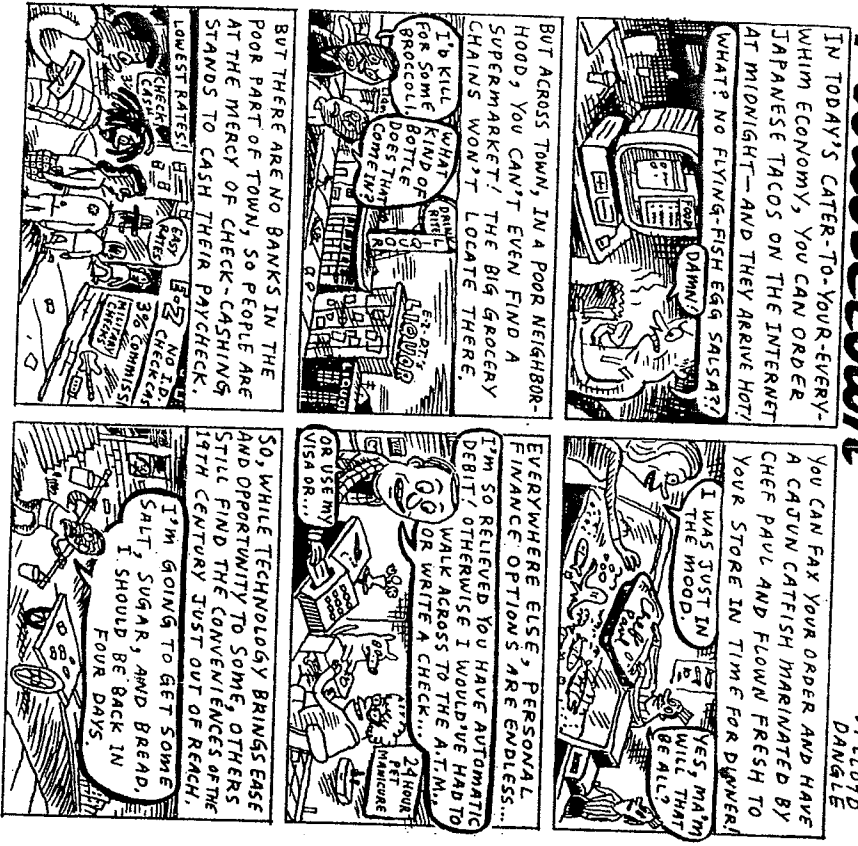


Howbletown

By Lloyd Dangle



On the other hand, class oppression permeates other spheres of power and oppression, so that the oppression experienced by women and minorities is also differentiated along class lines. Although women and minorities find themselves in subordinate positions vis-à-vis white men, the particular issues they confront may be quite different depending on their position in the class structure. Inequalities in the class structure distinguish social functions and individual power, and these distinctions carry over to race and gender categories.

Power is incremental, and class privileges can accrue to individual women and to individual members of a racial minority. At the same time, class-oppressed men, whether they are white or black, have privileges afforded them as men in a sexist society. Similarly, class-oppressed whites, whether they are men or women, have privileges afforded them as whites in a racist society. Spheres of power and oppression divide us deeply in our society, and the schisms between us are often difficult to bridge.

Table 2 Chances of Being Poor in America

WHITE MALE/ FEMALE	WHITE FEMALE/ HEAD*	HISPANIC MALE/ FEMALE	HISPANIC FEMALE/ HEAD*	BLACK MALE/ FEMALE	BLACK FEMALE/ HEAD*
1 in 11	1 in 4	1 in 3	1 in 2	1 in 3	1 in 2

*Persons in families with female householder, no husband present.
Source: Derived from "Poverty 1995" (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 1996), p. 1.

Whereas power is incremental, oppression is cumulative, and those who are poor, black, and female have all the forces of classism, racism, and sexism bearing down on them. This cumulative oppression is what is meant by the double and triple jeopardy of women and minorities. Furthermore, oppression in one sphere is related to the likelihood of oppression in another. If you are black and female, for example, you are much more likely to be poor or working class than you would be as a white male. Census figures show that the incidence of poverty varies greatly by race and gender.

