

## Who Has, Who Doesn't?

### *Looking for Answers to Poverty, Inequality, and Homelessness*

*The curse of poverty has no justification in our age. It is socially as cruel and blind as the practice of cannibalism at the dawn of civilization, when men ate each other because they had not yet learned to take food from the soil or to consume the abundant animal life around them. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty.*

—Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here?* (1967)

**P**rofessor Robert Rhoads created a service learning class at Pennsylvania State University where students spent a week over winter break working with homeless citizens in Washington, D.C. While spending their nights sleeping in the basement of a local church, students volunteered at a variety of soup kitchens. According to Rhoads (1998), the project “enabled students to learn about the lives of homeless people and in this way helped students to see homeless citizens as real people with real problems and concerns” (p. 43). As one student explained, “I learned that the homeless in general do not earn their predicament. Instead, their problems are brought on by a series of events that are largely beyond their control. Such events could make me or anyone wind up homeless” (p. 44).

Inequality exists in all societies, and **poverty** in most. Sociologists argue that both result primarily from social and structural conditions. While individuals’ behaviors may contribute to their own particular circumstances, *poverty itself comes from a society’s unequal distribution of resources—money, food, clothing, shelter, and so on.* Inequality derives from various groups possessing different amounts of wealth and power. Thus, while some people may have particular talents or skills, or might work very hard, their success in obtaining wealth or status is more often determined by the larger economic, social, or political conditions that surround them, *not* by their own individual actions.

Although inequalities seem basic to all forms of social organization, what they are and how they impact people vary tremendously across time and space. Thus, the social problems that come from inequality can differ widely depending on any particular society's economic system, political composition, and set of cultural norms and values. As you will see later in the chapter, some sociologists even argue that inequality is *not* a social problem. For them, wealth and power inspire competition and result in the most skilled and talented people reaching the positions they are best suited for. But even these sociologists would agree that huge inequalities either represent significant social problems or can be the root cause of them.

The student quoted earlier, in fact, implies that homelessness is not simply about a person's inability to compete for rewards. Homeless people don't necessarily "choose" their conditions, nor do they become homeless because of laziness or a lack of natural aptitudes. The phenomenon of **homelessness** has two major causes: poverty and the lack of affordable housing for poor people. Individual homeless people have little power to impact falling wage rates, change tax policies that benefit rich people and reduce subsidies for the poor, or alter real estate markets that make it more profitable to tear down cheap apartments and build luxury townhouses.

In spite of how little control most homeless people have in determining the larger causes of poverty, they often work very hard to improve their own and their family's lives. According to Gaetz and O'Grady (2004), there is little evidence that homeless people avoid work. In fact, just the opposite is true: "[M]any hours are spent toiling for, in many cases, limited dollars. . . . The problem is not about motivation, a rejection of the world of work, or the attractiveness of government benefits (in many jurisdictions the homeless are not eligible for welfare)" (p. 607). Similarly, Robert Rosenthal (1994) has argued, *social stigma*—the ways in which people discriminate against and devalue others based on physical or behavioral attributes—actually hinders anyone who has become homeless from ever rejoining the ranks of the housed. Because they look poor or unkempt or "scary," no one gives them a chance. As another student in Professor Rhoads's (1998) service projects announced,

I feel entirely different about homeless people than I did previously. I understand better some of the circumstances that contribute to people losing their jobs, or their homes. But I also understand that many of the people I've met through this work are not helpless victims. They are more than capable of working and maintaining a normal life if there were just more opportunities. (p. 40)

In most cases, to be homeless in America is not a sign of laziness or incapacity, but an indicator of people who struggle immensely, both physically and emotionally, to survive against the odds.



**Image 2.1** Despite a C average in college and a sketchy performance in graduate school; a series of failed business deals; serious violations of duties while a member of the military; and almost two decades (age 17–35) of “nomadic” behavior that included heavy drinking, partying, and drug use, George W. Bush became the 43rd president of the United States. While pundits and others have debated Bush’s political skills and overall intelligence, sociologists would argue that his success can only be explained by the wealth and power of his family. Each time he failed, or performed poorly, or misbehaved socially, he was able to avoid the economic or social ramifications that poor, working-, and middle-class people normally experience. While the United States of America promotes and cherishes an ideology of rugged individualism, the majority of our most successful people began with a disproportionate cache of wealth and power, and benefited from familial, peer, institutional, and even governmental support in gaining or maintaining their success. Sociologists use the term *social stratification* to explain the shape of structural inequalities and the varying levels of economic wealth, political power, and social status that different people have.

Source: © Reuters/CORBIS.

In the United States, mainstream values and ideas now celebrate individual achievement almost to the exclusion of concern for the collective or public good. Such cultural shifts have resulted in strong sentiments to cut taxes and reduce the size and power of government agencies once charged with redistributing various resources to poor people. These policies actually increase inequality by giving those with more wealth and power greater opportunities to make it and retain it, while simultaneously taking away support, not just from social welfare programs like food stamps and Medicaid, but also from traditionally espoused public institutions such as schools, hospitals, and police and fire departments. For example, tax cuts since 2001 have returned over \$100,000 to each person making over \$1 million per year. These same tax cuts have returned less than \$100 dollars per year to those making less than \$50,000 annually. For those earning \$51,000 to \$99,000, the percentage of federal income paid in taxes has actually increased from 18.7% to 19.5% during that period. In the eyes of many critics, most tax cuts have shifted the burden of public funding from the wealthy to the middle class (Krugman 2004).

Meanwhile, the costs of health care and education—services whose costs were historically offset by large public infusions of tax revenue—have risen as government funding has diminished. Thus, whatever tax savings may have been experienced by working- and middle-class people, they were easily wiped out by the increases to the costs of health; education; and a host of local services like sanitation, roads, and police and fire protection. In other words, recent tax policies have cost the middle and working class more money in the long run, while those in the top levels of wealth and income have benefited from getting more money back. Inequality continues to grow in our society, as those with resources acquire more and those without find fewer opportunities to succeed.

This chapter on inequality begins with a brief look at data on wealth, poverty, and inequality in the United States. Next, we present a brief historical look at the nation's broadest and most formalized policy attempt to address poverty: the welfare system. We will then examine how various sociological theories and concepts help explain inequality. *Despite different theories about the origins and impact of inequality, each intellectual approach provides potential strategies for addressing the social problems that arise from inequality.* By presenting how people with contrasting ideas might organize programs and projects that address similar issues, we hope to encourage a more broad-based understanding of both the discipline of sociology and its commitment to ameliorating social problems, thus making the world a better place. We should also note that data and analysis on global poverty and inequality will be addressed in the final chapter on globalization. However, we also need to recognize that many of the same social dynamics are at work in poverty and inequality on both domestic and international levels, and thus the same theoretical analyses are used to understand them.

## PAINTING INEQUALITY BY THE NUMBERS: A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT OF U.S. WEALTH AND POVERTY

In 2003, the median household income in the United States was \$43,318. However, if we break down the population into quintiles (fifths), we see that incomes range dramatically among the nation's population. Even more notable is the trend toward increasing income inequality. Between 1979 and 2002, the middle 20% of American income earners saw their after-tax income rise 15% or \$5,700, while the lowest quintile rose only 4.5% or about \$600. Yet income levels for the top fifth of the nation rose almost 50% or just over \$42,000. *For those in the top 1% of the nation's population, their incomes skyrocketed over 111% or more than \$333,000* (see Table 2.1). In 1979, the average income for the top 1% was 33.1 times the average income of the lowest 20% and 10.1 times the middle fifth. By 2000, the top 1% had an average income that was 88.5 times higher than the bottom fifth.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 2.1** Average After-Tax Income by Income Group (in 2002 dollars)

Income Category	1979	2002	Percent Change 1979–2002	Dollar Change 1979–2002
Lowest fifth	\$13,200	\$13,800	4.5%	\$600
Second fifth	\$26,700	\$29,900	12.0%	\$3,200
Middle fifth	\$38,000	\$43,700	15.0%	\$5,700
Fourth fifth	\$49,800	\$61,700	23.9%	\$11,900
Top fifth	\$87,700	\$130,000	48.2%	\$42,300
Top 1 Percent	\$298,900	\$631,700	111.3%	\$332,800

*Source:* Congressional Budget Office, *Effective Federal Tax Rates: 1979–2002*, March 2005.

