



Thirteenth Edition

SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Eitzen, D. Stanley.

Social problems / D. Stanley Eitzen, Colorado State University, Maxine Baca Zinn, Michigan State University, Kelly Eitzen Smith, University of Arizona. — Thirteenth Edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-205-88188-2

1. Social problems. 2. Social problems—United States. 3. Social structure—United States. 4. United States—Social conditions—1945–
I. Zinn, Maxine Baca. II. Smith, Kelly Eitzen. III. Title.

HN17.5.E372 2013

361.1—dc23

2013014676

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Student Hardcover Edition:
ISBN 10: 0-205-88188-2
ISBN 13: 978-0-205-88188-8

Books à la Carte Edition:
ISBN 10: 0-205-88239-0
ISBN 13: 978-0-205-88239-7

PEARSON

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PREFACE

Social Problems, Thirteenth Edition, examines inherently interesting subjects such as corporate crime, racism, sexism, urban decay, poverty, health care, the changing economy, the politics of drugs, antigovernment movements, and terrorism. The typical book on social problems describes these phenomena separately, using a variety of explanations. Students exposed to such a *mélange* of approaches might retain their interest in these problems, but they probably would complete the book with little grasp of how social problems are interrelated and society's role in their creation and perpetuation. This book is different. The approach is consistently sociological. There is a coherent framework from which to analyze and understand society's social problems.

The overarching goal in *Social Problems*, Thirteenth Edition, is to capture the imaginations of our readers. We want them not only to be interested in the topics but also to become enthusiastic about exploring the intricacies and mysteries of social life. We want them, moreover, to incorporate the sociological perspective (imagination) into their explanatory repertoire. The sociological perspective requires, at a minimum, acceptance of two fundamental assumptions. The first is that individuals are products of their social environment. Who they are, what they believe, what they strive for, and how they feel about themselves are all dependent on other people and on the society in which they live. The incorporation of the sociological perspective requires that we examine the structure of society to understand such social problems as racism, poverty, and crime. This method, however, runs counter to the typical explanations people offer for social ills. The choice is seen in an example supplied by Thomas Szasz:

Suppose that a person wishes to study slavery. How would he go about doing so? First, he might study slaves. He would then find that such persons are generally brutish, poor, and uneducated, and he might conclude that slavery is their "natural" or appropriate social status. . . . Another student "biased" by contempt for the institution of slavery might proceed differently. He would maintain that there can be no slave without a master holding him in bondage; and he would accordingly consider slavery a type of human relationship and, more generally, a social institution supported by custom, law, religion, and force. From this point of view, the study of masters is at least as relevant to the study of slavery as is the study of slaves. (Szasz 1970:123–124)

Most of us, intuitively, would make the first type of study and reach a conclusion. This book, however, emphasizes the second type of study: looking at "masters" as well as "slaves." An observer cannot gain an adequate understanding of racism, crime, poverty, or other social problems by studying only bigots, criminals, and the poor. Therefore, we focus on the social structure to determine the underlying features of the social world in an effort to understand social problems.

Because the emphasis is on social structure, the reader is required to accept another fundamental assumption of the sociological perspective (see Eitzen, Baca Zinn, and Smith 2013). We refer to the adoption of a critical stance toward all social forms. Sociologists must ask these questions: How does the social system really work? Who has the power? Who benefits under the existing social arrangements, and who does not? We should also ask questions such as, Is the law neutral? Why are some drugs illegal and others, known to be harmful, legal? Why are so few organizations in the United States—which is characterized as a democracy—democratic? Is U.S. society a meritocratic one in which talent and effort combine to stratify people fairly? Questions such as these call into question existing myths, stereotypes, and

official dogma. The critical examination of society demystifies and demythologizes. It sensitizes the individual to the inconsistencies present in society. But, most important, a critical stance toward social arrangements allows us to see their role in perpetuating social problems. In conclusion, the reader should be aware that we are not dispassionate observers of social problems.