In other words, being female and being nonwhite are attributes in our society that increase the chances of poverty and of lower-class standing.

Reality 8: Racism and sexism compound the effects of classism in society.

ENGAGING THE TEXT

1. Reexamine the four myths Mantstios identifies (paras. 9–12). What does Mantstios say is wrong about each myth, and what evidence does he provide to critique each? How persuasive do you find his evidence and reasoning?
2. Early in the essay, Mantstios refers to exploitation and oppression. Does the essay make a case that the wealthy are exploiting the poor, or does it simply assume this? To what extent do you agree with Mantstios's position?
3. Work out a rough budget for a family of four with an annual income of \$16,000. Be sure to include costs for food, clothing, housing, transportation, healthcare, and other unavoidable expenses. Do you think this is a reasonable "poverty line," or is it too high or too low?
4. Imagine that you are Harold S. Browning, Bob Farrell, or Cheryl Mitchell. Write an entry for this person's journal after a tough day on the job. Compare and contrast your entry with those written by other students.
5. Mantstios clearly sees our class system as oppressive, but in this essay he does not address solutions to the problems he cites. What changes do you imagine Mantstios would like to see? What changes, if any, would you recommend?

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Table 1 Average Combined Scores by Income
(400 to 1600 scale)

FAMILY INCOME	MEDIAN SCORE
More than \$100,000	1129
\$80,000 to \$100,000	1085
\$70,000 to \$80,000	1064
\$60,000 to \$70,000	1049
\$50,000 to \$60,000	1034
\$40,000 to \$50,000	1016
\$30,000 to \$40,000	992
\$20,000 to \$30,000	964
\$10,000 to \$20,000	920
less than \$10,000	873

Based on the test results of 896,596 SAT takers.

Source: Derived from the College Entrance Examination Board and Educational Testing Service, "1996 College-Bound Seniors: A Profile of SAT Test Takers" (Princeton, N.J.: 1993), p. 7.

operates independently of academic ability at every stage in the process of educational attainment.²⁰

Today, the pattern persists. There are, however, two significant changes. On the one hand, the odds of getting into college have improved for the bottom quartile of the population, although they still remain relatively low compared to the top. On the other hand, the chances of completing a college degree have deteriorated markedly for the bottom quartile. Researchers estimate the chances of completing a four-year college degree (by age twenty-four) to be nineteen times as great for the top 25 percent of the population as it is for the bottom 25 percent. "Those from the bottom quartile of family income . . . are faring worse than they have at any time in the twenty-three years of published Current Population Survey data."²¹

Reality 6: Class standing has a significant impact on chances for educational attainment.

Class standing and consequently life chances, are largely determined at birth. Although examples of individuals who have gone from rags to riches abound in the mass media, statistics on class mobility show these leaps to be extremely rare. In fact, dramatic advances in class standing are relatively few. One study showed that fewer than one in five men surpass the economic status of their fathers.²² For those whose annual income is in six fig-

²⁰William H. Sewell, "Inequality of Opportunity for Higher Education," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 36, no. 5, 1971, pp. 793-809.

²¹The Mortenson Report on Public Policy Analysis of Opportunity for Postsecondary Education, "Postsecondary Education Opportunity," Iowa City, September 1993, no. 16.

²²De Lone, *Small Futures*, pp. 14-19.

ures, economic success is due in large part to the wealth and privileges bestowed on them at birth. Over 66 percent of the consumer units with incomes of \$100,000 or more have some inherited assets. Of these units, over 86 percent reported that inheritances constituted a substantial portion of their total assets.²³

Economist Howard Wachtel likens inheritance to a series of Monopoly games in which the winner of the first game refuses to relinquish his or her cash and commercial property for the second game. "After all," argues the winner, "I accumulated my wealth and income by my own wits." With such an arrangement, it is not difficult to predict the outcome of subsequent games.²⁴

Reality 7: All Americans do not have an equal opportunity to succeed. Inheritance laws ensure a greater likelihood of success for the offspring of the wealthy.

