

INTRODUCTION TO

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# SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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THOMAS J. SULLIVAN

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FOURTH EDITION

# INTRODUCTION TO

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# *Social Problems*

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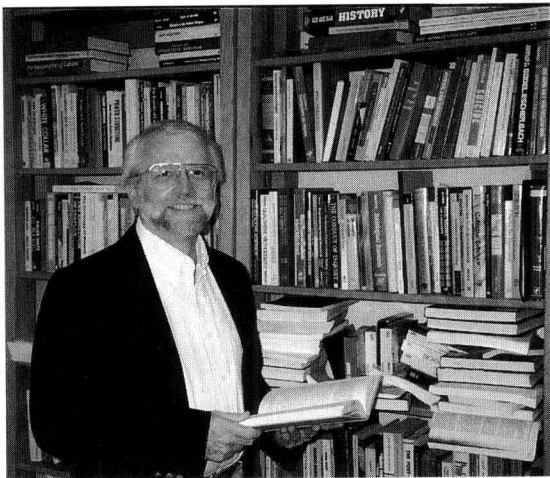
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# INTRODUCTION TO ***Social Problems***

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Thomas J. Sullivan** earned his Ph.D. at the University of California at Santa Barbara. He is Professor of Sociology at Northern Michigan University, specializing in social psychology, applied sociology, research methods, and medical sociology. He is the author of *Sociology: Concepts and Applications in a Diverse World* 3d ed. (Allyn and Bacon, 1995) and *Applied Sociology: Research and Critical Thinking* (Allyn and Bacon, 1992); he is the co-author of *Applied Social Research: Tool for the Human Services*, 3d ed. (Harcourt Brace, 1994). He has published articles in *Social Science and Medicine* and *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*. He has served in various committee positions for the American Sociological Association, the Society for Applied Sociology, and the Midwest Sociological Society. He holds an elected position on the Council of the Section on Sociological Practice of the American Sociological Association.

**FOR NANCY**



# PREFACE

As the twentieth century draws to a close, the study of social problems continues to be one of the most demanding, exciting, and fast paced fields in sociology and the other social sciences—in part because the world changes so fast. Old problems evolve and new ones are continually emerging. To name just a few examples, some significant advances have been made on environmental issues, such as substantial reductions in the amount of lead released into the atmosphere; at the same time, evidence is growing that global warming is a problem produced by human activities (see Chapter 13). In response to recent changes in the world political scene, the world economy continues to change, with global corporations becoming larger and more concentrated. This has resulted in well-paying jobs in the United States disappearing as employers seek cheaper labor in Mexico, Indonesia, or other third-world nations (see Chapter 2). Terrorism continues to stalk the globe, with Arab terrorists killing civilians in Israel and terrorists in the United States bombing a federal office building in Oklahoma City (see Chapter 14). The scourge of drugs continues to exacerbate health and crime problems, despite millions of dollars spent on the “War on Drugs” (see Chapter 10).

I could mention many other examples, but the point is that much has changed in the world in the past few years—some changes, thankfully, have been for the good, but too many changes

have intensified the social problems that confront the United States and the world. This fourth edition incorporates these and other developments to provide students with the most current assessment of social problems and their solutions.

Sociology and the other social sciences provide a set of unique and important tools in the analysis of social problems. In particular, they use scientific research to assess the nature and extent of social problems and the effectiveness of solutions to them. Just as society has changed, the social sciences have also changed in the past two decades: With their theoretical foundations solidly established, they have begun to develop in a more applied direction. Increasingly, social scientists have shaped their research tools toward evaluating solutions to social problems rather than limiting their focus to understanding the nature of those problems. Now social research often focuses on questions such as: Does it work? Who benefits? What are the negative consequences of the program? Is there a way that we can achieve the same gain for less expense? In fact, over the past few decades, the study of social problems has become, in my view, one of the most exciting and innovative wings of the social sciences because it involves the application of social science research and knowledge to the solutions of some of the most difficult, agonizing, and controversial problems confronting the United States and the world today.