Let us, then, briefly make our values more explicit. We oppose social arrangements that prevent people from developing to their full potential. That is, we reject political and social repression, educational elitism, institutional barriers to racial and sexual equality, economic exploitation, and official indifference to human suffering. Stating these feelings positively, we favor equality of opportunity, the right to dissent, social justice, an economic system that minimizes inequality, and a political system that maximizes citizen input in decisions and provides for an adequate healthcare system and acceptable living conditions for all people. Obviously, we believe that U.S. society as currently organized falls short of what we consider to be a good society. The problem areas of U.S. society are the subjects of this edition. So, too, are structural arrangements around the globe that harm people.

In 2001, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (a state oversight commission appointed by the governor) commissioned a conservative watchdog group to evaluate teacher education programs in the state universities of Colorado. The report criticized the University of Colorado's School of Education for pushing an agenda that "indoctrinates" students in issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. David Saxe, the principal investigator of the report, said, "More than any other reviewed institution, CU's teacher education programs are the most politically correct and stridently committed to the social justice model" (quoted in Curtin 2001:1B). Suffice it to say that our approach to social problems would also be castigated by Mr. Saxe, for we are absolutely committed to social justice; and this means, among other things, understanding how many social problems of U.S. society are rooted in the hierarchical arrangements based on class, race, gender, and sexuality.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

Since the last edition of *Social Problems* was published, certain events have shaken U.S. society, and important trends have become even more significant, making a major revision necessary. For example,

- The U.S. has ended its involvement in the Iraq war and is committed to do the same in Afghanistan. The U.S. budget for the military continues to rise. The terrorist threat remains with us, both from external and internal sources.
- World population continues to increase by about 76 million a year, almost all of the increase in poor countries. Put another way, 157 new people join the world's population every minute, 153 of them in developing countries.
- The U.S. population has moved past 300 million and will add another 120 million by 2050. At about 5 percent of the world's population, the United States has an enormous environmental footprint—emitting one-fourth of the world's greenhouse gases and using one-fourth of the world's resources.
- Non-Whites will be the numerical majority in the United States by 2042. Immigration increases racial/ethnic tensions in some parts of the nation.
- Politics in the United States has been more and more polarized, resulting in factions unwilling to compromise.
- The Supreme Court has ruled that money is a form of speech and therefore cannot be curtailed in politics. As a consequence, money from large organizations and wealthy individuals is swamping elections and making a mockery of democracy.

- Although some large cities in the United States are showing signs of vigor, many are troubled with growing dependent populations, shrinking job markets, increasing racial tensions, and declining economic resources to meet their problems.
- The economy continues its massive transformation from a manufacturing economy to one based on service/knowledge. This causes disruptions as some companies fail while others succeed. Globalization, with jobs and tasks moving outside the country, adds to the unemployment woes accompanying the economic transformation.
- The Great Recession hit in 2007 and caused havoc on Wall Street, Main Street, and in families. Unemployment rose precipitously. Wall Street tumbled. The value of housing dropped, causing bankruptcies and foreclosures. These economic difficulties continue.
- Government bailouts of the banks and recovery efforts such as an economic stimulus, plus the cost of conducting two wars, raised the national debt dramatically to \$15.8 trillion by July 2012. This huge debt provided a rationale to limit government by reducing or eliminating social welfare programs.
- Obamacare has been upheld by the Supreme Court. The public is divided on this healthcare reform.

This thirteenth edition of *Social Problems* considers each of these important trends and events as well as others. Some of the topics new to this edition are:

- Gender inequality and the workplace
- The new racial demography
- How the U.S. ranks among industrialized nations in investing in and protecting children
- The effects of the Great Recession on families
- Financing the 2012 political campaigns
- The politics of Obamacare
- A critique of trickle-down economics
- The continuing influence of the Tea Party movement
- The Latino Paradox
- The effects of gridlock in Congress
- The declining flow of immigrants from Mexico to the United States
- Efforts at voter suppression in many states
- Emptying out of much of the Great Plains and Appalachia while other rural areas are booming with natural resource extraction
- The trend toward returning to urban density
- China's one-child policy
- The drug war on the U.S.–Mexico border
- The persistent problem of not enough jobs
- The Upper Big Branch and other mining disasters
- The discriminatory practices of banks in lending to African Americans and Latinos
- The role of inequality in the health of the public
- Twenty-first century warfare
- Legacy of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars

Six types of panels are included:

- Voices panels provide the personal views of those affected by a social problem.
- A Closer Look elaborates on a topic in detail.

