THE
SOCIOLOGY
OF SOCIAL
PROBLEMS

Ninth Edition

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The Sociology
of Social Problems

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Preface

A textbook should do at least three things: First, it should present both a body of data and interpretations of those data that will meet the reasonably critical demands of professional colleagues; second, it should fit those data into a framework of theory the students can use in interpreting data after the course is completed; third, it should present data, interpretation, and theory in a manner that stimulates and challenges the students who use it.

Built upon the assumption that modern sociology provides the tools to permit significant, systematic, and consistent interpretation of social problems data, this book employs three separate, but related, frames of reference that have proved more than ordinarily useful. Social change and resulting social disorganization, the emergence of value conflicts, and the influences of personal deviation are brought to bear upon each problem. This is no "omnium-gatherum" of facts and varying interpretations of those facts, nor is it a narrowly particularistic interpretation.

Part 1 includes a chapter on the nature and definition of social problems, a chapter that outlines the three sociological approaches used in our frame of reference, and a chapter on logical and statistical problems involved in the interpretation of data. Part 2 includes fifteen chapters devoted to the analysis of major social problems. Each chapter presents a body of the most relevant data bearing on the problems and interprets these data in terms of each of the three approaches. Such practical application explains and illustrates the concepts of social disorganization, value conflicts, and personal deviation. The chapter sequence presents first those problems traditionally recognized as social problems—crime, race relations, marriage and family problems—then moves into some problems of more recent concern, such as civil liberties, mass communication, and problems of the environment and social policy. Part 3 consists of a final chapter that integrates and concludes the discussion.

Most students who use this book will be lower-division students with fairly limited training in sociology. The book is written with these students in mind. It strives to be readable, yet sociologically sound. It avoids unnecessary "sociologese" but seeks to explain basic sociological concepts thoroughly. It assumes that a textbook need be neither a "student's book" nor an "instructor's book," but may adequately meet the needs of both.

In preparing the ninth edition, we have been impressed by the many recent contributions in our rapidly changing field. The basic approach remains unchanged. We believe that instructors who liked the earlier editions will be pleased with this one. We hope that those who were less enamored may find some improvements in this edition. In the effort to please, however, we have not diluted controversy to the level of

platitude. We have sought to make this textbook as interesting as possible so that it may stimulate students to seek greater understanding of the drama in which they are both actors and audience. We are grateful for many constructive criticisms and suggestions from our colleagues (especially Ronald J. Knapp, John W. Ryan, D. Kinly Sturkie, Brenda J. Vander Mey, William M. Wentworth, and Mervin F. White), and we owe a deep debt of gratitude to Dr. John F. Cuber for his encouragement and assistance, and to the editorial staff of Prentice Hall for their tireless dedication.

We sought to document this book with easily available sources and references when-ever practical. Obscure citations and foreign-language references may spread the mantle of erudition upon a book's authors, but are of little use to undergraduate students who often depend upon local library facilities. The descriptions of current social data and developments draw heavily upon government documents as well as such sources as *Newsweek, The New York Times,* and *U.S. News & World Report,* because current information is rarely found in academic journals. A list of audio-visual aids is found in the instructor's manual.

We share joint responsibility for the organization of the book, and each chapter is a product of mutual criticism and suggestion.

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MAJOR SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN THE UNITED STATES

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CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Why Study Social Problems?

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One in three college students tries cocaine before graduating.[1]

AIDS is expected to increase tenfold by 1991, killing more people than highway accidents.[2]

Family violence, including child and spouse abuse, is widespread.[3]

Teenage pregnancy is on the rise; many pregnant teenagers are also high-school dropouts.[4]

Fear of rape exists in nearly two-thirds of all urban women under 35.[5]

Some ethnic groups divide societies and the conflict often results in military coups.[6]

Libyan terrorism results in U.S. warplanes bombing Tripoli.[7]

Nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl sends radioactive dust over Europe; can it happen here?[8]

Modern nations routinely face an array of social problems. In that regard, the United States is no different. U.S. citizens are concerned about drug use, AIDS, family violence, teenage pregnancy, rape, unstable governments, terrorism, and nuclear catastrophe. Clearly, people are deeply concerned about social problems today. Whether we like it or not, *social problems affect all of us*, so perhaps we should know something about them. What are they? Why do they exist? Who is responsible for them? How much do they cost? What can be done about them?

To ask these questions takes only a short paragraph; to answer them would require a library with half its shelves filled with books not yet written. Even the first question, What are social problems?, is much more complicated than it appears.