This increasing inequality results in some startling numerical juxtapositions. On the one hand, the number of millionaires (those with financial assets totaling \$1 million) has risen from almost 84,000 in 1983 to nearly 2.5 million in 2004. Households with a net worth of over \$1 million rose to almost 7.5 million. On the other end of the economic spectrum, less than 10% of Americans, or about 23 million, lived below the poverty threshold in 1983. By 2004, nearly 12.5% of the population, or almost 36 million, lived below the poverty line.

<sup>1</sup>These statistics were compiled from a number of sources including Edward N. Wolff, *Top Heavy* (Washington, DC: The Century Foundation, 2002).

### WHO DREW THE POVERTY LINE AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?



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the costs of housing, health care, child care, and transportation have risen exponentially, while food expenditures have declined significantly.

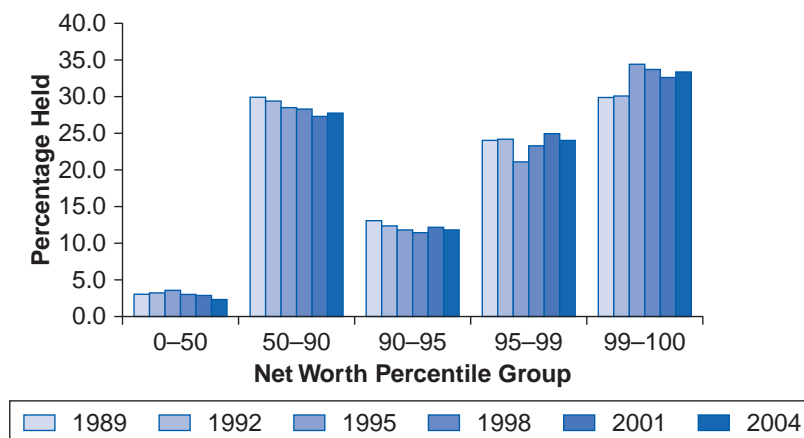
Almost unchanged since its inception in 1965, the *poverty line* came from an article published by Mollie Orshansky of the Social Security Administration. Established research showed that families of three or more persons spent about a third of their income on food. Orshansky then calculated the dollar amount for a family of three based on the Department of Agriculture's "Economy Food Plan" and multiplied it by three. Although she argued that such an amount would never be sufficient for an actual family of three to live on, she thought it might be effective as an amount by which to measure inadequacy, explaining, "if it is not possible to state unequivocally 'how much is enough,' it should be possible to assert with confidence how much, on an average, is too little" (quoted in Fisher 1992). The poverty line has become a demarcation of who is or is not poor. Since 1965, however, the cost of living has changed dramatically. Food is no longer the most expensive budget item for families. The

The growing concentration of wealth shows an even greater economic disparity than does income. **Income** is what one earns through wages. According to Oliver and Shapiro (1997),

Income refers to a flow of money over time, like a rate per hour, week, or year; wealth is a stock of assets owned by an individual at a particular time. **Wealth** is what people own, while income is what people receive for work, retirement, or social welfare. Wealth signifies command over financial resources that a family has accumulated over its lifetime along with those resources that have been inherited across generations. (p. 259, emphasis added)

They conclude that wealth is “more encompassing” than income in determining life chances. In 1976, the richest 10% of families in the United States held 50% of the country’s wealth; by 1995, they held 70% of all wealth. In 1995, the top 20% of families owned 83% of wealth, while the remaining 80% of families held only 17%. The figures below (Figure 2.1) show that between 1989 and 2004, during both economic upturns and downturns, the richest 1% moved from having just below 30% of the wealth to almost 35%, while the poorest 50% went from a high of over 4% in 1995 to under 3% in 2004 (Collins et al. 2004; Wolff 2002).

**Figure 2.1** Proportions of Total Net Worth Held by Various Percentile Groups, 1989–2004



*Source: Currents and Undercurrents: Changes in the Distribution of Wealth, 1989–2004, by Arthur B. Kennickell, 2006 (cited in <http://www.stephenkinsella.net/2006/04/06/changes-in-the-distribution-of-wealth-between-1989-and-2004/>).*

The difference between wealth and income is also notable when it comes to issues of race and gender. Just in the last decade or so, the median income of families of color has risen by approximately 12%, while that of white families has risen 18% (see Table 2.2). However, if we look at the wealth difference between white and non-white families during same period, the gap is much more stark and growing. Median net worth for families of color actually decreased 7% from 1995 to 2001 while white families saw their median net worth rise 37%.



**Table 2.2** Changing Median Incomes and Net Worth by Race (1995–2001)

Median Income	1995	1998	2001	\$ change	%
Families of Color	\$23,000	\$25,400	\$25,700	\$2,700	12 %
White Families	\$38,200	\$41,100	\$45,200	\$7,100	18 %
Median Net Worth	1995	1998	2001	\$ change	%
Families of Color	\$18,300	\$17,900	\$17,100	−\$1,200	−7 %
White Families	\$88,000	\$103,400	\$120,900	\$32,400	37 %

*Source:* “Recent Changes in U.S. Family Finances,” by Ana M. Aizcorbe, Arthur B. Kennickell, and Kevin B. Moore. In *The Wealth Inequality Reader*, edited by Dollars & Sense and United for a Fair Economy, 2004, Boston, MA: Economic Affairs Bureau.

Economic inequalities along gender lines are a bit more complicated. While income differentials between men and women have been well documented (Tomaskovic-Devey 1993; Wilson 2003), wealth differentials are impacted by other variables. For example, marriage makes it difficult to measure inequalities between genders. However, among non-married men and women, large differentials exist, as the median net worth for female-headed households was \$28,000 in 2001 and for male-headed households it was \$47,000 in the same year. There is an even greater gap between white and non-white women, as single white female households’ median net worth was \$56,590 in 2001, while that of single African American female households was \$5,700 and that of single Hispanic women was \$3,900. According to Amy Gluckman (2004), however, the gap among younger men and women seems to be disappearing. She says, “this should not be surprising as women are moving toward parity with men in several of the factors correlated with higher net worth, such as education and income” (p. 63). Still, she cautions, “the income gap has long been smaller between young women and men than between older women and men, at least in part because the workforce participation of women—who typically bear greater parenting responsibilities than men—becomes more uneven over time” (p. 63).

The impact of an increasing bifurcation of wealth can be best witnessed in the difficulties even middle-class Americans have in paying for basic commodities such as housing and health care. In urban areas, property and real estate have become such lucrative industries that both housing costs and rental rates have gone through the roof. The following chart (Table 2.3) shows just how much the average family would pay for a modest, two-bedroom apartment in the cities listed. Also included are the average salaries for selected working- and middle-class professions in those cities and how much annual income would be needed to pay for housing based on a family spending 30% of its income on it.



**Table 2.3** Middle- and Working-Class Rental Affordability in Major U.S. Cities

	San Francisco	Boston	Washington	San Diego	Chicago	Dallas
Apartment rent*	1,362	942	840	805	762	749
Income needed to pay for rent**	54,480	37,680	33,680	32,200	30,480	29,960
Median teacher's income	38,293	38,584	32,781	38,584	36,733	34,800
Median nurse's income	39,603	39,541	32,280	31,990	31,990	38,930
Median janitor's income	20,800	20,987	15,787	16,536	18,824	14,830

*Source:* Joint Centre for Housing Studies, as reported by *The Economist* (available at <http://www.pbs.org/now/politics/middleclass.html>).

