

Chapter 5

Tarnished Metal Frames

The Working Class and the Working Poor

Toronto, Canada:

Hot, humid weather and no garbage collection for four days had the city of Toronto smelling like rotting food Thursday as [garbage] strike negotiations continued. . . . The key issues are pay raises equal to what was given emergency workers last year, and the city's desire to drop bankable sick days and replace them with short-term disability insurance. Meanwhile, residents sweltered in line-ups to drop off bags of garbage at collection sites where strikers limited the number of people entering, local media said.¹

This [strike] is not simply about garbage pickup. Parks, community centers and even the ferry to Toronto Island has been closed. Let's not forget ambulance workers are working at 75% capacity. This strike affects the most vulnerable people in society, children, the elderly and the poor. Without cars the poor cannot transport their garbage to the temporary dumps, they are stuck with festering garbage. With the garbage inside the city, children and the elderly are being exposed to disease.²

The framing of the above UPI article and comment on a blogger's posting about a civil strike in Toronto, Canada, suggests that the greed of unionized workers demanding a pay increase and maintenance of their bankable sick days stinks as much as the piled-up garbage. As in this case, the media typically highlight how the labor actions of working-class individuals inconvenience ordinary people. Strikes by sanitation workers and other public servants are framed to describe health risks and the hassles that accompany work stoppages. Although these unionized workers, earning from \$10 to \$21 an hour, might seem to have little in common with Caroline Payne, a convenience store clerk who earns \$8,000 to \$12,000 a year, the media often lump

both categories of workers into a generic working-class category and frame their stories differently from those of individuals in the economic classes above them.

Here is Caroline Payne's story:

Muncie, Indiana: Caroline Payne embraces the ethics of America. She works hard and has no patience with those who don't. She has owned a house, pursued an education and deferred to the needs of her child. Yet she can barely pay her bills. Her earnings have hovered in a twilight between poverty and minimal comfort. . . . She is the invisible American, unnoticed because she blends in. Like millions at the bottom of the labor force who contribute to the country's prosperity, Caroline's diligence is a camouflage. At the convenience store where she works, customers do not see that she struggles against destitution.³

As is typical of many media stories about the working class, the episodic framing used in this article describes Caroline Payne's economic condition and establishes her as a valid example of millions of other working poor who earn less than a living wage and remain invisible as they "sew clothes, clean offices, harvest fruit, serve Big Macs and stack merchandise at Wal-Mart."⁴ Like most individuals who might be considered among this group, Payne earns an income above the official poverty line but cannot afford many basic necessities.⁵ In media framing of news articles and entertainment story lines, Payne represents the working poor, whereas labor unions represent the entire working class—despite the fact that most individuals in this socioeconomic category are not union members.

THE WORKING CLASS AND WORKING POOR IN SOCIOLOGY AND THE MEDIA

Media framing generally represents members of the working class as just that—as workers, laborers, or, in Marxian terminology, the proletariat. Like stories about the poor and homeless, news reports about the working class usually employ episodic framing that provides little information about people in this socioeconomic category beyond human interest. As economist Michael Zweig suggests, "Workers are seen, when they are seen at all, as faces in a crowd or in sound bites, rarely as people with thoughtful things to say about their condition and their country. In the media, the working class is truly the silenced majority."⁶ Human-interest stories about the working class are usually based on economics or politics. Examples include workers being laid off at a local factory and activists or politicians speaking out on behalf of residents of a working-class neighborhood who feel threatened by economic develop-

ment, such as the construction of a Walmart supercenter (a type of retail outlet known in media and commercial parlance as “big box”). As with other forms of episodic framing, many of these media representations do not look at the larger structural issues that produce such problems, focusing primarily on the outrage of the unemployed or people displaced by gentrification. By contrast, business articles in major newspapers often refer to the working class as “organized labor,” whereas reporters on the political beat describe its members as “blue-collar workers” who live in “working-class neighborhoods.” Similarly, television shows that focus on working-class home life emphasize workers’ humble origins, lack of taste, proletarian lifestyle, and disgust with their jobs. Characters, often the object of jokes, are portrayed as buffoons who are sloppy in appearance, ignorant, and sometimes racist.

One of the major problems in media representations of the working class is the lack of a clear definition of who constitutes this group, a fact that makes it easier for journalists and television writers to place the working class “comfortably” in the lower tier of the middle class. For example, a *New York Times* editorial describing a strike by grocery workers in Southern California stated that these workers “are the front line in a battle to prevent middle-class service jobs from turning into poverty-level ones.”⁷ From a sociological perspective, it is questionable whether workers earning Walmart wages, particularly in high-cost-of-living states like California, should be considered middle class. Many media reports, however, place working-class people in a large, undefined middle class where “everybody” belongs.

Sociologists identify the working class by occupation (such as manual, supervised, unskilled, or semiskilled workers), by how people are compensated for their work and how much they are paid, and by the level of education typically required. The “old” working class, primarily made up of semiskilled blue-collar workers in construction and manufacturing, has been shrinking since the 1950s. By contrast, the working class of the twenty-first century also includes low-skill manual workers, people employed in routine white-collar jobs (such as bank clerks, cashiers, and retail sales workers) and in the rapidly growing service sector (for instance, home health-care workers and employees in fast-food restaurants). According to stratification scholars, the primary characteristics of the working class are that its members “do not have much control or authority over the pace or the content of [their] work and they’re not a supervisor and they’re not the boss.”⁸ Some analysts believe that about 30 percent of the U.S. labor force should be classified as working class.⁹ In the past, a defining characteristic of the working class was union membership, particularly in the era when goods-producing jobs were a major source of employment in the United States. However, as goods-producing jobs have decreased, union membership has dropped to a small fraction of

the labor force.¹⁰ Consequently, the power of the working class to influence economic and political decisions has diminished; today, the media frequently characterize the working class as low in political participation.

Some scholars believe that the working poor should be a category separate from the working class, but my examination of media coverage suggests that the working class and working poor are discussed somewhat interchangeably, particularly as more working-class employees are “only a step—or a second family income—away from poverty.”¹¹ As a result, societal lines, like media distinctions, between the working class and working poor have become increasingly blurred. Global shifts in the labor force through outsourcing, downsizing, and plant closings have created more fluidity between the two groups. Some analysts place the working poor at 13 percent of the U.S. population; so, when combined with the working class (30 percent), these two categories together constitute approximately 43 percent of the population.

Even under the best of circumstances, the working poor hold low-wage positions with little job security, few employee benefits, and no chance to save money. Their work conditions are frequently unpleasant and sometimes dangerous.¹² The working poor may include illegal immigrants (known as undocumented workers) who worry that they will be incarcerated or deported if they complain to employers about wages or working conditions. Women make up a large segment of the working poor: females constitute about 60 percent of the low-wage workforce and 70 percent of part-time labor in the United States.¹³

Examining media representation of the working class is challenging because, as Zweig argues, this class is typically invisible.¹⁴ Sociologist Gregory Mantsios agrees that the media portray the working class as “irrelevant, outmoded, and a dying breed.” According to Mantsios, the media suggest that “the hardships faced by blue collar workers are inevitable (due to progress), a result of bad luck (chance circumstances in a particular industry), or a product of their own doing (they priced themselves out of a job).”¹⁵ In the 2000s, the focus of media coverage of the working class is unemployment as levels continue to hover in the 9 to 10 percent range nationwide, with higher rates in some regions of the country. An analysis of the historical framing of the working class provides insights into contemporary media framing of this class.

HISTORICAL FRAMING: THE WORKING CLASS AS LUMPS OF LABOR

Although nineteenth-century newspaper articles typically did not use the term *working class*, articles from the 1800s dealing with the laboring classes and

the working poor can be found in the archives of the *New York Times* and other urban newspapers. Framing typically focused on how laborers organized to demand better working conditions and wages and on the problems that emerged as a result of strikes. With the introduction of Labor Day as a federal holiday in the 1880s, parades and other celebrations attracted media attention and positive coverage of the so-called working man for that one day. During the rest of the year, however, articles focused more on workers and their union leaders as greedy and sometimes as “criminal elements” meriting prosecution. One 1806 article, for example, told of the conviction on charges of criminal conspiracy of members of the Philadelphia Journeymen Cordwainers who had gone on strike demanding higher wages. For a number of years thereafter, newspapers reminded readers that this case had set a precedent with which the U.S. government fought unions for many years.

The most common framing of early stories about the working class highlighted laborers’ demands for a shorter workday. Typical news reports described the demands of Boston carpenters for a ten-hour workday in 1825 and of children employed in the Paterson, New Jersey, silk mills for an eleven-hour day and a six-day workweek in 1835. By the 1850s, however, the tone of many articles had grown increasingly antagonistic toward organized labor and more positive toward workers who opposed unions. An example of the latter was a *New York Times* article, “Meeting of Front Bricklayers: A Union of Capital and Labor Advocated,” praising nonunion bricklayers for their opposition to the Bricklayers Protective Union.¹⁶ Not long thereafter, editorials and news articles reviled labor organizers for demanding strikes, creating conflict, and inconveniencing the general public. For example, an 1868 article argued for the “principle of harmony” in labor relations rather than confrontation:

We submit this consideration to those cooperative associations which are now striving to upset and revolutionize all the laws of political economy which experience has taught us. These societies do not simply ask Government to regulate the hours of labor. They have ulterior aims. They propose to distract the political parties from the issues which divide them by bringing into prominence the vexed questions between the capitalist and the laborer.¹⁷

Acknowledging that organizations comprising workers had evolved into a full-fledged social movement, this journalist questioned what the future of such a movement might be:

Indeed, how far the movement may go, it is impossible to foresee. But it is plain enough to all intelligent observers that the schemes proposed can be productive of mischief only. The operations of political economy will take care

of themselves without the help of these cooperative associations or of Labor Union Conventions.¹⁸

As newspapers began to question the ulterior motives of unions and their organizers, some reporters argued that the government should not intervene in disputes between workers and owners or managers. Here is an example from 1868: “Government has just as much right to establish religions as it has to regulate the laws which shall obtain between the capitalist and the laborer.”¹⁹ Citing the lack of progress made by bricklayers in bringing about changes through their tactics, this article warned other groups that their efforts would also fail:

The recent strike of the bricklayers has fully exposed the futility of the attempt of workmen to regulate by associated effort either their hours of labor or their wages. The employers, upon whom these bricklayers attempted to impose the most arbitrary conditions, have held their ground, and they are now masters of the situation. And why? Because they knew that the exactions imposed were arbitrary and unreasonable, and that they defied all the laws of political economy.²⁰

In keeping with Adam Smith’s philosophy that what is good for the economy is good for everyone, some newspaper reporters became advocates of the “laws of the political economy,” which typically benefited members of the capitalist class at the expense of the workers. Some articles in the 1860s even suggested that the best role for the trade unions was to send the working poor to the western United States rather than demanding higher wages for them in the Northeast. According to an article titled “Help for the Working Poor,” if the “trades’ unions would contribute money to send their poor to the West, instead of supporting them in idleness here, they would render a better and more lasting service.”²¹ In other words, too many of the working poor were sitting idle, and trade unions could reduce the problem not by making demands on employers in the Northeast but by helping relocate these workers to “the fields of the West, free for them and aching to be cultivated.”²²

For many years, media reporters have viewed the working poor and the activities of labor unions as problematic, resulting, according to some scholars, in an antilabor bias deeply embedded in media culture. In his study of media portrayals of unions, labor scholar William J. Puette concludes that the media’s antilabor bias is “heavy-handed and deliberate.”²³ According to Puette, many newspaper publishers and editors are employers who must negotiate with unionized workers, and these media elites are therefore less willing to report fairly on workers’ issues. On rare occasions, newspapers have carried reports about alleged media bias against workers and organized

labor, as in this exchange between Senator Henry William Blair of the U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor and President John Jarrett of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers:

MR. JARRETT: There is an impression among the working classes that the press ought to be the mouthpiece of the sentiments of the people in general. There is also an impression that the press is subsidized by capital.

SENATOR BLAIR: You will observe, however, that in the press your statement will be suppressed—unless this remark of mine leads to its publication.

MR. JARRETT: Well, there is certainly a general impression among our working people that a large portion of the press is subsidized by certain large corporations. There are a few papers, to be sure, where the working men can have their interests and views fairly presented, but that is not the case with the majority of papers.²⁴

Not all newspaper articles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took a negative attitude toward the working class. Some were nothing more than brief items about union meetings or workers' grievances, such as those of members of the Bakers' Union, who were required to work fifteen to eighteen hours per day, including Sundays²⁵; the "sewing women," who earned twenty-five cents per dozen shirts made, leaving them continually impoverished despite working until 2:00 A.M. most nights²⁶; and labor leaders who opposed the hiring of convict labor in the belief that "convicts should not be allowed to compete with skilled workmen [but should be] restricted to work of a menial kind."²⁷ However, the framing of newspaper articles about the working class at the end of the nineteenth century typically did not tell the stories of individual workers or give voice to their concerns; rather, they focused on "organized labor," leaving the workers as faceless employees controlled by their bosses and union leaders.

Although Labor Day was not officially designated a holiday until 1884, the first celebration took place on September 5, 1882, in New York City, when the Central Labor Union organized about ten thousand men to participate in a parade that was "conducted in an orderly and pleasant manner."²⁸ The headline of a *New York Times* article about that city's celebration of this holiday in 1902 was typical of media coverage at the time: "Big Labor Day Parade: Thirty Building Trade Unions to Be Represented. Forty Bands to Play in the Procession—Preparations to Handle Holiday Crowds."²⁹ Not all workers were equally celebrated, however. Media conveyed the message that U.S. workers should fear "immigrant, foreign labor" as a threat to their livelihood and a menace to public safety.³⁰ The *San Francisco Chronicle*, for example, carried lengthy articles in 1904 explaining how Japanese laborers were taking jobs

away from U.S. workers, reflecting a pattern of media reporting that continues in the twenty-first century regarding how immigrant labor may be a contributing factor to unemployment among native-born people in the United States.

Some articles in the 1890s and early 1900s portrayed the laboring classes as greedy, dangerous, and causing grave inconvenience for people in other classes. The violence connected with some labor strikes was a recurring theme, such as during the 1892 Homestead Strike, when eighteen people were killed as Pinkerton guards attempted to help scabs break picket lines at a Carnegie Steel mill, and the bloodshed and looting during a strike against the Pullman Palace Car Company in 1893. During the 1920s and 1930s, media representations of workers and the labor movement grew more negative; not only was the violence continuing, but (in the latter decade) political leaders placed blame for the nation's industrial depression and high unemployment rates on organized labor and its leaders.³¹ For example, an article titled "Blames Union Labor for Work Shortage" quoted from a speech by Senator Knute Nelson of Minnesota:

I am getting tired of these strike threats. I do not know but that it would be a good thing for the country if these railroad men should start a strike. Let the people of this country understand once for all what these men mean by their striking. Let the people realize that they will be deprived of their food supply, their fuel and everything else. If the employees ever embark on such a strike, leading to such results, I venture the prediction that the American people will rise in their might and wipe them from the face of the earth.³²

The tone of Nelson's statement and the news article containing it shows the negative image being painted of workers because of their demands for change. The focus had shifted from workers' issues and why they were threatening to strike to how workers' actions inconvenienced and harmed other people.

Congressional investigations, governmental actions, and violence during labor strikes provided reporters with fodder for numerous articles on the working class and its problems; however, the focus of many stories remained primarily on labor organizers and what Puette refers to as a "cartoon image" of labor unions—one that portrayed the "worthless, unproductive, overpaid blue-collar work force, which is considered the unhappy but inevitable result of unionization."³³ In articles ranging from coverage of the 1920 Palmer Raids (in which federal agents arrested more than five thousand people to break a nationwide strike)³⁴ to news reports about passage of the Taft-Hartley Labor Act in 1947 (which curbed union strikes),³⁵ reporters had ample opportunity to inform their readers about key issues facing workers. They typically chose instead to use only a few narrow frames that often told the story from the perspective of politicians and business leaders.

By the 1950s and 1960s, both newspaper and television coverage of the working class focused almost exclusively on walkouts and strikes, the threat of them, and the alleged criminality of some union leaders. Several reporters covering the labor beat sought to expose the involvement of organized crime in labor unions and unions' large, direct contributions to candidates for federal office. One example is Victor Riesel, a well-known New York newspaper columnist and radio commentator whose reports on organized crime and its infiltration of labor unions hit so close to home that he was attacked in 1956; a mob threw acid in his face, blinding him for life. According to his obituary, however, he "never stopped inveighing against gangster infiltration and other corruption in labor unions that had stirred his emotions since his youth."³⁶

Some scholars argue that media reporting on organized labor has shifted over time "from incendiary to invisible."³⁷ Others, including Puette,³⁸ hold that blatant discrimination against unions and their members still exists in the media, though it has become more subtle:

The image of labor has not been reduced to invisibility so much as it has been refocused and filtered into more subtle, indirect projections than before. . . . Television portrayals tend to emphasize the pettiness or foolishness of union bargaining goals and take the cinematic portrayals a step further by portraying good unionists out of power and generally suppressed by their local or national leaders, whose power is considered excessive, out of touch, and corrupt. Television and print news share a preference for using employers as sources, which causes them to adopt the employer's perception of the issues as the basic premise of their reports.

Based on an examination of television news programs like *60 Minutes* in the 1970s and 1980s, Puette concluded that the media's portrayal of unions typically was unsympathetic and tended to label union concerns as nothing more than special interests that might be the undoing of the country. Similarly, Puette concluded that in television dramas depicting the working class and labor unions, labor terminology is frequently abused, and unrealistic situations are often dramatized "without respect for realism or the true plight of the union or nonunion labor depicted."³⁹ According to Puette, basic "lenses" color and distort media portrayals of organized labor and its leaders. Among these media images are stereotypes that labor unions protect unproductive, lazy, and insubordinate workers; that unions undermine the ability of the United States to compete internationally because they have forced employers to pay exorbitant wages; that unions do not represent the best interests of the working class; that union leaders are not from the educated or cultured (privileged) classes and thus are more likely to be corrupted by power than

are business or political leaders; that unions are no longer necessary; and that unions create rather than resolve conflict.⁴⁰ If Puette's lenses are accurate representations of how the media portray workers and labor unions, these depictions no doubt have contributed to what he describes as a "systematic and relentless disparagement of the most visible effort at collective empowerment by working Americans."⁴¹

How much of this past framing is still reflected in contemporary media representations of the U.S. working class? In the following sections, I discuss five frames I identified in my research:

- Shady framing: greedy workers, unions, and organized crime
- Heroic framing: working-class heroes and victims
- Caricature framing #1: white-trashing the working class
- Caricature framing #2: TV's buffoons, bigots, and slobs
- Fading blue-collar framing: out of work or unhappy at work

SHADY FRAMING: GREEDY WORKERS, UNIONS, AND ORGANIZED CRIME

The media today continue to frame the working class primarily as a laboring class. Reports often fail to look at the wide diversity of individuals who might be categorized as working class, focusing instead on labor unions, their members, and their activities. Despite the fact that fewer than one in six American workers belong to a union, news reports about the working class typically emphasize the problematic aspects of these entities. Such stories often portray unionized workers as greedy individuals who engage in behaviors that harm others (such as work stoppages and strikes) and imply that most, if not all, unions have ties to organized crime.

Negotiations between unions and management are a frequent topic in business reporting, where news-analysis framing provides journalists an opportunity to take a side in the controversy. The content of these articles has shifted increasingly toward union subordination to management since the early 2000s because of changing economic conditions in the United States and issues such as immigrant "cheap labor," the offshoring of jobs, and globalization. For example, in the article "Auto Deal or Bust: Was Anyone Taken for a Ride in the U.A.W.–Big 3 Contract Talks?" journalist Danny Hakim describes a meeting of union leaders and representatives of the Big Three U.S. automobile manufacturers (General Motors, Ford, and DaimlerChrysler): "Last week the United Automobile Workers [UAW] offered more concessions to the Big Three than it has in the last two decades of contract talks. Then again, conces-

sions have not really been a feature of the last two decades of contract talks in the American auto industry.⁴² Drawing attention to problems the Big Three face with global competition, Hakim writes,

Of course, many white-collar workers would love such concessions [as those gained by the UAW]—paying \$10 for brand name drugs—or salaries. The average Ford assembly worker made \$70,206 in 2002, and the average skilled worker made more than \$80,000. Such high labor costs have been a chief contributor to an exodus of 2.7 million manufacturing jobs over the last three years.⁴³

Statements like this hold blue-collar workers up against white-collar employees, making the working class appear greedy—to be seeking higher wages and better benefits than most middle-class workers enjoy. Although portraying unionized workers as having a most-money-for-the-least-work attitude has been a recurring theme in media reports over the past century, articles and electronic news reports since 2009 have focused on the restructuring of the auto industry and on companies like General Motors being on the verge of bankruptcy. Conciliatory framing such as this is typical: “A Once-Defiant U.A.W. Local Now Focuses on G.M.’s Success.” The article describes how many people blame the union for dragging down the Detroit automakers, but the journalist explains that “the [auto] companies’ struggles have turned the U.A.W. into one of their strongest allies.” The shop chairman for Local 1112, the Lordstown, Ohio, UAW chapter, is quoted as saying, “We were the bad dog on the street at one time. We’ve got 3,000 lives to worry about. The cockiness and the arrogance that we once portrayed—we definitely got a lot more humble.” The president of Local 1112 agreed: “Everyone has come to a realization that management is not the enemy, and the union is not the enemy. The enemy is the foreign competition.”⁴⁴

Other media analysts have focused not on how the unions have become more submissive but on how they believe the Barack Obama administration’s intervention in the auto crisis amounts to a “plundering of public assets and assault on the working class.” From this perspective, the government’s quasi-nationalization of the auto industry, by taking control of nearly 75 percent of General Motors, protected the interests not of the workers and the larger society but of the “most powerful sections of the financial elite at the expense of the working class.”⁴⁵

When labor considers striking to gain concessions from management, media coverage about workers and their leadership often becomes more visible and more negative. In a study of *New York Times* coverage of strikes and nonstrike wage settlements between 1949 and 1991, management scholars Christopher L. Erickson and Daniel J. B. Mitchell found that among the factors that determine the extent of news coverage about labor are the “occurrence of a strike,

strike duration, number of workers involved, occurrence of federal intervention, key industry status (that is, whether the affected industry was among those industries identified as exceptionally important for wage-setting), and proximity to New York City.”⁴⁶ The presence of one or more of these factors increases the likelihood of extensive news coverage of labor activities. Erickson and Mitchell note the irony of this finding: “The fact that strikes are a key attraction for coverage . . . poses a dilemma for unions, since it implies that perhaps the surest way to claim attention in the papers is to be involved in bad news.”⁴⁷

By focusing on problems brought about by union actions, media coverage of the working class suggests not only that union members are greedy but that they harm others. Two important examples include reports on the 2003 Chicago trash haulers’ strike and the 2004 California supermarket strike. News reports of the Chicago strike emphasized how much garbage was piling up and the inconvenience to residents and business owners. Although some news reports suggested that the entire city of Chicago was rapidly becoming one big garbage dump, the strike was against private haulers and primarily affected commercial areas, apartment buildings, and suburban neighborhoods, not city neighborhoods with single-family residences, which were served by public garbage crews. According to one article published shortly after the trash haulers rejected a settlement offer from management, “A group of private waste haulers and striking workers failed to agree Sunday on a new contract, assuring millions of Chicagoans and suburbanites that they would have to endure a fifth day of mounting heaps of refuse and the stench from overstuffed trash bins.”⁴⁸ As this statement suggests, ordinary people had to “endure” problems such as “mounting heaps of refuse” and “the stench” because the workers could not reach a settlement. Little attention was paid to the striking workers’ grievances or the conditions under which they were expected to work. According to spokespersons for the trash haulers, their concerns pertained not only to wages but to the increasing (and, from their perspective, unreasonable) demands routinely placed on them to haul away large items such as sofas and king-sized mattresses.⁴⁹

Media framing of articles about the trash haulers’ strike was not unique in its emphasis on the problems caused by striking workers. When members of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (made up of stock clerks, cashiers, and other grocery workers) walked off their jobs in Southern California in 2004 and set up picket lines in front of hundreds of supermarkets, their reason—to protest various chains’ plans to reduce health-care benefits and require that workers pay a greater proportion of their insurance costs—was a secondary issue in news reports, which emphasized the disruptive effects of strike supporters’ behavior:

A hundred union supporters shut down a Safeway in Santa Cruz for an hour and a half recently, dancing and chanting in a conga line through the store. Others disrupted a golf tournament in Pebble Beach on Friday, shouting slogans at two supermarket board members who were about to tee off. Labor leaders are threatening to harass supermarket executives wherever they vacation, be it on beaches or ski slopes.⁵⁰

As is typical of reports on labor issues, the longer the strike continued, the more negative media coverage became. By the fourth month of the strike, news articles routinely focused on problems that the strike was causing for ordinary people. For example, “Grocery Strike Wearing on Customers, Workers” begins with a narrative about a shopper inconvenienced by the work stoppage:

Encinitas, Calif.—Linda Cugno avoided shopping at her neighborhood Albertson’s store for the first month in support of striking grocery workers. She tried to stay away in the second month of the strike, and the third. But as the grocery workers’ strike in Southern California enters its fourth month with no end in sight, she can no longer justify driving out of her way to other stores. “I literally live right up the hill,” she said, gesturing while loading groceries in an Albertson’s parking lot in this San Diego suburb. “I feel bad (for the strikers) . . . but this has been going on long enough.” That’s what everybody—shoppers, picketers, grocers—seems to be saying about the work stoppage that has dragged on since October 11, affecting 70,000 workers and 860 stores in Southern California and everybody here who needs milk, eggs, and toilet paper.⁵¹

Clearly, work stoppages and strikes do inconvenience people; however, the media may now give more coverage to this issue than to investigative, behind-the-scenes analysis of what causes strikes in the first place, how they might be resolved, or what their broader implications are. Regarding strikes by workers in the auto industry, for example, media framing of stories often emphasizes how the demands of one group of workers harm not only the corporation’s bottom line but also other industry employees. For example, when workers at a parts supplier that provided needed axles for General Motors automobiles downed tools, some journalists focused on how the auto industry’s longest strike in nearly half a century “disrupted production at 32 General Motors plants” and affected the livelihoods of thousands of other workers.⁵² Because American Axle’s unionized workers were striking at their plant, GM was forced to reduce or halt production on many pickup trucks and large sport-utility vehicles and to lay off tens of thousands of workers. One interpretation of media framing of these labor-dispute stories holds that if the unionized workers had been less greedy, other problems, such as lost wages and lost revenues from vehicle sales, would not have occurred.⁵³ Moreover,

strikes such as this have been blamed for nearly putting auto giants into bankruptcy before the government intervened with bailouts.