Spheres of Power and Oppression

When we look at society and try to determine what it is that keeps most people down—what holds them back from realizing their potential as healthy, creative, productive individuals—we find institutionally oppressive forces that are largely beyond individual control. Class domination is one of these forces. People do not choose to be poor or working class; instead, they are limited and confined by the opportunities afforded or denied them by a social and economic system. The class structure in the United States is a function of its economic system—capitalism, a system that is based on private rather than public ownership and control of commercial enterprises, and on the class division between those who own and control and those who do not. Under capitalism, these enterprises are governed by the need to produce a profit for the owners, rather than to fulfill collective needs.

Racial and gender domination are other such forces that hold people down. Although there are significant differences in the way capitalism, racism, and sexism affect our lives, there are also a multitude of parallels. And although race, class, and gender act independently of each other, they are at the same time very much interrelated.

On the one hand, issues of race and gender oppression cut across class lines. Women experience the effects of sexism whether they are well-paid professionals or poorly paid clerks. As women, they face discrimination and male domination as well as catcalls and stereotyping. Similarly, a black man faces racial oppression, is subjected to racial slurs, and is denied opportunities because of his color. Regardless of their class standing, women and members of minority races are confronted with oppressive forces precisely because of their gender, color, or both.

²³Howard Tuchman, *Economics of the Rich*, New York, Random House, 1973, p. 15.

²⁴Howard Wachtel, *Labor and the Economy*, Orlando, FL, Academic Press, 1984, pp. 161-162.

readings, pass out and collect food trays, feed patients who need help, bathe patients, and change dressings
Annual salary: \$16,000
Ambition: "to get out of the ghetto"
three-room apartment in the South Bronx; needs painting, has poor ventilation, is in a high-crime area
Note: Cheryl Mitchell lives with her two children and her elderly mother

When we look at Cheryl Mitchell, Bob Farrell, and Harold Browning, we see life-styles that are very different. We are not looking, however, at economic extremes. Cheryl Mitchell's income as a nurse's aid puts her above the government's official poverty line. Below her on the income pyramid are 40 million poverty-stricken Americans. Far from being poor, Bob Farrell's annual income as an assistant sales manager puts him in the fifty-first percentile of the income distribution. More than 50 percent of the U.S. population earns less than Bob Farrell. And while Harold Browning's income puts him in a high-income bracket, he stands only a fraction of the way up Samuelson's income pyramid. Well above him are the 17,000 individuals whose annual salary exceeds \$1 million. Yet Harold Browning spends more money on his horses than Cheryl Mitchell earns in a year.

Reality 4: Even ignoring the extreme poles of the economic spectrum, we find enormous class differences in the life-styles among the haves, the have-nots, and the have-littles.

Class affects more than life-style and material well-being. It has a significant impact on physical and mental well-being as well.

Researchers have found an inverse relationship between social class and health. Lower-class standing is correlated with higher rates of infant mortality, eye and ear disease, arthritis, physical disability, diabetes, nutritional deficiency, respiratory disease, mental illness, and heart disease.¹⁶ In all areas of health, poor people do not share the same life chances as those in the social class above them. Furthermore, lower-class standing is corre-

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¹⁶Vicente Navarro, "Class, Race, and Health Care in the United States," in Bersh Berberoglu, *Critical Perspectives in Sociology*, 2nd ed., Dubuque, IA, Kendall/Hunt, 1983, pp. 148-156; Melvin Krashner, *Poverty and Health in New York City*, United Hospital Fund of New York, 1989. See also U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, *Health Status of Minorities and Low Income Groups*, 1985, and Dan Hughes, Kay Johnson, Sara Rosenbaum, Elizabeth Butler, Janet Simons, *The Health of America's Children*, Children's Defense Fund, 1988.

lated with a lower quality of treatment for illness and disease. The results of poor health and poor treatment are borne out in the life expectancy rates within each class. Researchers have found that the higher one's class standing, the higher one's life expectancy. Conversely, they have also found that within each age group, the lower one's class standing, the higher the death rate; in some age groups, the figures are as much as two and three times as high.¹⁷

Reality 5: From cradle to grave, class standing has a significant impact on our chances for survival.

