CROSSROADS

READINGS IN SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Kathleen A. Tiemann, Editor

CROSSROADS: READINGS IN SOCIAL PROBLEMS

A CUSTOMIZED SOCIAL PROBLEMS READER

COMPILED BY

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Social Problems

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Preface

. . . There are, of course, different ways of looking at social problems, and...these perspectives reflect the tension that has existed since sociology first developed—the tension between concentrating on the problems of society, on the one hand, and on the development of sociology as a scientific discipline, on the other . . .

Earl Rubington and Martin S. Weinberg

Pearson Custom Publishing and General Editor Kathleen A. Tiemann are proud to bring you *Crossroads: Readings in Social Problems*.

Our highest goal in the creation of *Crossroads* is to give you the opportunity to show your students that there are 'different ways of looking at social problems.' A traditional way of doing this has been to expose students to central sociological ideas and examples of sociology in action through a book of readings. While *Crossroads* is a reader, it is anything but traditional due to the way it is being provided to you.

With *Crossroads*, we have endeavored to provide you with a rich and diverse archive of high quality readings in such a way that both professors and students will have easy and cost-effective access to the minds and ideas that illuminate and help explain some of the central ideas and issues in the study of social problems. Within *Crossroads* you will find over 270 readings—which we will update and expand yearly—from which you can choose only those readings that are germane to your particular course. No longer will you and your students have to be dependent on the standard large and expensive 'one-size-fits-all' college reader, which often includes more material than will be covered in the course, yet often also lacks those particular pieces that are viewed as essential by individual instructors. In addition, a classification system for each selection provides helpful information on how the selections might be organized to allow the various perspectives on the course to be pursued. Although

the primary course for which *Crossroads* was developed is the introductory social problems course, the size and quality of the database may also make it a good resource for a variety of other courses such as introduction to sociology, marriage and family, and gender studies.

However it is used, it is our ultimate hope that you will find *Crossroads* to be an essential source of readings in social problems— a source noted for its depth, breadth, and flexibility—that meets the highest scholarly and pedagogical standards.

CROSSROADS: READINGS IN SOCIAL PROBLEMS

☺ GENERAL EDITOR ☺

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Contents

The Problem with Social Problems

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Most people take a common-sense approach to social problems. That is, they believe social problems exist as observable objective conditions. However, sociologist Donileen R. Loseke argues that viewing social problems solely as objective conditions, and ignoring subjective definitions, severely limits our understanding of social problems. In this excerpt from her book, Thinking About Social Problems, *she introduces another perspective from which to view social problems—the social construction (or constructionist) perspective. She argues that by focusing on subjective definitions, we cannot only understand how people create social problems, but also how we sustain and change the meaning attributed to them.*

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*I*n this last decade of the twentieth century, the American landscape is littered with social problems. That is our topic here. I'll begin simply with a question for you, a reader of these lines: What do you think are the ten most important social problems in the United States today?

What is on your list? Perhaps poverty, AIDS, abortion, crime. Your list might include problems of "abuse" (child abuse, wife abuse, alcohol abuse, drug abuse). It could include problems of "rights" (homosexual rights, ability-impaired peoples' rights, laboratory ani-

mal rights); it could include "isms" (racism, sexism, ageism, anti-Semitism), or problems from solutions to other problems (welfare, affirmative action, busing of school children). Your list might include institutional problems, such as problems of the economy (factory shutdowns, a lack of well-paying jobs, unemployed Black teenagers), politics (illegal campaign contributions, politicians accused of sexual harassment), family (divorce, men who don't pay child support, single mothers, teenage pregnancy), education (schools that don't teach), or medicine (lack of affordable medical care, medical malpractice). Your list might include problems of individual behavior (smoking, drinking, drugs, Satanic cults, teens who gun down classmates); it might include problems of the environment (acid rain, deforestation, loss of the ozone layer).

There are three important lessons in this small exercise of naming social problems. First, there seemingly is no end to conditions in the United States that might be called social problems. Granted, the problems of crime and poverty tend to remain on the public's and policymakers' lists of problems, and racial inequality often is called this country's most enduring social problem. But after these, the list is all but endless. If given time, you could think of more than ten problems confronting the United States today. If you compared your own list to lists made by others, the number of items would grow. What we call social problems range from conditions isolated within one or another community (a specific manufacturing plant closing down, polluted water in a particular community, UFO sightings in another), to those affecting particular regions of the country (homelessness in the Midwest because of floods, the many problems of migrant workers in California, Texas, and Florida), to problems found throughout the entire nation (AIDS, inequalities, lack of low-cost day care for children), to those that cross international borders (human rights, world hunger, overpopulation, Pakistan and India testing nuclear bombs). The list is all but endless; the list is ever changing.