Media framing of articles about labor unions focuses not only on workers' alleged greed but on labor racketeering. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), labor racketeering entails "the domination, manipulation, and control of a labor movement which affects related businesses and industries."⁵⁴ As a result of racketeering, workers' rights are often denied, and businesses, insurers, and consumers suffer great economic losses. Media have reported on how the FBI uncovered the involvement of La Cosa Nostra, the Gambino family, and other crime syndicates in unions, which they run for their own profit, national power, and influence.⁵⁵

Newspaper headlines and leading television news stories like "Union Boss Indicted" reinforce the connection between unions and crime in the thinking of media audiences with little actual knowledge of union labor. In the late 1990s, news reports focused on government investigations of corruption among union leadership. Clear class distinctions between union leaders and rank-and-file workers became a key theme in many reports on these scandals, as shown in the opening statement of one article: "The scandal that swept the president of New York City's janitors' local from his union penthouse earlier this month was the latest in a series of stinging labor setbacks, stemming from an unusual combination of forces, that have made the city the national capital of union excess and corruption."⁵⁶ Class distinctions are shown when the article emphasizes that the head of the janitors' union received a \$450,000 salary, lived in an extravagant penthouse, and received \$1.5 million in severance pay while supposedly representing janitors and other custodial workers in the bottom tier of the working class. The journalist concluded that several factors resulted in New York City's unions being prone to corruption, including the entrenched Mafia presence, the city's many construction projects, the availability of large numbers of immigrant workers, and the juxtaposition of large, powerful unions with small, vulnerable businesses.⁵⁷

Media reports regarding union corruption have highlighted the FBI's efforts to enforce the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act since the 1970s and bring an end to labor racketeering. According to the FBI, some unions, including the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the International Longshoremen's Association, have in the past been "completely dominated by men who either have strong ties to or are members of the organized crime syndicate."⁵⁸

Despite extensive media coverage of the FBI's successes in curtailing organized crime's involvement in labor unions, connections between some unions and crime persist. A 2008 *New York Times* article, "Endless Task: Keeping Unions Clean," is framed to highlight the continual task of keeping

unions from becoming dirty. This article describes how the Gambino crime family took over two New York unions, one representing cement truck drivers and the other, construction laborers, as federal officials tried to bring the interconnection between crime and labor to a halt for more than a decade. According to New York prosecutors, Teamsters Local 282, the cement truck drivers' union, was a "candy store" for the mob at one time, funneling as much as \$1.2 million a year to the Gambino crime family. Other allegations listed in media coverage included mob involvement in embezzling money from Local 282's health and pension funds and bribing union officials to obtain union cards qualifying individuals for employment on construction jobs and for union benefits.⁵⁹

Framing of articles about the working class has primarily focused on corrupt labor leaders and less-than-honorable workers, but media coverage often fails to provide audiences with a balanced picture of life in unions specifically or in the working class generally. Media emphasis on labor corruption ignores the efforts of hard workers and legitimate unions seeking to better workers' conditions. This approach harms organized labor in general: "The high-profile episodes of corruption and skullduggery in New York and elsewhere are unquestionably hurting efforts to revive the labor movement," according to Nelson Lichtenstein, a University of Virginia labor historian.⁶⁰ Although in the past the labor movement brought about positive gains for the working class, such as the eight-hour workday, unemployment compensation, pension plans, and safer working conditions in heavy industry and mining,⁶¹ the contemporary labor union has acquired a bad reputation due to the real-life actions of labor leaders and fictionalized television and film portrayals of mob-infiltrated unions.

One widely watched fictional portrayal of mob life and the mob-labor connection is HBO's *The Sopranos*, now in worldwide syndication and available on DVD and via on-demand cable systems. Although at first his socioeconomic status appears to be middle to upper-middle class, based on visible cues such as his luxurious residence in an affluent New Jersey suburb and the cars his family drives, Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) is portrayed as a slob who fits stereotypical working-class attributes in how he dresses (ambling down his driveway in a bathrobe and floppy slippers to get the morning paper), speaks (in a pronounced ethnic accent with poor grammar and limited communication skills), eats (with a napkin tucked into his collar as he gorges on huge piles of pasta and talks to his cronies with his mouth full of food), and amuses himself (with mistresses or by watching strippers at his club, The Bada Bing).

Some *Sopranos* story lines touch on the relationship between organized crime and labor. One episode, "Do Not Resuscitate," involves a picket line

set up by African American joint fitters, led by Rev. Herman James Jr., who supposedly want jobs at the Massarone Brothers construction site. The owner, Jack Massarone, asks Tony to “fix” the problem, not knowing that Tony has a “business arrangement” with Reverend James. As the episode ends, James acknowledges that he is in cahoots with Tony: “I’m lining my pockets with [the picketing joint fitters’] blood.”⁶² With Tony’s encouragement, Massarone agrees to put five no-shows on his payroll; however, unbeknownst to Massarone, Tony collects the proceeds and divides them with Reverend James.

Although the intersection of crime and labor is not a constant theme in *The Sopranos*, the connection crops up often enough in the story lines to keep viewers associating labor with corruption and other mob activities, such as drug dealing, loan sharking, gambling, and hijacking. The program portrays control of even small-time work as an obsession with mob leaders. One episode shows the attempts of Feech LaManna, a recently paroled wiseguy sent to prison during the 1980s crackdown on organized crime, to take over running the yard-maintenance business in certain neighborhoods in order to grab back his old turf.⁶³ Although many have described *The Sopranos*, like the entire genre of organized-crime dramas on television and in film, as nothing more than entertainment, its portrayals of the working class as corrupt cast a negative light on millions of hardworking Americans on the lower socioeconomic rungs of society.⁶⁴

As *The Sopranos* was cancelled, HBO’s crime drama *The Wire* shifted audiences’ attention to the Baltimore police force, drug dealers, snitches, and how American labor unions are dying. Some episodes raise the question of whether organized crime syndicates destroyed labor unions or if the decline should be attributed to the lazy American workers, corrupt labor bosses, and global labor conditions. *The Wire* is named for the wiretap, which is important in many mob-related criminal investigations. At first the wiretaps are employed to apprehend drug dealers, but later their use is expanded to include members of union locals, the board of education, and city hall. According to one reviewer,

Season two captured the death of the Baltimore docks and its unions with exquisitely painful detail and bumptious color. When the ports at last are filled with robots instead of working stevedores, *The Wire* may be as much of a documentary of that vanishing lifestyle—its nicknames and noble labor and boozy camaraderie—as we possess.⁶⁵

As discussed previously, the media have either perpetuated stereotypes about the working class or ignored this group altogether, except when labor issues are involved. According to media analyst Phil Primack, newspaper and television newsrooms adhering to such an approach usually do not report many important working-class stories:

Most of the few labor reporters left today, like most of the new breed of workplace writers, are assigned to their papers' business sections, where space is tight and the investigative approach is not commonly encouraged. If the workplace were treated more as a hard news beat, and if reporters felt that their pieces could more easily make it to page one, coverage might quickly improve. . . . Stories about factory dangers or worker hassles require getting into factories and talking to workers. This means good old-fashioned beat development and reporting, whether it is called labor or workplace or something else. Meanwhile, the nation's workplaces remain a largely untapped gold mine of stories.⁶⁶

According to a *Los Angeles Times* labor reporter, "You get the impression sometimes that [working-class] people just do not count except when they shoot someone."⁶⁷ One exception to this general rule is media framing of stories about labor in the aftermath of a major crisis or a natural disaster. A classic example is the working-class hero, depicted for instance in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001 and after disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the massive BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010.

HEROIC FRAMING: WORKING-CLASS HEROES AND VICTIMS

No event in U.S. history did more to popularize the image of working-class heroes and victims than the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath. According to media reports issued during the weeks following those attacks, more than one thousand of the victims had belonged to labor unions. Some were praised for their work as firefighters, police officers, and emergency medical technicians who lost their lives in the effort to rescue thousands of other people; others were union members who lost their lives as they went about their daily jobs in the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. According to one media account published in *The Village Voice* shortly after the attack,

Union members . . . worked throughout the towers. At Windows on the World, the swank restaurant atop One World Trade Center, as many as 79 members of Local 100 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union perished. Twenty floors below them, at least 39 members of the Public Employees Federation, most of them workers at the Department of Taxation and Finance on the 86th and 87th floors of the south tower, are missing. Some 27 maintenance workers, members of Local 32B-J of the Service Employees International Union are missing, according to union spokesman Bill Meyerson. "They were window cleaners, security officers, elevator starters," said Meyerson.

In addition, at least 50 members of the building trades were killed, union officials estimate. About 17 of them were carpenters assembling office partitions, another 15 were electricians, five were painters, and four were laborers. . . . In a harbinger of the rescue efforts their fellow members would make later that day, union officials believe some tradesmen died trying to help after the attack.⁶⁸

As later news accounts confirmed, many of those described as missing in this report were confirmed to be among the dead.

Media framing of articles about the working class in this case was extremely positive, emphasizing the heroism not only of police officers, firefighters, and other emergency personnel but of union members across New York who rushed to the World Trade Center site to help in the wake of the attack. At the carpenters union headquarters, for example, more than three hundred members arrived early on the morning of September 12 to volunteer their services: “We unloaded every pair of gloves we had, gave them goggles, hard hats, whatever we could find. Then they marched straight down to the site. Their pass was their union card and their hard hat; they didn’t take ‘no’ for an answer,” according to Steve McInnis of the New York District Council of Carpenters.⁶⁹ Furthermore, union rules about trade demarcation (e.g., steam fitters are not supposed to drive nails; carpenters do not touch wiring) were ignored during the gritty excavation work.⁷⁰ The heroism of these union workers was celebrated by a journalist who wrote that any message the terrorists had tried to send by this horrendous act was “effectively refuted with every shovelful lifted from the pile”—much of it, in this case, by union workers who (as discussed earlier in this chapter) often serve as the objects of media criticism rather than praise.

Like media coverage of the heroic actions of workers in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, journalists’ stories positively framed the actions of both paid workers and volunteers who helped clean up after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. In Katrina’s aftermath, relief workers and volunteers poured into New Orleans, Louisiana; Biloxi, Mississippi; and other regions hardest-hit by hurricane-strength winds and flooding. Many media sources applauded these people for their bravery and tenacity. The framing of some stories, however, eventually shifted to alleged misconduct by Federal Emergency Management Agency workers, hospital personnel, police officers, and firefighters, some of whom were accused of failing to perform their official duties. Articles that initially focused on heroism began trumpeting headlines such as “Katrina Cover-Up: Cops May Face Death Penalty” to call attention to wrongdoing, in this case after four police officers were indicted for shooting and killing two unarmed civilians and injuring four others on a bridge in the days following the hurricane. According to media reports, the officers initially claimed they had fired in

self-defense, but a U.S. Department of Justice investigation concluded that they shot the civilians without cause and planted a gun at the scene as part of an elaborate cover-up and falsification of police reports.⁷¹ Other stories broke thereafter, indicating that this shooting represented only the tip of the iceberg in regard to police misconduct in New Orleans. Media framing of this type consumes many hours of television coverage, particularly on cable news networks, and diminishes positive coverage of the heroism of police officers and other civil servants in the aftermath of one of this nation's worst natural disasters.

Although little is written or broadcast about the everyday activities of members of the working class and their small acts of kindness or bravery, such as firefighters putting out a residential fire, construction workers digging a ditch in the street without breaking a water main or gas pipe, or an aide helping an elderly person get comfortable in a nursing home bed, there have been some notable exceptions in coverage of disasters like the 2010 BP oil spill. Consider, for example, continuous coverage on cable news channels of behind-the-scenes efforts to clean up the Gulf. Referring to it as the biggest cleanup job in the world, CNN presented various news specials, including "Rescue: Saving the Gulf" to show how paid workers and ordinary people had come together "to help their neighbors, their communities, their fellow man."⁷² The framing of these CNN stories focused on the willingness of individuals to step up in a time of need and accomplish a particular goal because they were "amazing people who happily put all of their opinions of this spill aside and [were] compelled to help."⁷³

Similar heroic stories about members of the working class have focused on immigrants who have been instrumental in cleaning up damage to beaches, wildlife, and the ocean. These reports emphasize the heroism of immigrants who comprised almost 50 percent of the hurricane-repair workers in New Orleans following Katrina. For example, Latino immigrants, many of them undocumented workers, have been praised for helping New Orleans get back on its feet and for working in hazardous conditions following the BP spill and other disasters to restore some semblance of normalcy.⁷⁴

With the growing popularity of reality TV, working-class heroes have received more attention in the 2000s. According to some media analysts, the advent of shows such as *Dirty Jobs*, *Construction Intervention*, and *Deadliest Catch* is ironic:



The irony is that TV networks have been out of touch with the working class for years. Blue-collar TV characters used to be routine: Ralph Kramden, Fred Sanford, Laverne and Shirley. TV was the people's medium, after all. But now network dramas and sitcoms have been gentrified. The better to woo upscale viewers, TV has evicted its mechanics and dockworkers to collect higher rents

thoughts?

from yuppies in coffeehouses. Even cop shows have been taken away from beat cops and given to the eggheads on *CSI* and *Numb3rs*. Goodbye, Roseanne. Hello, Liz Lemon [from *30 Rock*]!⁷⁵

Similarly, cable television networks have rediscovered the working person and started featuring shows that follow crews of Alaskan crab fishermen fighting storms (Discovery Channel's *Deadliest Catch*), long-haul drivers in the Arctic (History Channel's *Ice Road Truckers*), and concrete finishers, cricket farmers, chicken busters, bologna makers, and abandoned mine pluggers (Discovery Channel's *Dirty Jobs*). These shows have increased in popularity because their media framing brings a feeling of adventure, excitement, and danger to the world of hard, manual, and semiskilled labor. These programs typically attract young male viewers, who are a target audience for media ratings and advertisers. According to one media analyst, these reality shows are "about men, almost exclusively: men sweating and swearing, men powered by coffee and doughnuts, men revving heavy equipment to heavy-metal sound tracks."⁷⁶ Many of the jobs shown are well-paid positions; however, workers' attitudes toward money reveal important class differences because everything is mentioned in terms of its price: how much a lost piece of equipment is worth, how much it costs when a worker loses a day's wages, or how expensive it is when a pipe gets jammed. Some of the shows are so committed to reality that they seek to deal with very difficult real-life situations, such as the death of Phil Harris, captain of the crab-fishing vessel featured on *Deadliest Catch*, from a stroke. The captain and some of his family members wanted viewing audiences to know what life truly is like in that type of work, and some media analysts believe that the series actually captured "the reality of a crabber's life."⁷⁷

Crises and tragedies bring to the foreground individual workers rather than images of organized labor that many in the media have deemed either unnewsworthy or blameworthy. Stories of trapped miners, for example, highlight the role that teamwork plays in saving lives. The framing of articles about miners in such situations often emphasizes their heroism, as was the case in a Brookwood, Alabama, disaster—one of the nation's worst mining calamities in decades. Journalists described how some coal miners who escaped the cave-in that followed the initial explosion did not flee but courageously raced to aid their fallen comrades and became victims themselves when caught in a second explosion forty-five minutes later.⁷⁸ Even more media coverage occurs when there are happy endings, as after a 2002 mining accident at the Quecreek Mine in Pennsylvania, when all nine of the trapped miners escaped without serious injury and soon appeared on television entertainment programs like *Late Show with David Letterman*. Letterman introduced the miners and interviewed one of them, Blaine Mayhugh, who

described the despair that he and the other eight miners felt when trapped for three and a half days in a four-foot-high tunnel with water up to their chins. Seeking a moment of levity, Letterman asked Mayhugh if anything had been said or done to break the tension. According to Mayhugh, one of the trapped miners said, “We’ll be getting a lot of overtime for this.”

By the time the Letterman show was broadcast, working-class hero and victim framing had reached its peak with news, entertainment programming, and advertisements that focused on the heroic status of blue-collar workers, as one analyst noted:

The media and advertisers have responded to Americans’ post–September 11 need for heroes by elevating firemen and police officers to mythical status and saturating every conceivable communications vehicle with their images. Last month’s trapped miners saga was no different: suffocating coverage and a celebration of heroic efforts to liberate the workers. . . . People who get sweaty rather than wear suits (or pantsuits) to work have become the ultimate content marketing ploy. News, entertainment, advertising, whatever. Just trot ’em out and watch ’em grab eyeballs and sell stuff.⁷⁹

This comment was further affirmed by global media coverage of the 2010 mine collapse in Chile, which captured the interest of more than 1 billion people, who watched the dramatic rescue of all thirty-three miners on television. The workers had been trapped for more than two months after a rock collapse blocked the main entryway of the mine. Although some miners appeared on various media outlets after their rescue, perhaps the most famous was Edison Pena, who appeared on Letterman’s show to sing an Elvis Presley song and talk (with the help of a translator) about his New York City Marathon run.

Sadly, many of the portrayals of working-class individuals in settings such as mining disasters do not have heroes because of the devastating nature of the event. After a 2010 West Virginia incident, for instance, media reports basically catalogued the number of workers dead and those unaccounted for after an explosion ripped through a coal mine. Family members lamented the loss of their loved ones, but little was said about increasing safety in mines other than in a few “yell-a-thons” on cable news channels, where competing “experts” voiced their opinions about what is right or wrong with today’s mining industry.

Although there may be an occasional overload of working-class portrayals in the media, actual heroic framing of news stories about this class appears to be situational, occurring primarily after a tragedy of major proportions has taken place and when rescuers or survivors are able to help others through the disaster. In sharp contrast to the positive framing of the working class that typically focuses on those people who risk their lives for others, media

framing of news articles and television entertainment story lines more often employs caricatures that depict working-class women and men less favorably than people in the middle and upper classes.

CARICATURE FRAMING #1: WHITE-TRASHING THE WORKING CLASS

Although the middle and upper classes may be caricatured in some media representations, people in the working class are particularly vulnerable to media framing that overemphasizes or misrepresents their appearance or behavior to produce an exaggerated or comic effect and turn them into objects of ridicule. This occurs, for instance, when the media brand working-class individuals as inferior to members of the upper classes with derogatory labels like “white trash.”

In early usage, the phrase “white trash” typically referred to low-income individuals whom the more privileged members of society judged to be tasteless, uneducated, lazy, and otherwise inferior. As cultural studies scholars Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz have suggested, “White trash is ‘good to think with’ when it comes to issues of race and class in the U.S. because the term foregrounds whiteness and working-class or underclass poverty, two social attributes that usually stand far apart in the minds of many Americans.”⁸⁰ According to Wray and Newitz, many people associate whiteness with the middle and upper classes, not realizing that it persists across class lines. With regard to the impoverished class, classic films like *Gone with the Wind* popularized the phrase “po’ white trash”; since the 1980s, the media have employed the white-trash caricature to portray blue-collar and lower-income white-collar families.

The term has also been bandied about in television situation comedies like the now-syndicated *Roseanne*, which features a working-class family that prides itself on its “trashy” origins and behavior. In an episode titled “White Trash Christmas,” Roseanne Conner (Roseanne Barr), a blue-collar working mother, and her husband, Dan (John Goodman), snub their neighbors by putting up gaudy Christmas decorations outside their house. In another episode, Roseanne sits in the garage on a favorite sofa the family discarded when they purchased a new one. Roseanne is laughing at an episode of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, a “white-trash-made-good” show, which she is watching on the family’s discarded TV set. As Dan and Roseanne talk nostalgically about their old furniture, Roseanne jokingly reveals how she sees their family’s class location: “We’re white trash, and we’ll stay white trash until they haul us out to the curb.”

