Introduction to Social Problems

TENTH EDITION

Thomas J. Sullivan

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Thomas J. Sullivan
Professor Emeritus
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Preface

As we settle in to the twenty-first century, the study of social problems continues to be one of the most demanding, exciting, and fast-paced fields in sociology and the social sciences. Some remarkable advances have been made: The crime rate has fallen dramatically since 1990; the high school dropout rate among minorities is falling, dramatically in some cases; and women now go into combat as pilots and circle the globe as astronauts aboard space shuttles. And these are just a few examples of the significant advances that have occurred since the first edition of this book was published. At the same time, we should not rejoice for too long, because serious problems persist: The crime rate is still far too high, alarming new evidence suggests that global warming may be a much more severe problem than had previously been thought, the prevalence of poor people of color among the victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans brings home the extent to which class and race still shape opportunities and outcomes in the United States, and the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC, in 2001 remind us of the horrific acts of violence that still occur frequently in the world. So, although some rejoicing is warranted, much important and difficult work still remains.

The work of dealing with such social problems is, of course, a collective effort in which virtually all citizens join at some time and at some level. Many professionals—sociologists, educators, social workers, counselors, and police officers, to name a few—devote their careers to solving social problems. Many other people, with no special training, volunteer their efforts in community centers and other organizations in an effort to alleviate the pain and damage from crime, woman battering, or homophobia. This tenth edition of *Introduction to Social Problems* supports these efforts by providing students who are training for helping professions and any other interested activists with the most current assessment of social problems and their solutions. This book explores the nature and extent of the problems, documents the advances and setbacks, and analyzes what solutions work and don't work.

Sociology and the other social sciences make some special contributions to this battle against social problems. They use scientific research to assess the nature and extent of social problems and the effectiveness of solutions to them. Social science research focuses on questions such as: Why and how do particular social problems emerge? Does a given solution work? Who benefits? What are the negative consequences of a given solution? Is there a way that we can achieve the same gain for less expense? In fact, over the past few decades, the study of social problems has become one of the most exciting and innovative wings of the social sciences because it involves the application of social science research and knowledge to the solutions of some of the most difficult, agonizing, and controversial problems confronting the United States and the world today.

Organization

Many serious social problems confront the United States and the world—too many to cover in a single book. From among these social issues, I have chosen to discuss problems that are particularly serious, affect many people, and expose students to a broad array of concerns in varied sectors of life in the United States. By studying these problems, students gain the tools and the insights that enable them to analyze other problems and solutions not explicitly covered in this book.

Chapter 1 introduces students to the sociological analysis of social problems, including a discussion of the theoretical perspectives that are used throughout the book and of the importance of the scientific approach and applied research in the analysis of social problems and their solutions. Chapters 2 through 5 cover social problems that relate directly to some of the major social institutions in society: government, the economy, the family, health-care systems, education, science, and technology. Chapters 6 through 9 focus on problems that are linked by the common theme of social inequality: poverty; racial and ethnic discrimination; and inequality based on gender, sexual orientation, and age. Chapters 10 through 12 analyze problems surrounding behavior that some people consider unconventional or deviant: crime and delinquency; alcohol and drug abuse; and prostitution, pornography, and the sex trade. Chapters 13 through 15 focus on problems involving changes or disruptions in the physical and social world: urban problems and population growth; environmental pollution; and violence, war, and terrorism.

Features in the Tenth Edition

This book goes beyond simply cataloging a set number of social problems. It also provides the student with a framework for analyzing any such problems. This framework is incorporated into a number of special elements of the book.

1. *Theoretical Perspectives.* I have organized the analysis of social problems and their solutions around the three core theoretical perspectives in sociology: functionalism, conflict theory, and interactionism. These perspectives

offer tremendous insight into the sources of problems, the effectiveness of solutions, and the ramifications—both obvious and hidden—of adopting particular solutions. These perspectives are used in every chapter of the book to provide the student with a set of tools to analyze any social problem, including problems not directly discussed in this book.

