

DIANA KENDALL EDWARD G. THOMPSON VICKI L. NYGAARD FOURTH CANADIAN EDITION

SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY



SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

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FOURTH CANADIAN EDITION

PEARSON

Toronto

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 [VOSA]

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Kendall, Diana Elizabeth, author

Social problems in a diverse society / Diana Kendall, Edward G.

Thompson, Vicki L. Nygaard.—Fourth Canadian edition.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-205-88575-6 (paperback)

1. Social problems—Textbooks. 2. Social problems—Canada—Textbooks. I. Thompson, Edward G., 1945-, author II. Nygaard, Vicki Leanne, 1964-, author III. Title.

HN17.5.K45 2015

361.1

C2015-905658-6

PEARSON

ISBN 978-0-205-88575-6

Dedication

To my dear partner, Helen.

Edward G. Thompson

To the memory of Dr. Paul Morgan Baker (1949–2009), close friend and mentor, who taught me to be a sociologist.

Vicki L. Nygaard

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Preface

Learning about social problems can be a highly rewarding experience. Although we live in challenging times, a course on social problems provides an excellent avenue for developing critical thinking skills and for learning how to use sociological concepts and perspectives to analyze specific social concerns ranging from war and terrorism, media concentration, drug addiction, and violence to the inequalities of racism, sexism, classism, ageism, homophobia, and ableism.

Our first and foremost goal in writing this book is to make the study of social problems interesting and relevant for students. To stimulate interest in reading the chapters and participation in class discussions, we have used lived experiences (personal narratives of real people) and statements from a wide variety of analysts to show how social problems impinge on people at the individual, group, and societal levels. Moreover, we have applied the sociological imagination and relevant sociological concepts and perspectives to all the topics in a systematic manner.

The fourth Canadian edition of *Social Problems in a Diverse Society* focuses on the significance of racialization and ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, class, ability, and gender in understanding social problems in Canada and around the globe. Throughout the text, people—especially those from marginalized groups—are shown not merely as “victims” of social problems, but also as individual actors with agency who resist discrimination and inequality and seek to bring about change in families, schools, workplaces, and the larger society. To facilitate the inclusion of previously excluded perspectives, Chapters 2 through 6 examine wealth and poverty, racialized/ethnic inequality, gender inequality, and inequalities based on age and sexual orientation. Thereafter, in Chapters 10 through 16, concepts and perspectives are intertwined in the discussion of specific social institutions, such as education, health care, and the environment.

This fourth Canadian edition is balanced in its approach to examining social problems. However, it

includes a more comprehensive view of feminist and postmodern perspectives and global perspectives on a vast array of subjects than other social problems texts. As sociologists who integrate social theory into our lectures, we were disheartened by the minimal use of sociological theory in most social problems texts. Those that discuss theory typically do so in early chapters but then fail to use these theories as a systematic framework for examining specific social issues in subsequent chapters. Similarly, many texts give the impression that social problems can be solved if people reach a consensus on what should be done. But *Social Problems in a Diverse Society*, fourth Canadian edition, emphasizes that how people view a social problem is related to how they believe the problem should be reduced or solved. Consider poverty, for example: people who focus on individual causes of poverty typically believe that individual solutions (such as teaching people a work ethic and reforming welfare) are necessary to reduce the problem, whereas those who focus on structural causes of poverty (such as chronic unemployment and inadequate educational opportunities) typically believe that solutions must come from and through the larger society. Moreover, what some people see as a problem, others see as a solution for a problem (e.g., the sex trade as a source of income, or abortion to terminate a pregnancy). The epilogue allows students to explore further the question, “How can social problems be solved?”

Finally, we wrote *Social Problems in a Diverse Society* to provide students and instructors with a text that covers all the major social concerns we must deal with today, but does not leave students believing that the text—and perhaps the course—was a “depressing litany of social problems that nobody can do anything about anyway,” as many students have stated about different texts. We have written this text in hopes of resolving those students’ concerns, because we believe the sociological perspective has much to add to our individual, local, national, and global dialogues on a host of issues, such as environmental degradation; Canadian involvement in overseas military missions; discrimination based on racialization and ethnicity, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, or

other attributes; and problems in media and education. Welcome to an innovative examination of social problems—one of the most stimulating and engrossing fields of study in sociology! We welcome your engagement in the effort to make the world a better place.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS TEXT

Social Problems in a Diverse Society, fourth Canadian edition, has been organized with the specific plan of introducing disparities in wealth and poverty, racialization and ethnicity, gender, age, and sexual orientation early on so that the concepts and perspectives developed in these chapters may be applied throughout the text. All chapters offer theoretical analyses from structural functionalism, conflict or Marxist perspectives, symbolic interactionism, and feminist theories. In addition, other theories are introduced where most relevant.

Chapter 1 explains the sociological perspective, several of the central methods of analysis, and provides an analysis of attempts at problem solving at the micro, mid-range, and macro levels of society.

Chapter 2 looks at wealth and poverty in Canada and around the world. Students will gain new insights into disparities between the wealthy and the poor and into problems such as workfare, homelessness, food insecurity, and poverty. The chapter concludes with a thematic question, “Can class-based inequality be reduced?” This question will be asked throughout the text as new topics are discussed.

Chapter 3 integrates the previous discussion of class-based inequalities with an examination of racialized and ethnic inequality. The chapter looks at issues of democratic racism and White privilege in Canada, and at the ways that racism manifests throughout Canadian institutions and practices.