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## Organization

Many serious social problems confront the United States and the world, too many to cover in a single book. From among these social issues I have chosen to discuss problems that are particularly serious, affect many people, and expose students to a broad array of concerns in varied sectors of life in the United States. By studying these problems, students will gain the tools and the insight that will enable them to analyze other problems and solutions not explicitly covered in this book. Thus, this book is more than a catalog of particular problems and their solutions; it is also a training manual for the study of social problems.

Chapter 1 introduces students to the sociological analysis of social problems, including a discussion of the theoretical perspectives that will be used throughout the book and of the importance of the scientific approach and applied research in the analysis of social problems and their solutions. Chapters 2–4 cover social problems that relate directly to some of the major social institutions in society: government, the economy, the family, and health care systems. Chapters 5–8 focus on problems that are linked by the common theme of social inequality: poverty, racial and ethnic discrimination, and inequality based on gender and age. Chapters 9–11 analyze problems surrounding behavior that some people consider unconventional or deviant: crime and delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse, and some forms of sexual behavior. Finally, Chapters 12–15 focus on problems involving changes or disruptions in the physical and social world: urban problems, population growth, environmental pollution, violence and war, and new developments in science and technology.

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## Features

To reflect the trends of the past few decades, this book includes a number of creative elements:

**1. *Policy Issues inserts:*** An important theme of this book is that finding solutions to social problems is a political process in which groups differ with one another over which solutions are preferred. One's choice of solutions is influenced in part by one's cultural and subcultural values. Therefore, every chapter includes inserts titled "Policy Issues" in which contemporary debates on social policy related to that problem are discussed.

**2. *Applied Research inserts:*** Another theme in this book is that the application of social science research is central to solving problems and evaluating how well solutions work. Therefore, I have included inserts titled "Applied Research" that illustrate how and why this is the case. In this way, I emphasize the point that the choice of solutions to problems, although shaped by personal values and the public policy debate, should be constrained by the assessment of those solutions through systematic and scientific observation. In other words, the choice of solutions to problems should involve an interplay between human values and social research.

**3. *Laissez-Faire versus Interventionist Debate:*** The debate over social policy and social problems is centered in part on the role of the government in such issues. This debate is incorporated into the text in the form of two opposing positions. The laissez-faire stance posits that the government is, in most cases, either inefficient at finding or unable to find such solutions and should stand aside and let private enterprise and impersonal economic forces produce solutions. The interventionist position gives the government prime, although not sole, responsibility for finding and initiating solutions to problems. This debate is addressed periodically in the text where it is relevant.

**4. *Myth versus Fact:*** To emphasize further the role of research in understanding social problems, I point out some ways in which people's commonsense beliefs about social problems are proved incorrect by research data. This encourages the student to distinguish beliefs that have no scientific foundation and may be myths from



facts that have been substantiated by observational testing.

**5. *Theoretical Perspectives:*** I have organized the analysis of social problems and their solutions around the three core theoretical perspectives in sociology: functionalism, conflict theory, and interactionism. These perspectives offer tremendous insight into the sources of problems, the effectiveness of solutions, and the ramifications—both obvious and hidden—of adopting particular solutions. These perspectives are used in every chapter of the book to provide the student with a set of tools to analyze any social problem, including problems not directly discussed in this book.

**6. *International Perspectives:*** The intent of this feature is to provide students with a more global picture of particular social problems and their solutions. One reason this is important is the growing interdependence among the world's peoples and nations. Another reason is that we can gain insight into problems and their solutions when we observe them in societies and cultures that are different from our own. In addition, some social problems are inherently global rather than national or regional.

**7. *Linkages:*** To encourage the student to see the interconnections between social problems, a brief insert at the end of each chapter points out how a problem discussed in that chapter is linked to problems discussed in other chapters. This encourages the student to recognize that the worsening of one problem can mean that other, seemingly unconnected, conditions may also deteriorate, and that alleviating one problem can result in improvements in others.