2. *Applied Research Inserts.* A theme in this book is that the application of social science research is central to solving problems and evaluating how well solutions work. Therefore, I have included in every chapter an insert titled *Applied Research*, which illustrates how and why this is the case. In this way, I emphasize the point that the choice of solutions to problems, although shaped by personal values and the public policy debate, should be constrained by the assessment of those solutions through systematic and scientific observation. In other words, the choice of solutions to problems should involve interplay between human values and social research.
3. *Myths and Facts.* To emphasize further the role of research in understanding social problems, I point out some ways in which people's commonsense beliefs about social problems are proved incorrect by research data. This encourages the student to be sensitive to the distinction between myths and facts: beliefs that have no scientific foundation versus knowledge that has been substantiated by observational testing.
4. *Laissez-Faire versus Interventionist Debate.* The debate over social policy and social problems is centered in part on the role of the government in such issues. This long-standing debate is incorporated into the text in the form of two opposing positions. The laissez-faire stance posits that the government is, in most cases, either inefficient at finding or unable to find such solutions and should stand aside and let private enterprise and impersonal economic forces produce solutions. The interventionist position gives the government prime, although not sole, responsibility for finding and initiating solutions to problems. This debate is addressed periodically in the text where it is relevant.
5. *Policy Issues Inserts.* Another important theme of this book is that finding solutions to social problems is a political process in which groups differ with one another over which solutions are preferred. One's choice of solutions is influenced in part by one's cultural and subcultural values. Therefore, every chapter includes an insert titled *Policy Issues*, in which contemporary debates on social policy related to that problem are discussed. Both the pros and the cons of policies are debated and in many cases linked to the laissez-faire/interventionist debate.
6. *International Perspectives.* This feature provides students with a global picture of particular social problems and their solutions. One reason this is important is the growing interdependence among the world's peoples and nations. Another reason is that we can gain insight into problems and their solutions when we observe them in societies and cultures that are different from our own. In addition, some social problems are inherently global in nature rather than national or regional.
7. *Social Construction and the Media.* Explicit emphasis is given to the social constructionist perspective on social problems, in many cases by discussing the role of the mass media or other modern communications technologies in constructing problems and their solutions. A section in Chapter 1 discusses the social construction of social problems from the three theoretical perspectives; then, sections on constructionism and the various media are included in Chapters 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, and 15.
8. *Study and Review.* At the end of each chapter, a Study And Review section is included to give students an opportunity to test how well they have grasped the material presented in the chapter. Each section contains a chapter summary and a list of key terms, and they offer the students a mechanism for quickly determining how well and thoroughly they retained and understood the material in the chapter. For the student who wishes to pursue in more depth the topics of a chapter, there is a list of important and contemporary books on the subject.

Updates and Changes

The book's basic organization remains the same in the tenth edition. However, the text has been thoroughly revised and updated to reflect contemporary developments in sociology, as well as new social, political, and economic developments relating to particular social problems. Special attention has been given to ensuring that the data presented on the various social problems are the most current available. The "For Further Reading" sections at the end of each chapter have also been thoroughly updated with challenging books for the student who wishes to pursue a topic in greater depth.

Chapter-by-Chapter Changes

The following list highlights the major changes:

- In Chapter 1, the introduction to the interventionist and laissez-faire approaches to attacking problems has been expanded by discussion of the Occupy Wall Street and Tea Party movements as examples of each position, respectively.
- In Chapter 2, in the section on collective action by citizens and the antiglobalization movement, I have expanded the analysis with further discussion of the Occupy Wall Street and Tea Party movements to bring the issues up to the present day.
- In Chapter 3, in the section on dual-earner families, I have added significant new data on the impact of marriage and divorce on women. Also, the Policy Issues insert on gay families has been extensively rewritten to reflect current research findings and the dramatic political and policy developments of the past decade in this realm.
- In Chapter 4, in the International Perspectives insert, I have added more detail on how the Canadian system of national health insurance operates and differs from the U.S. health-care system.
- In Chapter 5, in the section on effectiveness, I have included new data about the effectiveness of schools in the United States. Also, the previous Policy Issues insert on biotechnology has been replaced with one that addresses the growing privatization and profit-making trend in U.S. schools—its benefits and disadvantages. The section on parental choice and charter schools has been extensively rewritten to reflect current developments and new data that address the issue. Furthermore, I have added a new section on online schooling that addresses the extent and implications of this development.
- In Chapter 6, the section on the extent of poverty has been retitled "The Extent of Poverty and Economic Inequality in the United States." Data and discussion now relate to the broader question of economic inequality rather than limiting it to poverty. In Figure 6.6, regarding children living below the poverty level, I have added statistics on Asian Americans.
- In Chapter 8, the section on discrimination against women in the military has been extensively rewritten to take into account significant policy developments of the past few years. Also, in the section on discrimination against gays, I rewrote the part on discrimination in the military because of recent changes in policy. And finally, I updated text about collective action by gays and lesbians.
- In Chapter 12, material has been added in a number of places about the impact of new technology, especially the Internet, on the practice of prostitution. Also, I rewrote the Policy Issues insert to show the impact of the same Internet technology on pornography and the possibility of controlling or regulating it.
- In Chapter 14, I have moved the discussion of global warming and climate change into a new section that is now separate from the discussion of air pollution. This revision makes possible a more thorough discussion of the most recent research on the extent and impact of climate change. In the section on

international cooperation, I have updated the discussion to include recent efforts (so far mostly unsuccessful) to expand the Montreal Protocol and the Kyoto Protocol as a way of making headway on global warming and climate change.

These and the other additions and revisions called for by world developments in the past few years will make the tenth edition of *Introduction to Social Problems* an even better vehicle for use with students in the study of social problems.

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Chapter 1

Approaches to the Study of Social Problems

Learning Objectives

After you read and study this chapter you will be able to:

1.1 Define when a condition is and is not a social problem, identify the social context of social problems, and explain what the sociological imagination is.

1.2 Define the three theoretical perspectives on social problems, compare them with one another, and explain how social problems are socially constructed.

1.3 Describe how the scientific method and research are used to understand social problems, elaborate on the different types of research that are used, and characterize the problems and pitfalls of scientific research.

1.4 Identify the things that sociologists do to address social problems, discuss the role of social policy in this process, compare and contrast the interventionist and laissez-faire approaches to this process, and analyze why this process benefits by focusing on social problems in other societies and cultures.

English novelist Charles Dickens characterized life in England and France in the late 1700s with these words: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . . it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair" (1924:1). Dickens was expressing a deep-felt ambivalence held by many people of that era regarding life in their time. England was undergoing industrialization, which promised greater levels of economic productivity, wonderful inventions, and new heights of affluence. For many, however, it also meant agonizing poverty, horrid crowding in filthy cities, and virulent disease. For the entrepreneur, it was a time to dream of riches yet to be made. For the pauper, it was a time to wonder where one's next meal might be found.

Today, in the early years of the twenty-first century, the United States can be viewed through an equally ambivalent lens. We, too, can find promise of a better life in emerging technologies such as computers, telecommunications, and biotechnology. We, too, have seen remarkable inventions that provide a level of comfort and security thought impossible by our ancestors. Imagine, for example, how you would be limited by the absence of but one amenity of modern living that you probably take for granted: electricity. Yet, not much more than 100 years ago, most people lived without it.

But there is a dark side to all this promise—a "winter of despair"—that is the topic of this text. There remain poverty, violence, drug addiction, alcoholism, and a host of other social problems. Perhaps nuclear power provides the best symbol for the contradictions of our time: We use it to produce our electricity, but no one wants its deadly wastes stored near his or her neighborhood. And we stand terrified at the specter of death and destruction that would surely accompany the use of nuclear weapons by some nation or terrorist group.

