

# SOC10103: General Sociology May Intersession 2025

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Chapter 8: class and  
stratification in the United  
States



# Chapter outlines

- What is social stratification
- Classical perspectives on social class
- Contemporary sociological models of the US class structure
- Inequality in the United States
- Poverty in the United States
- Sociological Explanations of Social Inequality in the United States

# What is social stratification

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Social Stratification is the Hierarchical Arrangement of Large Social Groups Based on Their Control of Basic Resources.

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Stratification Involves Patterns of Structural Inequality That are Associated with Membership in Each of These Groups, as Well as the Ideologies That Support Inequality.

# What is social stratification/social mobility

Social mobility is the movement of individuals or groups from one level in a stratification system to another. This movement can be either upward or downward.



Intergenerational mobility is the social movement experienced by family members from one generation to the next. For example, Sarah's father is a carpenter who makes good wages in good economic times but is often unemployed when the construction industry slows to a standstill. Sarah becomes a neurologist, earning \$350,000 a year, and moves from the working class to the upper-middle class. Between her father's generation and her own, Sarah has experienced upward social mobility.

## What is social stratification/social mobility

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intragenerational mobility is the social movement of individuals within their own lifetime.

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RaShandra, who began her career as a high-tech factory worker and through increased experience and taking specialized courses in her field became an entrepreneur, starting her own highly successful online business.

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RaShandra's advancement is an example of upward intragenerational social mobility. However, note that both intragenerational mobility and intergenerational mobility can be downward as well as upward.

## What is social stratification/systems of social stratification/slavery

- Slavery is an extreme form of stratification in which some people are owned or controlled by others for the purpose of economic or sexual exploitation.



Hulton Archive/Getty Images

## What is social stratification/systems of social stratification/caste system

- A caste system is a system of social inequality in which people's status is permanently determined at birth based on their parents' ascribed characteristics.
- Systems of stratification include slavery, caste, and class. As shown in these photos, the life chances of people living in each of these systems differ widely.



What is social stratification/systems of social stratification/the class system

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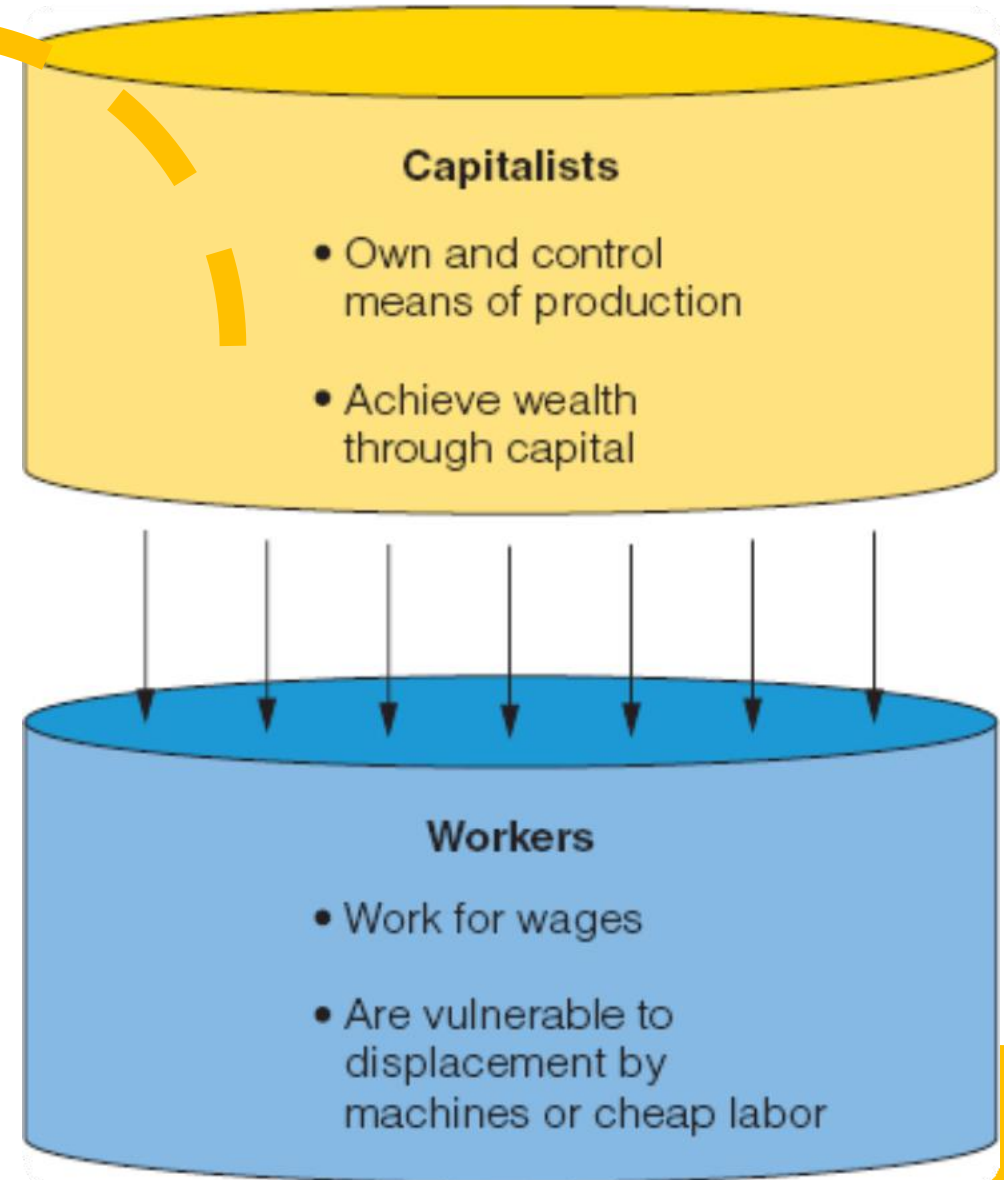
The class system is a type of stratification based on the ownership and control of resources and on the type of work that people do.