Airing from 1988 through 1997 on network television and still available on DVD and via global syndication, *Roseanne* has no doubt influenced



viewers' ideas about what it means to be white trash, portraying the working-class lifestyle as a mixture of tasteless behavior and the genuine love and respect that members of the Conner family show toward each other. Over the show's nine-year run, Roseanne held several working-class jobs, including factory worker, hair washer at a beauty salon, magazine telemarketer, and waitress at the local mall. The family's acceptance of its "white-trash" status was made clear to television audiences through comments the Conners made to each other as well as on a website (Roseanneworld.com), which once pictured a small metal house trailer with the door wide open, chairs and flowers out front, giving the general impression that visitors were welcome. In this symbolic gesture, Roseanne aligned herself not only with the concept of white trash but with that of trailer park trash. In 2010, the Roseanneworld.com website was gentrified to include Roseanne's political opinions, appearances on television talk shows, and blogs by other people about her ideas and statements.

As used by the media, the terms *white trash* and *trailer park trash* often have similar meanings, regardless of whether the individuals in question actually live in trailers. Late-1990s media coverage of the Paula Jones sexual-harassment lawsuit against President Bill Clinton serves as a good example of how one comment about a person's being called "trailer park trash" can produce a media wildfire that rages out of control for months. Briefly stated, Paula Jones alleged that in 1991, when she was a low-wage, hourly employee in an Arkansas state office, she was propositioned by then-governor Clinton. Her allegations were not made public, however, until Clinton was elected U.S. president and became embroiled in a sex scandal involving Monica S. Lewinsky, the White House intern who publicly admitted to having sexual relations with him. When Jones's claims were made public in the media, commentators widely discussed a statement by James Carville, a former Clinton campaign adviser and an ardent defender of the president, who accused Jones of being trailer park trash in an effort to discredit her claims. According to various media sources, Carville made the following statement in explaining why he thought Jones had come forward with her allegations: "Drag a hundred-dollar bill through a trailer park and you never know what you'll find."⁸¹

By using the term *trailer park*, Carville implied that Jones's testimony against the president had been bought and that her humble origins should discredit her testimony.⁸² According to one journalist who followed the case closely,

Carville didn't rely on the well-worn femme clichés of sexual opportunist, hysterical harpy or angry woman spurned when he went after Jones. He fingered a crevice of the American psyche that promised to spurt forth all that and more.

She was white trash, part of a subset blamed for everything from garishly bad taste in dress, America's obesity problem and Elvis adulation to incest, child abuse, alcoholism, spouse beatings, the fracturing of the family and out-of-wedlock motherhood, not to mention Roseanne and Tom Arnold. So powerful are those words that the media took up the smear campaign unquestioningly, for a time.⁸³

Although Carville later claimed that he never called Jones white trash, he did concede that he had used similar language in reference to Gennifer Flowers, another woman who claimed to have had a long-standing affair with Clinton.⁸⁴ Regardless of the intended victim of this class-based attack by Carville, all media outlets, including television, radio, the Internet, newspapers, and magazines, regaled audiences with play-by-play coverage of the ensuing battle of words. By publicizing Carville's use of the white-trash slur, the media kept the stereotype before people much longer than it might otherwise have lingered.

Just as news stories in the mainstream media may amplify negative images of the working class, another genre, called "white-trash culture" by one scholar,⁸⁵ also represents working-class whites in a derogatory fashion. The phrase "white-trash culture" refers to media forms such as tabloids (e.g., the *National Enquirer*), low-brow television talk shows, cable sports networks showing prole events such as demolition derbies, tractor pulls, and female mud wrestling, and websites that celebrate "redneck culture." According to sociologist Laura Grindstaff's study of "trashy" television talk shows, "The issue here is not the race or income level of guests per se but the relation of class and trash. ('They're white trash, black trash, Hispanic—any kind of, like, low-caliber people.')⁸⁶ In Grindstaff's interviews, one producer described typical "guests" on this kind of talk show as follows:

The trailer-park joke is not far from the truth. . . . Not that they necessarily live in trailer parks, but a lot of these people lead very transient lives. I would say their education level is high school for the most part, people who are semi-skilled. It's the crowd that would have been on an assembly line in a major manufacturing plant before all those jobs disappeared. It's a particular type because it satisfies—because we watch these things and it's almost like, "Gee, at least I'm not that bad off."⁸⁷

Bill Maher, host of HBO's *Real Time with Bill Maher*, further demonstrated the extent to which television talk show personalities use terms like *white trash* and *trailer park trash* in his numerous comments about former Alaska governor Sarah Palin, who ran on the 2008 Republican ticket for U.S. vice president. Because her unmarried adolescent daughter, Bristol Palin, was pregnant during Palin's political campaign, Maher and numerous other

television commentators and stand-up comedians referred to Palin's family as white trash. In an interview with Wolf Blitzer on CNN, conservative talk show host Glenn Beck referred not only to Palin and her family but also to himself as white trash. Beck stated that Palin had "white-trash family values" and commented that she could represent many "white-trash families in America," including his own.⁸⁸ When Levi Johnston, Bristol Palin's former boyfriend and the father of Sarah Palin's first grandchild, was later interviewed on CBS's *The Early Show*, he stated that the biggest misconception about him was "probably that my family's white trash."⁸⁹ The issue remained before the public because late-night talk show hosts and comedians continually brought it up. For example, David Letterman maintained a night-after-night monologue about Sarah Palin and why she is white trash. To prove his point, he held up photos of her hunting in Alaska and dressed in a stars-and-stripes bikini while holding an automatic weapon. He joked about her hunting prowess and about what he considered her redneck attitudes and behavior. Letterman was not alone: print media, television, and Web blogs were full of descriptions of Sarah Palin's trailer park lifestyle. According to well-known author Erica Jong, "White trash America certainly has allure for voters. Some people think rednecks are more American than Harvard educated intellectuals of mixed race. God help us in the [2008 presidential] election. The NRA and the oil industry sure won't."⁹⁰

According to some media analysts, comments about white trash are primarily limited to cable network channels known for expressing conservative views, such as Fox News Network. Mainstream media sources, however, have more frequently employed terms like *trailer park* and *white trash* in describing people on reality shows and creating story lines for sitcoms. According to syndicated columnist Cal Thomas, other media outlets are trying to copy Fox News by "doing more tabloid, more big-lipped blonds, and all this kind of stuff," but "there's only so much of that trailer-trash pie to go around."⁹¹

Whether white-trash framing is meant as a joke or not, some public opposition to the use of this terminology stems from the perception that it is demeaning to hardworking people with very limited financial resources. A fund-raising effort for a girls' softball team in The Colony (a suburb north of Dallas, Texas) received negative media coverage after organizers planned a "white trash party" and promoted it with a flyer showing a scantily clad woman and a picture of Britney Spears on one side and a trailer park on the other. After extensive negative publicity, the party's theme was changed to "softball, hot dogs, and apple pie." Some parties, however, still planned to dress for the original theme. One woman told a reporter, "I'm going over there and dress the part, with the fake mullet and everything." Another interviewee stated that she would be wearing her "Daisy Dukes" and a cut-off white tank top.⁹²

Although media portrayals of working-class people as white trash come and go, they have a persistent power over time and place. They show up in episodes of adult animated TV series like *Family Guy* when Peter attends a redneck comedy show and decides to buy a pickup truck and become a redneck. On the Redneck Comedy Tour (based on Jeff Foxworthy's "You Might Be a Redneck If . . ." routine), comedians make comments such as "You know you're a redneck if you come from a rural area and behave as such." Others refer to "Larry the Guy Who Works for the Department of Water and Power," referring to Larry the Cable Guy, the stage name of Daniel Lawrence Whitney, a stand-up comedian and actor who, along with Foxworthy, starred on the now defunct WB channel's *Blue Collar TV* from 2004 to 2006 and featured in segments such as "White Trash Days of Our Lives," a spoof of the long-running daytime soap opera *The Days of Our Lives*. In the *Family Guy* episode titled "Airport '07" (originally "Keep on Truckin'"), Peter moves his living room couch to the front lawn of his home and paints the entire rear window of his new pickup, causing him to run into his neighbor's car as he backs out of the driveway. In a commentary accompanying the DVD version of *Family Guy*, the show's producer, David Goodman, comments that this episode shows little respect for rednecks.

Media framing that uses words like "redneck" or "trash" to suggest that working-class white Americans are less worthy than others is more acceptable to some when the economy is doing well and middle- and upper-class individuals feel secure about their position in the social hierarchy. Both the political climate and how people perceive themselves influence these images, as does people's need for a scapegoat onto which they can project their own problems. Moreover, some television entertainment shows featuring working-class characters as buffoons or bigots further reinforce media portrayals of working-class people as white trash.

CARICATURE FRAMING #2: TV'S BUFFOONS, BIGOTS, AND SLOBS

Changes in the economic well-being of many people in the United States and other nations have affected media representations of working-class people as buffoons, bigots, and slobs since the first edition of *Framing Class* was published. However, as this section illustrates, a long history exists to show how the working class has either been absent altogether from media coverage or has been maligned in stories about people in this demographic. In 2010, ABC shifted the framing of one of its sitcoms, *The Middle*, as economic conditions worsened in the United States. According to Kelli Marshall, a film professor

at the University of Toledo, this show initially targeted “the middle of the country, middle age, and middle class”; however, a shift occurred during the production and filming of the series:

So why this shift? Why would *The Middle* move away from the buffoonish male stereotype that the working-class sitcom has perfected over half a century? Why would it bestow traits of the middle-class sitcom father—self-assured, admired, competent—on its blue-collar character? Three words: the current economy. . . . *The Middle* alone signifies familiar life in the Midwest. Now, consider the current unemployment rate: nearly 15 million people, the majority of whom live in blue-collar Michigan (14% jobless) as well as other Midwestern states. . . . If we reconcile these two realities, we might conclude that it would be mighty irresponsible and potentially risky of ABC to depict its sole blue-collar husband/father (and family) in the negative manner of the traditional working-class sitcom.⁹³

As Marshall concludes, it is a shame that it takes dismal real-life situations such as the economic crisis of the early twenty-first century to shift some media portrayals of working-class people, particularly men, from unthinking, incompetent bumbler to undervalued blue-collar individual and strength of the country.

How did such negative caricature framing originate? What is the history of the representation of the working class as buffoons, bigots, and slobs? In one well-known study of prime-time television, media scholar Richard Butsch demonstrates how, since their earliest episodes, U.S. television situation comedies have manipulated gender traits (for instance, portraying blue-collar men as incompetent, immature, and irrational husbands and fathers) to suggest the inferiority of the working to the middle class. According to Butsch, media depictions of the working class typically are either absent or biased:

The working class is not only underrepresented; the few men who are portrayed are buffoons. They are dumb, immature, irresponsible or lacking in common sense. This is the character of the husbands in almost every sitcom depicting a blue-collar (white) male head of house. *The Honeymooners*, *The Flintstones*, *All in the Family* and *The Simpsons* being the most famous examples. He is typically well-intentioned, even lovable, but no one to respect or emulate. These men are played against more mature, sensible wives, such as Ralph against Alice in *The Honeymooners*.⁹⁴

The sitcoms Butsch mentions feature male characters in blue-collar jobs, such as bus driver Ralph Kramden in *The Honeymooners*, rock-quarry “crane” operator Fred Flintstone, dockworker Archie Bunker, and low-level nuclear power plant technician Homer Simpson. These characters are

typically portrayed as inept bumbler who cannot achieve success because they do not have the necessary drive or smarts. Working-class wives in these shows are typically more intelligent, levelheaded, and in control than their husbands. According to Butsch, “Situation comedy is built around a humorous ‘situation’ which is resolved during the half hour. In working-class series the character typically caught in the situation, usually of his own making, was the man. Usually his wife had to help him out of the situation.”⁹⁵ Unlike some middle-class shows that portray the “man of the house” as wise, cooperative, sensible, and mature, working-class sitcoms invert gender status and devalue male characters. Such media portrayals of working-class men preserve the status quo by reinforcing the notion that the male proletariat needs direct supervision at work and at home.

Early representations of the working class in television sitcoms were based on both class location and ethnicity. In NBC’s *The Life of Riley*, Irish American Chester A. Riley (played in 1949 and 1950 by Jackie Gleason and from 1953 to 1958 by William Bendix) worked as an airplane riveter and lived in suburban Los Angeles with his nuclear family. Although each episode took place in the family’s residence, Riley’s job at the factory was a topic of frequent conversation, particularly regarding his frustration with his boss and animosity toward the upper classes, with their “pretentious nature.”⁹⁶ The stereotype of the working-class buffoon was central to the story line of each episode, as described in one review:

Each week, Riley first became flustered, then overwhelmed by seemingly minor problems concerning his job, his family, or his neighbors. These small matters—once Riley became involved—escalated to the verge of disaster. Riley’s catch phrase—“What a revoltin’ development this is!”—expressed his frustration and became part of the national idiom. His patient wife, Peg . . . managed to keep the family in order despite her husband’s calamitous blunders.⁹⁷

Following a similar format, CBS’s *The Honeymooners* featured Ralph Kramden (Jackie Gleason) as a New York City bus driver who lived in a rundown Brooklyn apartment with his wife, Alice. In most episodes, Kramden was the object of ridicule and tongue-lashings by Alice, who frequently said, “I told you so.” Although Ralph expressed ambivalence toward affluent people, he was not above trying one get-rich-quick scheme after another, such as investing in no-calorie pizza and marketing what he thought was Alice’s homemade sauce (only to learn that it was dog food).⁹⁸ Comments Ralph made to Alice often indicated his working-class background, including “Just you wait, Alice. One of these days, pow, right in the kisser,”⁹⁹ alluding to domestic violence, which audiences supposedly understood would not actu-

ally happen in the Kramden household. Airing between 1952 and 1970 as *The Honeymooners* or *The Jackie Gleason Show*, this sitcom is still available on the TV Land network and on DVD.

Animated comedy series like *The Flintstones* and the more contemporary FOX shows *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* also use buffoonery to frame the working class. In each of these series, the leading male character seems inspired by the characters of Chester Riley and Ralph Kramden. Like them, Fred Flintstone, Homer Simpson, and Peter Griffin are loudmouths who often talk before they think. And, like the earlier working-class sitcoms' wives, Peg Riley and Alice Kramden, the animated wives, Wilma Flintstone, Marge Simpson, and Lois Griffin are smarter than their husbands and often get them out of self-inflicted jams. In *Family Guy*, Lois Griffin comes from a family of wealthy socialites, the Pewterschmidts of Newport, Rhode Island; she met Peter, her future husband, when he worked as a towel boy at her family's country club. By contrast, Peter is a working-class Irish American Catholic. In *The Simpsons*, Homer often does something around the house or at work to create a crisis that others must resolve. He often concocts harebrained, get-rich-quick schemes that backfire, and his work ethic is lacking both at the nuclear power plant and at home, where he is largely useless in matters of domestic maintenance and family life. Although kind-hearted, Homer generally provides a negative role model for his children, watching television constantly, eating junk food from the refrigerator or a sack, drinking beer and throwing the empties on the floor, belching loudly, talking in blue-collar speech patterns, and hanging out at Moe's, the local blue-collar bar. Like Riley's daughter Babs, Homer's daughter Lisa is studious, talented, and well organized. In *The Simpsons*, Lisa, although only a second grader, beats Homer at Scrabble, while Bart, the son, beats dad in a video boxing game.¹⁰⁰

The Life of Riley, *The Honeymooners*, *The Simpsons*, and *Family Guy* all reinforce traditional gender roles: the father earns the family's income while the wife maintains the household. Although the creators of *The Simpsons* might argue that their show is nothing more than a parody of the earlier sitcoms mentioned, it fortifies for new generations of television audiences the stereotypes embodied by the leading characters, including the flustered husband, rock-solid wife, and children who are smarter or more conniving than their father. The *Family Guy* flaunts some of these conventions by having a mother, Lois Griffin, who at first glance appears to be the stereotypical TV wife, a stay-at-home mom who teaches piano lessons to supplement the family income; however, Lois has also been a promiscuous drug user, a gambling addict, and a kleptomaniac, as well as one of the stabler members of her dysfunctional family.

The framing of sitcom story lines not only creates and reinforces the image of the working-class buffoon but portrays some members of this group as racist. Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor) of *All in the Family* has been referred to as the “quintessential, all-American bigot . . . who was part of the old guard who failed to recognize the melting pot mentality of the modern world.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, Bunker’s character is an intolerant, opinionated, and uneducated blue-collar dock foreman who drives a taxi on the side to earn extra money. Eventually, Archie buys a bar, at which point the show was renamed *Archie Bunker’s Place*, but Bunker himself remains a narrow-minded proletarian throughout the show’s nine seasons. Even though Archie is sometimes kind-hearted when dealing with his wife, Edith (Jean Stapleton), or his daughter, Gloria (Sally Struthers), he embodies working-class sexism, for instance, in referring to Edith as a “dingbat” and speaking to her in a demeaning manner. Edith, portrayed as ditzy and subservient but kind to other people, perfectly balances Archie’s harsh character.¹⁰²

Much of Bunker’s racism surfaces in conversations with his son-in-law, Mike Stivic (Rob Reiner), and verbal battles with his African American neighbor, George Jefferson (Sherman Hemsley). The Jeffersons’ son, Lionel (Mike Evans), shares Mike’s liberal views, and bitter debates take place with Archie on one side and Mike and Lionel on the other.

Though as intolerant as Archie, George Jefferson is portrayed as a wealthier, opinionated African American, in contrast to Archie’s role as a white, working-class bigot. In early seasons of *All in the Family*, Archie’s racism is apparent in episodes like the one in which he refuses to donate his blood because he does not want it to be mixed with a black person’s. In another episode, “Lionel Moves into the Neighborhood,” Archie tries to prevent a black family from buying the house next door, not realizing that the potential buyers, the Jeffersons, are Lionel’s parents. Since Lionel has been a frequent visitor to the Bunkers’ home in the past, Archie’s opposition creates embarrassment for the Bunker family, which is soon overshadowed by the barbs Archie and George exchange.¹⁰³ George Jefferson became the lead character in a spin-off series, *The Jeffersons*, after becoming wealthy and moving from Archie’s neighborhood to Manhattan’s affluent Upper East Side.

By the ninth (and final) season of *All in the Family*, another black family has moved into the Bunkers’ neighborhood, but Archie maintains his racist attitude. When Edith prepares sandwiches to welcome the new neighbors, Archie loudly rails at her for desiring to befriend them. Showing how deeply ingrained his attitudes are, he tells Edith, “You know damn well there’s certain things about me I ain’t never gonna change. But you keep asking me to make out like I’m gonna,” to which Edith replies, after a lengthy pause, “That’s right.”¹⁰⁴ With this conclusion to the show, Archie,

the working-class buffoon and bigot, demonstrates that he was either unable or unwilling to change.

Norman Lear, creator and producer of *All in the Family*, has argued that Archie's attitudes throughout the series merely reflect how life really was in the United States: "If a couple thousand years of Judeo-Christian ethic have not solved the problems of bigotry and narrow-mindedness, I'd be a fool to think a little half-hour situation comedy is gonna do the trick."¹⁰⁵ Some media scholars have argued, however, that portrayals of working-class characters as "lovable bigots" may serve as "proof that racism really isn't a dangerous thing. It might be embarrassing, or unsettling, but never dangerous."¹⁰⁶ As one analyst stated after Carroll O'Connor's death in 2001,

Archie Bunker never led a lynch mob, but the "Bunkerish" attitude allows for modern lynch mobs that target Blacks, whether in police departments, courts or social service agencies. . . . Images do matter. They help to legitimize, uplift and protect or dehumanize, violate and make expendable. So the world may miss Mr. O'Connor, but don't grieve for Archie Bunker, he's alive and well.¹⁰⁷

Though less likely to portray working-class women as buffoons or bigots, some sitcoms depict them as lacking in class, particularly as compared with their middle- and upper-middle-class counterparts. The character of Roseanne Conner is perhaps the closest female equivalent of Archie Bunker. According to one media scholar, the sitcom *Roseanne* contributed to the "Roseannification" of working-class women in the media by showing these women as violating the "codes of bourgeois respectability and the codes of femininity."¹⁰⁸

Since the 1990s, some working-class sitcom portrayals have been subtler; however, characters' behavior, the sets on which the episodes are staged, and other telltale signs of characters' proletariat status reinforce earlier stereotypes. Consider, for example, the syndicated sitcom *The King of Queens*, set in the working-class New York City borough of Queens. The show follows Doug Heffernan (Kevin James), a deliveryman for the International Parcel Service, and his wife, Carrie (Leah Remini), who holds down various jobs over the course of the series. Like most other working-class television wives, Carrie is more ambitious than Doug, and her desire to shop far exceeds the family's budget. Consequently, the Heffernans have numerous financial crises intensified by events such as mold damage to their house and Carrie's being laid off. To make matters worse, Carrie's obstinate, opinionated father, Arthur Spooner (Jerry Stiller), lives in the Heffernans' basement, which had previously been Doug's recreation room, where he and his pals watched a large-screen television. Spooner is often the brunt of working-class jokes, as when friends of the Heffernans reluctantly take him to a Mexican food restaurant and let him eat the hot sauce.

In keeping with earlier working-class sitcoms, Doug is portrayed as a kindhearted bumbler with a slob factor evidenced by extensive discussions about his weight and fixation on food. Like his sitcom predecessors, Doug is also a slob when it comes to performing tasks around the house; in one case he cannot even find the scissors and tape to finish a project, and Carrie has to come to his rescue. The slob factor intensifies when Doug hangs out with his friends, Deacon and Spence, and his cousin, all of whom experience male bonding and share “guy” humor. In “Wild Cards,” for example, Doug and Deacon (who is also his coworker) are returning from a delivery in Philadelphia when they decide to go to Atlantic City for an evening of gambling. Since Doug had promised Carrie that they would see a Broadway play that night, he tells her that he cannot go because he has to make an unexpected night delivery. Doug loses all his money and gets into a dispute with Deacon; Carrie catches him in the lie and chastises him about his “boys’ night out.”¹⁰⁹

This episode illustrates a widely held stereotype that working-class men bond with each other over alcohol, at gambling or strip clubs, while leaving their wives and children at home to fend for themselves.

The setting of *The King of Queens* reinforces the working-class slob stereotype. Like the set of *Roseanne*, the Heffernans’ living room has an oversized sofa with a shawl draped across the back. The cluttered kitchen contains a small wooden table and chairs and a refrigerator covered with magnets and pictures. Other than his delivery uniform, Doug usually wears a Jets T-shirt or similar attire, while Carrie, who has a shopping problem, sometimes buys expensive clothes at department stores and boutiques, then returns them. If television portrayals of working-class families like the Heffernans have grown somewhat more sophisticated, contemporary sitcoms still employ many of the recurring themes and characterizations of earlier shows, where the working class typically fares less well than the upper classes. In 2010, reruns of *The King of Queens* still aired five nights a week on television, and DVD and Web viewings remained popular despite the fact that the series filmed new episodes from 1998 to 2007.

Other working-class sitcoms, such as *My Name Is Earl*, air for three or four seasons on network and cable television because this type of entertainment appeals to younger males. *My Name Is Earl* abounds with stereotypical portrayals of white trash and slobs: Earl Hickey (Jason Lee) personifies the white-trash thief who makes people want to lock their doors when they drive past. Earl’s luck appears to change when he buys a winning scratch-off lottery ticket worth \$100,000, but the ticket flies away when he is hit by a car. After he wakes up in a hospital bed, he watches a TV show about karma and decides that he must make amends to all the people he has harmed in his life. As Earl works to be a better person and improve his karma by doing things

like picking up trash outside the motel where he lives, the winning lottery ticket miraculously blows into his hand, and his troubles begin all over. Later episodes of *My Name Is Earl* reveal problems he encounters while trying to make up for the bad things he has done. White-trash and blue-collar culture infuse each episode in the appearance and actions of Earl and other characters. Earl's ex-wife, Joy Turner (Jaime Pressly), tries to steal his lottery winnings. Joy usually wears short, short cutoff blue jeans and a very tight sweater that exposes her midriff. With her blond hair piled up on her head, she sports a kind of low-brow headband that shows "attitude."¹¹⁰

Although sitcoms reinforce the idea that the working class still exists in the United States, some media framing has focused on creating just the opposite impression—namely, that the kinds of jobs typically considered working class in this country are vanishing.

