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Social Problems

FOURTH EDITION

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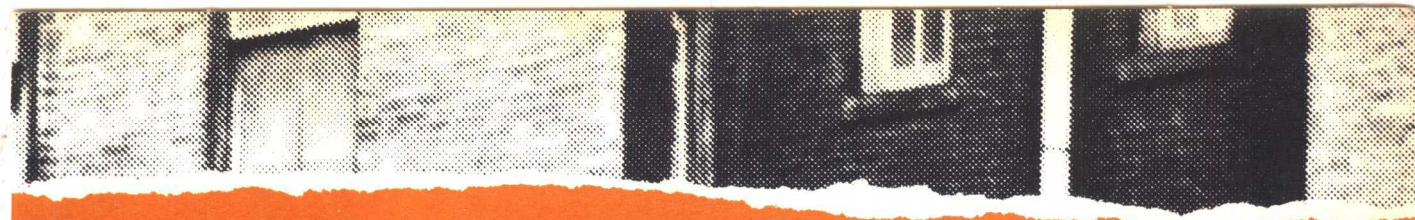

SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Fourth Edition

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PREFACE

From the rough draft for the first edition through this fourth edition, our goals in writing *Social Problems* have remained the same. We write for students. Our objectives have been to familiarize them with the crucial problems of their times and to stimulate them to think in a critical, scientific way. We try to challenge the half-truths and pat answers that are so often repeated about our social problems and to get students to participate in the dialogue about these issues rather than merely stand back and observe.

Professors familiar with the third edition will notice that I have continued the special features that helped make this book so successful—the broad coverage of social problems, the strongly worded debates, the clear and informative graphics, and the consistent theoretical organization, which includes a theoretical perspective section in each chapter.

This fourth edition is, however, different from the other revisions in two important ways. Since it has been almost 10 years since the first edition of *Social Problems,* we decided that a major rewrite, not just an update, was necessary. I worked to maintain the overall structure of the book, but the individual chapters have been extensively rewritten with the goal of making each chapter fresh, contemporary, and relevant.

The new material added during this process includes the following:

Chapter 1—new coverage of the analysis of public records and statistics as a method of sociological research

Chapter 2—the impact of growing debt and government deregulation, and new material on the current economic crisis

Chapter 3—new coverage of government spending and taxation, and corruption in defense spending

Chapter 4—new research on the quality of education and the reform proposals

Chapter 5—new studies of the changes in family structure and household inequality

Chapter 6—new information on the widening gap between rich and poor and the problems of the working poor, the homeless, and the underclass

Chapter 7—new material on the role of race and class in perpetuating ethnic injustice

Chapter 8—new information on the AIDS crisis and the shortage of health care for the poor

Chapter 9—new coverage of the problems of the young as well as the elderly

Chapter 10—new information on women's roles, feminist theory, and gender issues

Chapter 11—new coverage of sexually transmitted diseases and child molestation

Chapter 12—new research on sexism in the mental health care system, and the new APA classification system

Chapter 13—new research on the physical and social effects of drug use

Chapter 14—new material on white collar and corporate crime

Chapter 15—new coverage of suicide and the controversial new evolutionary theories of violence

Chapter 16—new coverage of the farm crisis, and new studies of suburbanization and the effects of the cutbacks in public housing

Chapter 17—new research on China's population control program and the current trends in world population

Chapter 18—new studies of the "green house effect," the destruction of the ozone layer, and the problems of desertification and deforestation

Chapter 19—new theories of revolution and new information on nuclear proliferation

These changes were, of course, planned long in advance, but another change came on quite unexpectedly—the death of Donald R. Cressey. Don was one of the great contemporary sociologists, and he is deeply missed. Although Don wasn't able to review all the changes in this edition, his influence pervades the new material as much as the old. I have tried hard to live up to the demanding standards he set and to listen to his often repeated advice to "cut the B.S. and get to the heart of the matter."

Space permits the mention of only a few of the many people who contributed to this edition. First and foremost are the hundreds of students who have given invaluable suggestions over the years. I would also like to thank the following professors who served as academic reviewers for this edition: Michael F. Morris, Pensacola Junior College; Merry Shernock, Norwich University; D. A. Rozas, Milwaukee Area Technical College; John Pease, University of Maryland; Robert Bolin, New Mexico State University; Louis Kriesberg, Syracuse University; Michael Pastor, University of Pennsylvania; Carol Handy, University of Calgary; John O'Brien, Kent State University; Sam Josephs, Luzerne County Community College; Bernard Green, Texas A&I University; and Ellen Horgan, Northeastern University.

