

*sixth edition*



# **Social Problems**



**James William Coleman   Donald R. Cressey**

# Social Problems

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SIXTH EDITION

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# Preface

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From the first rough draft to this sixth edition, we wrote this book for students. Our objective has been not only to familiarize undergraduates with the most trying problems of their times, but also to stimulate them to think in a critical scientific way. We try to challenge the half-truths and pat answers that many people accept simply because they have heard them repeated so often, and to get students to participate in the dialogue about these issues rather than merely stand back and observe.

In preparing the sixth edition, I have tried to retain the features that have helped make this book so successful—the broad coverage, strongly worded “Debates” on controversial issues, informative graphics, consistent theoretical organization that includes a section on the major theoretical perspectives in each chapter, and a clear straightforward style of writing that does not talk down to the reader or oversimplify complex issues.

Over the years, I have heard numerous students complain that they leave social problems courses depressed and discouraged about the future. To provide a counterbalance to the gloom and doom that seem to creep into social problems classes, each chapter in this new edition now has a special box, “Signs of Hope,” that highlights some positive trend or development. Another new feature is the “Personal Perspectives” box, which seeks to get students more personally involved by providing a vivid commentary from someone directly affected by a major social problem.

In carrying out this revision, I was guided by two general objectives. The first was to revise each chapter thoroughly to make it fresh, contemporary, and relevant. Second, I made a concerted effort to see that global perspectives and gender and diversity issues are systematically incorporated into the entire book and not limited to one or two individual chapters. For instructors who have used earlier editions of this book, the following provides a brief summary of the major changes to each chapter:

**Chapter 1: Sociology and Social Problems** This chapter was heavily rewritten in order to make the discussion of the sociological approach and the theoretical perspectives clearer and more involving for students. A new section, “The Foundations of the Sociological Approach,” introduces the basic sociological terms in a more narrative fashion, rather than simply a list of terms to be learned. The section “Sociological Perspectives on Social Problems” has been redone, and the subsection “Social Psychological Perspectives” has been simplified to place primary emphasis on interactionist theory. A new section, “Applying the Socio-

logical Perspectives: An Example," which uses a homeless family as an example and analyzes it from each of the major perspectives, has been added.

**Chapter 2: Problems of the Economy** This chapter has been completely redone to take account of the new realities of today's global economy. The distinction between communitarian capitalism (e.g., Germany and Japan) and individualistic capitalism (e.g., the United States) is now used as a central organizing principle, rather than focusing on the differences between communism and capitalism as many other texts still do. Extensive new material on such topics as the decline in well-paying jobs, the growth of small business, the continuing decline in union membership, and the transformation of the world economy has been added. The section "Responding to Economic Problems" now has new subsections: "The Role of the Government: Bystander or Planner?" "Investing in the Future," and "Restructuring the Workplace."

**Chapter 3: Problems of Government** This chapter has also been extensively revised. The discussion of bureaucracy has been trimmed down and more emphasis has been placed on the issue of who runs the government. This question is now examined from three perspectives instead of just two. In addition to the pluralists and elitists, a new section on the structuralist approach has been added, along with "An Appraisal," which evaluates those three approaches. The other topics discussed in the last edition have been gathered under a new heading, "The Problems of Government," which opens with a new section, "Scandals and Corruption."

**Chapter 4: Problems of Education** There are new data on school desegregation, a new section on gender bias in schools, and new comparative data on academic performance. Another new section, "Fighting Gender Inequality," was added to the discussion of responses to educational problems. New discussions of current educational experiments—such as increasing school choice and returning more control to local communities—are also included.

**Chapter 5: Problems of the Family** This chapter was heavily revised to focus more heavily on the importance of the growing diversity of family patterns and to place more emphasis on current feminist scholarship. An extensive new section, "Understanding Family Diversity," with subsections, "Changing Family Patterns" and "Class and Ethnic Differences," was added, along with a great deal of new material in other sections.

**Chapter 6: The Poor** The focus of the revision in this chapter was on updating and simplifying the statistical profile of inequality in our society to make it more accessible to students, and on examining the current attack on the welfare system. To that end, a new section, "The Attack on Welfare," was added, along with a later section, "Improving Welfare."

**Chapter 7: The Ethnic Minorities** A new discussion of the success of the Inuit peoples in winning territorial rights in Canada is included. A new section on Jews as a North American ethnic group was added, as was a new section, "The Impact of Immigration."

