

2.5 Global Poverty

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

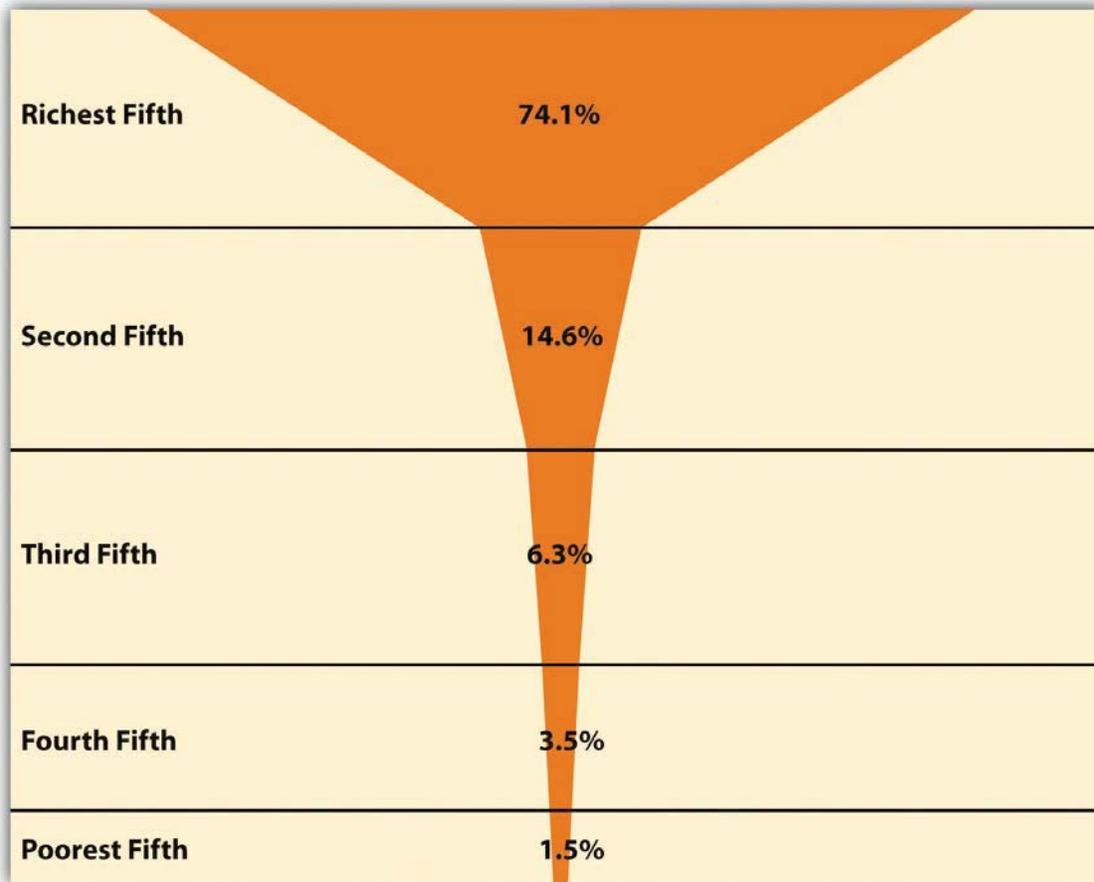
1. Describe where poor nations tend to be located.
2. Explain the difference between the modernization and dependency theories of poverty.
3. List some of the consequences of global poverty.

As serious as poverty is in the United States, poverty in much of the rest of the world is beyond comprehension to the average American. Many of the world's poor live in such desperate circumstances that they would envy the lives of poor Americans. Without at all meaning to minimize the plight of the American poor, this section provides a brief look at the world's poor and at the dimensions of global poverty

Global Inequality

The world has a few very rich nations and many very poor nations, and there is an enormous gulf between these two extremes. If the world were one nation, its median annual income (at which half of the world's population is below this income and half is above it) would be only \$1,700 (data from 2000; Dikhanov, 2005 ^[1]). The richest fifth of the world's population would have three-fourths of the world's entire income, while the poorest fifth of the world's population would have only 1.5 percent of the world's income, and the poorest two-fifths would have only 5.0 percent of the world's income (Dikhanov, 2005). ^[2] Reflecting this latter fact, these poorest two-fifths, or about 2 billion people, live on less than \$2 per day (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). ^[3] As [Figure 2.5 "Global Income Distribution \(Percentage of World Income Held by Each Fifth of World Population\)"](#) illustrates, this distribution of income resembles a champagne glass.

Figure 2.5 Global Income Distribution (Percentage of World Income Held by Each Fifth of World Population)

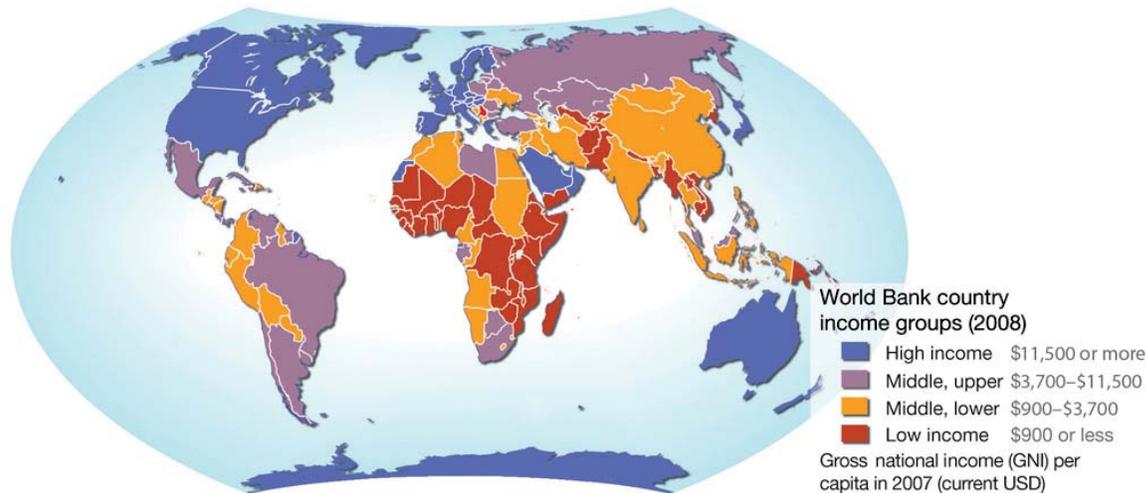


Source: Data from Dikhanov, Y. (2005). Trends in global income distribution, 1970–2000, and scenarios for 2015. New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme.