Chapter 4 highlights factors such as mainstream gender socialization and social barriers that contribute to the unequal treatment of women in the workplace, in the family, at school, and at other social institutions. Transgender issues and global gender issues are also introduced for discussion.

Chapter 5 explores ageism and inequality based on age, and problems like employment, retirement, health and health care, housing, and death and dying are discussed.

Chapter 6 highlights inequality based on sexual orientation, placing these important topics in a context similar

to the studies of prejudice and discrimination rooted in racism and sexism in contemporary societies. In addition, feminist intersectionality theories and queer theories are highlighted as ways of analyzing issues and inequalities around sexual orientation.

Chapter 7 links previous discussions of racialization and ethnicity, class, and gender to an analysis of the sex trade. The discussion of pornography has also been reintroduced to this chapter. The chapter provides up-to-date information on the globalization of sex work and gives students insight into the rationales of both sex workers themselves and their clients. New information on global sex tourism is presented, with a specific focus on differences and similarities between female and male sex tourists. Finally, controversies and legal challenges regarding the legalities of sex work in Canada are presented as important issues to consider in the 21st century.

In Chapter 8, social problems caused by addictions—alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and gambling—are discussed in depth, and students are provided with information about the drug commonly called the “date rape” drug; the abuse of prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, and caffeine; as well as the characteristics of problem gambling.

Chapter 9 discusses crime and criminal justice and takes an incisive look at sociological explanations of crime.

Chapter 10 highlights health and health care and its problems, disability, mental illness, and our health care system.

Chapter 11 explores the changing family, emphasizing diversity in intimate relationships and families, and child-related family issues. It also explores the dark side of family life.

Chapter 12 presents contemporary problems in education, tracing the problems to such issues as what schools are supposed to accomplish, how they are financed, and why higher education may become less widely accessible with increasing tuition fees.

Chapter 13 explores current issues in the global economy and politics, such as Canada’s economic report card, the recent global recession, politics in Canada, as well as globally comparing voter participation and confidence in parliament.

Chapter 14 discusses ongoing concerns regarding the Canadian and global media, such as media concentration, new media technology, and consequences of exposure to violent, racist, and sexist media.

Chapter 15 provides a survey of problems associated with population and the environmental crisis, focusing particularly on the causes and consequences of high rates of global migration and certain types of pollution. It also includes a look at urban problems, detailing the powerful impact of urbanization on both high-income and low-income nations of the world.

Chapter 16 presents an overview of Canada's roles in the ongoing U.S. "war on terror," examining the consequences of war and terrorism for people and the environment. The politics of war, as well as global and domestic terrorism, are highlighted.

The epilogue asks, "How can social problems be solved?" and includes a review of the four main sociological theories used to explain social problems, plus some thought-provoking questions about everyone's role in creating solutions to social problems.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

A number of special features have been designed to incorporate racialization and ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and gender into our analysis of social problems and to provide students with new insights on the social problems that they learn about in the news. The following sections discuss the text's distinctive features.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

The most substantial new feature of *Social Problems in a Diverse Society*, fourth Canadian edition, is the inclusion of multiple international comparisons, both with our peer high-income countries and with the global community as a whole. In previous editions, Social Problems in Global Perspective boxes showed some comparisons between Canada and other countries. This edition shows international comparisons both in these boxes and throughout the chapters to illustrate how Canada is doing relative to other countries, as measured by international organizations like the United Nations (UN), the World Economic Forum (WEF), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); Canadian institutions like the Conference Board of Canada and Statistics Canada; and peace, democratic, and environmental groups at home and abroad. When you see how Canada is doing relative to other countries, it may inspire ideas for how you and your peers can get involved in advocacy and problem solving. Examples of such comparisons include the following:

- Canada's relative performance in income, crime, acceptance of diverse groups, voter turnout, etc. (Chapter 1)
- Canada's disadvantaged groups (e.g., disabled, elderly, and children) and rates of poverty (Chapter 2)
- Canada's position in the Gender Inequality Index (Chapter 4)
- Canadians' level of alcohol consumption relative to those in other countries (Chapter 8)
- Organized crime in Canada and on the international level (Chapter 9)
- The Global Health Burden (Chapter 10)
- The well-being of Canada's children (Chapter 11)
- Canada's report card on education and skills (Chapter 12)
- Canada's economic report card, and Canada's quality of democracy ranking (Chapter 13)
- Canada's ranking in the Global Peace Index (Chapter 16)

The text also explores many international comparisons with our high-income peer countries, including the following:

- Canadians' acceptance of diversity (Chapter 3)
- Canada's gap in wages between men and women (Chapter 4)
- Poverty among Canada's elderly (Chapter 5)
- Canada's health report card (Chapter 10)
- Canada's voting participation and confidence in parliament (Chapter 13)
- Canada's environmental report card (Chapter 15)

In addition to this major improvement, we have created two new types of boxes for several chapters. First, Critical Thinking and You boxes invite you to think carefully about what constitutes a social problem in Chapter 1, how to choose a university in Chapter 12, and whether we should have a two-tiered Internet (Net neutrality) in Chapter 14. Second, Social Problems and Social Statistics boxes invite you consider how to measure what we call social problems, such as how to measure poverty, in Chapter 2.

BUILT-IN STUDY FEATURES

These pedagogical aids promote students' mastery of sociological concepts and perspectives:

- Chapter outlines: A concise outline at the beginning of each chapter gives students an overview of major topics.