The lower one's class standing, the more difficult it is to secure appropriate housing; the more time is spent on the routine tasks of everyday life, the greater is the percentage of income that goes to pay for food and other basic necessities, and the greater is the likelihood of crime victimization.¹⁸ Class can predict chances for both survival and success.

Class and Educational Attainment

School performance (grades and test scores) and educational attainment (level of schooling completed) also correlate strongly with economic class. Furthermore, despite some efforts to make testing more fair and schooling more accessible, current data suggest that the level of inequity is staying the same or getting worse.

In his study for the Carnegie Council on Children [in the 1970s], Richard de Lone examined the test scores of over half a million students who took the College Board exams (SATs). His findings were consistent with earlier studies that showed a relationship between class and scores on standardized tests; his conclusion: "the higher the student's social status, the higher the probability that he or she will get higher grades."¹⁹ Fifteen years after the release of the Carnegie report, College Board surveys reveal data that are no different: test scores still correlate strongly with family income.

A little more than twenty years ago, researcher William Sewell showed a positive correlation between class and overall educational achievement. In comparing the top quartile (25 percent) of his sample to the bottom quartile, he found that students from upper-class families were twice as likely to obtain training beyond high school and four times as likely to attain a postgraduate degree. Sewell concluded: "Socioeconomic background . . .

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¹⁷Kenneth Neubeck and Davita Glassberg, *Sociology: A Critical Approach*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1966, pp. 436-438; Aaron Antonovsky, "Social Class, Life Expectancy, and Overall Mortality," in *The Impact of Social Class*, New York, Thomas Crowell, 1972, pp. 467-491. See also Harriet Duleep, "Measuring the Effect of Income on Adult Mortality Using Longitudinal Administrative Record Data," *Journal of Human Resources*, vol. 21, no. 2, Spring 1986.

¹⁸Dennis W. Roncsek, "Dangerous Places: Crime and Residential Environment," *Social Forces*, vol. 60, no. 1, September 1981, pp. 74-96.

¹⁹Richard De Lone, *Small Futures*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, pp. 14-19.

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Ambition: "to make it through college"
High-school graduation gift: \$500 savings bond

Family activities: family gatherings around television set, bowling, an occasional trip to the movie theater, summer Sundays at the public beach

Higher education: a two-year community college with a technical orientation

Major: electrical technology

After-school activities: employed as a part-time bagger in local supermarket

Ambition: "to become an electrical engineer"

First full-time job (age 19): service-station attendant
Note: continued to take college classes in the evening

Subsequent employment: mail clerk at large insurance firm; manager trainee, large retail chain

Present employment (age 38): assistant sales manager, building supply firm

Typical daily activities: demonstrate products, write up product orders, handle customer complaints, check inventory

Transportation to and from work: city subway

Annual salary: \$32,000

Ambition: "to open up my own business"

Additional income: \$6,100 in commissions from evening and weekend work as salesman in local men's clothing store

Present residence: the Farrells own their own home in a working-class neighborhood in Queens

Bob Farrell and Harold Browning live very differently: the life-style of one is privileged; the other is not so privileged. The differences are class differences, and these differences have a profound impact on the way the men live. They are differences between playing a game of handball in the park and taking riding lessons at a private stable; watching a movie on television and going to the theater; taking the subway to work and being driven in a limousine. More important, the difference in class determines where they live, who their friends are, how well they are educated, what they do for a living, and what they expect from life.

