Teaching Economic Inequality and Capitalism in Contemporary America Using Resources from the Federal Government

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Author's Reflexive Statement

I am a historian of the United States with research and teaching interests in politics, economics, and social movements. In 2014, I became the dean of the College of Letters, Arts, and Social Sciences at the University of Idaho. As I assumed this new job, my contact with students lessened. That said, by assisting undergraduate and graduate students with their research, I still engage many on the historical issues relating to working people, particularly in the United States. When I was teaching full time, I focused my courses not only on the stories that workers tell but also on the data that illuminate the structures of their lives. In other words, I helped students gather qualitative and quantitative sources. In some ways, I have been trying to teach students what I do from my own perspective.

As a son of working class parents who went to college and a son of an immigrant, I have always been interested in the stories that people tell and in finding out how unique or common those stories are. This chapter reflects my thinking on how to handle one type of source material: federal publications. These sources contain both qualitative and quantitative information but are especially helpful with the latter. I have used these stories to ask questions like this: my mother was a Cuban immigrant who arrived in 1954. How many Cubans arrived in the United States in the year she came? I know from teaching and from counseling young historical researchers that the answers can be found in federal publications. The problem is finding these sources and then understanding the data sets. This chapter is designed to help based on more than 20 years of teaching and mentoring.

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K. Haltinner and L. Hormel (eds.), *Teaching Economic Inequality and Capitalism in Contemporary America*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71141-6_13

Introduction

The U.S. federal government is among the largest publishers in the world. Each year, it releases hundreds of books, reports, and pamphlets. Each one is full of information and data (both quantitative and qualitative) about the conditions of contemporary America. As such, they provide a treasure trove for exploring issues of inequality and capitalism. This has long been the case. These historical sources are rich for analysis. More recently, with the advent of the worldwide web, using these sources have become more challenging. First, there are so many documents and so much more information available that the volume of information itself can be quite overwhelming. Second, getting to the sources and the data is not always straight-forward: some are in print sources; others are on government websites; and still others only can be accessed through social media. For teachers and students who are interested in exploring issues of inequality and capitalism in contemporary America, there are some good guides and shortcuts to gain access to the information. This essay is designed to introduce some common federal resources and provide a method of accessing them. This chapter will highlight the following publications: *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*; *Income and Poverty in the United States*; and *Digest of Education Statistics*; It will also focus on a few web sites including those of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and Federal Reserve Board. In the context of this volume, the focus is on inequality and contemporary American capitalism, but the method outlined below should work for any topic about American life and history.

Currently, I am the dean of the College of Letters, Arts, and Social Sciences at the University of Idaho. I am also a U.S. historian. When I regularly taught classes, I frequently had courses about U.S. labor history, U.S. immigration history, and comparative and interdisciplinary courses about work and working people. I often had assignments in which I asked students to use federal resources to investigate conditions for workers in the past, in the present, and around the world. The sources I feature in my discussion below are perfect for any class dealing with inequality and capitalism within the larger contexts of economics, history, sociology, politics, and anthropology.

When teaching with the resources of the federal government, the first step is to provide students with an orientation. I suggest spending no more than one class period on this and, if possible, to have this session in a library that is a federal government document repository. The orientation, ideally conducted by a government documents librarian, would cover three basic aspects of federal resources. First, it would provide an overview of the Government Printing Office (GPO). Created in 1861, the GPO is the official publisher of federal documents and has churned out these resources for more than one hundred and fifty years. There are three nice official histories of the GPO. Each is available online at the GPO's web site (https://www.gpo.gov/about/gpohistory/).[1] Finding specific documents within

[1]Kerr (1881), Harrison (1961), and Boarman (2011).

the corpus of GPO publications can be a challenge, but there are a few helpful guides. The first is the GPO's *Monthly Catalog*, which has been published in various forms since 1895. For the period 1789–1909, there is a checklist of public documents, which the GPO published in 1911. The GPO's online bookstore has now replaced the monthly catalog. One can access it here: https://bookstore.gpo.gov. One particularly useful feature of this site is that one can browse by agency. For example, by clicking on the Department of Labor, one has access to lists of books, pamphlets, and other materials related to the mission of the Department of Labor and its bureaus and offices.

