhoods have higher rates of asthma and violence than other neighborhoods.⁵⁶

Stigma and health. Over 50 years ago, sociologist **Erving Goffman** wrote about the stigma of mental illness.⁵⁷ A **stigma** is a mark or label that discredits a person as a form of social control; people are pressured to accept and follow social norms out of fear of being stigmatized. Sociologists have since refined the concept of stigma, particularly as it relates to health.⁵⁸ They note that social, economic, and political power inequities determine the difference between a harmful stigma versus a **stereotype** (a widely-shared perception about the characteristics or abilities of members of a particular group). For example, there are stereotypes and jokes about lawyers; however, the prestige and power associated with the law profession prevents these stereotypes from transforming into a stigma. Sociologists identify several stages of the stigmatization process. First, society as a whole determines which marks or features are important in distinguishing “us” from “them”; “they” are seen as problematic. In general, these features characterize groups of people that society would like to control. For example, a feature may be dark skin tone, specific clothing (such as a hijab), or an accent. **Stereotyping** links these features or marks to characteristics such as being a criminal, poor, or a terrorist. This stereotyping allows us to separate “us” from “them.” Finally, the stigmatized group experiences discrimination and loses status. This is the key stage that makes stigma a powerful form of social control.

Bearing the mark of a stigmatized group, even without sharing the underlying characteristics, can impact health, which is called a **spillover effect**. The growing stigmatization of Latinx immigrants through stereotyping them as “illegal” or “criminal” may cause health effects not only to undocumented Latinx immigrants but also to documented Latinx residents and citizens, even those whose families have been U.S. citizens for generations. For example, in May 2008, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) suddenly raided a meat-processing plant in Postville, Iowa. Nearly 300 men were arrested, charged with working in the U.S. without proper



A meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa. ([Source](#))

documentation, and deported after serving a five-month prison sentence. News of this raid and allegations of inhumane treatment toward those arrested in the raid spread quickly through the Spanish-speaking community in the state. After the raid, there were increases in low-birth-weight babies born to Latinx mothers in Iowa, even among those who weren't related to the men who were deported, suggesting that the stress of a stigmatized identity has health consequences.⁵⁹

Stress and health. Think about the last time you experienced something stressful. Maybe you weren't prepared for a test, or you got into an argument with a close friend. Perhaps a close family member passed away, or you lost your job. Each of these appears to be an isolated incident, but through a sociological lens, we can understand that they are embedded in our broader social context.

How did you feel during that stressful experience? Did your heart rate go up? Did you feel anxious? For decades, scientists have studied how the body reacts and adjusts to environmental stimuli. The term "stress" was coined to refer to anything that challenges and threatens the body's internal stability and equilibrium, such as blood pressure or even cellular processes.

Several disciplines, including psychology and endocrinology, pay particular attention to individual perceptions of stress, coping processes, personality characteristics, and biological pathways. While the body is resilient and designed to deal with stressful situations, chronic stress wears away at the body's stress response system, leading to problems in the immune, metabolic, and cardiovascular systems. Chronic stress can develop not just from repeatedly experiencing stressors. Anticipation and worry can transform even a momentary situation into a chronic stressor.⁶⁰

Stress has received increasing research and media coverage because of its link to health. Stress compromises the immune system, whether it is acute stress about an upcoming exam or the chronic stress of stigma.⁶¹ Additionally, major traumatic stress and chronic stress are related to numerous chronic diseases and conditions including poor mental health, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and certain cancers, just to name a few.⁶²

There are social patterns in stress, and social inequities in stress are related to social inequities in health.⁶³ Inequities in chronic stress are thought to drive many of the health inequities between the rich and poor, between different genders and sexual identities, and between different racial and ethnic groups. Early sociological work on stress and racial health inequities focused on **interpersonal discrimination**, or unfair treatment of one person by another, with some attention to structural racism.⁶⁴ Many sociologists continue to study the health impact of discrimination; however, some have turned to structural racism as a more fundamental driver of racial health inequities.

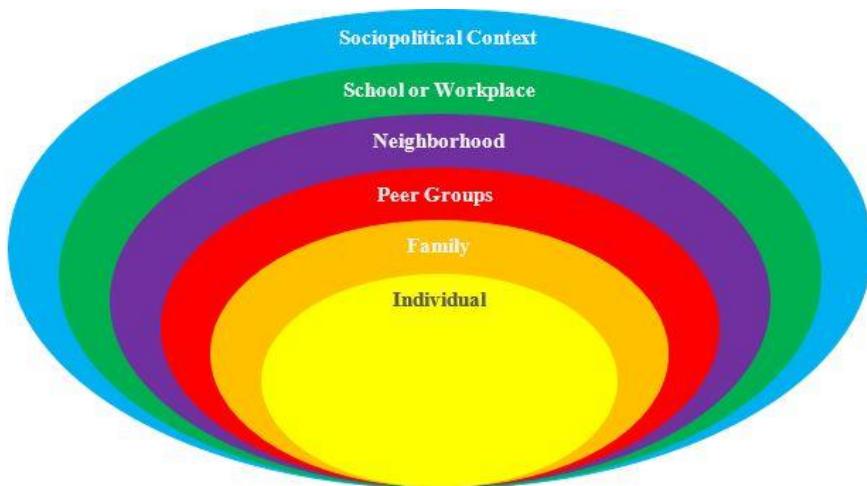
A sociological lens on stress helps us understand the link between social forces and health inequities. For example, Nandi's traumatic birth experience was a single event that cascaded into a series of stressful circumstances, including her inability to focus on her doctoral research, which then delayed her graduation and later employment (and the higher income and health insurance that came with it). Sociologist **Leonard Pearlin** described this as **stress proliferation**, when one stressful event leads to a series of other stressful events and situations.⁶⁵ We can go further back and look at the premature death of Nandi's mother less than two years earlier. Nandi and her mom had always been

very close, so when her mother fell ill, Nandi moved back to Washington, D.C., in the middle of her doctoral studies, to take care of her. Could the stressful event of her mother's death, with the connected stresses of a major move, delaying her progress in her graduate program, and then caring for her mother's affairs, be related to the later death of her babies? Poet Claudia Rankine talked of "the condition of [B]lack life [as] one of mourning".⁶⁶ Sociologists would note that Nandi, as a Black woman in the U.S., is more likely to experience the death of friends and family as well as other chronic stressors. These stressors are likely not separate events, but are interconnected, building on one another to result in poor health.

More recently, sociologist **Joe Feagin** and anthropologist **Philomena Essed** have helped us understand the stressful experiences of Black men and women as they negotiate everyday American life. Marginalized social groups often anticipate potential prejudice or discrimination or worry about previous problematic encounters. This anticipation or worry may stem from their own personal interactions as well as encounters experienced by people in their social networks – or just as importantly, from experiences of their larger marginalized group, as in the raid on the meat-processing plant in Iowa. **Vigilance** includes the anticipation and worry stress that comes with membership in a socially marginalized and stigmatized group. Vigilance is consistently related to poor mental and physical health, and racial inequities in vigilance are also related to numerous health inequities.⁶⁷

Perspectives for studying health

One of the most widely-used perspectives for studying the social determinants of health is the **socio-ecological framework**.⁶⁸ In this framework, the individual is placed within their interpersonal, community, and societal contexts. Some sociologists focus on the broadest level and explain how societal-level factors affect health. Social epidemiologists, on the other hand, may place more emphasis on the behavioral or biological mechanisms of the



An example of the socio-ecological model of the social determinants of health. (Source: Authors)

individual. Let's think about the childhood nutritional environment. Sociologists might focus on school district policies and practices (which reflect the larger sociopolitical context) throughout a city to understand differences in the nutritional value and quality of lunches served at schools in different neighborhoods. A social epidemiologist might instead document what children choose to eat in their schools, focusing on the individual health behavior. These approaches target different areas of the

same issue; to address childhood nutrition, we can focus on school district policies to ensure that all schools provide nutritious food or we can focus on individual children (and their families) to suggest better food choices.

The socio-ecological model has influenced research on public health and guided interventions and policy recommendations. For example, a recent trend in health promotion focuses on the social determinants of health more globally. The 8th World Congress on Health Promotion, held in 2013, led to the “Health in All Policies” (HiAP) model. It addresses issues of health inequities by recognizing that these inequities ultimately stem from numerous social factors. The World Health Organization (WHO) stated,

Health and health equity are values in their own right, and are also important prerequisites for achieving many other societal goals. Many of the determinants of health and health inequities in populations have social, environmental, and economic origins that extend beyond the direct influence of the health sector and health policies. Thus, public policies in all sectors and at different levels of governance can have a significant impact on population health and health equity.⁶⁹

The National Academy of Sciences in the United States has also recognized the importance of the HiAP movement, stating:

Medical services, while vitally important, play a lesser role in overall population health improvement than the social determinants of health—the environments in which people live, work, learn, and play. Economic status, educational attainment, structural racism, and neighborhood characteristics are critical determinants of health and health inequities. Improvements in a community’s economic, physical, social, and service environments can help ensure opportunities for health and support healthy behaviors. However, health agencies rarely have the mandate, authority, or organizational capacity to make the policy, systems, and environmental changes that can promote healthy living through healthy environments. That responsibility falls to housing, transportation, education, air quality, parks, criminal justice, agriculture, energy, and employment agencies, among others.⁷⁰

This means that we can’t address health inequities through conventional medical approaches targeted at disease management, or with public health approaches that try to promote better health. We must incorporate a sociological lens that understands how social, economic, and political contexts ultimately drive health inequities. From this perspective, labor policies are health policies; education policies are health policies; transportation policies are health policies; and so on.