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A class system is more open than a caste system because the boundaries between classes are less distinct than the boundaries between castes

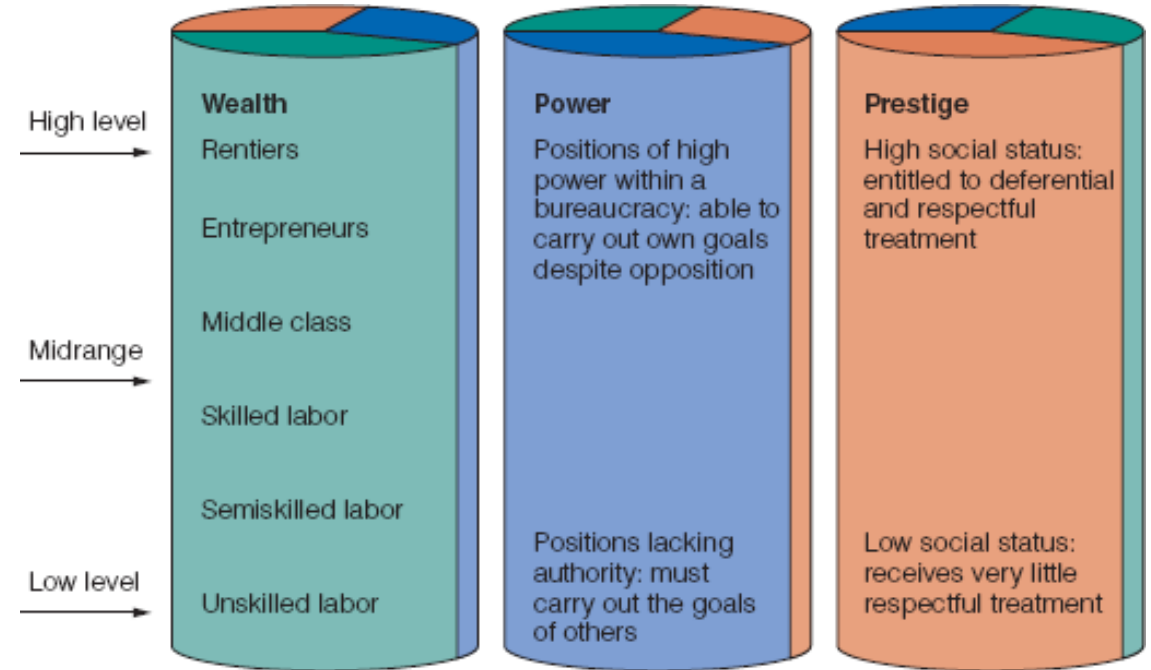
## Classical Perspectives on Social Class

- Karl Marx: Relationship to the Means of Production
  - The capitalist class (bourgeoisie) consists of those who own and control the means of production—the land and capital necessary for factories and mines, for example.
  - The working class (proletariat) consists of those who must sell their labor to the owners in order to earn enough money to survive