Let's take an example to demonstrate one method to use the GPO online bookstore and connect it to a common question about the economy and American society. Suppose one wonders: how many immigrants obtained green cards in 2015? By typing in "immigration" into the search box or by clicking on the "Department of Homeland Security," one can quickly access publications regarding immigrants. Among the top hits is the 2015 *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*. Selecting that publication provides the opportunity for purchase. But, knowing that it is published, also gives one the chance to see if a local library has this title or to check out the Department of Homeland Security's web site. The 2015 *Yearbook* is also available as an interactive website with yearbooks going back to 1996 (see: https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2015). Clicking on Table 1 gives access to the data.[2]

These are large numbers! When a foreign national receives green card, it means that they are lawfully allowed permanent residence in the United States. This would include people who were granted asylum or refugee status or were naturalized. While not everyone inside those large numbers were workers, many were. That means that our economy draws workers from around the world, and consistently so. This is an important point of understanding of modern capitalism in the United States. Despite all the changes in the economy and the society for the last thirty years, the number of green cards issued has been a constant. The contemporary capitalist economy relies heavily on foreign-born workers.

The interplay between GPO publications and web-based resources is an important point to impart to students as they begin to ask more sophisticated questions about economic inequality and contemporary capitalism. In my teaching experience, this is the key to unlocking the treasure trove of federal resources to answer big questions in classroom. One question that is appropriate to a classroom studying this theme is: Has the rate of poverty in the United States been increasing or decreasing since the turn of the millennium? A search of the GPO bookstore web site yields the essential government publication: *Income and Poverty in the United States*. The U.S. Census Bureau publishes it annually. Going to the Census Bureau's web site allows one to access a wealth of statistical tools and reports,

[2]"Table 1. Persons Obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status: Fiscal Years 1820–2015," *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2015*, accessed March 20, 2017, https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2015/table1.

Table 1 Immigrants Entering the United States, 1999-2015

Year	Number
2015	1,051,031
2014	1,016,518
2013	990,553
2012	1,031,631
2011	1,062,040
2010	1,042,625
2009	1,130,818
2008	1,107,126
2007	1,052,415
2006	1,266,129
2005	1,122,257
2004	957,883
2003	703,542
2002	1,059,356
2001	1,058,902
2000	841,002
1999	644,787

Source "Table 1. Persons Obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status: Fiscal Years 1820–2015." *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2015*. Accessed March 20, 2017. https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2015/table1

including the latest *Income and Poverty in the United States* (2015), which is available for free download as a PDF. The report begins to provide a framework for understanding economic inequality.

Using Government Data to Understand the Social-Historical Dynamics of Economic Inequality

Government data can be used by instructors to help students understand the dynamic nature of economic inequality over time and by social location. For example, *Income and Poverty in the United States* (2015), which is based on U.S. Census data, provides a wealth of information that can be used by students or in classes on topics related to economic inequality. This includes essential and basic demographic information. For example, in 2015, there were 125,819,000 households reported by the U.S. Census Bureau. Of those, 107,081,000 (85%) were native born and 18,738,000 were foreign born (15%). Most of the foreign born households were in metropolitan areas.

This document can also be used to show and analyze economic trends by various factors such as gender and race. For example, looking at this data reveals a few critical aspects of economic inequality: women earn less than men. The median

income for men was $51,212 while the median for women was $40,742.[3] As a snapshot in time, this statistic—that women earn 80% of what men earn—does not indicate the trend, which has reflected slow and steady growth in the female-to-male earnings ratio since the mid-1980s, when the percentage was about 60%.[4] However, students can compare Census data over time to analyze social change. In terms of race, if we slice the income data another way to account for race and Hispanic origin, other patterns emerge. The median household income for African Americans in 2015 was $36,898; for Hispanics of any race $45,148; for whites (not Hispanic) $62,950; and for Asians $77,166. Looking at trends from 2010 to 2015, one can see that since the end of the Great Recession incomes have been rising, but much more slowly for African Americans than for other groups.[5]

Census data also can be used to show the contemporary (or historical) nature of capitalism and inequality in the United States. For example, income distribution reveals a structure of social class where the top income earners have a commanding share of the wealth. In 2015, the highest quintile of earners earned 51.1% of the money income. The top 5% earned 22.1%. The lowest three quintiles earned a combined 25.6%. In other words the top 5% earned nearly as much as the lowest 60% of the income earners in the United States.[6]

This income information question provides a foundation for the answer to the question about the trend in poverty and poverty rates in the United States. In 2015, 43.1 million Americans lived in poverty. The official poverty rate was 13.5%, down from 14.8% in 2014. That rate was one percent higher than the 2007 rate. In other words, in 2015, the United States had essentially returned to a pre-Great Recession poverty rate. That said, the poverty rate in the United States is still higher than it was in 1995. In fact, the Great Recession wiped out all the gains of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Furthermore, the United States remains near the high water mark for the number of poor Americans. In 1960, there were almost 40 million Americans in poverty. That number declined to under 25 million in the 1970s, and it has been on the increase since then with periods of decline such as the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s.[7]

