



SOCIAL PROBLEMS

A CRITICAL
APPROACH

third edition

KENNETH J. NEUBECK

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THIRD EDITION

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KENNETH J. NEUBECK is Associate Professor of Sociology at The University of Connecticut-Storrs. Before receiving his Ph.D. at Washington University—St. Louis, he held research positions in civil rights and education offices at what was then known as the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (now known as Health and Human Services).

Professor Neubeck is also the author of *Corporate Response to Urban Crisis*. He has contributed to anthologies on such topics as the impact of racism on welfare policies, income maintenance experimentation and poverty politics, and political and economic factors influencing downtown city development. Additional articles have appeared in such journals as *Social Problems*, *Social Policy*, and *Teaching Sociology*. He is currently at work on an exploration of data sets dealing with the consumer and investment behaviors of American families and with the relationship between executive compensation and corporate financial success.

Social Problems: A Critical Approach is now in its third edition. Our goal is to encourage students to seriously analyze some of the causes and implications of many of the most pressing social problems confronting people today. The text is intended to provoke spirited thought, discussion, and debate among students, rather than to simply present a series of dry facts. Out of this process should come new views, knowledge and awareness, and for some students the will to act when possible to help attack those social problems of greatest concern to them.

As the table of contents indicates, *Social Problems: A Critical Approach* opens with an introductory chapter that presents traditional approaches to the study of social problems and then describes the approach taken in this book. Our approach involves examining two different types of social problems: problems of societal organization and problems of individuals. We analyze causes and effects and—in many cases—posit possible solutions or steps toward mitigating the problems. These solutions or steps toward mitigation may themselves invite healthy debate.

In the first part of the text, students are introduced to eleven “macro problems”—key organizational features of society that are to us demonstrably harmful to millions of people. In the second part, students are presented with six “micro problems”—individual behaviors that have an adverse impact on other people and/or are self-harmful.

The text is organized to make it possible for instructors to assign the chapters they wish to use in the sequence they prefer. However, it is our feeling that the micro problems involving individual behaviors are most logically handled after—and thus in the context of—macro

problems depicting features of societal organization that are harmful to so many people.

As a learning device, a textbook must be comprehensible to students and must engage their interest. Like the first two editions, this text presents information in a straightforward and (I hope) highly readable manner, even when rather complex and abstract ideas are being addressed. Conflicting and contrasting views on problems are clearly delineated. Tables, figures, and photographs are directly linked to the text in order to underscore important ideas. Specialized terms and concepts are defined and illustrated in the text.

Each of the chapters on macro and micro problems contains a boxed reading that addresses—often poignantly—the impact of the problem on human beings. These readings, entitled “Public Problem, Private Pain,” are carefully chosen excerpts from published interviews, autobiographies, and journalistic accounts. This special feature increases student interest by grounding sometimes abstract problems in more concrete human experiences with which students may identify. For example, in the reading in Chapter 1, The Global Context, a newspaper correspondent frankly discusses his experiences and feelings during a visit to a famine-stricken area of Ethiopia. Some of the other Public Problem, Private Pain readings present the views of a woman whose family is homeless, the memories and attitudes of a disabled Vietnam veteran, and the thoughts of a young woman who experienced sexual abuse.

Another feature of this text that will promote student involvement in discussing the subject matter is the series of provocative questions at the end of each chapter. These questions can form the bases of classroom or

small-group discussions, or they may be used in conjunction with outside assignments. Many of the questions are designed to encourage debate and to get students to consider different positions or viewpoints on social problems. We have used the discussion questions with great success, and highly recommend class assignments and/or panels around them.

Many instructors will want to know how this third edition differs from the second. We begin by saying that very little was removed from the second edition (basically outdated events and data). The extremely favorable reception accorded the second edition led instead to our expansion of what we were—according to users and reviewers—already doing right. The principal addition is a new chapter on health care. A number of original chapters have new sections to cover topics of increasing significance. For example, there are new sections on the “greenhouse effect,” hunger, homelessness, illiteracy, gun control, capital punishment, and AIDS and drug abuse. A section on research methods was added to the Introduction. And care has been taken to bring citations, data, and treatment of all social problems covered as up to date as is possible. *Social Problems* is accompanied by an instructor’s manual, which includes a test bank.

Many people have selflessly contributed to the successful completion of the third edition.

My appreciation goes to the staff of McGraw-Hill, especially to Phil Butcher, Sylvia Shepard, and Elaine Rosenberg. I am also grateful to colleagues at the University of Connecticut and at many other institutions who took time to make suggestions about the second edition.

I am greatly indebted to Dennis Breslin for his research assistance. His initiative, good judgment, and sense of humor helped me immeasurably. Thanks, Dennis.

I wish also to thank undergraduate students. Their reactions—both in and outside the classroom—helped guide the direction and development of this edition. Students’ enthusiasm has made my labor so worthwhile.

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Finally, I again thank Gig, Michael, Kara, and Christopher Neubeck for their love and support. Bet you thought I’d never get this edition done.

Kenneth J. Neubeck

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SOCIAL PROBLEMS

A CRITICAL APPROACH



Introduction

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

- The Social Pathology Approach
- The Social Disorganization Approach

A CRITICAL APPROACH TO SOCIAL PROBLEMS

- Macro Problems
- Micro Problems

THE LIFE CYCLE OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

- Defining a Social Problem
- Transformation into a Public Issue
- Debating Causes and Solutions
- The Role of Power

METHODS OF RESEARCH

- Survey Research
- Field Research
- Experimental Research

SUMMARY

As we look back at the twentieth century, now rapidly drawing to an end, there is much

to be struck by. From technological breakthroughs to movements for freedom and liberation, the one constant feature of this century has been change.

In the United States we have passed many historical milestones and displayed achievements that are said to have made this country great. And yet equally striking are the many serious social problems that continue to plague us. These problems, far from being resolved, provide a bothersome contrast to the many positive tendencies and accomplishments that characterize U.S. society.

Social Problems: A Critical Approach analyzes the most serious of today's social problems, ranging from the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of a few to drug abuse. The book looks at the causes and effects of these problems and considers solutions to many of them. None of the social problems analyzed in this text has a simple solution, and all pose challenges to our collective wisdom and ingenuity.

We begin this introduction with a review of the various approaches sociologists have traditionally taken toward the study of social problems. Next, the approach taken in this book—a