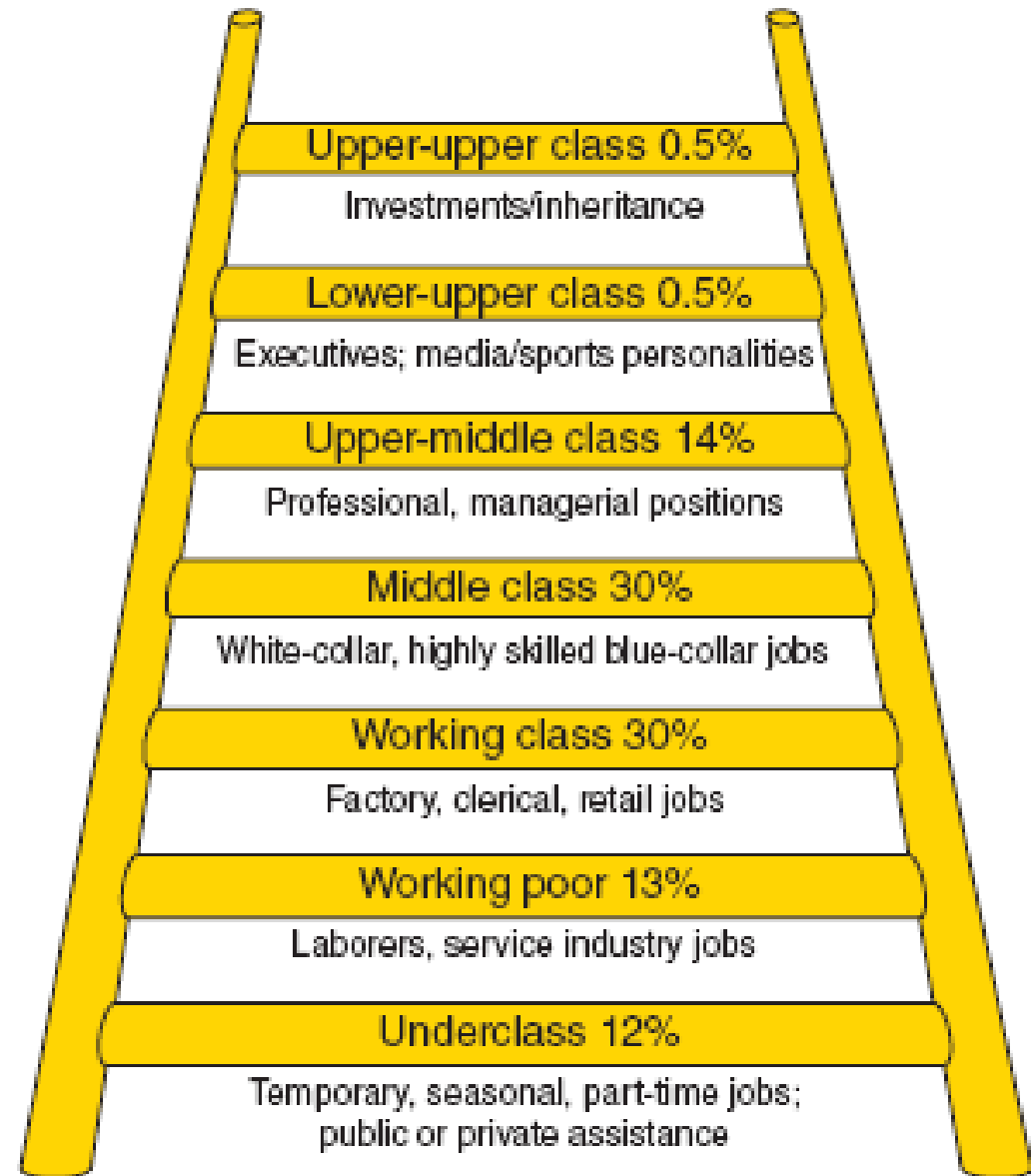
# Max Weber: Wealth, Prestige, and Power

- According to Max Weber, wealth, power, and prestige are separate continuums. Individuals may rank high in one dimension and low in another or they may rank high or low in more than one dimension. Also, individuals may use their high rank in one dimension to achieve a comparable rank in another.



## Max Weber/ The Weberian Model of the U.S. Class Structure

- The Upper (Capitalist) Class
  - About 1 percent of the population is included in this class, whose members own substantial income-producing assets and operate on both the national and international levels.
  - Old rich and powerful: Rockefeller, Mellon, Du Pont, and Kennedy
  - New rich: Walton family, founders of Walmart, high-tech entrepreneurs (Bill Gates of Microsoft, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, and Jeff Bezos of Amazon), and hedge-fund managers (James Simons of Renaissance Technologies, Ray Dalio of Bridgewater, Ken Griffin of Citadel, and John Overdeck and David Siegel of Two Sigma Investments)



# Max Weber/ The Weberian Model of the U.S. Class Structure

- The Upper-Middle Class
  - Persons in the upper-middle class typically earn incomes in the \$200,000–400,000 range, and may go as high as \$500,000 for the “working rich.”
  - These individuals are often highly educated professionals who hold graduate degrees and have built careers such as physicians, attorneys, stockbrokers, or corporate managers. Others derive their income from family-owned businesses.
- The Middle Class
  - Today, two-year or four-year college degrees have replaced the high school diploma as an entry-level requirement for employment in many middle-class occupations, including medical technicians, nurses, legal and medical assistants, lower-level managers, semiprofessionals, and nonretail sales workers.
  - Most people in this country think of themselves as middle class but the typical income of a family in the middle class is around \$85,000