**Chapter 8: Health and Illness** This chapter was thoroughly revised both to expand its coverage and to include the latest issues in the ongoing health care debate. A new section, "Physical Injuries: Suicide, Accidents, and Violent Crime," was added to the discussion of physical health. A considerable amount of new material on AIDS was also added. The section on mental disorders was significantly expanded:

A great deal of material from the new National Comorbidity Survey was included, the discussion of the causes of mental disorders was expanded, and a new section, "Classifying Mental Disorders," was added. Considerable new data about gender, class, and ethnic inequality in health care were also added. A new discussion of physician-assisted suicide is also included, as is a new section, "Restructuring the Health Care System," which examines the many proposals for changing the American health care system and the fate of the reform efforts to date.

*Chapter 9: The Young and the Old* This chapter now has greater coverage of the problems of the young. There is also a new section on the physical and psychological abuse of the elderly.

*Chapter 10: Women and Men* This chapter is significantly expanded and now includes a discussion of the role of the media in gender socialization, expanded coverage of the men's movement, and a new section on the role of language and communication in gender inequality.

*Chapter 11: Sexual Behavior* The survey data are strengthened with results from the National Health and Social Life Survey. The chapter was reorganized to create separate sections on heterosexuality and homosexuality under the general heading of "Contemporary Sexual Behavior." The overall coverage of homosexuality is expanded. "Problems and Issues" now begins with a new section, "Discrimination Against Gays and Lesbians." Considerable new material is included on the current state of the AIDS epidemic.

*Chapter 12: Drug Use* The latest data on drug use were added, along with new discussions of the effects of secondhand smoking, the recent upsurge in the use of heroin, hospital-based "chemical dependency programs," and the most recent developments in the Dutch approach to drug control.

*Chapter 13: Crime and Violence* The chapter now has an expanded treatment of property crimes, and much greater coverage of juvenile gangs. There is a new discussion of international criminal syndicates and of "three strikes" laws and other get-tough policies, and a new debate about putting more police on the streets.

*Chapter 14: The Global Divide* A new section, "Women and Children," is included in the discussion of the problems of the global inequality. There is new material on the issue of global free trade, and a new discussion of the role of the wealthy countries in promoting economic development in the post-Cold War world.

*Chapter 15: Urbanization* This chapter has been expanded to include more material from the "new urban sociology." A new section on the patterns of growth, competition, and dominance among contemporary cities was added, and the discussion of the problems of local governments has also been expanded.

*Chapter 16: Population* The latest information on population trends is included, and for the first time this chapter has a separate section on migration, which examines its growing global importance. A new discussion of the impact of the Chinese population control program is also included.

*Chapter 17: The Environment* An expanded treatment of water pollution is included, along with a new discussion of the international dumping of toxic wastes, and the latest information on nuclear power. There is also a new section on the threat to our "biological diversity."



## PREFACE

*Chapter 18: Warfare and International Conflict* There is a new discussion of the dangers of nuclear proliferation in the post-Cold War world, and of the international arms trade and America's role in it. There is a new discussion of Martin van Creveld's theories on war, and a new section, "The Prospects for Tomorrow: War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century," which examines the changing face of warfare in the contemporary era concludes the chapter.

## Supplements

### For the Instructor

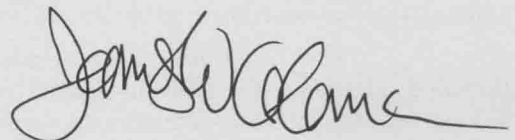
*Instructor's Manual/Test Bank* Written by text author James Coleman, the instructor's manual features detailed chapter outlines, additional resources for lecture material, class projects, recommended films, and discussion questions. The test bank offers multiple-choice, true/false, and essay questions. A computerized version of the test bank is available on demand in both IBM and Mac version.

### For the Student

*Study Guide* Prepared by Laurence Basirico of Elon College, the study guide provides a series of exercises directed toward reinforcing each chapter's learning objectives. Each chapter is designed to improve study habits and promote better comprehension of key themes and concepts. Practice tests for every chapter, including multiple-choice, short-answer, and essay questions are also featured.