FADING BLUE-COLLAR FRAMING: OUT OF WORK OR UNHAPPY AT WORK

Twenty-first-century media representations of the working class have described the diminished political and economic clout of the laboring class as compared to the heyday of unionized blue-collar workers' earning relatively high wages with good benefits and job stability. News reports now focus on the "fading" of blue-collar work due to job loss, the threat of cheap immigrant labor, the outsourcing of jobs to other countries, the downgrading of blue-collar work generally, and the number of working-class families joining the ranks of the working poor or unemployed. A political cartoon summed up the problems of the formerly well-paid union factory worker by showing a man wearing a hard hat and work shirt sitting across a desk from a young woman at a computer. Behind them, a sign reads, "U.S. Job Placement Agency." The man says, "I'm an experienced factory worker." The woman replies, "What's a factory?"

In this visual image, cartoonist Signe Wilkinson captures a major problem facing the working class: blue-collar workers are becoming dinosaurs as their jobs continue to vanish. For example, an article about the closing of a sugar factory tells the story of a worker who had been employed for twenty-eight years at the Domino Sugar plant in Brooklyn, which had been in continuous operation since the 1880s and provided work for thousands of people. However, as Richard Rednour, the laid-off worker, lamented, "I learned this past week that I'm a dinosaur. . . . Having a job for a long time in one place is not necessarily a good thing. It used to mean I was reliable."¹¹¹

Earlier framing of articles about plant closings often focused on the effects of globalization on the U.S. working class. Contemporary framing now highlights

how the Great Recession has killed off jobs and the number of weeks many people have been out of work (ninety-nine and up for many). Looking first at the issue of plant closings, one recurring theme in news reports centers on how native-born American workers are pitted against workers in other countries. Another theme involves the negative consequences for the U.S. working class of having so many immigrant workers in the United States. The first of these themes juxtaposes the job losses experienced by American workers following numerous plants closings with the gains of workers in other countries who are hired in similar positions—for much lower wages and fewer benefits—when the factories relocate. An example of this framing is found in articles about the closing of the Levi Strauss plant in San Antonio, Texas, and former employees' frustration at realizing "their" work was being exported to Mexico. Headlines like "As Levi's Work Is Exported, Stress Stays Home"¹¹² tell this story in few words. When factories close as work is exported to other countries, former employees must bear the stress triggered by being out of work and without a paycheck.

In factories across America, employees have arrived at work one day expecting to do their jobs and instead learned that the factory was closing soon, leaving them unemployed. According to one veteran Levi Strauss employee, "There still probably is an American dream [for workers in other countries]. But what about us? What happens to our American dream?"¹¹³ The photos accompanying such articles typically show longtime employees dejectedly leaving the factory after learning of their impending unemployment. A photo accompanying an article describing the closing of the Syracuse, New York, Carrier plant shows a twenty-five-year employee with his back to the camera so that the writing on his T-shirt is visible: "UTC Carrier: The Un-American Dream."¹¹⁴ The linkage between working-class job loss and the decline of the American Dream is a key framing device in many media accounts of plant closings.

The framing of reports about job loss since 2007 has emphasized the problem's permanent nature. The writer of an article titled "7.9 Million Jobs Lost—Many Forever" emphasizes that it is "increasingly likely" that many jobs "killed off" in the recession will never reappear. Based on government reports, one pressing problem associated with job loss is that hiring has slowed to a relative trickle. If hiring and job creation started up again at the old rate, analysts estimate, it would take at least three years to recapture the lost jobs, much less to add any new ones. According to one analyst, "We've got the wrong people in the wrong place with the wrong skills." To mitigate this problem, construction workers in states like California and Florida and auto workers in Michigan would have to relocate and retrain to have any hope of ever finding a new job.¹¹⁵

Outsourcing has also contributed to the loss of millions of U.S. jobs in manufacturing and service industries: workers in other countries where wages are lower are now filling many of these positions. Media documentaries on outsourcing highlight the movement of jobs to nations such as India or China and show the negative effects on workers in both the United States and the countries where these positions are now located. An NBC sitcom, *Outsourced*, has sought to frame the issue of outsourcing humorously by depicting a supposedly all-American company, Mid-American Novelties, that sells products such as whoopee cushions, foam hands with extended fingers (like those used at sporting events), and plastic molds that look like pools of fake blood. The Mid-American Novelties call center, where customers place orders, has been outsourced to India. When the company sends a manager, Todd Dempsy (Ben Rappaport), from the United States to run the call center, he quickly learns that he must educate his new staff in the ways of American culture so that they can more effectively interact with U.S. callers and make sales. To accomplish this goal, Dempsy requires employees in India to watch old films so that they can learn U.S. popular culture. They must study English, lose their accents, and pretend to live in the United States when talking with callers. This humorous framing downplays the crisis that outsourcing has created for many U.S. workers and their families. It also minimizes the problems faced by people who increasingly must rely on globalized call centers for technology support and to purchase products and services.

In media framing of stories about job loss in the United States, illegal immigration is a key culprit, along with downsizing and outsourcing. Articles and news reports about the “Americano Dream” explain how indigenous workers are pitted against illegal immigrants, sometimes referred to more politely as undocumented workers, who are a source of cheap labor in this country. Frequently, media sources employ this terminology when a major corporation is accused of labor violations, as when Walmart, the nation’s largest private employer (with 1.4 million U.S. workers in 2009), was alleged to be using undocumented workers as cleaning personnel in its megastores. Although earlier media coverage of the chain had praised Walmart’s economic success and applauded the ingenuity of founder Sam Walton and other members of his family, subsequent news reports focused on the corporation’s questionable labor practices, including the use of undocumented workers.¹¹⁶ According to Walmart officials, the company hired subcontractors to do the janitorial work without knowing that they hired illegal immigrants:

After federal agents raided 60 Wal-Mart stores in October and found more than 200 illegal immigrants in the cleaning crews, the world’s largest retailer was

quick to defend itself from this enormous embarrassment. Wal-Mart's officers said they had no idea those workers were illegal, insisting they knew next to nothing about the workers from Mexico, Mongolia, Russia and elsewhere because they were employed by contractors. Nor did Wal-Mart know, its spokesmen said, that the contractors were cutting corners by not paying overtime or Social Security taxes or by flouting other labor laws, as the investigators claimed.¹¹⁷

As the media later reported in articles such as "Wal-Mart Settles Illegal Immigration Case for \$11M," the retailer paid up to end the federal probe and escape criminal charges for using illegal immigrants as custodial workers. Twelve businesses that provided contract janitor services to Walmart also agreed to pay \$4 million in fines and pled guilty to criminal immigration charges to resolve the matter.¹¹⁸ Walmart officials emphasized that the chain is a good corporate citizen and does not hire undocumented workers. Walmart's website states that the company provides good wages and benefits for the workers it hires, and these individuals often include college students and retirees who want to earn extra income.¹¹⁹ In framing media stories such as these, reporters bandy around phrases like "cheap labor" to describe immigrant workers—documented or not—as a potential threat to the indigenous working class. As a source of cheap labor, however, undocumented workers do not have access to many legitimate jobs and are vulnerable to exploitation by labor contractors, unscrupulous immigration officials, and others who prey on their illegal status.

Media framing of news stories about undocumented workers questions the legality of hiring practices and raises the issue of whether these workers take jobs away from U.S. citizens and depress working-class wages. Some journalists have publicized data suggesting that immigrants in the early twenty-first century have fared better in the job market than U.S. citizens. By 2010, however, media framing had shifted to describing the uncertain work status of undocumented immigrant workers. For example, the *New York Times* article "A Slippery Place in the U.S. Work Force" describes the delicate position of immigrant workers who took "the lowest-paying elbow-grease jobs, some hazardous, in chicken plants and furniture factories" and have been hard hit by the spiraling economy and a massive crackdown on illegal immigration. Problems in the U.S. economy have rendered undocumented workers' already tenuous foothold in the workforce even more precarious.¹²⁰

According to 2007 media reports, the flow of immigration has continued to slow as federal and state officials have worked to reduce the number of people illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexican border and as the U.S. economic recession has continued. By sharp contrast, past articles, such as "U.S. Pay-day Is Something to Write Home About," once described how immigrants

working low-paying jobs in the United States sent billions of dollars to families living in Mexico:

Inside his little Western wear store [in Austin, Texas] . . . Francisco Javier Aceves can't help but feel a kinship with the angular young men who come in to buy jeans, cowboy boots, phone cards and cell phones. As sure as a regular payday, they come in also to wire money to their families back home in Mexico, in places such as Veracruz, Tabasco, Chiapas and Oaxaca. "Sometimes they come three or four in a car," Aceves said about his customers. "Sometimes they just start lining up to wire money."¹²¹

The men described by this shop owner earned between \$200 and \$400 per week and sent \$100 to \$300 to family members in Mexico. To put this figure in perspective, journalists estimated that immigrant workers sent more money back to Mexico annually than that country earned from tourism or foreign investment.¹²²

A few years later, media framing of stories about Latino immigrant workers shifted. Articles such as "Fewer Latino Immigrants Sending Money Home" indicated that more than 3 million workers had stopped sending money to families in their home countries and that increasing numbers were considering giving up on U.S. jobs and returning to their countries of origin. As a result, the number of money transfers (such those described above) declined sharply, and people who continued to send money home often reduced the amount because they had less income and job security and needed to spend the money on their own survival.¹²³ Some media analysts argue that immigration, legal and illegal, continues to put a fiscal strain on state and local governments, depress wages for low-income workers, widen the U.S. income gap, and displace Americans in the job market.¹²⁴ By contrast, other analysts assert that foreign workers revitalize cities, contribute to consumer spending, and pay taxes that prop up Social Security and the federal budget.¹²⁵ Regardless of which perspective we choose, clearly immigrant workers in the U.S. economy will remain a pressing issue for the foreseeable future, and these workers will continue to receive extensive attention from politicians and journalists alike.

The final theme in fading blue-collar framing is the increasing impoverishment of the working class as more people join the ranks of the working poor or the unemployed. As with many other topics of media interest, journalists and academics have analyzed the issue of the working poor through the lens of people who are employed full-time but cannot make ends meet. The publication of a best-selling or scholarly book often generates reviews and articles in the print media and heated debates on television "news" programs. A number of books have served as the catalyst for stories about the fading nature

of blue-collar work and growth of the working poor: *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, by Barbara Ehrenreich¹²⁶; *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, by David K. Shipler¹²⁷; *The Betrayal of Work: How Low-Wage Jobs Fail 30 Million Americans and Their Families*, by Beth Shulman;¹²⁸ and *Broke, USA: From Pawnshops to Poverty, Inc.—How the Working Poor Became Big Business*, by Gary Rivlin.¹²⁹

Shipler and Shulman based their books on interviews with low-wage workers; Ehrenreich took a series of low-wage jobs herself as a waitress, hotel maid, cleaning woman, nursing home aide, and Walmart sales clerk to see if she could make ends meet on the meager wages she earned. The attention the media gave these books through reviews, reprints of excerpts, author interviews, and other commentaries turned the subject of the working poor, at least temporarily, into a hot topic. Journalists played with the phrase “Take this job and . . .” in headlines that proclaimed this demographic’s bad fortune: “Take This Job and Starve” was the banner of a *Time* magazine review¹³⁰; a *New York Times* book review declared, “Take This Job and Be Thankful (for \$6.80 an Hour).”¹³¹ According to the *Times* review, the fading of the working class into the ranks of the working poor is partly, but not entirely, society’s fault:

Shipler doesn’t place all the blame on society. The people he meets often lack the soft skills that employers require, like showing up on time, following directions, even knowing how to comb their hair. To be sure, they need better schools and reliable medical insurance, but they also need to know better than to use their precious tax-refund checks to get tattoos. Sometimes they clip coupons and turn up faithfully at job training. Sometimes they get drunk and disorderly. They go in for ill-advised sex and foolish spending sprees. In other words, the working poor are not so different from Paris Hilton, except that they have less money. And that makes all the difference. When they stumble, low-wage earners have nothing to fall back on.¹³²

Although Shipler, author of *The Working Poor*, is credited with “exposing the wretched conditions of these invisible Americans” and thus performing a “noble and badly needed service,”¹³³ media framing of articles about popular books dealing with this group tends to shape the discussion within the initial framework established by the book’s author, an approach that typically does not accrue diverse viewpoints. For example, Shipler’s book tends to blame women who are single heads of household for their low-income status, as when he writes, “Married, Ann was in the middle-class. . . . Divorced, she sank rapidly.”¹³⁴ By contrast, Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* provides more anecdotal evidence, based on her personal journey as a low-wage worker, to suggest that corporate greed and other societal factors, rather than the behavior of the working poor, should be blamed for their economic condi-

tion. When Ehrenreich reinterviewed several of the individuals she met while writing *Nickel and Dimed*, she found no significant improvement in their financial condition. A woman referred to as “Melissa” in the book was still working at Walmart, where her wages had risen from \$7 to \$10 an hour in the intervening nine-year period.¹³⁵ In his 2010 book, Gary Rivlin emphasizes the exploitation of the working poor by the “poverty industry.” According to Rivlin, the recession has not been equally difficult for everyone: the “mercenary entrepreneurs” have enriched themselves by preying on the “credit-hungry working poor” and misleading them about instant tax refunds, payday loans, subprime mortgages, pawnshop specials, and rental furniture and appliances with strings attached.¹³⁶

Were it not for books like these, the mainstream media might not have published as many reports about the growing problems of the working poor. Through media framing of stories about this group and the increasing problem of long-term unemployment, journalists provide media audiences with information and explode myths that have perpetuated and exacerbated economic and social inequalities in this country for many years. In regard to this myth, *Newsweek* states,

America is a country that now sits atop the precarious latticework of myth. It is the myth that work provides rewards, that working people can support their families. It’s a myth that has become so divorced from reality that it might as well begin with the words “Once upon a time. . . .” The American Dream for the well-to-do grows from the bowed backs of the working poor, who too often have to choose between groceries and rent.¹³⁷

And for blue-collar workers and the working poor, being unemployed is an even greater financial and psychological burden. Media framing of stories about unemployment in this sector of the workforce has grown increasingly poignant during the 2000s. Articles like “What Recovery? For the Unemployed, the Pain Gets Worse” point to the anguish of unemployed workers who know that their unemployment benefits are running out. As jobless figures continued to increase in 2010, more media stories emphasized how long some individuals had been on the unemployment rolls and suggested that some had given up trying to find a job. Even those who finally found work were concerned because they had accepted a pay cut or had taken a job that did not utilize their education or prior experience or that was temporary in nature. These included the thousands of temporary workers hired to conduct the 2010 U.S. Census.¹³⁸

Here, we return to where this chapter began, with the individuals who remain largely invisible because they blend in or work without having much say in what they do, individuals who have worked hard for most of their lives

only to learn that they cannot find a job and that the “safety net” they presumed would exist if they faced long-term unemployment is shaky indeed.¹³⁹ Perhaps these people find their primary voice in the work of analysts who write about their dilemmas and the reports of journalists and television reporters who pick up on their stories, for “human-interest” filler if nothing else.

EFFECTS OF MEDIA FRAMING OF THE WORKING CLASS

The media typically focus on minute details about how the rich and famous live, including how many houses and vehicles they own, but the working class simply does not have the same appeal to most journalists and television entertainment writers. Whereas the upper and upper-middle classes are showcased for their conspicuous consumerism and lavish lifestyles, the working class—which produces many of the goods and provides most of the services enjoyed by the leisure classes—is largely invisible in the media. Frequently, in the past, this invisibility has resulted from journalists’ absorbing members of the working class into an all-inclusive “middle-class majority,” creating an inaccurate assessment of the actual resources and social status of the working class. Thus, (mis)placing working-class people in the middle class helps to perpetuate the idea of the American Dream, as communications scholar Linda Holtzman states: “The working-class characters [in television shows] do little to challenge the dominant ideology and the myth of the American Dream.”¹⁴⁰

In media representations of the working class, some stories focus on the greed of workers (for better wages, working conditions, and benefits) but say nothing about avaricious owners, managers, and shareholders, whose wealth can be attributed partly to the work of those below them in the class structure. Working-class union members are portrayed at best as greedy, at worst as shysters or criminals. Even nonunion members of the working class are suspect when it comes to honesty and integrity on the job. This stereotype is employed for humor’s sake in old television comedies such as *The Help*, one episode of which takes a possible theft by the hired help as its plot. The rich lady of the house, Arlene Ridgeway (Brenda Strong), accuses her maid, cook, nanny, chauffeur, personal trainer, and dog walker of stealing \$1,000 from her purse. At the end of the episode, viewers learn that she has misplaced the money herself; in the meantime, however, the help have scrounged to come up with the money so she will not fire them. Although supposed to poke fun at class warfare, sitcoms like this also reinforce negative stereotypes of the working class as untrustworthy. Even when the joke behind the stereotype is understood, such representations may make the middle and upper classes

feel superior to the working class. As the rich woman in *The Help* derisively declares, “I wouldn’t want to be a maid.”

Derogatory depictions of the working class are not limited to issues of trustworthiness and reliability. Stereotypes also highlight the supposed lack of values, taste, and good manners among people in this group. In contrast with their emphasis on the middle class as the backbone of the nation and the standard bearer with respect to values, the media sometimes portray members of the working class as white trash, buffoons, bigots, and slobs. These depictions raise important questions: Are middle- and upper-class audiences laughing with or at the working-class characters? Do working-class people identify with these negative images and see themselves as lacking in values, taste, and refinement? Is the embracing of a proletariat identity by some members of the working class a genuine affirmation of who they believe they are, or does it reflect how the media have popularized and commercialized negative images of the working class so that a T-shirt emblazoned with “Trailer Park Trash” is deemed humorous or stylish?

Perhaps in faded blue-collar framing the media come closest to providing an accurate representation of the working class and the issues that affect people in this segment of the social hierarchy. By presenting real issues important to members of the working class, including escalating job loss, increases in immigrant workers who might threaten employment, the changing nature of available work, and the dramatic growth of the working poor, the media sometimes raise important questions. Perhaps they should reassess the importance of the working class and view its members as the proverbial canaries in the coal mine. In that light, as the gap between the wealthy and the poor continues to widen, the problems of working-class people should signal a warning that trends evident in the early twenty-first century will negatively affect many people—even on other rungs of the class ladder. If the media continue to ignore the concerns of “the silenced majority,” they will ignore pressing issues faced by all of us.

Although the working class and working poor often serve as little more than political props for politicians in election years and receive media coverage in that connection, a few journalists see the crucial problems they face. One is *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert:

It’s like running on a treadmill that keeps increasing in speed. You have to go faster and faster just to stay in place. Or, as a factory worker said many years ago, “You can work ’til you drop dead, but you won’t get ahead.” American workers have been remarkably productive in recent years, but they are getting fewer and fewer of the benefits of this increased productivity. While the economy, as measured by the gross domestic product, has been strong for some

time now, ordinary workers have gotten little more than the back of the hand from employers who have pocketed an unprecedented share of the cash from this burst of economic growth.¹⁴¹

This statement was written in 2004. Six years later, in 2010, Herbert saw the problem as even more pressing when he described a study of the economic security index, which measures the percentage of Americans who experience a decrease in their household income of 25 percent or more in one year without having the financial resources to offset that loss:

The pain coursing through American families is all too real and no one seems to know what to do about it. A rigorous new analysis for the Rockefeller Foundation shows Americans are more economically insecure now than they have been in a quarter of a century, and the trend lines suggest that things will only get worse. Rampant joblessness and skyrocketing medical costs are among the biggest factors tearing at the very fabric of American economic life so painstakingly put together in the early post–World War II decades.¹⁴²

Herbert believes that many of the problems of the working class, the working poor, and the unemployed can be attributed to megacorporations that continue to make profits but will not employ new workers, policy makers who refuse to deal with the increasing economic insecurity of people in this country, and the lack of a safety net to help people get back on their feet. In the twenty-first century, working-class people are not treated as thoughtful individuals who might have important things to say. Instead, the media tend to view middle- and upper-class opinions as more significant and relevant to audiences' interests. Perhaps the tarnished metal frames (metaphorically speaking) that the media have employed in portraying the working class should be polished to enable more accurate representations of the working class that include the opinions of its members, how they live their everyday lives, and the positive contributions that they make at home, at work, and in the community. Most important, perhaps, would be a more accurate assessment of the class-related issues and realities of social inequality that affect people in this group; their problems should be of greater concern to everyone, rich and poor alike, if the adage "As the working class goes, so goes the nation" is accurate. In Bob Herbert's words, the vast gaps in the condition of groups at the top and bottom of the economic ladder are "unmistakable signs of impending societal instability. This is dangerous stuff. Nothing good can come of vast armies of the unemployed just sitting out there, simmering."¹⁴³ If analysts are correct that the working class actually constitutes the majority of people in this nation, perhaps we (and the media) should be looking to them to see the future of the United States.

Chapter 6

Splintered Wooden Frames

The Middle Class

Portland, Maine:

Matthew Charlebois is spending a lot more time these days worrying about things he once took for granted. He's scared he'll lose his home. He wonders whether he'll be able to afford new clothes for his job search. He wishes he could do more for his daughter's upcoming wedding. . . . "[Before] I wasn't worried about everything. Now I don't know if I'm going to have to squat and live in a tent city in Deering Oaks [Maine] or not."

The recession has Mainers like Charlebois worried about something very basic: falling out of the middle class. Job insecurity, investment losses, declining home values and threats to their health care coverage have these people concerned about some once-fundamental assumptions they held about their quality of life.¹

The middle class has been considered the backbone of the nation and for good reason: until the turn of the twenty-first century, middle-income Americans had continued to make absolute progress in earnings and managed to endure relative declines in the economy for decades. Since 1999, however, many people in the middle class have not made economic progress, and the economic insecurity of many so-called middle-class families is greater than it has been at any time on record. As politicians and journalists discuss the possible decline of the middle class, it is important to understand the various ways in which terms like *middle class* and *middle income* are used. Let's look at exactly what categories of people media sources typically include in their definition of the middle class and determine how accurate that categorization is.