To understand global inequality, it is helpful to classify nations into a small number of categories based on their degree of wealth or poverty, their level of industrialization and economic development, and related factors. Over the decades, scholars and international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank have used various classification systems, or typologies. A popular typology today simply ranks nations into groups called *wealthy* (or high-income) nations, *middle-income* nations, and *poor* (or low-income) nations, based on measures such as gross domestic product (**GDP**) per capita (the total value of a nation's goods and services divided by its population). This typology has the advantage of emphasizing the most important variable in global stratification: how much wealth a nation has. At the risk of being somewhat simplistic, the other important differences among the world's nations all stem

from their degree of wealth or poverty. Figure 2.6 "Global Stratification Map" depicts these three categories of nations (with the middle category divided into upper-middle and lower-middle). As should be clear, whether a nation is wealthy, middle income, or poor is heavily related to the continent on which it is found.

Figure 2.6 *Global Stratification Map*



Source: Adapted from UNEP/GRID-Arendal Maps and Graphics Library. (2009). Country income groups (World Bank classification). Retrieved from <http://maps.grida.no/go/graphic/country-income-groups-world-bank-classification>.

Measuring Global Poverty

How do we know which nations are poor? A very common measure of global poverty was developed by the World Bank, an international institution funded by wealthy nations that provides loans, grants, and other aid to help poor and middle-income nations. Each year the World Bank publishes its World Development Report, which provides statistics and other information on the economic and social well-being of the globe's almost two hundred nations. The World Bank puts the official global poverty line (which is considered a measure of extreme poverty) at income under \$1.25 per person per day, which amounts to about \$456 yearly per person or \$1,825 for a family of four. According to this measure, 1.4 billion people, making up more than one-fifth of the world's population and more than one-fourth of the population of

developing (poor and middle-income) nations, are poor. This level of poverty rises to 40 percent of South Asia and 51 percent of sub-Saharan Africa (Haughton & Khandker, 2009).^[4]

In a new development, the World Bank has begun emphasizing the concept of **vulnerability to poverty**, which refers to a significant probability that people who are not officially poor will become poor within the next year. Determining vulnerability to poverty is important because it enables antipoverty strategies to be aimed at those most at risk for sliding into poverty, with the hope of preventing them from doing so.

Vulnerability to poverty appears widespread; in several developing nations, about one-fourth of the population is always poor, while almost one-third is vulnerable to poverty or is slipping into and out of poverty. In these nations, more than half the population is always or sometimes poor. Haughton and Khandker (2009, p. 246)^[5] summarize this situation: “As typically defined, vulnerability to poverty is more widespread than poverty itself. A wide swathe of society risks poverty at some point of time; put another way, in most societies, only a relatively modest portion of society may be considered as economically secure.”

Explaining Global Poverty

Explanations of global poverty parallel those of US poverty in their focus on individualistic versus structural problems. One type of explanation takes an individualistic approach by, in effect, blaming the people in the poorest nations for their own poverty, while a second explanation takes a structural approach in blaming the plight of poor nations on their treatment by the richest ones. [Table 2.4 "Theory Snapshot"](#) summarizes the two sets of explanations.

Table 2.4 Theory Snapshot

Theory	Major assumptions
Modernization theory	Wealthy nations became wealthy because early on they were able to develop the necessary beliefs, values, and practices for trade, industrialization, and rapid economic growth to occur. Poor nations remained poor because they failed to develop these beliefs, values, and practices; instead, they continued to follow traditional beliefs and practices that stymied industrial development and modernization.
Dependency theory	The poverty of poor nations stems from their colonization by European nations, which exploited the poor nations’ resources and either enslaved their populations or used them as cheap labor. The colonized nations were thus unable to develop a professional and business class that would have enabled them to enter the industrial age and to otherwise develop their

Theory	Major assumptions
	economies.

Modernization Theory

The individualistic explanation is called **modernization theory** (Rostow, 1990).^[6] According to this theory, rich nations became wealthy because early on they were able to develop the “correct” beliefs, values, and practices—in short, the correct culture—for trade, industrialization, and rapid economic growth to occur. These cultural traits include a willingness to work hard, to abandon tradition in favor of new ways of thinking and doing things, and to adopt a future orientation rather than one focused on maintaining present conditions. Thus Western European nations began to emerge several centuries ago as economic powers because their populations adopted the kinds of values and practices just listed. In contrast, nations in other parts of the world never became wealthy and remain poor today because they never developed the appropriate values and practices. Instead, they continued to follow traditional beliefs and practices that stymied industrial development and modernization.

Modernization theory has much in common with the culture of poverty theory discussed earlier. It attributes the poverty of poor nations to their failure to develop the “proper” beliefs, values, and practices necessary for economic success both at the beginning of industrialization during the nineteenth century and in the two centuries that have since transpired. Because modernization theory implies that people in poor nations do not have the talent and ability to improve their lot, it may be considered a functionalist explanation of global inequality.

Dependency Theory

The structural explanation for global stratification is called **dependency theory**, which may be considered a conflict explanation of global inequality. Not surprisingly, this theory’s views sharply challenge modernization theory’s assumptions (Packenham, 1992).^[7] Whereas modernization theory attributes global stratification to the “wrong” cultural values and practices in poor nations, dependency theory blames global stratification on the exploitation of these nations by wealthy nations. According to this view, poor nations never got the chance to pursue economic growth because early on they were

conquered and colonized by European ones. The European nations stole the poor nations' resources and either enslaved their populations or used them as cheap labor. They installed their own governments and often prevented the local populace from getting a good education. As a result, the colonized nations were unable to develop a professional and business class that would have enabled them to enter the industrial age and to otherwise develop their economies. Along the way, wealthy nations sold their own goods to colonized nations and forced them to run up enormous debt that continues to amount today.