Often, health and illness are described in terms of a particular period in the life span – childhood asthma, vaping among teenagers, hypertension among adults, and cognitive impairments in older adults. In reality, our social experiences and health are interrelated throughout our lives, which is a major principle of the **life course perspective** on health. Sociologist **Glen Elder** outlined a theory of

the life course related to child development, and many sociologists have adapted this perspective to the study of health.⁷¹ Elder suggested five basic principles that have been incorporated into studies of health and social structure:

- *Life span development*: Human development isn't limited to a single period in the life span, but is a continuous process throughout one's life. The health of adults, for example, represents a progression of health throughout their lives.
- *Constrained agency*: People make choices and take actions that shape their lives; they are active participants in how their lives unfold. However, these choices and actions are constrained by structural circumstances. For example, while we may try to have more nutritious diets and exercise, our ability to do so depends on the resources in our neighborhoods (are there safe places to jog?) and the norms of our social networks (what kind of food is served at social gatherings?).
- *Time and place*: The course and trajectory of a person's life is embedded and shaped not only by their own lived history, but by the history of the spaces they inhabit. Your health depends on where you live and at what point in your life you lived there – living in a polluted neighborhood can have different effects on children than on adults, for example. And the history of your neighborhood, even before you lived there, can shape your health by affecting the quality of resources available there now.
- *Timing*: The ways in which your life unfolds depend on your social experiences and when in your life you had those experiences. For example, conventional American norms of the life course are that a person completes their education, gets a job, gets married, then has children, and later retires. Our social institutions are set up to support this timing and ordering of the life course; high schools aren't set up to accommodate students with children, for instance. Due to structural constraints, different social groups may not be able to adhere to these norms, with implications for their health.
- *Linked lives*: Our lives are interconnected directly through our social networks and indirectly through our place in history. Our health is related to the health of the members of our social network. We are also connected as, for example, Americans living at this point in time, as veterans of recent American wars, or as Black men and women living during the Civil Rights era.

In this section, we introduced several social determinants of health that have been the focus of sociology for many years. Sociologists have documented the health inequities among different racial groups and among those with different levels of education. Recently, sociologists have focused on the features of society that might drive these health inequities, such as structural racism or unequal access to resources important for health. These social determinants may impact health differently depending on when in the life course they are experienced, as outlined by the life course approach. Finally, the social determinants of health perspective suggests that, in order to improve population health and

reduce social inequities in health, we must focus on social factors rather than on primarily public health, health care, or medical factors.

Review sheet: Social determinants of health & health inequities

Key Point

- The social determinants of health include “a society’s past and present economic, political, and legal systems [and] its material and technological resources.”
- Race, gender, and class are major social determinants of health due to their social meaning and the extent to which structural racism, sexism, and classism interactively play out.
- Your health is related to the health of people in your social network.
- Neighborhoods are the sites of many resources and constraints important for health.
- Stigmatizing stereotypes can result in poor health through social, economic, and political constraints and through social stress.
- Chronic stress is related to multiple illnesses through wear and tear on the biological stress response system.
- Each of the social determinants of health interact with and/or operate through one another to result in health inequities.

Key People

- Glen Elder
- Joe Feagin
- Leonard Pearlin

Key Terms

- **Interpersonal discrimination** – Unfair treatment by one person to another, generally due to a prejudice about that person or their social group.
- **Occupational prestige** – Status and social power associated with particular occupations.
- **Physical environment** – Human-made/built (e.g. housing, roads, pollution) and natural (e.g., rivers, climate) features of a work, school, or neighborhood context.
- **Social determinants of health** – Historical and contemporary social, economic, and political factors that drive social patterns in health.
- **Social environment** – Social elements of one’s work, school, or neighborhood, including violence, civic participation, and cohesion.
- **Social network** – Structure of socially interrelated individuals.
- **Social support** – Emotional, informational, and instrumental (e.g. money, transportation) support we receive from others.
- **Spillover effects** – Effects of one context or situation on a seemingly unrelated context or situation.

- **Stereotyping** – Process by which a particular feature of a group is linked to undesirable characteristics.
- **Stress proliferation** – One stressful experience cascades into other stressful experiences.
- **Structural racism** – Set of beliefs and ideologies, and the social structure that they create through policies and institutions, based on the idea that a specific racial group is biologically or culturally superior to other racial groups.
- **Structural sexism** – Set of beliefs and ideologies, and the social structure that they create through policies and institutions, based on the idea that men are superior to women.
- **Vigilance** – Anticipation and worry-related stress due to the burden of stigmatizing stereotypes about a social group.

THE FUTURE OF SOCIOLOGY IN HEALTH & ILLNESS

- What role does the sociology of health and illness have in the genomics era?
- Is historical context related to contemporary social patterns in health?



An African-American boy at a segregated drinking fountain in Halifax, North Carolina, 1938. ([Source](#))

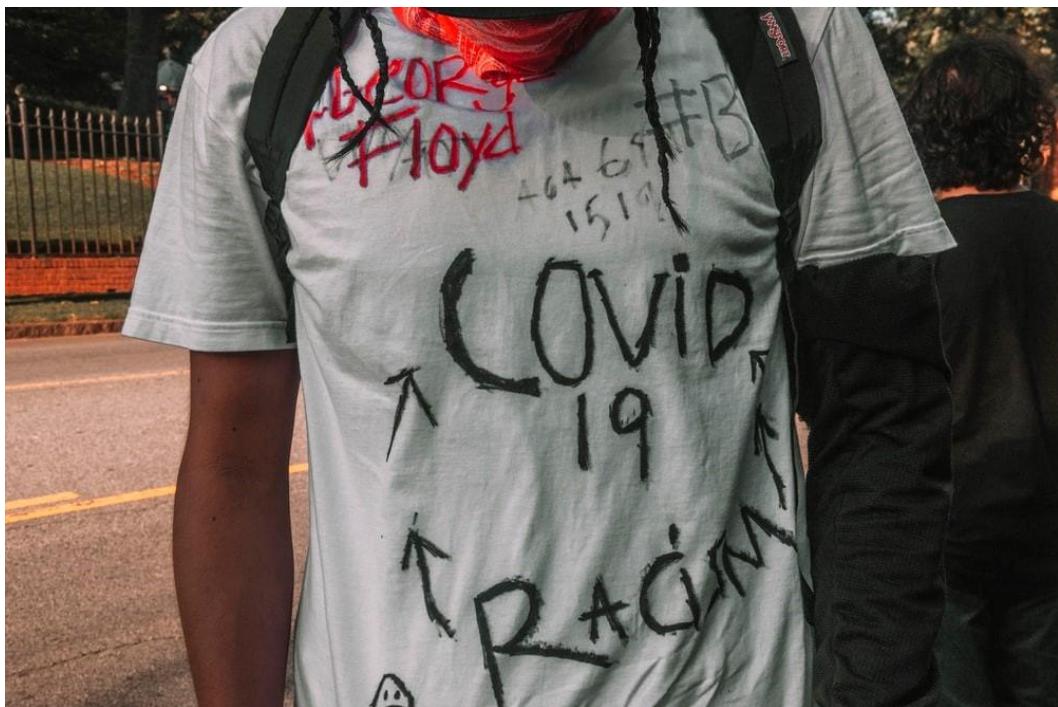
With the sequencing of the human genome (the complete set of genes needed to build and maintain our bodies) in 2003 came the promise of boundless discoveries of cures for diseases. Since then, it has become clear that health and illness are not simply the product of our genes, but the likely result of a complex interplay between our genes and our social experiences, which are ultimately

shaped by cultural norms and values and our social structure. We are witnessing the birth of a new interdisciplinary field of **social genomics** in which sociologists and other social scientists work with geneticists to understand how the social world might alter the structure and function of our genome and affect social patterns in health.⁷² As we move into this field, we must be careful not to conflate socially-constructed races with genetic ancestry, which is composed of specific parts of the genome.⁷³

Physical barriers (such as oceans or mountains) and social forces (such as policies or traditions that ban or encourage people from different social or cultural groups from marrying) separate groups of people, and this separation is reflected in our genomes.⁷⁴ How racial categories are socially constructed in a particular society or country at a particular point in time may or may not match the underlying genetic ancestries.⁷⁵ And importantly, there is no evidence that genetic differences among racial groups are responsible for the racial inequities in common chronic diseases.⁷⁶ In addition to the social forces that shape the structure of our genomes, social forces can also affect how our genes are related to health. For example, studies show that the effect that our genes have on health really depends on the environment we are in.⁷⁷ Sociologists have an important role to play in this genomic era, both by continuing to clarify the social forces that shape health patterns and by working with geneticists to understand how social forces and our genome contribute to social patterns in health.

Sociologists have contributed important information about historical patterns in social, economic, and political aspects of society; some have also linked historical social forces to contemporary society.⁷⁸ As the life course perspective highlights, we are linked to history – which means that our health may also be linked to historical aspects of society. Indeed, historical elements of structural racism, such as redlining, Jim Crow laws, lynching, legal (e.g. police) and extra-legal (e.g. Ku Klux Klan) racial violence, and slavery, created racial boundaries around access to resources, opportunities, and full citizenship that continue to drive contemporary racial health inequities, such as the disparities in novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) infection and the risk of death once infected.⁷⁹

We have discussed only two possible future avenues for sociologists to study health – social genomics and social history. In reality, as society changes, there are new roles for sociologists, such as understanding the impact of social media on society and health and using algorithms and artificial intelligence to model the complexity of society and health. Common to all of these topics of research is the growing integration of sociology with other fields to create interdisciplinary areas of study. Because sociology provides a unique and important lens for the study of health, there will be exciting new ways to integrate it with other social sciences such as economics or psychology, and also with biomedicine, humanities, and computer science. Ultimately, given the critical ways in which social forces shape health and the illness experience, the future of sociology and health is one that centers sociology while extending into other fields of study.



An African American protestor's shirt with handwritten messages linking racism to COVID-19 (Source).

Review sheet: The future of sociology in health & illness

Key Points

- Social genomics is an emerging interdisciplinary field that integrates social factors with genetics to understand health. Sociologists can play a key role by identifying the social forces that result in social patterns in health.
- Sociologists have contributed significantly to our understanding of historical social forces. Social epidemiologists have started linking broad aspects of history to contemporary health. Sociologists can add substantial nuanced historical information to the study of contemporary health and health inequities.