One can understand, then, how life in today's world might be thought of as "the best of times . . . the worst of times." A principal challenge that we face is to conquer these social problems or at least to alleviate their negative impacts on people's lives. In these pages, I take a sociological approach to understanding these social problems. **Sociology** is *the scientific study of societies and human social behavior*, and it provides one of the most useful approaches for understanding social problems and is a most effective tool for finding solutions to them. In fact, modern sociology might be considered an offspring of industrialization, because it emerged in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century shortly after the era of which Dickens had written. A major motivation of many early sociologists was to develop a "science of society" to deal with the dislocations, disruptions, poverty, and violence that accompanied industrialization. The same purpose underlies this text: to remove, as best we can, the poverty, crime, violence, and other problems that persist as the United States and the world move into an advanced industrial era. Along with these early sociologists, this text assumes that we *can* do something to improve social conditions and to attack social problems. Furthermore, our actions regarding social problems need to be grounded in *scientific research* on the problems and in *scientific assessments* of the effectiveness of solutions. Uninformed or casual meddling in social problems can create more difficulties than it solves.

This chapter will serve as a framework for the study of specific problems in later chapters. First, what makes a social condition a social problem and why sociology is an essential tool in understanding and solving problems will be discussed. Then consideration will be given to the three major theoretical perspectives in sociology and how they are important in the study of social problems. Finally, it will be shown how scientific research provides the most useful information about problems and their solutions.

What Is a Social Problem?

1.1 Define when a condition is and is not a social problem, identify the social context of social problems, and explain what sociological imagination is.

There are some issues that practically everyone today agrees are social problems, such as crime and racial discrimination. About other issues, however, there is less agreement. There is great debate, for example, over whether water pollution, pornography, and the use of marijuana are social problems. A commonsense approach might define a condition as a social problem if it "harms people" or is "detrimental to society." But this is far too imprecise for our purposes. To develop a more rigorous definition of what is a social problem, it is helpful to distinguish problems that affect individuals from those that involve an entire society.

Personal Troubles, Public Issues, and Social Problems

A distinction made by sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) between personal troubles and public issues may be the best place to begin. *Personal troubles* are things that affect individuals and those immediately around them. When parents discover that their daughter has a serious drug problem, theirs is a personal trouble because the values and goals of only that family are threatened. The trouble is seen as being primarily that family's difficulty. *Public issues,* on the other hand, have an impact on large numbers of people and are matters of public debate; collective solutions, rather than individual or familial ones, are considered. When statistics reveal that our nation loses millions of dollars every year because of accidents, suicide, and worker absenteeism due to drug abuse, we are dealing with a public issue because the values and goals of a large group are threatened. The issue is debated in public forums, and collective solutions are usually proposed. Thus, every condition that adversely affects some individuals is not necessarily an issue of great public concern toward which we should, or could, direct societal resources. Of course, public issues may translate into personal troubles in the lives of some people, but every personal trouble is not a public issue. Mills's distinction between personal troubles and public issues makes us aware that problems need to be viewed in the broad context of their impact on society.

How do we place these issues in a broader societal context? A good start is the following definition: A **social problem** exists when *an influential group defines a social condition as threatening its values; when the condition affects a large number of people; and when the condition can be remedied by collective action* (Loseke, 2003; Spector and Kitsuse, 2000). Let's look briefly at each element in this definition. An *influential group* is one that can have a significant impact on public debate and social policy. For example, groups opposing discrimination against women in employment and other areas have been able to mount a campaign that has forced politicians and the public nationwide to listen to their demands. Groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, on the other hand, have not been able to generate significant debate about experimentation with animals or cruelty to animals, and relatively few people consider these to be social problems. Personal troubles do not become public issues, then, unless an influential group so defines them. The mere existence of a social condition does not make it problematic, no matter how harmful it may be. For example, smoking tobacco has been a contributing factor in lung cancer for as long as humans have used the substance, but it was not defined as a social problem until biomedical research made people aware of the link between smoking and lung cancer.

Conditions are viewed as social problems when they threaten a *group's values.* **Values** are *people's ideas about what is good or bad, right or wrong.* We use these values as guidelines for choosing goals and judging behaviors. Because values are necessarily ranked in terms of priority in any group or society, there is disagreement over which conditions will be viewed as social problems. Some groups in the United States, for

example, place great value on work and industriousness. Because of this, they may view people who receive welfare with considerable disdain and even consider them threatening to their own way of life. Other groups, emphasizing religious or humanitarian values, might argue that poverty—not poor people—is the real threat and that the poor should be helped, not castigated.

