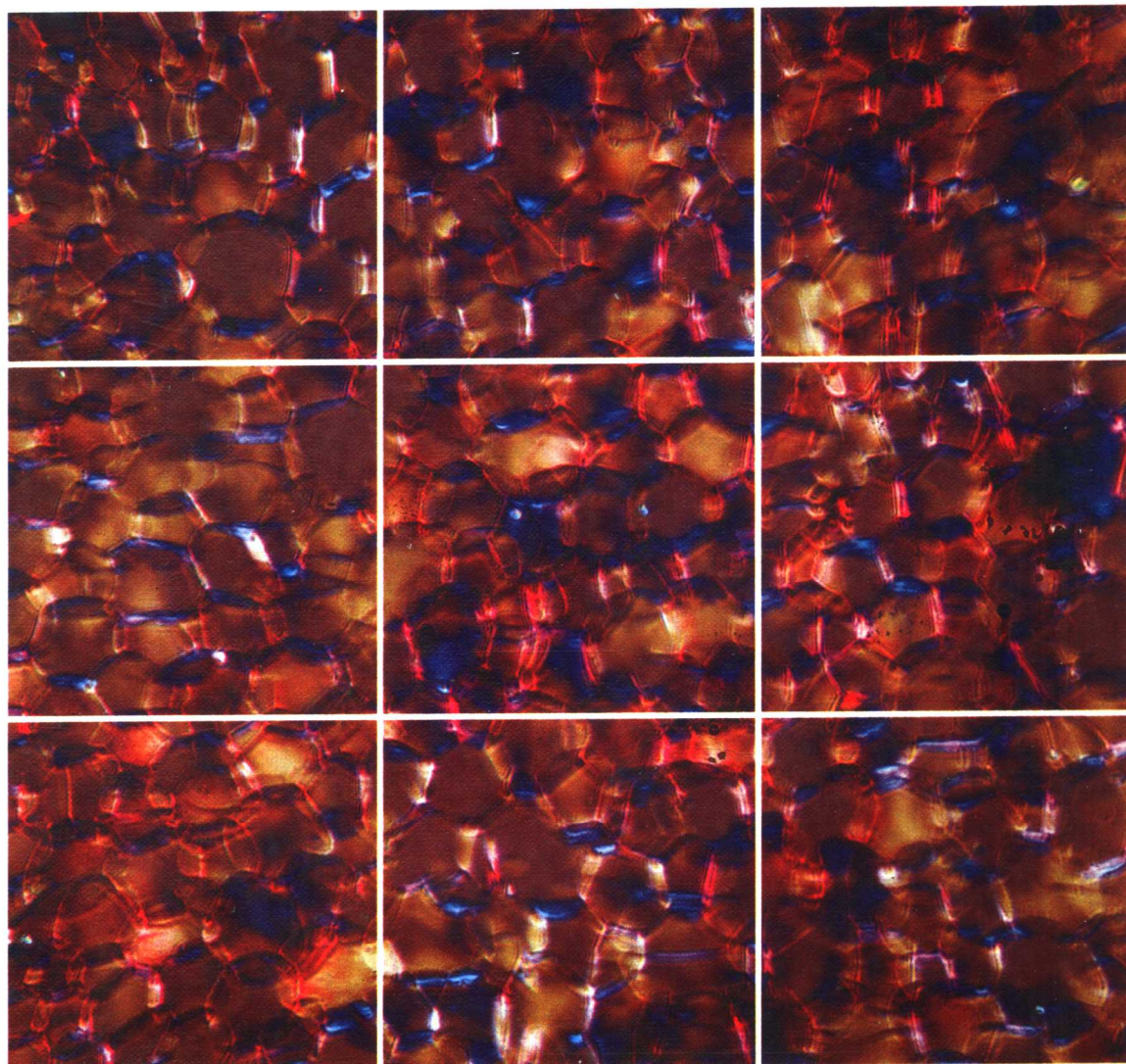


SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Joan W. Moore · Burton M. Moore



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Preface

Modern sociology is now beginning to look not only at social problems, but also at the institutions that are supposed to solve these problems. This book is a comprehensive approach to contemporary social problems. As such, part of its objective is to give students a sociological perspective for this new approach. It is intended to give enough basic information to prepare the reader for the vigorous and important debates on social problems now in progress in this nation.

