

# Study shows pitfalls of using the term middle class

January 19 2018

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Middle class describes an economic tier between rich and poor. It implies upward mobility and a break from poverty.

But a recent article co-authored by Portland State University anthropologist Charles Klein shows that the term does little to shine a light on the real lives of people who make it into this social classification. It may be a convenient term for politicians and marketers, he said, but it's too simplistic to be used as a one-size-fits-all descriptor of economic status across different countries and cultures.

The ongoing study, funded by the National Science Foundation and published in the journal *Economic Anthropology*, focuses on Brazil, which saw a dramatic rise in incomes from 2003 to 2010. One estimate showed that [poverty](#) fell by 55 percent and that more than 30 million people became members of what Brazilian policy makers and others called the "new [middle class](#)."

Klein and his fellow researchers conducted surveys in three Brazilian cities, and found that previously poor Brazilians did have more money to spend, but few felt that they had risen higher on the socioeconomic ladder.

"The definition of the 'new middle [class](#)' masks the fact that increases in [income](#) and consumption have not translated into a reduction of structural inequality and cannot therefore be said to have ushered in a new class order," wrote Klein, a professor at PSU's College of Liberal

Arts & Sciences.

In fact, Klein discovered that the [economic downturn](#) in Brazil in recent years resulted in many previously poor Brazilians becoming poor again or afraid of sliding back into poverty during the recession. He said that for the term middle class to have greater meaning, it must take into account more than just income and include things such as work relationships, changes in the way previously [poor people](#) interact with the elite, and some kind of measure of how they see themselves and imagine their futures.

**More information:** Charles H. Klein et al, Naming Brazil's previously poor: "New middle class" as an economic, political, and experiential category, *Economic Anthropology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/sea2.12104](https://doi.org/10.1002/sea2.12104)

Provided by Portland State University

Citation: Study shows pitfalls of using the term middle class (2018, January 19) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-01-pitfalls-term-middle-class.html>

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