



Social Class in America

Inequality

Work

Media

and

The American Dream

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Big idea:

Economic inequality in the U.S. **isn't** just about money — it's about work, housing, media, belief systems, and who gets ahead.





Our Readings



“The Rich, the Poor, and the Growing Gap Between Them: Inequality in America” — The Economist

“*Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*” — Barbara Ehrenreich

“*Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America*” — Diana Kendall



Main Idea's:
Income inequality
Low-wage work and survival
Media portrayals of wealth and poverty

Economic Shifts Timeline

1950s–1960s

During this period, productivity surged alongside wages, fostering a **strong middle class** and **improved living standards** across various socio-economic groups, marking a time of **economic growth and stability**.

1980s Onward

Starting in the 1980s, wages stagnated for middle and lower classes while income levels for the top rapidly increased, contributing to widening income inequality and decreased union influence.

1990s–2000s

The rise of technology and globalization redefined labor markets, leading to the disappearance of middle-skill jobs and significant wealth concentration at the top, impacting economic mobility for many.

2000s-Present

In recent decades, wealth concentration has intensified, resulting in pronounced economic disparities, with significant portions of wealth residing with a small elite, raising concerns about sustainability and fairness.



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Is the American Dream Dead?

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True or False:

**If productivity increases,
wages usually rise for everyone?**

Why Inequality Matters

WAGE STAGNATION

Middle-class wages have seen barely any growth since 2000, with less than 1% increase after adjusting for inflation, highlighting the economic struggles faced by this group.

INCOME VOLATILITY

Income volatility has increased significantly, causing uncertainty as people's earnings are no longer stable year to year, making financial planning and security increasingly difficult.

SQUEEZED MIDDLE CLASS

The middle class is being squeezed while the top continues to grow



According to the reading, which group's share of income has grown the most in the United States over the past few decades?

- A. Top 50% of earners**
- B. Top 5 % of earners**
- C. Top 0.01% of earners**
- D. Top 1% of earners**