In today's world, huge multinational corporations continue to exploit the labor and resources of the poorest nations, say dependency theorists. These corporations run sweatshops in many nations, in which workers toil in inhumane conditions at extremely low wages (Sluiter, 2009).^[8] Often the corporations work hand-in-hand with corrupt officials in the poor nations to strengthen their economic stake in the countries.

Comparing the Theories

Which makes more sense, modernization theory or dependency theory? As with many theories, both make sense to some degree, but both have their faults. Modernization theory places too much blame on poor nations for their own poverty and ignores the long history of exploitation of poor nations by rich nations and multinational corporations alike. For its part, dependency theory cannot explain why some of the poorest countries are poor even though they were never European colonies; neither can it explain why some former colonies such as Hong Kong have been able to attain enough economic growth to leave the rank of the poorest nations. Together, both theories help us understand the reasons for global stratification, but most sociologists would probably favor dependency theory because of its emphasis on structural factors in the world's historic and current economy.

The Lives of the World's Poor

Poor nations are the least industrialized and most agricultural of all the world's countries. They consist primarily of nations in Africa and parts of Asia and constitute roughly half of the world's population. Many of these nations rely heavily on one or two crops, and if weather conditions render a crop unproductive in a particular season, the nations' hungry become even hungrier. By the same token, if

economic conditions reduce the price of a crop or other natural resource, the income from exports of these commodities plummets, and these already poor nations become even poorer.

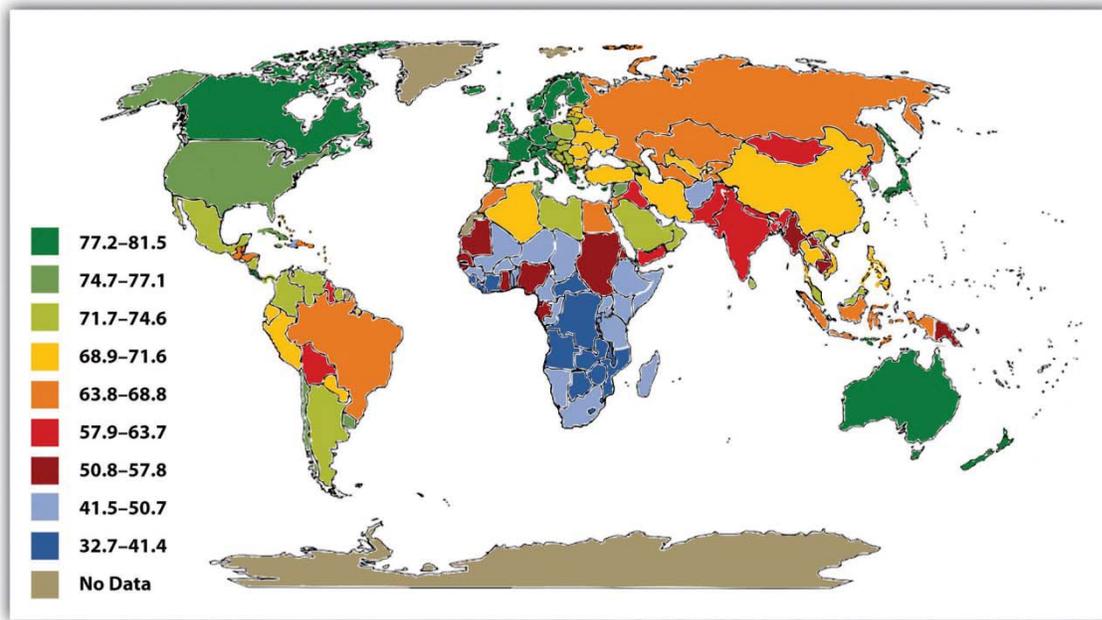
By any standard, the more than 1.4 billion people in poor nations live a desperate existence in the most miserable conditions possible. They suffer from AIDS and other deadly diseases, live on the edge of starvation, and lack indoor plumbing, electricity, and other modern conveniences that most Americans take for granted. Most of us have seen unforgettable photos or video footage of African children with stick-thin limbs and distended stomachs reflecting severe malnutrition.

It would be nice if these images were merely fiction, but unfortunately they are far too real. AIDS, malaria, starvation, and other deadly diseases are common. Many children die before reaching adolescence, and many adults die before reaching what in the richest nations would be considered middle age. Many people in the poorest nations are illiterate, and a college education remains as foreign to them as their way of life would be to us. The images of the world's poor that we see in television news reports or in film documentaries fade quickly from our minds. Meanwhile, millions of people on our planet die every year because they do not have enough to eat, because they lack access to clean water or adequate sanitation, or because they lack access to medicine that is found in every CVS, Rite Aid, and Walgreens in the United States. We now examine some specific dimensions and consequences of global poverty.

Life Expectancy

When we look around the world, we see that global poverty is literally a matter of life and death. The clearest evidence of this fact comes from data on life expectancy, or the average number of years that a nation's citizens can be expected to live. Life expectancy certainly differs within each nation, with some people dying younger and others dying older, but poverty and related conditions affect a nation's overall life expectancy to a startling degree.

