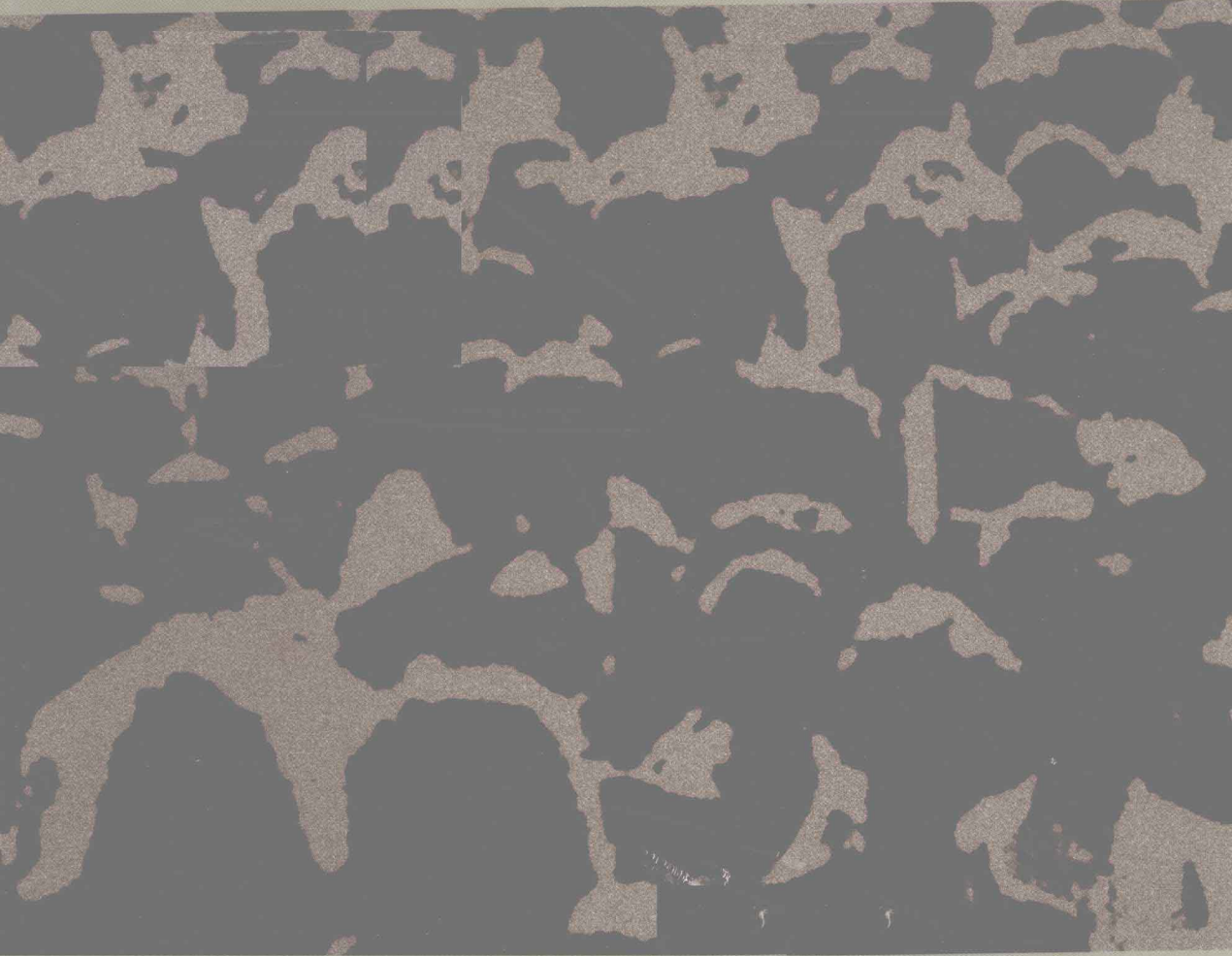


SOCIAL PROBLEMS



Causes, Consequences, Interventions



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Social Problems

Causes, Consequences, Interventions

Second Edition

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*This book is dedicated to
Flea, Andrea, Bonnie, and Michael
Dave, Keaghan, and Kylie
Robin, Becca, Matt, and David
and
Carol, Michael, and Steven*