Conditions do not typically become social problems unless they affect *a large number of people.* When they affect relatively few people, they are private issues and there is little public debate over them or search for collective solutions. The more people are affected by such issues, the more likely these issues will be publicly debated and defined as a problem that society should address. When the unemployment rate is low, for example, relatively few people are adversely affected. It may be a terrible personal hardship for those few who are unemployed, but it does not threaten large or influential groups, and there will likely be little societal pressure directed toward alleviating the problem.

Finally, a social condition may satisfy the previous criteria but not be regarded as a social problem because the condition does not have social causes and cannot be *remedied by collective human action.* Earthquakes, tornadoes, and other vagaries of nature, for example, are harmful and frightening natural disasters, but they would not be considered *social* problems because they are not produced by social conditions and cannot be prevented by collective action or changes in social policy.

The Social Context of Social Problems

Social problems differ from personal troubles because the former are public issues rather than personal ones. In addition, social problems are fundamentally social rather than personal in nature because their causes and their solutions have something to do with the workings of society. Social problems may have an impact on individuals, but their roots are found in social life. This section will illustrate the social basis of social problems here by briefly describing four distinct social conditions that can play a role in the emergence of social problems: deviation from group values and norms, a decline in the effectiveness of social institutions, extensive social and cultural diversity, and the exercise of power. The importance of these social conditions will be further elaborated in the next section on theoretical perspectives in sociology and throughout this book.

Societies are generally stable and orderly, although change and disruption do occur. This social stability arises in part because societies pass on to their members the values and norms that serve to guide people in their behavior. The term *values* has been defined. **Norms** are much more specific and concrete than values; they are *rules of conduct that guide people's behavior.* They are expectations that people in society share about how they ought to behave. Values are general preferences, whereas norms are specific guidelines for behavior. Norms dictate, for example, that men should wear pants, not dresses, and that motor vehicles are to be driven on the right side of the road rather than the left. Note how norms, like values, can vary from one culture to another and from one group to another. In some societies, men wear dresses and in others people drive on the left side of the road.

Values and norms, then, serve as a script for how to behave, and they enable us, to an extent, to predict how others will behave and to coordinate our behavior with theirs. Thus, values and norms lend stability and orderliness to society. A basic tenet of the sociological view of society is that people live in a socially created reality in which their behavior is shaped by social objects, such as values and norms, as much as by physical objects. However, people do not always behave in conformity with accepted values and norms. *Behaviors or characteristics that violate important group norms and as a consequence are reacted to with social disapproval* are called **deviance**. Laypeople often approach deviant or unconventional behaviors in an absolute way, judging them to be good or bad,

right or wrong, by comparing them with some fixed standards, such as some religious teachings. Sociologists view deviance as relative, or based on the social definitions of some group. For sociologists, it is not behaviors or characteristics in themselves that are deviant. Rather, it is the judgments of some group whose norms have been violated that make a behavior unconventional or deviant. This makes deviance relative in the sense that a behavior is deviant only when so defined by some group. So, deviance can be understood only within the context of the norms and values of a particular culture, subculture, or group. As one sociologist put it: "Deviance, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder" (Simmons, 1969:4).

Deviance does not refer only to the violation of group norms; some stigma, or mark of disgrace, must also be attached to the violation that sets the deviant person apart from others. When people violate the values and norms of the influential or powerful, the reaction against the deviant can be very strong. So, some social problems—prostitution, alcoholism, and drug abuse, to name but a few—arise in part because they are defined as deviant and stigmatized. Some people are unwilling or unable to conform their behavior to the dictates of influential groups.