THE MIDDLE CLASS: AN AMBIGUOUS BUT POPULAR TERM

In his 1830s work *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville stated that the United States had a condition of equality. For Tocqueville, the ideal of democracy was linked with equality, and he asserted that the United States appeared to have melded into one class: the middle class.² Yet, the exact meaning of the term with regard to this country—whether in the nineteenth century or today—is unclear. To some people, being middle-class means having an income at least three times the poverty level or within some range of median household income in any given year.³ Neither of these definitions, however, accurately delineates the U.S. middle class. Since the 1980s, for example, the line between the middle and working classes has become more ambiguous because it is difficult to determine what dollar figures serve as the upper and lower cutoff points for the middle class. This does not, however, keep politicians from proposing plans to help reverse a decade of middle-class decline, as one journalist explains:

The definition of who is in the middle class is fuzzy, but it's not hard to see why the White House is pitching proposals directly to the kinds of families who work, vote, and traditionally have had opportunities to steadily climb the economic ladder. . . . After rising for generations, living standards have stagnated over the past decade for millions in this group. . . . All this doesn't mean that middle-income America is falling off an economic cliff, or that it has been hit harder by recession than any other groups. . . . But America's middle class represents a large swath of the voting public, a group more politically powerful than the poor and more vulnerable to economic swings than the wealthy. And the goal of an expanding and prospering middle class has long served as a litmus test for the nation's well-being.⁴

Based on this approach, many politicians are less concerned about who is in the middle class. Most important is who thinks they are, and most people in the United States identify with this class category.

According to sociologist Dennis Gilbert, the typical middle-class household income is about \$70,000 (in 2008 dollars). Gilbert suggests that we can solve the dilemma of what constitutes the middle class by distinguishing between the terms *middle class* and *middle income*. As Gilbert points out, what is shrinking in the United States is not the middle class per se but rather the middle-income group because of declining earnings in both the middle and working classes and a corresponding dramatic increase in incomes of people at the upper end of the economic distribution.⁵ Popular misperceptions about what constitutes the middle class, however, do not keep most Americans

from considering themselves members of that demographic. For example, according to a 2010 report issued by the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economics and Statistics Administration, most Americans consider themselves middle class, particularly when that class is defined as a combination of values, expectations, and aspirations, as well as income levels.⁶ Similarly, a 2008 Pew Research Center study found that 53 percent of adult Americans referred to themselves as middle class, while an additional 10 percent identified themselves as lower-middle class, even though they actually comprised a more varied lot.⁷ Clearly, income levels alone do not define the middle class: the mathematical middle has room for only 20 percent of all U.S. households, not 53 percent or more. Taking just the center 20 percent would place households with earnings between \$40,000 and \$62,000 in the true middle.

Even sociologists who have spent years studying the U.S. class structure do not agree about what constitutes the middle class or whether such a class actually exists (some assert that there are only two classes: the upper class and the working class). Social analyst Barbara Ehrenreich expresses the problem well when she states that "class is a notion that is inherently fuzzy at the edges"⁸; however, she believes that the middle class, defined somewhat abstractly, consists of people whose economic and social status is based on education rather than their ownership of capital or property.

Some sociologists use occupational categories to identify social classes. One widely used model divides the middle class into two categories: the middle class itself, consisting of people who have some college education and significant skills and work under loose supervision, and the upper-middle class, consisting of highly educated professionals and corporate managers.⁹ Some analysts identify a third middle-class category: the lower-middle class. The dividing line between the middle-middle class and the lower-middle class is very blurred, particularly with regard to the exact point at which the middle class ends and the working class begins. Increasingly, sociologists do not distinguish between the lower-middle and working classes, seeing them as one and the same. This category comprises semiskilled workers, many of whom are employed in factories or in the service sector (as clerks and sales associates, for instance), where their responsibilities involve routine, mechanized tasks requiring little skill beyond basic literacy and a brief period of on-the-job training.¹⁰

Members of the upper-middle class are often thought to have achieved the American Dream; unlike many in the upper class, however, most members of the upper-middle class must work for a living. Early in the twenty-first century, two best-selling books offered new concepts about the upper-middle class. In *Bobos in Paradise*, David Brooks suggests that many people in the upper-middle class are now "the new upper class," a well-educated elite

that he calls “Bobos” (bourgeois bohemians).¹¹ Based in part on information in the *New York Times* wedding section about brides, grooms, and their families, Brooks argues that the “white-shoed, Whartonized, Episcopalian establishmentarians with protruding jaws” are long gone from the ranks of the privileged upper class, having been replaced by “mountaineering-booted overachievers with excellent orthodontia and impressive GRE scores.”¹² However, Brooks’s description of the future prospects of the so-called Bobos gives them the appearance of being upper-middle class at best:

But members of today’s educated class can never be secure about their own future. A career crash could be just around the corner. In the educated class even social life is a series of aptitude tests; we all must perpetually perform in accordance with the shift in norms of propriety, ever advancing signals of cultivation. . . . And more important, members of the educated class can never be secure about their children’s future. The kids have some domestic and educational advantages—all those tutors and developmental toys—but they still have to work through school and ace the SATs just to achieve the same social rank as their parents. Compared to past elites, little is guaranteed.¹³

In another best-selling book on this subject, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida asserts that the United States has a creative class composed of two major occupational categories: the supercreative core, which consists of occupations in computer science; mathematics; architecture; engineering; the life, physical, and social sciences; education; the arts; and the media; and the creative professions, which are occupations in management, business, finance, law, health care, and high-end sales. In Florida’s view, these creative occupations stand in sharp contrast to working-class, service-class, and agricultural occupations. About 30 percent of the U.S. workforce would fit into Florida’s creative class, which would thus constitute the dominant economic group.

Books such as these influenced media framing of stories about the upper-middle class and produced cartoons such as one in the *New Yorker* showing a man and woman sitting in a restaurant booth and holding hands. The woman says, “It would never work out between us, Tom—we’re from two totally different tiers of the upper middle class.”¹⁴

As compared with the upper-middle class, people in the middle-middle class are characterized as possessing a two- or four-year college degree, having more supervision at work, and experiencing less job stability than those in the upper-middle class. Those in the “solid” middle class are typically characterized as most likely to feel the squeeze of layoffs at work, escalating housing prices, lack of affordable health insurance, and economic problems that contribute to overuse of credit cards.

FORMS OF MEDIA FRAMING OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

The media send a variety of messages to readers and television audiences about the middle class based on the framing of articles and story lines. Sociologist Gregory Mantsios has identified three key messages that he believes the media convey about the middle class. The first is that “the middle class is us,” meaning that the news media create a universal middle class in which everyone has similar problems, such as high taxes, lack of job security, and fear of crime, while sharing a feeling of intellectual and moral superiority over those in the working and poor classes. In a nation that has embraced the “mythology of classlessness,”¹⁵ thinking of oneself as middle class creates a mental comfort zone, where the individual is in neither the “snobbish” upper class nor the “inferior” lower classes.

The second message that Mantsios believes the media send portrays the middle class as a victim. If the middle class is doing so well, as suggested by the myth that everyone is middle class, how can people in this category be considered victims? According to Mantsios, the media frequently portray the middle class as being victimized by the wealthy (who control prices and get tax breaks), by the working class (who are greedy, demand higher wages, and drive up prices), and by the poor (who, because of their own shortcomings, run up welfare costs and stretch other governmental programs to their limits).

The third message suggests that the middle class is not a working class. According to Mantsios, media stories typically make clear distinctions between the middle class and individuals in the blue-collar, working-class sector. Some television shows, for example, portray working-class people and the poor as lacking manners, middle-class values, and social respectability.

Somewhat along these lines, I have identified three major frames used in stories pertaining to the middle class in newspaper and magazine articles, on websites, and in television news and entertainment story lines. These three frames are middle-class-values framing, squeeze framing, and victimization framing. Middle-class-values framing emphasizes that the core values held by people in the middle class should serve as the model for this country and that these values remain largely intact despite economic, political, and cultural changes. By contrast, squeeze framing indicates that the middle class is perilously caught between the cost of a middle-class lifestyle and the ability to pay for it. Victimization framing suggests that many of the problems that the middle class faces stem from actions by or on behalf of those above and below it in the social-class hierarchy.

Ironically, media framing of stories about the middle class, while suggesting that nearly everyone is in this demographic, often assert that this group is rapidly shrinking and perhaps in danger of disappearing altogether. These

seemingly contradictory messages are not recent in their origin. As far back as the 1860s, newspaper articles portrayed middle-class existence as problematic, and some of the issues raised more than a century ago are still raised as concerns by the media today.

THE PAST STILL PRESENT: HISTORICAL FRAMING OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

The major U.S. newspapers of the 1900s had barely “discovered” the middle class before journalists began using the three forms of framing described above in their discussions of it. An examination of *New York Times* headlines from as early as 1851 shows the popularity of such framing. The middle class, although the backbone of the nation, was being squeezed by its rampant spending habits and lack of savings, and it was being victimized by the capitalist and working classes.

Numerous newspaper articles decried how people in the middle class were overspending. Even in an era when major daily newspapers provided glowing details about the lavish spending and opulent lifestyles of the rich and famous on the society and women’s pages (see chapter 2), these same newspapers admonished the middle class to be more frugal. For example, an 1868 *New York Times* article, “Economy among the Middle Classes,” described members of this group as being able to make money easily but spending it too readily:

The greatest of all obstacles to saving is, of course, the scale of living of our middle classes. People live here in a style entirely out of proportion to income. . . . Our middle classes will never accumulate property til they learn to content themselves with more simple furniture, smaller houses, and less display.¹⁶

The negative tone of this article suggests to readers that people in the middle class (defined at the time as earning \$2,500 to \$6,000 annually) were acting irresponsibly by spending all of their income and not saving money. The article concluded by noting that lack of savings is a problem for the middle class because its “children are not trained to labor, and their habits will be expensive.”¹⁷ This statement draws a distinction between middle-class children and their working-class counterparts, who presumably are trained to work with their hands and have less-expensive habits than children raised in middle-class families.

Squeeze and victimization framing appeared not only in newspaper articles but also in book reviews, as reflected in a 1905 *New York Times* review of Walter G. Cooper’s *The Consumers: Fate of the Middle Classes*. The book equated middle-class status with being a consumer ground between an upper

and lower millstone—capital (the upper classes) on the top and labor (the working class) on the bottom:

Combinations of labor and capital are . . . to be feared [since] they can fix a price which the consumer must pay—a price that [should] yield a living wage and a fair return to capital. Having done this, [labor unions and capitalists] become masters of the situation, and all they have to do is raise profits and wages at the consumer's expense. Thus [the consumer] is, as Mr. Cooper said in the beginning [of the book], ground beneath the upper and nether millstone.¹⁸

Most readers seem to have agreed with such media representations about the plight of the middle class, as reflected in published letters to the editor such as this one sent to the *New York Times* by “Another Middle Classer”:

While the price of houseroom, food, and clothing rises steadily every year, the large army of [people in the middle class] struggle along with no increase of wages. They have no organized unions or sympathetic strikes. If they do not like their pittances, out they go. There is a horde of waiting hungry ones to take their places.¹⁹

Affordable housing was a major middle-class concern in the first half of the twentieth century. A 1929 *New York Times* article, for example, described how the middle class was losing its housing to the wealthy in Manhattan: the scarcity of affordable housing was intensified by the demolition of old tenements and private residences, many of which were replaced with exclusive new apartment buildings on the Upper East Side.²⁰ Now known as co-ops, many of these buildings serve as homes for New York's wealthiest citizens today. As older housing was demolished, middle-class residents were forced to find new homes, and many learned that the only housing they could afford would require a commute to the city from the Bronx or Queens.

Unlike accounts suggesting that middle-income people sought housing in the suburbs because they thought the suburbs would be more agreeable to family life, some of these articles suggest the contrary—that members of the urban middle class, particularly in cities such as New York, were pushed out of their original residences and replaced by wealthier occupants. According to the 1929 *New York Times* article, upper-middle-class professionals, such as lawyers, doctors, and businessmen, found that they could no longer afford to live on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The plight of the middle class is readily apparent in this article:

The rich and the poor are being provided for, the former in the Yorkville and the Fifth Avenue sections and the latter in the lower east side, where model tenements are projected. The middle class, however, is fast being excluded from the Manhattan homes of the kind that were abundant a decade ago.²¹

In other words, the middle class was being forced out of its homes as members of the upper class solved their own housing problems by constructing new residences that only they could afford. Meanwhile, the middle class was also being victimized by those serving the interests of the poor, who would have “model tenements” in which to reside.

Almost seventy years later, journalists for the *New York Times* still wrote articles using squeeze and victimization framing to describe middle-class housing problems. Consider, for example, a 1998 article titled “For Middle Class, New York Shrinks As Home Prices Soar,” which begins,

Todd Neuhaus, an advertising executive, and his wife, Christina, didn’t want much. They wanted to rent a Manhattan apartment for less than \$3,000 with a bedroom for themselves and one for their two boys. They wanted it to be near good public schools, because private school was beyond their means. [However, the couple eventually quit looking for a two bedroom apartment because nothing they liked was available in a price range they could afford.] It is one of the crueler paradoxes of the city’s economic boom and bright new image [that] even as middle-income families tend to earn more, they are finding themselves priced out of dozens of neighborhoods in and around Manhattan, say real-estate brokers and legions of frustrated apartment seekers.²²

Reminiscent of the 1929 *New York Times* article, the 1998 article offered this explanation for why the middle-class housing shortage would continue into the twenty-first century:

Housing experts say the present squeeze reflects a deeper problem [because] builders are creating new housing only for the city’s wealthiest residents and, using government subsidies, for a comparatively small number of its poorest. . . . For various reasons—chiefly the high cost of land and construction—the housing supply is not growing and, in fact, may be shrinking, for those in the middle. They are the city’s teachers, nurses, civil servants, small-business owners, even mid-level executives, who want basic, affordable housing near their jobs.²³

Although this analysis is relatively farsighted, the author did not anticipate the economic crisis brought on by dishonest financiers on Wall Street and subprime lending on mortgages.

Over the years, stories in the media have noted other middle-class aspirations in addition to appropriate residences. A 1935 *New York Times* book review titled “What Is the Middle Class and What Does It Want?” sets forth the reviewer’s belief that the United States is a “middle-class nation in outlook and aspiration,” but it continues,

Exactly what that means you may not be sure, but you are safe in believing that it includes a desire that children shall go to college, that a new automobile be parked in front of the house, that homes be furnished in the approved fashion, that clothes, whatever else they are, shall be in style. More fundamental perhaps are the emotional urges of home and church and country, to which must be added a profound distrust of anything intellectual.²⁴

The 1935 book review saw the middle class as “smug in its values” and “unlikely to revolt” against the capitalist class: “‘Trim front yards,’ [the book’s author] suggests, ‘petty snobbery, gossip and *The Saturday Evening Post* may be discouraging soil for revolutionary doctrines, but the radicals would have done better not to ignore [the middle class].’”²⁵ Here again, the middle class is characterized as wanting nice homes with “trim front yards” but also as engaging in “petty snobbery” and “gossip” and having a fondness for the *Saturday Evening Post*, a magazine known for its middle-class values and portrayal of an idyllic lifestyle depicted in nostalgic cover art by Norman Rockwell, which often featured happy, middle-class American families that taught children respect for parents, God, and country.

Despite admonitions to members of the middle class that they should be frugal, popular magazines such as *Saturday Evening Post*, *American Magazine*, *The Delineator*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Munsey’s*, and *McClure’s* in the early to mid-1900s featured articles about middle-class families and encouraged consumerism, particularly of goods and services that would make homes more pleasant, children healthier, and family life more “modern.” Magazines targeted the “common man” and the “housewife,” not only as readers but as consumers. As one analyst has suggested, “At this point . . . the role of the publisher changed from being a seller of [the magazine] to consumers to being a gatherer of consumers for the advertisers.”²⁶

Class distinctions often were obvious in the framing of ads, which typically portrayed the middle class as being in the know, while those in the lower classes were not. A 1910 Quaker Oats cereal ad with the headline “The Homes That Never Serve Oatmeal” is an example. Showing the slum section of a major city, with tenement houses in the background, the subcaption reads, “In the lowliest sections of our largest cities not one home in twelve serves oats. Among the highest types we breed, seven-eighths are oatmeal homes.” The ad asks, “What Does This Mean?” and replies,

This doesn’t mean that some can afford oats and others cannot. Quaker Oats—the finest oatmeal produced—costs but one-half cent per dish. And a pound of Quaker Oats supplies the nutrition of six loaves of bread. . . . It means that some know, and others don’t know, the food needs of a child. Some know, and some

don't know, what the food of youth means in a child's career. . . . Some know, and some don't know, that the highest authorities on foods for the young give the first rank to oatmeal.²⁷

This is middle-class-values framing, the other general category of middle-class framing: the middle class is the backbone of the nation, and its values should be encouraged and supported. It is clear from the ad that people in the middle class should know about good nutrition and desire to provide only the best for their families. According to the ad, when the Quaker Oats interviewers

canvassed hundreds of homes of the educated, the prosperous, the competent—the homes of the leaders in every walk in life . . . we find that oatmeal is a regular diet in seven out of eight . . . four-fifths of all college students come from these oatmeal homes.²⁸

The ad suggests that, by contrast, working-class families lack the knowledge and sophistication to feed themselves and their children properly.

Food advertisements particularly bound the middle-class woman to particular brands based on images that manufacturers conveyed to potential consumers. Ads for products such as Betty Crocker pie and cake mixes showed the ideal middle-class family enjoying a meal together. Betty Crocker, a fictitious middle-class woman, became the model of the ideal homemaker, even if her store-bought mixes were not as tasty as the made-from-scratch variety. The image of Betty Crocker personified hearth and home, suggesting the importance of family values and supporting the positive role of the homemaker who performed kitchen magic for the benefit of her family.

Over the years, the media generally have supported the American Dream and encouraged their audiences to view themselves as upwardly mobile. The 1935 *New York Times* book review quoted above, for example, describes what the reviewer believed to be the ultimate aspiration of members of the U.S. middle class:

In the United States there is an individualist tradition, a belief in progress, which has made most men unwilling to accept the label of "worker" for more than a short time. One does not need to be a sociologist to know that Americans as a lot live in hope of a lucky break which will place them or their children on Park Avenue. With such sentiments still widely prevalent, it is wasted breath to talk about the "revolutionary working class."²⁹

Politicians have long been aware of the tendency of people in the United States to view themselves as members of the middle class and have therefore

lavished praise on that group while promising to do more for it than their opponents would. The media have framed their reporting on politics in similar terms. A 1937 *New York Times* article about Congressman Bruce Barton's first speech to the House of Representatives in Washington, DC, for example, highlighted his frequent references to the middle class as the backbone of the nation and as long-suffering and slow to anger, but it also noted his belief that the middle class was beginning to "stir," particularly as it was caught in a squeeze produced by an increase in living costs.³⁰

Defining the middle class as "professional men and women, small business men and shopkeepers, white-collar workers and the thrifty who have saved a few hundred dollars by their toil and invested it in the shares of American industries," Barton is quoted as saying,

Time was when these people were regarded highly; they were referred to as the backbone of the nation. But unorganized, with no lobby, incapable of political pressure, they are currently treated as of little consequence. The idea seems to be that the nation has lost its backbone or needs no backbone.³¹

By quoting both the section of Barton's speech that referred to the middle class as the backbone of the country and the portion asserting that the middle class is "treated as of little consequence," this article uses both middle-class-values and victimization framing: the middle class holds the country together, but it is in peril, a peril not of its own making. Subsequent articles, such as one covering Congressman Barton's 1938 address to the New England Young Republicans, used similar framing, describing the middle class as "bruised and bleeding" and trapped between the "millstones of bad business and high taxes."³²

Since the early 1900s, speeches by politicians have provided journalists with many opportunities to write about the problems of the middle class. Headlines such as "Says Middle Class Needs Salvation: Martin Asks National Support of Republican Drive to Avert Its 'Ruin' by New Deal" (1939) and "Save Middle Class, Congress Is Urged" (1942)³³ indicate persistent media framing emphasizing the potential downfall of this class. Threatened by the New Deal and by higher taxes (victimization framing), the middle class was often described as needing salvation. The article on saving the middle class quotes Congressman August Herman Andresen of Minnesota as saying, "When the middle class is liquidated, American democracy is destroyed" and as referring to the middle class as the "backbone of the nation."³⁴

During World War II, media framing of stories about the middle class typically had a more optimistic tenor than in the past. Articles often focused on positive comments by politicians and other spokespersons. Consider, for

example, a 1943 article with the headline “Wallace Sees All in a Middle Class: Picturing Future, He Asserts the ‘Horatio Alger’ Spirit Will Never Die Here,” which focused on Vice President Henry A. Wallace’s forecast for the postwar United States and his vision of “an America where all can become members of the middle class—where all can share in the benefits which that class has enjoyed in the past.”³⁵ The article presents a very positive view of this group, highlighting what many Americans wanted to believe at the time—that this class represented the American Dream, which would exist forever.

Although there is less political talk about Horatio Alger in the twenty-first century, politicians continue to focus on the middle class and insist they can do more for it than their opponents during almost every election. The 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns were no exception. Battling headlines in the *New York Times* introduced articles discussing how the 2000 presidential candidates, Al Gore and George W. Bush, sought to garner middle-class votes: “Bush Says Rival’s Tax-Cut Plan Fails Middle Class,” “Gore Offers Vision of Better Times for Middle Class,” and “Bush Campaign Turns Attention to Middle Class”³⁶ are only a few of thousands of examples.

Rhetoric about the needs of the middle class continued in speeches and stories during the 2004 presidential election. An example is media coverage of a speech given by Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, the Democratic candidate, who criticized President Bush’s administration for favoring wealthy special-interest groups. Kerry spoke out against a system he believed to be “stacked against” the middle-class family:

I’m running for President because the American people are calling 911 for help. I think the American people are tired of watching corporate executives on Friday afternoons pile into their airplanes paid for by their corporations . . . going to homes paid for by the corporations, playing golf on the weekend in memberships paid for by the corporations, going to shows on Broadway paid for by the corporations, all of which is subsidized by the American taxpayer while the American taxpayer is struggling to get along.

Middle-class families have an agenda, too. . . . And it’s about time someone in the White House held a special meeting for them.³⁷

Moving forward to the presidential election of 2008, Barack H. Obama emphasized his middle-class origins throughout his candidacy, and he has clearly focused on his middle-class upbringing during his administration. The White House website states, for example, “His story is the American story—values from the heartland, a middle-class upbringing in a strong family, hard work, and education as the means of getting ahead, and the conviction that a life so blessed should be lived in service to others.”³⁸

Consequently, and not surprisingly, President Obama has balked when media analysts have tried to place him and his interests anywhere other than with the middle class. When a 2010 *Washington Post* article stated that Obama was “a rare President who comes from the middle class,” some readers clamored that Obama was only one of a number of presidents from families in this economic group. National and international media coverage informed audiences that not only President Obama but also former presidents Lyndon Johnson, Harry Truman, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton were all products of the middle class.³⁹

Class-related media framing of stories about President Obama has focused on the White House Task Force on Middle Class Families, established by his administration and chaired by Vice President Joseph Biden. The task force’s findings include the following:

- Middle class families are defined by their aspirations more than their incomes. We assume that middle-class families aspire to home ownership, a car, college education for their children, health and retirement security, and occasional family vacations.
- Families at a wide variety of income levels aspire to be middle class and, under certain circumstances, can put together budgets that allow them to obtain a middle-class lifestyle.
- Planning and saving are critical elements in attaining a middle-class lifestyle for most families. Under the right circumstances, even lower-income families may be able to achieve many of their aspirations if they are willing to undertake present sacrifices and necessary savings.
- However, many families, particularly those with less income, will find attaining a middle-class lifestyle difficult if not impossible. Areas with high housing costs can make even higher-income families feel pinched. . . . And unforeseen expenses can ruin even the best-laid budget plans.
- It is more difficult now than in the past for many people to achieve middle-class status because prices for certain key goods—health care, college, and housing—have gone up faster than income.

