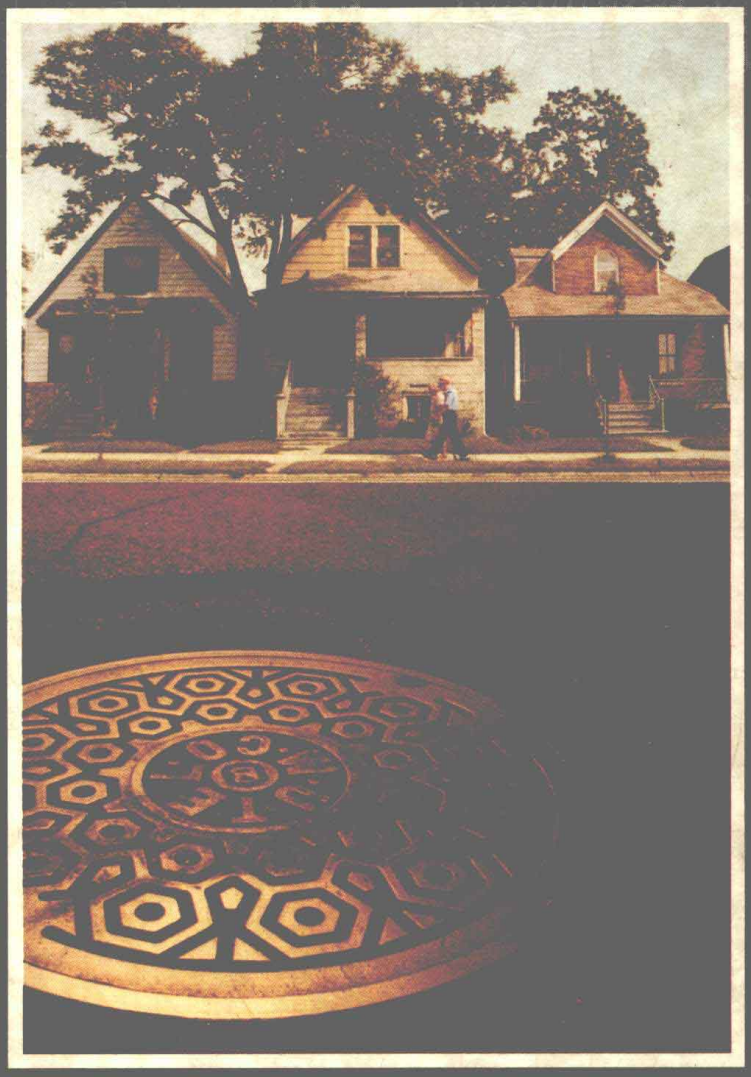
Robert R. Bell

Contemporary Social Problems



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ROBERT R. BELL
Temple University

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Contemporary Social Problems

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To Wendy L. Jones, Ph.D.
with whom I share sociology,
tennis, and marriage

Preface

The study of social problems has always been a basic part of American sociology. In the early days of American sociology the major interests were in social problems relating to the cities, immigrants, poverty, crime, breakdown of the family, and so on. Over the years, many of these problems came to be the substantive areas of sociology and represent a major part of course offerings in sociology.

Sociologists, like almost all professionals, are specialists. The field is too complex for any sociologist to be an expert in all theories, methods, and substantive areas. Any sociologist who starts to write a book on social problems quickly realizes he must learn a great deal about substantive areas that are not a part of his specialization. In many ways the most interesting part of writing this book was reading and preparing the chapters about which I knew the least: for example, the chapters on work, urban areas, and ecology. In those chapters more directly related to my specializations the problems were to limit what could be presented in one chapter.

There are a variety of theoretical approaches that are used in the study of social problems. I have chosen to use primarily, but not exclusively, a conceptual approach that attempts to examine a social problem as a process. Essentially the interest is in the rise, development, and establishment of a social problem in contemporary American society. This means that some problems discussed are emerging while others are clearly recognized as being a part of our society.

I have tried to include a wide range of social problems of interest and importance to undergraduate students. I have avoided a lot of sociological jargon, in the hope that students will find this book more comprehensible.

I wish to thank Dr. Wendy L. Jones (Fox Chase Cancer Research Center, Philadelphia) for her help. She helped to frame the conceptual approach and critiqued all the chapters.