- **What Can You Do?** sections: This section gives students suggestions about how they can tackle social problems on their own, as individuals, or collectively in a group.
- **Key terms:** Major concepts and key terms are defined and highlighted in bold print within the text. Definitions are also available in the glossary at the back of the text.
- **Summaries in question-and-answer format:** Each chapter concludes with a concise summary in a convenient question-and-answer format to help students master the key concepts and main ideas in each chapter.
- **Questions for Critical Thinking:** End-of-chapter questions provide opportunities for students to develop important critical-thinking skills about the issues raised in each chapter.

SUPPLEMENTS

Instructors can download the following supplements specific to this text from a password-protected location of Pearson Education Canada's online catalogue. Contact your local sales representative for further information.

- **Instructor's Manual**—a comprehensive resource that provides you with tools for classroom discussion, assignments, and recommendations for related films and readings.
- **PowerPoint Presentations**—highlight the key concepts in each chapter of the text.
- **Test Item File**—contains multiple choice, true/false, and essay type questions. Each question is classified to difficulty level and includes the appropriate page reference.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to personally thank the many people who have made this new edition a reality. First, we offer our profound thanks to the following reviewers who provided valuable comments and suggestions on how to make this text outstanding. Whenever possible, we have incorporated their suggestions into the text.

Helene A. Cummins	<i>University of Western Ontario, Brescia University College</i>
Augie Fleras	<i>University of Waterloo</i>
J. David Flint	<i>Saint Mary's University</i>
Kierstin C. Hatt	<i>University of Alberta, Augustana Campus</i>
Charles Quist-Adade	<i>Kwantlen Polytechnic University</i>
Erin Steuter	<i>Mount Allison University</i>

The fourth Canadian edition of *Social Problems in a Diverse Society* has benefited from the expertise and excellence of Madhu Ranadive, program manager and Rachel Stuckey, developmental editor. We sincerely appreciate all the support and encouragement they provided throughout this revision.

I could not have written this book without the assistance of my partner, Helen Barron, who has not only provided continuing support, but also edited each of my original chapters. I also wish to acknowledge the help of Lama Hamdanieh, a former student, who ably reviewed and commented on several chapters.

—Edward G. Thompson

With overwhelming gratitude, love and appreciation I wish to acknowledge Freja Nygaard and Phoenix Nygaard, for continuing to inspire me and bring me joy every single day; Marilyn Hardy, for her unwavering love, Stephen Kayer for “the beautiful love”; Anni Torikka and Tabitha Steager, for their ongoing encouragement and support; Logan MacNair and Jes Hovanes, for excellent research assistance; and last, but certainly not least, my co-author Ed Thompson, for stepping in when

things went a little sideways during the revision process of this edition. “*Let us be grateful to the people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.*” (Marcel Proust)

—Vicki L. Nygaard

To each of you reading this preface, we wish you the best in teaching or studying social problems and hope that you will share with us any comments or suggestions you have about *Social Problems in a Diverse Society*,

fourth Canadian edition. The text was written with you in mind, and your suggestions (with appropriate attribution) will be included whenever possible in future editions. Let’s hope that our enthusiasm for “taking a new look at social problems” will spread to others so that together we may resolve some of the pressing social problems we encounter during our lifetime.

—Diana Kendall

—Edward G. Thompson

—Vicki L. Nygaard

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Ryan Remiorz/CP Images

CHAPTER

1

Studying Social Problems in the Twenty-First Century

WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

Box 1.1 Critical Thinking and You: Determining What Constitutes a Social Problem and How Well Canada Deals with Social Problems

Box 1.2 Social Problems in Global Perspective: Worldwide Homicide

WHY STUDY SOCIAL PROBLEMS?

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

USING SOCIAL THEORY TO ANALYZE SOCIAL PROBLEMS

The Functionalist Perspective
The Conflict Perspective

The Interactionist Perspective
Feminist Perspectives

USING SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS TO STUDY SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Field Research
Survey Research
Secondary Analysis of Existing Data

SOCIAL CHANGE AND REDUCING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Microlevel Attempts to Solve Social Problems
Mid-Range Attempts to Solve Social Problems
Macrolevel Attempts to Solve Social Problems

SUMMARY

Whether it takes place in a small-town school or on a busy city street, homicide—the intentional killing of one human being by another—leaves shock and anguish behind. It is also considered a standard setter for overall violent crime. Around the world, homicide is a major social problem. On a daily basis, the Internet and television news channels quickly spread word of the latest bombing, the latest massacre, and the latest homicide. In Canada, a place not known for the level of violence reported daily in the United States, murders of authority figures by youth or lone-terrorists, or youth by other youth, have made sensational headlines. Among the recent murders of note were the killing of five young people by another young person in Calgary in May 2014, the killing of three RCMP officers in June 2014, and the killing of military personnel by lone terrorists in October 2014.

Many of us condemn drive-by shootings and cold-blooded homicides, yet we enjoy watching action movies with lots of “blood and guts” or potentially violent sports such as wrestling, hockey, football, and boxing. Despite these contradictory attitudes, homicide certainly counts as a social problem.

WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

Although not all sociologists agree about what constitutes a social problem, most would agree with this general definition: a **social problem is a social condition (such as poverty) or a pattern of behaviour (such as violence against women) that people believe warrants public concern and collective action to bring about change.** Social conditions or certain patterns of behaviour are defined as social problems when they systematically disadvantage or harm a significant number of people (or a number of “significant” people?), or when they are seen as harmful by many of the people who wield power, wealth, and influence in a group or society. To put it another way, social problems are social in their causes, consequences, and possible sources of resolution.

The study of social problems is one area of inquiry within **sociology—the academic and scholarly discipline that engages in systematic study of human society and social interactions.** A sociological examination of social problems focuses primarily on issues that affect an entire **society—a large number of individuals who share the same geographical territory and are subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations**—and the groups and organizations that make up that society. Because social problems are social in their causes, public perception of what constitutes a social problem can remain the same or change. What are the major social problems facing Canadians? Over the last 35 years, Canadians have reported to pollsters that their greatest concerns have been unemployment and the economy (Ibbitson 2013). But when does something become serious enough to be considered a social problem?

As the Conference Board indicates (see Box 1.1), homicide is a major social problem affecting Canada’s social performance, even though it is not directly related to the economy. The following box provides information on worldwide rates of homicide. Later we will use sociological perspectives to help better understand the causes of homicide.

Sociologists apply theoretical perspectives and use a variety of research methods to examine social problems. Some social problems—such as homicide—are commonly viewed as conditions that affect all members of a population (see Box 1.2). Other social problems—such as racialized discrimination and sexual harassment—may be viewed (correctly or incorrectly) as conditions that affect some members of a population more than others. However, all social problems may be harmful to all members in a society whether they realize it or not. Sociological research, for example, has documented the extent to which White racism wastes the energies and resources of people who engage in racist actions as well as those of the targets of the actions (see Feagin and Sikes 1994; Feagin and Vera 1995).

Social problems often involve significant discrepancies between the ideals of a society and their actual achievement. For example, in Canada, the rights of individuals are guaranteed by the *Charter*

Critical Thinking and You

Box 1.1

Determining What Constitutes a Social Problem and How Well Canada Deals with Social Problems

Which of the following is defined as a major social problem in Canada?

- Driving a motor vehicle, which resulted in over 2000 deaths in 2011 in Canada (Transport Canada 2013)
- Playing contact sports in school, which results in many injuries among young people
- Hunting for wild game, which results in numerous injuries and deaths among hunters and bystanders

If you answered “None of the above,” you are correct. Although driving a motor vehicle, playing contact sports, and hunting may have hazardous potential consequences, few people view these actions in and of themselves as being a social problem. In other words, not all behaviour that may result in violence or even death is classified as a social problem.

What questions should we ask to determine if something is a social problem? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Is there a public outcry about this conduct or this condition? Are people actively discussing the issue and demanding that a resolution be found?
2. Does the conduct or condition reflect a gap between social ideals and social reality? What social ideals are involved? What is the social reality about the situation?
3. Are a large number of people involved in defining the problem and demanding that a solution be found? Does the matter have national attention? If not, is a special-interest group the primary source of demands that something be done about the condition?

4. Can a solution be found for the problem? If not, can we reduce the problem or alleviate the suffering of some victims of the problem?

How does Canada rank relative to other similar countries regarding dealing with social problems?

The Conference Board of Canada has devised a report card on how Canada compares with other high-income countries regarding the participation of citizens, the minimizing of inequalities, and the cohesion of society. They chose 16 variables ranging from “acceptance of diversity” to “homicide” to “voter turnout,” and found that overall, Canada ranked 7 of 17 high-income countries for a grade of “B.” The Scandinavian countries ranked highest, usually with “As,” and Japan and the United States ranked at the bottom with “Ds.” Since most of these problems will be discussed in the following chapters, they will not be identified here (for the full list, see <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/details/society.aspx>).

Questions for Consideration

1. Based on these questions and excluding the problems identified by the Conference Board, what pressing social issues are we overlooking in our nation that should be considered as social problems requiring immediate action?
2. What issues receive too much attention from the media and the public?
3. How do culture, religion, and politics influence our definition of what constitutes a social problem?

of *Rights and Freedoms*, which also provides the legal basis for remedying injustices. One such discrepancy is **discrimination—actions or practices of dominant-group members (or their representatives) that have a harmful impact on members of subordinate groups**. Sociologists define the *dominant group* as the group whose members are disproportionately at the top of the hierarchy, “with maximal access to the society’s power resources, particularly political authority and control of the means of economic production” (Marger 1999:273). *Subordinate groups* are those whose members, in relation to the dominant group (or groups), do not occupy such positions of power. The term

usually used for a subordinate group is *minority group* (see Chapter 3).

Discrimination may be directed along a number of lines—class, race, gender, and age. It also may be directed against subordinate group members whose sexual orientation, religion, nationality, disability, or other attributes or characteristics are devalued by those who discriminate against them. Sometimes, discrimination is acted out in the form of violence. This type of violent act is referred to as a **hate crime—an act of violence motivated by prejudice against people on the basis of racialized identity, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation**. This can include the dissemination of materials intended to

Social Problems in Global Perspective

Box 1.2

Worldwide Homicide

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) released a report, *Global Study on Homicide*, in 2013. The report seeks to shed light on the worst of crimes: the unlawful, intentional killing of one person by another. The global average homicide rate stands at 6.2 per 100 000 population. As might be expected, some regions have much higher rates, such as Central America and South Africa, which have rates four or five times the worldwide average. In contrast, some regions, such as Europe and eastern Asia, have rates a quarter or less than the worldwide average. High homicide rates occur in countries that have just over a tenth of the world's population (UNODC 2013:12).