\*Monthly rent for modest two bedroom

\*\*Assuming 30% of income spent on housing

Middle-class professionals like teachers and nurses either barely make enough money or in some cities fall just below what is needed. For janitors and other working-class families, it is virtually impossible to find adequate housing without either paying well above 30% of one's salary or moving far enough out of urban centers to find cheaper housing. The latter strategy usually results in even higher transportation costs. These are the dynamics at work as more and more working people must choose which commodities to purchase among health care, housing, and food.

Economic inequality also affects health and health care. The table below demonstrates the impact financial resources have on who has health insurance.

Annual Income	% Not Covered by Health Insurance
Under \$25,000	24.3
\$25,000–\$49,999	18.8
\$50,000–\$74,999	13.0
More than \$75,000	8.2

Studies continue to show that the more wealth you have, the more likely you are to stay healthy, get adequate medical attention when you're sick, and live longer. However, the greater income inequality that exists in a given society may also contribute to poorer health

for *everyone*, not just the impoverished. According to social epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson (Wilkinson and Pickett 2006), the lack of access to health and health care results in poor health for those without resources, but a society's overall health also is negatively impacted by levels of economic inequality. He explains that "relative inequality" creates an overall sense that particular individuals are "failing," and these people are much more likely to die of cancer or coronary disease, infectious diseases, or (of course) suicide than are people who rate themselves as successful. Wilkinson points toward higher mortality rates in the United States than in poorer countries that have greater equality as evidence for his theory. In other words, while the United States may have more wealth, greater economic and social disparity results in more stress, illness, conflict, and crime. Thus, the United States has higher mortality rates than countries with less wealth but also less *disparity*.<sup>2</sup>

Whether Wilkinson is right or not about the overall impact of inequality on health, concentrations of wealth have indisputably resulted in a variety of social problems, especially in communities characterized by concentrations of poverty. To address these problems, the United States has embarked on many different solutions to poverty, but none as formal or expansive as our system of welfare.

### CORPORATE WELFARE



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<sup>2</sup>Other arguments for the impact of economic disparity on everyone's health include the following: (1) Very contagious diseases including STD's fester when people receive neither preventive care nor treatment. These diseases spread among an *entire* population, not just the poor. (2) Vast inequality obscures the problems of the poorest, and those with the resources and power to establish health care for poor people understand these issues less and less. The more distance between rich and poor, the less likely the rich are to address poverty. Again, without redress, health issues among the poor quickly become health issues for the mainstream. See Robert H. Frank, *Falling Behind: How Rising Inequality Harms the Middle Class* (University of California Press, 2007).

The Cato Institute, a conservative Washington, DC, think tank, defines **corporate welfare** as “any government spending program that provides unique benefits or advantages to specific companies or industries . . . [including] programs that provide direct grants to businesses, programs that provide research and other services for industries, and programs that provide subsidized loans or insurance to companies.” Supporters of these programs argue that government aid boosts the economy, and company profits eventually create more jobs and trickle down to the general public. Congressman Bernie Sanders (2002) has demonstrated, however, that some programs like the Export–Import Bank show corporate welfare at its worst. He explains, “General Electric has received over \$2.5 billion in direct loans and loan guarantees from the Ex-Im Bank. And what was the result? From 1975–1995 GE reduced its workforce from 667,000 to 398,000, a decline of 269,000 jobs. . . . [This included insuring] a \$3-million loan to . . . [help] General Electric build a factory where Mexican workers will make parts for appliances to export back to the United States. This project is responsible for the loss of 1,500 jobs in Bloomington, Indiana” (n.p.).

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF WELFARE IN THE UNITED STATES

The history of a national **welfare** system in the United States begins during the Great Depression, although programs to address the problems of poverty date back to the early use of poorhouses and outdoor relief aid in the 1700s and 1800s (Katz 1986). All relief programs, however, reflect a long-standing *ideological suspicion over subsidies* for poor people. In essence, what sociologist Robert Bellah has called Americans’ belief in “hyper-individualism” and myths of the “self-made man” run counter to social welfare efforts. This distrust has resulted in the requirement that any public aid program prove the *worthiness* of potential recipients. For example, in the late 19th and early 20th century, state and local governments established aid programs that responded to a perceived crisis in the rise of single motherhood. Most supporters “saw single mothers as victims, either of death [of husbands] or other undesirable mishaps, or of male irresponsibility” (Gordon 1994:160). Historian Linda Gordon argues that such images were necessary to legitimize the aid on a moral level. Eventually, these local “Mothers’ Aid” programs “became the model not only for ADC (Aid to Dependent Children) but for most of the programs today called ‘welfare’” (p. 160). Yet the ideological apprehensions of a devoutly individualistic citizenry remained constant as well.

After the stock market crash of 1929, the United States witnessed some of its worst economic conditions ever. Unemployment rates reached record highs as over 25% of the population couldn’t find work. Evictions skyrocketed, leaving between 1 and 5 million people homeless. From bread lines to shanty towns, the signs of poverty were everywhere. By the early 1930s, local and state governments had broken their budgets on public aid and could not meet basic relief needs (Leuchtenberg 1963; McIlvane 1993).

In 1932, President Franklin Roosevelt declared that “every man has a right to life; and this means that he has also a right to make a comfortable living. He may by sloth or crime decline to exercise that right; but it may not be denied him” (quoted in Zinn 1966:50–51). The federal government thus designed a wide range of relief efforts—commonly known as the **New Deal**—that included a \$500 million federal emergency aid program, a national employment service, the Commodity Credit Corporation for farm loans, and a variety of public works projects through the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Public Works Administration (PWA).

The largest Depression-era aid programs came under the Social Security Act, which established unemployment insurance, old age and survivors’ insurance for pensions, and aid to dependent children or ADC. But, as historian Michael Katz (1986) has argued, these programs only further entrenched the deep ideological distinction between those worthy and not worthy of support. “There remains a lurking assumption,” Katz writes, “that many of those who ask for help neither need nor deserve it” (p. 246). Thus, despite FDR’s recognition that poverty could very well be a systemic problem and not one of individual failings or weaknesses, America’s myth of rugged individualism continued to stigmatize most poor people who needed help.

But FDR’s New Deal also represented a response to tremendous social and political upheaval brought about through grassroots organizing around the country. The Depression had inspired a host of collective activity and protest that sociologists Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1979) have referred to as “poor people’s movements.” They argue that poor people “began to define their personal hardship not just as their own individual misfortune but as misfortune they shared with many of their own kind. . . . [and] maybe it wasn’t they who were to blame, but ‘the system’” (p. 32). Demonstrations, marches, and rent riots as well as increased pressure from labor strikes and sit-ins eventually forced the federal government to develop more support programs and larger financial subsidies for the poor and unemployed. Piven and Cloward conclude, however, that the expansion of relief programs and the mainstreaming of dissent eventually reduced pressure on the system. As protest alliances waned and leaders moved from militancy to legislative lobbying and agency building, the relief rolls were cut back and millions were left unemployed and destitute again.

Still, these benefits comprised the bulk of the welfare system until the 1960s when ADC was changed to ADFC (Aid to Dependent Families with Children), and the number of recipients more than doubled. President Lyndon Johnson’s **“war on poverty”** programs increased the wide variety of services available to poor people, including expanded health care, legal services, and social work. Once again, Piven and Cloward (1979) argue that such federal programs were responding to growing social movements and the political upheavals of poor people, not simply to the feelings of sympathy and goodwill among political leaders. By the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, protest alliances again gave way

to institutionalized service agencies and community organizations. And once again, the money for programs and services was cut.