Preface

We wrote *Social Problems: Causes, Consequences, Interventions* to serve as an introduction to a wide range of social problems. We have organized the chapters in a consistent format, beginning with the definition and prevalence of the social problem covered, followed by levels of causation, consequences, and interventions. Each chapter also includes a discussion of the future of the social problem and a summary of its major substantive issues. Concluding each chapter are discussion questions, references, and a list of relevant World Wide Websites.

An *Instructor's Resource Guide/Testing Program* (available in book form or on disk) and a website for the text are also available (<http://www.bridgew.edu/~wcarroll/socialproblems.htm>). The website includes updated data, additional teaching resources, and suggested student projects.

We have tried to make this a lively, readable text that introduces students to a variety of sociological viewpoints on social problems. We analyze every topic from individual, cultural, and structural viewpoints. This allows an instructor to compare explanations which incorporate such structural factors as social class and economic structure to those which focus on cultural factors or on biological and psychological characteristics of the individual. Although *Social Problems* is eclectic, it emphasizes the importance of class, gender, and race for understanding social problems. The text focuses on the United States, but incorporates comparative, cross-cultural material when appropriate.

Unique features of this book include:

- A consistent approach that offers possible solutions to social problems, not just explanations.
- Full chapters on cities and urban decline, and on food and population.
- Coverage of such contemporary issues as: the criminalization of pregnancy, domestic violence as a health issue, age discrimination, and sexual orientation and homophobia.

To stimulate student interest, we begin each chapter with an "In the News" section drawing on recent newspaper articles related to the social problem covered in the chapter. The discussion of newspaper articles for this purpose illustrates the everyday occurrence of social problems and helps students link abstract ideas to the concrete circumstances of everyday life.

Every chapter also includes "Closer Look" inserts to heighten student interest by describing ongoing efforts to resolve current social issues. Some inserts highlight the impact of social policy, while others summarize research which has historical importance or challenges traditional, or "common sense" assumptions. We hope that the "In the News" and "Closer Look" sections stimulate discussion and debate on controversial aspects of social problems.

We have sought to provide a book that offers a broad representation of topics, but is not an encyclopedic social problems text. However, the text is comprehensive enough to serve as the sole text for a semester or quarter course. Because many instructors prefer not to rely on a single text, the book is concise enough that an instructor may supplement it with additional materials.

To the Student

We hope you learn a lot from this book, but even more, we hope it stimulates your own thinking and provokes your curiosity. The problems covered are among the most important facing our society today.

In writing this book we tried not to make too many assumptions about who you are. Of course we know you're smart and curious or you wouldn't be taking a social problems course. Beyond that, we did not make assumptions about your age, gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or type of school. Some of you are 18–22 years old, but many fall into other age categories. Some of you attend community colleges, while others are enrolled in four-year colleges and large universities. The increasing diversity of American society and of American higher education should be reflected in texts, which do not leave any groups of students feeling left out. Please let us know what you think about this or any other aspects of the text, by emailing either Walter Carroll (wcarroll@bridgew.edu) or Kim Mac Innis (kmacinnis@bridgew.edu). We would appreciate receiving your comments, criticism, praise, or suggestions.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Understanding Social Problems

In the News: An End to Social Problems?

The First Edition of this book, published in 1983, started with a newspaper article entitled "President declares all problems solved." According to the article, which was dated July 4, 2107, the President of the United States had commemorated the Fourth of July by declaring an end to all social problems. "Poverty, inequality, and deviance—so prevalent during the 1980's—no longer existed." The minister of mental health released studies showing that "our citizens have never been so happy." The last paragraph of the bogus article did introduce a somber note: "Later in the day, President Ryder also announced that all chronic complainers have been summarily shot."

