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Issue Brief: Socio-Economic Status/Class and Discrimination

Keywords

Class discrimination, exclusion, representation, race, mobility, and power.

Description

This issue brief discusses the discrimination that Americans face due to their socio-economic status particularly with regards to political engagement, access to education and class mobility. Understanding class divides requires an understanding of preexisting racial oppression that often aligns with class oppression. The main component of this brief will be highlighting the challenges individuals and politicians face when trying to mitigate class inequality.

Key Points

- Low income families tend to have to have both parents and maybe older siblings working, therefore childcare can detract from pursuit of higher education.
- Types of work available to people of low socio economic class not conducive to upward mobility.
- Mobility is reduced along class lines because getting subsistence takes priority over political engagement and advocacy.
- Cross cutting cleavages between class and race are very strong and vital to recognize the extent of discrimination along class division.
- There is discrimination along all levels of socio-economic class, in that the poorest people may receive more aid or attention than poorer middle class people.

Issue Brief

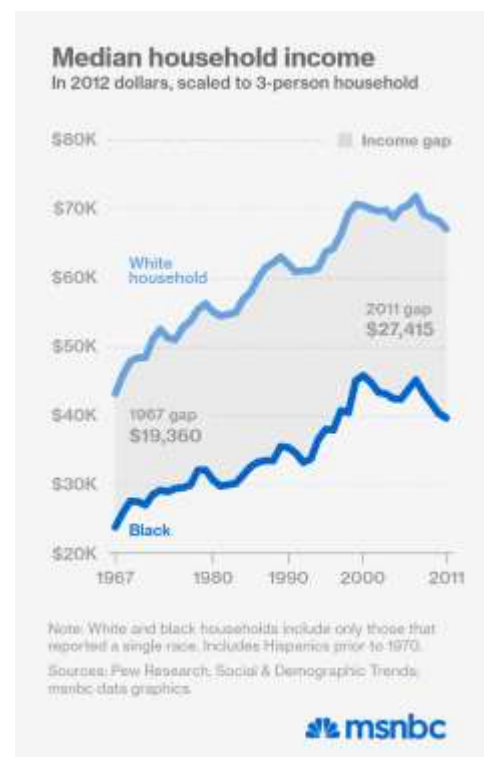
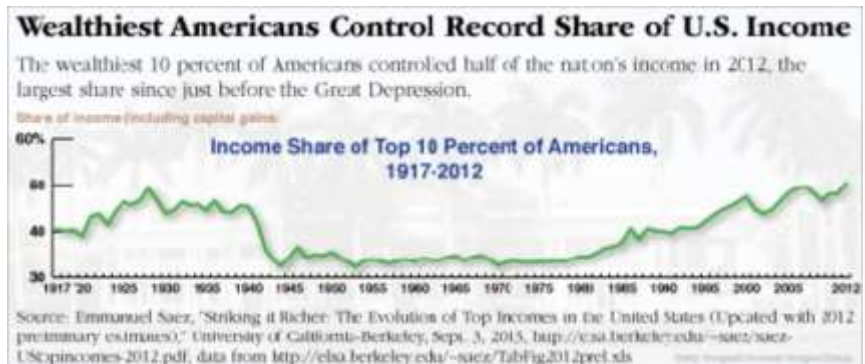
Despite the United States' proud dismissal of the existence of a class-based hierarchy within our society, large bodies of evidence have proven otherwise, highlighting the discrimination many Americans face around socio-economic status. According to French economist Thomas Piketty, the world's top 1 percent "owns about half of global wealth and the bottom half less than 5 percent" (Piketty, 80). The discrimination that occurs along class lines includes: access to education, career mobility, quality and quantity of welfare resources available, social stigmatization of welfare and the cross cutting cleavages of

racial discrimination. Given the increased wage gap within the United States over the past couple of decades, it is crucial to critically examine the discriminatory practices in place that put people and keep people in less favorable socio-economic conditions.

