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Boundaries: Class-ridden America

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- America is famed for its principles of equality -- but renowned researcher Richard Florida says conditions have shifted so much nowadays that "the fundamental fact about America is its gaping inequality."

"The likelihood that a person will remain in the same income bracket as his or her parents is greater in the United States than in France, as well as Denmark, Australia, Norway, Finland, Canada, Sweden, Germany, Spain, Singapore -- and even Pakistan," Dr. Florida wrote in *USA Today*.

He said it's dismal that new Census figures show 15 percent of Americans, 47 million people, now living below the poverty line.

Known for his books on the wealth-spurring "creative class," professor Florida says the blue-collar industrial working class comprised half of Americans in the 1950s, but that share has shrunk to 20 percent.

Today's largest group, nearly half of the U.S. work force, is the low-paid "service class who prepare and serve food, perform janitorial functions, take care of children and old people, and perform routine clerical and administrative functions," he wrote.

In contrast, he said, the "creative class" of well-educated specialists and professionals -- one-third of the work force -- enjoys 70 percent of income.

Dr. Florida, a professor at the University of Toronto and New York University, said his research team found these patterns:

"Paradoxically, Republican affiliation and conservative identification were most pronounced in America's poorest and least-educated states." (Does this explain why West Virginia moved into the "red" camp in recent presidential elections?)

"Those who are most likely to characterize themselves as 'very religious' ... tend to live in poorer, working-class states" that vote Republican, he said. Those states also have more smoking and obesity, he noted.

"Higher rates of gun deaths were significantly more likely in states that voted for McCain than Obama. Firearm deaths were also higher in states with higher levels of poverty and older blue-collar economies and far less likely to occur in states with higher levels of college grads and the creative class."

It's a shame that America is plagued by wider class divisions than many other nations. But it's fascinating to ponder how those divisions shape the U.S. political landscape -- and presumably will be visible in results of the Nov. 6 election.