But the backlash against such programs and the “undeserving poor” had, according to historian Premilla Nadasen (2005), “come to be dominated by discussions of cultural values, ‘illegitimacy,’ and immorality, all cast through a racial lens” (p. 37). State and local officials used such stereotypes to justify benefit cuts, limited access, and more invasive monitoring procedures. These changes made a hard life for poor people even harder. The distrust of poor people also led to shifts in how money was spent, as more went toward *administering* programs and *managing* or *supervising* recipients instead of directly to poor people themselves. Large layers of bureaucracy now stood between economic resources and the people who needed them. Agency staff and social workers took on the intermediary role of determining who deserved aid and who didn’t, resulting in even more moralizing and stigmatizing of poor people.

Since the 1970s, most federal and state welfare policies have consistently cut welfare benefits and limited eligibility. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan made cutting welfare one of his major domestic policy initiatives. Citing the story of a Chicago “welfare queen” (a euphemism for a welfare cheat) driving a “welfare-paid-for Cadillac,” he suggested that this particular woman had “ripped off” the government for more than \$150,000, and was representative of rampant fraud within the system. Although no researcher ever found this woman, and most reputable studies showed that fraud was actually a minor problem at most, Reagan succeeded in initiating deep cuts to public aid. Politicians again found that they could gain popular support by ridiculing the supposed behavioral problems and character flaws of the poor.

From a conflict theoretical perspective, the history of welfare can be seen as a long *struggle between rich and poor*. When poor and working-class people create effective social movements, they are successful in bringing about public policies that redistribute certain amounts of wealth. When the movements wane or don’t exist at all, government policies generally benefit the wealthy with tax breaks, corporate subsidies and bailouts, and so on. In fact, as Piven and Cloward (1993) have argued, most welfare policies are intended to “regulate the poor.” For the economy, welfare maintains a surplus labor force at barely subsistence levels during periods of slow production. On a cultural and political level, welfare maintains a group of social scapegoats whose behavior and capacities can be ridiculed to reinforce the moral legitimacy of an unequal system. But even the words and language used to talk about poverty change when poor people organize and speak for themselves. As Nadeasen (2005) explains about the national welfare rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, “empowering individuals as agents of social change, movements gave a voice to the disenfranchised and articulated a moral code of human rights, racial equality and social justice that superseded the law and custom” (p. 39) that discriminated against them.

### MEDIA BOX: POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN THE MEDIA

According to sociologist Kate Butler (2007), "The mainstream media presents those who live in poverty as being inherently different from the rest of society by creating artificial divisions and dissimilarities." She continues, "Few stories about issues surrounding the debate on poverty make it to the mainstream, and when articles about those living in poverty do appear, these stories are too often negative and have no contextual information" (n.p.). She cites three reasons for these stories and their focus:

1. The feminization and racialization of poverty in the media;
2. The complexity of the issue itself;
3. The unpopular nature of these types of stories with elites in society.

The result, according to the media research group FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), argues that "despite being an issue that directly or indirectly affects a huge chunk of the U.S. population, poverty and inequality receive astonishingly little coverage on nightly network newscasts. An exhaustive search of weeknight news broadcasts on CBS, NBC, and ABC found that with rare exceptions, such as the aftermath of Katrina, poverty and the poor seldom even appear on the evening news—and when they do, they are relegated mostly to merely speaking in platitudes about their hardships" (deMause and Rendall 2007:2). In the 3 years between 2001 and 2004, only 58 segments on poverty appeared on the major news networks and over half of them followed the Katrina disaster in New Orleans (p. 2). Perhaps media corporations hope that if poor people aren't on TV, people won't think poverty is much of a social problem at all—out of sight, out of mind. Or maybe, as Gil Scott-Heron proclaimed in his poem of the same name, "The Revolution will not be televised":

The revolution will not be right back after a message  
 about a white tornado, white lightning, or white people.  
 You will not have to worry about a dove in your  
 bedroom, a tiger in your tank, or the giant in your toilet bowl.  
 The revolution will not go better with Coke.  
 The revolution will not fight the germs that may cause bad breath.  
 The revolution will put you in the driver's seat.  
 The revolution will not be televised, will not be televised,  
 will not be televised, will not be televised.  
 The revolution will be no re-run brothers;  
 The revolution will be live.

## CASE STUDY #1

### Speaking Truth to Power: Conflict Sociology and the Welfare Warriors

In 1996, the U.S. government passed sweeping welfare reform legislation that included cutting subsidies and reducing the time period during which poor people could receive benefits. The bill also forced many recipients to work for their benefits and made it increasingly difficult for them to attend college, study for GEDs (General Educational Development certificates, equivalent to high school diplomas), find alternative job training programs, and raise their children. The rhetoric supporting the legislation seemed even harsher. Although negative images of welfare recipients had been common since the beginning of government support for the poor, politicians in 1996 got downright nasty. Congressman John Mica (R-FL) compared aid recipients to animals as he held up a sign on the house floor reading, "Don't Feed the Alligators." He explained that "we post these warnings because unnatural feeding and artificial care create dependency." While equations between poor people and animals may have been extreme, such comments found acceptance with a public that believed people receiving welfare were lazy, fraudulent, immoral, and unwilling to work.

In response to cuts in aid and the increasingly hostile climate that supported them, a group of Suffolk County, New York, welfare recipients (or *participants*, as they preferred to be called) organized to challenge unfair policies for, and images of, the poor. Calling themselves the Suffolk County Welfare Warriors (SWW) and modeled after a similar group of poor women activists in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, these women began as a kind of speakers bureau. As lecturers, they countered stereotypes of laziness, ignorance, irresponsibility, and lack of ambition with stories of hard work, close families, and serious dreams. SWW spoke to religious groups and civic organizations and gave testimony at public hearings about the social disenfranchisement of poverty, the widespread impact of domestic abuse, the lack of economic opportunities for single women, and the dearth of child and health care available to low-income mothers. By debunking myths about who they were and how they became poor, SWW hoped to educate the public and change policies. The group also lobbied against a local policy that stopped child care benefits for women attending college, which led to a successful lawsuit. Eventually, the warriors also used direct action techniques such as hijacking programs at government meetings and public events in order to get their messages heard.

A group of undergraduate students from Southampton College started working with the organization in 1994 and for almost 2 years participated in a range of events, from educational to direct action, in order to help. One student, an older African-Native American woman with three children who herself had been on and off welfare support, became a member of the speakers bureau. Another student, a white Navy veteran whose mother had been on welfare for a short time after his parents divorced, attended meetings and helped organize a variety of direct action events. And another student, an 18-year-old woman from a white, upper-middle-class family in the Philadelphia suburbs, helped run an art program that acted as an informal day care for the children of some of the women who participated in the organization. In each case, students gained insights into the everyday lived

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experiences of people in poverty, as well as experience in working together with poor people themselves to change policies that maintained and intensified poverty.

Terri Scofield, the founder of SWW, believed that a group of women receiving welfare benefits could debunk mean-spirited myths about poor people at the same time that they organized to advocate for others suffering from what she called "systemic problems" of economic abuse and neglect (deMause 1995). For Melissa Arch-Walton, the Southampton College student, a single mother of three children and a welfare recipient, SWW "reframed the whole welfare reform debate from 'the welfare problem' to the problem of the disparity between the poor and the wealthy." In other words, she continued, "welfare exists to address inequality, so you can't reform welfare without doing something more about inequality."<sup>3</sup>

In fact, SWW argued that poor people should be shaping welfare reforms since they were the experts on what resources they needed to better raise their families. Scofield explains,

[The government] does a business bill, they talk to businessmen. They do an environmental bill, they talk to environmentalists. Why when they write a poverty bill, don't they talk to poor people? We are the experts on poverty. We can tell you exactly what we need. And it ain't services. The only thing keeping us from a decent life is money, income. We don't need parenting classes, we don't need supervision, we don't need training in self-esteem. What we need is education, what we need is good paying jobs. (Quoted in deMause 1996:16)

In other words, SWW allowed poor women to represent themselves. These women knew they worked hard, parented well, and were intelligent enough to succeed in higher education. Their stories described how a host of life circumstances, primarily linked to their class positions and public policies, kept them in poverty.