SIMPLE, U.S.-BASED BREAKDOWN USING AVERAGE ANNUAL INCOME RANGES

Lower class

- About \$0–\$30,000 per year

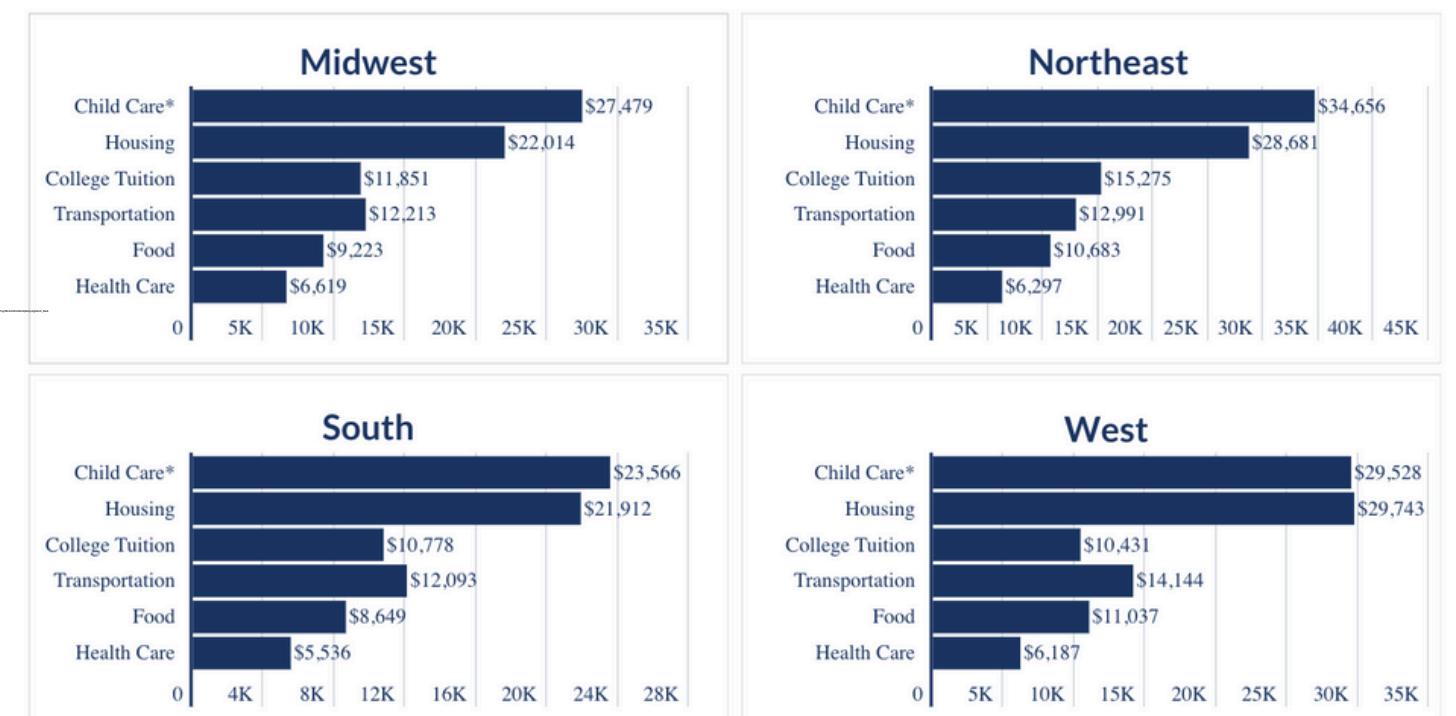
Middle class

- About \$50,000–\$100,000 per year

Upper class

- \$100,000+ per year

Figure 3: Regional Price Comparisons



*Average price of child care for two children (an infant and 4-year-old) in a center

Sources: Child care prices calculated from CCAoA annual survey. Housing, transportation, food and health care data retrieved from [Table 1800: Region of Residence: Annual Expenditure](#), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023 data). College tuition data retrieved from the 2024 College Board [Trends in College Pricing](#) report. Regions are defined by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

2 kids

“Raising a child alone: About \$15,500–\$23,000 per year on average, depending on expenses like childcare, food, housing, and healthcare.” - Nasdaq

Ehrenreich's Experience

Result:

Working harder **no longer guarantees
financial stability.**



Reflect

Economic Hardship

Exploring Daily Struggles in America

Work & Wages

Full-time workers are **struggling to afford** basic necessities, leading many to take on multiple jobs just to make ends meet and still falling short of their needs.

Housing

Rent has surged dramatically, outpacing wage growth, resulting in housing costs consuming a **significant portion** of income and leaving families in precarious financial situations.

Poverty Measures

Official poverty statistics often **underestimate** the true extent of hardship, failing to account for the rising costs of living, particularly housing, which is often the breaking point.

According to the article “The rich, the Poor, and the Growing Gap between Them- Inequality in America,” income and wealth inequality in the United States has continued to increase. America is still far less unequal than Brazil, which is known for extreme concentration of income and wealth:

True

B) False



Who Actually Gets Ahead?

Economic Mobility Facts

- In the U.S., about half of income inequality is passed from parents to children
- Family background strongly predicts future success
- The American Dream belief remains strong (even when reality doesn't match)

Comparison

- **Canada & Nordic countries:**
 - Only about 20% of inequality passes between generations
- Europe:**
- More concern with redistribution
 - Stronger social safety nets

Media & Culture — Why Don't We Talk About This?

Media Framing of Class

- Wealth is glamorized and celebrated

Poverty is:

- Turned into comedy
- Blamed on individuals
- Ignored

Working class portrayed as:

- Jokes
- Unrefined
- invisible

Result:

People identify with the rich instead of questioning inequality.

U.S. media often downplays poverty as a structural issue while heavily promoting wealthy celebrities and reality TV lifestyles, which can increase consumer pressure and shape how audiences view success and inequality.

A) True

B) False



Examples in Media and Sports People identify with the rich instead of questioning inequality:



- **Michael Vick (NFL): Signed a massive contract with the Atlanta Falcons**
- **Crime: Involved in a brutal, illegal dogfighting ring**
- **Punishment: Served 23 months in prison**
- **Aftermath: Returned to the NFL and was widely praised for a comeback, despite the severity of his actions**

Michael Vick earned approximately \$116 million to \$118 million



- **One of boxing's most profitable champions ever**
- **Convicted of rape (1992), served prison time**
- **Returned to boxing, endorsements, movies, and pop culture fame**
- **His violence was often reframed as part of his "dangerous mystique"**

\$400–\$430 million total from boxing
he was the highest-paid athlete in the world 1990's



Reality shows + celebrity culture = consumer pressure

In many professional sports leagues, the highest paid athletes can earn more in a single season than lower-paid players earn over their entire careers, highlighting extreme income inequality within the same league.

A) True

B) False

Sports & Money

Where This Shows Up in Sports

Massive pay gaps:

- - Owners & top athletes vs. support staff
-
- College sports generate billions while many athletes:
 - Lack long-term financial security
-
- Youth sports:
 - Increasingly “pay to play.”
 - Access tied to family income






What Do Other Countries Do Differently?



Outside the U.S.

- **Universal healthcare**
 - **Subsidized housing**
 - **Stronger worker protections**
 - **Higher minimum wages**
 - **More public investment in families**
- 

Impact

- **Less pressure on wages alone to provide survival**
- **More economic stability for working families**

Will We Ever Find a Solution?

- Inequality will probably keep growing unless big changes are made
- Many Americans accept inequality, but only when the economy is doing well
- When the economy slows down, people become more frustrated and less accepting
- More people are questioning globalization and whether it really helps everyone

This could lead to pressure for:

- Better wages
- More affordable housing
- Stronger worker protections



Can the American Dream survive without economic mobility?

THE END

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