- Social Problems in Global Perspective panels illustrate how other societies deal with a particular social problem. This global emphasis is also evident in panels and tables that compare the United States with other nations on such topics as crime/incarceration, medical care, and education.
- Social Policy panels look at policy issues and highlight social policies that work to alleviate particular social problems.
- Looking Toward the Future panels examine the trends concerning the social problems under consideration at the beginning of a new millennium.
- Speaking to Students panels address issues especially pertinent to college students.

Also included are:

- New MySocLab icons in the margins of the text highlight resources in Pearson's unique online resource that enhance the content within the text.
- End-of-chapter pedagogy includes Chapter Reviews and Key Terms.

In summary, this new edition of *Social Problems* improves on the earlier editions by focusing more deliberately on five themes: (1) the structural sources of social problems; (2) the role of the United States in global social problems; (3) the centrality of class, race, gender, sexuality, and disability as sources of division, inequality, and injustice; (4) the critical examination of society; and (5) solutions to social problems.

NOTE ON LANGUAGE USAGE

In writing this book, we have been especially sensitive to our use of language. Language is used to reflect and maintain the secondary status of social groups by defining them, diminishing them, trivializing them, or excluding them. For example, traditional English uses masculine words (man, mankind, he) to refer to people in general. Even in the ordering of masculine and feminine or of Whites and Blacks within the discussion, one category consistently preceding its counterpart subtly conveys the message that the one listed first is superior to the other. In short, our goal is to use language so that it does not create the impression that one social class, race, or gender is superior to any other.

The terms of reference for racial and ethnic categories are changing. Blacks increasingly use the term African American, and Hispanics often refer to themselves as Latinos. In *Social Problems*, Thirteenth Edition, we use both of these terms for each social category because they often are used interchangeably in popular and scholarly discourse.

Also, we try to avoid the use of America or American society when referring to the United States. America should be used only in reference to the entire Western Hemisphere: North, Central, and South America (and then, in the plural, Americas). Its use as a reference to only the United States implies that the other nations of the Western Hemisphere have no place in our frame of reference.

SUPPLEMENTS

Instructor's Manual and Test Bank Each chapter in the Instructor's Manual includes the following resources: Chapter Summary, Learning Objectives, Critical Thinking Questions, Activities for Classroom Participation, and Suggested Films.

Designed to make your lectures more effective and to save preparation time, this extensive resource gathers together useful activities and strategies for teaching your Social Problems course. Also included in this manual is a test bank of over 1,500 multiple-choice, true/false, and essay questions. The Instructor's Manual and Test Bank is available to adopters for download from the Pearson Instructors Resource Center at www.pearsonhighered.com.

MyTest This computerized software allows instructors to create their own personalized exams, to edit any or all of the existing test questions, and to add new questions. Other special features of this program include random generation of test questions, creation of alternate versions of the same test, scrambling question sequence, and test preview before printing. For easy access, this software is available within the instructor section of the MySocLab for *Social Problems*, Thirteenth Edition, or for download from the Pearson Instructors Resource Center at www.pearsonhighered.com.

PowerPoint Presentations The PowerPoint presentations for *Social Problems*, Thirteenth Edition, are informed by instructional and design theory. You have the option in every chapter of choosing from any of the following types of slides: Lecture, Line Art, and Image PowerPoints. The Lecture PowerPoint slides follow the chapter outline and feature images from the textbook integrated with the text. The Special Topics PowerPoint slides allow you to integrate rich supplementary material into your course with minimal preparation time. Additionally, all of the PowerPoints are uniquely designed to present concepts in a clear and succinct way. They are available to adopters for download from the Pearson Instructors Resource Center at www.pearsonhighered.com.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the following reviewers of the previous editions of *Social Problems* for their helpful comments:

Payton Andrews, Cape Fear Community College
Ernestine Avila, California State University, San Bernardino
Leonard Beeghley, University of Florida
Moshe ben Asher, California State University, Northridge
Deva Chopyak, Cosmunes River College
Jesse Goldstein, Baruch College
Jeanne Humble, Bluegrass Community & Technical College
Gary Hytrek, California State University, Long Beach
Dana Mayhew, Bristol Community College
Adrienne Trier-Bieniek, Western Michigan University

Special thanks to our friend and longtime user of *Social Problems*, Laurel Davis-Delano, Springfield College, for her careful and helpful critiques of previous editions. Maxine Baca Zinn thanks Paula Miller in the Department of Sociology, Michigan State University, for research assistance.