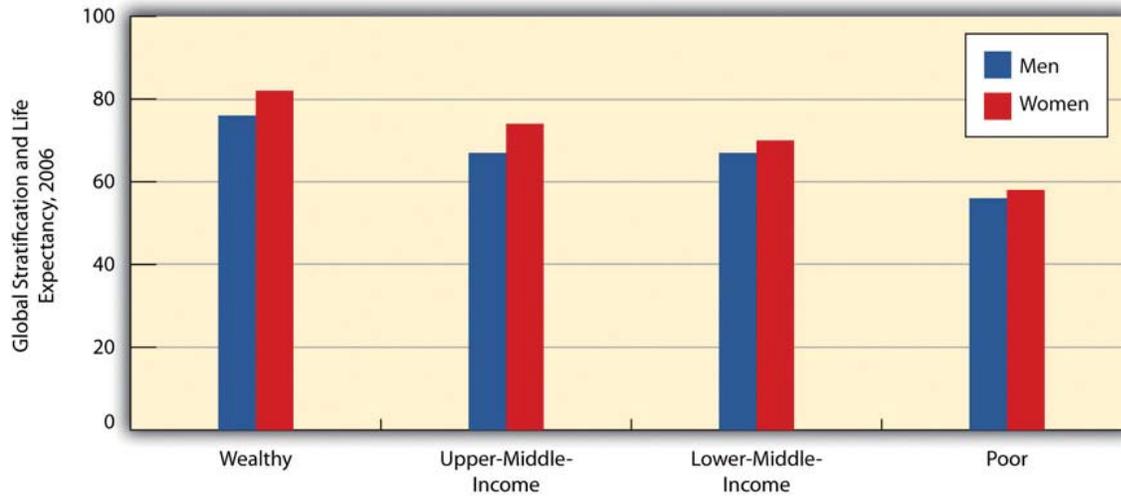
Figure 2.7 Average Life Expectancy across the Globe (Years)



Source: Adapted from Global Education Project. (2004). *Human conditions: World life expectancy map*. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobaleducationproject.org/earth/human-conditions.php>.

A map of global life expectancy appears in [Figure 2.7 "Average Life Expectancy across the Globe \(Years\)"](#). Life expectancy is highest in North America, Western Europe, and certain other regions of the world and lowest in Africa and South Asia, where *life expectancy in many nations is some 30 years shorter than in other regions*. Another way of visualizing the relationship between global poverty and life expectancy appears in [Figure 2.8 "Global Poverty and Life Expectancy, 2006"](#), which depicts average life expectancy for wealthy nations, upper-middle-income nations, lower-middle-income nations, and poor nations. Men in wealthy nations can expect to live 76 years on average, compared to only 56 in poor nations; women in wealthy nations can expect to live 82 years, compared to only 58 in poor nations. Life expectancy in poor nations is thus 20 and 24 years lower, respectively, for the two sexes.

Figure 2.8 Global Poverty and Life Expectancy, 2006



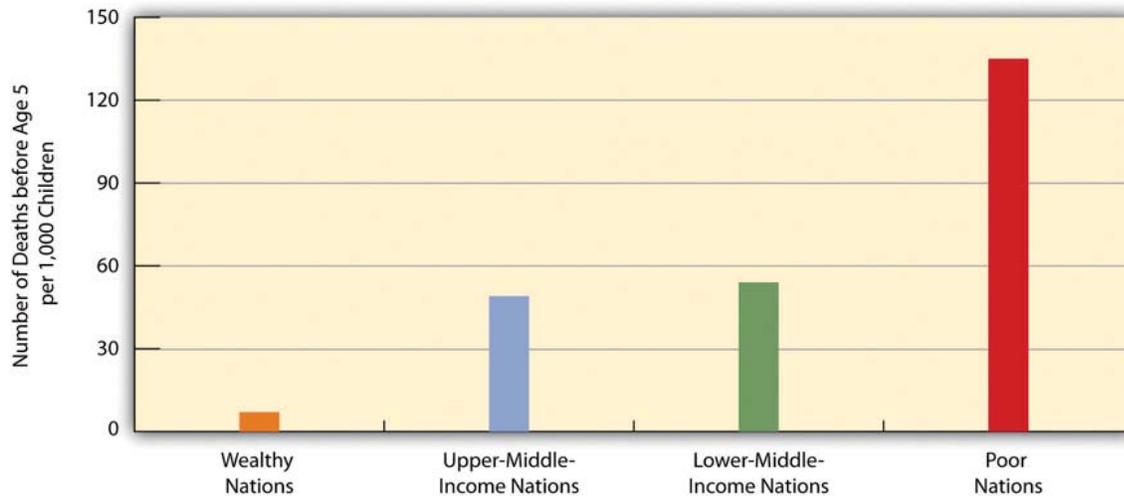
Source: Data from World Bank. (2009). World development report 2009. Washington, DC:

Author.

Child Mortality

A key contributor to life expectancy and also a significant consequence of global poverty in its own right is child mortality, the number of children who die before age 5 per 1,000 children. As Figure 2.9 "Global Poverty and Child Mortality, 2006" shows, the rate of child mortality in poor nations is 135 per 1,000 children, meaning that 13.5 percent of all children in these nations die before age 5. In a few African nations, child mortality exceeds 200 per 1,000. In contrast, the rate in wealthy nations is only 7 per 1,000. Children in poor nations are thus about 19 times ($13.5 \div 0.7$) more likely to die before age 5 than children in wealthy nations.

Figure 2.9 Global Poverty and Child Mortality, 2006



Source: Data from World Bank. (2009). World development report 2009. Washington, DC:

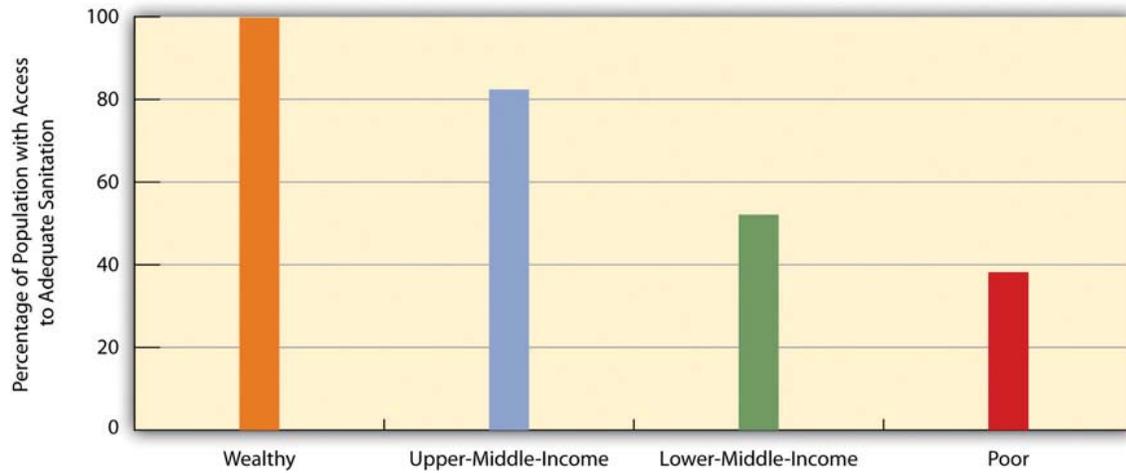
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Sanitation and Clean Water

Two other important indicators of a nation's health are access to adequate sanitation (disposal of human waste) and access to clean water. When people lack adequate sanitation and clean water, they are at much greater risk for life-threatening diarrhea, serious infectious diseases such as cholera and typhoid, and parasitic diseases such as schistosomiasis (World Health Organization, 2010).^[9] About 2.4 billion people around the world, almost all of them in poor and middle-income nations, do not have adequate sanitation, and more than 2 million, most of them children, die annually from diarrhea. More than 40 million people worldwide, almost all of them again in poor and middle-income nations, suffer from a parasitic infection caused by flatworms.