Space permits the mention of only a few of the many people who contributed to this book. First and foremost are the hundreds of students who have given countless invaluable suggestions over the years. I would also like to thank the following professors who served as academic reviewers for this edition: Patricia Atchison, Colorado State University; Lucia Benequisto, McGill University; Barbara Feldman, Seton Hall University; Kurt Finsterbusch, University of Maryland-College Park; B. G. Gunter, University of South Florida; Julia Hall, Drexel University; Sam Joseph, Luzerne Community College; Robert Kleidman, Cleveland State University; Abraham Levine, El Camino College; Maralee Mayberry, University of Nevada; Judith McIlwee, Mira Costa College; Michael Miller, University of Texas at San Antonio; Stuart Miller, Washington and Jefferson College; Charles Mulford, Iowa State University; Charles O'Connor, Bemidji State University; David Prock, Baldwin-Wallace College; Judy Vuaghan, Arkansas Technical University; and J. B. Watson, Stephen F. Austin State University.

The insightful suggestions of these reviewers were a great help, as were those made by professors who used earlier editions of *Social Problems* and kindly volunteered their comments. The work of Alan McClare, Margaret Loftus, Art Pomponio, Shuli Traub, and other members of the HarperCollins team who have labored on this project over the years is also greatly appreciated. And special thanks goes to my research assistant, Linda Ramos, who helped make this a much better book.



James William Coleman

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# 1

## Sociology and Social Problems

What is a social problem?

What part do social movements play in creating social problems?

What are the sociological perspectives used to analyze social problems?

How do sociologists study social problems?

How can we evaluate the claims made about social problems?





War, poverty, discrimination, violence, overpopulation, pollution—the list of our social problems is depressingly long, so long that many people just throw their hands up in despair. Though a picture of a starving African baby or the sight of a homeless old woman may stir our concern, most of us quietly decide that there is nothing we can do to help. But is this true? Is there nothing we can do? The sociological study of social problems is founded on the belief that something can indeed be done if we first make the effort to study our problems systematically and then act on our understanding.

Politicians and community officials spend much of their careers trying to solve social problems that include everything from double parking to the threat of nuclear war. Voters select the candidates who claim to have the best solutions, but the public's ideas about many social problems are distorted or confused. While the serious study of social problems can clear up much of this confusion and misunderstanding, beginning students often have the uncomfortable feeling that the more they read, the less they understand. There are so many conflicting viewpoints, and even the results of objective, scientific research may appear to be contradictory.

**sociology** The scientific study of societies and social behavior.

**Sociology**—the scientific study of society and social behavior—provides a framework for sorting out all these facts, ideas, and beliefs. It provides the perspective and the tools we need to make sense of our social problems. Using this perspective we can develop programs to deal with our problems and evaluate their results once they have been put into effect. This is not to say, of course, that all sociologists agree on the exact causes of our social problems or how we should solve them, but fortunately such disagreements can result in a richer understanding for the student who is willing to examine all sides of the issues involved.

## What Is a Social Problem?

**social problem** (1) A condition that a significant number of people believe to be a problem. (2) A condition in which there is a sizable difference between the ideals of a society and its actual achievements.

Most people think of a **social problem** as any condition that is harmful to society; but the matter is not so simple, for the meanings of such everyday terms as *harm* and *society* are far from clear. Conditions that some people see as social problems harm some segments of society but are beneficial to others. Consider air pollution. On the one hand, an automobile manufacturer might argue that government regulation of free enterprise is a social problem because laws requiring antipollution devices on cars raise costs, decrease gasoline mileage, and stimulate inflation. On the other hand, residents of a polluted city might argue that the government's failure to outlaw noxious automobile emissions is a social problem because the smog created by such emissions harms their health and well-being. One person's social problem is another person's solution. Clearly, most people define a social problem as something that harms—or seems to harm—their own interests.

A more precise sociological definition holds that *a social problem exists when there is a sizable difference between the ideals of a society and its actual achievements*.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, social problems are created by the failure to close the gap between the way people want things to be and the way things really are. Thus, racial discrimination is a social problem because although we believe that everyone should receive fair and equal treatment, some groups are still denied equal access to education, employment, and housing. Before this definition can be

applied, someone must first examine the ideals and values of society and then decide whether these goals are being achieved. Sociologists and other experts thus decide what is or is not a problem because they are the ones with the skills necessary for measuring the desires and achievements of society.

Critics of this approach point out that no contemporary society has a single, unified set of values and ideals. When using this definition, sociologists must therefore decide which ideals and values will serve as the standard for judging whether or not a certain condition is a social problem. Critics charge that those ideals and values are selected on the basis of the researcher's personal opinions and prejudices, not objective analysis.

