

C | L | A | S | S **ACTION**

Building Bridges Across the Class Divide

A world without classism:

- Meets everyone's basic needs;
- Treats people from every background, class status and rank with dignity and respect;
- Supports the development of all people to their full potential;
- Reduces the vast differences in income, wealth and access to resources
- Ensures everyone has a voice in the decisions that affect them.

What do we mean by class?

Class - relative social rank in terms of income, wealth, education, status, and/or power.

Classism – the institutional, cultural, and individual practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people according to their socioeconomic class; and an economic system that creates excessive inequality and causes basic human needs to go unmet.

Class Identities

Class in the US is a confusing and slippery topic. The definitions that make sense to one person may not make sense to another. These definitions are offered in hopes of starting a discussion with shared language.

The U.S. has no hard and fast divisions between class groups. Some people grow up in one class and live as adults in another.

For immigrants, there's another layer of confusion, as their class status in their country of origin is often different from their class status in the U.S.

Nevertheless, it can be useful for understanding class dynamics to clump people roughly into the following groups.

Working Class & Lower-Middle Class (~60% of U.S. households)

Signs that someone might belong to the working class can include:

- little or no college education; in particular no BA from a 4-year college;
- low or negative net worth (assets minus debts);
- rental housing, or one non-luxury home long saved for and lived in for decades;
- occupations involving physical work and/or little control in the workplace.

Lower-middle-class families are somewhat more prosperous and secure, but they have a lot in common with working class people, such as less college than a BA, and/or less control over their work, and/or fewer assets than professional middle-class families. If they own a small business, it can only survive by the proprietor's hands-on work.

Working-class people are varied in race, culture, values and political belief. They are majority white, but compared with the composition of the whole population, they are disproportionately people of color and women, and disproportionately have strong ethnic and religious identities.

Persistent Poverty Class (~5% of U.S. households)

A subset of working class people who over decades or generations can't get income sufficient to cover all their basic needs. Signs that someone might belong to this class can include:

- substandard housing or homelessness;
- long-time use of public benefits, such as welfare, or charity;
- chronic unmet needs for health care, food, or other necessities;
- frequent involuntary moves, chaos and disruption of life.

People in chronic poverty are varied in race, culture, values and political beliefs — although they are disproportionately people of color, women and children.

Professional Middle Class (~30% of U.S. households)

College-educated, salaried professionals and managers and their family members. Signs that someone might belong to the professional middle class can include:

- 4-year college, especially at private &/or residential universities, sometimes grad school;
- secure homeownership, often with several moves up to bigger houses in a lifetime;
- more control over the hours and methods of work than working-class people, and/or control over others' work;
- more economic security than working class people (although that difference is eroding), but no way to pay bills without working.

Professional middle-class people are varied in race, culture, values and political beliefs; they are disproportionately white.

Upper-middle-class families have more in common with owning class families, such as more luxuries and travel, than most middle-class families.

Owning Class (~5% of U.S. households)

Investors and their family members with enough income from assets that they don't have to work to pay basic bills. Signs that someone might belong to the owning class can include:

- elite private schools and colleges;
- large inheritances;
- luxuries and international travel;
- owning multiple homes.

However, people who live modestly on investment income are also owning class.

Owning class people are disproportionately white; they are varied in culture, values and political beliefs.

Ruling Class (about 1/10 of 1% of US adults)

A subset of upper-middle-class and owning-class adults who hold positions of great power and influence)

Collins, Chuck, *99 to 1: How Wealth Inequality is Wrecking the World and What We Can Do About It*, Berrett-Koehler, 2012.

hooks, bell. *Where We Stand: Class Matters*. Routledge, 2000

Leondar-Wright, Betsy. *Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures*. Cornell, 2014.

Lubrano, Al, *Limbo: Blue Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams*, John Wiley & Sons, 2003

Shapiro, Thomas, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality*, Oxford 2004

Stout, Linda, *Bridging the Class Divide and other Lessons for Grassroots Organizing*, Beacon, 1996

Tea, Michelle, *Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class*, Seal Press, 2004

Zweig, Michael. *The Working-Class Majority*. 2nd ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011.

New! *Reading Classes: On Culture and Classism in America*.
Book by Barbara Jensen

New! *Created Equal*
The only high school curriculum on class and classism

Cross-Class Dialogue Manual
Class Action's founders guide others to replicate their transformative experience

Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle Class Activists
Book by Betsy Leondar-Wright

"*Straight Talk on Class and Classism*" pamphlet

The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide

Enough DVD and curriculum
Conversation-provoking 11-minute video created by 13-year-old Zoe Greenberg.