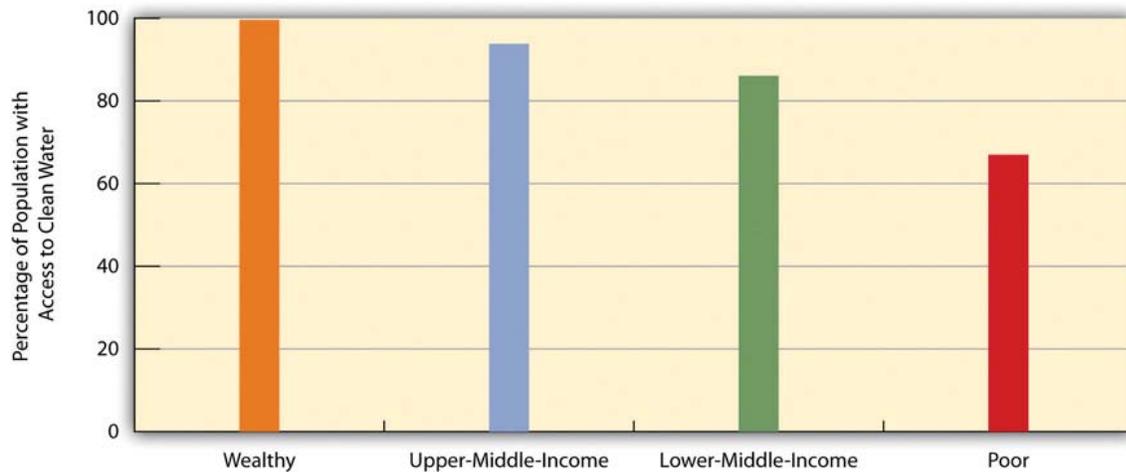
As [Figure 2.10 "Global Stratification and Access to Adequate Sanitation, 2006"](#) and [Figure 2.11 "Global Stratification and Access to Clean Water, 2006"](#) show, access to adequate sanitation and clean water is strongly related to national wealth. Poor nations are much less likely than wealthier nations to have adequate access to both sanitation and clean water. Adequate sanitation is virtually universal in wealthy nations but is available to only 38 percent of people in poor nations. Clean water is also nearly universal in wealthy nations but is available to only 67 percent of people in poor nations.

Figure 2.10 Global Stratification and Access to Adequate Sanitation, 2006



Source: Data from World Bank. (2010). Health nutrition and population statistics. Retrieved from <http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do>.

Figure 2.11 Global Stratification and Access to Clean Water, 2006



Source: Data from World Bank. (2010). Health nutrition and population statistics. Retrieved from <http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do>.

Malnutrition



About one-fifth of the population of poor nations, about 800 million individuals, are malnourished.

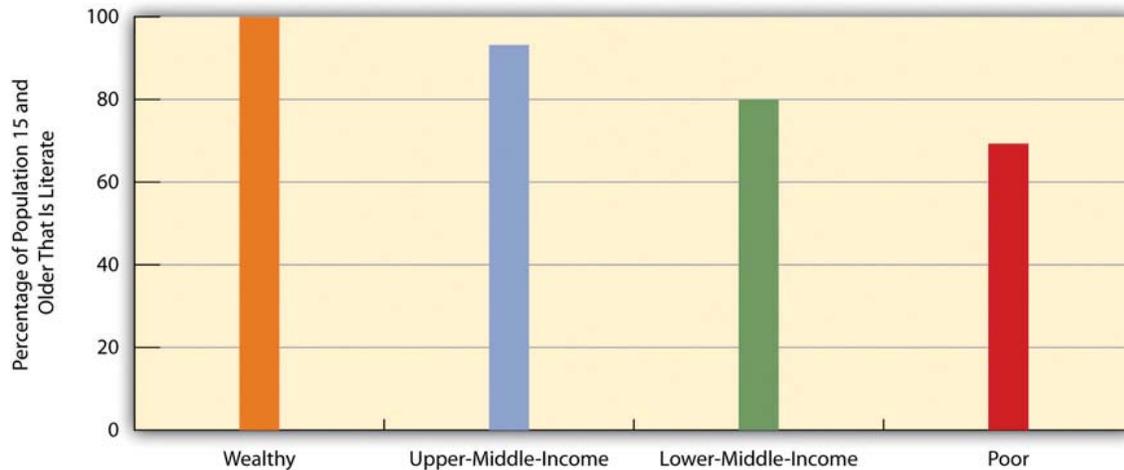
Image courtesy of Dr. Lyle Conrad at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ID# 6874, <http://phil.cdc.gov/phil>.