Finally, we especially want to thank our families for their ongoing support and inspiration.

*D. Stanley Eitzen
Maxine Baca Zinn
Kelly Eitzen Smith*

MySocLab is a state-of-the-art interactive and instructive solution for the Social Problems course, designed to be used as a supplement to a traditional lecture course or to completely administer an online course. MySocLab provides access to a wealth of resources all geared to meet the individual teaching and learning needs of every instructor and every student. Highlights of MySocLab include:

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- **Sociology in Focus** (www.sociologyinfocus.com) is a blog by sociologists for students that highlights a sociological perspective on current events, pop culture, and everyday life. Updated weekly, Sociology in Focus is a terrific way to bring current examples into the classroom.

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and useful to instructors for making assignments and for engaging students by giving them the opportunity to explore important sociological concepts, and enhance their performance in this course.

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The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.

—Franklin Delano Roosevelt,
Second Inaugural Address, 1937

The Sociological Approach to Social Problems

 Listen to Chapter 1 on MySocLab



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Understand how sociologists approach the study of social problems.
- 1.2 Explain the complex nature of defining a social problem.
- 1.3 Describe the two main types of social problems.
- 1.4 Explain and apply the sociological imagination to different social problems.
- 1.5 Compare/contrast the person-blame approach to social problems and the system-blame approach.
- 1.6 Understand the four basic research designs and research methods that sociologists use to study social problems.

The official population of the United States surpassed the 300 million mark at 7:46 a.m. EDT on October 17, 2006. In 2043, when the typical reader of this text is about 50 years old, it is estimated that the United States will have added another 100 million people, reaching 400 million. What will life in the United States be like when you reach middle age with that added 100 million? Will the problems of today be eliminated or reduced, or will they have worsened? Consider these issues:

Immigration and the browning of America. Immigration from Latin America and Asia is fueling the population growth. About half of the last 100 million Americans are immigrants and their U.S.-born children. Half of the next 100 million will be immigrants or their children. By 2042, the race/ethnicity mix will be such that non-Whites will surpass Whites as the numerical majority. The increasing numbers of non-Whites will likely fuel racial/ethnic unrest among them as they experience discrimination and low-paying, demeaning jobs and among the native-born, who fear that the low wages of recent immigrants either take away their jobs or keep their wages low. With the additional millions of immigrants added in the coming decades, previously White rural areas and small towns will begin to deal with the challenges of new ethnic and racial residents.

The graying of America. After 2030, one of five U.S. residents will be at least 65 (similar to the proportion in Florida today). The increase in the number of elderly will cause problems with funding Social Security and Medicare, placing a greater burden on the young to support the elderly through these programs. This divide between workers who support the old with payroll taxes will have a racial, as well as a generational, dimension because the workers will be increasingly people of color and the elderly overwhelmingly White (Harden, 2006).

The inequality gap. Today the wealth and income of the affluent grows rapidly while the income of workers languishes. The inequality gap now is at record levels, resulting in a diminished middle class. As the middle class is squeezed, the trend is for more downward mobility than upward mobility. As the inequality gap enlarges, will it result in greater social unrest, extreme political movements, more crime?

The increasing power of money to influence elections and public policy. A 2010 Supreme Court decision allows corporations and other organizations to spend unlimited amounts to elect or defeat political candidates. Individuals can also spend millions to further their candidates and causes. Add to this the influence of organizations through their lobbyists to influence policies. The consequence of this inverse relationship between money and power is obvious. Where, we might ask, is the voice of the poor heard? What happened to our democratic ideals?