There are also great differences in rates in terms of gender. Men are much more likely to be killed than are women (79 vs. 21 percent), and men are much more likely than women to be killers (95 vs. 5 percent) (UNODC 2013:13). However, in family and intimate relations, the reverse is the case: about two-thirds of victims of this kind of violence are women and one-third are men. In other words, women are more likely to be killed by someone they know, and men are more likely to be killed by a stranger (UNODC 2013:13). Homicide victims are also more likely to be young, with more than half the victims 29 years of age or younger (UNODC 2013:13).

UNODC identified three types of homicides: those related to criminal activities, those related to interpersonal conflict, and those related to socio-political agendas (UNODC 2013:13). In the Americas, about 30 percent of the killings are related to criminal activities, especially drugs. In some places, such as Sweden, Costa Rica, and India, interpersonal conflict accounts for about half of the killings (UNODC 2013:14). It is very difficult to identify homicides related to socio-political agendas, but most terrorist killings would fit into that category (see Chapter 16).

Several factors are related to a lower homicide rate. One factor is a well-organized criminal justice system that is able to do rigorous investigation and fair adjudication. This contributes both to justice for victims (and families) and ensures that potential perpetrators know they could be caught. Such organization can be measured in terms of cases solved and convictions. A great difference exists among countries in conviction rates, ranging from 81 percent in Europe to 48 percent in Asia and 24 percent in the Americas (UNODC 2013:18). These conviction rates are inversely correlated with the homicide rates: people are more likely to commit a crime when there is little chance of them being punished.

Interestingly, development factors were not studied in the 2013 edition of the UNODC report. They were

mentioned in the 2011 edition, where researchers found that higher levels of homicide are associated with lower scores on the Human Development Index (HDI). First, using the HDI (an index combining life expectancy, educational level of the population, and per capita income), countries high on the index had homicide rates of less than 5 per 100 000 population, those in the middle had homicide rates of 10, and those lower on the index had rates of 20 per 100 000 population. In addition, using the Gini Index (a measure of inequality in a country where 0 is perfect equality and 1 is perfect inequality), countries high on the Index had a homicide rate of over 20 per 100 000 population, those in the middle of the Index had a rate of 15 to 20, and those low on the Index had a rate of below 15 (UNODC 2011:4).

Another factor that the earlier study included was the likelihood of gang-related or organized crime-related homicides. The researchers found that in the Americas, there was a much higher rate of homicides (25+) compared to other areas like Asia (7) and Europe (less than 5). In addition, South and Central America and the Caribbean had a much higher percentage of deaths by firearms than other regions did (UNODC 2011:5).

Later in this chapter we will show how these perspectives help us to understand this data in a more comprehensive and complete manner.

Questions for Consideration

1. Explain why homicide rates are related to inequality. What consequences do you think this has for growing inequality in Western countries?
2. Homicide in Western countries is generally declining (see Canada's data in Chapter 9). Why do you think that might be the case?

Independent research

This text stresses the large number of social problems that are related to inequalities. Begin itemizing the number of problems caused by inequalities, starting with homicide.

Sources: *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2011, Global Study on Homicide 2011 – Key Findings. United Nations Publication. Retrieved June 6, 2014 (<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/statistics/crime/global-study-on-homicide-2011.html>); UNODC, 2013, Global Study on Homicide 2013. United Nations Publication. Retrieved June 6, 2014 (http://www.unodc.org/documents/gsh/pdfs/2014_GLOBAL_HOMICIDE_BOOK_web.pdf).*



What does this photo show us about the discrepancies that exist between the democratic ideals and the social realities of our society? Does discrimination against subordinate group members take place in other societies as well?

Cesar Lucas Abreu/The Image Bank/Getty Images

incite hatred. Although hate crimes were added to the *Criminal Code* only quite recently, the crimes themselves date back hundreds of years (see Chapters 3, 6, and 9 for further discussion of hate crimes).

WHY STUDY SOCIAL PROBLEMS?

Studying social problems helps us understand the social forces that shape our lives on both personal and societal levels. In our daily lives, we rely on common sense—“what everybody knows”—to guide our conduct and make sense of human behaviour. But many common-sense notions about why people behave the way they do, who makes the rules, and why some people break rules and others follow them are *myths*—beliefs that persist even when the actual truth is different. Myths about social problems frequently garner widespread acceptance and sometimes extensive media coverage.

A sociological examination of social problems enables us to move beyond common-sense notions, to gain new insights into ourselves, and to develop an awareness of the connection between our own world and the worlds of other people. According to sociologist Peter Berger (1963:23), a sociological examination allows us to realize that “things are not what they seem.” Indeed, most social problems are multifaceted. When we recognize this, we can approach pressing local, national, and global concerns in new ways and make more effective decisions about those concerns. In taking a global perspective on social problems, we soon realize that the

lives of all people are closely intertwined, and that any one nation’s problems are part of a larger global web of interrelated problems.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Just like other people, sociologists usually have strong opinions about what is “good” and “bad” in society and what might be done to improve conditions. However, sociologists know their opinions are subjective. Thus, they use systematic research techniques and report their findings to other social scientists for consideration. In other words, sociologists strive to view social problems *objectively*. Of course, complete objectivity may not be an attainable—or desirable—goal in studying human behaviour. Max Weber (1864–1920), an early German sociologist, acknowledged that complete objectivity might be impossible and pointed out that *verstehen* (“understanding,” or “insight”) was critical to any analysis of social problems. According to Weber, *verstehen* enables individuals to see the world as others see it and to empathize with them. *Verstehen*, in turn, enables us to develop what is called the sociological imagination.