Another widely accepted sociological definition holds that *a social problem exists when a significant number of people believe that a certain condition is in fact a problem.*<sup>2</sup> Here "the public"—not a sociologist—decides what is or is not a social problem. The sociologist's job is to determine which problems concern a substantial number of people. Thus, in this view, pollution did not become a social problem until environmental activists and news reports attracted the public's attention to conditions that had actually existed for some time.

The advantage of this definition is that it does not require a value judgment by sociologists who try to decide what is and is not a social problem; such decisions are made by "the public." However, a serious shortcoming of this approach is that the public is often uninformed or misguided and does not clearly understand its problems. If thousands of people were being poisoned by radiation leaking from a nuclear power plant but didn't know it, wouldn't radiation pollution still be a social problem?

All the topics discussed in the chapters that follow qualify as social problems according to both sociological definitions. Each involves conditions that conflict with strongly held ideals and values, and all are considered social problems by significant groups of people. The goal of every chapter is to discuss the problem fairly and objectively. It is important to understand, however, that even selecting the problems requires a value judgment, whether by social scientists or by concerned citizens, and honest disagreements about the nature and importance of the various issues competing for public attention cannot be avoided.

## Social Problems and Social Movements

The social issues that concern the public change from time to time, and a comparison of the numerous surveys of public opinion that have been done over the years reveals some interesting trends. War and peace and various economic issues have consistently ranked high on the public's list of social concerns. Interest in other problems seems to move in cycles. Thus, concern over taxes, foreign policy, illegal drug use, and lack of religious belief and morality is high in some years and low in others. Still other social problems are like fads, attracting a great deal of interest for a few years before dropping from public attention.<sup>3</sup>

These changes have many different causes: shifts in ideals and values, the solution of an old problem, the creation of new ones. The most important forces affecting changes in public opinion are **social movements**: groups of people that have banded together to promote a particular cause. For example, none of the

**social movements** Groups of people who have banded together to promote a particular cause.





Social movements create public awareness about social problems and push the government to take action. The Native-American leaders depicted here are protesting the celebration of Christopher Columbus as a national hero.

polls in the 1930s and 1940s showed civil rights or race relations to be significant problems, even though racial discrimination was widespread and openly practiced. It was not until the civil rights movement began in the late 1950s that the polls began to reflect an interest in this problem. The problem of racial discrimination would probably have remained buried if a powerful social movement had not developed to demand that society change its ways.

Such movements tend to follow a typical pattern of development. They begin when a large number of people start complaining about some problem they share. Such a group may be composed of people who believe they have been victimized, such as African-American victims of racial discrimination or female victims of sexual discrimination; or it may be made up of concerned outsiders, such as opponents of alcohol use or those favoring the death penalty. As people with a common interest in an issue begin to talk with one another and express their feelings about the problem, individuals step forward to lead the developing movement.<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., was such a leader for the civil rights movement in the United States as Nelson Mandela was for the movement to liberate South Africa from its racial oppression.

The leader's first job is to mold separate groups of dissatisfied people into an organized political movement. The success of the movement depends on publicity, for it is only through publicity that the general public can be made aware of the problem and encouraged to do something about it. In other words, it is through publicity that the problem of a particular group becomes a social problem.

Three factors help a social movement gain public support and favorable action by government. The most important is the political power of the movement

and its supporters. If the movement's supporters are numerous, highly organized, wealthy, or in key positions of power, it is more likely to be successful.

A second factor is the strength of the movement's appeal to the people's values and prejudices. A movement to protect children from sexual abuse by adults is much more likely to gain widespread support than an effort to protect the civil liberties of child molesters.

The strength of the opposition to a movement is a third element determining its success or failure. Money is always limited, and the advocates of various social programs must compete with one another for funds. For example, few people object to the proposition that our children deserve a better education; however, a variety of opponents quickly emerge when someone suggests raising taxes to pay for improving the schools. Opposition to social movements also comes from people whose special interests are threatened by the goals of the movement. Thus, a proposal to raise the minimum wage for farmworkers is bound to be opposed by agricultural businesses.