# Max Weber/ The Weberian Model of the U.S. Class Structure

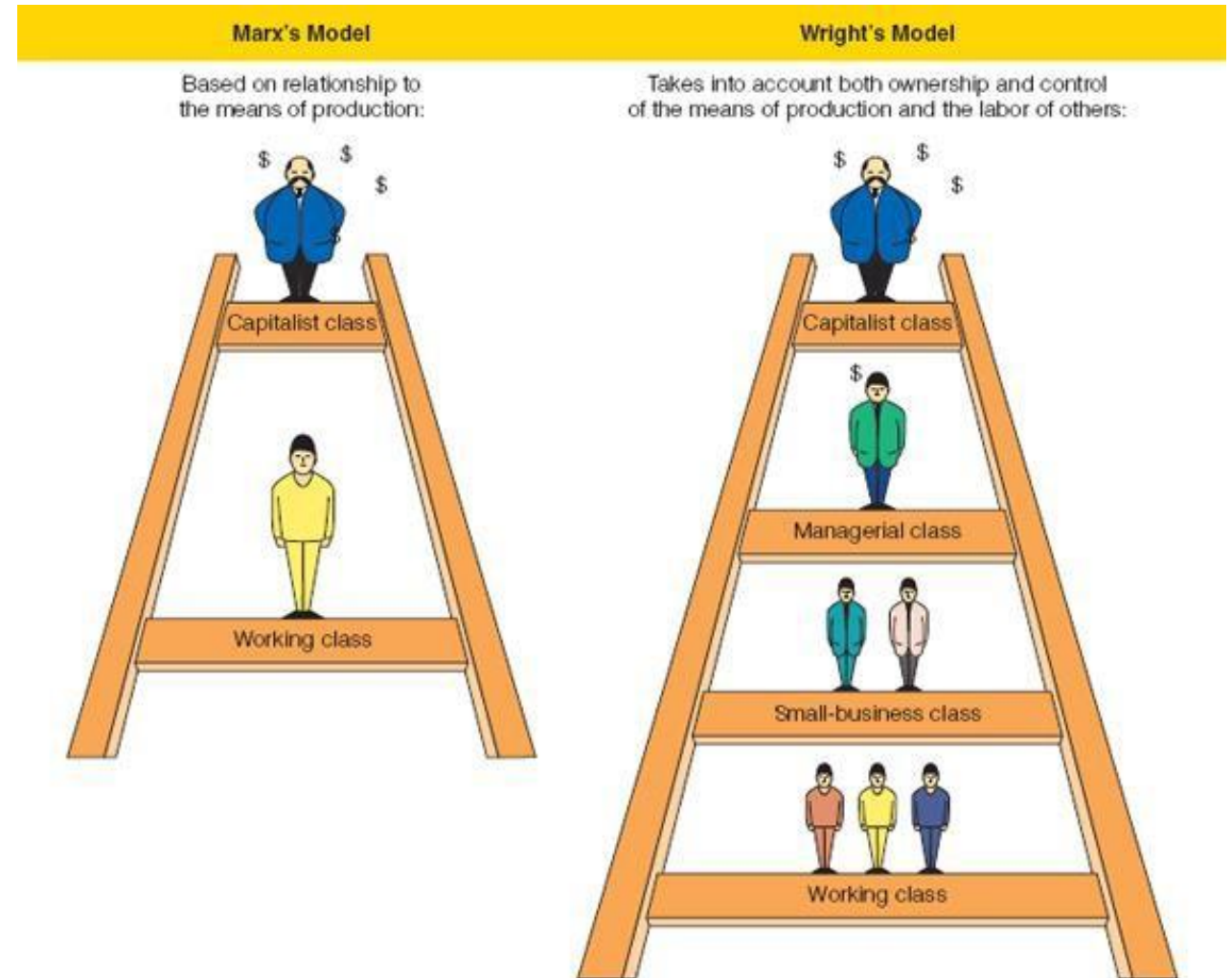
- The Working Class
  - An annual income in the \$40,000 range.
  - Clerks, salespeople, and fast-food workers whose job responsibilities involve routine, mechanized tasks requiring little skill beyond basic literacy and a brief period of on-the-job training.
  - Pink-collar occupations—relatively low-paying, nonmanual, semiskilled positions primarily held by women, such as daycare workers, checkout clerks, and restaurant servers. Jobs offer minimum wage and have few, if any, benefits such as sick leave, parental leave, or paid holidays and vacations
- Lower-Income Working Class
  - “working-poor class.” Have an annual income of approximately \$26,500 which is the poverty guideline amount set by the federal government for a family of four.
  - They typically hold unskilled jobs, seasonal migrant jobs in agriculture, lower-paid factory jobs, and service jobs (such as nurses’ aides and home health workers without advanced training).