Professors Richard Shaffer, Barbara Mori, and William Preston of the California Polytechnic State University also made extensive comments on several individual chapters. The insightful suggestions of all these reviewers were of great assistance, as were those made by the professors who used earlier editions of *Social Problems* and kindly volunteered their comments. The work of Alan McClare, Nora Helfgott, and the other members of the Harper & Row team who have labored on this project is greatly appreciated. Finally, my special thanks and gratitude go to Maureen Jung, who was the researcher for this edition. Her diligent work and her brilliant comments made this a far better book than it would otherwise have been.

James William Coleman

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- What is a social problem?
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- What are the sociological perspectives used to analyze social problems?
- What techniques do sociologists use to study social problems?
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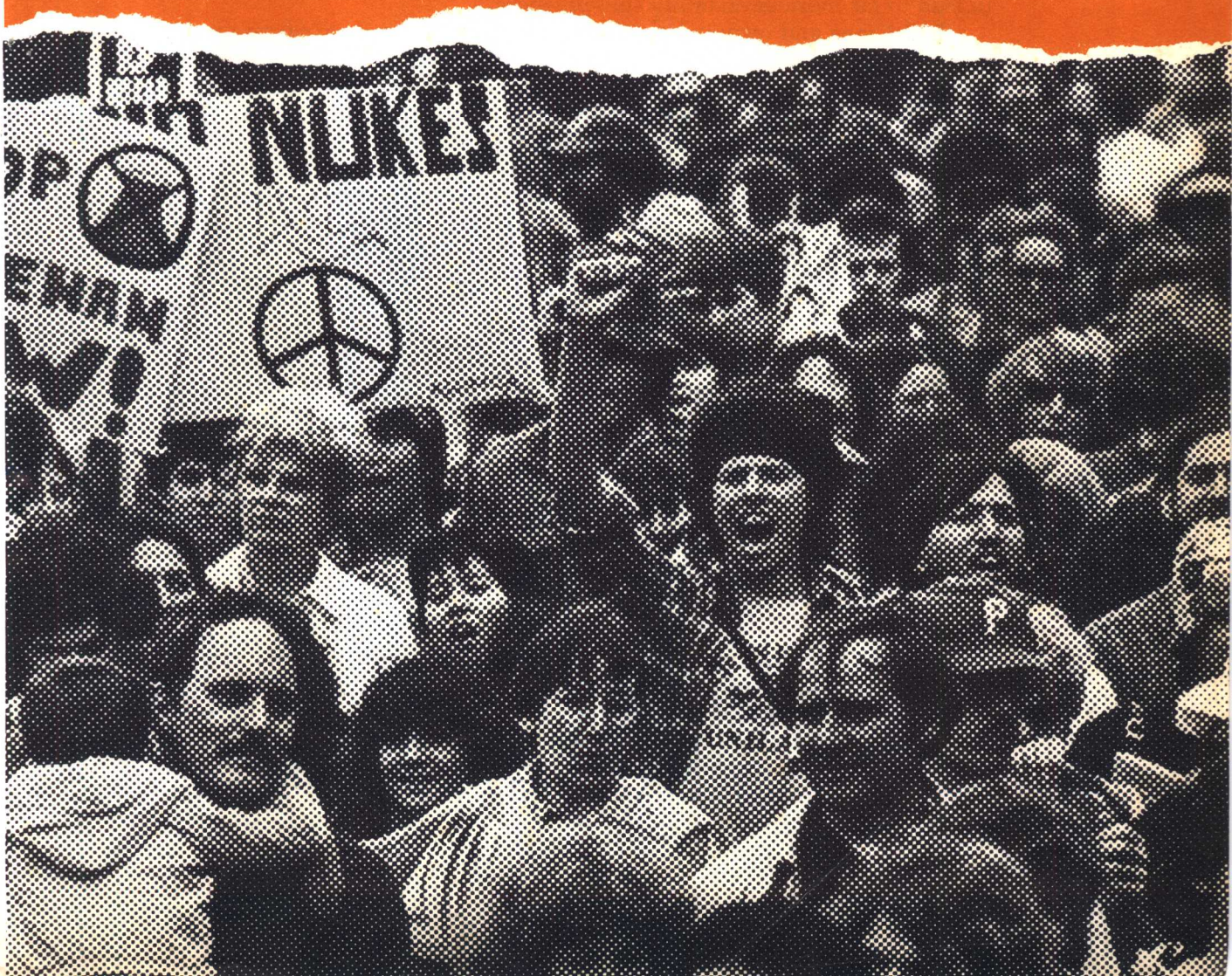
Chapter 1
SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS



Poverty, discrimination, war, violence, overpopulation, pollution—the list of our social problems is depressingly long, so long that many people throw their hands up in despair. Though a picture of a starving Asian baby or the sight of a lonely old woman may stir our concern, most of us quietly decide that there is nothing we can do to help. But is this true? Can we do nothing? 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.

Understanding our problems does not mean that they can be easily changed. Medical scientists have been able to conquer dread diseases by applying the knowledge they have built up over the years. But social problems are woven into the fabric of social relationships in ways that diseases are not; effective action to deal with them is almost always painful and difficult. However, history has repeatedly shown that failure to act is likely to lead to far more devastating consequences.

Politicians and community officials spend much of their careers trying to solve social problems that include everything from double parking to nuclear war. Voters select the candidates who claim to have the best solutions, but the average citizen's ideas about many social problems can be distorted or confused. While serious study of social problems will clear up much 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. One group sees a social problem one way and another group with conflicting interests sees it another way. Even the results of objective, scientific research may appear to be contradictory.

Sociology is a framework for sorting out all these facts, ideas, and beliefs. It provides the perspective and the tools needed to make sense of our social problems. Use of the sociological perspective helps reduce confusion in the minds of those who wish to participate intelligently in public discussions of these important issues. With 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 sociologists agree on just what a social problem is or how it can be explained. But fortunately such disagreements often result in a richer understanding for the student who is willing to examine all sides of the issues involved.

WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

Most people define a **social problem** as a 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 gas-

oline mileage, and stimulate inflation. On the other hand, residents of a city with heavy air pollution might argue that the government's failure to outlaw noxious automobile emissions is a social problem because the smog created by automobiles harms their health and well-being. One person's social problem is another person's solution. Clearly, most people define social problems as conditions that harm or seem 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.*[1] 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. According to this definition, 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 note that no contemporary society has a single, unified set of values and ideals. Instead, there are many conflicting and contradictory beliefs. Thus, sociologists must decide which ideals and values will serve as standards for judging whether a certain condition is a social problem. Critics charge that sociologists select those ideals and values on the basis of their personal opinions and prejudices, not objective analysis.

The most 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.*[2] 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 conditions are social problems. Such decisions are made by "the public." However, a serious shortcoming of this approach is that the public often is 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 problem involves conditions that conflict with strongly held ideals and values, and all are considered social problems by significant groups of people. We have tried to discuss every problem fairly and objectively. However, it is important to understand that even selecting the problems requires a value judgment, whether by so-

cial 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 examination of the Gallup poll's surveys 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, drugs, and lack of religion 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.[3]

These changes have many different causes: shifts in ideals and values, the solution of an old problem, the creation of new ones. But the most important forces affecting changes in public opinion are **social movements** that focus attention on a certain social problem. For example, none of the Gallup 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 civil rights issue would probably have remained buried if a powerful social movement had not developed.

Such movements begin when a large number of people start complaining about something they feel is a social problem. This group may be composed of people who believe they have been victimized, such as black 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 leaders step forward to lead the developing movement.[4] Martin Luther King, Jr., was such a leader for the civil rights movement, as Ralph Nader has been for the consumer movement. Jerry Falwell, leader of the Moral Majority, is another example.

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.

Social movements create public awareness about social problems and push the government to take action to resolve them.

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 elderly citizens deserve a higher standard of living. However, a variety of opponents quickly emerge when someone suggests raising taxes to pay for improving the living conditions of the elderly. 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 farm workers is bound to be opposed by farm owners.

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. A new government agency is often the means chosen to deal with a problem. Governments all over the world have created huge bureaucracies to deal with poverty (departments of welfare), health care (medicare and medicaid), pollution (the Environmental Protection Agency), and crime (police, courts, and prisons). 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 designed to solve. After all, if narcotics enforcement agencies stopped all drug abuse, if police departments pre-

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