Key Terms

- **Social genomics** – Study of social factors and their impact on the human genome.

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Environmental Sociology



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Environmental Sociology

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INTRODUCTION

- Why should sociologists study the environment? How can sociology help us understand the complex relationship between society and the environment?

The 2019-2020 bushfire season in Australia, which has been called Black Summer, was the worst ever experienced.¹ An extensive drought over much of Eastern Australia, combined with unusually hot dry winds and high temperatures exacerbated by climate change, meant that when the fires started earlier in the year than usual, they spread quickly. An area roughly the size of England burned, more than 3,500 homes were destroyed, and over a billion animals died.²



Plane dropping flame retardant on a wildfire. ([Source](#))

Unfortunately, environmental destruction over the past year wasn't limited to Australia. With 2020 on track to be one of the hottest years since record-keeping began,³ it's not surprising that other parts of the world are also burning: in June 2020, the *New York Times* reported that it was 125 degrees in Baghdad and 100 degrees above the Arctic Circle. These heatwaves, which are also exacerbated by climate change, are having numerous effects on society and social life and are contributing to "inequality at the boiling point."⁴

In May 2019, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), which provides a global assessment of **biodiversity** (the variety of species in an ecosystem), reported that a million species are threatened with extinction if we don't change the way we treat the natural environment.⁵ This alarming news comes at the same time as scientists report that plastic pollution is raining down in protected areas in the U.S., as well as clogging our rivers and covering the oceans.⁶ While the earth burns, animals die, and pollution spreads, societies respond in varying ways, with some demanding policies that respond to these environmental crises while others deny that these problems even exist.

As bad news about the state of our environment and non-human species has continued, environmental sociology emerged specifically to ask: What is the relationship between society and the environment? Sociology has often overlooked the ways societies affect the natural environment, as well as how the natural environment affects society. Perhaps the most well-known statement of this **exceptionalist perspective**, which assumes that humans are inherently different from other living beings, was made by sociologist Frederick Buttel. In a 1984 paper, he argued that due to the influence of Émile Durkheim's founding work in the field of sociology, which proposed that only social causes

could explain social facts, "...a virtual taboo has developed against explaining social phenomena by means of nonsocial factors"⁷, including the physical environment. As a result, it was left out of most sociological research and theory. But if we ignore how societies and the environment interact, how do we explain the changing climate due to fossil fuel emissions, species extinction, the increased severity of hurricanes, and the impact of all of these trends on communities throughout the world?

In this chapter we provide a brief summary of environmental sociology's roots before it was formally recognized as a subfield of sociology in the late 1970s. We review major perspectives on the relationship between society and the environment, particularly focusing on economic development, environmental degradation, and environmental protection. We also provide case studies about common topics of interest in environmental sociology. Finally, we discuss the future of environmental sociology and its role in interdisciplinary research and educational programs, such as environmental studies and sustainability studies.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- How did environmental sociology emerge as a field of study?

Before the field of environmental sociology was formally created in the late 1970s,⁸ some scholars, particularly in rural sociology and human ecology, were already studying how society and the natural environment were interconnected. **Rural sociology** focused on how people in rural areas, many living on farms and working in the agricultural sector, were directly connected to the environment and relied on natural resources.

Coming from a very different perspective, scholars working within **human ecology** also connected their work to the environment. Rather than exploring life in rural areas,⁹ human ecology largely looked at the social organization of urban communities.¹⁰ Some of the most notable work used environmental terms as a metaphor for social phenomena and looked at the city as an organism.

Environmental sociology emerged in response to environmental problems in the U.S. and the citizens' movement that was formed to address them.¹¹ By 1970, environmental degradation was widespread across the United States. Major environmental disasters included a large oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California; the Cuyahoga River in Ohio catching on fire because of the flammable chemicals dumped into the water; and polluted air and poor water quality throughout the country. After substantial pressure from people involved in a growing environmental movement, the federal government passed the **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)** in 1970. NEPA required



EPA seal. ([Source](#))

federal agencies to consider the environmental effects of all policies and legislation. This led to the establishment of the **Environmental Protection Agency**, as well as numerous laws that protected the natural environment, including our air and water, from pollution.

With growing attention to how humans interact with the environment and the sometimes dire consequences of those interactions, more sociologists began to study the issue. **William Catton and Riley Dunlap** called for a new paradigm for thinking about the society-environment relationship.¹² They argued that, although people have been living within a **human exceptionalist paradigm** that prioritizes economic growth, prosperity, and individualism, a shift to a more environmentally sensitive perspective, which they called the **New Environmental Paradigm** (now called the **New Ecological Paradigm**), was needed.

This perspective considers potential limits to economic growth and encourages developing a stable economy that is balanced with nature. The New Ecological Paradigm has also been used to explore the relationship between environmental attitudes and pro-environmental behaviors.

Since Catton and Dunlap's call for a field of sociology focused on environmental issues,¹³ environmental sociologists have studied a range of topics about the relationship between society and the environment. This work recognizes that there is a **conjoint constitution** between society and the natural environment: society affects the quality of the natural environment, and environmental change (both environmental degradation and protection) also has a clear effect on the quality and scope of society.¹⁴ One of the most central questions is the relationship between social development, industrialization, and environmental protection, with a variety of theoretical perspectives influencing this research.¹⁵

Review Sheet: Introduction/historical context

Key Points

- Early sociologists often overlooked the natural environment, focusing instead on social issues and causes of behavior.
- In the 1970s, environmental sociology arose as sociologists began to place more attention on how societies and the environment interact.
- Public concern about the environment grew in response to a number of ecological disasters and growing pollution.
- Societies have often treated the environment as though humans are exempt from any limits on our economic growth or use of resources.
- Environmental sociologists called for an approach that acknowledges limits on available resources and the need to live in balance with the environment.

Key People

- Frederick Buttel
- Émile Durkheim
- William Catton and Riley Dunlap

Key Terms

- **Biodiversity** – The variety of species in an ecosystem.
- **Human exemptionalist perspective** – View that humans are different from other living beings and do not face environmental limits on our economic growth.
- **Rural sociology** – Subfield focuses on people in rural areas and their connections to the environment and natural resources.
- **Human ecology** – Subfield that focuses on the social organization of urban communities and similarities to other organisms.
- **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)** – 1970 law requiring federal agencies to consider the environmental effects of policies and legislation.
- **Environmental Protection Agency** – Federal organization created to oversee implementation of NEPA.
- **New Environmental Paradigm (or New Ecological Paradigm)** – Perspective that considers potential limits to economic growth and encourages developing a stable economy balanced with nature.
- **Conjoint constitution** – Society affects the natural environment, and environmental change affects the quality and scope of society.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIETY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

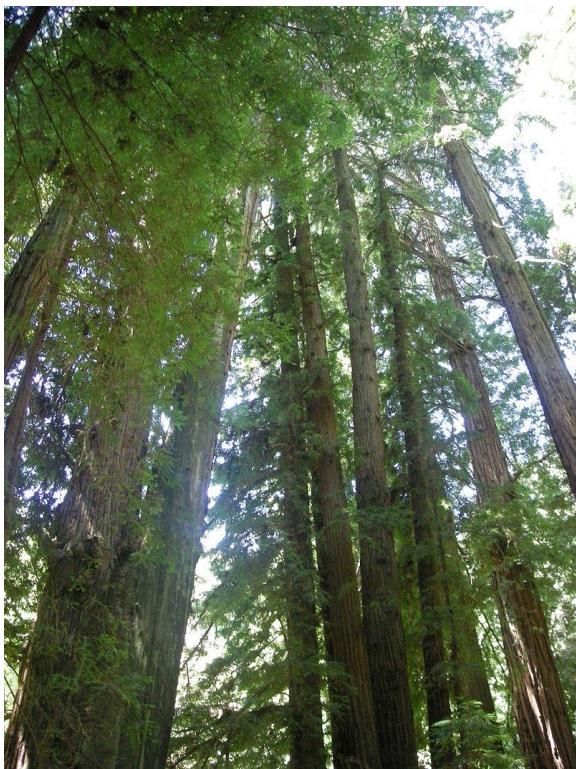
- How can the major perspectives in environmental sociology help us understand the relationship between society and the natural environment?
- How do these perspectives shape sociologists' research and findings?

Much of the work in environmental sociology has focused on the debate regarding the degree to which a society's expansion and economic growth comes at the expense of the quality of the natural environment. Some of the perspectives are critical and believe that environmental protection and economic development can't co-exist, while others are more optimistic and believe that the economy

can grow along with environmental improvement and protection. Like the rest of sociology, these perspectives look at the varying roles that the main social actors of the state (or government), the market (economic sector), and **civil society** (people working individually or collectively through community groups and social movements) play.