# Max Weber/ The Weberian Model of the U.S. Class Structure

- Most Economically Disadvantaged Class
  - “underclass.” The lowest income levels, are seldom employed, Income from all sources (including multiple assistance programs) is at or below \$13,000 per year.
  - Some persons in this category are unable to work because of age or disability;
  - Others experience discrimination based on appearance, religion, race/ethnicity, or other attributes deemed “undesirable” by employers.
  - Single-parent households, especially those with a female parent, are more likely to be in this class because of the lack of available jobs, lack of affordable childcare, and other impediments to the mother’s future and that of her children.

# Karl Marx Model

- Capitalist and working class



# Capitalist

- Carlos “Slim” Helu and Alice Walton are both on Forbes’ 2021 list of the richest people in the world. They represent people from different nations and genders—both who have been highly successful in navigating the business world.



# Working class

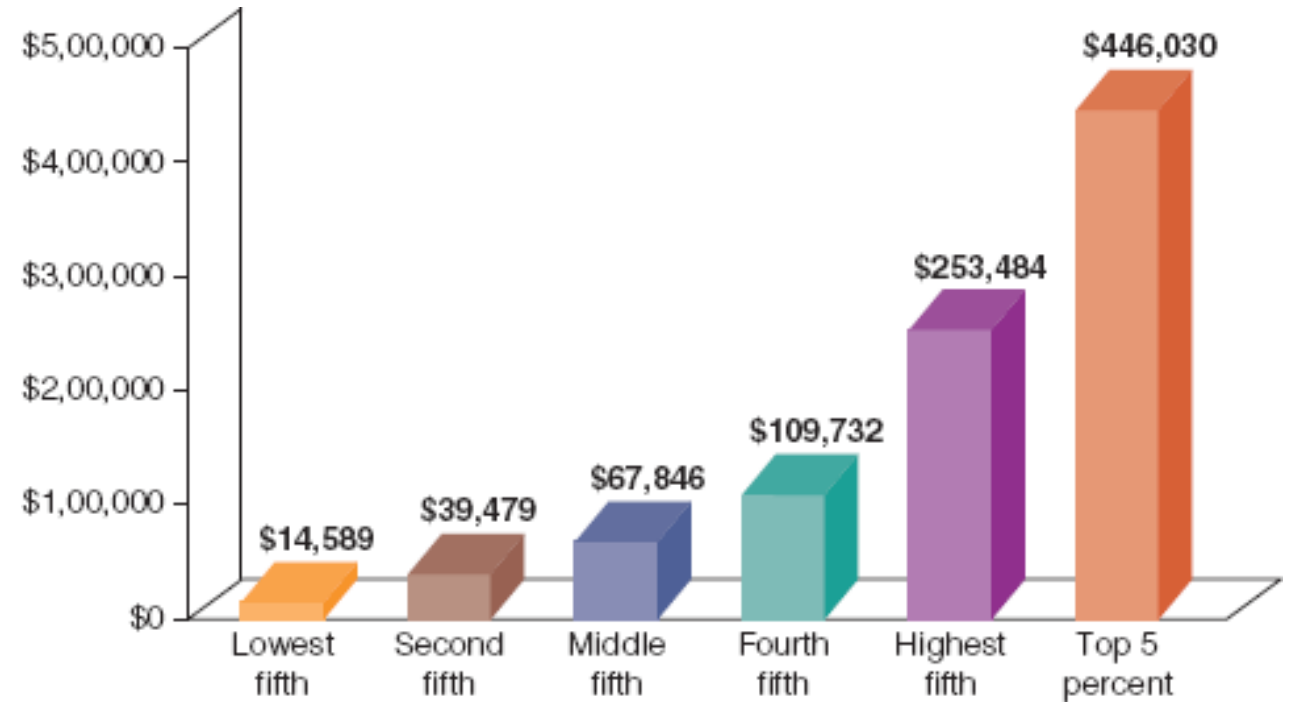
- Many immigrants believe that they can achieve the American Dream by starting a small business, such as a store or restaurant. Other immigrants are employed in major retail concessions, such as the man shown here who works at a convenience store.