Students who worked with SWW not only learned these stories (for Melissa, it was already her own experience), but they also learned about strategies to impact public perceptions and public policies. For the student who led the arts and crafts workshop for the children of some of the activists, she provided an important service for the women who needed time to give talks, support other welfare recipients who were dealing with red tape, or just run errands. She also wrote that the experience taught her how few opportunities children in poverty have for enrichment programs—something she always took for granted growing up in an upper-middle-class suburb.

Adam Boyle (personal communication, June 2005), the Navy veteran, explains that he learned how systemic inequalities impacted people on an everyday level. In an interview, he remembers thinking that he "could have learned the specifics of welfare policies and how agencies work, but without

<sup>3</sup>Quotation from personal interview with Melissa Arch-Walton, March 1998. For more on the backlash against welfare mothers, see Ellen Reese, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers: Past and Present* (University of California Press, 2005) and Angie-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (NYU Press, 2004).

getting to know and work with SWW I would never have experienced how these policies and procedures work to impact people's daily lives." He continues,

When Beth lost a whole day of work because a case worker lost her file and she needs to fill out paperwork again; or when Terri spent an afternoon defending someone whose benefits were cut unfairly, you can see how the system works to degrade people, puts stumbling blocks in front of them and makes it harder to get off of welfare. On top of that, these women were vilified—they were an easy target to deflect attention from issues of government and corporate malfeasance by turning them into "lazy people with 10 kids living off the government's dime." When you meet them you would see how comical this caricature was. They didn't want to be on welfare. Who would, considering the hardships? Yet, if they did manage to make a decent life for their family they'd be vilified for that, too ("how come you can buy meat and your kids are dressed nice?" when checking out at the grocery store using food stamps). To make matters worse, the government wants to *look* like they're doing something to solve this "problem" and comes up with unworkable solutions to get them off welfare and into the workplace, forgetting that most of them already work, go to school, or both and that there are often children to care for, no money for transportation, and the government-sponsored jobs were dead-end, low wage ones. These women went through life just trying to eke out a living for themselves and their children, facing scorn at every turn. (n.p.)

SWW understood their poverty as being caused by systemic inequalities resulting from rich and powerful people promoting policies that increased their own wealth and power while demonizing those on welfare. Students who worked with SWW learned how policies and structural inequalities caused poverty in general, and they also learned how people in poverty could fight back to challenge both structures and ideologies that oppressed them.

Conflict sociology has long looked at inequality, not as a necessary function of social organization like the functionalists do, but as a result of unequal struggles for power in society. From a conflict perspective, poverty exists because people in power create policies and institutions to maintain and increase their power and wealth, while those with little power struggle to organize and change those conditions. Policies and programs to improve the lives of poor people arise only when serious grassroots movements force people in power to respond.

### Case Study Questions

1. How might welfare policies be designed differently if their architects were composed of people who participated in the welfare system?
2. What kinds of organizing methods did the Welfare Warriors use to challenge the power of state legislators and others?
3. What roles do you think students could or should play in addressing issues such as welfare reform?

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

### The Welfare Warriors and the Direct Action Welfare Group

Headquartered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Welfare Warriors have been fighting for the rights of poor women since 1986. According to its mission, "The Welfare Warriors are mothers and children in poverty who have joined together to make our voices heard in all policies affecting families in poverty, the larger community, and the Earth." Aside from marches, demonstrations, lobbying, and other grassroots activist tactics and organizing strategies, the Welfare Warriors produce the *Welfare Mothers Voice*, a newsletter with national distribution in the tens of thousands.



One recent edition featured the group DAWG (Direct Action Welfare Group) from West Virginia. According to Evelyn Dortch, one of DAWG's leaders, "Direct Action Welfare Group (DAWG) was founded by welfare mothers in college. We were fighting to make sure education counted as a work activity. To this day higher education and the right to an education are a big part of DAWG."

In 2000, the West Virginia Legislature passed Senate Bill 577, which was widely viewed as landmark legislation in the wake of welfare reform. The bill allowed West Virginia TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] recipients to count education and training as a work activity. This bill allowed people to pursue college degrees and still receive welfare benefits. West Virginia was one of the first states to allow this.



DAWG continues to fight to ensure that everyone who wants to pursue higher education has that right. West Virginia is still one of the few states that allows post-secondary (college) education to count toward work requirements for a welfare

check. But we are in danger of no longer having this option. Due to the recent Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) the federal government has changed what can count as a work activity. And one of the things that no longer counts is higher education. This means people who receive welfare can *not* go to college."

*Source:* Welfare Warriors website at [www.welfarewarriors.org](http://www.welfarewarriors.org). Photos courtesy of Evelyn Dortch (DAWG).

## CASE STUDY #2

### To Market: Functionalism and the East St. Louis Farmers' Market

Kenneth Reardon (1997), former professor of urban planning at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and director of the East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP), writes that the idea for a farmers' market in East St. Louis came from a door-to-door survey of 550 households conducted by a group of college students and community members. The survey found that most people spent more money on food than any other regular consumer item, yet they were often forced to shop outside of their neighborhoods or pay inflated prices for poor selections at local "convenience" stores. According to a University of Connecticut's Food Marketing Policy Center report, low-income urban neighborhoods across the United States have 30% fewer supermarkets than their wealthier suburban neighbors (Brownell & Horgen 2004; Cotterill & Franklin 1995). When it comes to groceries, *poor people pay more for less*.

The lack of access to adequate and healthy food results in something economists and hunger analysts call **food insecurity**. According to Kathleen Walker (2005),

Food insecurity is best defined as the uncertain ability of acquiring adequate nutritional food in a safe and acceptable manner. Household food security is defined as the ability of a household to have permanent and secure access of sufficient amounts and variety of foods. In food security all individuals in the household live a healthy, active and productive life. (p. 2)

Poor people suffer a variety of health problems because of the inaccessibility of nutritional food in adequate quantities. Changing their lack of access, however, seems out of their hands.

For major retailers, it only makes sense to locate in areas where people have more money to shop. The old joke states that three things determine a retail business's success: "location, location, location." Thus, Just-Food.com (2001) found, "it was no surprise that, on average, the top stores in the 2001 Supermarket Panel were in locations with unusually high median household income" (n.p.). Along with poorer people, low-income urban neighborhoods usually have higher crime rates that result in more security costs, higher utility rates, and older infrastructures that require frequent and expensive repairs. A lack of adequate transportation for consumers results in more people taking shopping carts home, further increasing retailers' costs. In essence, it doesn't make good business sense for grocery stores to locate in poor urban neighborhoods.

Perceived "good sense" based on such cost-benefit analyses pervades contemporary logic and morality. Such premises, however, also dominated sociological thinking for many years. Functionalism gained ascendancy in the United States right after World War II. As described earlier, the theory argues that society is an increasingly complex organism that must fulfill certain basic functions to survive and thrive. While functionalists usually claim that social problems are "dysfunctions" that eventually get addressed, many believe that the continued existence of certain social ills must mean that so-called "problems" actually have positive functions, too. In other words, a cost-benefit analysis would reveal that some social problems actually benefit much of society and, therefore, societies have a functional interest in maintaining, not ameliorating them.