A second lesson in this simple exercise of naming social problems is that social problems are about disagreements. You might believe

that some of the problems I offered are not social problems at all; you might believe that I failed to mention others that are far more important. Or, you and I might be thinking about very different things even if we did agree to include something on a list of important problems. If there is a problem called "homosexual rights," for example, is this a problem of too many rights or too few? If there is a problem of "school prayer," is this a problem of too much prayer or too little? Or, we might disagree on what, particularly, should be included in the problem. Is it "date rape" if a woman says yes but means no? If a married couple who can't afford their own home must live with the wife's parents, is that an example of "homelessness?" Or, we might agree that something is a problem of a particular type and we might agree on what is included in the problem, but still we might not agree about what should be done to resolve it. So, even if we agreed that "teenage pregnancy" is a social problem, do you think we should promote sexual abstinence or provide birth control? Should we try to make life easier for teen parents so that they can remain in school, or should we make life more difficult for them in order to show others that there are negative costs to teen pregnancy? As another example, even if we agree that there is a problem of teens who take guns to school and open fire on their classmates and teachers, what causes this problem? Is it a problem of schools, of parents, of mentally unbalanced teens? Is it a problem of guns? What we should do depends on what we think causes the problem. Social problems are about disagreements.

A third lesson from this simple exercise of naming social problems is that social problems are about conditions *and* they are about people in those conditions. A social problem called crime contains two types of people: criminals and victims of crime. A social problem called poverty contains poor people. Likewise we can talk about pollution and polluters, welfare and welfare recipients, a lack of civility and uncivil people. Whether explicit and obvious (the condition of unemployment and the people who are unemployed) or implicit and subtle (the deindustrialization of America, which implies unemployed or underemployed workers), social problems include both conditions (something) and people (somebody).

3

Let me ask another question: Think of your list of the top ten U.S. social problems. What do all of these conditions have in common? What is a social problem? My guess is that when I asked you to name ten social problems you didn't think to yourself, "What does she mean?" In daily life, social problems are something like "pornography" in that few people can define the meaning of the term itself but most folks say they know it when they see it. So it goes with social problems. We rarely (if ever) in daily life think about what the term itself means but we have little trouble knowing a social problem when we see one. Our first task, then, is to define "social problem."

❧ What Is a Social Problem?

While writers of social problems textbooks can offer complex definitions of their topic matter, I want to focus on *public perceptions* where there seem to be general agreements. There are four parts to this most basic definition of social problems.

First, we use the term "social problem" to indicate that something is *wrong*. This is common sense. The name is social *problem* so the topic matter includes those conditions that are negative. In popular understanding, a social problem is *not* something like happy families, good health, or schools that succeed in educating children. "Social problem" is a term we use to note *trouble*.

The second part of the definition of social problems sounds harsh and uncaring: To be given the status of a social problem the condition must be *widespread,* which means that more than a few people must be hurt. If I lose my job, that is a *personal trouble*.[1] It's sad for me but not, necessarily, for you or for anyone else. But if something causes many of us to lose our jobs, then it is a social problem that wasn't created by (and therefore can't be resolved by) individuals. I like to talk about Jeffrey Dahmer to illustrate this. Jeffrey Dahmer was a man who killed—and ate—young boys. He showed Americans that there could be cannibals among us. I don't know about you, but I think that's certainly wrong. But Americans never mention the problem of cannibalism when we talk to people doing public opinion polls; cannibalism

isn't mentioned in social problems texts; it's not debated in the halls of Congress; there aren't any social services to reform cannibals; we aren't asked to donate money for the cause of stopping cannibalism, and so forth. Why not? Because as hideous as it was that Jeffrey Dahmer killed and ate young boys, one cannibal among us is not enough to make cannibalism a social problem. Social problems are those troublesome conditions affecting a *significant number of people.*

Third, the definition of social problem includes a dose of optimism. Conditions called social problems share the characteristic that we think it's possible they can be *changed.* They are conditions we think are caused by humans and therefore can be changed by humans. Consider the condition of death. This certainly is a troublesome and widespread condition. But humans will die and that can't be changed. So, death isn't a social problem. At the same time, think about the many other conditions surrounding death that *could* be changed: We could possibly change *when* people die (using medical technology to extend life or assisted suicide to end life) and *how* people die (care in nursing homes for elderly people, automobile or airplane crashes that cause early death). Likewise, earthquakes or tornadoes aren't social problems because nothing can be done to stop them. But we could talk about social problems surrounding natural disasters—there are potential social problems such as the cost of insurance, failures of early-warning systems for disasters, or the response of officials to such disasters. "Social problems" is a term we use when we believe the troublesome condition *can be fixed by humans.*

