

# SOCIAL PROBLEMS



*D. Stanley Eitzen Maxine Baca Zinn*

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SEVENTH EDITION





# ***Social Problems***

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# ***Social Problems***

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## Preface

THIS BOOK EXAMINES SUCH subjects as crime, corporate crime, racism, sexism, urban poverty, and the politics of drugs. These topics are inherently interesting. The typical book on social problems describes these phenomena separately, using a variety of explanations. Students exposed to such a melange of approaches might retain their interest in these problems, but they probably would complete the book with little grasp of how social problems are interrelated and of society's role in their creation and perpetuation. This book is different. The approach is sociological. There is a coherent framework from which to analyze and understand society's social problems.

Our overarching goal in *Social Problems*, Seventh Edition, is to capture the imagination of the readers. We want them not only to be interested in the topics but also to become enthusiastic about exploring the intricacies and mysteries of social life. We want them, moreover, to incorporate the sociological perspective into their explanatory repertoire. The sociological perspective requires, at a minimum, accepting two fundamental assumptions. The first is that individuals are products of their social environments. Who they are, what they believe, what they strive for, and how they feel about themselves are all dependent on other people and on the society in which they live. The incorporation of the sociological perspective requires that we examine the structure of society in order to understand such social problems as racism, poverty, and crime. This method, however, runs counter to the typical explanations people use for social ills. The choice is seen in an example supplied by Thomas Szasz:

Suppose that a person wishes to study slavery. How would he go about doing so? First, he might study slaves. He would then find that such persons are generally brutish, poor, and uneducated, and he might conclude that slavery is their "natural" or appropriate social status....

Another student "biased" by contempt for the institution of slavery, might proceed differently. He would maintain that there can be no slave without a master holding him in bondage; and he would accordingly consider slavery a type of human relationship and, more generally, a social institution supported by custom, law, religion, and force.

From this point of view, the study of masters is at least as relevant to the study of slavery as is the study of slaves. (Szasz, 1970: 123-124)

Most of us, intuitively, would make the first type of study and reach a conclusion. This book, however, emphasizes the second kind of study: looking at masters as well as slaves. An observer cannot gain an adequate understanding of racism, crime, poverty, or other problems by studying only bigots, criminals, and the affluent. Therefore, we focus on the social structure to determine the underlying features of the social world in an effort to understand social problems.

Because our emphasis is on social structure, the reader is required to accept another fundamental assumption of the sociological perspective (see Eitzen and Baca Zinn, 1995). We are referring to adopting a critical stance toward all social forms. Sociologists must ask these questions: How does the social system really work? Who has the power? Who benefits under the existing social

arrangements and who does not? We should also ask such questions as: Is the law neutral? Why are some drugs illegal and others, which are known to be harmful, considered legal? Why are so few organizations in the United States—which is characterized as a democracy—democratic? Is our society a meritocratic one in which talent and effort combine to stratify people fairly? Questions such as these call into question existing myths, stereotypes, and official dogma. The critical examination of society can demystify and demythologize. It sensitizes the individual to the inconsistencies present in society. But, most important, a critical stance toward social arrangements allows us to see their role in perpetuating social problems.

In conclusion, the reader should be aware that we are not dispassionate observers of social problems. Unlike the chemist, who can observe the reaction of chemical compounds in a test tube objectively, we are participants in the social life we seek to study and understand. As we examine riots in South Los Angeles, child abuse, poverty, urban blight, the O. J. Simpson court case, or the behavior of the federal government in the assault on the Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas, we cannot escape our feelings and values. The choice of topics, the order in which they are presented, and even the tone of the discourse in the book, reveal our values. We cannot, however, let our values and our feelings render the analyses invalid. All pertinent findings must be reported, not just those that support our point of view. In other words, we must be as scientific as possible, which requires a recognition of our biases so that the findings will not be invalidated.