The findings of this task force show the progression of several media framing devices used for many years to describe the U.S. middle class. Underlying numerous articles from the mid-1800s to the 2000s are three framing devices I have identified in stories about the middle class: the middle class and its values constitute the backbone of the nation; the middle class is caught in a squeeze between aspiration and anxiety; and the middle class is victimized by other classes. I now examine these devices in greater detail, starting with the most positive of the three: middle-class-values framing.

MIDDLE-CLASS-VALUES FRAMING: THE BACKBONE OF THE NATION

In *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, social analyst Barbara Ehrenreich offered the following comments on the pervasive nature of middle-class values and their significance even to people who do not think of themselves as being in this class: “[Middle-class] ideas and assumptions are everywhere, and not least in our own minds. Even those of us who come from very different social settings often find it hard to distinguish middle-class views from what we think we ought to think.”⁴⁰ According to Ehrenreich, “Traits the middle class [likes] to ascribe to itself [include] self-discipline, a strong super-ego, [and] an ability to plan ahead to meet self-imposed goals.” People in the middle class use these traits, she asserts, to evaluate not only others in their economic group but those below them in the class structure, making the poor especially vulnerable to criticism. Other analysts have identified other traits or values they believe are associated with the middle class, such as “punctuality, a certain minimum of reliability and accountability (if not responsibility), as well as a minimum of orderliness [and] a certain amount of postponement of instant gratification.”⁴¹

Sociologist Robin M. Williams Jr. developed one of the most comprehensive lists of so-called American values, identifying ten that he believed constituted the bedrock of the U.S. value system.⁴² Four are often associated with the middle class: individualism, achievement and success, progress and material comfort, and freedom and liberty. The value of individualism rests on the belief that people are responsible for their own success or failure and that individual ability and hard work are the keys to success. A belief in individualism makes it possible for middle-class people to praise those who do well while at the same time identifying the shortcomings (such as laziness or lack of intelligence) of nonachievers. Individualism is associated with another core value, achievement (success), which rests on a person’s ability to compete effectively with others. One of the rewards for success, both individually and collectively as a society, is the progress and material comfort that often follow. Successful individuals and nations have far more than the basic necessities required for survival, and people can enjoy a wider variety of consumer goods and services. As core values, most people esteem freedom and liberty highly—particularly individuals in the middle and upper classes, who believe that among their freedoms are the right to own property and to expect the government to protect them and the “American way of life.” These core values are embedded in the media framing of many articles and story lines about the middle class. Even when the term *middle class* is not specifically used, it is often assumed that the people in this portion of the U.S. class structure share these virtues.

The study “Middle Class in America,” conducted by the Obama administration’s Middle Class Task Force, suggests that a multidimensional approach to identifying the middle class rests on the perception that certain values and expectations, primarily about economic security, safety, and protection, are strongly associated with that demographic. Examples of these middle-class values include

- strong orientation toward planning for the future;
- control over one’s destiny;
- movement up the socioeconomic ladder through hard work and education;
- a well-rounded education for one’s children;
- protection against hardship, including crime, poverty, and health problems;
- access to home ownership and financial assets such as a savings account;
- respect for the law.

Media framing of news stories about the middle class often includes a discussion of one or more of these values or a perceived threat to them.

Middle-Class-Values Framing in News Stories

Middle-class-values framing is frequently found in reporting about so-called middle-class neighborhoods and communities. In print, broadcast, and electronic media ranging from *USA Today* to CNN and CNN.com, communities that uphold certain values receive widespread publicity for having “middle-class values.” A CNN cable television news report and companion statement on CNN.com regarding the high-tech boom of the late twentieth century, for example, described the Midwestern United States providing the “right kind” of communities for the families of information technology professionals:

Family values, a strong work ethic and friendly folk are all things you think about when someone mentions the Midwest. But one phrase people don’t always associate with the region is “high technology.” Des Moines, Iowa, and Omaha are welcoming a growing population of information technology professionals as people seek an area where they can not only hone their technical skills, but can also experience an environment conducive to raising a family.⁴³

Via interviews with information technology workers, the framing of this article about the high-tech job opportunities then available also conveys a message to viewers and readers about what the journalist calls “American dreamin’.” One interviewee said, “The No. 1 draw for a person with a family is that the school systems are wonderful, and the general ethics and morals of the community and area in itself.” Another worker told the reporter,

“People believe in a fair day’s labor, a fair day’s wage. I think the work culture is one that is a participatory culture. They will pitch in to get the job done.” Although based on people’s perceptions about their own communities, these statements also suggest that individuals living in the region share good middle-class moral values and a belief in the work ethic.

National and regional news coverage about a community’s values are not unique. Like the report carried by CNN, articles in local newspapers such as the *Detroit News* extol the virtues of the middle class. Consider, for example, editorial writer George Cantor’s story titled “Middle-Class Livonia Turns into Wayne County Power”:

Livonia is a seething hotbed of middle-class values. It has an almost invisible crime rate [and] neat residential streets, many of them looking as if they had been time-warped from 1956 Detroit. . . . But it is Livonia’s sheer lack of drama that is its charm. “The American dream writ large,” approvingly says an attorney friend of mine who specializes in municipal finance. Because middle-class values do matter. They supply the essential balance of any community. A sense of restraint. Of responsibility. Of work ethic. If someone asked me to pinpoint exactly when Detroit hit the wall, it would be when the city’s political leadership dismissed middle-class values.⁴⁴

Whether in Des Moines, Iowa; Livonia, Michigan; or Franklin, Tennessee, journalists tend to be nostalgic for the “good old days” when, supposedly, middle-class values prevailed, family life was stable, and there was less tension and discord.

In a series of articles examining the “values gap” that divided Americans during the 2000 presidential election and shaped the 2004 campaign, journalists for *USA Today* described Franklin, Tennessee, as the prototypical community with middle-class values. Stories like “Values, Points of View Separate Towns—and Nation” referred to the community as “a sprawling Sun Belt suburb with a distinct Bible Belt flavor” where “horse and dairy farms are giving way to subdivisions and strip malls, but its values remain rooted in tradition.”⁴⁵ This article quotes the president of the Gospel Music Association as saying, “The lifestyle is at that stage where it’s still idyllic. There’s a small-town feel. It’s almost a return to the social and civic values of life in the ’50s.” The journalist describes the small-town, middle-class-values feel of Franklin as follows:

Franklin’s hallmark is a veneer of Southern graciousness. Much is left unsaid, and privacy is prized. Families stick close to home in neighborhoods they compare to movie fantasies, complete with horse fences and soda shops. The line between personal and public life is clearly drawn. It’s a town where gays remain in the closet, race relations go largely undiscussed and a PTA president declines to be interviewed about her school.⁴⁶

By the 2008 presidential race, however, journalists for *USA Today* were typically framing stories to suggest that family values were less important than in previous election years. “Family Values’ Lower on Agenda in 2008 Race” states, “There are signs that family values have lost their punch as a campaign issue.” Most voters say family values in general are important to them, but a *USA Today*/Gallup Poll found that they do not care much about candidates’ personal lives. Rather, media audiences appear to subscribe broadly to the idea of middle-class family values but have more immediate concerns of their own, such as war, nuclear programs, the threat of terrorism, and “an economy that’s putting stress on low- and middle-income people.”⁴⁷

Middle-class values have been debated by politicians, framed by media analysts, and visibly dramatized in television sitcoms that first entered the American living room in the 1950s and persist in many modified forms, including various animated series, in the twenty-first century.

Middle-Class-Values Framing in Sitcom Story Lines

The middle class and its values received the most favorable representation in sitcoms during the post-World War II era of the 1950s and 1960s. According to media scholar David Marc, when it emerged as the new entertainment medium, television gave credibility to “suburbia as democracy’s utopia realized, a place where the white middling classes could live in racial serenity, raising children in an engineered environment that contained and regulated the twin dangers of culture and nature.”⁴⁸ This engineered environment was apparent in the settings and story lines of television shows such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–1966), *Father Knows Best* (1954–1963), and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963), in which characters acted out middle-class values in idealized nuclear families composed of happily married couples and their heartwarming children. With the exception of a few shows like *My Three Sons*, whose story line revolved around Steve Douglas (Fred MacMurray), an aeronautical engineer and widower raising his three boys, most sitcoms employed the tried-and-true format of the traditional nuclear family with the occasional addition of an extra member who visited or lived with the family on a temporary basis. Common themes in these shows included the presumed middle-class values of honesty, integrity, and hard work, all believed to enable people to get ahead in life and solve problems as they arose. The problems these families typically confronted, however, were minor, as reflected by an *Ozzie and Harriet* episode in which the crisis of the day entailed dealing with a mistaken delivery of two chairs to the Nelson family. Similarly, shows such as *Father Knows Best* often showed brief children’s arguments easily resolved within one episode by Dad’s wise counsel.

White Middle-Class Family Values

Middle-class sitcoms such as these were the pictures of civility. According to media scholar Hal Himmelstein, early sitcoms almost universally portrayed members of the suburban middle class as “upscale, socially conservative, politically inactive, and essentially kind to one another and their neighbors.”⁴⁹ Usually, middle-class fathers, such as Jim Anderson (Robert Young) in *Father Knows Best*, demonstrated wisdom and good judgment, never losing their patience with their families or raising their voices when correcting the children. Middle-class status was clearly established through dialogue that made viewers aware of the father’s professional position (Anderson managed an insurance company) or visual cues such as clothing (Anderson wore a suit to work each day and replaced his suit coat with a pull-over sweater when he came home in the evening). In many sitcoms, the family’s residence and the characters’ clothing signified more than just the setting in which the story line unfolded; such visual cues transmitted ideological codes about middle-class lifestyles as well. The fact that middle-class children in early sitcoms showed respect for their parents and teachers, remorse for wrongdoings, and willingness to “shake hands and make up” formed not only a part of the story line and a significant proportion of the characters’ dialogue but communicated an ideological code about middle-class values. As some analysts have noted, the middle class was portrayed as “principled and benign” and therefore deserving of the advantages that typically accrue to middle-class family life.⁵⁰

Story lines about middle-class families not only entertained viewers and attracted consumers for advertisers’ products but also contributed to an unrealistic view of the middle class. According to media scholars David Croteau and William Hoynes,

Network television presented the suburban family as the core of the modern, postscarcity society, a kind of suburban utopia where social problems were easily solved (or nonexistent), consensus ruled, and signs of racial, ethnic, or class differences or conflict were difficult to find. . . . This image of the postwar family—and the not-so-subtle suggestion that this was what a “normal” family looked like—was a particular story masked as a universal one. Certainly, these families were not typical American families, no matter how often they were served up as such.⁵¹

For whatever reason, domestic comedies prevailed in network scheduling and in popularity with viewers, and these sitcoms offered many representations of the middle-class family as well as the rights and responsibilities of its members. As one media scholar notes with regard to the middle-class wife-mother role on sitcoms such as *Ozzie and Harriet*,

[These wife-mothers] understand the cultural and personal significance of the family and work to maintain family stability. Moreover, their failings are not individual failings but family failings; the wife-mother fails intellectually without her husband, the sons fail academically without their father, and the father fails socially and personally without his wife and children. The lesson, here, is that family is fundamental and needs all of its parts to function effectively so that a wife-mother's place and a husband-father's place is in the home.⁵²

This functionalist statement suggests the importance of the ideology of “family values” in framing entertainment shows. Family-values framing stresses that the middle-class family is the backbone of the country and that certain values must be upheld and certain rules adhered to if these families, and society as a whole, are to function properly.

Among the strongest of family values is the belief that there is only one appropriate way to establish and maintain a family: young people should marry by a certain age (which varies over time and place), have children only after an appropriate period has elapsed after the wedding, be actively involved parents, and demonstrate a high level of commitment to work, the community, and doing what's right even when tempted to do otherwise. Betty Friedan and other feminist analysts have argued, however, that middle-class family-values framing imposes a limited role—that of housewife-mother—on women, thus transforming motherhood from an option into a mandate. As media analyst William Douglas explains, “That is, the role of women not only was essentially domestic and defined, in the most fundamental way, by motherhood but was articulated by a more elaborate relational code that relegated women to a dependent and, so, subservient status.”⁵³

Many sitcoms transcended this simple formula, showing women as willing under some circumstances to violate the family-values code. *I Love Lucy* serves as a classic example of a show that seeks to depict women's tension when torn between remaining a housewife and pursuing a career. In numerous episodes, Lucy Ricardo (Lucille Ball) attempts to break into show business while her husband, Ricky (Desi Arnaz), a Cuban American bandleader, attempts to keep her at home, a story line that becomes the show's staple plot. As the series progresses, the Ricardos not only have a child but become upwardly mobile, transforming themselves from a struggling, lower-middle-class family in a New York City apartment into a solid (although slightly inane) suburban family that lives in a well-appointed country home in Connecticut.

The story lines in *I Love Lucy* frequently involve issues such as home economy, child rearing, and postdating checks; however, the undercurrent of activity often questions what constitutes family values and a woman's “appropriate” role in the family. In one episode Ricky states his desire to have “a

wife who's just a wife," telling Lucy, "All you have to do is clean the house for me, bring me my slippers when I come home at night, cook for me, and be the mother of my children."⁵⁴ Ultimately, Ricky does not win; the episode ends with Lucy accepting a role in a television show. Media messages about middle-class values, family life, and gender issues in this sitcom are not entirely lost on contemporary audiences. In the twenty-first century (sixty years after it first aired in 1951), *I Love Lucy* continues to air on the U.S. cable network TV Land; it is also in syndication worldwide and available on DVD, bringing new generations of viewers the same story lines that in the past both supported and questioned middle-class family values.

The framing of some twenty-first-century sitcom story lines continues to reinforce the importance of family life and middle-class values. For example, ABC's *According to Jim*, a syndicated show billed as a "traditional family comedy," features Jim (Jim Belushi), his wife, Cheryl (Courtney Thorne-Smith), and their family. Jim is a contractor in a design firm with his architect brother-in-law, while Cheryl is a stay-at-home mom who keeps the three kids on the right track when Jim is at work. The story lines of two episodes serve as examples of framing in which a character's actions violate and then restore middle-class values, such as honesty and integrity. In "We Have a Bingo," Jim cheats at the church fund-raising bingo game by stealing the winning card from an elderly woman who has fallen asleep. Jim has to deal with his conscience for being dishonest and claiming the waterbed actually won by Mrs. Meyer. The minister helps Jim confront his problem, and after several more scrapes with dishonesty, Jim finally comes clean with everyone. In another episode, "The Lemonade Stand," Jim tells his two daughters that they should earn their own money (the work ethic) to buy the new scooters they want (consumerism). When the daughters set up a lemonade stand to make money, they get into avid competition with the neighbor's son, and Jim has to deal with his own competitive feelings toward the boy and his father. Plots such as these include messages about family values ("in our family, we don't do that") and reinforcement of such virtues as honesty and kindness to others, even people we do not like.

Some sitcoms bring the issue of middle-class family values to light by depicting characters who oppose, rather than support, those values. Women who stray from customary family values are popular characters in such story lines. Perhaps the earliest example that garnered national media coverage was the long-running series *Murphy Brown* (1988–1998). Episodes relating to the decision of the title character (Candice Bergen), a star television reporter on a Washington, DC, news magazine show, to bear a child without being married generated extensive controversy among some conservative political leaders and newspaper columnists. Vice President Dan Quayle led the criticism of

this character's actions, stating that such shows contribute to the moral decline of the nation.

TV shows based on so-called middle-class families, such as *Desperate Housewives*, *Parenthood*, *Friday Night Lights*, and *Brothers & Sisters*, frame white middle-class family values as situational, based on a sliding normative scale, but as coming through strongly when external forces such as violence, evil neighbors, or financial ruin threaten individuals or families. On *Desperate Housewives*, for example, love for their young son and a desire to see him do well in school takes precedence over their frequent squabbles when his parents, Susan Mayer (Teri Hatcher) and her husband, Mike Delfino (James Denton), decide that Susan should take a part-time job to help pay for the boy's private-school tuition. In the ABC series *Brothers and Sisters*, Nora Walker (Sally Field) is supposedly affluent, but her children and other family members have money troubles to the extent that some media analysts place them in the middle- or upper-middle-class instead. Some of Nora's children live relatively prosperous lives and hold positions like head of the family-owned business, OJAI Foods, or practicing attorney; however, the framing of story lines in the series shows that other Walker family members are just one step away from financial disaster. To show family values, the show depicts family members as fighting with each other first and then sticking together through thick and thin, even when they have opposing political and social viewpoints. The plot is framed so that one regular occurrence in the series, a family dinner given by Nora, serves as the site of family "food fights" and loud discord, but also as a place where heartwarming reassurances are given about the importance of family values and solidarity.

Other examples of shows framed around white middle-class family values include *Parenthood*, which focuses on how four siblings and their spouses raise their own children; *Friday Night Lights*, which uses football and a small-town backdrop to address many issues faced by contemporary American families; and *The Middle*, which, although initially a comedy that made fun of middle-class families, now seeks to highlight some positive attributes of people living on the margin between the middle and working classes.

Middle-Class Values and Minority Families

Family values in sitcoms were originally associated with middle-class white families, because these were the only families shown on network shows. Let us look first at the history of African Americans in sitcoms about middle-class families and their values. The few African American characters in early shows were "presented not only in service to middle-class, White families, but, at the same time, absent from any apparent personal family relations."⁵⁵

These African American characters were typically “comforting domestics” or “uneducated handymen [who] provided menial aid to White employers rather than love and support to families of their own.”⁵⁶

For a number of years, network television had difficulty producing shows that portrayed intact African American families comparable to the white (European American) families regularly featured in situation comedies. *Julia* portrayed a widowed African American nurse who took care of her daughter. Early episodes of *Good Times* featured an intact African American family, but even it eventually became parentless; the actors who played the father and mother left the series, and the teenage son became the head of the family. Rather than supporting family values like their white counterparts, sitcoms that featured African American families, like *Good Times*, relied on characters and interactions that were comfortable to white viewers.⁵⁷

The first significant shift in sitcoms featuring predominantly African American characters came with the introduction of *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992), which clearly lauded the upper-middle-class family and its values. This highly successful series focused on the everyday adventures of an African American family consisting of the father (a respected gynecologist), the mother (a successful attorney), and their children. As researchers have noted, in such shows “both husband and wife [are] present; [the] spouses interact frequently, equally, and lovingly with each other; and children are treated with respect and taught achievement-oriented values.”⁵⁸ These achievement-oriented values support a belief in the middle-class way of life and in the importance of family values in fostering harmony and stability. The portrayal of African American male characters as middle-class in situation comedies therefore shows them to be “competent, successful, and able to provide comfortably for their families.”⁵⁹ In this way, programs seeking to incorporate more African Americans into mainstream television also communicate middle-class values because, like their working-class white counterparts, blue-collar African American males are generally presented as “inept, stupid, emotional, and so on.”⁶⁰

Although *The Cosby Show* was extremely popular with viewers, scholars who have examined the representations of African Americans and other people of color in television typically conclude that this show helped cultivate an impression that racism is no longer a problem and that people of color who have not achieved upward mobility have no one to blame but themselves.⁶¹ According to one study, portrayals in *The Cosby Show* incorporated myths about both race and class:

Television, in the United States, combines an implicit endorsement of certain middle class life-styles with a squeamish refusal to confront class realities or class issues. This is neither inevitable nor natural. Nothing about being working

or lower middle class prevents someone from being funny, proud, dignified, entertaining, or worthy of admiration and respect, even if the social setting of most TV programs would encourage you to believe otherwise.⁶²

Despite such criticisms, however, many subsequent sitcoms featured upper-middle-class African American families if they included any African Americans at all. Programs such as ABC's *My Wife and Kids* replaced *The Cosby Show* in portraying successful African American parents living in fashionable residences, wearing nice clothing, and teaching their children solid middle-class values. Michael Kyle (Damon Wayans) of *My Wife and Kids* is described as "a loving husband and modern-day patriarch who rules his household with a unique and distinct parenting style. As he teaches his three children some of life's lessons, he does so with his own brand of wisdom, discipline and humor."⁶³

Twenty-first century sitcoms based on supposedly middle-class African American families, such as TBS's *House of Payne*, have attracted millions of African American viewers, even though these series have been criticized for racially stereotyping black families. The characters in *House of Payne* include a stay-at-home mother, Ella Payne (Cassi Davis), who represents the good-natured voice of reason, and an assortment of far less straightlaced family members and outsiders. Ella is the family's religious voice and the spokesperson for values and morality. By contrast, her husband, Curtis Payne (LaVan Davis), tells derogatory jokes, uses profanity, and has a strong desire to get his nephew C. J. out of his home. (C. J.'s wife burned down their own house while under the influence of illegal drugs.) The combination of some characters with a strong sense of morality and others with major vices sets the audience up for contrasts in family values. However, some analysts believe that such shows are framed primarily to stereotype African Americans rather than to reflect positive family values or provide wholesome entertainment for young people.

One series focusing on middle-class African American families is TBS's *Are We There Yet?* based on a movie by the same title. The show depicts a blended family in which newlyweds Nick (Terry Crews) and Suzanne (Essence Atkins) have ten- and fourteen-year-old children who spend most of their time texting their friends and playing on the computer rather than enjoying time together. In one episode, "The Get Together," family members are gathered in the kitchen, but each person is doing his or her own thing and not paying attention to anyone else. Nick, increasingly frustrated that his wife and the children are not talking to each other, suggests that they plan a family get together at which they can hang out, eat, and play games. His son would rather play on his computer, his daughter would rather talk on her cell phone, and his wife, a professional party planner, wants to continue working

on an upcoming event instead. Nick talks to them about what he thinks a family should value and why time together is important. The show's website describes Nick's character as possessing "solid family values and a strong work ethic." While some analysts applaud this type of family-oriented values framing of stories on cable networks, they question why major networks, such as NBC, CBS, ABC, and Fox, air so few shows like this one.⁶⁴

If framing of middle-class family values is limited in TV shows featuring African Americans, it is even more limited when it comes to Latinos and Asian Americans, who are neglected in all prime-time television series, particularly situation comedies. A 2002 study by Children Now National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts found that Latino characters comprised only 4 percent of the prime-time television population, as compared to this group's overall portion of the U.S. population (12.5 percent in 2002). Of those Latino characters written into prime-time television shows, 63 percent appeared in drama and science fiction programs, 21 percent in crime or law enforcement series, and 16 percent in sitcoms or comedic dramas. According to this study, the absence of Latino roles on television is a major concern. The dearth of Latinos in sitcoms is problematic for young viewers because children watch sitcoms more often than any other prime-time genre. For this reason, many viewers and media critics were frustrated when ABC cancelled *The George Lopez Show*, the only sitcom featuring a middle-class Latino family. In the show, George Lopez was a father and a manager at a Los Angeles airplane-parts factory, where he had worked his way up from the assembly line. The show included Lopez's wife, children, and mother and showed the love and stress members of an intergenerational family experience. Some media analysts especially applauded *The George Lopez Show*'s emphasis on family values.⁶⁵

Similar studies about Asian American characters in prime-time television have found that actors in this category are more underrepresented when compared to the number of Asian Americans in the U.S. population. According to a National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium report, "Given that situational comedies generally feature family and domestic settings, the invisibility of Asian Pacific Island American [APIA] actors in this genre may contribute to an image that APIA's do not represent the 'American family.'" Moreover, when an APIA character makes a short-term appearance on a sitcom or other prime-time network program, the script often fails to portray such individuals realistically. In 2005, APIA characters were featured on three sitcoms, ABC's *Hot Properties*, FOX's *That '70s Show*, and UPN's *Half & Half*. Focused on themes such as selling real estate or stories about half-sisters, none of these series followed the typical middle-class family model in its story line.⁶⁶

Changing Values in Middle-Class Sitcoms

The story lines in some sitcoms either overtly or subtly ridicule the middle-class values and lifestyles portrayed in other shows. *Malcolm in the Middle*, which started on the Fox Network and is now shown on such cable channels as Nick at Night and FX, is an example. The show's story line revolves around a middle-class family comprising "four squabbling brothers and their parents who are just trying to 'hold on until the last one turns eighteen.'" The story is told through the eyes of Malcolm (Frankie Muniz), who scores very high on an IQ test and is placed in a gifted-children program at school. Rather than having parents who represent the voice of reason, Malcolm plays the role of parent, serving as the family's peacemaker and stabilizer on some occasions.