In a famous article entitled "The Uses of Poverty: The Poor Pay All," Herbert Gans (1971) claimed that the historical persistence of poverty forces social scientists to consider the possibility that it serves

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some undeniable role in fulfilling some of society's basic functions. Gans realized such a claim, that poverty may be good (or at least necessary) for society, might be seen as controversial. He explained,

Associating poverty with positive functions seems at first glance to be unimaginable. Of course, the slumlord and the loan shark are commonly known to profit from the existence of poverty, but they are viewed as evil men, so their activities are classified among the dysfunctions of poverty. However, what is less often recognized, at least by the conventional wisdom, is that poverty also makes possible the existence or expansion of respectable professions and occupations, for example, penology, criminology, social work, and public health. (p 20)

Gans continued his list, contending that poverty also created jobs for people who provide services for the poor and presented career-making subject matter for journalists and social scientists. He concluded that "poverty and the poor may well satisfy a number of positive functions for many nonpoor groups in American society" (p. 20).

Gans (1971) went on to argue that poor people serve important economic functions, as they do the "dirty work" no one else wants to do, they do it cheaply enough to subsidize the middle and upper class who hire them, and they create jobs for middle-class service professionals ranging from social workers and health care providers to police and prison officials. On a social level, poverty serves to guarantee the social status of non-poor people, it provides an easily stigmatized group, and it helps to maintain economic and cultural discipline among those of higher classes who might fear falling into poverty.

Some sociologists believe that Gans's article was written "tongue-in-cheek" as a sarcastic critique of functionalism. For some, the idea that a system's functioning depended on a group's poverty and suffering seemed absurd, morally and theoretically. Yet, from a macro-functionalist perspective, Gans shed light on the many interests that *are* served by poverty's persistence. Certainly, poverty does not serve many positive functions for the poor themselves. Poor people often find that their own "cost-benefit analyses" of their condition require them to organize and act on their own behalf against what might be financially or socially profitable for others in society.

In the early 1990s, East St. Louis was one of the poorest communities in the nation with almost 40% of the population living below the poverty line. The city's once-thriving industrial base had disappeared as businesses sought to maximize their profits by seeking cheaper labor and production costs elsewhere. Meanwhile, the city also experienced a rapid evacuation of upper- and middle-class residents (mostly white) to the suburbs. With them went major department stores and other retail outlets. Traditional economic development plans had not succeeded in recruiting either major retailers or manufacturers back to the city. In an effort to take control of their own local economic and social development, the Winstanley/Industry Park Neighborhood Organization (WIPNO) contacted ESLARP to bring in university resources and expertise in hopes that more collaborative and community-based planning projects could be successful.

The ensuing project brought together University of Illinois students and faculty with religious leaders and local officials. They investigated job-creation strategies that might also keep consumer spending inside the local community. As Reardon (1997) explains, "*recaptured* purchases provide direct sales to local businesses, enabling them to expand their activities and increase city revenues

from local sales taxes" (p. 63, emphasis original). The aforementioned household survey was then conducted to see what kinds of businesses might be most successful in attracting people to shop locally. The emphasis on groceries, and particularly fresh and affordable produce, led the task force to consider the potential of a community-owned farmers' market.

In 1993, local residents and students examined a dozen other similar midwestern cities that had municipally operated farmers' markets. They interviewed customers, vendors, and managers to find out what made markets successful. Eventually, the group recommended that WIPNO develop a market in or near the East St. Louis central business district (Axel-Lute, 1999). Reardon (1999) describes the kinds of student involvement that ensued:

In the spring of 1994, the task force, with the assistance of a graduate planning student and faculty member, developed funding for such a facility. The task force collaborated with three graduate architecture, landscape architecture, and urban and regional planning studios to identify the most appropriate site for the market, design an attractive yet inexpensive market structure, and secure the necessary local and state building and health permits to establish a facility where fresh foods could be sold. . . . When the physical rehabilitation of the market structure was completed, these graduate students helped the task force recruit fourteen local residents interested in operating stands in the new market, and worked with WIPNO to design and offer a sixteen-hour small business training program to provide would-be merchants with basic skills in purchasing, marketing, merchandising, pricing, customer relations, and accounting. (p. 65)

Ultimately, between 1994 and 1996, the market generated almost \$395,000 in direct sales and helped the city recapture over \$900,000 that would have gone to nearby suburban towns if the farmers' market had not been there.

Gans's (1971) argument, that some social problems persist because they serve a range of social functions, is persuasive. But a functionalist approach to social problems also requires that we recognize how groups strive to meet their *own* needs. By tapping into the resources of local institutions such as universities and churches, WIPNO was able to move toward improving local economic conditions and even improve the community's nutritional choices. ESLARP's primary political goals target such opportunities and aim to offer resources, research, and expertise in the cause of community-led local development.

But ESLARP also has important educational objectives. Students participating in local development and improvement projects learn that social science research can be done in collaboration with nonacademic organizations and be applied to making the community a better place. They've learned and applied knowledge in a variety of fields: research methods, urban planning, community organizing, and landscape architecture. Reardon (1999) believes that examples such as the East St. Louis Farmers' Market highlight "the reciprocal learning that occurs in participatory action research projects in which the local knowledge of community residents is joined with the professional knowledge offered by university faculty and students to arrive at innovative solutions to community problems" (p. 65).

In essence, social problems become the subject and object of study as students use particular social problems as their curriculum, and use their course work to try and understand *and* address these very

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same problems. In the case of the East St. Louis Farmers' Market, students learned that poverty can impact a variety of issues, from consumer practices to nutrition. They also discovered that these disparities were not just a sign of social dysfunctions, but could also appear because economic institutions made cost-benefit analyses that seemed logical—at least for some. Ultimately, students learned that sociological theories could be marshaled to analyze a situation and develop strategies for change. Sociological research and knowledge could then be applied to make that change.

### Case Study Questions

1. What difference do you think it makes to have people in the neighborhoods decide what the local problems are that need to be addressed?
2. Many sociologists consider functionalism a "conservative" theory that merely legitimizes the system "as it is." Do you agree? How might this example challenge such a perspective?
3. What local businesses or groups would you create to address community problems?

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

### Mimi Arnstein, Wellspring Farm CSA



Mimi Arnstein is a farmer in Marshfield, Vermont. She runs the Wellspring Farm CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). CSAs allow people who might not have access to fresh (and often organic) produce to get them straight from the farm. According to Arnstein, "they reconnect people with the farms producing their food, while using 'members' or 'shareholders' fees to meet the farm's early season expenses." In exchange, members receive a weekly share of the season's harvest direct from the farm. CSAs address a variety of social problems by educating people about the environment and nutrition; helping the local economy and preserving farm land; and bringing people together to build community. Arnstein says, "CSA connects members with the land, seasonal change, and the people growing their food. Members support local farmers by keeping their food dollars in the community and contribute toward stewardship of

local land and agricultural viability on a small scale." CSAs often depend on volunteer labor and student internships.

*Source: Personal communication, April 2008.*



**CASE STUDY #3****Cultures of Poverty and Power: Symbolic Interactionism, or "Who You Callin' Homeless?"**

Poverty impacts children the most. In 2004, an estimated 38% of children (almost 27 million) lived in a low-income home, and 17% lived in families below the poverty line.<sup>4</sup> These children suffer from hunger, homelessness or inadequate shelter, and poor medical care. The 1994 Children's Defense Fund report, *Wasting America's Future*, documents what a lack of money does to poor children. Without proper food, poor children have high rates of iron deficiency, malnutrition, stunted growth, and lack of energy. Without adequate housing, youth suffer from transience; overcrowding; allergies and illness caused by cold, dampness, mold, cockroaches, and so on; and the disruption of sleep and study. Without sufficient health care, many chronic illnesses go untreated and serious diseases go undetected. Meanwhile, these children have little hope of improving their conditions through education, hard work, or some form of creative self-expression or intellectual activity. As one of the SWW student volunteers learned, kids who grow up in poverty have fewer resources and opportunities to experience the kinds of enrichment programs that often allow middle- and upper-class children to explore creative interests, occupations, or dreams.

