



SOCIAL CLASS IS REAL IN THE UNITED STATES

Abstract

In this op-ed, I argue that social class in the United States does exist, despite opponents who reject this reality. The well documented disparities in employment benefits, health status, and food access between low-income and upper-income workers will support this view. The reader will discover the quality of these life necessities (benefits, health status, and food access) and experience depends on where they find themselves along the social class ladder.

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Social class in the United States is often a matter of life or death. Where you find yourself along the social class ladder; whether its low, middle, or upper class, can present a vastly different set of circumstances impacting your overall quality of life, but more specifically, the options at you have to maintain your health. Don't believe me? Let an upper-income worker, myself according to the Pew Research Center's income calculator (Bennet et al, Pew Research Center, 2020) examine the employment benefits, health status, and access to food, low-wage workers are offered, compared to how upper income workers, including myself, fair in these categories.

As the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities writes, "Most low-wage jobs lack benefits such as paid sick leave and health insurance" (CBPP, 2017). What do these works do when they or their family are sick? Since only 41% of the Nation's low-wage workers have paid sick leave, this is a crucial question for many households. Do they see a doctor or do they go to work to make next month's rent? But what question is the upper income worker, such as myself, faced when they are sick? For me, my mortgage never crosses my mind when I become ill. Instead, I have a menu of options; should I take a paid sick day or vacation time, see a doctor during my paid lunch hour, or go on a day I'm working from home? And I'm not alone; a whopping 92% of employees making over \$32 an hour have access to paid sick or vacation time (Desilver, Pew Research Center, 2020). As for teleworking, this benefit is common among higher income workers. While the Country hit almost a quarter of its workers unemployed this year, 83% of higher income workers had the luxury of working from home (WBUR, 2020).

Paid time off is just one aspect of social inequality; what about employer paid health insurance? How does low-wage worker health insurance compare to upper income workers? It's simple: it doesn't. Twenty-two percent of low-wage workers aren't provided health insurance

and an even smaller percentage of these workers from low-income families do, despite over half of all of the U.S.' workers, including myself, having access to health insurance provided by their place of employment (Acs and Nichols, 2007, Pg. 6). As an upper-income worker I'm even more fortunate: I have a choice between my fiancé's excellent healthcare and an array of options the Federal government offers me, while many low-wage workers struggle to navigate government healthcare programs or end up remaining uninsured (Garret et al, The Urban Institute)

So, even if the low-wage worker chooses the ladder of the original question in my introduction, work or struggle with rent next month, they most likely won't be able to afford the doctor's visit. Therefore, could lack of healthcare coverage or the lack of access to paid time off be the reason why low-income workers from poor families are twice as likely, when compared to the average worker in the U.S., to have poor health (Acs & Nichols, 2007, Pg. 6)? Or perhaps a variable leading to the poorer health status of these workers is that one in seven households are food insecure in a nation where, for decades, advocates have stressed increasing the minimum wage, and thereby the "purchasing power of the low-wage working families", could solve hunger nationwide. As for me, since my career entered the middle to upper income bracket, I haven't had to worry where my next meal comes from. You may still ask though, what about the fifteen-domestic food programs the U.S. government provides to the low-income and unemployed? Despite these programs, these households still rely heavily on additional food pantries and soup kitchens to help feed their families (Rodgers III, 2016).

There is a real correlation between a person's social class, typically defined by their amount of wealth and income, and their health status, despite how the pandemic has, once again, reminded us of this sobering, yet very real, fact. Our Nation remains plagued by social and

economic inequality; where a person finds themselves on our society's social class ladder continues to determine the tools awarded to them to effectively tend to their health.

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