Another health indicator is malnutrition. This problem is caused by a lack of good food combined with infections and diseases such as diarrhea that sap the body of essential nutrients. About one-fifth of the population of poor nations, or about 800 million individuals, are malnourished; looking just at children, in developing nations more than one-fourth of children under age 5, or about 150 million altogether, are underweight. Half of all these children live in only three nations: Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan; almost half the children in these and other South Asian nations are underweight. Children who are malnourished are at much greater risk for fat and muscle loss, brain damage, blindness, and death; perhaps you have seen video footage of children in Africa or South Asia who are so starved that they look like skeletons. Not surprisingly, child malnutrition contributes heavily to the extremely high rates of child mortality that we just examined and is estimated to be responsible for more than 5 million deaths of children annually (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2006; World Health Organization, 2010).^[10]

Adult Literacy

Moving from the area of health, a final indicator of human development is adult literacy, the percentage of people 15 and older who can read and write a simple sentence. Once again we see that people in poor and middle-income nations are far worse off (see [Figure 2.12 "Global Poverty and Adult Literacy, 2008"](#)). In poor nations, only about 69 percent of adults 15 and older can read and write a simple sentence. The high rate of illiteracy in poor nations not only reflects their poverty but also contributes to it, as people who cannot read and write are obviously at a huge disadvantage in the labor market.

Figure 2.12 *Global Poverty and Adult Literacy, 2008*



Source: Data from World Bank. (2010). *Health nutrition and population statistics*. Retrieved from <http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do>.

Applying Social Research

Unintended Consequences of Welfare Reform

Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was a major government program to help the poor from the 1930s to the 1960s. Under this program, states allocated federal money to provide cash payments to poor families with children. Although the program was heavily criticized for allegedly providing an incentive to poor mothers both to have more children and to not join the workforce, research studies found little or no basis for this criticism. Still, many politicians and much of the public accepted the criticism as true, and AFDC became so unpopular that it was replaced in 1997 by a new program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which is still a major program today.

TANF is more restrictive in many respects than AFDC was. In particular, it limits the amount of time a poor family can receive federal funds to five years, and allows states to impose a shorter duration for funding, which many have done. In addition, it requires single parents in families receiving TANF funds to work at least thirty hours a week (or twenty hours a week if they have a child under the age of 6) and two parents to work at least thirty-five hours per week combined. In most states, going to school to obtain

a degree does not count as the equivalent of working and thus does not make a parent eligible for TANF payments. Only short-term programs or workshops to develop job skills qualify.

Did welfare reform involving TANF work? Many adults formerly on AFDC found jobs, TANF payments nationwide have been much lower than AFDC payments, and many fewer families receive TANF payments than used to receive AFDC payments. All these facts lead many observers to hail TANF as a successful program. However, sociologists and other scholars who study TANF families say the numbers are misleading because poor families have in effect been excluded from TANF funding because of its strict requirements. The reduced payments and lower number of funded families indicate the failure of TANF, they say, not its success.

Several problems explain why TANF has had these unintended consequences. First, many families are poor for many more than five years, and the five-year time limit under TANF means that they receive financial help for only some of the years they live in poverty. Second, because the federal and state governments provide relatively little financial aid for child care, many parents simply cannot afford to work, and if they don't work, they lose their TANF payments. Third, jobs are certainly difficult to find, especially if, as is typical, a poor parent has relatively little education and few job skills, and if parents cannot find a job, they again lose their TANF payments. Fourth, many parents cannot work because they have physical or mental health problems or because they are taking care of a family member or friend with a health problem; these parents, too, become ineligible for TANF payments.

Sociologist Lorna Rivera put a human face to these problems in a study of fifty poor women in Boston, Massachusetts. She lived among them, interviewed them individually, and conducted focus groups. She found that TANF worsened the situation of these women for the reasons just stated, and concluded that welfare reform left these and other poor women “uneducated, underemployed, underpaid, and unable to effectively move themselves and their families forward.”

Ironically, some studies suggest that welfare reform impaired the health of black women for several reasons. Many ended up with jobs with long bus commutes and odd hours, leading to sleep deprivation and less time for medical visits. Many of these new workers also suddenly had to struggle to find

affordable day care for their children. These problems are thought to have increased their stress levels and, in turn, harmed their health.

The research by social scientists on the effects of TANF reveals that the United States took a large step backward when it passed welfare reform in the 1990s. Far from reducing poverty, welfare reform only worsened it. This research underscores the need for the United States to develop better strategies for reducing poverty similar to those used by other Western democracies, as discussed in the [Note 2.19 "Lessons from Other Societies"](#) box in this chapter.

Sources: Blitstein, 2009; Mink, 2008; Parrott & Sherman, 2008; Rivera, 2008 ^[1]

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- People in poor nations live in the worst conditions possible. Deadly diseases are common, and many children die before reaching adolescence.
- According to the modernization theory, rich nations became rich because their peoples possessed certain values, beliefs, and practices that helped them become wealthy. Conversely, poor nations remained poor because their peoples did not possess these values, beliefs, and practices.
- According to the dependency theory, poor nations have remained poor because they have been exploited by rich nations and by multinational corporations.

FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. Considering all the ways in which poor nations fare much worse than wealthy nations, which one seems to you to be the most important problem that poor nations experience? Explain your answer.
2. Which theory of global poverty, modernization or dependency, makes more sense to you? Why?

[1] Dikhanov, Y. (2005). *Trends in global income distribution, 1970–2000, and scenarios for 2015*. New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme.

[2] Dikhanov, Y. (2005). *Trends in global income distribution, 1970–2000, and scenarios for 2015*. New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme.

[3] United Nations Development Programme. (2009). *Human development report 2009*. New York, NY: Author.

- [4] Haughton, J., & Khandker, S. R. (2009). *Handbook on poverty and inequality*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- [5] Haughton, J., & Khandker, S. R. (2009). *Handbook on poverty and inequality*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- [6] Rostow, W. W. (1990). *The stages of economic growth: A non-communist manifesto* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Packenham, R. A. (1992). *The dependency movement: Scholarship and politics in development studies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [8] Sluiter, L. (2009). *Clean clothes: A global movement to end sweatshops*. New York, NY: Pluto Press.
- [9] World Health Organization. (2010). Water sanitation and health. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/diseases/malnutrition/en/.
- [10] United Nations Children's Fund. (2006). *Progress for children: A report card on nutrition*. New York, NY: Author; World Health Organization. (2010). Children's environmental health. Retrieved from <http://www.who.int/ceh/risks/cehwater2/en/index.html>.
- [11] Blitstein, R. (2009). Weathering the storm. *Miller-McCune*, 2(July–August), 48–57; Mink, G. (2008). *TANF reauthorization and opportunity to invest in America's future*. Paper presented to the ADA Economic Policy Committee. Retrieved July 25, 2011, from <http://www.adaction.org/pages/issues/all-policy-resolutions/social-amp-domestic/issues-brief-no.-13-welfare-reform.php>; Parrott, S., & Sherman, A. (2008). *TANF at 10: Program results are more mixed than often understood*. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; Rivera, L. (2008). *Laboring to learn: Women's literacy and poverty in the post-welfare era*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.