According to sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959b), the **sociological imagination is the ability to see the relationship between an individual’s experiences and the larger society in which they are contextualized.** The sociological imagination enables us to connect the private troubles of individuals to the public

issues of a society. Public issues (or social problems) are matters beyond a person's control that originate at the regional or national level and can be resolved only by collective action. In *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills used unemployment as an example of how people may erroneously separate personal troubles from public issues in their thinking. The unemployed individual may view his or her unemployment as a personal trouble concerning only the individual, other family members, and friends. However, widespread unemployment resulting from economic changes, corporate decisions (downsizing or relocating a plant abroad), or technological innovations (computers and advanced telecommunications systems displacing workers) is a public issue. The sociological imagination helps us to shift our focus to the larger social context and see how personal troubles may be related to public issues.

Sociologists make connections between personal and public issues in society through microlevel and macrolevel analysis. **Microlevel analysis focuses on small-group relations and social interaction among individuals.** Using microlevel analysis, a sociologist might investigate how fear of unemployment affects workers and their immediate families. In contrast, **macrolevel analysis focuses on social processes occurring at the societal level, especially in large-scale organizations and major social institutions such as politics, government, and the economy.** Using macrolevel analysis, a sociologist might examine how globalization and the attendant labour market restructuring have impacted Canadian workers and their families.

As Mills suggested, a systematic study of a social problem such as unemployment gives us a clearer picture of the relationship between macrolevel structures such as the Canadian economy and microlevel social interactions among people in their homes, workplaces, and communities. It does not get the individual his or her job back, but it provides a better understanding of how the situation happened. With a clearer understanding of how we find ourselves in the situations we do, we may be able to develop more effective levels of prevention and intervention.

USING SOCIAL THEORY TO ANALYZE SOCIAL PROBLEMS

To determine how social life is organized, sociologists develop theories and conduct research. A **theory is a set of logically related statements that attempt to describe, explain, and occasionally predict social events.** Theories are useful for explaining relationships between social concepts or phenomena, such as “ethnicity and unemployment” or “gender and poverty.” They

also help us interpret social reality in a distinct way by providing a framework for organizing our observations. Sociologists refer to this theoretical framework as a **perspective—an overall approach or viewpoint toward some subject.** Four major theoretical perspectives have emerged in sociology: the functionalist perspective, which views society as a basically stable and orderly entity; the conflict perspective, which views society as an arena of competition and conflict; the interactionist perspective, which focuses on the everyday, routine interactions among individuals; and the feminist perspective, which focuses on the gendered (and racialized and classed) inequalities between groups and on strategies for positive social change. The functionalist and conflict perspectives are based on macrolevel analysis because they focus on social processes occurring at the societal level. The interactionist perspective is based on microlevel analysis because it focuses on small-group relations and social interaction. The feminist perspective involves both macro- and microlevel analysis by looking at the ways, for example, that the dominant gender ideology (macro) impacts the specific interactions (micro) between woman X and man Y within a capitalist and patriarchal White-dominant culture.

The Functionalist Perspective

The functionalist perspective grew from the works of early social thinkers such as Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who is thought to be the founder of sociology. Comte compared society to a living organism. Just as muscles, tissues, and organs of the human body perform specific functions that maintain the body as a whole, the various parts of society contribute to its maintenance and preservation. According to the **functionalist perspective, society is a stable, orderly system composed of several interrelated parts, each of which performs a function that contributes to the overall stability of society (Parsons 1951).** These interrelated parts are social institutions (such as families, the economy, education, and the government) that a society develops to organize its main concerns and activities so that it meets social needs. Each institution performs a unique function, contributing to the overall stability of society and the well-being of individuals (Merton 1968). For example, the functions of the economy are producing and distributing goods (such as food, clothing, and shelter) and services (such as tourism services and dry-cleaning), whereas the government is responsible for coordinating the activities of other institutions directed to such ends as health care, education, maintaining law and order, dealing with unmet social needs, and handling international relations and peace.

Manifest and Latent Functions

Though the functions of the economy and the government seem fairly clear-cut, functionalists suggest that not all the functions of social institutions are intended and overtly recognized. In fact, according to the functionalist perspective, social institutions perform two different types of societal functions: manifest and latent. *Manifest functions* are intended and recognized consequences of an activity or social process. A manifest function of education, for example, is to provide students with knowledge, skills, and cultural values. In contrast, *latent functions* are the unintended consequences of an activity or social process that are hidden and remain unacknowledged by participants (Merton 1968). The latent functions of education include the babysitter function of keeping young people off the street and out of the full-time job market while their parents work, and the matchmaking function whereby schools provide opportunities for students to meet and socialize with potential marriage partners. These functions are latent because schools were not created for babysitting or matchmaking, and most organizational participants do not acknowledge that these activities take place.