Yet, as dissimilar as their life-styles are, Harold Browning and Bob Farrell have some things in common. They live in the same city, they work

long hours, and they are highly motivated. More important, they are both white males.
Let us look at someone else who works long and hard and is highly motivated. This person, however, is black and female.

American Profile No. 3

Name: Cheryl Mitchell

Father: janitor

Mother: waitress

Principal child-rearer: grandmother

Primary education: large public school in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Brooklyn, New York

Note: rote teaching of basic skills and emphasis on conveying the importance of good attendance, good manners, and good work habits; school patrolled by security guards

Ambition: "to be a teacher"

Supplemental tutoring: none

Summer camp: none

Secondary education: large public school in Ocean Hill-Brownsville

Note: classmates included sons and daughters of hairdressers, groundskeepers, painters, dressmakers, dishwashers, domestics

After-school activities: domestic chores, part-time employment as babysitter and house-keeper

Ambition: "to be a social worker"

High-school graduation gift: corsage

Family activities: church-sponsored socials

Higher education: one semester of local community college

Note: dropped out of school for financial reasons

First full-time job (age 17): counter clerk, local bakery

Subsequent employment: file clerk with temporary service agency; supermarket checker

Present employment (age 38): nurse's aide at a municipal hospital

Typical daily activities: make up hospital beds, clean out bedpans, weigh patients and assist them to the bathroom, take temperature

Higher education: an Ivy League liberal arts college in Massachusetts

Major: economics and political science
After-class activities: debating club, college newspaper, swim team
Ambition: "to become a leader in business"

First full-time job (age 23): assistant manager of operations, Browning Tool and Die, Inc. (family enterprise)

Subsequent employment: 3 years — executive assistant to the president, Browning Tool and Die

Responsibilities included: purchasing (materials and equipment), personnel, and distribution networks

4 years — advertising manager, Lackheed Manufacturing (home appliances)

3 years — director of marketing and sales, Comerex, Inc. (business machines)

Present employment (age 38): executive vice president, SmithBond and Co. (digital instruments)

Typical daily activities: review financial reports and computer printouts, dictate memoranda, lunch with clients, initiate conference calls, meet with assistants, plan business trips, meet with associates

Transportation to and from work: chauffeured company limousine

Annual salary: \$315,000

Ambition: "to become chief executive officer of the firm, or one like it, within the next five to ten years"

Present residence:

eighteenth-floor condominium in Manhattan's Upper West Side, eleven rooms, including five spacious bedrooms and terrace overlooking river

Interior: professionally designed and accented with elegant furnishings, valuable antiques, and expensive artwork

Note: building management provides doorman and elevator attendant; family employs a pair¹⁵ for children and maid for other domestic chores

¹⁵ *au pair:* A young woman from another country who works for a family, typically caring for children in exchange for room and board.

Second residence:

farm in northwestern Connecticut, used for weekend retreats and for horse breeding (investment/hobby)

Note: to maintain the farm and cater to their needs when they are there, the Brownings employ a part-time maid, groundskeeper, and horse breeder

Harold Browning was born into a world of nurses, maids, and governesses. His world today is one of airplanes and limousines, five-star restaurants, and luxurious living accommodations. The life-style of Harold Browning is in sharp contrast to that of Bob Farrell.

American Profile No. 2

Name: Bob Farrell

Father: machinist

Mother: retail clerk

Principal child-rearer: mother and sitter

Primary education: a medium-sized public school in Queens, New York

Note: characterized by large class size, unmoded physical facilities, and an educational philosophy emphasizing basic skills and student discipline

Ambition: "to become president"

Supplemental tutoring:

none

Summer camp: YMCA day camp

Secondary education:

large regional high school in Queens

Note: classmates included the sons and daughters of carpenters, postal clerks, teachers, nurses, shopkeepers, mechanics, bus drivers, police officers, salespersons

