

[Class Matters]

Betsy Leondar-Wright

classmatters.org

Working Definitions

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.

What do we mean by class?

Class is relative status according to income, wealth, power and/or position.

What do we mean by working class, low-income, middle class, and owning class?

The U.S. has no hard and fast divisions between class groups. Income and wealth are both on spectrums, and most of us move a little up or down the spectrums during our lifetimes. 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 these four groups.

Working Class:

People who have some or all of these class indicators, and their family members:

- 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. Working-class people are more likely to have strong ethnic and religious identities than middle-class people.

Low-Income or Poor:

A subset of working class people who chronically 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.

Low-income people are varied in race, culture, values and political beliefs — although they are disproportionately people of color, women and children.

Because some low-income people see "poor" as a negatively loaded term, many activists use "low-income" as a more respectful term.

Professional Middle Class:

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 and/or residential schools, sometimes professional 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.

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:

Investors and their family members with enough income from assets that they don't have to work to pay basic bills. A subset have positions of power or vast wealth that put them in the ruling class.

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.

How Big Is Each Class?

About two-thirds of Americans are working-class, low-income or lower-middle-class. Fewer than one in ten Americans remains low-income for a generation or more, although many working-class people spend part of their lives in poverty. About 3% of Americans are owning-class. Almost a third of Americans are professional middle-class.

Class Self-Identifications

It's not true, as sometimes is said, that almost all Americans call themselves "middle class." That's only the answer when the choices are lower, middle, and upper. Few people want to call themselves "low class."

When "working class" is one of the options, then there's a big self-identified working class.

By Self-Identification 1998 Average of all years 1972-1998

Lower class	5%	5%
Working class	45%	46%
Middle class	46%	46%
Upper class	4%	3%

Source: National Opinion Research Center, available at www.norc.uchicago.edu. Thanks to Jack Metzger, [Politics and the American Class Vernacular, WorkingUSA](#), Summer 2003