DEFINITION OF A SOCIAL PROBLEM

A formal definition might read, *A social problem is a condition affecting a significant number of people in ways considered undesirable, about which it is felt something can be done through collective social action*. This definition has four distinct ideas: (1) a condition af-fecting a significant number of people; (2) in ways considered undesirable; (3) about which it is felt something can be done; and (4) through collective social action. Each of these ideas needs to be examined in detail. First, however, you should be aware that sociologists often disagree among themselves on whether "social problems" should be defined by the general public or by social scientists—whether "social problems" are those situations about which a large number of the public is concerned, or those about which social scientists think the public *should* be concerned. To the authors of this book, social problems are conditions that are socially recognized and socially debated; therefore, we follow the public's definition of social problems.

"A Condition Affecting a Significant Number of People . . ."

Our pet peeves are not social problems unless they also disturb a good many other people. How many people? There is no exact number that must be affected before a condition qualifies as a social problem. But when a condition affects enough people so that many of them notice, talk, and write about it, a social problem exists. One way of

measuring public concern about a condition is to count the number (and length) of magazine articles devoted to it each year as listed in the periodical indexes. For example, in all the magazines indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature,* only one article on environmental pollution appeared in 1940, seven in 1950, thirteen in 1960, 155 in 1970, 139 in 1975, and fourteen in 1985. However, the nuclear catastrophe at the Chernobyl reactor near Kiev in the Soviet Union in 1986, and the consequent radioactive dust that fell on much of Europe produced a plethora of articles on environmental pollution.[9]

When numerous articles appear, the condition has clearly attracted widespread concern and has become a social problem. When the number of articles begins to decline, (1) concern over the problem may be waning; (2) considerable policy agreement about it may have been reached; or (3) the problem may be just as real but articles about new problems are in greater demand. In the case of environmental pollution, public reaction to the Chernobyl nuclear accident clearly reestablished concern over the problem.

"In Ways Considered Undesirable . . ."

Child labor was no social problem as long as most people thought child labor was desirable. Only when a considerable number of people decided that child labor was harmful and began to express real concern—only then did child labor become a social problem. Many people still consider marijuana use a grave social problem. They believe that marijuana is harmful and should be forbidden by law. The scientific evidence of harmful consequences of marijuana is still inconclusive, but the widespread public *belief* that marijuana is harmful and should be suppressed makes marijuana use a social problem. A social problem, therefore, involves a *value judgment,* a decision that the condition is "bad." Note, however, that value judgments do change. For example, once witches were feared in Europe, and witchburnings were a common event. They ended when people began to suspect that the "witches" were merely harm-

Turn of the century young mill spinner.

less eccentrics or mentally ill people, unable to summon evil powers to do their evil bidding.

These examples show how *values may define any condition as a social problem or prevent designation of any particular condition as a problem.* Suicide, drunkenness, drug abuse, homosexuality, starvation, illiteracy, beating one's children, not beating one's children—any of these may be defined as a social problem by the values of the society, or they may be defined as nonproblematic because they are acceptable. No condition, no matter how dramatic or shocking to someone else, is a social problem *unless and until* the values of a considerable number of people within the society define it as a problem.

"About Which It Is Felt Something Can Be Done . . ."

Everybody talked about the weather, but nobody did anything about it until very recently. Conditions that cannot be changed or evaded must be accepted, usually with the aid of a supporting set of rationaliza-

During a time when much of the world seemed to be at peace, forty-two nations and the PLO were involved in hostilities of one form or another that had claimed as many as 5 million lives. The fighting included eight wars between nations and more than thirty revolutionary and separatist insurgencies.

Some fighting was intense, with thousands of casualties, as in the war between Iraq and Iran. Other disputes simmered and only occasionally flared into violence. The conflicts involved Afghanistan, Angola, Argentina, Burma, Chad, China, Colombia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Falkland Islands, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Kampuchea, Laos, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mozambique, Namibia, Nicaragua, North Korea, North Yemen, Northern Ireland, Pakistan, Peru, PLO, Philippines, South Africa, South Korea, South Yemen, Soviet Union, Spain, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda, Vietnam, Western Sahara, and Zimbabwe.

