

Chapter
8**SOCIAL STRATIFICATION****Reading Test***Sociology and You, pp. 259–262*

Read the passage and answer the questions that follow.

MEASURING POVERTY

Absolute poverty is the absence of enough money to secure life's necessities—enough food, a safe place to live, and so forth. It is possible, however, to have the things required to remain alive and still be poor. We measure relative poverty by comparing the economic condition of those at the bottom of a society with the economic conditions of other members of that society. According to this measure, the definition of poverty can vary. It would not, for example, be the same in India as in the United States.

How is poverty measured in the United States? Historically, the United States government has measured poverty by setting an annual income level and considering people poor if their income is below that level. As of today, that figure is \$16,600 for a family of four.

How many Americans are poor? Poverty is widespread throughout the United States. According to U.S. Census Bureau reports, the poor comprise 13.3 percent of the American population, or more than 35 million people (1999a). Great poverty existed when it became a national political issue in the 1960s. Forty years later, poverty in America is still a problem (Newman, 1999).

IDENTIFYING THE POOR

Minorities, female-headed households, children under eighteen years of age, elderly people, people with disabilities, and people who live alone or with nonrelatives make up

the most disadvantaged groups in the United States.

How are race and ethnicity related to poverty? Nearly 70 percent of the poor in America today are white. The poverty rate for African Americans and Latinos is higher than that for whites, however. The poverty rate for whites is 6 percent; for African Americans, almost 27 percent; and for Latinos, 27 percent. African Americans and Latinos together account for only about one-fourth of the total population, but they make up nearly half of the poor population.

What other factors are related to poverty? Another large segment of the poor population is made up of female-headed households. We can look at this issue in two different ways. We can look at all poor households as a group and determine what proportion of them are headed by females. When we do this, we find that over one-half of poor households are female-headed. In contrast, when we look at nonpoor households, we find that only about 14 percent are headed by females. Another approach would be to look at all female-headed households as a group and determine what proportion of them are poor. We find that the poverty rate for these households is about 32 percent, compared with just over 11 percent for all families.

By either measure, then, households headed by females are poorer than those headed by males. A related factor is the poverty rate for children under six years of age. The current rate for this group is about 22 percent—the highest rate for any age group

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in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1999a). The high poverty rates for women and children reflect a trend in U.S. society. Between 1960 and today, women and children make up a larger proportion of the poor. Sociologists refer to this trend as the feminization of poverty (*The State of America's Children*, 1998).

There are several reasons why women have a higher risk of being poor. Women, on average, make only about \$.75 for every dollar earned by men. Women find it more difficult to find regular, long-term employment. When they do, a lack of good child care facilities adds to the likelihood that they will not be able to keep working.

Older Americans account for another large segment of the poor. About 10 percent of people aged sixty-five or older live in poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999a). Another large segment of the poor are people with disabilities—those who are blind, deaf, or otherwise disabled. This group accounts for some 12 percent of America's poor. Finally, nearly one out of every four poor persons either lives alone or lives with nonrelatives.

RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM OF POVERTY

Before the mid-1960s, fighting poverty was not a major concern of the federal

government. Some programs, like Social Security and Aid to Dependent Children, were enacted during the Great Depression. These measures did not usually reach the lowest levels of needy citizens, however. In August 1964, president Lyndon Johnson marshalled the forces of the federal government to begin a War on Poverty.

What were the goals of the War on Poverty? The philosophy behind the War on Poverty was to help poor people help themselves (Patterson, 1986; Jacoby, 1997; Barry, 1999). In the words of President Johnson's predecessor, President John F. Kennedy, if the chains of poverty were to be broken, it had to be through self-improvement, not temporary relief. Accordingly, almost 60 percent of the first poverty budget was earmarked for youth opportunity programs and the work experience program (a program of work and job training designed primarily for welfare recipients and unemployed fathers).

Hopes for the War on Poverty were high. However, not all of the programs were as successful as predicted. Indeed, some have come under severe criticism. These criticisms center around supposed widespread abuses and the fear that the system encourages people to become dependent upon the government longer than is necessary. "Fixing" the way social welfare should be distributed has been the focus of many hot political debates.

1. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, what percentage of the American population is considered to be poor?
 - A. 16.4%
 - B. 13.3%
 - C. 35%
 - D. 60%
2. What group is NOT typically considered an economically disadvantaged group?
 - A. elderly people
 - B. children under eighteen
 - C. white, middle-aged men
 - D. disabled people

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3. The trend of women and children making up a larger and larger proportion of the poor population is called

- a. the feminization of poverty.
- b. the War on Poverty.
- c. the masculinization of poverty.
- d. the aging of poverty.

4. A recent criticism of the welfare system is that

- A. it encourage people to stay on government assistance longer than necessary.
- B. is used only by the rich.
- C. it only give financial aid for six weeks.
- D. there isn't any real poverty in the United States.

5. Why do women have a higher risk of being poor?

6. How would relative poverty in India be different from relative poverty in the United States?