In 1991, Valerie Ackerman, a social worker and local activist in Ann Arbor, Michigan, wrote a successful grant for McKinney Act funding for homeless youth. Passed in 1986, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act originally consisted of 15 programs providing a range of services to homeless people, including emergency shelter, transitional housing, job training, primary health care, education, and some permanent housing. Ackerman wanted money to address the educational deficiencies of youth whose transience from shelter to relatives' homes to public housing to shelter severely impacted their schooling. As part of her work, she enlisted me (Corey Dolgon, then a University of Michigan graduate student and composition teacher) to design a summer writing and enrichment program for her students. I had been involved with summer writing programs for high school students at the university and had worked with colleagues who were nationally known for designing community-based literacy programs for "at-risk" youth (Fleischer 1995; Schaafsma 1993).

To develop the curriculum, I enlisted a group of graduate students he had worked with as writing teachers and as community activists involved with anti-poverty, anti-racism and homelessness issues. We wanted to give students a chance to write creatively about their lives and experiences at the same time that we offered them basic literacy skills, computer skills, and a chance to publish work at the end of the 6-week program. We knew that homeless youth were stigmatized by teachers, welfare case workers, and the community at-large (Polakow, 1994). Many of us had already experienced, either through observation or our own backgrounds, how people assumed that poor youth grew up in cultures of poverty where education had little value.

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<sup>4</sup>These numbers are from the federal poverty guidelines issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The demographic findings in this fact sheet were calculated using a more complex version of the federal poverty measure—the thresholds issued by the U.S. Census Bureau. More information about federal poverty measures is available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/04poverty.shtml>.

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These assumptions led to the kind of labeling that lowered expectations of the youth and limited the motivations of the youth themselves. We thought our program could challenge these dynamics.

From a cultural perspective, some sociologists and anthropologists have proposed the **culture of poverty** theory (Lewis 1966). In brief, this idea recognizes that different classes have different sets of cultural values and practices. Poor people develop a *subculture* that includes unstable family structures, personal irresponsibility, and a lack of faith and investment in education and other public institutions. These values and behaviors get passed down from generation to generation and make it almost impossible to get out of poverty.

Many sociologists (Coward, Feagin, Williams 1974), however, argue that these cultures are a response to social conditions and are shaped as much, if not more, by the choices allotted by society as by individuals' choices. Sociologist Elijah Anderson's (1989, 1992) work on the sexual practices and family structures of inner-city teenagers offers an example of these dynamics. He explains that the sexual conduct among poor, black, inner-city adolescents often results in growing numbers of unwed parents. Partly, this comes from young men whose peer groups boast about sexual exploits and denounce conventional family life. Yet Anderson (1989) argues that their "realities are born of the extremely difficult socioeconomic situation prevailing in ghetto communities. The lack of family-sustaining jobs or job prospects denies young men the possibility of forming economically self-reliant families, the traditional American mark of manhood" (p. 25). While these young males' peer groups emphasize sexual prowess as a mark of manhood, girls may be lured by promises of love and marriage. As girls submit, they "often end up pregnant and abandoned, eligible for a limited but sometimes steady income in the form of welfare which may allow them to establish their own households, and at times, attract other men, in need of money" (p. 25). A culture of poverty results, but it is a culture that is highly structured by the opportunities and values that impact the possibilities and choices of poor urban youth.

Similarly, labeling theory helps explain how the expectations and treatment of poor youth further influence their cultural practices and social behaviors. We've seen how stereotyping and social stigma worked to impact the lives of poor women on welfare. The process of labeling has even more detrimental effects on children. Poor youth face lower expectations at school; experience higher rates of arrest; and suffer a barrage of media images that demonize their music, fashion, and other means of expression (Males 1996). Writer Jonathan Kozol (1996) interviewed a poor teenage girl from New York's South Bronx who explained the impact of these dynamics:

If you weave enough bad things into the fibers of a person's life—sickness and filth, old mattresses and other junk thrown in the streets and other ugly ruined things, and ruined people, a prison here, sewage there, drug dealers here, the homeless people over there, then give us the very worst schools anyone could think of, hospitals that keep you waiting for ten hours, police that don't show up when someone's dying . . . you can guess that life will not be very nice and children will not have much sense of being glad of who they are. Sometimes it feels like we've been buried six feet under their perceptions. (p. 123)

Our summer writing program hoped to address these cultural conditions. First, we would offer poor youth the chance to change their own self-perceptions by giving them an opportunity to be published authors. At the same time, we hoped to challenge the community's perceptions of these youth as they became the public experts on their own lives.

In two summers, students produced two different volumes of writing and art work (*Life Stories* and *Minds at Work*) and each summer we held book signings at local bookstores. Some wrote about their work experiences. Lanier, an 18-year-old junior at Willow Run High School, wrote "A Day at Work":

When I come in McDonald's I be wanting to be like, "Damn, another day in this bitch!" So I just, you know, go and do my original job: I go wash my hands, punch in and get my apron, and I begin working.

I go check the meat setting to see if everything is all right. The meat patties are very cold. I grab a few and begin cooking meat and wrapping burgers for about six hours.

The heat from the grill is very hot. The grease from the burgers was popping on me, burning me a little bit while I was cleaning the grill.

For about six hours I wrapped burgers and thought about stuff like them not giving me enough hours, about my pay, and about getting me another job.

Two weeks later I got twenty dollars for that day's pay.

Many of us had read ethnographies of factory and service work, but Lanier's words captured so much of the sensory experience—the range from frozen meat on the fingers to burning oil on the arms—of fast food labor. Lanier poignantly exposes the awful dilemma of such drudgery—hating the tediousness but wanting more hours.

Other students wrote about their lives in the streets. Guns and shootings, drugs and illness, welfare services and prisons, violence and despair filled the pages of both books. But students also wrote tremendous fantasy stories about knights and football players, about haunted houses and graveyards, about hard-nosed crime detectives and superheroes. Some of the most powerful writing reflected the dichotomy of being both children and people struggling to survive poverty. Poems from student David Gilvin-Heath depict the heart-wrenching truths of innocence amidst the degradation and horror.

### Bear

I am a bear, large and fierce

Yet somehow only a cub

My fellow people surround me with knowledge

I eat this sweet fruit with nectar and am poisoned

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Poisoned by my own fear and ignorance  
But yet I am a bear and am compelled by tradition to fight  
My own bitter hemlock now makes me weak  
No I must fight! Fight! Until there is nothing left to do  
But to die in shame and unknowing, a bear.

### Cat

I chase birds; I must be strong  
I run from dogs, could I be weak?  
I am a cat: no one's beast of burden  
I am a cat: not like a dog  
I am a cat: use me only as directed.

In the introduction to the first volume, Dave Schaafsma (quoted in *Life Stories* 1993:8) reminded readers that "despite all that [these students have] seen and done they are still children." He concluded,

Dancing with hope on these pages for a future where they are loved, where they are accepted, where they are not living in fear, hunger, despair, the voices of these proud and defiant and vulnerable children speak to us. What emerges, finally, is that these children become our teachers, speaking to us about what it means to live their lives. (p. 9)

And I believe that is exactly what Gilvin-Heath had in mind when he invited us to read,

### Being a Fruit

Lying idle waiting for you  
Waiting  
Unwrap my gentle skin  
Eat my sweet and lush insides  
Swallow me  
Let me provide for you

Students surprised us in other ways, too. Whenever we discussed the project in general terms, youth resisted the program's reference to "homeless" or "poor" youth. One student exhorted, "Who you callin' homeless? My mom has a home now." The youth themselves had accepted the social stereotypes of poor and homeless people to such a degree that they were offended by the reference. Such ingrained hostility to their own social conditions and position helps explain why so many of them actually resisted relating personal experiences and often chose to create fantasy pieces or fictional characters who experienced similar conditions. But even in these fantasies, they demanded a kind of respect and dignity, even if they couldn't reflect critically on the social and structural conditions that stigmatized and even demonized being poor.