Critical perspectives

One set of perspectives tends to be critical of the notion that economic development can continue in a way that protects the environment. Critical perspectives generally expect that environmental interventions won't be very effective, in part because governments often support relatively unregulated economies that don't prioritize environmental protection. Critical scholars recognize that social movements will push for environmental protection, but believe those efforts will have limited success.¹⁶



Old-growth redwood forest, California. ([Source; CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

One of the most well-known critical perspectives is the **treadmill of production theory**,¹⁷ which suggests that any society driven by economic expansion is stuck in a conflict with nature. The drive to expand the production of consumer goods and provide fuel to power machinery requires us to withdraw natural resources constantly from ecosystems while we also add pollution to our environment. This process of withdrawals and additions is seen as a never-ending treadmill where we remove so many resources that we often exceed the ecosystems' ability to renew themselves and replace those resources. Think about logging. Whether trees are cut down from the **old growth forests** (those with mature trees that have been relatively undisturbed by human activity) of the Pacific Northwest or from the Amazon rainforest, the treadmill of production expects that the deforestation will not be sustainable: companies will cut down the trees until they are gone or it's too expensive to continue extracting wood from that area; then they

will move somewhere else and do the same thing. As trees are cut down and the wood is processed into lumber, the process generates a broad range of waste. Because companies move to increasingly isolated, remote forests (since they tend to cut down the most accessible wood first), the amount of energy and materials used to remove logs and the waste produced to access remote areas, transport the wood to where it will be processed, and then transport the finished lumber to market typically increases over time. Governments are often caught in contradictory positions between promoting environmental protection or promoting the interests of business. In the end, research from this

perspective finds that governments end up supporting economic expansion through international trade agreements, bailing out industries when they're in crisis, and other measures.¹⁸

Like the treadmill of production theory, the **metabolic rift perspective** argues that capitalism drives a **growth imperative**, or necessity for continual economic growth. The focus of this view is on the interchange of matter and energy between human societies and the larger environment, describing it as a form of metabolism (just as the human body converts what you eat and drink into energy).¹⁹ Metabolic rift theorists argue that the **social metabolism** – the exchange of resources and material between society and the environment – of capitalism exceeds natural limits, which undermines ecosystem renewal and produces “metabolic rifts” (or breaks) in various cycles and processes.²⁰ Metabolic theorists generally agree with treadmill of production theorists that the relationship between development and environmental degradation is strong and will continue to be as long as societies are tied to the growth imperative of capitalism.

Consider, for example, the depletion of natural fish stocks in the world’s oceans. Our total consumption of seafood has grown over time as societies have become wealthier and populations increased. Humans came up with new methods to catch larger numbers of fish more quickly, which let them expand their profits. These methods include bottom trawls, large nets that are pulled along the ocean floor by boats, and gillnetting that catches fish in a wall of netting. Because of these new fishing practices, the rate of catching wild fish has far outpaced the ability of the world’s oceans and aquatic ecosystems to renew those fish populations, which disrupts their natural cycles. The consequences can be devastating to ecosystems and will also lead to the collapse of the world’s fish populations, which people around the world depend on for food.²¹

In contrast to the other critical theories, **ecologically unequal exchange theory** specifically focuses on unequal resource exchanges and ecological interdependencies within the global economy.²² The inequalities here are tied to global disparities in socioeconomic development and power.²³ Ecologically unequal exchange refers to the environmentally damaging withdrawal of energy and other natural resources and the concentration of environmentally damaging production and disposal activities within less-developed, poorer countries. Like the treadmill of production and metabolic rift approaches, ecologically unequal exchange theory is relatively pessimistic about the relationship between development and the environment. It is distinct in its focus on inequality between societies that exacerbates the harmful impacts of development on the environment, especially in less-developed nations.

This perspective is illustrated by the video “The Story of Stuff.”²⁴ In the video, we see how environmentally unfriendly manufacturing, which is largely controlled by global corporations headquartered in wealthy countries, has become concentrated in less-developed countries. A good example of the role corporations play in ecologically unequal exchange is in sneaker production, which is located overwhelmingly in developing countries in Asia where environmental and labor laws are much weaker than in the U.S., while the sneakers are mostly produced for consumers in the wealthier nations where the major sneaker companies are headquartered.²⁵

Optimistic perspectives

In contrast to the critical theories, those coming from a more optimistic perspective tend to agree that economic growth can be associated with environmental protection, or at least reductions in environmental degradation. They expect an **environmental state** to emerge — that is, governments will begin to include environmental protection “as a basic state responsibility.”²⁶ Optimistic theories see the economy playing a hybrid role in society: businesses and financial institutions work effectively in collaboration with government and community actors, such as **nongovernmental organizations** (non-profit groups that work independently of governments) to bring about more environmentally friendly outcomes.

Ecological modernization theory argues that the dynamic nature of capitalism allows economic growth and related technologies to be directed toward environmental reforms. Change comes from collaboration among people working within the government, science, and economic sectors to create policies. At the same time, civil society, including social movement organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), helps to facilitate environmental improvements and policy reforms. Instead of focusing on cleaning up environmental “bads” after they are produced or letting them become a common problem for society to address, supporters of ecological modernization theory expect innovations in production processes to reduce the production of environmental bads from happening in the first place.²⁷

The transition to renewable energy is an example of ecological modernization. Instead of burning fossil fuels to generate electricity, which emits numerous pollutants into the atmosphere, clean and renewable energy from wind, solar power, and hydropower (generated by water) make it possible to produce energy without creating pollution. As the technologies get better, the government works with businesses to encourage the spread of these more sustainable technologies. For instance, to encourage a more environmentally sustainable transportation system, Norway’s government is encouraging a move away from fossil fuel-based transportation to electric vehicles powered by the nation’s electric power grid, which relies almost exclusively on hydropower. To push faster adoption of electric vehicles, the government taxes cars with higher pollution emissions. This tax encourages consumers to buy cleaner low- or zero-emissions vehicles.²⁸

In contrast to ecological modernization’s focus on technological innovation, **world society theory** looks to global institutional structures to shape social change and bring about environmental protection.²⁹ At the center of world society are international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), which include environmental groups like Friends of the Earth.³⁰ Much of this work focuses on international organizations, like the United Nations, and treaties that coordinate national responses to environmental issues, such as the Paris Climate Agreement. Scholars find that ties to the pro-



Solar panels. ([Source](#))

environmental world society, usually in the form of a larger presence of environmental INGOs, are associated with improved environmental conditions, including lower growth in carbon emissions and less deforestation.³¹

Like other optimistic theories that emphasize the emergence and role of the environmental state, **reflexive modernization** focuses on development as a process through which environmental protection becomes more common.³² Reflexive modernization is a two-step process. The first step—the **risk society** phase—involves a universalization of risk, spreading it across the globe and throughout society, which leads to a breakdown in the general functions of society. The COVID-19 pandemic provides an example of this phase: risk of the virus spread across all sectors of our social lives and efforts to slow transmission had a huge effect on all aspects of society, from the economy to education to sports to family life. The second step in reflexive modernization is driven by a new type of solidarity. People no longer feel connected by social class, race, gender, or type of employment; instead, they feel connected to one another by risk. Groups that have not historically worked together collaborate in response to their feelings of being at increased risk. The political change described in reflexive modernization is driven by “citizens, the public sphere, social movements, and expert groups”³³ rather than by governments or elites.

Reflexive modernization could occur as nations respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis it caused. Although the virus has had unequal health effects on different social groups, with rates of infection much higher in the Black, Latinx, and Native American communities;³⁴ the risk of disease is experienced by everyone and experts predict that climate change and human migration into animals habitats will lead to more spread of disease as viruses jump from other species to people. If some nations end up responding to the COVID19 pandemic and the economic crisis that it has instigated by implementing policies in line with a just transition to address climate change and racial inequalities—like the proposed **Green New Deal**³⁵—the outcome would be consistent with Reflexive Modernization. Such a response involves collaborations among groups that historically do not work together, including those within the climate movement and the movement for Black Lives.

Bridging perspectives with the anthro-shift

So who is right? When we look at a society’s relationship to the natural environment, which perspective wins, the critical perspectives or the optimistic ones?

Well, perhaps neither. Instead, the **anthro-shift** proposes that the society-environment relationship is a dynamic system determined by how governments, the market, and civil society interact and how much they prioritize environmental issues by regulating environmental “bads” and protecting environmental “goods.” The anthro-shift has two distinctive features: 1) risk affects the relationship among states, markets, and civil society; and 2) the relationship between society and the environment can move in multiple directions—toward what the more critical perspectives might expect or toward more effective environmental protection and a stronger environmental state.

Risk as the pivot. **Risk**—both the perception of it and the actual experience of risk—serves as a pivot to reorient individuals and groups, and how they interact with one another and the natural

environment. As we previously noted, COVID-19 provides a clear example of a risk event that has been experienced globally. In the past twenty years, we have seen other risk events with large-scale implications, such as 9/11 in the U.S., the tsunami that led to the Fukushima nuclear plant melt-down in Japan, and Hurricane Katrina that destroyed New Orleans. These events represent moments of risk-motivated pivots in society. The general sense of risk among the population leads to changes in how the government, businesses, and civil society work together, or don't, in each situation.



Damaged reactor in Fukushima, Japan, after a tsunami caused a nuclear meltdown in 2011. (Source: CC BY-SA 2.0)

As risk permeates society, portions of government, the economy, and civil society are reorganized: governments become stronger or weaker, economic markets become more or less collaborative, and civil society becomes either more individualized and disengaged or more engaged and collectively oriented. A government's strength determines its level of autonomy in relation to the other social actors. A strong government has more ability to implement policies; a weaker one is more likely to collaborate and engage in cooperative arrangements, such as working with utility companies to encourage people to increase the energy efficiency of their homes. In addition to reducing a consumer's monthly energy bill, more efficiency can reduce the demand on a utility, and might reduce energy consumption overall.

Scholars working from the critical perspectives in environmental sociology tend to expect a strong, independent government and a less regulated economy, which is generally much less supportive of efforts to protect the environment. For example, the U.S. government has been very strong since the 2016 election: The Republican Party won the White House and held the majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives for the first two years of the Trump Administration, and Republicans continued to hold the majority in the Senate along with the White House during its second two years. Because of this distribution of power, the Trump Administration has been able to act autonomously in many areas, including rolling back numerous environmental policies during its

time in office. In a July 2020 summary, the *New York Times* reported, “The bulk of the rollbacks...have been carried out by the Environmental Protection Agency, which repealed and replaced the Obama-era emissions rules for power plants and vehicles; weakened protections for more than half the nation’s wetlands; and withdrew the legal justification for restricting mercury emissions from power plants.”³⁶

In contrast, studies within the optimistic perspectives of environmental sociology have noted that weaker governments work in more collaborative ways with civil society and economic actors to bring about better environmental outcomes. The economy can shift from a command-and-control, or a neoliberal orientation, to having more hybrid and collaborative arrangements with other social actors. All of these differences have an effect on the ways environmental decision-making takes place and, as a result, the success or failure of both the decision-making process and how environmental policies are implemented and enforced.