After-school activities: basketball and handball in school park

economic growth as a "spectator sport for the majority of American families."⁸

The level of inequality is sometimes difficult to comprehend fully with dollar figures and percentages. To help his students visualize the distribution of income, the well-known economist Paul Samuelson asked them to picture an income pyramid made of children's blocks, with each layer of blocks representing \$1,000. If we were to construct Samuelson's pyramid today, the peak of the pyramid would be much higher than the Eiffel Tower, yet almost all of us would be within six feet of the ground.¹⁰ In other words, the distribution of income is heavily skewed; a small minority of families take the lion's share of national income, and the remaining income is distributed among the vast majority of middle-income and low-income families. Keep in mind that Samuelson's pyramid represents the distribution of income, not wealth. The distribution of wealth is skewed even further.

Reality 2: The middle class in the United States holds a very small share of the nation's wealth.

Lottery millionaires and celebrity salaries notwithstanding, evidence suggests that the level of inequality in the United States is growing. Statistically, it is getting harder to "make it big" and more difficult to even stay in the middle-income level. Census data show the gap between the rich and the poor to be the widest since the government began collecting information in 1947. Furthermore, the percentage of households earning at a middle-income level (the middle quintile) has been falling steadily since 1968.¹¹ Most of those who disappeared from the middle-income level moved downward, not upward. And economic polarization is expected to increase over the next several decades.¹²

Reality 3: The middle class is shrinking in size, and most of those leaving the ranks of the middle class are falling to a lower economic standing.

American Life-Styles

At last count, nearly 40 million Americans across the nation lived in unrelenting poverty. Yet, as political scientist Michael Harrington once commented, "America has the best dressed poverty the world has ever known."¹³ Clothing disguises much of the poverty in the United States, and

⁸Paul Krugman, quoting Alan Bhinder, in "Disparity and Despair," *U.S. News and World Report*, March 23, 1992, p. 54.

⁹Paul Samuelson, *Economics*, 10th ed., New York, McGraw Hill, 1976, p. 84.

¹⁰Money Income of Households, Families, and Persons in the United States 1992, "U.S. Department of Commerce, "Current Population Reports: Consumer Income" series P60-184, Washington, DC, 1993, p. B6.

¹¹Paul Blumberg, *Inequality in an Age of Decline*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1980.

¹²Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, New York, Macmillan, 1962, pp. 12-13.

this may explain, in part, its middle-class image. With increased mass marketing of "designer" clothing and with shifts in the nation's economy from blue-collar (and often better-paying) manufacturing jobs to white-collar and pink-collar jobs in the service sector, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish class differences based on appearance.¹⁴ Beneath the surface, there is another reality. Let us look at some "typical" and not-so-typical life-styles.

American Profile No. 1

Name: Harold S. Browning

Father: manufacturer, industrialist

Mother: prominent social figure in the community

Principal child-rearer: governess

Primary education: an exclusive private school in Manhattan's Upper East Side

Note: a small, well-respected primary school where teachers and administrators have a reputation for nurturing student creativity and for providing the finest educational preparation

Ambition: "to become President"

Supplemental tutoring: tutors in French and mathematics

Summer camp: sleep-away camp in northern Connecticut

Note: camp provides instruction in the creative arts, athletics, and the natural sciences

Secondary education: a prestigious preparatory school in Westchester County

Note: classmates included the sons of ambassadors, doctors, attorneys, television personalities, and well-known business leaders.

After-school activities: private riding lessons

Ambition: "to take over my father's business"

High-school graduation gift: BMW

Family activities: theater, recitals, museums, summer vacations in Europe, occasional winter trips to the Caribbean

Note: as members and donors of the local art museum, the Brownings and their children attend private receptions and exhibit openings at the invitation of the museum director

¹⁴Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1982.

mistakenly hold a set of beliefs that obscure the reality of class differences and their impact on people's lives.

Let us look at four common, albeit contradictory, beliefs about the United States.