As reported in *Income and Poverty in the United States, 2015,* the U.S. Census data tell even more about the poor in 2015. Most were white (66%). African-Americans made up 23%, and Hispanics of any race constituted 28%. Most poor were women, born in the United States, and aged 18–64. There were more than three times as many poor children as there were poor seniors. Most poor live in the South and the West.[8] Teachers can create interesting student assignments, since they may use this data filtered and sorted for state, counties, and localities. For

[3]Proctor et al. (2016).

[4]Proctor, Semega, and Kollar, *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015*, 10.

[5]Proctor, Semega, and Kollar, *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015*, 5.

[6]Proctor, Semega, and Kollar, *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015*, 9.

[7]Proctor, Semega, and Kollar, *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015*, 12.

[8]Proctor, Semega, and Kollar, *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2015*, 13.

example, you might have a group of students working on collecting the national level data on income and poverty. Then other groups in the class could find the state, county, and city data. Working in teams, students could then report out using a collaboration platform such as Google Docs, building toward a reveal in the classroom when the teacher takes the class through all the data, zooming in from the national level to the local level. This assignment could even have a public element by having a local government official in the room as the presentation is made.

Using Government Data to Analyze Areas of Possibility for and Barriers to Change

Once students have an understanding of socio-historical patterns of inequality, they will likely want to understand: (a) how people can improve their class position and (b) why people remain in poverty. Federal documents and statistics can also provide some information about what poor people can do to get ahead now and in the future as well as barriers to these changes.

For example, one method of economic advancement is to secure higher paying jobs. Looking at the Bureau of Labor Statistics web site is essentially the only place to go for information about jobs and income relative to contemporary American capitalism (https://www.bls.gov). Among the myriad of statistics available, four points of data indicate what it is like for average Americans. First, unemployment—a measure of people who are looking for work and who have not found employment—is now nearing levels not seen since the years prior to the Great Recession. In February 2017, the national rate was 4.7%. At the comparable time in 2007, it was 4.5%.[9] One of the stark differences, however, is that the labor participation rate has declined. In January 2007, 66.4% of the civilian labor force over the age of 16 was working or seeking work. In January 2017, that rate was 62.9%.[10] Thus by only looking at the unemployment rate, we might get a false sense of the vibrancy of contemporary American capitalism. It is not yet producing enough jobs to support the growing working population. Unemployment is relatively low, but many have ceased to look for work.

Obtaining a job is only part of a path out of poverty. Many of the kinds and numbers of jobs that are being created are at the lower level of the income scale. The BLS has projected that for the period 2014–2024 the great number of jobs that will be created have relatively low median incomes (Table 2).[11]

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[9]"Bureau of Labor Statistics Data,." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed March 28, 2017, https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000.

[10]"Bureau of Labor Statistics Data," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed March 28, 2017, https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS11300000.

[11]"Most new jobs: 20 occupations with the highest projected numeric change in employment." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed March 28, 2017, https://www.bls.gov/ooh/most-new-jobs.htm.

The jobs that pay higher rates frequently require degrees beyond high school, which is the next step many have to take to get out of poverty. Although college and university degrees are important achievements unto themselves, the costs of attainment, measured not merely by tuition but also by total cost of attendance year over year, is increasing. Finding that information is also relatively easy using our belt-and-suspenders approach of checking for published resources and web resources. First, checking the GPO online bookstore for current statistics about higher education yields two important sources for purchase or for check out at a library that is a federal repository: (1) *Digest of Education Statistics 2016* and *The Condition of Education 2016*. They are also available online at the U.S. Department of Education's web site. Second, digging into the statistics reveals the stark reality of the challenges of higher education in the United States. As state-sponsored support has dwindled over the last three decades, the cost of attendance has risen. Comparing 1986–2016, in constant, inflation-adjusted dollars, we see that the average cost of attendance (tuition plus room and board) for all institutions (public and private), was $10,969 in 1986 and $22,432, a 104% increase.[12] At the same time, student debt has increased to accommodate the rise in costs of degree attainment. The Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System maintains data about consumer debt. The latest information is on its website (https://www.federalreserve.gov/). Student loan debt has increased from $1055 billion in 2012 to $1406 billion in 2016.[13] The Federal Reserve has only tracked this information since 2006. The percentage increase has been 192%.[14]