A social problem is a condition defined as wrong, widespread, and changeable. The fourth and final component of the definition is that " social problem" is a name for conditions we believe *should* be changed. This is very logical. If the condition is troublesome and if it occurs frequently and if it can be changed, then it follows it should be changed. Americans tend to use the name "social problems" for conditions we believe are so troublesome that they can't be ignored. To say that something is a social problem is to take a stand that *something needs to be done.*

We use the term "social problem" to categorize troublesome conditions that are prevalent, that can be changed, that should be changed. . . . With this basic definition in hand we can go on to the next question: What should we study about social problems? This question doesn't have a simple answer because social problems are about two quite different aspects of social life: They are about *objective* conditions and people (things and people that exist in the physical world) and they are about *subjective definitions* (how we understand our world and the people in it). Because it isn't immediately and obviously apparent why the objective and subjective aspects of social problems can be separated, I'll discuss each of them.

I begin with the commonsense framework of a type of person I'll call a *practical actor.* I'll use this term when I want to refer to a type of person like you or me in our daily lives. As practical actors, we aren't academics studying something, we're simply citizens living in this country. We have jobs and/or we go to school; we're concerned with getting through our days the best ways possible. We might not have the education of a nuclear scientist, but we're not stupid; we think, we use common sense. Practical actors most often are concerned with social problems as objective conditions.

❧ Social Problems as Objective Conditions and People in the Social World

When members of the American public use the term "social problems" we are most frequently interested in these as *objective* characteristics of the social environment. "Objective" means real, tangible, measurable. Within this perspective, social problems are about things we can see; they are about measurable and widespread conditions in the environment and they are about the living, breathing people who are hurt by these conditions or who create these conditions. Within this perspective, poverty is a condition where people don't have enough money to live a decent life, and poor people are people living

in this condition. Or, drunk driving is a condition where people with a high blood alcohol count drive cars, and drunk drivers are the people who do this. When we think about social problems as objective characteristics of the social environment, a series of very practical questions emerge: Who or what causes the condition? What harm is created? What types of people are harmed? What can we do to stop this harm?

When experts study social problems in this way, they rely on *objective indicators* of social problems conditions, causes, and consequences. These indicators include statistics such as those showing the numbers of school children who can't read, the numbers of crimes committed, or the number of babies born addicted to crack. There also are objective indicators of types of people who cause social problems or who are harmed by social problems. These are measures such as age, ethnicity, or gender. There also can be more complex psychological profiles: people who commit crimes are given various psychological tests and a profile of "criminals" is constructed; tests are given to heterosexuals to measure their "homophobia"; women victims of "wife abuse" are given tests and psychological profiles of "battered women" are constructed from them, and so on.

Such objective indicators are the basis of arguments in many social problems textbooks. Such texts most often are arranged in a series of chapters with titles such as "Problems in the Economy," "Problems in Government," "Problems of Inequality" (poverty, ethnicity, age, gender), "Problems of Deviance" (sexual behavior, drug use, crime), and so on. Each chapter in these texts tends to contain a more or less standardized treatment of the problem at hand. Readers see objective indicators describing the extent of the problem (how widespread it is), what people are involved in it, and the consequences of the problem for the people. Various sociological theories are used to explain the causes of the problem and this leads to statements about what can be done to resolve it.

This makes sense because practical actors are concerned with social problems as objective conditions. But now I'm going to say that while it makes practical sense to examine social problems as objective

(real, tangible) conditions involving real people, we can't stop there because it's *not enough*. Social problems are about things and people that we *worry* about and when we talk about "worry" we go beyond objectivity into the topic of *subjective definitions*. But you might ask, So what? Don't Americans worry about things we should worry about? Aren't experts qualified to tell us what we should worry about? To answer these questions we must leave the world of a common-sense practical actor in order to examine the confusions in this thing we're calling social problems. Let's look at why it's not good to simply assume that we worry about those things we should worry about.

Objective Characteristics and Subjective Worry

We can't simply assume that we worry about things we should worry about, because there is *no necessary relationship* between any objective indicators (statistics, results of tests) of social problem conditions and what Americans worry about, what politicians focus on, or what television, newspapers, or magazines present to us. This means there's no necessary relationship between the measurable characteristics of any given condition or the people in it and a definition of that condition as troublesome. So, sometimes Americans start to worry about a condition when objective indicators could be used to show that the *condition is not new*. For example, the historical record (an objective indicator) shows that what we now call "child abuse" always has been a part of human existence. Indeed, I could make a case that children in the past were much more likely to be brutally treated by their parents than are children now. Yet the term "child abuse" didn't appear in the United States until the 1960s. Or, how long did slavery exist before it was called a social problem? In these examples, objective indicators about the troublesome nature of conditions were available long before there was any worry about them. This means that we might not worry about something at one time and then start to worry about it at another time. Likewise, Americans can begin to worry about something when objective indicators could be used to show

8