**8. *Study and Review:*** At the end of each chapter, a new “Study and Review” section has been added to give students an opportunity to test how well they have grasped the material. Each section contains a list of key terms, multiple-choice questions, true-false questions, fill-in questions, matching questions, and essay questions. Correct answers are also provided. These various testing formats offer an assessment of

the different kinds of information found in each chapter and will assist students in organizing their study. Students, thereby, will have a good measure of how much they have learned and a comprehensive review of the content in the chapter, as well as help in preparing for exams.

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## New to the Fourth Edition

Although the book's basic organization remains the same in the fourth edition, it has been thoroughly revised and updated to reflect contemporary developments in sociology as well as new social, political, and economic developments relating to particular social problems. Special attention has been given to ensuring that the data presented on the various social problems is the most current available.

One significant change in organization involves Chapters 12 and 13, and was in response to the suggestions of professors who had used the book. They observed that many issues discussed as a part of urban problems in Chapter 12 are also discussed in other chapters; they also suggested that more attention be devoted to environmental problems in Chapter 13 than was done in the third edition. In response to these suggestions, Chapter 12, which had focused solely on urban problems, now combines urban and population problems. Chapter 13 is now devoted solely to environmental problems, permitting a much more extensive review of these problems.

Four new “International Perspectives” inserts have been added to the text, so that almost all chapters have one such insert. This is supplemented with more in-text discussion of social problems from a global perspective to provide students with a broader perspective on social problems. The “Policy Issues” and “Applied Research” inserts have remained much the same as in the previous edition because, with some updating, they continue to work well. The “For Further Readings” sections at the end of each chapter have also been thoroughly updated

with challenging books for the student who wishes to pursue a topic in greater depth. Totally new to this edition are the “Study and Review” sections found at the end of each chapter.

Regarding the text material itself, I have made many revisions throughout that update discussions, present new research, and address issues that have come to prominence or have changed in some fashion since the previous edition was completed. A detailed listing of the revisions in each chapter can be found in the Instructor’s Manual that accompanies this book. These revisions are partially reflected by the following:

- More material on global corporations and the global concentration of power, using world systems theory as an explanatory framework (Chapter 2)
- A Policy Issues section on the position of gay families in society and the problems they confront (Chapter 3)
- Expanded discussion of health maintenance organizations (HMOs) and managed care as means of organizing and financing health care (Chapter 4)
- A comparison of the extent of poverty and the concentration of wealth in the United States and in other nations (Chapter 5)
- A discussion of innovative political structures in Switzerland that might encourage multiethnic cooperation (Chapter 6)
- More material on gender inequality and the women’s movement around the world (Chapter 7)
- Additional material on the problems that confront children and youth in modern societies and place them at risk of difficulties in social development (Chapter 8)
- A discussion of urban problems with a global perspective as the world economy affects cities in the United States and the Third World (Chapter 12)
- Extensive new material on environmental problems, including the social sources of environmental problems in economic and

social practices and the social construction of environmental problems (Chapter 13)

- New technologies and their effect on the concentration of the global communications network (Chapter 15)

These additions and revisions are called for by world developments in the past few years and will make the fourth edition of *Introduction to Social Problems* an even better vehicle for use with students in the study of social problems.

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## Acknowledgments

Many people have contributed to the completion of this new edition. Karen Hanson served ably as the editor of this new edition, suggesting timely and sound revisions to make the book even more valuable to students. I am especially thankful for the research assistance that I received from some students at Northern Michigan University, especially Jason Maki, who made some very positive contributions to the book. I also received some excellent advice and assistance from a number of colleagues: Carole A. Campbell, California State University, Long Beach; Chris Girard, Florida International University; George R. Gross, Northern Michigan University; Gary Hodge, Collin County Community College; Christine Johnson, Quinsigamond Community College; Kirk A. Johnson, Washburn University; Anthony W. Zumpetta, West Chester University.

Of all the people who have had an impact on this work, the students in my various classes have probably been most significant. They have questioned and challenged me, agreed and disagreed with me, and generally forced me to be more careful, analytical, and critical in my teaching and writing than I might otherwise have been. Their collective imprint on this book is greater than they probably imagine.

Thomas J. Sullivan

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