A principal goal of many social movements is to create awareness of a social problem and then mobilize government action to resolve it; but even when a movement achieves these objectives, government action may be ineffective. Governments all over the world have created huge bureaucracies to deal with poverty (departments of welfare), health care (national health services), pollution (environmental protection agencies), and crime (police, courts, and prisons), but like all bureaucracies, these agencies are clumsy and slow-moving, and are often more concerned with their own survival than with the problems they are supposed to solve. After all, if narcotics enforcement agencies stopped all drug abuse, if police departments prevented all crime, or if mental hospitals quickly cured all disturbed people, most of the employees of these agencies would soon be out of work. Occasionally, it appears that the agencies set up to deal with a particular social problem are not actually expected to solve it. Politicians have been known to approve funds for a social program just to silence troublesome protesters, creating new agencies with impressive titles but no real power.

## Foundations of the Sociological Approach

Over the years sociologists have built up a body of basic knowledge about society and how it operates that can help us put the conflicting claims and counterclaims about our social problems in perspective. A great deal of this book is devoted to helping students develop this kind of sociological understanding of the world. Before we can proceed, however, we must look at some of the basic concepts that provide the foundation on which the sociological approach is built. (A wide variety of sociological concepts, including all the key terms defined in the margins, are included in the glossary at the end of the book. So if you run across an unfamiliar concept while you are reading be sure to check the glossary.)

As we go through our daily lives dealing with our friends, relatives, and acquaintances, most of us see a group of unique individual people, but the sociologist also sees a set of social roles. In the theater or the movies, a role is the part a particular person plays in the show. Sociologists use the term in much the same way except that the role is played in real-life social situations. A **role** is usually

**role** A set of expectations and behaviors associated with a social position.



defined as the set of behaviors and expectations associated with a particular social position (often known as a *status*). All roles—daughter, son, student, automobile driver, and countless others—offer certain rights and duties to the player. A student, for example, has the right to attend classes, to use the school's facilities, and to be graded fairly. The student also has the duty to read the texts, complete assigned work, and behave in an orderly manner. However, the way actual people carry out their roles often differs enormously from such idealized expectations.

Roles are one of the basic building blocks of our social world, and every society has countless positions with roles attached. Roles are interwoven in complex ways, so it is often impossible to understand a particular role apart from the social network in which it is embedded. How, for example, can the role of wife be defined without reference to the roles of husband, daughter, son, mother, and father? This interdependence stems from the fact that the rights of one position—wife, for example—are interlaced with the duties of other positions—husband, daughter, son. Each of us is judged by our performance as we carry out our roles. The negligent mother, the abusive father, the incompetent professor, and the disruptive student are judged harshly because they fail to meet our role expectations.

The standards we use to make such judgments are known as norms. A **norm** is simply a social rule that tells us what behavior is acceptable in a certain situation and what is not. Every human group, be it a small circle of friends or an entire society, generates norms that govern its members' conduct. An individual who violates a group's norms is often labeled a **deviant** and given some kind of formal or informal punishment. A person who violates the norm against taking the lives of others may be tried and formally punished with a prison term, whereas a person who violates the trust of his or her friends is informally punished by ridicule or exclusion from the group. Just as the various roles we play may place conflicting demands upon us, so the norms of various groups may conflict. Thus, we are sometimes placed in the uncomfortable position of being forced to violate the norms of one group in order to meet the norms of another.

Although some of the roles we play involve nothing more than a small group or a single individual, social roles tend to be woven together into larger units. **Social institutions** are relatively stable patterns of roles and behavior centered around some particular social tasks. The family, for example, is a basic institution in all known societies. It usually handles much of the duties of child rearing and provides emotional and sometimes economic support for its older members.

Social class is one of the most useful of all these basic sociological ideas. Although everyone has some idea of what it means, few of us use the concept in a very clear or consistent way. Sociologists define **social class** as a category of people with similar shares of the things that are valued in a society. People of the same social class have a similar chance in life: a similar opportunity to get an education, to receive health care, to acquire material possessions, and so on. Thus, the people you see sleeping on the heating grates outside an office building are from one social class, and the executives who speed past them on their way to the parking lot are from another.

Many nineteenth-century thinkers, including Karl Marx and his followers, defined social class solely in economic terms.<sup>5</sup> Today, most sociologists use a broader definition taken from the work of the German sociologist Max Weber.<sup>6</sup> According to Weber, the valuables a society distributes include social status and power as well as money, so to assess the class positions of an individual or group

**norm** A social rule that tells us what behavior is acceptable in a certain situation and what is not.

**deviant** (1) An individual who violates a social norm.  
(2) An individual who is labeled as a deviant by others.

**social institutions**  
Relatively stable patterns of roles and behavior centered on the performance of important social tasks.

**social class** A category of people with similar shares of the things that are valued in a society.