The challenges for most Americans in paying for higher education comes at a time and in a context of other rising costs, particularly for health care. Given the relative costs of health care and of higher education, many Americans choose one or the other. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Center for Disease Control and Prevention (known also as the CDC) issues an annual publication titled *Health, United States*. The 2015 installment provides a wealth of information about disease, wellness, and the health care industry. It's available for purchase; in libraries, and for free download (https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/

[12]"Average undergraduate tuition and fees and room and board rates charged for full-time students in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by level and control of institution: 1963–64 through 2015–16," National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics* 2016, Accessed March 29, 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_330.10.asp?current=yes.

[13]"Consumer Credit—G.19, January 2017," Statistical Releases and Historical Data, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, Accessed March 29, 2017, https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g19/current/default.htm.

[14]"Consumer Credit—G.19, Historical Data," Statistical Releases and Historical Data, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, Accessed March 29, 2017, "Consumer Credit—G.19, January 2017," Statistical Releases and Historical Data, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, Accessed March 29, 2017, https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g19/current/default.htm.

Table 2 20 occupations with the highest projected numeric change in employment

Occupation	Number of new jobs (projected), 2014–2024	2015 Median Pay
Personal care aides	458,100	$21,980 per year
Registered nurses	439,300	$68,450 per year
Home health aides	348,400	$22,600 per year
Combined food preparation and serving workers including fast food	343,500	$19,440 per year
Retail salespersons	314,200	$22,680 per year
Nursing assistants	262,000	$26,590 per year
Customer service representatives	252,900	$32,300 per year
Cooks, restaurant	158,900	$24,140 per year
General and operations managers	151,100	$99,310 per year
Construction laborers	147,400	$33,430 per year
Accountants and auditors	142,400	$68,150 per year
Medical assistants	138,900	$31,540 per year
Janitors and cleaners, except maids and housekeeping cleaner	136,300	$24,190 per year
Software developers, applications	135,300	$100,080 per year
Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand	125,100	$25,980 per year
First-line supervisors of office and administrative support workers	121,200	$54,340 per year
Computer systems analysts	118,600	$87,220 per year
Licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses	117,300	$44,090 per year
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	111,700	$21,820 per year
Medical secretaries	108,200	$33,730 per year

Source "Most new jobs: 20 occupations with the highest projected numeric change in employment." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Accessed November 4, 2017. https://www.bls.gov/ooh/most-new-jobs.htm

hus15.pdf). The same information, though in a different format, on the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics web site. If you had the question of how many Americans have no health insurance, the answer is easily accessed there (Table 3).[15]

[15]"Uninsured: Table 105. No health insurance coverage among persons under age 65, by selected characteristics: United States, selected years 1984–2014," National Center for Health Statistics, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed March 30, 2017, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/2015/105.pdf.

Table 3 Americans under age 65 without Health Insurance, 1984–2014

	1984	1997	2000	2004	2010	2012	2014
Total in millions	29.8	41.0	41.4	42.1	48.3	45.2	35.7
Total as percentage of population	14.5	17.5	17.0	16.6	18.2	16.9	13.3

Source "Uninsured: Table 105. No health insurance coverage among persons under age 65, by selected characteristics: United States, selected years 1984–2014," National Center for Health Statistics, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Accessed March 30, 2017, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/2015/105.pdf

Using Government Data to Assess the Impact of Contemporary Inequality

These data provide some indication of what life is like for contemporary Americans. By examining the information about jobs and income, we get a rough portrait of the kinds of inequalities that exist. But, how do they affect people? What can we say about them? Federal sources in print and online provide some answers here as well. In particular, the *Monthly Labor Review*, a publication of the Bureau of Labor Statistics since 1915, provides reports and information on particular topics drawing from many sources of information. First published in 1915, most of the MLR is widely available for purchase and in many libraries. Some of it is also available online. From the period 1981 to 2017, the entire issues are accessible. Prior 1981, it is hit and miss, at least for now.