Globalization and the transformation of the economy. The U.S. economy has undergone a dramatic shift from one dominated by manufacturing to one now characterized by service occupations and the collection, storage, and dissemination of information. As a result of this transformation, relatively well-paid employment in manufacturing products such as automobiles has dwindled and been replaced with jobs in lower-paying service industries. Most of the manufacturing is now done in foreign countries where U.S. corporations produce the same products but with cheaper labor, lower taxes, and fewer governmental controls. Some services, such as research, accounting, and call centers, have also been transferred to overseas companies to increase profits. Currently, these trends have negatively affected U.S. workers by making their jobs more insecure and reducing or eliminating their benefits.

In the coming decades, as 100 million people are added and new technologies enhancing globalization are developed, will the working conditions and standard of living of U.S. workers decline or be enhanced?

The plight of the poor. Nearly one in six Americans is poor: 46.2 million Americans were “officially” poor in 2010. The number of Americans without health insurance was 49.0 million. The numbers of those receiving food stamps were the highest on record. Emergency food requests and people seeking emergency shelter are increasing. The government considers those with incomes at or below 50 percent of the poverty level to be “severely poor.” In 2010, 20.466 million Americans were in this category. Two factors lead to the speculation that the needs of the poor will not be met satisfactorily in the future. First, the trend is for the federal government to reduce “safety net” programs that help the poor, such as welfare to single mothers, nutrition programs, Head Start, and the like. Moreover, the national minimum wage was only \$7.25 an hour in 2012, far below a living wage.

The environmental impact. Currently, the United States, at about 4.5 percent of the world’s population, consumes one-fourth of the world’s energy, most particularly oil, and is the world’s greatest producer of greenhouse gases that result in global warming. More people leads to more traffic congestion, more suburban sprawl, and more landfills. Population growth means greater demand for food, water, fossil fuels, timber, and other resources. At present, land is being converted for development (housing, schools, shopping centers, roads) at about twice the rate of population growth. Adding another 100 million people with today’s habits (large houses, gas-guzzling transportation, suburban sprawl, and the consumption of products designed to be obsolete) will lead to an ecological wasteland. But perhaps recognition of the negative environmental impacts of current usage patterns will lead to our reducing waste, finding alternative energy sources, making greater use of mass transit, increasing housing density, and finding other ways to sustain and even enhance the environment.



The numbers seeking refuge in homeless shelters has increased dramatically in recent years.

A Closer Look

THE HEALTH OF WOMEN AND THEIR CHILDREN

International Comparisons

A few days before Mother's Day 2010, a global relief and development organization, Save the Children, published its "State of the World's Mothers," ranking forty-three developed nations and 117 countries in the developing world on ten measures related to the health of women and their children, their education, and their political status. Norway ranked number one as the best place to be a mother, and the United States ranked twenty-eighth. This was behind nearly all of the nations in Western and Central Europe and Scandinavia. The six indicators of mothers' well-being

are lifetime risk of maternal mortality, percentage of women using modern contraception, percentage of births attended by skilled personnel, percentage of pregnant women with anemia, adult female literacy rate, and participation of women in national government. Among the factors affecting the placement of the United States were the following:

- The U.S. rate of lifetime maternal mortality was 1 in 4,800, compared to 1 in 47,600 for Ireland.
- The United States ranked eighth in under 5 mortality rate per 1,000 live births.

- The United States also lags in the political status of women. Only 17 percent of seats in the U.S. national government were held by women, compared to 39 percent of the national legislature in Norway.
- The United States has a female life expectancy of 81 years. Eighteen nations have a higher life expectancy for women, led by Japan with 86 years.
- The United States is the least generous of the forty-three More Developed Countries in terms of maternity leave benefits.

Source: State of the World's Mothers. 2010. Save the Children, London, UK (May).

At the global level, the earth is warming because of human activities, most prominently the use of oil and other carbons. Global warming will have disastrous effects during this century—coastal flooding, shifting agricultural patterns, violent weather, spread of tropical diseases, and loss of biodiversity, to name a few. The United States is the primary user of petrochemicals, and China will surpass it around 2025.