Robert R. Bell

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PART ONE

Introduction

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Chapter 1

An Anatomy of Social Problems

Societies long have had to deal with various conditions and events seen as problems. There have probably always been some conditions defined as bad and treated as inescapable conditions of society. For most of history some conditions have been seen as inevitable and untouchable. But beginning in the 18th century the fatalism of the past was increasingly replaced by a view that problems could be alleviated or solved. It no longer seemed necessary to wait for the one available solution—divine intervention. The view came to be that rationality and directed social change would solve social problems. This optimism has come to be a part of the American ideology, which holds that social problems can be resolved if only given the time and effort and money. The fact that this often has not proved true hasn't greatly altered the optimism.

In general our interest is in how social problems come to gain social importance. Before something can be considered a social problem it must be recognized as negatively defining some significant group of persons or behavior in society. Many areas of activity that some persons see as problems are never identified as social problems. This is because they are neither severe nor widespread enough to be defined as socially significant. Our interest is to discover why some problems are so defined while others are not.

Social problems occur in society through the interaction of individuals. A social problem, at whatever stage of development, is a dynamic process because some change is always taking place. A problem may emerge as a social problem, be relatively stable for a while, and over time begin to fade away. Even during the time when a social problem appears to be relatively stable, there always are some changes

occurring because the problem consists of what people do with and to each other.

There are a number of theories related to defining social problems. The disorganization approach assumes that a social problem exists as an objective condition or arrangement that is a part of the structure of society. When it is seen in that way, it is defined as intrinsically bad or even as being malignant in contrast to normal or healthy society. Herbert Blumer suggests that social problems are fundamentally the products of a process of collective definition. He sees this to be the case rather than the problems existing independently as a set of objective social arrangements with an intrinsic structure. For Blumer, and other symbolic interactionists, social reality is made up of social acts, and it is these acts that should be the focus of research rather than social structures and institutions.[1] The interactionist stress is on process and that is the focus we take in examining the nature of social problems. For example, if our interest is in poverty as a social problem, it is not in the economic structure of poverty but rather in how people define poverty and act toward it, and in how they are influenced by one another's definitions of poverty and its consequences.

Our approach is to look at the settings of social interaction where something is considered to be a social problem. The interactional nature of the problem will often focus on different values or different ways of acting. Or persons may have difficulties in carrying out such basic processes as exchanging words, gestures, and cues of approved or condemned behavior. "Thus, people may be troubled, and may engage in troubling behavior, because they are unable to agree on the meaning of 'the world,' proper conduct, or even basic concepts, and because of inherent limitations in the human ability to communicate and order communication."[2] When people interpret one another's actions and respond in socially appropriate ways, they "create" rather than "discover" reality. Often the nature of the interpersonal setting where a social problem occurs includes multiple realities. For example, the world of drug use created by the police is very different from the world created by the drug user.

Our interest in this chapter is to look at the how and the why of the interactional process—how and why people act and are reacted to. John I. Kitsue has argued that a sociology of social problems must take the perspective of the individual as a starting point and focus on the definitions and claims-making activities as the basic subject matter. He says, "We examine how individuals and groups become engaged in collective activities organized and directed toward establishing institutional arrangements, recognizing punitive conditions as problems, and attempting to relieve, ameliorate, and eliminate them."[3]

Social deviance is behavior that violates institutional expectations—the expectations that are shared and recognized as legitimate in

a society. This definition suggests that deviant behavior is a reflection of how persons perform and of the structure of the groups within which they perform. In other words, deviance has both an individual and group perspective, although the usual pattern for analysis is to look at the interaction of deviants within a social setting.

Deviance theory argues that persistent deviance is not an individual or group creation but rather has a history in particular locales. This means that many areas responsible for deviance have existed for some time and have contributed to a history and to certain systems of deviant behavior. This time factor is an important influence on social deviance because when deviance persists it often becomes patterned (although not all deviance is systematic, nor is all systematic deviance socially organized). There may be systematic individual deviance where there is no interaction among the participants. That is, many deviant patterns are practiced by solitary individuals.

In a general sense, social deviance may be thought of as a part of social problems. Basically the stress of defining deviance is on what people do, and how, and in what ways it is defined as deviant. The study of social problems includes the concerns found in the study of deviance but is also interested in broader social questions about the structure and function of society. While all social deviance may be thought of as a social problem, not all social problems are social deviance.

The reason for these brief comments on social deviance is that this book, like almost all social problem texts, will include some substantive areas that are social deviance. The traditional topics such as social problems of the city, poverty, and population are included. But also usually included are the common areas of social deviance like drugs and homosexuality. The difference in presenting these two areas is that in discussing social problems a somewhat greater stress is placed on structure and function, whereas in those areas thought of as social deviance, the stress is more on the person and social interaction. But these different stresses are a matter of degree and are not absolute. In the substantive areas we will look at all areas as social problems and, wherever appropriate, we will also consider the social deviance dimension.