Beyond values and norms, another important element of society is **social institutions**: *relatively stable clusters of social relationships that involve people working together to meet some basic needs of society*. The family, for example, is a social institution ensuring that children will be born and raised properly to be contributing members of society. These institutions—the family, religion, politics, education, and others—serve as further guides for people's behavior and also involve social relationships that offer people a sense of community involvement and self-worth. In fact, many behaviors and personal qualities—happiness, mental stability, morality, respect for the law, and others—arise out of such social relationships, out of a sense of community and personal involvement with others. A person who is fired from his or her job, for example, experiences a social loss that can result in psychological problems as well as physical ailments. Industrialization has threatened traditional sources of support and authority such as the family and religion. Unless the decline of these social institutions is replaced by other sources of support, there will likely be an increase in crime, substance abuse, and other problems. In other words, many social problems arise from the ineffectiveness of social institutions in guiding behavior and offering people a sense of community and self-worth.

As the clothing, hairstyles, and body piercings of these youth in the United States suggest, there is much social and cultural diversity in most societies. Subcultural diversity is an important element in the study of social problems because differing subcultures create the potential for conflicts over values and lifestyles.

Social and cultural diversity is another important element of societies. The United States, for example, is extremely diverse. The norms of the inner-city slum are light-years away from those of the middle-class suburb; the values of the young have little meaning for the elderly; and many beliefs of the affluent are foreign to the poor. One result of all this diversity is that many groups in the United States inhabit their own social worlds, called *subcultures*. A **subculture** is *a group within a culture that shares some of the beliefs, values, and norms of the larger culture but also has some that are distinctly its own.* Each of the following could be considered a subculture: teenagers, Cubans in Miami, gays in most large cities, skinheads, drug addicts, prison inmates, hip-hop youth of the 1990s, even the few hippies left over from the 1960s. In fact, everyone in the United States belongs to a wide array of subcultures based on age, sex, social standing, religion, leisure pastimes, or other characteristics.

Subcultural diversity is an important element in the study of social problems because it points to the potential for conflict between groups: The values of one group may clash with the values of another. One group, for example, may find the widespread availability of abortion offensive to its religious tenets, whereas another views restrictions on abortion as a threat to women's reproductive choices. Such conflicts are enhanced by **ethnocentrism**, *the tendency to view one's own culture or subculture as the best and to judge other cultures or subcultures in comparison to it.* Because of ethnocentrism, people may view the practices of another subculture as a social problem because they differ from their own practices. For example, are prostitution and the use of marijuana truly problems for society, or are they just offensive to the values of some particular subcultures?

A final element of society to be mentioned here is the exercise of power. **Power** is *the ability of one group to realize its will, even in the face of resistance from other groups* (Boulding, 1989; Weber, 1958, originally published 1919). Power can arise from many sources: the strength of numbers, efficient organization, access to wealth or status, or control of the political and economic institutions that dominate society. Whatever its source, power enables its possessor to compel others to act in a particular fashion. Ultimately, societies can use force or coercion to induce conformity to values and norms or to reduce conflicts or threats to a way of life. **Authority** refers to *legitimate power that is obeyed because people believe it is right and proper that they obey.* For example, most U.S. citizens believe that the Congress and the president, working together, have the legitimate authority to declare war on another country and to compel military service on the part of the citizenry. Many people may prefer not to fight in a war, but they would go because they believe the government has the authority to require that of them. Most social problems are related to the exercise of power and the use of authority, either as forces that intensify problems or as crucial elements in their solution. After all, a group needs some power in order to have a condition defined as a social problem to begin with. Then, which solutions are settled on often depends on which groups can most effectively utilize the power and authority available to them.

This brief description of four elements of society suggests the ways in which social problems are "social" in nature: They are both created and alleviated by social mechanisms. To understand and solve social problems, then, we need to know something about how society works.