The growing global inequality. While the United States' population will increase by 100 million before midcentury, the world will grow by 50 percent, adding 3 billion (for a total of 9 billion) people. Almost all this growth will occur among the poorest nations. Today, an estimated 1.1 billion people are undernourished. Most do not have clean water and adequate sanitation. Half of the world's people live on less than \$2 a day, one-sixth on less than \$1 a day. Hundreds of millions are ravaged by diseases such as malaria, chronic diarrhea, Ebola, dengue, and parasites. At the other extreme, the richest nations live lavish lifestyles, consuming and wasting most of the world's resources. Multinational corporations profit from exploiting the resources and labor of the poorest countries. This gap between the fortunate few and the impoverished, desperate masses continues to widen.

The underdeveloped world, already in dire straits, will face enormous obstacles in providing the minimum of food, water, housing, and medical attention for their peoples as they add billions in population. The result will be ever-greater numbers of desperate people on this planet, making the world less safe. Unless the affluent nations and international organizations make structural changes to aid the underdeveloped countries, conflicts over scarce resources will increase, as will sectarian and tribal violence and acts of terrorism.

TABLE 1.1

**How America Ranks
Among Industrialized
Countries in
Investing in and
Protecting Children**

1st in gross domestic product
1st in number of billionaires
1st in number of persons incarcerated
1st in health expenditures
1st in student expenditures
1st in military technology
1st in defense expenditures
1st in military weapons exports
17th in reading scores
22nd in low birthweight rates
23rd in science scores
30th in infant mortality rates
31st in math scores
31st in the gap between the rich and the poor
Last in relative child poverty
Last in adolescent birth rates (ages 15 to 19)
Last in protecting our children against gun violence

Source: Children's Defense Fund. 2011. *State of America's Children*. Washington, DC, Children's Defense Fund, p. xiv.

An increasingly dangerous world. September 11, 2001, unleashed a chain of negative events. Those terrorist acts on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon caused death and destruction and redirected government policies. The United States responded with a war on Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and a preemptive war on Iraq, presumably to squelch terrorism and spread democracy throughout the Middle East. To fight the war on terror, the United States suspended the civil rights of prisoners, including their protection from the use of techniques that many would define as torture, and spied on American citizens. Suicide bombers (the “guided missiles” of the militarily weak) have destabilized the Middle East and threaten terror worldwide. There is the growing threat of nuclear proliferation, with North Korea joining the nuclear club in 2006 and Iran threatening to join the club soon. As the world’s population soars, with its consequent poverty, hunger, water shortages, disease, and political chaos, the United States will be increasingly unsafe. Will we face these incredible problems and find solutions? That is the ultimate question.

These issues highlight the social problems addressed in this book. Although the focus is on the dark side of social life, our hope is that readers will find this exploration intriguing, insightful, and useful (for a summary of social problems as experienced by children in the United States, see Table 1.1).

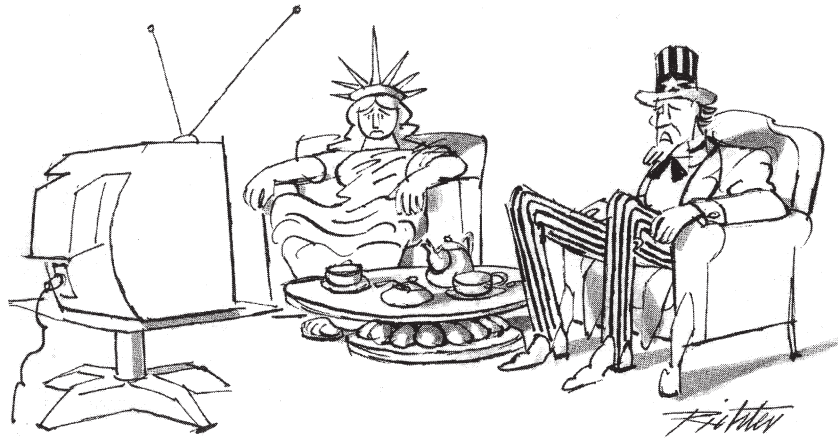
1.1 Understand how sociologists approach the study of social problems.