Multidirectionality. In the anthro-shift, even though risk can drive social change, the process does not necessarily lead to a specific configuration among social actors or a more environmentally-friendly outcome. A society could have an environmental state: the government is relatively weak, collaborating with both civil society and economic actors to include environmental protection as a state responsibility. Increasing uncertainty due to a major “risk event,” such as a terrorist attack, an environmental disaster, a financial crisis, or a pandemic could lead to changes in the arrangement of social actors that then changes the relationship between society and the natural environment. This reconfiguration may involve the government becoming stronger and the economy functioning more independently and with less regulation, which is more consistent with the critical perspectives. In this case, environmental protection would not be as effective. Similarly, a risk pivot can lead to a reorientation in the other direction, and a more collaborative and environmental state might emerge. This relationship goes back and forth; understanding when risk leads to societal changes that are more consistent with the critical perspectives and when it leads to arrangements that are more consistent with the optimistic perspectives is a key task for environmental sociologists.

Given that the relationship between society and the environment changes, how do we study it in a meaningful way? Research testing different theories about the relationship between the environment and economic development use a variety of research designs, ranging from in-depth case studies of factories, corporations, and communities to statistical analyses of the relationship between forms of environmental pollution, such as carbon dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels, and measures of economic growth.

Review Sheet: Theoretical perspectives on society and the environment

Key Points

- There are multiple ways to think about the relationship between societal development and environmental protection.

- Pessimistic theories see economic growth as in conflict with environmental protection.
- Optimistic theories think economic growth is possible with environmental protection.
- The anthro-shift argues that the relationship between economic growth and environmental protection changes based on other social characteristics.
- The anthro-shift says that the relationship between society and the environment is determined by risk and perceptions of risk.
- The anthro-shift is multidirectional; it can move toward both more and less environmentally friendly configurations of actors.

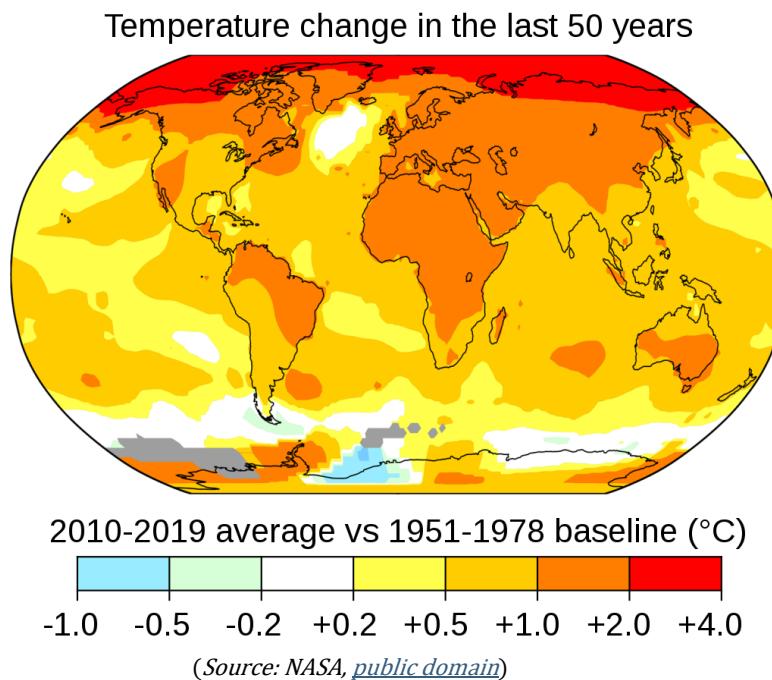
Key Terms

- **Civil society** – People working individually or collectively through community groups and social movements.
- **Treadmill of production theory** – Suggests that societies driven by economic expansion are in conflict with nature.
- **Old-growth forest** – One with mature trees that have been relatively undisturbed by human activity.
- **Metabolic rift perspective** – Theory focused on the interchange of matter and energy between human societies and the larger environment as economies grow.
- **Growth imperative** – Need for constant economic growth.
- **Social metabolism** – Exchange of resources and material between society and the environment.
- **Ecologically unequal exchange theory** – Focuses on unequal resource exchanges and ecological interdependencies within the global economy.
- **Environmental state** – Governments include environmental protection as a basic responsibility.
- **Nongovernmental organizations** – Non-profit groups that work independently of governments.
- **Ecological modernization theory** – View that the dynamic nature of capitalism allows economic growth and related technologies to be directed toward environmental reforms.
- **World society theory** – Perspective that global institutional structures bring about environmental protection.
- **Reflexive modernization** – View that through development, environmental protection becomes more common.
- **Risk society** – Risk is spread broadly throughout a society.
- **Green New Deal** – Proposed legislation to address climate change and racial inequalities.

- **Anthro-shift** – Sees the society-environment relationship as dynamic, determined by how governments, the market, and civil society interact and how much they prioritize environmental issues.
- **Risk** – Actual and perceived exposure to environmental dangers and natural disasters.

CLIMATE CHANGE

- How does sociology help us understand climate change?
- What are the different ways that sociologists look at responses to this global environmental problem?



Climate change (warming of the Earth and increases in extreme weather events) provides a great example of the conjoint constitution between society and the natural environment: it's a human-caused environmental crisis that also has tremendous consequences for people. According to the United Nations, "One of the most pressing issues of our time, climate change threatens the lives and livelihoods of billions of people. Natural disasters, environmental degradation and extreme weather patterns disrupt harvests, deplete fisheries, erode livelihoods and spur infectious diseases. Some effects come on suddenly, as when a typhoon of unprecedented force destroys entire communities. Others unfold over time."³⁷

Given that climate change is affecting all levels of society—from the local to the global—and addressing the problem requires substantial changes to the energy infrastructure our economy relies on, environmental sociologists have used a variety of research methods to study it.

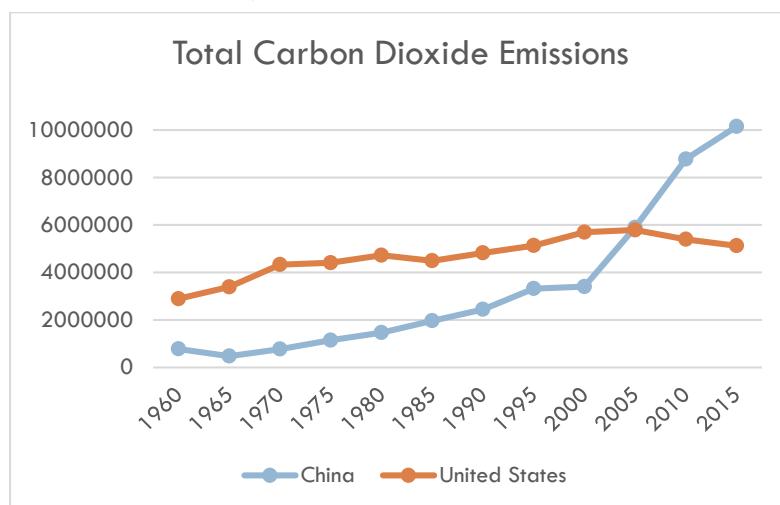
Measuring and interpreting our contributions to climate change

While analyses are conducted using different methods at different scales, including the individual energy or manufacturing plant level, the city level, and the state level, research often focuses on nations, looking at how the majority of the world's countries contribute to climate change by emitting carbon dioxide and through efforts to respond to this environmental problem. This type of analysis is used by governments to negotiate and assess international agreements to address climate change.

One challenge is deciding how to measure the amount of carbon emissions each nation produces. There are three common measurements: total emissions, per capita emissions, and emissions per unit of Gross Domestic Product (that is, emissions per unit of production in a nation).

Total emissions focus on the scale of environmental damage: how much carbon, collectively, are we adding to the atmosphere each year? This is the most important measure when considering the climate, given that it's the overall accumulation of emissions in the atmosphere that contributes to global warming and climate change. The second measure, **per capita emissions** (the amount of emissions per person) assesses international inequalities in carbon emissions, where the atmosphere is viewed as a global **commons**, a resource available to everyone. From this perspective, every person in the world has equal rights to the atmosphere, and the amount of allowable pollution should be determined per person. The third measure, **emissions per unit of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)**, is widely used to quantify relative levels of carbon efficiency or eco-efficiency, since we can compare how much carbon each nation emits to create the same amount of value.

