1.4D: The Significance of Social Inequality

Sociologists study many types of inequality, including economic inequality, racial/ethnic inequality, and gender inequality.

Learning Objectives

• Describe different types of social inequality

Key Points

• People experience inequality throughout the life course, beginning in early childhood.
• Inequality early in life can affect life chances for the rest of one’s life.
• Inequality means people have unequal access to scarce and valued resources in society. These resources might be economic or political, such as health care, education, jobs, property and land ownership, housing, and ability to influence government policy.

Key Terms

• **inequality**: An unfair, not equal, state.
• **social stratification**: The hierarchical arrangement of social classes, or castes, within a society.

When we are growing up, we might hear our parents talk about others as being from the “wrong side of the tracks,” or not being “our kind.” We also become aware of what kind of toys they have (or don’t have), the way others dress, what kind of house they live in, what jobs their parents have, and due to this, some are treated differently and have better...
opportunities than others. We see differences in elementary schools and high schools in our city. If our parents belong to
the upper class, we have a good chance of graduating high school and entering higher education. The more education
we have, the more active we will be in political life, the more traditional and conservative our religious affiliation, the
more likely we will marry into a family with both economic and social capital, and the more likely we will eat better food,
will be less exposed to unhygienic conditions, and be able to pay for good health care. Social stratification and inequality
are everywhere and impact us throughout our lives.

Sociology has a long history of studying stratification and teaching about various kinds of inequality, including economic
inequality, racial/ethnic inequality, gender inequality, and other types of inequality. Inequality means people have
unequal access to scarce and valued resources in society. These resources might be economic or political, such as
health care, education, jobs, property and land ownership, housing, and ability to influence government policy.

Statistics on United States and global inequality are alarming. Consider this:

- Just 400 Americans have the same wealth as half of all Americans combined.
- Just 25 Americans have a combined income almost as great as the combined income of 2 billion of the world’s
  poor.
- In 2007, more than 37 million U.S. citizens, or 12.5% of the population, were classified as poor by the Census
  Bureau.
- In 2007, CEOs in the Fortune 500 received an average of $10.5 million, 344 times the pay of the average worker.
- Four of the wealthiest people in the world come from one family, the Walton’s. They are the four children who
  inherited Sam Walton’s company Wal-Mart. Together, they are worth $83.6 billion.
- Half of American children will reside in a household that uses food stamps at some point during childhood.
- Life expectancy in Harlem is shorter than in Bangladesh.

Although inequality is everywhere, there are many controversies and questions about inequality that sociologists are
interested in, such as where did inequality come from? Why does it continue? Do we justify inequality? Can we eliminate
inequality? Can we make a society in which people are equal? The sociological approach gives us the methodological
and theoretical tools to begin to answer these questions.

**Cape Verde Water:** The water situation in Cape Verde, an island country in the central Atlantic, is a poignant illustration
of global social inequality. Most of the population in Cape Verde collects water at public water channels.
**Income inequality:** This chart shows the proportion of total income that goes to the richest 1% of Americans. After the Great Depression, this proportion fell as New Deal policies helped distribute income more evenly. But since the 1980s, the proportion rose rapidly, so that by 2007, the richest 1% of Americans earned almost a quarter of total income in the United States.