Access more broadly to upward mobility for people with low socio-economic status is a huge source of discrimination within the US economic system. Numerous experts have affirmed “achieving middle-class status today is unlikely without a

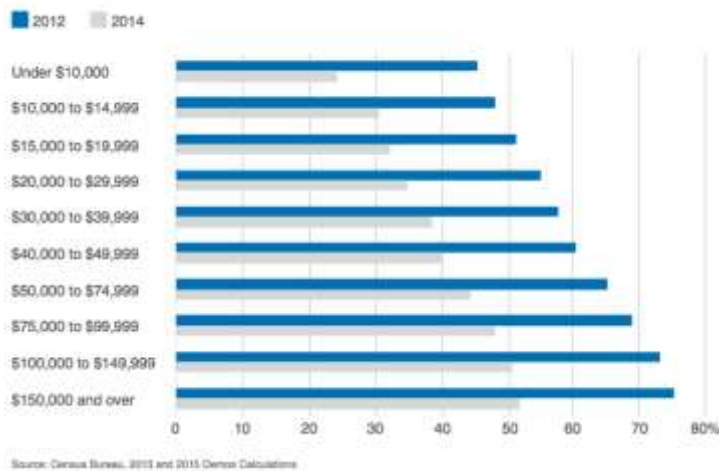
college education and entry into the white-collar work world” (Glazer, 3). Families with low SES tend to have both parents working in order to generate enough income to support their families; consequently providing attentive childcare will likely be more challenging than families with a stay home parent. Having a guardian that actively emphasizes the need for homework to be completed or ensure daily attendance to school is a huge advantage in academic performance, that invariably leads to greater opportunity. Similarly, needing an older sibling to take up part time work or care for younger siblings may detract from pursuing education beyond High School levels. In more extreme cases, securing subsistence on a daily basis may be the only means of survival, which automatically eliminate any long term saving or planning. Beyond the High School level as well, often students in College seek unpaid internship positions, which would be inaccessible to students who cannot afford to do unpaid work. Consequently, accessibility to future high paying positions is restricted.

The types of work that people with low SES are hired for often involve hourly wages, manual labor, and consequently make upward career mobility challenging. This is an example of how the cross cutting cleavages along racial lines are also pertinent in the discrimination low-income people face. Racial profiling in the hiring process of individuals happens frequently, and how an individual is physically presented can welcome discriminatory practices. For example, having weaved hair for African American people, not having the appropriate wardrobe to be accepted as ‘professional’ in certain work environments, and not having substantive work allocated to people of color in the work place are all instances of discrimination



that low SES individuals face. Not only is there a lack of career development in the majority of these hourly waged jobs, often they can be dangerous to health and safety. In order to provide for their families, some may resort to high-risk high return professions, such as drug dealing or prostitution.

Figure 2. Percent Voting, By Family Income Bracket, 2012 and 2014



Given that our capitalist system is responsible for prohibiting individuals with low SES from upward mobility, one would assume that low SES peoples should be more politically engaged. However, even engaging in the political system can be a matter of class privilege. For example, having access to information to empower voters to elect a representational candidate, being able to take time off work to vote, and attending political rallies or

community organizing are all time consuming endeavors that many individuals simply can't afford. In "Can We All Get Along? Racial and Ethnic Minorities in American Politics", it is rightfully addressed that "if one is struggling to subsist, political participation – even the simple act of voting – may be perceived as a luxury, a not very profitable investment of one's time and energy" (Stewart & McClain, 31). Because low SES individuals are not wholly included in the political process, the necessary advocacy for systemic changes is slowed as rarely high-income peoples seek changes to a system that they are profiting from immensely.

Although initial access to resources that can level the playing field regarding discriminatory practices against low SES peoples are important, the quality of those resources must be examined. For example, there may be programs put in place that benefit impoverished people that are not available to low or middle SES peoples. To receive welfare or compensation often one must be in the lowest income bracket. This can be problematic, as often it is those in the middle to low SES bracket that are failed the most as they are not supported and are expected to rise out of their condition. However, "some experts call fears of a middle-class decline overblown, saying poor Americans who face far tougher conditions are being overlooked" (CQ Researcher). Ultimately, very meaningful economic reform is needed to degrease the income gap in the US to challenge the class discrimination.

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