The Sociological Imagination

Before going on to a more detailed analysis of the sociological perspective and social problems, it is valuable to step back and consider the implications of this perspective for your own life. The sociological perspective on human beings is a unique and remarkable one, recognizing as it does that human behavior consists of far more than individuals acting independently of one another. It emphasizes the powerful role that group membership and social forces play in shaping behavior. Sociologists focus on social interaction and social relationships rather than on individuals. The sociological perspective offers a special awareness of the world that enables people to approach their own lives with

introspection and insight. Peter Berger (1963) referred to the sociological perspective as an "emancipated vista" that can free people from blind submission to social forces that they do not understand. C. Wright Mills (1959) coined the term **sociological imagination** to refer to *the ability to understand the relationship between what is happening in people's personal lives and the social forces that surround them.* For both Berger and Mills, the more people learn about society and social problems, the better equipped they will be to understand their own lives and the impact—both desired and intrusive—of society and social problems on them. To be emancipated, of course, is not always pleasant, because we often learn that social problems hinder us from achieving sought-after goals. Poverty-stricken parents, for example, may not welcome the realization that their children will be penalized by the inequities of the school system in the United States, which has adverse effects on the poor. Nevertheless, it is precisely a better understanding of the role of such inequities that can open the door to making improvements in the educational process. So the sociological imagination offers not only emancipation but also *empowerment:* It assists people in taking control of their lives and circumstances through the struggle against social problems.

Theoretical Perspectives on Social Problems

1.2 Define the three theoretical perspectives on social problems, compare them with one another, and explain how social problems are socially constructed.

Every science, including sociology, accumulates knowledge through an interplay between theory and research. First, we need to provide a more detailed account of the theories commonly used in the sociological analysis of social problems. A **theory** is *a set of statements that explains the relationship between phenomena.* The key role of theories is to tell us why something occurred. They help us organize the data from research into a meaningful whole. In this section, we will discuss the most general and important theoretical approaches in sociology. Later we will return to the importance of research.

Some sociological theories focus on specific social problems, such as the causes of juvenile delinquency or the explanations for divorce. We will discuss quite a few of these theories in this book. In addition to these specialized theories, however, there are a number of broader explanations of social reality that are called **theoretical perspectives**. These perspectives are *general views of society that provide some fundamental assumptions about the nature and operation of society and that commonly serve as sources of the more specific theories* mentioned previously. Most sociologists today are guided by one or more of the following theoretical perspectives: functionalism, conflict theory, and interactionism. The functionalist and conflict approaches are frequently referred to as *macrosociology* because they focus on large groups and social institutions as well as on society as a whole. The interactionist perspective falls under the category of *microsociology* because it concentrates on the intimate level of everyday interactions between people. This section first summarizes the perspectives and then suggests how you should use them in analyzing social problems.

The Functionalist Perspective

The functionalist perspective grew out of the similarities early sociologists observed between society and biological organisms. The human body, for example, is composed of many different parts—the heart, the eyes, and the kidneys, to name but three—each of which performs a particular function. The heart pumps blood to the other organs of the body, the eyes transmit information about the external world to the brain, and the kidneys remove waste materials from the blood. These parts of the body do not exist in isolation, however; rather, they are interrelated and interdependent. If one of them ceases to perform its function—if the heart stops, or the eyes go blind, or the kidneys

fail—the effective operation of the whole body is threatened and survival itself may be in jeopardy.

Society, functionalists argue, operates in a way somewhat analogous to that of a biological organism. According to the **functionalist perspective**, *society is a system made up of a number of interrelated elements, each performing a function that contributes to the operation of the whole* (Parsons, 1951; Turner and Maryanski, 1979). The elements of society include, for example, institutions such as the family, education, and the economy. The family provides for the bearing and rearing of children until they can live on their own. Educational institutions provide training in the various skills needed to fill jobs in society. The economy is responsible for producing food, clothing, and other necessities needed by families to survive, as well as for providing the books and other supplies needed for education. The family and the schools could not survive without the goods provided by the economy, and economic organizations need workers who have been socialized by the family and trained by the schools to work industriously. In addition to institutions, society is also made up of many social roles, social groups, and subcultures, and all these parts fit together into a reasonably well-integrated whole. For functionalists, then, all parts of society are interdependent and function together to provide the things that are essential to maintain society. In addition, there needs to be considerable agreement among the members of society regarding the content of important values and norms.