Malcolm in the Middle regularly ridicules the frequent plots of past sitcoms regarding family values and the possibility of striking it rich through good fortune or inheritance. Consider the following from the "Family Reunion" episode, as recorded in Malcolm's journal:

All right, so we've never been close with Dad's side of the family. There's a couple of reasons: First, Dad can't stand them. Second, they all hate Mom. It sucks though because Grandpa is totally rich and if we play our cards right, big inheritance coming our way . . . a boy can dream can't he?

Anyway, it's Grandpa's birthday and we got the call to join the family at his place for a reunion of sorts. Reese [Malcolm's brother] immediately went into "milk Grandpa for all he's worth" strategic-planning mode. Can't say I blame him. I mean, Grandpa's really rich.

[After they arrive at the party] . . . Grandpa is great. He's always laughing, joking, life of the party. He even took me to see all his Civil War memorabilia, which is cool, but I think I feigned more interest in hope of that inheritance money. Shameless, I know. I will say this though, no money is worth me having to dress in Civil War fatigues and reenact battles with the man. Give me some credit, my hypocrisy has limits.⁶⁷

This episode's story line is typical of the plots of many contemporary television sitcoms about middle-class families, whose members are often depicted as desiring upper-class wealth but as ultimately unwilling to "sell out." The "Family Reunion" episode and Malcolm's fictitious journal account of it (as posted on the FOX website) convey the message to viewers that although a big inheritance might be desirable, there are far more important things to take into account. The episode ends with Malcolm's immediate family making his grandfather and other members of the extended family extremely unhappy. Malcolm's mother locks herself in the bathroom and starts crying upon learning that she was intentionally excluded from the

family photo; Malcolm and his siblings decide to ruin the party by driving a golf cart through the party table, trampling the birthday cake, and launching the golf cart into the swimming pool. In supposedly middle-class fashion, Malcolm concludes, “So much for that inheritance, but at least we took care of our own, which may come back to us with Mom being a little nicer . . . wait, who am I kidding?”

Malcolm’s father, Hal Wilkerson (Bryan Cranston), has been described as “the antithesis of the traditional sitcom dad, bonding with his sons in wonderfully unwholesome ways and in effect becoming one of them instead of maintaining the paternal distance and the platitudes typical of the rest of TV’s patriarchs.” As one television critic suggests, however, the framing of family values in shows such as *Malcolm in the Middle* may be much more realistic than past portrayals of sitcom families:

Back when his star was ascendant, Newt Gingrich [then Speaker of the House of Representatives] once called for the nation’s families to return to the values embodied by the Nelsons of *Ozzie and Harriet*, seemingly unaware that the family in question was actually quite dysfunctional in real life, unable to live up to its own fiction. The irony of Gingrich’s pronouncement was—and remains—that America has been trying to live up to the ideal of TV family life and it is, to a certain degree, our failure to meet these impossible standards that has led to disillusionment. *Malcolm in the Middle* is very much the product of this disillusionment—art that imitates Life’s inability to imitate art—a candid Polaroid of an only slightly exaggerated family rather than the usual Olan Mills glossy of the sitcom family in its perpetual Sunday best.⁶⁸

Even with the increasing prevalence of reality shows on broadcast networks and cable channels, sitcoms have remained popular as a means of framing story lines about families of various social classes. In the 2000s, more children have appeared as characters in sitcoms, shifting the focus to families, many of which are somewhat dysfunctional and do not necessarily illustrate traditional middle-class values. Throughout the history of sitcoms, the framing of story lines has inaccurately reflected the class composition of the United States. Although television entertainment shows typically have assumed the stability and ongoing integrity of the middle class, the framing of many articles in newspapers and on websites focuses instead on the problems it faces—particularly those of being squeezed by economic conditions and victimized by people in other classes. We now turn to how stories are framed to emphasize the vise in which the middle class is caught and the ways in which individuals in this class are being victimized.

SQUEEZE FRAMING: CAUGHT BETWEEN ASPIRATION AND GROWING ANXIETY

The idea that the middle class is in peril is a key framing device for news stories about politics and the economy. While the United States enjoyed an economic boom in the 1990s, headlines like “Bottom’s Up: The Middle Class—Winning in Politics, Losing in Life” were not unusual. The statements made in the accompanying story were not unusual either:

The great American middle class. Politicians on the left and right court it. Policies, liberal and conservative, are proclaimed on its behalf. Health care reform was to have eased its cares. Tuition subsidies educate its children. . . . Most voters see themselves as members of the middle class. . . . But for all its mythic power, the middle class is finishing last in the race for improvement in the current economic boom.⁶⁹

As this article indicates, people in the middle class, even when the nation is experiencing an economic boom, are often seen as “losing ground to their upper- and lower-earning fellow citizens.” In the second decade of the 2000s, however, media framing of stories about the growing problems of this class has intensified, and postings such as “The Middle Class in America Is Radically Shrinking: Here Are the Stats to Prove It” are widespread. Typically, framing of this topic rests on the assumption that the middle class is being wiped out of existence in the United States. Here are some key statistics the media use to prove that the middle class is disappearing:

- Eighty-three percent of all U.S. stocks are in the hands of 1 percent of the people.
- Sixty-one percent of Americans “always or usually” live paycheck to paycheck.
- Sixty-six percent of the income growth between 2001 and 2007 went to the top 1 percent of all Americans.
- Thirty-six percent of Americans say that they do not contribute anything to retirement savings.
- Forty-three percent of Americans have less than \$10,000 saved up for retirement.
- Twenty-four percent of American workers say that they have postponed their planned retirement age in the past year.
- Over 1.4 million Americans filed for personal bankruptcy in 2009, a 32 percent increase over 2008.
- Only the top 5 percent of U.S. households have earned enough additional income to match the rise in housing costs since 1975.

- For the first time in U.S. history, banks own a greater share of residential housing net worth in the United States than all individual Americans put together.
- In 1950, the ratio of the average executive's paycheck to that of the average worker was about thirty to one. Since 2000, that ratio has exploded to between three hundred and five hundred to one.
- As of 2007, the bottom 80 percent of American households held about 7 percent of liquid financial assets.
- The bottom 50 percent of income earners in the United States now collectively owns less than 1 percent of the nation's wealth.
- In America today, the average time needed to find a job has risen to a record 35.2 weeks.
- More than 40 percent of Americans who actually are employed are now working in service jobs, which are often very low paying.
- The top 10 percent of Americans now earn around 50 percent of our national income.⁷⁰

Based on such data, media stories about the middle class often refer to a "giant sucking sound" as the U.S. middle class disappears from the stratification system and workers in this country are merged into a new "global" labor poor. Describing families that earn more than the median income for U.S. households, journalists make statements such as, "Once upon a time this was called the American Dream. Nowadays it might be called America's Fitful Reverie."⁷¹

What has caused the peril faced by the middle class? Newspaper articles and television news shows suggest that a central problem its members struggle with is the gap between their incomes and the cost of providing for their families. As a result, more families are going into bankruptcy or losing their homes to foreclosure. Intensifying the problem is the fact that Americans feel stuck in their tracks because they believe that they either have not moved forward in life or have fallen backward. Real median annual household income peaked in 1999 and has not reached the same level again, much less continued to grow. As framed by the media, even more depressing for many people is the decades-long stagnation of the median wage as the annual incomes of the bottom 90 percent of U.S. families have remained essentially flat since 1973.⁷²

According to some media reports, part of the problem stems from chronic excessive spending by middle-class consumers who have consequently not put enough money into savings. Other media reports suggest, however, that we should not blame the middle class because corporate advertisers seeking to expand their consumer base target middle-income individuals heavily, leading

to excessive consumerism by many who cannot afford such goods and services. For example, a *Fortune* magazine article, “Getting Malled,” describes the extent to which retailers compete for middle-class shoppers: “Big retailers are locked in a bloody battle for the shrinking middle-class pocketbook.”⁷³ Another article, “Shaking the House of Cards,” points out that some former members of the middle class are now entering the ranks of the poor. Bob Herbert of the *New York Times* often frames his opinion columns to focus on the problems of the middle class, as in pieces like “Caught in the Credit Card Vise,” “Caught in the Squeeze,” and “Living on Borrowed Money.”⁷⁴ His article about the “credit card vise” squeezing the middle class provides this statement by Julie Pickett, a middle-class homemaker who quit her full-time job when her twins were born: “I’m still paying for groceries I bought for my family years ago.” Herbert adds, “She meant it literally. Mrs. Pickett and her husband, Jerry, of Middletown, Ohio, are trapped in the iron grasp of credit card debt. Except for the fact that no one is threatening to damage their kneecaps, they’re in the same dismal position as the classic victim of loan-sharking.”⁷⁵ Herbert’s article explains that buying on credit used to help the middle-class family stay afloat, at least temporarily, but in the long run, many of these families have actually gone “deeper and deeper into debt, in large part because of the overuse of credit cards.”⁷⁶ Citing a report titled “Borrowing to Make Ends Meet” (compiled by a nonpartisan public-policy group), Herbert states that “more and more Americans are using credit cards to bridge the difficult gap between household earnings and the cost of essential goods and services.”⁷⁷ Heightening this predicament are structural problems in the U.S. economy, such as widespread job displacement, declining real wages, and rising housing and health-care costs. As a result, many in the middle class rely on credit cards as “a way of warding off complete disaster,” until they exhaust this avenue, and unpaid credit card debt continues to pile up.⁷⁸

The framing of a number of articles, including Herbert’s, about the middle-class squeeze reflects the content of published government reports or well-received books that highlight the “gloom and doom” of the middle class. Consider, for instance, the media coverage given to Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi’s *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle Class Mothers and Fathers Are Going Broke*.⁷⁹ The book contains many useful sound bites easily used by commentators and digested by media audiences, adding to the book’s popularity. For example, Herbert used information gleaned from the book to inform his readers that home mortgage costs between 1970 and 2000 rose seventy times faster than the average male head of household’s income during that same period and that two-income families are not faring well in the early twenty-first century’s economy.⁸⁰ As Herbert states, “So you end up with two parents working like crazy just to keep the family economically

afloat.”⁸¹ *The Two-Income Trap* also highlights middle-class families’ lack of savings because most today set aside virtually nothing and continue to pile up consumer debt. Based on this book and an application of the ideology of the American Dream, Herbert states, “The American Dream has morphed into a treacherous survival regimen in which the good life—a life that includes a home, family vacations, adequate health coverage, money to provide the kids with a solid education, and a comfortable retirement—is increasingly elusive.”⁸²

Economic peril is the most prevalent theme framing news stories about the middle class. Headlines lament, “Middle Class Barely Treads Water,”⁸³ and journalists and television commentators repeat warnings about how middle-class mothers and fathers are going broke.⁸⁴ Newspapers, magazines, and Internet and television news reports about the middle-class squeeze typically feature college-educated parents who have purchased a home, then experienced an economic catastrophe, such as a job loss due to illness or disability, that depletes any accrued savings. According to one news account, “The dance of financial ruin starts slowly but picks up speed rapidly, exhausting the dancers before it ends.”⁸⁵ However, individuals in so-called financial ruin are not those whom most people might expect to be in bankruptcy:

They are not the very young, tempted by the freedom of their first credit cards. They are not the elderly, trapped by failing bodies and declining savings accounts. And they are not a random assortment of Americans who lack the self-control to keep their spending in check. Rather, the people who consistently rank in the worst financial trouble are united by one surprising characteristic. They are parents with children at home. Having a child is now the single best predictor that a woman will end up in financial collapse.⁸⁶

Based on *The Two-Income Trap*, reporters on NBC’s *Today Show* and MSNBC.com framed a number of their stories using such phrases as “middle-class problems,” “financial meltdown,” “living from paycheck to paycheck,” and “pressing families against the wall.”⁸⁷ Journalists widely adopted “the two-income trap” sound bite to describe the problems that middle-class families experience when both parents are employed outside the household, but the family cannot make ends meet.

Often implicit in the framing of stories about the middle-class squeeze is the assumption of whiteness, meaning that journalists and media audiences typically associate middle-class problems with the white (non-Hispanic) population. This does not, however, reflect reality, as middle-class families across racial and ethnic categories experience economic problems. In 2010 a new study revealed that the wealth gap between white and African American families has increased more than four times since 1984, from \$20,000



to \$95,000. Defining wealth as “what you own minus what you owe,” the researchers found that middle-income white households have made greater gains in financial assets than high-income African Americans: white households they studied had accumulated an average of \$74,000 as compared to only \$18,000 owned by the average high-income African American family.⁸⁸

Few media sources discussed this new study, and those that did failed to explain why differences had occurred in the “wealth factor” between African and white Americans. According to the researchers in this study,

The racial wealth gap results from historical and contemporary factors but the disturbing four-fold increase in such a short time reflects public policies, such as tax cuts on investment income and inheritances which benefit the wealthiest, and redistribute wealth and opportunities. Tax deductions for home mortgages, retirement accounts, and college savings all disproportionately benefit higher income families. At the same time, evidence from multiple sources demonstrates the powerful role of persistent discrimination in housing, credit, and labor markets.⁸⁹

Earlier articles also highlighted the fact that the weakening power of labor unions and job loss affect African Americans more than some white American workers. In 2003, “Blacks Lose Better Jobs Faster As Middle-Class Work Drops” reported on government data showing that African Americans are “hit disproportionately harder than whites” by job loss in the United States. Written by journalist Louis Uchitelle and originally published in the *New York Times*, this article was subsequently reported on CNN TV and CNN.com. It quotes William Lucy, president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, as saying that “the number of jobs and the types of jobs that have been lost have severely diminished the standing of many blacks in the middle class.”⁹⁰ Although some sociologists might argue that union jobs paying \$12 to \$13 an hour are properly classified as working-class, journalists typically use the term *middle class* to describe this type of work, based on the widely held myth that most workers fall into this vast demographic. Since this article was written in 2003, the problems of African American workers in all classes have worsened, their sting felt particularly by middle-income and upper-middle-class individuals, some the first in their families to reach high levels of education and income, only to see their earnings diminished by changing economic conditions across the nation and world.

No topic has received greater media attention regarding the middle-class squeeze than the issue of health insurance. Prior to the passage of the Barack Obama administration’s health-care legislation, a typical headline framing such a story was “For Middle Class, Health Insurance Becomes a Luxury.”⁹¹ Although being uninsured or underinsured is a major problem for millions of

people in the United States, many articles focused on how this “health-care crisis” harms the middle class. One typical article states, “The majority of the uninsured are neither poor by official standards nor unemployed. They are accountants, employees of small businesses, civil servants, single working mothers and those working part time or on contract.”⁹² The journalist’s interviewees emphasized the middle-class nature of the health-care crisis. R. King Hillier, director of legislative relations for Harris County, Texas (which includes the city of Houston), stated, “Now [being uninsured] is hitting people who look like you and me, dress like you and me, drive nice cars and live in nice houses but can’t afford \$1,000 a month for health insurance for their families.”⁹³ Although articles like this do not completely exclude the working class and poor, their framing suggests that the cost of health insurance is primarily a middle-class concern. There is an implicit assumption that charity in public hospitals and government-funded programs take care of the poor.

While the U.S. Congress debated the health-care-reform bill in 2009, media sources referred to one version of the Senate’s bill as a “middle-class time bomb”⁹⁴ because it would have imposed a 40 percent excise tax on plans that would pay in excess of \$23,000 annually for families or \$8,500 for individuals.⁹⁵ In actuality, the health-care-reform legislation would affect very few in the middle class, particularly during the early years of its implementation. With health-care costs rising rapidly, however, the excise tax could spread to nearly 20 percent of all U.S. workers within three years. Media framing of debates about the Senate’s health bill focused on its potentially disastrous effect on the middle class, and Congress eventually passed, and President Obama signed into law, a compromise bill that levied tax increases on high-income households rather than placing an excise tax on health plans.⁹⁶

During the health-care-reform debates, the middle-class squeeze in regard to the high cost of health care was widely discussed on television talk shows, and commentators typically assumed that the middle class had employer-based insurance. The word “hardworking” was used frequently to describe middle-income Americans employed full-time, and media analysts often assumed these hardworking Americans would not experience the same problems as the unemployed or those working without health benefits. As the Great Recession worsened in 2010, media analysts began to shift their discussions to include most people in the middle- and upper-middle class in their squeeze framing of stories.⁹⁷

As we have seen, squeeze framing emphasizes the economic woes of the middle class and points out the resulting danger not only for this group but for the American way of life. The “Middle Class Squeeze,” shown on PBS’s *Now with Bill Moyers*, summed up this problem as follows: “Some say the broadly middle class society we used to take for granted has unraveled—unraveled to

the point where America is no longer the land of widespread economic and social opportunity we believe it to be.”⁹⁸ That probably is an overstatement; as discussed earlier in this chapter, for more than 150 years news stories have framed articles in terms of how the middle class is being squeezed out of existence—and yet it still exists. In fact, most people still think of themselves as its members. However, victimization framing in news articles, discussed next, points a finger at some of the potential culprits who contribute to the problems that members of the middle class believe they face.

VICTIMIZATION FRAMING: FEAR FACTOR AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

Victimization framing identifies specific villains or perpetrators—ranging from national political leaders and top corporate executives to individuals designated “ordinary street criminals”—whose actions allegedly threaten the middle class (although possibly members of other classes as well). One form of victimization framing suggests that those who occupy top economic and political leadership positions in the nation have created and are now perpetuating the problems of the middle class, pitting the interests of this group against those of the wealthy and powerful. Another form of victimization framing suggests that the working class and the poor are victimizing the middle class, this time pitting their interests against those of people below them in the social-class hierarchy.

Victimization by the Rich and Powerful

Two recurring themes in the first of these forms of victimization framing include how the rich have benefitted—at the expense of the middle and lower classes—from changes in the tax laws and from the greed of corporate CEOs and wealthy shareholders. Early in the 2000s, a typical headline about U.S. tax laws demonstrated the first of these themes: “Plan Gives Most Benefits to Wealthy and Families.”⁹⁹ The accompanying story discusses how changes in the tax law during the George W. Bush administration affected households in various income ranges. The article asserted that nearly half of the benefits in that administration’s tax cut program would flow to the wealthiest 10 percent of taxpayers. To show that many middle-class people believed the tax cuts left them out in the cold, the reporter included an interview with Robert and Bee Moorhead of Austin, Texas. The article informed readers that the Moorheads were both employed, with a combined income of about \$88,000, but still could not accumulate any substantial savings. Mr. Moorhead showed

typical middle-class disbelief regarding the proposed change: “They’re trying to sell this once again as trickle-down economics. I have my doubts.”¹⁰⁰ A photo of the Moorhead family sitting on their porch, looking how most people expect members of the middle class to look, facilitated the story’s framing. The general framing of the article focused on the greater benefit wealthy families would receive, as compared with middle-class families like the Moorheads, even though the journalist acknowledged that “President Bush’s mammoth tax plan would give something to almost everybody.”¹⁰¹ Another article, “Caught in the Squeeze,” stated, “Only the rich have reason to cheer” about the 2003 tax cut President Bush signed into law,¹⁰² while another bore the headline “Tax Analysis Says the Rich Still Win.”¹⁰³

Media also used visual framing in the form of political cartoons to inform audiences that the rich were the primary beneficiaries of the Bush tax laws. In 2003, political cartoons throughout the nation showed how the rich benefited from the bill that cut taxes for the wealthy and increased the federal debt limit by nearly \$1 trillion. Syndicated cartoonist Ben Sargent portrayed a very obese, wealthy man in a full-length coat wiping tears from his eyes with a large handkerchief while standing in front of a house where two seemingly middle-class parents sit on the front porch staring at a photograph of their son, who is in uniform and evidently serving in the U.S. armed forces in Iraq. The wealthy man says to the parents, “Oh, yeah? Well, now they’re talking about cutting my next massive tax cut in half! Don’t talk t’me about sacrifice!”¹⁰⁴ Another Sargent cartoon depicts a wealthy, well-dressed (but extremely overweight) man and woman talking to a mother with her child in a stroller. The wealthy man holds a sucker on a stick out to the child. The wealthy man’s wife says to the child’s mother, “Don’t mind Howard. . . . He’s just determined to thank the future generations who’ll be paying for our lovely tax cut.”¹⁰⁵ These cartoons visually reflect the form of victimization framing that suggests to media audiences that many actions benefitting the rich harm the middle class.

By 2010, in the sobering light of trillions of dollars of rapidly growing federal debt and the lingering U.S. economic recession, changes in the framing of stories could be seen in headlines that asked media audiences to consider what would happen when the Bush income tax cuts expired. For example, media reports such as an Associated Press article titled “With Income Tax Cuts Expiring, Rates Could Rise for Wealthy—but What about Middle Class?” emphasized that, although President Obama had repeatedly promised throughout his election campaign and early tenure in office to shield the middle class from higher tax rates, in actuality, many middle- and upper-middle-income families might be hit with much larger tax increases within the next two or three years. With the Bush tax cuts set to expire in

January 2011, elected officials and political party spokespersons were heavily divided over whether to pass legislation to make them permanent or to allow them to expire, in which case tax rates would increase to their previous higher level across most income categories. One proposal called for only allowing the cuts to expire for couples earning more than \$250,000 and individuals earning more than \$200,000 per year, which would place about 2 percent of U.S. households back in the 39.6 percent tax bracket (up from 35 percent). Although those making more than \$200,000 in taxable income were most at risk for having to pay higher taxes, media framing emphasized that, once again, the middle class would likely be victimized by the rich when changes were made in the tax code. Although many Bush tax breaks helped middle-class families because they involved educational allowances and deductions for mortgage interest and charitable donations, as well as tax credits for some families with children, media framing of many stories focused on how much the wealthy or near wealthy benefitted from the tax cuts. After the Republican Party regained control of the U.S. House of Representatives in the 2010 mid-term elections, Congress passed, and President Obama signed into law, the Tax Hike Prevention Act of 2010, which extended all Bush-era income tax rates for two years and established a thirteen-month extension of federal jobless benefits, among other provisions. Media framing of some stories about the so-called tax-cut deal highlighted its negative effect in trillions of dollars on the federal deficit and on middle- and working-class people. Other stories primarily suggested that political partisanship and getting reelected were major factors in political leaders' decisions about temporarily renewing tax cuts that benefit the rich at the expense of the middle class.¹⁰⁶

The other primary theme of victimization-by-the-wealthy framing is corporate greed. As chapter 3 shows, this issue has intensified in the early twenty-first century. In 2010, *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert referred to the problem as “a sin and a shame” in an article published under that headline. According to Herbert, corporate America has treated workers much worse than most people realize, and the primary motivation for such actions has been “outright greed by corporate managers.” From this perspective, although corporations have “mountains of cash,” they are not hiring new workers or increasing employees' paychecks despite the fact that worker productivity has increased dramatically. In Herbert's words, “There can be no robust recovery as long as corporations are intent on keeping idle workers sidelined and squeezing the pay of those on the job.”¹⁰⁷ The problem described here is not new: consider earlier articles, such as *Time* magazine's “They're Getting Richer!” describing how several major corporations, including Viacom, Citigroup, and Goldman Sachs, dramatically boosted the stock dividends paid to their top executives and shareholders after the Bush administration's 2003

tax cut went into effect. Supposedly, the tax cut was intended to provide a stimulus to corporations so that they would hire additional employees and help the U.S. economy. According to this article, “Dividends are a clean way for many CEOs to give themselves a big raise—and you have to figure that they will.”¹⁰⁸ In hindsight, many things clearly contributed to the boom and bust experienced by giant corporations like Citigroup and Goldman Sachs since 2003. Corporate greed became even more visible to everyday people, however, as the media highlighted the questionable practices of large corporations and financial institutions.