**Explore on
MySocLab Activity:**
Why Do Sociologists
Study Social Problems?

HISTORY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS THEORY

Typically, social problems have been thought of as social situations that a large number of observers felt were inappropriate and needed remedying. Early U.S. sociologists applied a medical model to the analysis of society to assess whether some pathology was present. Using what were presumed to be universal criteria of normality, sociologists commonly assumed that social problems resulted from “bad” people—maladjusted people who were abnormal because of mental deficiency, mental disorder, lack of education, or incomplete socialization. These social pathologists, because they assumed that the basic norms of society are universally held, viewed social problems as behaviors or social arrangements that disturb the moral order. For them, the moral order of U.S. society



“Where did we go wrong?”

Mischa Richter/The New Yorker Collection/Cartoonbank.com

defined such behaviors as alcoholism, suicide, theft, and murder as social problems. But this approach did not take into account the complexity inherent in a diverse society.

In a variation of the absolutist approach, sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s focused on the conditions of society that fostered problems. Societies undergoing rapid change from the processes of migration, urbanization, and industrialization were thought to have pockets of social disorganization. Certain areas of the cities undergoing the most rapid change, for example, were found to have disproportionately high rates of vice, crime, family breakdowns, and mental disorders.

In the past few decades, many sociologists have returned to a study of problem individuals—deviants who violate the expectations of society. The modern study of deviance developed in two directions. The first sought the sources of deviation within the social structure. Sociologists saw deviance as the result of conflict between the culturally prescribed goals of society (such as material success) and the obstacles to obtaining them that some groups of people face. The other, of relatively recent origin, has focused on the role of society in creating and sustaining deviance through labeling those people viewed as abnormal. Societal reactions are viewed as the key in determining what a social problem is and who is deviant.

Most recently, some sociologists have tried to alert others to the problematic nature of social problems themselves (see Spector and Kitsuse 1987). These theorists emphasize the **subjective nature of social problems**. They say that what is defined as a social problem differs by audience and by time. Pollution, for example, has not always been considered a social problem. This perspective also examines how particular phenomena come to be defined as social problems, focusing on how groups of people actively influence those definitions.

This brief description reveals several issues that must be addressed in looking at social problems. First, sociologists have difficulty agreeing on an adequate definition of social problems. Second, there is continuing debate over the unit of analysis: Is the focus of inquiry individuals or social systems? Related to the latter is the issue of numbers: How many people have to be affected before something is a social problem? In this regard, C. Wright Mills (1962) made an important distinction: If a situation such as unemployment is a problem for an individual or for scattered individuals, it is a “private trouble.” But if unemployment is widespread, affecting large numbers of people in a region or the society, it is a “public issue” or a “social problem.”

1.2 Explain the complex nature of defining a social problem.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

There is an **objective reality of social problems**: There are conditions in society (such as poverty and institutional racism) that induce material or psychic suffering for certain segments of the population; there are sociocultural phenomena that prevent a significant number of societal participants from developing and using their full potential; there are discrepancies between what a country such as the United States is supposed to stand for (equality of opportunity, justice, democracy) and the actual conditions in which many of its people live; and people are fouling their own nest through pollution and the indiscriminate use of natural resources (Eitzen 1984). This normative approach assumes that some kinds of actions are likely to be judged deleterious in any context. Therefore, one goal of this book is to identify, describe, and explain situations that are objective social problems.

There are several dangers, however, in defining social problems objectively. The most obvious is that subjectivity is always present. To identify a phenomenon as a problem implies that it falls short of some standard. But what standards are to be used? Will the standards of society suffice? In a pluralistic society such as the United States, there is no uniform set of guidelines. People from different social strata and other social locations (such as region, occupation, race, and age) differ in their perceptions of what a social problem is and, once defined, how it should be solved. Is marijuana use a social problem? Is pornography? Is the relatively high rate of military spending a social problem? Is abortion a social problem? There is little consensus in U.S. society on these and other issues. All social observers, then, must be aware of differing viewpoints and respect the perspectives of the social actors involved.