Figure 1: U.S. and China Total Emissions, 1960-2015



Figures 1, 2, and 3 provide examples of these measures of carbon emissions for the United States and its largest trading partner, China, from 1960 to 2015. They present data on carbon emissions from burning fossil-fuels and manufacturing cement, which is essential for construction.³⁸

For total emissions (Figure 1), which are measured in metric kilotons, we see that emissions were much larger for the U.S. than for China in 1960, before China opened its economy to foreign trade and implemented free-market reforms in 1979.³⁹ The difference between the two nations increased in the 1960s, remained fairly stable in the 1970s, and then began to shrink as total emissions for the U.S. started to flatten out while total emissions for China increased dramatically. By 2005, total emissions for China was larger than for the United States, and the gap between the two nations grew substantially until 2015, when the graph ends. The **Paris Agreement**, a global climate effort, was negotiated in 2015 and committed all countries to take steps to address climate change.⁴⁰

Figure 2: U.S. and China Per Capita Emissions, 1960-2015

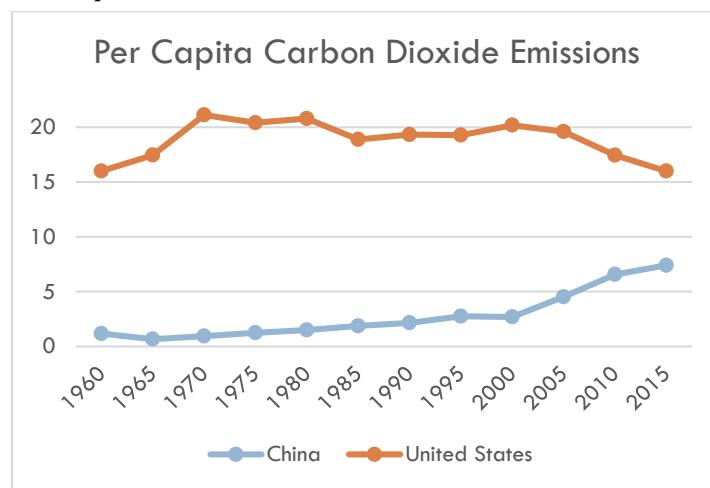
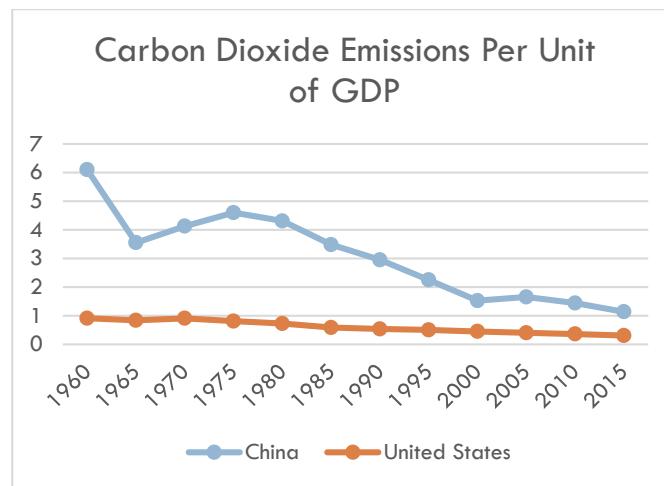


Figure 3: U.S. and China Emissions per Unit of GDP, 1960-2015



For per capita emissions (Figure 2), measured in metric tons per person, we see an enormous gap between the United States and China, with per capita emissions in the U.S. more than ten times

higher than in China in 1960. The gap between the two countries got larger in the 1970s and then began to decrease as China's per capita emissions gradually rose, while per capita emissions for the United States remained relatively stable in the 1980s and 1990s, then began to decrease after 2000. So while China now emits much more carbon overall than the U.S. (Figure 1), per capita emissions in the U.S. were more than twice as large as in China in 2015.

For emissions per unit of GDP, measured as kilograms per 2010 U.S. Dollar (Figure 3), both nations experienced decreases from 1960 to 2015, but the decrease was much more substantial for China than for the United States. On the surface, this trend suggests that China and the U.S. became more carbon-efficient over time, even though both nations increased their *total* emissions (Figure 1).

Comparing these measures provides important insights about climate change. Even with moderate differences in the results of analyses these kinds of data, the general findings of sociological research on carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases tend to support the arguments of the critical perspectives, suggesting that economic growth and inequalities between nations are fundamental causes of the climate crisis.⁴¹

How should we address climate change?

Beyond the U.S. and China, carbon emissions continue to be high across countries.⁴² Unfortunately, nations are producing rising levels of greenhouse gases even though they negotiated international agreements to cap emissions and then reduce them. Based on the current scientific consensus, we should stabilize the Earth's climate to limit global warming to an average increase of **1.5 degrees Celsius** (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit). An increase above this point would lead to lasting changes that cannot be stopped or reversed. To halt global warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius, scientists have determined that carbon emissions must be lowered overall and carbon removal technologies will be needed to reduce carbon that has already accumulated in the atmosphere.

Figure 4 is from a 2018 special report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a group of the top natural scientists and social scientists from around the world who are working on this issue.⁴³ The report provides scenarios for governments to consider as they try to limit climate change so it does not pass this important point of 1.5 degrees Celsius limit for warming. The report presents four pathways that will reduce carbon concentrations in the atmosphere enough to stay within this limit. They range from Pathway 1 (P1), an accelerated pathway to reduce carbon emissions by shifting away from carbon-based fossil fuels quickly, to Pathway 4 (P4), which involves economic growth and development that leads to the most "greenhouse gas intensive lifestyles" for the longest period of time.

Technological innovation plays a role in all four scenarios. It is necessary to develop sustainable and affordable energy supplies that aren't based on fossil fuels, and to develop ways to capture carbon in the atmosphere and store it so we can substantially reduce global concentrations. Pathway 4 is the closest to a business-as-usual perspective where we don't take steps to reduce carbon emissions; instead, it relies on technological innovation to remove carbon after it has been released into the atmosphere. The two technologies that are used in these pathways are: bioenergy with carbon

capture and storage (BECCS); and agriculture, forestry, and other land use (AFOLU). Both involve removing carbon that has already been emitted into the atmosphere, in some cases creating carbon sinks by planting forests or agricultural products that capture carbon.

Each pathway involves the various social actors—governments, citizens, and businesses, including the fossil fuel industry—working together to reduce carbon concentrations in the atmosphere. Governments would play a big role in determining which path each country chooses to respond to climate change. However, as we've discussed, each country's response to the climate crisis will be determined by its particular configuration of social actors, and these configurations can change.

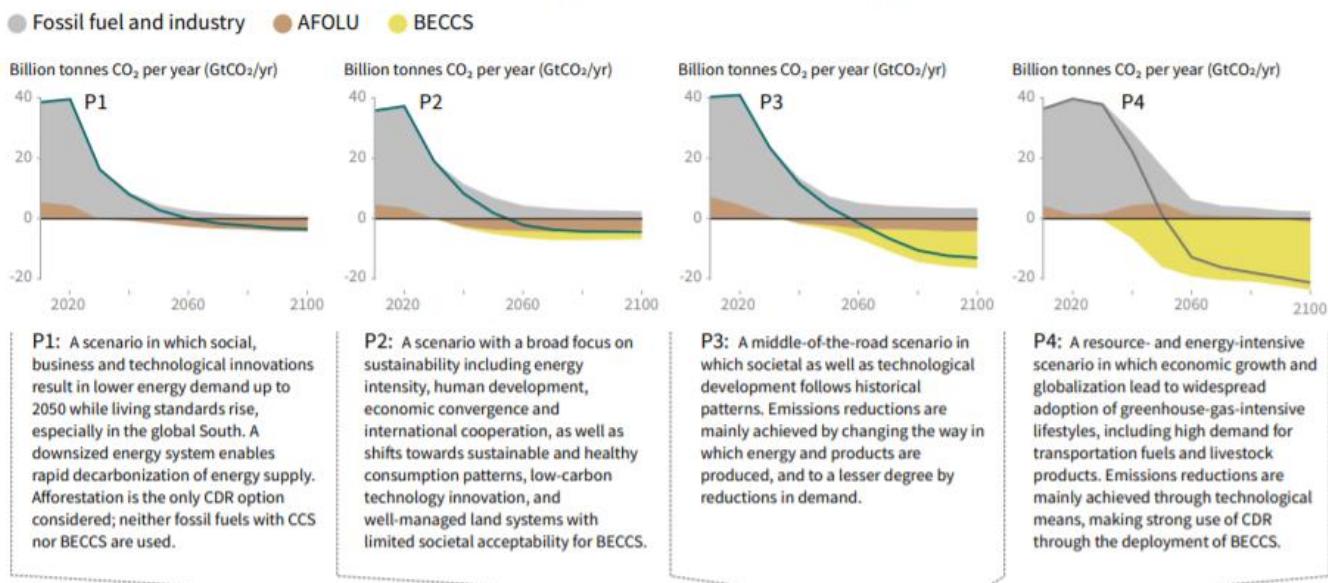
While scientists have created these possible pathways to limit climate change to 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming, progress toward an international response that effectively implements a plan that will actually reduce carbon emissions has been limited. All of the pathways involve changes to the economic system in terms of which fuels are used to generate electricity, for transportation, and to manufacture products. Currently, we are not even close to following *any* of the four pathways outlined by the IPCC that would keep warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius, and data from 2020 indicate that the planet has already warmed an average of 1.3 degrees.⁴⁴

Figure 4: Pathways to Combat Climate Change

Characteristics of four illustrative model pathways

Different mitigation strategies can achieve the net emissions reductions that would be required to follow a pathway that limits global warming to 1.5°C with no or limited overshoot. All pathways use Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR), but the amount varies across pathways, as do the relative contributions of Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS) and removals in the Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Use (AFOLU) sector. This has implications for emissions and several other pathway characteristics.

Breakdown of contributions to global net CO₂ emissions in four illustrative model pathways



Source: [IPCC](#)

Although almost all countries signed onto the Paris Agreement by 2016, the agreement itself doesn't commit countries to emissions reductions that keep global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. National responses to this environmental crisis have been diverse and change as governments change, which frequently leads to reorientations of social actors who choose different paths to address climate change, including choosing not to address the issue at all; for instance, the Trump Administration decided to pull the U.S. out of the Paris Agreement in 2017.⁴⁵ Different cultural and historical contexts that involve varied natural resources affect a country's specific response and trajectory. Japan, for example, has limited natural resources to fuel its energy sector while the United States has more coal and natural gas than it uses and is able to export both fossil fuels to other countries.⁴⁶

Social responses to climate change are especially difficult because this environmental problem involves gradual changes to the entire planet. Because climate change is caused by concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere affecting various natural systems around the world, there is no immediate, clearly observable effect of a specific policy; we can't directly *see* climate change happening, or see if we're slowing it down. Change will be slow, and the pathways identified by the IPCC would limit change to a manageable level, not to stop it entirely. If we're successful, it doesn't mean the earth won't warm at all; it means we would avoid changing the climate so much that we surpass a "point of no return" where drastic changes threaten entire societies. Whether we manage this or not, there's little question that climate change will lead to all sorts of environmental changes, including melting the polar ice caps, sea levels rising, **desertification** (when fertile land becomes desert), extreme weather (including hurricanes and heatwaves), and the extinction of some plants and animals. These changes will have clear effects on society, including where people can live and how they live there.