Victimization framing of media stories about the middle class informs audiences of how the decisions of corporate elites harm this group. In the midst of corporate downsizing, layoffs, offshoring, and outsourcing of upper-middle-, middle-, and working-class jobs, one political cartoonist captured the essence of this form of victimization by portraying a bald CEO, wearing a nice suit and tie, shopping at “The Corporate Card Shoppe.” The CEO fills his basket with cards from various sections of a rack labeled with greetings like “Congratulations! You’ve been downsized,” “Good-bye! We’re moving off-shore,” “Sorry about your pension,” and “I’m in recovery . . . too bad your job isn’t.” A *New Yorker* cartoon conveyed a similar idea: a judge sits in his courtroom listening to a well-dressed attorney standing before him with an affluent client by his side. The attorney states, “Your Honor, my client would like to be tried offshore.”¹⁰⁹

Articles such as “Bracing for the Blow”¹¹⁰ and “The White-Collar Blues”¹¹¹ ask, “Who’s next out the exit door?” as corporations continue sending jobs offshore. Although the practice of shipping thousands of jobs to lower-paid workers in other nations first hit the manufacturing sector and many so-called blue-collar workers hard, the problem has now extended to higher-paying, middle- and upper-middle-class positions. In “Education Is No Protection,” Bob Herbert describes a New York conference titled “Offshore Outsourcing: Making the Journey Work for Your Corporation,” offered to help executives make decisions about “the shipment of higher-paying white-collar jobs to countries with eager, well-educated and much lower-paid workers.”¹¹² As the article’s headline suggests, the education that middle-class individuals so highly value is not adequate protection against offshoring of jobs; many middle- and upper-middle-class positions formerly located in the United States can be performed less expensively by well-educated, white-collar workers in other countries.

Extensive media coverage followed after IBM, once considered a mainstay of the American economy, announced it was offshoring well-paid jobs such as those belonging to computer technicians. IBM uses the term *global sourcing* for sending jobs to workers in other countries; white-collar workers

in the United States see this practice as further eroding their way of life, as middle-class jobs become increasingly difficult to find and those available do not pay as well as in the past.¹¹³

A news report titled “Guess Which Jobs Are Going Abroad,” broadcast on CNN and posted on the CNN/Money website, contained the following statement: “If a tax preparer gets you an unexpected refund this year, you may have an accountant in India to thank. That’s because accounting firms are joining the outsourcing trend established years ago by cost-conscious American manufacturers.”¹¹⁴ The movement of jobs out of the country continued in 2010 as articles like “Due Diligence from Afar” explained how “cost-conscious companies” were outsourcing legal work from cities such as New York to New Delhi. An example is Pangea3, a legal outsourcing firm that employs 110 Indian lawyers in New Delhi to review legal documents and do other work previously performed by lawyers in U.S. firms. Outsourcing makes sense to corporate executives because it is cheaper: Indian law firms charge one-tenth to one-third of what a U.S. law firm would bill per hour. Outsourcing means the end of jobs or much tighter competition for the jobs that exist in the United States, and this problem now affects the middle- and upper-middle class as it previously did blue-collar workers and other working-class people in this country. By 2010, India had become a prime location for outsourcing professional work, such as legal and publishing services: that nation has lower wages and a large pool of young, English-speaking professionals described as highly motivated.¹¹⁵

Media framing of stories sends a message that middle- and upper-middle-class employees in the United States are being victimized by wealthy corporate elites whose decisions affect the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people in this country when they choose to move jobs, including scientific laboratory analysis, medical billing, accounting, and legal work, to other nations, leaving U.S. workers in the lurch. Such stories pit corporations and their profitability against middle- and upper-middle-class workers. Obviously, most CEOs and corporate shareholders, who frequently benefit from cost-cutting measures such as downsizing, layoffs, offshoring, and outsourcing, do not share the problems of these middle-income workers and upper-middle-class professionals. In summing up the victimization of the middle class and the long-term slump of the U.S. economy, some journalists refer to these issues as the “new normal,” in which economic growth is “too slow to bring down the unemployment rate and the government is forced to intervene even more forcefully in a struggling private sector.”¹¹⁶ According to one journalist, “The new normal challenges the optimism that’s been at the root of American success for decades, if not centuries. And if it is here, the new normal could force Democrats and

Republicans to rethink their traditional approach to unemployment and other social problems.”¹¹⁷ Many fear that the new normal means that high, long-term unemployment, particularly for the middle class, is now a way of life. Headlines such as “Nation Lost 131,000 Jobs As Governments Cut Back,” inform readers that the scale of job layoffs not only in the private sector but also by state and local governments in 2010 surprised economists.¹¹⁸ Although the official unemployment rate remained at 9.5 percent in mid-2010, government estimates reached as high as 16.5 percent when the broadest definition of unemployment was used. This figure includes people who have given up searching for work even though they want and need a job. In the words of Mary Moore, a former administrative assistant at a publishing company who lost her job more than a year ago, “This economy is absolutely appalling. As an American I did not believe we would see times such as this.”¹¹⁹

Victimization by the Poor and Homeless

Although some forms of victimization framing emphasize the role of the wealthy and powerful in subordinating the middle class, media also use it to show audiences that the middle class is being victimized by those beneath it in the social-class hierarchy. The theme of victimization of the middle class by the poor and homeless typically surfaces in media stories about middle-class housing and shelters for homeless people. Both of these residential settings are evaluated in terms of the widely held belief that the middle class is entitled to privacy, safety, maintenance of property values, and a feeling of community.

Home ownership is a key ingredient in the American Dream, and many in the middle class have realized this dream in residential settings that provide physical and psychological distance from lower-income people and the poor. According to many urban scholars, the need for this social distance contributed to the growth of suburbs in the past and to the popularity of exurbia and gated communities (residential areas surrounded by walls or fences with a secured entrance). News articles and television reports discussing gated communities and reviewing popular books on the topic, such as *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States*¹²⁰ and *Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America*,¹²¹ have informed media audiences that these communities are popular with middle-class residents who fear for their safety and want to keep out those who might victimize them. Framing of stories in this manner suggests that the gated community not only extends the middle-class American Dream but symbolizes the middle-class fear of violation:

It transforms Americans' dilemma of how to protect themselves and their children from danger, crime, and unknown others while still perpetuating open, friendly neighborhoods and comfortable, safe homes. It reinforces the norms of a middle-class lifestyle in a historical period in which everyday events and news media exacerbate fears of violence and terrorism. Thus, residents cite their "need" for gated communities to provide a safe and secure home in the face of a lack of other societal alternatives.¹²²

Extensive media coverage of middle-class gated communities and books such as *Behind the Gates* convey the message that the middle class is not only emulating the upper class in its desire for safe and exclusive residences but participating in a new phase of residential development that will have a long-term effect on other urban problems, such as city planning, crime prevention, and public education. As *Washington Post* columnist Jonathan Yardley explains:

People living in urban high-rises with security systems and doormen have done that for generations, of course, but the suburban walled community is a recent phenomenon and is not, in fact, a suburb as the term has been understood until now. This is "a new phase of residential development," in which "architectural and planning parameters are redefining neighborhoods physically and socially by using walls and guards—not just distance, street patterns, and middle-class norms and mores."¹²³

A number of journalists used the titles of books like *Fortress America* and *Behind the Gates* as sound bites in their discussions of urban problems, gated communities, and middle-class fears of victimization. However, as anthropologist Setha Low, author of *Behind the Gates*, states, the middle class may be putting too much hope in these communities:

Architectural symbols such as gates and walls also provide a rationale for the moral inconsistencies of everyday life. For instance, many residents want to feel safe in their homes and argue that walls and gates help keep out criminals, but gated communities are not safer than nongated suburban neighborhoods, where crime rates are already low. Instead, the logic of the symbolism satisfies conventional middle-class understandings of the nature of criminal activity—"it makes it harder for them to get in"—and justifies the choice to live in a gated community in terms of its moral and physical consequences—"look at my friends who were randomly robbed living in a nongated development."¹²⁴

Just as the gated community serves as a source of reassurance for upper-middle- and middle-class residents, many people who do not live in such communities obtain security devices to prevent unauthorized intrusions of

every type into their homes. According to “Fortress Home: Welcome Mat Bites,” the 2004 annual International Builders Show in Las Vegas featured “all manner of newfangled security devices” ranging from security cameras that can be manipulated from anywhere in the world to protect a home’s perimeter to deadbolt locks twenty-eight inches long.¹²⁵ According to the article, consumers—many of them middle class—fall into three groups: “the anxious, those whose peers are also arming themselves with alarms and deadbolts, and those who have experienced some kind of violence or violation.”¹²⁶ Although the middle class is not the only socioeconomic category of people whose concerns about safety and security have been heightened by media reports about crimes like sniper shootings, members of this group have the economic resources to invest in security systems and fortress-building devices for their homes, as the wealthy have done for many years.

Although much media coverage has focused on how more affluent people try to live away from the poor and homeless by moving to the suburbs, security-oriented high-rise buildings, or gated communities, some researchers have also found that the public spaces in major cities are becoming more and more off-limits for poor people. Despite large influxes of recent immigrants into some cities, many neighborhoods have become more segregated. The framing of stories about the use of public space and how it affects the middle class often incorporates issues of race and class. In one incident, police harassed a group of African American friends as they stood on a corner, drinking beer. Another group—white customers at a restaurant with an outdoor patio—were drinking wine, but they were not bothered. According to one analyst, middle- and upper-middle-class gentrification “can redefine some activities. . . . The actual activity is not necessarily changing—people outside drinking alcohol—but the context is different and one is proscribed and one is not.”¹²⁷

It may initially appear a wide jump to shift to media framing of articles about homeless shelters, but victimization of the middle class is a recurring theme in this type of story as well. Articles about the infringement of the poor and homeless on private and public spaces that members of the middle class feel entitled to call their own gain salience with audiences because some fear that they too might “fall” and end up living in a shelter themselves. Media framing contributes to this fear with headlines like “From Middle Class to the Shelter Door: In a Trend, New Yorkers Face Poverty after Last Unemployment Check”¹²⁸ and “U.S. Offers a Hand to Those on Eviction’s Edge.”¹²⁹ In such articles, the people interviewed have either lost their jobs and unemployment benefits or experienced personal problems that left them destitute. As one article states, “Unemployment benefits have traditionally been a safety net of the middle class, as public assistance has been for the poor,” and there

is now a widespread fear that this safety net is not secure enough to keep people from falling out of the middle class.¹³⁰

Middle- and upper-middle-class people who once believed they were safe from the worst effects of an economic recession, but have learned otherwise, find stories about home evictions particularly frightening. The framing of one story highlights a two-year “merciless downward spiral” experienced by Antonio Moore, who nearly had to live on the streets after he lost his \$75,000-a-year job as a mortgage consultant, his three-bedroom house, and his Lexus sedan. Eventually, he did not have the money to pay for a small studio apartment because he was working as a part-time fry cook earning \$10 an hour. A \$1.5 billion federal program implemented in 2010 to help middle-class people avoid eviction enabled him to remain in his apartment—at least for the time being. The journalist writes,

Much like the Great Depression, when millions of previously working people came to rely on a new social safety net for their sustenance, a swelling group of formerly middle-class Americans like Mr. Moore, 30, is seeking government aid for the first time. Without help, say economists, many are at risk of slipping permanently into poverty, even as economic conditions improve.¹³¹

Another recurring media frame entails the physical proximity of the poor and homeless to the daily paths of those who consider themselves members of the middle and upper-middle classes. For decades, public libraries have been a terrain contested by the middle class and the homeless. In an article titled “Anywhere but Here: Library Tells Homeless to Move Along,” we learn that hundreds of homeless people in Dallas, Texas, have congregated in or near the public library; however, the library strictly enforces rules about sleeping on and misusing the premises because of complaints from middle-class citizens who believe the homeless infringe on the rights of library patrons. According to this article, “The recent crackdown is the latest in response to long-standing complaints about homeless people bathing in library restrooms, muttering obscenities, panhandling outside, littering and forming a gauntlet that makes some patrons uncomfortable. But many see it as another round in an endless cycle of dealing unsuccessfully with homelessness.”¹³² In cities across the nation, including Washington, DC, and San Francisco, California, journalists have described similar library encounters between the middle class and the homeless. The West End Library in Washington, DC, has attempted to welcome the homeless as much as possible; however, “older, richer, and whiter people” have registered complaints about their presence and asked the library to stock *New York Times* bestsellers rather than the self-help books assumed to be a favorite among the poor and homeless. Media framing about the homeless taking over the libraries has contributed to a middle-class fear

of victimization in some cities. For example, the media report about Washington's West End Library brought this response from one reader:

As a former resident of DC (Foggy Bottom) and as someone who works with a variety of libraries, I have to say that allowing libraries to become day-time homeless shelters isn't fair to anyone. Nor is it valid to suggest that those uncomfortable around the mentally ill are just the self-absorbed rich whites. Government agencies (city, state, federal) don't want to pick up the care for the homeless because it costs money so they look the other way when services used by the middle class collapse under the weight. Why shouldn't the needs of the middle class be considered alongside the needs of the homeless?¹³³

Headlines regarding the homeless and libraries crop up across the country. For example, a San Francisco newspaper reports that John Banks, a homeless man in a wheelchair, shows up at the main library every day when it opens and stays there until it closes, at which time, he returns to the bus terminal where he spends the night.¹³⁴ As discussed in chapter 4, some journalists frame stories in a manner that engenders sympathy for the poor and homeless, asking, for instance, where a person like John Banks is supposed to stay. However, even stories originally intended to produce sympathy for this marginalized group may instead generate hostility from middle- and upper-middle-class people who feel threatened. One media analyst suggests that newspaper articles about the homeless often follow a standard frame:

Dirty, smelly homeless people are ruining the enjoyment of facility X (in this case, a youth hostel) by upstanding group Y (tourists). City department Z (the Office of Homelessness), while trying to do its best, is just too overwhelmed to make anyone happy. Middle- or working-class citizens are interviewed about the latest dilemma, and lo and behold, out of their mouths pop prejudice and stereotypes about the homeless. A reaction quote from advocates for the homeless rounds out the picture.¹³⁵

Media framing about placing homeless shelters within any particular community often asserts that choosing a particular location potentially threatens the middle class and informs media audiences of the negative responses of middle-class residents to these facilities. Examples include articles from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Homeless Shelter Plan Attacked, Potrero Hill Neighbors Worry about Property Values,"¹³⁶ and the *San Francisco Examiner*, "Showdown over Shelter: A Gritty Little Neighborhood Fights S.F. Plan for Homeless,"¹³⁷ both of which use NIMBY ("not in my back yard") framing and carry the underlying theme of middle-class victimization.

This approach to framing stories about the effects of homeless shelters on the middle class is not unique. "Chicago Looks for Home for Shelter for Home-

less” describes Pacific Garden Mission, a shelter in need of a new location because the city wanted the property to build a new gymnasium and library for a high school. As more middle- to upper-middle-class residents moved into the expensive condominiums and town houses built as the area became gentrified, the shelter—at one time considered to be on skid row in “an undesirable neighborhood that people would rather avoid than come to”—was now deemed an eyesore and a threat to middle-class residents living and working nearby.¹³⁸

Consider one final example of the pitting of the middle class against the homeless when it comes to shelters. Articles and letters to the editor published in the Fredericksburg, Virginia, *Free Lance-Star* informed readers that middle-class residents were concerned about their and their children’s safety due to plans to move the Thurman Bisben Homeless Shelter to their neighborhood. “Shelter’s Plan Not a Popular Move” prominently featured a photo of Theresa Lewis, a twenty-seven-year-old mother of four, expressing her opposition to the shelter at a local civic association meeting. According to the article, Lewis did not want the shelter in her backyard: “I feel badly for the families, but I have to think of my children. How can you guarantee their safety from these strange people?” she asked the approximately fifty people gathered.¹³⁹ In the days immediately prior to and after that news report, readers sent sharply contrasting letters to the newspaper’s editor: pieces with titles like “Shelter Will Bring Only Crime”¹⁴⁰ and “Please Don’t Let Shelter Ruin Our Neighborhood”¹⁴¹ presented the middle-class-victimization side of the argument; “There’s No Reason to Fear the Poor Residents of a Shelter”¹⁴² and “L.A. Confidential: A Well-Run Shelter Suppresses Crime”¹⁴³ argued the other side of the debate.

Overall, media framing of articles about homeless shelters and their effect on the middle class may contribute to a sense on the part of members of that group of increasing victimization not only by those above them in the class structure but also by those living in poverty and experiencing homelessness. Although a variety of social problems do harm individuals in the middle class, these problems also hurt people in other demographics as well. For this reason, media framing of stories suggesting that middle-class concerns are more important than those of other people is in itself an important issue to evaluate when considering how media representations of various classes may influence audiences.

EFFECTS OF MEDIA FRAMING ABOUT THE MIDDLE CLASS

When I began my research into how the media frame news articles and television entertainment story lines about the middle class, I assumed that

I would primarily find data to support a representation of the middle class as “us”—the vast category into which almost everyone in the United States supposedly fits. I also expected that the media would focus on positive attributes of the middle class, such as people’s values and lifestyles. Based on the popularity of books like Brooks’s *Bobos in Paradise* and Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class*, I anticipated depictions of the middle class as “in charge” and upwardly mobile. Instead, I found that although some journalists and television writers extol the virtues of this group, many others focus on the constant peril it faces, and they have done so for more than 150 years. This type of framing has become more prevalent given the economic climate of the United States in the early twenty-first century, and even more stories are found in all forms social networking and mainstream media.

Media framing of the middle class as the backbone of the nation supports the notion that this class holds the rest of the country together and that middle-class mores are the core values of the United States. News reports and television sitcoms of the past widely used family-values framing, but much of this has given way to a portrayal of the middle class as deeply conflicted, fragmented, and fragile. News articles suggesting that the middle class is in peril—its existence perhaps even in jeopardy—reflects such framing further.

The fragility of the middle class is a recurring theme in media framing. Many articles and news stories depict this demographic as caught in an economic vise. If readers and viewers accept the premise behind squeeze framing, they may see the middle class as continually caught between aspiration and anxiety. As a proliferation of products and services, coupled with high levels of credit card and other types of debt, fuel rampant consumerism, we can either praise the middle class or blame it for its consumer habits.

Media framing of news articles shapes, at least in part, how people think about the middle class and its habits. For example, when the media depict the middle class as overspending and taking out mortgages that they cannot afford, squeeze framing assigns responsibility to those individuals and their families. If, however, the media present these middle-class problems as a form of victimization, the blame shifts to corporations and government officials. Even the poor and homeless may be portrayed as infringing on the rights and property of the middle class. As political scientist Shanto Iyengar states with regard to the media framing of poverty, “While there is as yet no well-developed theory of framing effects, it seems quite likely that these effects occur because the terms or ‘frames’ embodied by a stimulus subtly direct attention to particular reference points or considerations.”¹⁴⁴ Similarly,

media framing of stories about the middle class also directs audiences' attention to particular reference points and considerations.

Representing the middle class as victimized by the wealthy can either produce middle-class animosity toward the rich or engender greater resolve to earn more money (or strike it rich playing the lottery) and join the ranks of the rich and famous, thereby gaining their tax breaks and lifestyle advantages. It is hard to explain our fascination with the wealthy if some part of us does not aspire to their status, or at least have a deep-seated interest in how they manage to live "above" everyone else. Rather than systematically opposing laws and policies that benefit the well-to-do, some in the middle classes are content to live vicariously, watching reality shows in which people get rich because they have talent (FOX's *American Idol*, NBC's *America's Got Talent*), correctly answer a number of questions on a quiz show (ABC's *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*), or successfully compete against others for a job or other high-value resources (NBC's *The Apprentice*).

By contrast, the more that media coverage shows middle-class people as victimized by the poor and homeless, the more likely some in the former group will be to wish to segregate themselves and their families from individuals in other classes who might do them harm. Media coverage may also encourage people to oppose national, state, or local decisions that bring low-income and homeless individuals into closer proximity with middle-class families. "Not in my backyard" and "I don't want them to take away what I've worked so hard to get" are common reactions to such situations as plans to build new homeless shelters.

Just as fear of others probably constituted one of many factors contributing to the growth of suburbs in the past, the proliferation of exurbs and gated communities in the twenty-first century stems partly from the facts that fear sells; the middle class is a prime target of marketing for security systems and other protection devices. For many years, the upper class fortified itself against encroachment by the poor (and even by the middle class) in its high-security, high-rise urban residences and in its fenced estates with guard dogs. Now the middle class has joined its ranks, seeking to fortify its residences and schools, and even public spaces like streets and city libraries, against those they find threatening. As Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder conclude in *Fortress America: Gated Communities in America*, community building has greatly diminished in the United States, and the emphasis has shifted, at least among those with the ability to pay, toward "privatization, increasing atomization, and increasing localism."¹⁴⁵ These authors question whether democracy can long endure under these conditions, and they suggest that perhaps the more media coverage encourages the middle class to "duck and

cover,” the less focus there will be on community building in this country. According to Blakely and Snyder,

When privatization and exclusion become dominant, and neighborhood connectedness and mutual support structures disappear, we must question whether an American democracy founded on citizenship and community remains possible. . . . All of the walls of prejudice, ignorance, and economic and social inequality must come down before we can rendezvous with our democratic ideals. The walls of the mind must open to accept and cherish a more diverse nation. Then the walls that separate our communities, block social contact, and weaken the social contract will also come down.¹⁴⁶

Certainly, members of the middle class are not the only ones contributing to the building of the walls of separation in the United States. However, if media representations of this class over the past 150 years are any indication, much of the news reporting and many of the entertainment shows have contributed to a view of the middle class not as the great unifier in society but as part of the great divide, increasingly squeezed by economic conditions, perpetually victimized by the wealthy and the poor, and generally living in fear of its future. Media framing of news reports and entertainment story lines about the middle class may find a vast well of insecurities—economic, political, and social, as well as moral—upon which to prey in the portrayal of this group.

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CHAPTER 6: SPLINTERED WOODEN FRAMES

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