Ultimately, the writing project was only a momentary blip on the radar screens of these youths' lives. But for a short time, these youth got a variety of opportunities: educational, personal, and political. The program gave students intense tutoring in writing and computer literacy, and it helped them develop a host of skills that would enhance their learning potential in school. Today, Gilvin says the program encouraged him to keep reading and writing and trying to better understand himself and the world around him. "It was an opportunity to think and dream about a better world, something that remains important to me today." I recently received an e-mail request from David to sign a petition and forward an announcement concerning a multinational corporation's plan to destroy two glaciers in Chile (thus destroying the local water resource) in order to mine for precious minerals discovered below the glaciers. He explained, "The problem we face with greed is out of control. This sort of ecological destruction should never be condoned."

Students also got an opportunity to build relationships with staff and one another in a noninstitutional academic context. In other words, youth experienced education in an empowering and encouraging framework—very different from the stereotyping or negligence they were used to. And, finally, as they became "published" experts in communicating their lives, their insights and ideas entered the public debate about policies for youth in poverty. Many of the staff members who have gone on to work in education and policy fields claim to have been impacted by these stories. Some of us use them frequently when promoting the power of intense, noninstitutional educational opportunities for children in poverty.

### Case Study Questions

1. Why did some of the young people respond negatively to being called "homeless"?
2. How did having the opportunity to express themselves formally and creatively change at least some of the hardships facing these youth?
3. Can you think of any experiences in your own life where your own sense of identity and pride was challenged by being stereotyped?

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

**Neil Donovan, Executive Director, National Coalition for the Homeless**

(Excerpt from interview with Andy Freeze, Street News Service)



**Andy Freeze:** How did you get started working on the issue of homelessness?

**Neil Donovan:** In my early twenties, I was studying to be a brother of religious orders, with the Xaverian Brothers. It was an important and life-changing period in my life. My first internship involved working at Common Life, a drop-in center for homeless and run-away youth. As a new intern, I asked a young girl in the shelter if she wanted to talk. She said, "Only if you promise to come back tomorrow." I agreed to return, hoping that our conversations could help her in some small way and maybe turn into something lasting. The Xaverian Brothers' motto is, "In harmony small things grow." So I guess in a way, I've just never stopped, "coming back tomorrow."

**AF:** You have worked with and for people who are homeless over 26 years, working at a variety of agencies, from what you have learned, what will help the National Coalition for the Homeless [NCH] move forward with their plan/agenda?

- ND:** Everywhere I've worked and everything I've learned, from working with and for people experiencing homelessness, has taught me about the importance of justice. The Coalition's mission, strategic plan and stand on justice is clear and direct: Bring America Home. It's the cornerstone of our beliefs and the engine that drives our advocacy. The only way that we can work toward ending homeless[ness], either as a coalition or as a nation, is through: housing justice, health care justice, economic justice and civil rights. . . .
- AF:** You then went to the National Alliance to End Homelessness to start up the Center for Capacity Building, which works with communities across the country. What did you learn from this experience and what else do you think is needed to help communities accomplish the goals contained in their Ten Year Plans to End Homelessness?
- ND:** I think there was a lot to learn from the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness experience. National advocacy groups learned that a call-to-action must consider the overall capacity of local communities to respond. The federal government learned that top down guidance only works if that guidance takes into consideration the needs and characteristics of local communities. And local communities learned about the importance of building capacity to a level that would allow them to end homelessness and not merely maintain a level of support. I think two things are needed to help communities accomplish the goals contained in their Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness. First, include current and former homeless people at every level of planning, development and execution. At the Coalition, we ask all groups—public and private, local, state, and federal—to begin every meeting by asking the basic question "Is everyone here, who needs to be here?" If there isn't a first-person representative stakeholder representing homelessness at your meetings and convenings, your plan has a greater potential to fail. Second, local communities can not and will not end homelessness without a greater federal commitment. There's an expression: "Homelessness is a national problem with local solutions." The end of that sentence should be, ". . . and a greater federal commitment."
- AF:** NCH has been around over 25 years, what do you see the role of the coalition as the organization moves forward?
- ND:** The original purpose or role of the National Coalition for the Homeless remains its only purpose: The Coalition exists as a national network of current and former homeless people, activists and advocates, community-based and faith-based service providers, and other dedicated individuals and organizations committed to ending homelessness in America. It's what attracted me to the Coalition and more importantly it's what will Bring America Home. The power is in its simplicity.



## SUMMARY

While some believe that “the poor will always be with us,” history has demonstrated that the rates and impact of poverty change significantly over time. How many people are poor and what quality of life poor people can expect are malleable social conditions, effectively impacted by humane public policies and committed public efforts. This chapter has demonstrated how a wide range of projects and programs has challenged the structural and cultural impediments that face poor people. Students working with neighborhood organizations, direct action groups, and educational programs have helped to make a serious difference in the lives of people with fewer resources. These collaborations taught all involved about the power of collective engagement in changing individual lives, but more importantly social institutions and public policies. Perhaps even more importantly, this work also exposed the limitations of these efforts and the continuing need to integrate local and regional work with large-scale political attempts to change the basic conditions of resource distribution in the country and around the world.

## SUMMARY QUESTIONS

1. What is social stratification? How does it shape and support the existence of poverty?
2. What is the poverty line? Why was it created? How has its impact changed?
3. How does an ideology like individualism impact our understanding and treatment of poverty in general and poor people in particular?
4. What is a social stigma? How does stigma influence social policy and individual treatment of poor people?
5. How do different theories of social life influence the kinds of approaches society takes to addressing poverty?

## GLOSSARY

**Corporate Welfare:** Government funding to corporations so as to enhance their profit-making capabilities through international trade subsidies, tax breaks, grants for advertising and marketing, and so on.

**Culture of Poverty:** This theory contends that poor people share deviant cultural characteristics and maintain lifestyles that perpetuate their own poverty.

**Food Insecurity:** When people lack physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life.

**Homelessness:** An extreme form of poverty in which families and individuals do not have access to affordable shelter.

**New Deal:** A series of policies and programs enacted by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration that addressed the severe economic hardships caused by the Great Depression. These included jobs programs, Social Security, and Medicare.

**Poverty:** The World Bank contends that poverty is hunger; not having a job; and lack of access to schools, health care, adequate shelter, and so on. However, a more comprehensive definition understands poverty as a relative term: Individuals, families, and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities, and have the living conditions and amenities that are customary, or are at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong.

**War on Poverty:** A series of policies and programs enacted by the Lyndon Baines Johnson administration to address the problems of poverty during the 1960s.

**Wealth vs. Income:** *Income* is what one earns through wages, while *wealth* is what people own.

**Welfare:** Government funding programs that include food stamps and direct payments to poor people, unemployment compensation and workman's compensation, and other aid that helps people when economic hard times occur.

## WEBSITES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT INEQUALITY AND SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

Alliance of Students Against Poverty: <http://www.asap2025.org/>

Beyond Shelter: Combating Chronic Poverty, Welfare Dependency & Homelessness: <http://www.beyondshelter.org/home.html>

Food First: <http://www.foodfirst.org/>

Institute for Research on Poverty: <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/>

National Coalition for the Homeless: <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/>

National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness: <http://www.studentsagainst-hunger.org/>

Oxfam America: <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/>

Project South: <http://www.projectsouth.org/>

Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity: <http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/>

US Census Bureau—Poverty: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty.html>

Welfare Warriors: <http://www.welfarewarriors.org/>

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