Basically the conceptual approach to be used in this book is that social problems may go through three developmental stages. However, many problems do not go through all three stages. The first stage is the interactional process where there is an emergence of a definition of a social problem. Many problems may never get beyond this stage. The second stage is the development of various publics that attempt to deal with the social problem. At this stage conflicting solutions are proposed; there are a number of social problems that do not go beyond this stage. The third stage is where *institutionalization* takes

place. Only a few social problems reach this stage. Once a problem is institutionalized, there is no guarantee that it will remain so. At any time a social problem may be moving through the developmental processes either towards institutionalization or towards disappearance as a social problem. Its disappearance as a social problem may be the result of its disappearance altogether, or as a result of becoming acceptable, and therefore no longer being seen as a problem. But for the most part, our conceptual approach is to look at social problems as they develop through any of the three stages. This means that the conceptual approach can have a more meaningful application for some social problems than others. There is more to say with regard to a social problem that is receiving a great deal of public attention because those who want to define it are vocal and visible—for example, abortion or drug use—while other social problems are less visible or controversial because they have become accepted, as with crime or mental illness. Still others may have less visibility because they are disappearing as social problems; for example, illegitimacy or premarital sexual behavior.

THE EMERGENCE OF A DEFINITION

In examining various social problems in later chapters we will look at their historical origins and how they have survived or failed to survive as social problems over time. Some social problems have been around a long time; for example, crime or minority group conflicts. Others have been a social problem in the past, come to be seen as less serious, but later return as a social problem. Poverty is an illustration of a social problem with this kind of history.

The intensity of a social problem for society can also vary greatly. For example, homosexuality is seen as less of a social problem today than a few decades ago, while violence appears a more intense social problem today than in the recent past. Also, for those social problems that continue to exist for a long period of time, the alleged causes and cures often change. To illustrate, in the past mental health problems were often seen as caused by sin and the treatment was repentance. In contrast, today the cause is usually explained as psychological and the cure is medical-psychiatric treatment.

A society is rarely confronted with the inevitability of some objective condition being defined as a social problem. If we look at any phenomenon defined as a social problem at different times in a given society or in different societies, we can see there is nothing inherent in a phenomenon that necessarily makes it a social problem. A social problem is not the result of some intrinsic malfunctioning of a society but rather comes about through a process of definition whereby a par-

ticular social condition is selected and identified as a social problem. As Blumer points out, a social problem does not exist for a society unless it is recognized by that society to exist. "It is a gross mistake to assume that any kind of malignant or harmful social condition or arrangement in a society becomes automatically a social problem for that society."[4]

There are many difficulties in defining a social problem. For example, there is a very subjective result when persons who are influential define a social problem. Whatever subjective elements go into the definition they tend to call for punishment of the "offenders." There are usually negative statements about those persons defined as the social problem and what should be done about them. Malcolm Spector and Kitsue suggest that we may define social problems as the activities of groups asserting complaints and that the definers claim some organization which attempts to change the conditions. The emergence of a social problem is contingent on the organization of group activities to define some conditions as a problem and to state that it should be eradicated, ameliorated, or in some way changed. These groups usually have strong notions on how this change is to be brought about.[5]

In general, the more severe the definition of the social problem, the stronger the nature of the proposed solution. What that usually means is the stronger the punishment for those held to be responsible for the problem. At the first stage we often find there is strong disagreement that a social problem exists and therefore needs solution. By the second stage there is usually agreement that a problem exists and strong points of view on what ought to be done about it. By the third stage there is a high level of agreement that a problem exists and on the response. At the third stage, there are social agencies trying to enforce actions to control the social problem or to deal with its consequences.

We can say that all problems that come to be seen as social problems must go through the first and second stages (and often into the third stage). But some dangerous or threatening actions never make it to being a social problem—for example, smoking of cigarettes or white collar crime. Some problems may get to the second stage of conflicting solutions but drop out as social problems. This would be true of hippies and militant students in the late 1960s as social problems.

Of crucial importance at the first stage is those who are defining something as a social problem—how much power and influence do they have? For example, various groups periodically go around saying the world is coming to an end on a given date but they are heeded because they have no social credibility. Or sometimes groups may have a good deal of influence about some condition being a problem but opposition groups may cancel out their influence. Such would be

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