Let us, then, briefly make our values more explicit. We oppose social arrangements that prevent people from developing their full potential. That is, we reject political and social repression, educational elitism, institutional barriers to racial and sexual equality, economic exploitation, and official indifference to human suffering. Stating these feelings positively, we favor equality of opportunity, the right to dissent, social justice, an economic system that minimizes inequality, and a political system that maximizes citizen input in decisions and provides for an adequate health care system and acceptable living conditions for all persons. Obviously, we believe that U.S. society as presently organized falls short of what we consider to be a good society. The problem areas of U.S. society are the subjects of *Social Problems*, Seventh Edition. So, too, are structural arrangements around the globe that harm people.

Ordinarily, when revising a book for the sixth time, the task is rather routine—updating and other cosmetic changes with, perhaps, a new chapter. Not so, this time. Since the sixth edition was published in 1994 (and actually written a year earlier), several important trends have intensified, requiring a significant revision. For example:

- The chance for nuclear war among the superpowers is remote, while the chances for localized wars and terrorism have increased.
- Acts of domestic terrorism within the U. S. by U. S. citizens are increasing.
- The magnitude of domestic and global environmental problems has accelerated.
- Racial and ethnic tensions throughout the world and within the United States have escalated.

- The world has added 300,000,000 people, most of whom are poor.
- We are reminded almost daily of the cozy relationship between money and politics.
- The large cities of the U.S. are more troubled with growing dependent populations, shrinking job markets, increased racial tensions, and declining economic resources to meet their problems. For the most part, the cities have been abandoned by federal and state governments, as well as by the political parties.
- The economy continues its massive transformation, adding workers in some areas and displacing workers in others. Among other consequences, the middle class continues its decline in numbers.
- The Republican-controlled Congress has altered very significantly the way government seeks to solve social problems.

This seventh edition of *Social Problems* considers each of these important trends and events and others as well. Specifically, a new chapter on national security has been added. This chapter addresses the traditional issues of national security and new domestic ones (domestic terrorism and the growing number of poor children, especially in the inner city). Another chapter has been added that concentrates on two major demographic shifts: the new immigration and the growing elderly population. The chapter on global inequality has been changed considerably to reflect the ever-greater magnitude of this problem in the context of world population growth. Other chapters have been reorganized to include new data, current research, and new interpretations. Three types of panels are included in most of the chapters: (1) "Voices," which provide the personal views of those affected by a social problem; (2) "Other Societies, Other Ways," which illustrate how other societies deal with a particular social problem. Societies included in these panels are those in Sweden, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Japan. This global emphasis is also found in panels and tables that compare the U.S. with other nations on such topics as crime/incarceration, medical care, and education; and (3) "Looking Toward the Future," which examine the trends concerning the social problem under consideration as we move toward the twenty-first century.

At the end of each chapter there are a glossary, chapter review, and selected bibliography.

To summarize, this seventh edition of *Social Problems* improves on the earlier editions by focusing more deliberately on four themes: (1) the structural sources of social problems; (2) the role of the United States in global social problems; (3) the centrality of class, race, and gender as sources of division, inequality, and injustice; and (4) the critical examination of society.

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#### ■ A NOTE ON LANGUAGE USAGE

In writing this book we have been especially sensitive to our use of language. Language is used to reflect and maintain the secondary status of social groups by defining them, diminishing them, trivializing them, or excluding them.

For example, traditional English uses masculine words (man, mankind, he) when referring to people in general. Even the ordering of masculine and feminine, or of Whites and Blacks, within the discussion or the reference to one category consistently preceding its counterpart, subtly conveys the message that the one listed first is superior to the other. In short, our goal is to use language so that it does not create the impression that one social class, race, or gender is superior to any other.

The terms of reference for racial and ethnic categories are changing. Blacks increasingly use the term African American, and Hispanics often refer to themselves as Latinos. In *Social Problems*, Seventh Edition, we use each of these terms for each social category because they often are used interchangeably in popular and scholarly discourse.

Also, we do not use the terms America or American society when referring to the United States. America should be used only in reference to the entire Western hemisphere—North, Central, and South America (and then in the plural, Americas). Its use as a reference only to the United States implies that the other nations of the Western hemisphere have no place in our frame of reference.

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