Drought and desertification affect farming. (Source: USDA, [public domain](#))

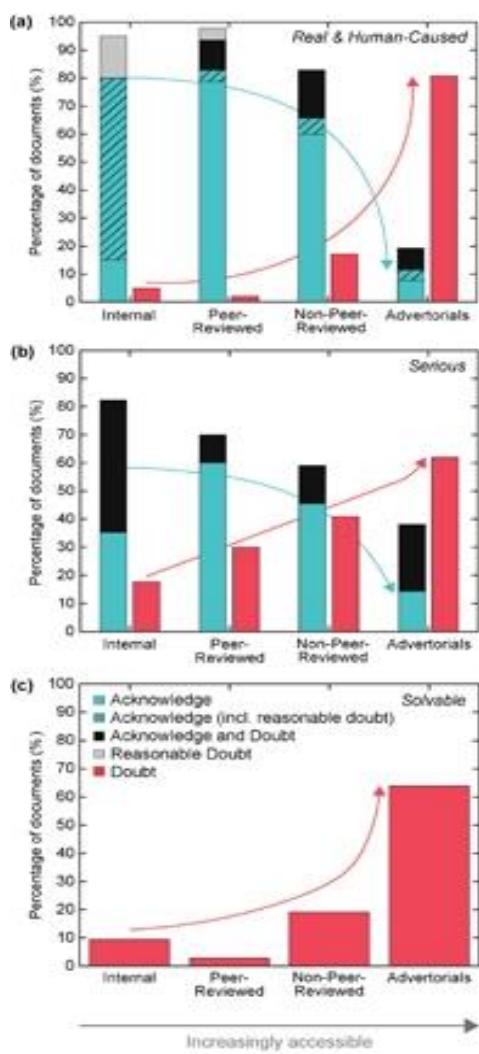
Determining how to respond to climate change is a challenge among countries, and has also created tensions between people within the same nation. Regions within nations that have lots of natural resources—such as the province of Alberta in Canada, which is home to petroleum deposits known as the Tar Sands—generally resist measures to address climate change.⁴⁷ A battle over how to address climate change and the political power to make those decisions has been documented in multiple countries and regions. The anthro-shift framework can help us understand these battles and what determines their outcomes across regions, countries, and the world as a whole.

Climate denial

Promoting scientific uncertainty is a tactic in the battle over how to respond to the threat of climate change. The overwhelming majority of scientists around the world agree that climate change is happening and is caused by human activities.⁴⁸ But powerful interests have waged a war to miscommunicate the scientific consensus and confuse people about the level of certainty. Intentionally

promoting scientific misinformation about climate change is called **climate denial**. At this point, it is well documented that the tobacco and fossil fuel industries use the same scientists and publicists to downplay the risks of smoking and climate change.⁴⁹ Multiple studies have shown how fossil fuel industry interests, including some of the biggest oil companies in the world, contributed to this war over the science of climate change and how the science is communicated to the public.⁵⁰

Figure 5: Climate Misinformation by Source



Source: Supran and Oreskes 2017 ([CC BY 3.0](#))

Figure 5 presents some of the findings from analyses of documents generated by ExxonMobil from 1977 to 2014. Red represents material expressing mostly unfounded doubts (misinformation) about climate change; turquoise sections represent documents that acknowledged that climate change was happening (even if they included reasonable doubts among scientists about it that still existed at the time); the black sections represent discussions that both acknowledged climate change and discussed unfounded doubts. ExxonMobil presented misinformation about the scientific certainty of climate change to the general public through paid editorial-style advertisements (advertorials), even while their own scientists' research (the internal documents) was much more likely to acknowledge (indicated by the turquoise sections) that human-caused climate change was occurring.⁵¹ On the other hand, the scientific papers (peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed) overwhelmingly acknowledged that climate change was real, caused by people, and would have serious effects. If you read an advertorial placed by ExxonMobil, you got a very different idea of the science on climate change than if you read the science itself.

Looking beyond this one fossil fuel company, research has also documented how corporate funding of science about climate change has contributed to polarizing views and creating conflict around the climate issue.⁵² As special interest groups push climate denial, the message that the science is uncertain leads to confusion among the general public, who

then support policymakers and policies that don't address climate change even though the science about it is clear.⁵³

Not only can climate misinformation confuse people and encourage us to believe there is uncertainty about the science of climate change; climate misinformation has also been used by political elites to support specific political perspectives and agendas. Instead of policymakers using

science to make decisions about how to address climate change, perspectives *about* the science (some based on the information generated by companies with fossil fuel interests) are trapped in **echo chambers**, or groups of ideologically similar policy actors who amplify and distort climate misinformation.⁵⁴ In other words, the politics of climate change drives the science more than the science drives the politics.

Disproportionality and hyperpolluters

In 1968, Garrett Hardin published an article about the **tragedy of the commons**.⁵⁵ His paper highlights the ways that many common pool resources – those available to everyone, like air or water – are being polluted due to self-interest, or what some scholars have called the “free-rider problem.”⁵⁶ From this perspective, since everyone has access to the common resource, individual people may act selfishly and use too much of it, thinking that if they don’t, someone else will. Since we’re afraid of missing out personally, we behave in ways that don’t benefit the common good.

More recently, William Freudenburg responded to this view of resource use with a sociological lens.⁵⁷ Instead of viewing most environmental damage as the result of the overuse of common resources, Freudenburg concludes that there is **disproportionality** – inequalities in the production of environmental harms – in environment-economic relationships. Looking at toxic releases by facilities in the U.S., Freudenburg found that the majority of industrial facilities are not free-riding when it comes to environmental pollution. Instead, most pollution comes from a relatively small number of facilities.

Other analyses have also found disproportionality in environmental degradation. In their recent book *Super Polluters*, Don Grant and colleagues discuss **hyperpolluters** across a range of industries and sectors that are disproportionately responsible for environmental harms, including contributing to climate change.⁵⁸ These findings have been replicated with data from households, electrical energy producers, and fossil-fueled power plants in most nations around the world, including the United States.

Why does disproportionality matter? Although addressing climate change and other environmental problems can feel overwhelming, given the enormous number of polluters around the world, understanding disproportionality reveals that we could make significant improvements in the quality of the environment if just a small proportion of companies – the worst actors in their industries – reduced their pollution levels.⁵⁹

Review Sheet: Climate change

Key Points

- Climate change is a key example of how societies and the environment affect each other.
- Different measures of carbon emissions highlight different relationships. Per capita emissions focus on inequality and how much carbon is produced by each person in a

- country. Emissions per unit of GDP measure how much carbon a nation produces for the value it creates in its economy. Total emissions allow us to see our overall impact on the atmosphere.
- Scientists agree that we should limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius to avoid devastating impacts on societies around the world. We are not currently on track to stay within this limit.
 - To reduce climate change, societies could follow a number of pathways, focuses more on reducing use of fossil fuels (to limit emissions of carbon) or relying on technologies to remove carbon after it's released.
 - While countries signed on to the Paris Agreement, it does not enforce any specific limits on carbon emissions or commit nations to reducing carbon emissions.
 - Climate denial involves intentionally spreading misinformation so people are unsure about the severity of climate change or whether humans cause it.
 - Climate change represents a tragedy of the commons, as every nation has access to the atmosphere and releases carbon, even though the overall result hurts everyone.
 - A small group of hyperpolluters in any industry are often responsible for a large proportion of all pollution.

Key People

- Garrett Hardin
- William Freudenburg
- Don Grant

Key Terms

- **Climate change** – Warming of the Earth and increases in extreme weather events)
- **Total emissions** – How much carbon we add to the atmosphere.
- **Per capita emissions** – Carbon emissions per person.
- **Commons** – Resource available to everyone.
- **Emissions per unit of GDP** – Eco-efficiency, or carbon emitted to create economic value.
- **Paris Agreement** – Global agreement to take steps to address climate change.
- **1.5 degrees Celsius** – Scientific consensus of amount of global warming societies can adapt to.
- **Desertification** – Land turns into desert.
- **Climate denial** – Intentionally promoting scientific misinformation about climate change.
- **Echo chamber** – Ideologically similar groups who amplify and distort climate misinformation.
- **Tragedy of the commons** – Since everyone has access to the common resource, individual people may act selfishly and use too much of it.
- **Disproportionality** – Inequalities in the production of environmental harms.
- **Hyperpolluters** – Those disproportionately responsible for environmental harms.

ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

- What is the relationship between the environmental movement and the environmental justice movement? How are they different?
- What have sociologists learned from studying these different movements?



(Source)

While corporations continue to pollute and create climate misinformation designed to confuse the public and support policymakers who are funded by the fossil fuel industry, social movements have emerged to respond to these challenges. On April 22, 2020, the world commemorated the 50th anniversary of **Earth Day**. The original event, held in 1970, turned out 20 million Americans to protest environmental pollution and celebrate the planet,⁶⁰ and the anniversary event was expected to engage people across the U.S. and around the world in teach-ins, climate strikes, and concerts. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic the in-person event was converted into a digital event coordinated by local leaders on every continent (for a map, visit the [Earth Day website](#)).

As we discussed, environmental sociology emerged during the 1970s after the first Earth Day, when the environmental movement became very active in the U.S. Research on social movements discusses the diverse tactics that groups and individuals use to pressure economic and political actors from both inside and outside the system. When social movements work inside the political system, they tend to be much less confrontational than when they work outside it through protests, strikes, and other disruptive tactics. Most contemporary social movements use a combination of insider and outsider tactics to achieve their goals. (For more information on social movements, see the Politics chapter).⁶¹

Groups and individuals involved in the environmental movement work inside the political system to pressure businesses and political actors to protect the environment; they lobby elected officials and business representatives, work as shareholders to change the policies of companies, vote for candidates who support stronger environmental policies, buy products that are more environmentally sustainable, and avoid products that are known to damage the environment. They also use tactics that work outside economic and political systems to encourage environmental change. The most common outsider tactic is protest, which can be more or less confrontational. Protests have become very common in the U.S., with some of the largest demonstrations focusing on climate change. Protests frequently have various economic and political targets. For example, the 2017 People's

Climate March targeted the federal government, pressuring it to rejoin the Paris Agreement and encouraging Congress to pass legislation to reduce carbon emissions.