Dysfunctions and Social Disorganization

From the functionalist perspective, social problems arise when social institutions do not fulfill their functions or when dysfunctions occur. *Dysfunctions* are the undesirable consequences of an activity or social process that inhibits a society's ability to adapt or adjust (Merton 1968). For example, a function of education is to prepare students for jobs, but if schools fail to do so, then students have problems finding jobs, employers or governments have to spend millions of dollars on employee training programs, and consumers have to pay higher prices for goods and services to offset worker-training costs. In other words, dysfunctions in education threaten other social institutions, especially families and the economy.

Dysfunctions can occur in society as a whole or in a part of society (a social institution). According to functionalists, dysfunctions in social institutions create social disorganization in the entire society. ***Social disorganization refers to the conditions in society that undermine the ability of traditional social institutions to govern human behaviour.*** Early in the 20th century, sociologists Robert E. Park (1864–1944) and Ernest W. Burgess (1886–1966) developed a social disorganization theory to explain why some urban areas had higher rates of *social deviance*, which they defined as a pattern of rule violation, than other areas had. Social disorganization causes a breakdown in the traditional values and norms that serve as social control mechanisms, which,

under normal circumstances, keep people from engaging in nonconforming behaviour. ***Values are collective ideas about what is right or wrong, good or bad, and desirable or undesirable in a specific society*** (Williams 1970). Although values provide ideas about behaviour, they do not state explicitly how we should behave. Norms, on the other hand, have specific behavioural expectations. ***Norms are established rules of behaviour or standards of conduct.*** French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) suggested that social problems arise when people no longer agree on societal values and norms. According to Durkheim, periods of rapid social change produce *anomie*—a loss of shared values and sense of purpose in society. During these periods, social bonds grow weaker, social control is diminished, and people are more likely to engage in nonconforming patterns of behaviour, such as crime.

While examining the relationship between social problems and rapid industrialization and urbanization in Britain, Western Europe, and the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, early sociologists noted that rapid social change intensifies social disorganization. ***Industrialization is the process by which societies are transformed from a dependence on agriculture and handmade products to an emphasis on manufacturing and related industries.*** At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, thousands of people migrated from rural communities to large urban centres to find employment in factories and offices. New social problems emerged as a result of industrialization and ***urbanization, the process by which an increasing proportion of a population lives in cities rather than in rural areas.*** During this period of rapid technological and social change, urban social problems such as poverty, crime, child labour, inadequate housing, unsanitary conditions, overcrowding, and environmental pollution increased sharply.

Applying the Functionalist Perspective to the Problem of Homicide

Some functionalists believe that homicide arises from a condition of anomie, in which many individuals have a feeling of helplessness, normlessness, or alienation. These feelings can lead to seeking attachments in organized deviant behaviour, especially among the young. The 2013 United Nations (UN) study discussed earlier (see Box 1.2) found that many victims of homicide were involved in drug gangs and organized crime in the Americas, and that most of these victims were under 30 years of age. Others believe that homicide increases when social institutions such as the family, schools, and religious organizations weaken, and the main mechanisms

of social control in people's everyday lives are external (i.e., law enforcement agencies and the criminal justice system) and weak or non-existent. The 2013 UN study found that homicide occurs more frequently when the rates of conviction for homicides are low.

Other functionalist explanations of violence focus on how changes in social institutions put some people at greater risk than others of being victims of violent crime. According to the *lifestyle–routine activity approach*, **the patterns and timing of people's daily movements and activities as they go about obtaining such necessities of life as food, shelter, companionship, and entertainment are the keys to understanding violent personal crimes and other types of crime in our society** (Cohen and Felson 1979). Several changes over the past 50 years may have put people at increased risk for violent crime victimization. The 2011 UN study found that the increase of gangs and organized crime in the Americas involved in the drug trade was related to high rates of homicide. The lifestyle–routine activity approach suggests that people who willingly put themselves in situations that expose them to the potential for homicide should modify their behaviour, or that society should provide greater protection for people whose lifestyle routine leaves them vulnerable to attackers. The lifestyle–routine activity approach offers some insight, but does not address the issue of homicide in the home and other supposedly safe havens. Further, it does not explain the homicide itself; it simply points out that people are at risk, which tells us nothing that would assist in eliminating violence.

How would functionalists approach the problem of homicide? Most emphasize shared moral values and social bonds. They believe that when rapid social change or other “disruptions” occur, moral values may erode, and problems such as school violence or hate crimes are likely to occur more frequently. Functionalists believe that to reduce homicide, families, schools, religious organizations, and other social institutions should be strengthened so that they can regenerate shared values and morality. Most functionalists also believe that those who engage in homicidal behaviour should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

The Conflict Perspective

The *conflict perspective* is based on the assumption that groups in society are engaged in a continuous power struggle for control of scarce resources. Unlike functionalist theorists, who emphasize the degree to which society is held together by a consensus on values, conflict theorists emphasize the degree to which society is characterized by conflict and discrimination. According

to some conflict theorists, certain groups of people are privileged while others are disadvantaged through the inequitable use of political, economic, or social power. Not all conflict theorists hold the same views about what constitutes the most important form of conflict. We will examine two principal perspectives: the value conflict perspective and the critical–conflict perspective.

The Value Conflict Perspective

According to value conflict theorists, social problems are conditions that are incompatible with group values. From this perspective, value clashes are ordinary occurrences in families, communities, and the larger society, in which individuals commonly hold many divergent values. Although individuals may share certain core beliefs, they do not share all values or a common culture. *Culture* refers to the knowledge, language, values, customs, and material objects that are passed from person to person and from one generation to the next in a human group or society.