2.6 Reducing Poverty

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain why the United States neglects its poor.
2. List any three potentially promising strategies to reduce US poverty.
3. Describe how to reduce global poverty from a sociological perspective.

As this chapter noted at the outset, the United States greatly reduced poverty during the 1960s through a series of programs and policies that composed the so-called war on poverty. You saw evidence of the success of the war on poverty in [Figure 2.1 "US Poverty, 1959–2010"](#), which showed that the poverty rate declined from 22.2 percent in 1960 to a low of 11.1 percent in 1973 before fluctuating from year to year and then rising since 2000. The [Note 2.19 "Lessons from Other Societies"](#) box showed that other democracies have much lower poverty rates than the United States because, as many scholars believe, they have better funded and more extensive programs to help their poor (Brady, 2009; Russell, 2011). ^[1]

The lessons from the 1960s' war on poverty and the experience of other democracies are clear: It is very possible to reduce poverty if, and only if, a nation is willing to fund and implement appropriate programs and policies that address the causes of poverty and that help the poor deal with the immediate and ongoing difficulties they experience.

A major reason that the US poverty rate reached its low in 1973 and never went lower during the past four decades is that the United States retreated from its war on poverty by cutting back on the programs and services it had provided during that good war (Soss, Hacker, & Mettler, 2007). ^[2] Another major reason is that changes in the national economy during the past few decades have meant that well-paying manufacturing jobs have been replaced by low-paying service jobs with fewer benefits (Wilson, 2010). ^[3] Yet this has also happened in other democracies, and their poverty rates remain lower than the US rate because, unlike the United States, they have continued to try to help their poor rather than neglect them.

Why does the United States neglect its poor? Many scholars attribute this neglect to the fact that many citizens and politicians think the poor are poor because of their own failings. As summarized by sociologist Mark R. Rank (2011, p. 18), ^[4] these failings include “not working hard enough, failure to

acquire sufficient skills, or just making bad decisions.” By thus blaming the poor for their fate, citizens and politicians think the poor do not deserve to have the US government help them, and so the government does not help, or at least not nearly as much as other democracies do. We have seen that the facts do not support the myth that the poor lack motivation to work, but that does not lessen the blame given the poor for being poor.

To renew the US effort to help the poor, it is essential that the actual facts about poverty become better known so that a fundamental shift in thinking about poverty and the poor can occur. Rank (2011, p. 17) ^[5] says that one aspect of this shift must include the recognition, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, that “poverty affects us all” because it costs so many tax dollars to help the poor and because a majority of the public can expect to be poor or near poor at some point in their lives. A second aspect of this shift in thinking, adds Rank, is the recognition (following a blaming-the-system approach) that poverty stems much more from the lack of opportunity, lack of jobs, declining government help for the poor, and other structural failings of American society than from individual failings of the poor themselves. A third aspect of this shift in thinking, he concludes, is that poverty must become seen as a “moral problem” and as “an injustice of a substantial magnitude” (Mark R. Rank, 2011, p. 20). ^[6] As he forcefully argues, “Something is seriously wrong when we find that, in a country with the most abundant resources in the world, there are children without enough to eat, families who cannot afford health care, and people sleeping on the streets for lack of shelter” (p. 20). ^[7] This situation, he says, must become seen as a “moral outrage” (p. 20). ^[8]

Sociologist Joe Soss (2011, p. 84) ^[9] argues that a change in thinking is not enough for a renewed antipoverty effort to occur. What is needed, he says, is political protest and other political activity by the poor and on behalf of the poor. Soss notes that “political conflict and mass mobilization played key roles” in providing the impetus for social-welfare programs in the 1930s and 1960s in the United States, and he adds that the lower poverty rates of Western European democracies “are products of labor movements, unions, and parties that mobilized workers to demand more adequate social supports.” These twin histories lead Soss to conclude that the United States will not increase its antipoverty efforts unless a new wave of political activity by and on behalf of the poor arises. As he argues, “History suggests that major antipoverty victories can be achieved. But they won’t be achieved by good will and smart ideas alone.

They'll be won politically, when people—in poor communities, in advocacy groups, in government, in the academy, and elsewhere—mobilize to advance antipoverty agendas in ways that make politics as usual untenable.”

Antipoverty Programs and Policies

If a renewed antipoverty effort does occur for whatever reason, what types of programs and policies show promise for effectively reducing poverty? Here a sociological vision is essential. It is easy to understand why the hungry schoolchildren described in the news story that began this chapter might be going without food during a very faltering national economy. Yet a sociological understanding of poverty emphasizes its structural basis in bad times and good times alike. Poverty is rooted in social and economic problems of the larger society rather than in the lack of willpower, laziness, or other moral failings of poor individuals themselves. Individuals born into poverty suffer from a lack of opportunity from their first months up through adulthood, and poverty becomes a self-perpetuating, vicious cycle. To the extent a culture of poverty might exist, it is best seen as a logical and perhaps even inevitable outcome of, and adaptation to, the problem of being poor and not the primary force driving poverty itself.