In a system with all the parts so tightly interdependent, a change in one element of society will probably lead to changes in other parts. For example, the establishment of compulsory education in the United States caused significant alterations in the economic sphere by removing children and eventually adolescents from the labor force, which made more jobs available for adults. Compulsory education also affected the family; with young people no longer working, the financial burden on parents was increased. When children could no longer help support the family financially, a gradual shift to smaller families began. Thus, changes in the educational sphere had important ramifications for family and economic structures. Small changes can usually be absorbed with relative ease, but large or sudden changes can cause major social disruption and lead to problems. Because of this, functionalists argue, social systems are characterized by stability and a tendency toward equilibrium—a state of balance in which the relationships among the various parts of the system remain the same.

A central concern of the functionalist approach is the determination of just what functions each part of society performs. This is not always easy to do because some functions are not as obvious as those in our previous example. In fact, sociologist Robert K. Merton (1968) suggests that there are two different types of functions: manifest and latent. *Manifest functions* are the intended consequences of some action or social process and refer to what most people expect to result. *Latent functions* are consequences that are unexpected or unintended. For example, one of the manifest functions of colleges and universities is to provide people with specialized training. However, institutions of higher education perform a number of latent functions. For instance, they serve as a marriage market, and they reduce unemployment by keeping some adults out of the job market. These latent functions are just as much a part of the system of higher education as its manifest purposes. In addition, some social practices may be *dysfunctional*; that is, they may disrupt social equilibrium rather than contribute to it. For example, encouraging large families, as some religious teachings do, would be dysfunctional in a society that is already overpopulated.

According to the functionalist perspective, a social problem can arise when some element in society becomes dysfunctional and interferes with the efficient operation or stability of the system or the achievement of societal goals. In other words, social problems arise from social disorganization, in which the parts of society work at cross-purposes rather than together. One sign of this disorganization is the decline in the effectiveness of social institutions, discussed in the preceding section. Functionalists search for the sources of this societal breakdown. Consider how divorce might be viewed by functionalists: Marital dissolution involves the breaking up of what is perhaps society's

most basic institution, the family. Divorce could be seen as a social problem if those functions that are typically served by the family were to go unperformed, such as children not being raised properly to become contributing members of society (see Chapter 3).

The functionalist perspective is a very useful one, but it tends to overemphasize the extent of stability and order in society and to downplay the fact that social practices that are beneficial to one group in society may be dysfunctional to another. These cautions should be kept in mind when using this perspective.

The Conflict Perspective

Conflict theorists emphasize the inevitability of coercion, domination, conflict, and change in society. The **conflict perspective** is based on *the idea that society consists of different groups who struggle with one another to attain the scarce societal resources that are considered valuable, be they money, power, prestige, or the authority to impose one's values on society.* Karl Marx (1967, originally published 1867–1895) provided the foundation for the conflict perspective when he viewed society as consisting of different social classes. The two central classes of his era were the proletariat, or the workers, and the bourgeoisie, or those who owned the businesses, factories, and textile mills in which the proletariat toiled. Marx saw these classes as being in constant struggle with one another to improve their respective positions in society. The workers tried to gain more income and control over their work; the owners tried to make more profits by lowering labor costs and getting workers to work more. For Marx, this conflict was irreconcilable, because what benefits one group necessarily works to the disadvantage of the other. Furthermore, if those in one group can gain an advantage in this struggle, they will use it to dominate and oppress the other group and enhance their own position. They might, for example, gain control of the government and pass legislation that limits the ways the subordinate groups could otherwise compete. A century ago in the United States, for example, it was illegal for workers to organize for the purposes of collective bargaining. This benefited the factory owners because workers were unable to use their strength of numbers to gain higher wages or better working conditions.

Although Marx limited his focus to class conflict, modern versions of conflict theory in sociology hold that domination, coercion, and the exercise of power occur to some degree in all groups and societies because they are the basic social mechanisms for regulating behavior and allocating resources (Collins, 1990; Dahrendorf, 1959; Duke,

The conflict perspective makes us aware that people vary substantially in terms of the social and economic resources available to them. The social programs and policies that would benefit the fur-coated woman in this photo are, in all likelihood, quite different from those that would benefit the homeless person huddled under a blanket.