

# THE POOR AND THE HOMELESS

April 8, 2009

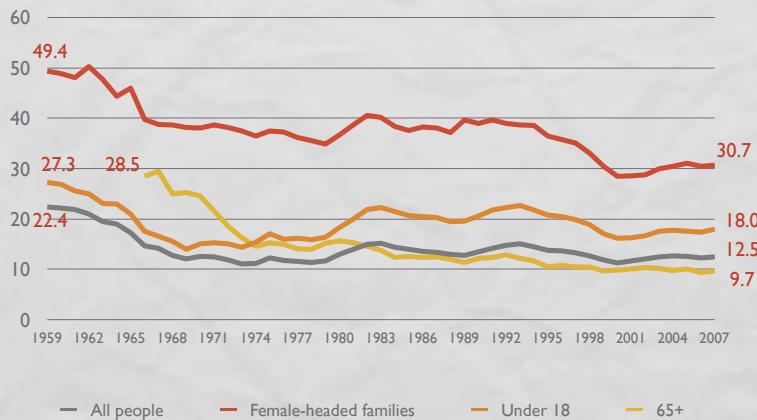
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## POVERTY DEFINITIONS

- Absolute poverty: inability to afford the minimal requirements for sustaining healthy existence (p. 310)
- Relative poverty: individual's economic position compared to the living standards of the majority in society (p. 310)
- Poverty line: amount of yearly income a family requires to meet its basic needs, according to the federal government (p. 355)
  - 2007 poverty line: one person: \$10,590; two people: \$13,540; family of three: \$16,530; family of four: \$21,203
- Poverty rate: percentage of people whose income falls below the poverty line (p. 357)
  - 2007 poverty rate: 12.5%; 37.3 million people (Iowa: 8.9%)
- Near poor: Individuals or families whose earnings are between 100% and 125% of the poverty line
  - 2007 near poor: 13.6 million

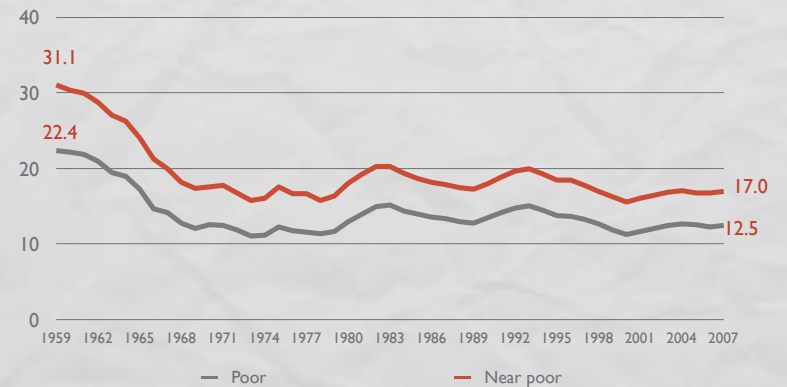
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## POVERTY RATES



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## POVERTY VS. NEAR POVERTY



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## WHY POVERTY?

- Many Americans blame poverty on the poor
  - Competitive individualism: cultural belief that those who succeed in society are those who work the hardest and have the best abilities and that those who suffer don't work hard enough or lack necessary traits or abilities (p. 318)
  - Culture-of-poverty thesis: belief that poor people, resigned to their position in society, develop a unique value structure to deal with their lack of success (p. 319)
- Sociologists focus on structural, not personal factors:
  - Increasing disparities between top and bottom income means less income for those on bottom
  - In 2007, 2.7 million poor (10.9%) worked year-round full-time; 9.1 million poor (35.9%) did some paid work
  - Most poor people don't receive government assistance and many who do don't remain in programs

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## HOMELESSNESS

- Who is homeless?
  - Estimates of homelessness range from 750,000 to 2 million (2000)
  - 1995 survey of homelessness: 46% homeless men, 13% single women, 36.5% families with children, 3.5% children on own
- Individualistic explanations of homelessness
  - Substance abuse
  - Mental illness (Snow et al. found only 15% were mentally ill)
- Structural explanations
  - Residential dislocation (lack of low-income housing, housing inflation)
  - Economic dislocation (unemployment, low-paying jobs)
- Best explanations connect structural to biographical

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## PATHWAYS TO THE STREET

- Snow and Anderson's *Down on Their Luck* (1993)
- Method: participant observation and analysis of shelter and government documents in Austin, Texas
- Connects structural factors and individual-level factors
- Structural factors: residential dislocation & economic dislocation
- Biographical determinants of homelessness
  - Voluntarism (homeless as lifestyle choice): not supported by evidence; only 6.3% of homeless gave this explanation
  - Disabilities and pathologies: also not supported; Snow & Anderson view individual pathologies as adaptations to homeless, not cause of it
  - Lack of family support: most commonly mentioned biographical factor (66.6%); S & A claim it's also the most important biographical factor
  - Bad luck: may result in homelessness among the economically marginal



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## HOMELESS JOB EXPERIENCE (TEXAS, 1980S)

- Last job
  - General laborer (construction, warehouse loading, oil field): 30.7%
  - Service (dishwashing; janitorial; nursing home): 21.5%
  - Factory work and vehicle operation: 20.6%
  - Craft/skilled work (building trades; mechanics): 19.3%
  - Sales and clerical: 5.7%
  - Military: 2.2%
- Median hourly wage: \$4.90
- Median duration of job: 6.5 months
- Reason for job termination
  - Laid off/job ended: 44.3%
  - Fired 9.1%
  - Quit: 21.0%
  - Other: 25.6%

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PREVIEW OF FRIDAY'S LECTURE  
2004 RIOT AT IOWA STATE

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