Myth 1: The United States is fundamentally a classless society. Class distinctions are largely irrelevant today, and whatever differences do exist in economic standing are, for the most part, insignificant. Rich or poor, we are all equal in the eyes of the law, and such basic needs as health care and education are provided to all regardless of economic standing.

Myth 2: We are, essentially, a middle-class nation. Despite some variations in economic status, most Americans have achieved relative affluence in what is widely recognized as a consumer society.

Myth 3: We are all getting richer. The American public as a whole is steadily moving up the economic ladder, and each generation propels itself to greater economic well-being. Despite some fluctuations, the U.S. position in the global economy has brought previously unknown prosperity to most, if not all, North Americans.

Myth 4: Everyone has an equal chance to succeed. Success in the United States requires no more than hard work, sacrifice, and perseverance: "In America, anyone can become a millionaire; it's just a matter of being in the right place at the right time."

In trying to assess the legitimacy of these beliefs, we want to ask several important questions: Are there significant class differences among Americans? If these differences do exist, are they getting bigger or smaller, and do these differences have a significant impact on the way we live? Finally, does everyone in the United States really have an equal opportunity to succeed?

The Economic Spectrum

We will begin by looking at differences. An examination of available data reveals that variations in economic well-being are in fact immense. Consider the following:

- The wealthiest 20 percent of the American population holds 85 percent of the total household wealth in the country. That is, they own nearly seven-eighths of all the consumer durables (such as houses, cars, and stereos) and financial assets (such as stocks, bonds, property, and savings accounts).³
- Approximately 100,000 Americans or 0.1 percent of the adult working population earn more than \$1 million annually, with many of these in-

³Edward Wolff, in Lawrence Mishel and Jared Bernstein, *The State of Working America*, Armonk, NY, M.E. Sharpe, 1994, p. 245.

dividuals earning over \$10 million and some earning over \$100 million annually. It would take the average American, earning \$34,000 per year, more than 65 lifetimes to earn \$100 million.⁴

Affluence and prosperity are clearly alive and well in certain segments of the U.S. population. However, this abundance is in contrast to the poverty and despair that are also prevalent in the United States. At the other end of the spectrum:

- A total of 14 percent of the American population—that is, one of every seven—live below the government's official poverty line (calculated in 1996 at \$7,992 for an individual and \$16,029 for a family of four).⁵ These poor include a significant number of homeless people—approximately 3 million Americans.
- More than a quarter of all the children in the United States under the age of six live in poverty.⁶

The contrast between rich and poor is sharp, and with nearly one-third of the American population living at one extreme or the other, it is difficult to argue that we live in a classless society. The income gap between rich and poor in the United States (measured as the percentage of total income held by the wealthiest 20 percent of the population versus the poorest 20 percent) is approximately 9 to 1, one of the highest ratios in the industrialized world. The ratio in Japan, by contrast, is 4 to 1.⁷

Reality 1: There are enormous differences in the economic status of American citizens. A sizeable proportion of the U.S. population occupies opposite ends of the economic spectrum. And it cannot be said that the majority of the American population fares very well. In the middle range of the economic spectrum:

- Fifty percent of the American population holds less than 3.5 percent of the nation's wealth.⁸
- While the real income of the top 1 percent of U.S. families skyrocketed by 78 percent during the economic growth period leading up to the 1990s, the income of the middle fifth of the population actually declined by 5.3 percent. This led one prominent economist to describe

⁴Jean-Paul Dubois, "Living on Different Planets," *World Press Review*, July 1996, p. 43.

⁵Preliminary Estimates of Poverty Thresholds in 1996," Washington, DC, Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1996.

⁶Mishel and Bernstein, *The State of Working America*, p. 8.

⁷Derived from: U.S. Department of Commerce, "Current Population Reports: Consumer Income, 1992," Washington, DC, 1993; and World Bank, "World Development Report, 1992," Washington, DC, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1992.

⁸See U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Current Population Reports," series P80, no. 146, 1989; and Steven Rose, *The American Profile Poster*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1986, p. 31.