The arrangement is designed to help the student gradually build knowledge and acquire a systematic view of the available sociological information. Yet the chapters are self-contained, so they may be used in a variety of ways.

Four sections divide the work into a logical presentation. The first section of two chapters introduces the sociological approach to social problems. The idea that social problems do not just appear, but have a clear-cut "career" is presented. The basic tools of sociological inquiry and the delicate methodological issues in researching social problems are outlined.

The second section covers the five pervasive "social locations"

of social problems. It is logical that these should be given early in the book because the problems of inequality (poverty and wealth), race, gender (sexual equality), age, as well as rural or urban location are frequent factors in dealing with all other social problems.

In the third section, a group of four conventional social problems are discussed: crime, drugs, sexual behavior, and a “responsive society” (environment, consumerism, and the corporate and governmental bureaucracies). Here again, special emphasis is given to the “careers” of these problems—and to their history.

In the fourth section, the student learns of four social problems that are sometimes created by the very institutions that are supposed to deal with the problems. In each case, both the positive and the negative appraisals are carefully balanced. These institutions are education, criminal justice, the welfare system, and the delivery systems designed to handle physical and mental health. Modern sociology is moving rapidly toward this approach—in fact, without an institutional perspective such subjects as crime and poverty are quite meaningless.

Throughout all four sections new theories and research findings are carefully outlined. Biological, psychological, cultural, and structural approaches are included. In two chapters where biological theories are important (gender and race), they are presented in detail.

Each chapter is written so that the student begins easily with common ideas and interests. Once these shared ideas are precisely and sociologically expressed, it is possible to introduce more complicated ideas. The book is carefully structured to move from the obvious problems to the more sophisticated discussion of institutions.

Each chapter is summarized to reinforce the main ideas and to interest the student in some of the possible consequences of the social forces described. The illustrative material relies heavily on tables and charts. These are the raw materials of sociology and are included in a deliberate effort to accustom the student to their use.

A Test Item File is available and includes questions in a variety of formats.

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J. W. M. and B. M. M.

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THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Studying social problems in a professional way is not nearly as easy as it may appear. The almost endless American debates about the environment, crime on the streets, and the troubles of poor people engage our interest constantly. Many of us will work from day to day in the partial solution of exactly such problems. Yet most of the major social problems seem almost insoluble. The poor, it is said, are always with us. And certainly there will always be mental illness, even if we solve the problems of crime and poverty. It is this strange quality of insolubility that fascinates both ordinary people and sociologists. Perhaps, after this introduction to the sociological perspective, students will sense something of the depth and range of the social factors that make our most important social problems virtually insoluble. For some it may possibly make such social problems even more fascinating.

In beginning to deal with the actual complexity of these problems, in this section we will see that when sociologists talk about "social problems" they refer to a very wide range of social phenomena. We will see how social scientists define social problems. Then we will uncover how Americans define certain happenings as "problems," although other phenomena are not so defined. We will develop the idea of the "career" of a social problem from its earliest identification to the growth of institutional solutions.

The second step outlined in this section is the selection of the theories and techniques that can be used to study social problems usefully. As the famous social psychologist Kurt Lewin once said, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory." Useful theories provide the guiding concepts for many sociologists and social psychologists who are concerned about social problems. On the other hand, there is nothing so easy as a little moralizing. Even social scientists are not immune to moralizing. In particular, the study of social problems poses some difficult moral and technical issues because the researchers are in actual personal contact with the vulnerable and damaged people who are the reality of these problems.

1

Defining Social Problems

Most of us are not pleased with life in the United States. We know this because the Gallup Poll found in 1979 that 69 percent of the people answering questions from their interviewers were "dissatisfied with the way things are going in the U.S. at this time." Only 26 percent declared themselves "satisfied"—a sharp drop from 34 percent in 1976.¹ This low—and falling—note of satisfaction appears to be new for Americans, and it brings up even more important questions: Is the constant talk of "problems" from the news media and from politicians merely rhetoric, or are there truly serious faults in our social structure? Do our current problems suggest disaster in future years, or will progress continue as it has in the past? Did such progress ever exist? What happens when Americans systematically try to solve social problems? Is it Americans working together systematically that has led to a high degree of satisfaction in the past—or is it something else?