Examining or searching the MLR provides a place to see how inequality and contemporary American capitalism intersect. Let's take the relationships between income and health care. In a February 2017 *Monthly Labor Review* article titled "Income and Health Outcomes," Serah Hyde summarizes some recent research that indicates that as income disparity has grown since the 1970s mortality rates among the middle aged have risen among those are in the middle to lower income earners. As she explains, "individuals in this [top income] group were more than twice as likely to report being in very good or excellent health than individuals in the bottom [or lower income] group… The number of those who reported very good to excellent health," she continues, "have eroded over time, but for the top income group, that erosion has been negligible." Thus higher incomes point to better health outcomes. Lower income Americans are in a worse situation generally.[16]

Hyde's report points to two caveats of using federal sources to discuss inequality and contemporary American capitalism. The first is that to use sources like the *Month Labor Review* one needs beyond the web site and to go to the library. Similar data sets also exist that require that trip. One of the most useful sources of information about the United States was the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*,

[16]Hyde (2017).

published yearly from 1878 to 2011. The U.S. Census Bureau's web site has some the information, but there is no substitute for the books, which for the most part are unavailable for purchase. The last difficulty with federal sources is that statistics do not tell the story of people. In this context, inequality can boil down to numbers and ratios. But what does it mean for people who have lived in the past and are alive now? Taken together, these comments point to the need to head to the library and dig into some additional sources. Again, the federal sources can help.

There are a few go to places for finding print-only federal sources regarding inequality and contemporary American capitalism. I have already mentioned the *Monthly Labor Review* and the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, which are in most libraries. In addition, there are some other go-to sources which can help students and researchers alike. Before the worldwide web, the Government Printing Office published a *Monthly Catalog*, which is essentially an index to its publications and a useful way to find materials not included in the GPO online catalog. Finally, there are two other statistical compellations that one needs to know. The U.S. Census Bureau published two versions of *Historical Statistics of the United States*. Utilizing data sets from the U.S. Census, these volumes offer historical tables on population, work and welfare, economic structure and performance, economic sectors, and governance and international relations. The first was released in time for the bicentennial. The second appeared at the start of the new century. The *Historical Statistics of the United States: Millennial Edition* was subsequently sold to Cambridge University Press. The set has a companion web site (http://hsus.cambridge.org/HSUSWeb/HSUSEntryServlet). All the tables are only available for purchase. It is no longer a free federal resource. They are available at many libraries.

Using Government Data to Hear the Stories of Americans

There is a final but important point to make. Federal sources provide an ocean of statistics to wade through. For every question about inequality or the structure of contemporary capitalism, there are many data sets that help provide an answer. And, there is a methodology for gaining access to those sources, which I have outlined above. But, what about the stories of Americans? By focusing on the quantitative, we risk ignoring the quantitative data. There is a large body of published work, perhaps the subject of an additional essay. One place to begin are the reports of federal blue-ribbon committees. There is a long tradition of these, which constitute an incidental canon of federal publications. To take the long arc on conditions of inequality and the structure of American capitalism, I suggest beginning with two sources. One source, *Recent Social Trends in the United States*, was published during Herbert Hoover's presidency and gives a detailed overview of the conditions on the eve of the Great Depression. Another source is the reports of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's National Resource Planning Board, particularly

its multi-volume reports issued in 1943 *Security, Work and Relief Policies* and *National Resource Development*, which pointed the way to a postwar world.[17]

A few more are worth mentioning in the context of this topic. The report of President Harry S Truman's Committee on Civil Rights not only summarized briefly the seriousness of inequality in American life but also charted a course for public policy.[18] The difficulties in achieving improvements is at the heart of another federal report. At the end of the 1960s, after several massive riots in American cities, the federal government empaneled a U.S. Riot Commission, under the direction Illinois Governor Otto Kerner. Its report began with a stark and startling assessment: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal".[19] The federal government has fallen out of habit of these ceremonious committees and reports, especially as they relate to inequality and the economy. Every once in a while, they still come out as with the 9/11 Commission's Report. Inequality and the nature of contemporary capitalism, though, are unlikely to receive similar attention. To fill the void, some newspapers have been publishing their own in-depth reports based on their reporting. Some valuable reports from the *New York Times* include *The Downsizing of America: Millions of American are Losing Good Jobs, This is Their Story* (1996) and *Pulling Together, Pulling Apart: How Race is Lived in America* (2001).[20] These sources contain the stories of individuals that provide direct qualitative examples that make the quantitative data come alive.

In teaching about inequality in America and its connection to contemporary capitalism, the quest for resources is as important as the analysis that can be done. There are more resources than one person would have time to investigate. Even at the federal level for a simply stated question such as how many people are currently working, many resources can be brought to bear. Expanding the search into state, county, and local data sets makes the project richer yet more difficult. This makes such an investigation perfect for the classroom. Acquiring the data—both quantitative and qualitative—is not easy but it is engaging.

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