In looking for objective social problems, we must also guard against the tendency to accept the definitions of social problems provided by those in power. Because the powerful—the agencies of government, business, and the media—provide the statistical data (such as crime rates), they may define social reality in a way that manipulates public opinion, thereby controlling behaviors that threaten the status quo (and their power). The congruence of official biases and public opinion can be seen in several historical examples. Slavery, for instance, was not considered a social problem by the powerful in the South, but slave revolts were. In colonial New England, the persecution of witches was not a social problem, but the witches were (Szasz 1970). Likewise, racism was not a social problem of the Jim Crow South, but “pushy” Blacks were. From the standpoint of U.S. public opinion, dispossessing Native Americans of their lands was not a social problem, but the Native Americans who resisted were.

Thus, to consider as social problems only those occurrences so defined by the public is fraught with several related dangers. First, to do so may mean overlooking conditions that are detrimental to a relatively powerless segment of the society. In other words, deplorable conditions heaped on minority groups tend to be ignored as social problems by the people at large. If sociologists accept this definition of social problems as their sole criterion, they have clearly taken a position that supports existing inequities for minority groups.

Second, defining social problems exclusively through public opinion diverts attention from what may constitute the most important social problem: the existing social order (Liazos 1972). If defined only through public opinion, social problems are limited to behaviors and actions that disrupt the existing social order. From this perspective, social problems are manifestations of the behaviors of abnormal people, not of society; the inadequacies and inequalities perpetuated by the existing system are not questioned. The distribution of power, the system of justice, how children are

educated—to name but a few aspects of the existing social order—are assumed to be proper by most of the public, when they may be social problems themselves.

By overlooking institutions as a source of social problems (and as problems themselves), observers disregard the role of the powerful in society. To focus exclusively on those who deviate—the prostitute, the delinquent, the drug addict, the criminal—excludes the unethical, illegal, and destructive actions of powerful individuals, groups, and institutions in U.S. society and ignores the covert institutional violence brought about by racist and sexist policies, unjust tax laws, inequitable systems of healthcare and justice, and exploitation by the corporate world (Liazos 1972).

1.3 Describe the two main types of social problems.

TYPES OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

This book examines two main types of social problems: (1) acts and conditions that violate the norms and values present in society and (2) societally induced conditions that cause psychic and material suffering for any segment of the population.

Norm Violations

Sociologists are interested in the discrepancy between social standards and reality for several reasons. First, this traditional approach directs attention to society's failures: the criminals, the mentally ill, the school dropouts, and the poor. Sociologists have many insights that explain the processes by which individuals experience differing pressures to engage in certain forms of **deviant behavior** (actions that violate the norms of a social organization) because of their location in the social structure (social class, occupation, age, race, and role) and in space (region, size of community, and type of neighborhood). A guiding assumption of our inquiry here, however, is that norm violators are symptoms of social problems, not the disease itself. In other words, most deviants are victims and should not be blamed entirely by society for their deviance; rather, the system they live in should be blamed. A description of the situations affecting deviants (such as the barriers to success faced by minority group members) helps explain why some categories of persons participate disproportionately in deviant behavior.

Another reason for the traditional focus on norm violation is that deviance is culturally defined and socially labeled. The sociologist is vitally interested in the social and cultural processes that label some acts and persons as deviant and others as normal. Because by definition some social problems are whatever the public determines, social problems are inherently relative. Certain behaviors are labeled as social problems, whereas other activities (which by some other criteria would be a social problem) are not. People on welfare, for example, are generally considered to constitute a social problem, but slumlords are not; people who hear God talking to them are considered schizophrenic, but people who talk to God are believed perfectly sane; murder is a social problem, but killing the enemy during wartime is rewarded with medals; a prostitute is punished, but the client is not; aliens entering the country illegally constitute a social problem and are punished, but their U.S. employers are not. The important insight here is that “deviance is not a property inherent in certain forms of behavior; it is a property conferred upon these forms by the audiences which directly or indirectly witness them” (Schur 1971:12). The members of society, especially the most powerful members, determine what is a social problem and what is not.

Powerful people play an important role in determining who gets the negative label and who does not. Because there is no absolute standard that informs citizens of what is deviant and what is not, our definition of deviance depends on which behaviors the



Watch on MySocLab Video:
Deviance and Inequality:
Social-Conflict Analysis