This book intends to provide a sociological perspective on these questions and still others. Yet in no sense can this book offer a full

¹ *Gallup Opinion Index*, vol. 164 (March, 1979), vol. 137 (December, 1976).

and exact analysis of any single problem and of its causes or solutions: We must at all times remind ourselves that social scientists cannot be free from the bias or the blindness that affects all members of any society. American social scientists have been justly criticized for their failure to consider certain important perspectives in their theorizing and study of social problems; and nowhere was this criticism more justified than in their study of the social problems surrounding many minorities. Social scientists have also found themselves caught in biases and prejudices when they have dealt with yet other social problems in American life. Nevertheless, they can offer an important and valuable view. What is this view? Why is it worth time and study?

First, the sociological view provides a way of thinking about how certain conditions come to be defined as social problems. (After all, a lot of distressful conditions—like child abuse—can be ignored for years; and, conversely, some



Public opinion polls have consistently reflected a concern among ordinary people with problems of poverty and of public spending. Often these two concerns are at odds with each other, as in the recent debate over food stamps. (*Irene Springer*)

conditions—like gambling—that were considered social problems in the past are no longer taken seriously.)

Second, social science has given us many hypotheses and theories about the causes of certain social conditions. In the process of providing these ideas, social scientists critically evaluate many other theories. Although critical evaluation sometimes seems to be merely professional shoptalk, the conflict of various theories or explanations greatly helps to clarify the basic factors and the basic assumptions. It is usually a scientific dialogue in the best meaning of the term, and the dialogue itself tends to bring attention to the most important issues.

Third, social science offers a systematic approach to gathering evidence about the pervasiveness of certain social conditions that may be associated with social problems. We will discuss methods in Chapter 2.

Fourth, social scientists can look critically at just how well certain proposed “solutions” to a social problem actually work. These solutions may be established on a very small scale, as simple as a program in city high schools for counseling pregnant teenagers. They may be enormous national inventions like the federal prison system or a broad-based national pension arrangement like Social Security. Developing and analyzing small-scale solutions are a small-scale specialty of sociology that is widely in demand in this country. Sometimes it is called “applied social science” in contrast to basic research, which attempts to gather fundamental data for extensive solutions. If the solution is small enough and concerned with the effects of a given condition or institution, it might be called “evaluation research.” This special advice is widely in demand for evaluating specific projects. Section 4 of this book will be concerned with the analysis of some large-scale institutional solutions to social problems. In a sense this is evaluation research, even though the institutions are very well established in American life.

WHAT ARE SOCIAL PROBLEMS?

Everybody seems to know what a social problem is. (Indeed, we used these words in the opening paragraphs of this chapter.) Politicians define a problem (“The problem with this country is too much government regulation”), and then offer a solution (“I say again, we’re going to run the bureaucrats out of the government”). On the basis of their perceptions of the source of social problems parents warn their children (“Stay away from the wrong kind of kids”); or they may even make a diagnosis of the kind of environment where social problems may occur (“I don’t want you hanging around the playground after school; so come on home”). Such almost unspoken assumptions dominate newspapers, radio, and television: The flat assertion that crime is increasing in a certain area because fewer policemen were hired last year contains several simple

assumptions about the causes and environmental location of certain social problems. Even complex analyses of an increase in crime may fall very short of discovering underlying causes because these causes are often deeply hidden and not at all obvious.