Source: "Even in 'Peacetime,' 40 Wars Are Going On," *U.S. News & World Report,* July 11, 1983, pp. 44–45. Copyright, 1983, U.S. News and World Report. Exerpted from issue of July 11, 1983.

tions. In much of the world, famine was not a social problem until very recently, because famine was considered part of the natural and unchangeable order of things. Flood control became a social problem only when we decided that floods could be prevented; before that, floods were simply a misfortune to be endured. Now that we may exercise some control over the weather, the weather is becoming a social problem; debate has arisen over who owns the clouds in the sky and who may say where rain shall fall.[10] Now that techniques have been developed for mining the great mineral wealth of the deep seabeds, the lack of full support for a suitable international "law of the sea" has become a serious problem. The Third United Nations Conference on Law of the Sea has already developed such an international sea-law treaty. When the treaty was adopted by the Conference, 130 nations voted in its favor. The United States and three other nations, however, voted against it, and seventeen nations abstained. In fact, the United States has declined to participate in the treaty. The treaty would govern deep seabed mining, navigation, and overflight, and would set up the decision-making machinery to implement various treaty provisions.[11]

The nature of a problem also changes as techniques of treatment are developed. For centuries, the mental-illness problem was purely one of protecting the sane and hid-

ing the mentally ill; only recently has the problem become one of treating and curing the mentally ill. This is not because our ancestors were insensitive, but because they lacked a full appreciation of the nature of mental illness as well as the means to treat the mentally ill effectively.

A condition is a problem *when it is believed* that something can be done about it. It is the belief in the possibility of treatment that causes people to consider it a problem. Whether this belief is correct can often be determined only by trial. Meanwhile, the *hope* of treatment is sufficient to lead people to consider a condition a problem and to seek ways of doing something about it.

". . . Through Collective Social Action"

If I am the only person who is unhappy over the lack of table tennis contests on television, my discontent creates no social problem. But if thousands of other viewers share my sense of deprivation and think we should do something about it, a social problem develops.

New social problems arise as people discover a condition they consider undesirable and correctable. Thus, social problems are those situations that are so widely disturbing that public concern, opinion formation, and pressure develop in the search for treatment.

Social problems, therefore, are *social in origin* ("a condition affecting a significant number of people . . ."); *social in definition* ("in ways considered undesirable . . ."); and *social in treatment* (". . . about which it is felt something can be done through collective social action").

BIAS IMPLICIT IN DEFINITION

A *bias* is an unconscious tendency to notice and interpret facts in a way that supports one's value preferences or personal interests. A totally unbiased definition of specific social problems is impossible, because each definition of a problem carries implicit assumptions about the causes of the problem and the kinds of policy outcomes that are desirable. For example, most research in criminology asks, "Why do people break the law?"—not "Why do societies make such laws?" The problem of poverty may be stated as, "What's wrong with the people who are poor?" or, "What's wrong with an affluent society that still has so many poor people?" The issue of homosexuality may be defined as a problem of sex deviation or as a problem of personal liberty. Most statements of social problems, research designs, and policy recommendations have a bias, usually conservative. The impact of such conservative bias has been to preserve the major values and institutions of the existing society. Whether one views this as good or bad depends upon one's own degree of liberalism or conservatism.

NOT ALL PROBLEMS "BELONG" TO SOCIOLOGISTS

In an article in the journal *Social Problems,* one sociologist criticizes social-problems textbook writers for not consistently following their own definition.[12] He charges that, after defining social problems as whatever people worry over, we then ignore their choices in organizing our textbooks. According to the Gallup Polls, for example, "war and peace," "foreign policy," "taxes,"

"lack of religion and morality," and "communism" are all topics that have been frequently listed by the public as major social problems. Not all of these problems are covered in this (or almost any other) social-problems textbook.

There is a reason for this omission: Not all social problems lie within the sociologist's field of expertise. Sociologists are not specialists in everything and should not act as if they were. Economists are better equipped than sociologists to analyze problems of inflation, unemployment, and taxes; and political scientists can better treat problems of war, peace, and foreign policy. Since no textbook can cover everything, we sociologists should concentrate upon those problems for which our training and experience best qualify us. Furthermore, the focus of this textbook is not upon selected problems themselves, but upon the *sociology* of social problems—that is, upon how and why social problems develop.

There are also social problems discussed in this text that are not often mentioned by the general public. The reason is clear. Some problems—divorce, child abuse, alcoholism, drug abuse, and sexual deviation—are more likely to be considered by the general public as "personal troubles" than as "social problems."

FALLACIES ABOUT SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Although most people know something about social problems, their "knowledge" is generally unorganized, frequently contradictory, and often incorrect. A listing of some of the widespread fallacies about social problems reveals that much of this popular "knowledge" is superficial and unreliable.

That People Agree on What the Social Problems Are

Although many people may agree that poverty and unemployment are social problems in the U.S., many others emphatically disagree. Important real-estate leaders have insisted that there has been no real housing