Jeffrey Isaac Greenberg / Getty Images

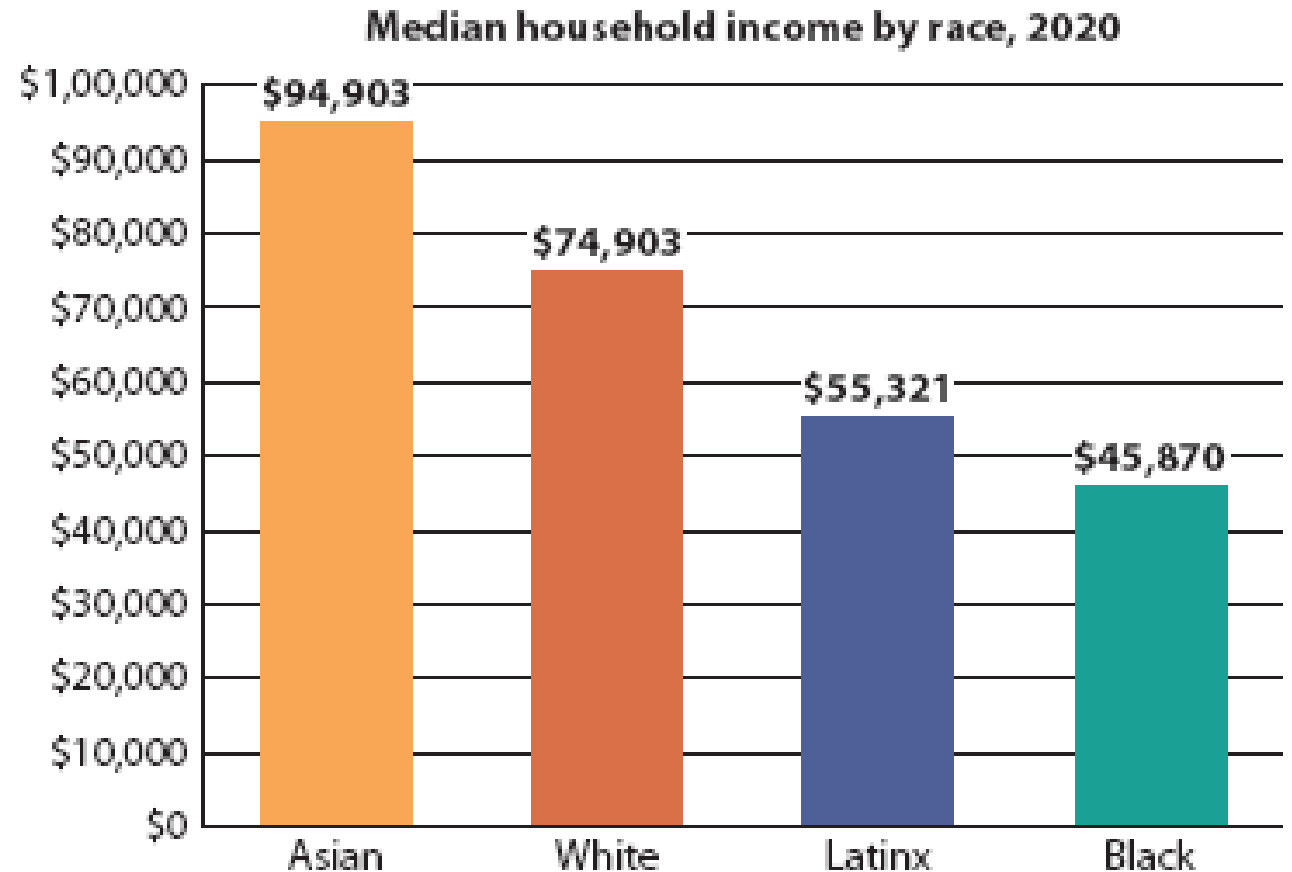
# Inequality in the United States

- Income Inequality



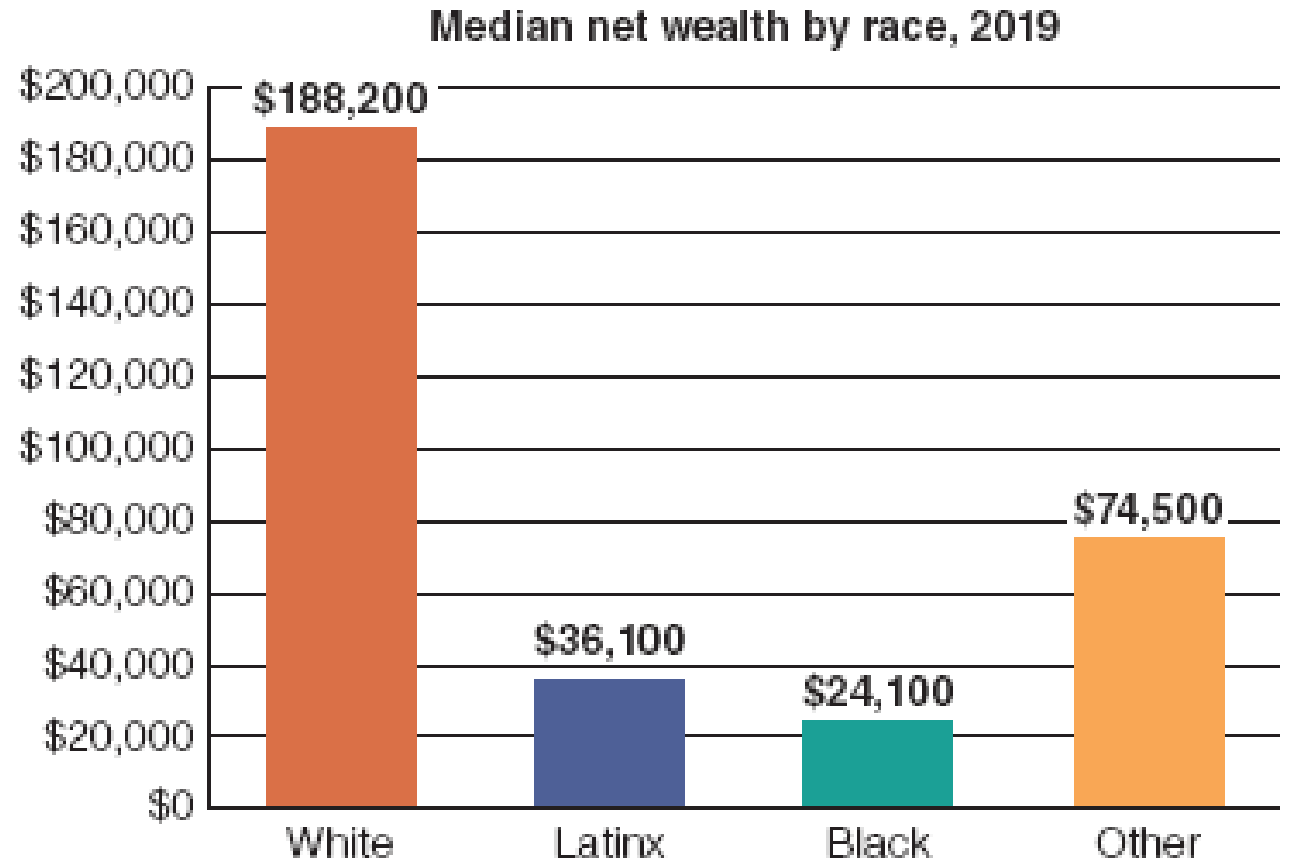
# Inequality in the US

- Median Household Income by Race/Ethnicity in the United States, 2020



# Inequality in US

- Wealth Inequality: buildings, land, farms, houses, factories, and cars, as well as other assets such as bank accounts, corporate stocks, bonds, and insurance policies.



## Inequality in the US/Consequences of Inequality

- Physical Health, Mental Health, and Nutrition
- Housing: housing is considered affordable when a household spends no more than 30 percent of its income on rent or mortgage payments.
- Education: elevator of social mobility. Some argue education itself perpetuates inequality