Another difficulty in analysis is that time changes many things. New generations move into positions of responsibility and have new ideas. New perspectives appear: What "everybody knows" to be a social problem may turn into just a variety of behavior that does not worry people very much. Two or three generations ago, drinking (particularly by immigrants from Europe) was considered a major social problem; the Constitution was in fact amended to cure this problem. Gambling once provoked concern as a major social problem leading to "moral decay." Now lotteries, horserace betting, and casinos are promoted and protected by public agencies as a safe and important method of raising public revenue.² Women's roles in society are an even more interesting example of a radical change in the perception of social problems: Only a generation ago any woman who wanted to pursue a career outside the home was considered to be maladjusted. Today the right of women to reject housewifery is generally recognized; the rejection is a matter of choice, not mental disorder. Thus the question of what constitutes a social problem is important because the definition of a social problem changes over time.

What Ordinary Citizens Define as Social Problems

Since 1935 public-opinion pollsters under the direction of Dr. George Gallup have been asking a carefully chosen sample of Americans to state "the most important problem facing the nation." If we examine these responses over the years 1935 to 1980, we find that certain top problems nearly always appear, reflecting the same underlying and persistent issues. Of course, in some years the issue is disguised by the political rhetoric of the times, and sometimes the problem stated will reflect only part of a persistent issue. As an example, the atomic bomb was considered a major problem in the period 1945 to 1947, just after it was used against Japan, but it really can be understood as a fundamental concern with war and peace. It is important to notice that this concern with war and peace appeared continuously from 1935 through 1980, in 17 out of 29 possible choices. The economy is another persistent issue. We notice that farm problems appeared in 1935 to 1937 (the years of the midwestern Dust Bowl), again in 1953, and in 1956 and 1957. The problem of taxes was mentioned from 1935 through 1943, in 1947, in 1950 through 1957, in 1962 and 1963, and in 1968, while underlying concerns—with the high cost of living and the economy—were mentioned continuously. Living costs appeared in 23 out of a

² "Gambling in the U.S.: Public Finance or Public Problem," *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 35, no. 3 (Summer, 1979).

possible 29 times. The problem of the economy appeared 22 times out of a possible 29. In short, international problems (sometimes phrased differently) and the problems of the economy (under such terms as "farm problems," "taxes," or "the high cost of living") are underlying and persistent. They take different forms as events, political rhetoric, and the mass media shape the important questions of the time. But they endure.

A third persistent set of problems concerns certain major cleavages in American society, that is, class and race. In following these problems, we must be very careful indeed about the historical context. Thus we see that throughout the 1930s and 1940s (and occasionally in the 1950s) labor problems were mentioned consistently. But they do not appear at all in the 1960s and through the 1970s except as a concern with unemployment. Poverty began to appear as a top problem shortly after President Lyndon Johnson invented the famous War on Poverty of the middle 1960s. But all three issues, labor, race, and poverty, reflect major cleavages that came to public attention only through social movements (like the labor movement of the 1930s) or timely dramatization by a president. That Americans did not see race as a major problem earlier than 1956 means that it did not attract national public attention, as was the case with the problems of aged Americans and the problems of women, which were not mentioned as serious before 1975.

In the mid-1970s many Americans were concerned about crime and delinquency, and yet they did not become continuous worries until about the same time as the urban riots and protests, that is, around the middle and late 1960s, continuing throughout the 1970s and virtually vanishing by 1980. The problems of crime in the streets and urban riots and protests both appeared at about the same time, and many observers believe that the rhetoric about street crime was really concealing substantial—and racist—worry about minorities in urban areas. This may (or may not) be true, but we can admit that it at least reflects something about the relationships between certain groups in American society. Possibly too the question of government spending (a social problem of the 1930s) was really a mask for other cleavages because the government-spending concern appeared during the 1930s, when the federal government, for the first time in history, spent a great deal of money on programs designed to aid the poor. More recently, government spending for the poor again came under attack, now in the historical context of serious inflation. We will discuss some of these issues in later chapters.

A fourth persistent topic concerns lack of religion and morality, or moral decline. This problem appeared during the 1930s, in the 1940s, more consistently during the 1950s, and again in the 1970s (at about the time of the Water-gate scandals); but it had almost disappeared by 1980.³ Interesting analyses

³ Robert H. Lauer, "Defining Social Problems: Public and Professional Perspectives," *Social Problems*, vol. 24 (October, 1976), pp. 122-130; *Gallup Opinion Index*, rep. 157 (August, 1978), rep. 175 (February, 1980).