This sort of understanding suggests that efforts to reduce poverty must address first and foremost the structural basis for poverty while not ignoring certain beliefs and practices of the poor that also make a difference. An extensive literature on poverty policy outlines many types of policies and programs that follow this dual approach (Cancian & Danziger, 2009; Greenberg, Dutta-Gupta, & Minoff, 2007; Iceland, 2006; Lindsey, 2009; Moore et al., 2009; Rank, 2004).^[10] If these were fully adopted, funded, and implemented, as they are in many other democracies, they would offer great promise for reducing poverty. As two poverty experts recently wrote, “We are optimistic that poverty can be reduced significantly in the long term if the public and policymakers can muster the political will to pursue a range of promising antipoverty policies” (M. Cancian & S. Danziger, 2009, p. 32).^[11] Although a full discussion of these policies is beyond the scope of this chapter, the following measures are commonly cited as holding strong potential for reducing poverty, and they are found in varying degrees in other Western democracies:

1. Adopt a national “full employment” policy for the poor, involving federally funded job training and public works programs, and increase the minimum wage so that individuals working full-time will earn enough to lift their families out of poverty.
2. Increase federal aid for the working poor, including higher earned income credits and child-care subsidies for those with children.
3. Establish well-funded early childhood intervention programs, including home visitations by trained professionals, for poor families.
4. Provide poor families with enough income to enable them to pay for food and housing.
5. Increase the supply of affordable housing.
6. Improve the schools that poor children attend and the schooling they receive and expand early childhood education programs for poor children.
7. Provide better nutrition and health services for poor families with young children.
8. Establish universal health insurance.
9. Increase Pell Grants and other financial aid for higher education.

Global Poverty

Years of international aid to poor nations have helped them somewhat, but, as this chapter has shown, their situation remains dire. International aid experts acknowledge that efforts to achieve economic growth in poor nations have largely failed, but they disagree why this is so and what alternative strategies may prove more successful (Cohen & Easterly, 2009).^[12] One very promising trend has been a switch from macro efforts focusing on infrastructure problems and on social institutions, such as the schools, to micro efforts, such as providing cash payments or small loans directly to poor people in poor nations (a practice called *microfinancing*) and giving them bed nets to prevent mosquito bites (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011; Hanlon, Barrientos, & Hulme, 2010; Karlan & Appel, 2011).^[13] However, the evidence on the success of these efforts is mixed (Bennett, 2009; The Economist, 2010).^[14] Much more to help the world’s poor certainly needs to be done.

In this regard, sociology’s structural approach is in line with dependency theory and suggests that global stratification results from the history of colonialism and from continuing exploitation today of poor nations’ resources by wealthy nations and multinational corporations. To the extent such exploitation

exists, global poverty will lessen if and only if this exploitation lessens. A sociological approach also emphasizes the role that class, gender, and ethnic inequality play in perpetuating global poverty. For global poverty to be reduced, gender and ethnic inequality must be reduced.

Writers Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (2010) ^[15] emphasize the need to focus efforts to reduce global poverty of women. We have already seen one reason this emphasis makes sense: women are much worse off than men in poor nations in many ways, so helping them is crucial for both economic and humanitarian reasons. An additional reason is especially illuminating: When women in poor nations acquire extra money, they typically spend it on food, clothing, and medicine, essentials for their families. However, when men in poor nations acquire extra money, they often spend it on alcohol, tobacco, and gambling. This gender difference might sound like a stereotype, but it does indicate that aid to women will help in many ways, while aid to men might be less effective and often even wasted.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- According to some sociologists, a change in thinking about poverty and the poor and political action by and on behalf of the poor are necessary for a renewed effort to help poor Americans.
- Potentially successful antipoverty programs and policies to help the US poor include expanding their employment opportunities and providing them much greater amounts of financial and other aid.
- To help people in poor nations, gender and ethnic inequality must be addressed.

FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. Write a brief essay summarizing the changes in thinking that some sociologists argue must occur before a renewed effort to reduce poverty can take place.
2. Write a brief essay summarizing any four policies or programs that could potentially lower US poverty.

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2.7 End-of-Chapter Material

SUMMARY

1. Poverty statistics are misleading in at least two ways. First, the way that poverty is measured is inadequate for several reasons, and more accurate measures of poverty that have recently been developed suggest that poverty is higher than the official poverty measure indicates. Second, even if people live slightly above the poverty line, they are still living in very difficult circumstances and are having trouble making ends meet.
2. Children, people of color, the South, and single-parent families headed by women have especially high poverty rates. Despite what many Americans think, the most typical poor person is white, and most poor people who are able to work outside the home in fact do work.
3. To explain social stratification and thus poverty, functionalist theory says that stratification is necessary and inevitable because of the need to encourage people with the needed knowledge and skills to decide to pursue the careers that are most important to society. Conflict theory says stratification exists because of discrimination against, and blocked opportunities for, the have-nots of society. Symbolic interactionist theory does not try to explain why stratification and poverty exist, but it does attempt to understand the experience of being poor.
4. The individualistic explanation attributes poverty to individual failings of poor people themselves, while the structuralist explanation attributes poverty to lack of jobs and lack of opportunity in the larger society.
5. Poverty has serious consequences in many respects. Among other problems, poor children are more likely to grow up to be poor, to have health problems, to commit street crime, and to have lower levels of formal education.
6. The nations of the world differ dramatically in wealth and other resources, with the poorest nations being found in Africa and parts of Asia.
7. Global poverty has a devastating impact on the lives of hundreds of millions of people throughout the world. Poor nations have much higher rates of mortality and disease and lower rates of literacy.

8. Modernization theory attributes global poverty to the failure of poor nations to develop the necessary beliefs, values, and practices to achieve economic growth, while dependency theory attributes global poverty to the colonization and exploitation by European nations of nations in other parts of the world.
9. A sociological perspective suggests that poverty reduction in the United States and around the world can occur if the structural causes of poverty are successfully addressed.

USING WHAT YOU KNOW

It is December 20, and you have just finished final exams. In two days, you will go home for winter break and are looking forward to a couple weeks of eating, sleeping, and seeing your high school friends. Your smartphone signals that someone has texted you. When you read the message, you see that a friend is asking you to join her in serving a holiday supper on December 23 at a food pantry just a few miles from your campus. If you do that, you will not be able to get home until two days after you had been planning to arrive, and you will miss a big high school “reunion” party set for the night of the twenty-third. What do you decide to do? Why?

WHAT YOU CAN DO

To help fight poverty and the effects of poverty, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Contribute money to a local, state, or national organization that provides various kinds of aid to the poor.
2. Volunteer at a local food pantry or homeless shelter.
3. Start a canned food or used clothing drive on your campus.
4. Write letters or send e-mails to local, state, and federal officials that encourage them to expand antipoverty programs.