Discrepancies between ideal and real culture are a source of social problems in all societies. *Ideal culture* refers to the values and beliefs that people claim they hold; *real culture* refers to the values and beliefs they actually follow. In Canada, members of such diverse groups as the Heritage Front, the Aryan Nations, and the Urban Alliance on Race Relations all claim to adhere to ideal cultural values of equality, freedom, and liberty; however, these ideal cultural values come into direct conflict with real cultural values when issues of racialized/ethnic relations arise.

The value conflict perspective has been criticized by critical–conflict theorists, who argue that it overlooks the deeper social problems of inequality and oppression based on class, racialization, and gender.

Critical–Conflict Perspective

Unlike the value conflict approach, critical–conflict theorists suggest that social problems arise out of the major contradictions inherent in the way societies are organized. Some critical–conflict perspectives focus on class inequalities in the capitalist economic system; others focus on inequalities based on “race”/ethnicity or gender.

Most class perspectives on inequality have been strongly influenced by Karl Marx (1818–1883), a German economist and activist who recognized that the emergence of capitalism produced dramatic and irreversible changes in social life. **Capitalism is an economic system characterized by private ownership of the means of production, from which personal profits can be derived through market competition and without government intervention.** According to Marx, members of the *capitalist class* (the *bourgeoisie*), who own and control the means of production (e.g., the

land, tools, factories, and money for investment), are at the top of a system of social stratification that affords them different lifestyles and life chances from those of the members of the *working class* (the *proletariat*), who must sell their labour power (their potential ability to work) to capitalists. In selling their labour power, members of the working class forfeit control over their work, and the capitalists derive profits from the workers' labour.

Marx believed that capitalism leads workers to experience increased levels of impoverishment and *alienation*—a feeling of powerlessness and estrangement from other people and from oneself (Marx and Engels 1847/1971:96). He predicted that the working class would eventually overthrow the capitalist economic system. Although Marx's prediction has not come about, Erik Olin Wright (1997) and other social scientists have modified and adapted his perspective to apply to contemporary capitalist nations. In today's capitalist nations, according to Wright (1997), ownership of the means of production is only one way in which people gain the ability to exploit others. Two other ways in which individuals gain control are through control of property and control over other people's labour. In this view, upper-level managers and others in positions of authority gain control over societal resources and other individuals' time, knowledge, and skills in such a manner that members of the upper classes are able to maintain their dominance.

Some critical-conflict perspectives focus on racialized and gender subordination instead of class-based inequalities. Critical-conflict theorists who emphasize discrimination and inequality based on "race" or ethnicity note that many social problems are rooted in the continuing exploitation and subordination of people of colour and Indigenous people by White people, or, more accurately, by institutions and systems set up by and for White people. For example, the Canadian Human Rights Commission report, entitled "Equality Rights of Aboriginal People," found Indigenous peoples continue to experience conditions of persistent disadvantage, including a greater likelihood of suffering violent crimes and physical, emotional, or sexual abuse (Canadian Human Rights Commission 2013). Throughout this text, where we discuss conflict theory, we will use critical-conflict theory (rather than the value conflict approach) to highlight the power relations that result in social problems.

Applying the Conflict Perspective to the Problem of Homicide

Conflict theorists who focus on class-based inequalities believe that the potential for homicide is inherent in capitalist societies. In fact, say these theorists, the wealthy

engage in one form of violence, and the poor engage in another. They note that the wealthy often use third parties to protect themselves and their families from bodily harm, as well as to secure their property and investments in this country and elsewhere in the world. For example, the wealthy who live in Canada or other high-income nations and who own factories (or own stock in factories) in middle- and low-income nations use the governments and police of those nations—third parties—to control workers who threaten to strike. The wealthy also influence Canadian government policy by supporting or not supporting political parties that deploy peacekeeping or military intervention in nations where they may have investments or desire to have investments.

In contrast, these theorists say, when the poor engage in violence, the violence is typically committed by the individual and may be a reaction to the unjust social and economic conditions he or she experiences daily on the bottom rung of a capitalist society. In fact, the 2011 UN study found that higher rates of homicide occur in countries with greater inequality and in countries low on the Human Development Index. The economic exploitation of the poor, conflict theorists note, dramatically affects all aspects of the individual's life, including how the person reacts to daily injustices, stress, and other threatening situations. In gang-related homicide, the vast majority of offenders—as well as victims—are poor, young, and unemployed, or working in low-level, low-paying jobs. In fact, most violent street crime is an intra-class phenomenon. Arrest and conviction data suggest that poor and working-class people typically victimize others who are like themselves. In part, this is due to the fact that violence committed by middle- and upper-class individuals is not investigated and/or prosecuted to the same degree as that committed by poor and working-class people. Moreover, middle- and upper-class individuals often enlist the services of people from lower classes when they wish to commit homicide. Another factor that could be included in the conflict perspective is age stratification (older people are usually more powerful than younger people). The 2013 UN study found that over half the victims of homicide were under 30 years of age.

The conflict perspective argues that the criminal justice system is biased in favour of the middle and upper classes. Because of this, its definition of violence depends on where a person's ethnicity, class, and gender locate him or her in the system of stratification. In this way, violent crimes are but one part of a larger system of inequality and oppression. Sexism and racism are also reinforced by the overarching class structure that benefits the powerful at the expense of the powerless. The conflict perspective that focuses on racialized/ethnic