Bob Daemich/Alamy Stock Photo

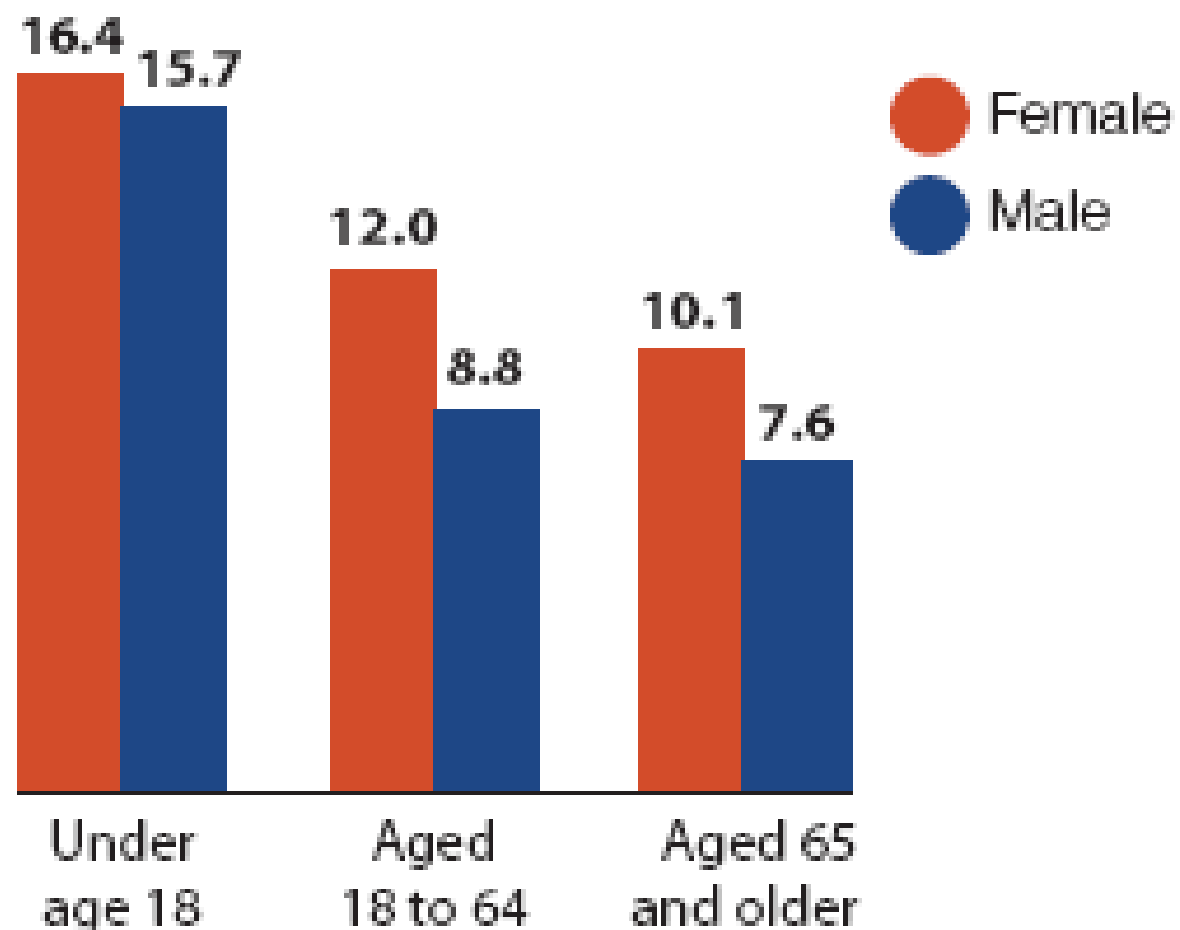
# Poverty in the United States

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- According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the official 2020 poverty rate was 11.4 percent, which is an increase of 1 percent from 2019.
  - Social Security continues to be a key program, moving 26.5 million people out of poverty;
  - economic relief stimulus payments related to the COVID-19 pandemic brought 11.7 million people out of poverty; and
  - expanded unemployment insurance benefits kept 5.5 million individuals from falling into poverty.

## Poverty in the United States /Who Is Affected by Poverty?

- Gender and age



Note: Information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions is available at <<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/techdocs/cpsmar21.pdf>>.

# Poverty in the United States /Who Is Affected by Poverty?

- Race/Ethnicity
- In 2020 the poverty rate for Asians was the lowest of all major racial groups in the United States at 8.1 percent, this was closely followed by the poverty rate for Whites (non-Hispanic) which was the second lowest of all major racial groups at 8.2 percent. Higher rates of poverty were experienced by Blacks at 19.5 percent and Latinxs at 17.0 percent (Shrider, Kollar, Chen, and Semega, 2021).
- These overall poverty rates have gone down slightly but generally remain persistently stubborn to change.

# Sociological Explanations of Social Inequality in the United States

- Functionalist Perspectives
  - All societies have important tasks that must be accomplished and certain positions that must be filled.
  - Some positions are more important for the survival of society than others.
  - The most important positions must be filled by the most qualified people
  - The positions that are the most important for society and that require scarce talent, extensive training, or both must be the most highly rewarded.
  - The most highly rewarded positions should be those that are functionally unique (no other position can perform the same function) and on which other positions rely for expertise, direction, or financing.

# Sociological Explanations of Social Inequality in the United States/functional perspective

- According to a functionalist perspective, people such as these recent Harvard graduates are likely to attain high positions in society because they are the most qualified and they work the hardest. Do you believe that the United States is a meritocracy—a hierarchy in which all positions are rewarded based on people's ability and credentials? Why or why not?



## Sociological Explanations of Social Inequality in the United States /Conflict Perspectives

- From a conflict perspective, people with economic and political power are able to shape and distribute the rewards, resources, privileges, and opportunities in society for their own benefit.

# Future of inequality in the US

- None of us can thrive in a nation divided between a small number of people receiving an ever larger share of the nation's income and wealth, and everyone else receiving a declining share. The lopsidedness not only diminishes economic growth but also tears at the fabric of our society. America cannot succeed if the basic bargain at the heart of our economy remains broken. The most fortunate among us who have reached the pinnacles of power and success depend on a stable economic and political system. That stability rests on the public's trust that the system operates in the interest of us all. Any loss of such trust threatens the well-being of everyone.
  - Robert Reich (2010)