The environmental movement in the United States grew out of efforts to conserve pristine natural areas. With this focus on conservation, rather than protecting people from environmental harms like pollution, it's not surprising that the movement has a history of concentrating on issues of and supported by people with privilege.⁶² More recently, the **environmental justice movement**, which focuses on the unequal distribution of environmental harms and environmental goods by race and class, emerged outside of this movement.⁶³ The environmental justice movement has been more focused on the ways that people in low-income communities and communities of color have less access to environmental goods like parks and are disproportionately exposed to environmental bads, like polluted air and water. These groups are **frontline communities**, those that experience environmental pollution and harm first and most severely.

As consensus has grown that climate change is one of the most pressing problems of our time, social movements have focused on mobilizing activists around this particular issue. New social movement organizations have been formed to focus on climate change. One of the most well-known is the U.S. Climate Action Network (the U.S. branch of an international network of activists), which was founded in 2006 and coordinates a large network of local groups that work to support the U.S. in meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement.⁶⁴ More recently, Sunrise Movement, formed in 2017 to build "an army of young people to make climate change an urgent priority across America, end the corrupting influence of fossil fuel executives on our politics, and elect leaders who stand up for the health and wellbeing of all people,"⁶⁵ gained national notoriety for occupying House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office in 2018 to demand that Congress pass a Green New Deal, an environmental priority of newly-elected Congressional Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

At the same time, many environmental groups that have been around for decades have shifted much of their attention to climate change. For example, one of the oldest environmental groups in the U.S., the Sierra Club, started their Beyond Coal campaign in 2002. The goal of the campaign is to replace coal, the most carbon-intensive of all fossil fuels, "with clean energy by mobilizing grassroots activists around the country to advocate for the retirement of coal plants and to prevent new coal plants from being built."⁶⁶ As of the summer of 2020, the campaign reported that it had helped lead to the retirement of over half of all coal-burning power plants in the United States.

Activists working to fight climate change and the various groups that coordinate their efforts have also integrated the notion of justice into their efforts. As the world responded to the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis in May 2020 with protests across the U.S., conservation and climate-focused groups called for solidarity with the protesters and their concerns. For example, Sunrise Movement encouraged its network of thousands of members to join the Black Lives Matter movement in their protests against systemic racism and police brutality.⁶⁷

Even with these recent efforts, conflicts still exist. The protests against systemic racism led many organizations and institutions to consider how they are contributing to the problem. A number of environmental groups were pressured to reflect on their pasts and address inequities in their

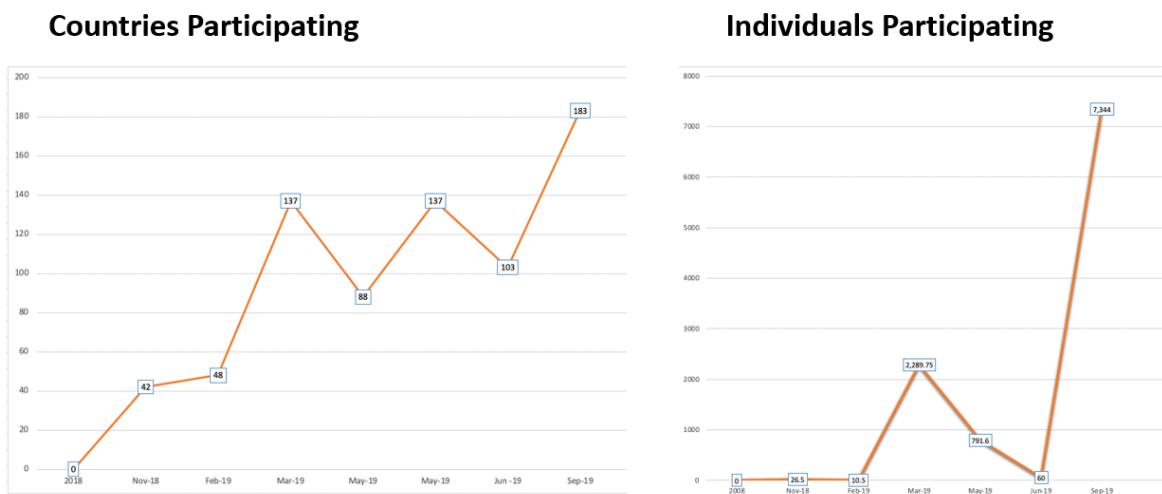
leadership and membership. The Sierra Club, for example, has reflected on the fact that its founder, John Muir, was a noted racist,⁶⁸ while the Union of Concerned Scientists was pressured to think about how it has treated its Black workers over the years.⁶⁹

Youth climate strikes

On August 20th, 2018, **Greta Thunberg** participated in the first-ever climate strike. Inspired by the national school walkout against gun violence in the U.S. that was organized after the Parkland School Shooting in Florida, the 15-year-old decided to spend her Fridays sitting with a handwritten sign in front of the Swedish parliament. Since that Friday in 2018, **Fridays for Future** – the group coordinating this tactic of skipping school on Fridays to protest inaction on climate change – has spread around the world.

In March 2019, the first global climate strike took place, with more than 1 million people around the world taking part. Six months later, in September 2019, young people and adults responded to a call by young activists to participate in climate strikes as part of the Global Week for Future surrounding the United Nations Climate Action Summit; the number of participants jumped to an estimated 7.6 million people globally (Figure 6).⁷⁰

Figure 6: Growth in Global Climate Strike Participation, 2018-2019



Source: [Fridays for Future](#) public data

In early 2020, organizers of this movement were planning for even larger strikes and demonstrations throughout the year. However, with the global spread of COVID-19 and the enforcement of social distancing, climate activists called off the in-person protests and moved their activism online.⁷¹ In April 2020, as part of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, the organizers for the climate strike hosted a 3-day digital event called Earth Day Live.⁷² As part of the event, they encouraged activists to participate in numerous activities including virtual protests, tweet storms, hashtag activism targeting specific corporations, and posting selfies with signs.

The aim of the digital strike was to maintain the momentum of the movement while in-person activism was seen as too dangerous due to the pandemic. Although digital activism makes it easier to connect with people in different locations, it's unclear how these changes will affect the youth climate movement. Organizers and activists in this movement report that their environmental activism is directly connected to issues of equity and racial justice. Now that many young people in the youth climate movement have participated in in-person protests in support of Black Lives Matter, it's likely that the climate strikers will go back into the streets even during the pandemic. In fact, the next global climate strike has been called for September 25th, 2020.⁷³

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we discussed how sociologists think about the relationship between society and the natural environment, the questions they ask, and what their research tells us about some of the most pressing issues of our time. Although the field of environmental sociology emerged relatively recently, especially compared to other areas of sociology, there's no doubt that its importance will grow as the interactions between social change and environmental change become increasingly apparent. We have only discussed a small number of environmental issues in this chapter, but the relationship between societal development and environmental degradation contributes to numerous environmental problems that are interrelated, including water depletion, sea level rise, and threats to biodiversity around the world. Sociologists can help us understand the complex relationship between society and the environment, looking at how our communities can protect the environment so people grow up with clean air and water and green space to explore, as well as how battles at the local, state, national, and international levels over access to environmental goods and where to locate environmental bards are fought and resolved in environmentally sustainable and socially equitable ways.

Although some people think of the environment as outside of society and unconnected to how society functions, one of the main goals for this chapter was to highlight the clear connections between society and the environment. As the conjoint constitution stresses, society has an effect on the quality of the natural environment; environmental change, in terms of environmental degradation and protection, also has a clear effect on the quality and scope of society.⁷⁴ Decisions about how to treat the environment or respond to the unintended consequences of societal development are not made in a vacuum; they are the outcome of configurations of social actors from the government, the economy, and the public who compete to have their perspectives heard and negotiate actively for a successful outcome. We hope this chapter helps you think in a more sociological way about environmental change, environmental problems, and environmental solutions.

Another goal of this chapter has been to stress the role that environmental sociology can and will play more broadly in the future. While environmental sociology is a relatively young field, it has

grown very quickly. At the same time that interest in environmental sociology has expanded within sociology, programs in environmental studies and sustainability studies have also grown worldwide. In many of these programs, environmental sociology courses are considered foundational parts of the curriculum.

Besides the growing presence of environmental sociology in higher education and published research both within and outside of sociology, environmental sociology has experienced a growing presence in policy. Within the U.S., sociological studies have influenced decisions at the Environmental Protection Agency and efforts of the U.S. Global Change Research Program, which coordinates research on climate and other environmental changes. Environmental sociology is also increasingly present at the international level, where researchers contribute to policy discussions and to international scientific assessments, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).

Review Sheet: Environmental movements and environmental justice & conclusion

Key Points

- In recent years, social movements have introduced protest campaigns to bring more attention to climate change. Participation has grown rapidly.
- Activists use a mixture of insider and outsider tactics to influence government environmental policy.
- Environmental justice activists emphasize that race, ethnicity, and class affect who experiences the most severe effects of environmental degradation.
- Young activists have been at the center of recent climate change movements.
- Environmental sociologists continue to influence government policy by studying how societies and the natural environment affect each other and how environmental destruction will impact different communities and nations.

Key People

- Greta Thunberg

Key Terms

- **Earth Day** – Annual event to protest environmental pollution and celebrate the planet.
- **Environmental justice movement** – Focuses on the unequal distribution of environmental harms and environmental goods by race and class.
- **Frontline communities** – Those that experience environmental pollution and harm first and most severely.
- **Fridays for Future** – Group coordinating tactic of skipping school on Fridays to protest inaction on climate change.

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