The year 2107 is still a long way off, but the economic news in the United States in the late 1990s seems good. Unemployment and inflation are both down, and other indicators of economic well-being are rising. Certainly, at least on some counts, the United States economy seems healthy. What about the society? How healthy is it? Does improving economic health suggest that social problems in the United States have been solved? How close are we to solving our major social problems?

According to a New York Times article, a "report says health of society lags behind that of economy" (Kannapell 1997). Since 1985, the Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy has produced the Index of Social Health. In compiling the Index, the Fordham Institute combines statistics on sixteen areas of social life. The statistics used include measures of drug abuse, average wages, the percentage of children in poverty, teenage suicide, poverty among the elderly, and the gap between rich and poor.

The Index does indicate that the nation's social health is improving. However, Marc L. Miringoff, the institute's director, did not find the overall picture in the 1990s very encouraging. "Of the eight worst years since 1970, six have been in this decade. The social health of the nation has not kept up with the recovery of the economy." Another recent survey of social conditions found the United States ranking 27th of 160 countries. This report was based on 45 measures in 10 areas of social development, including health, education, and social conflict. Richard J. Estes, a professor of social work at the University of Pennsylvania, conducted the study. He noted that the "relatively low" standing of the United States was due to the "persistence of poverty among 37 million Americans, as well as deteriorating cities, racism, stagnation in social progress for women, and growing hostility toward the poor, the elderly, and recent immigrants" (McDonald 1997).

These surveys raise many questions about social problems in the United States. Although social conditions have clearly been improving, the "end of social problems" does not seem to be in sight. To understand social problems we can start by considering what a social problem is and how it is defined.

What Is a Social Problem?

At first glance, the definition of a **social problem** may appear obvious. Violent crime, poverty, teenage suicide, drug abuse, divorce—these issues are commonly mentioned as concerns of the American people and could be con-



sidered social problems. Several difficulties, however, arise in defining what is, and what is not, a social problem.

One difficulty is *who* decides whether a problem exists. While some individuals or groups may view a condition as a problem, others may be indifferent or actually view the phenomenon as desirable. Pro-life (anti-abortion) groups, for example, see abortion as the killing of a child while pro-choice (pro-abortion) advocates consider it a humane technique that limits unwanted births and allows women control over their bodies.

No society has a single, unified set of values, and because of differences in perspectives and interests, it is unclear who has, or should have, the power of defining a problem. An environmentalist may express concern over air pollution, while an automobile manufacturer may protest pollution-control regulations. Parents may complain about excessive television violence and ask for a television rating system, while broadcasters challenge programming constraints as assaults on free speech and resist setting up a rating system. Do you accept the position of the anti- or the pro-abortionist? The environmentalist or the industrialist? The media consumer or the producer?

These are some of the tough questions that arise in the sociological study of social problems. You have probably thought about some of these questions. Undoubtedly you have strong opinions on some of them and you may be unsure about others. In reading this book you will learn how sociologists look at and try to understand social problems. More important, you will learn to think systematically about social problems yourself and develop your own perspective on them.

To understand social problems it helps to cultivate what sociologist C. Wright Mills called the **sociological imagination**, which “enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (Mills 1959:6). This may sound complicated, but it basically means learning to see how your own individual life experience (“biography”) is affected by and interrelated with your society and how it changes (“history”). You can use the sociological imagination to place your individual experience in a broader social and historical context.

Sociology is essential for understanding the connections between your own individual experience and the larger structures of your society because it is the scientific study of human social relationships. Those social relationships vary widely in scale, from interaction between two people to global social processes. Sociologists have studied how we cooperate with each other in face-to-face interaction to create a shared, predictable social life (Goffman 1959), what life is like in working-class families (Rubin 1976, 1994), social organization in large corporations (Kanter 1977), the relationships between work and family life (Hochschild 1989), and the creation of a **world system** of societies (Wallerstein 1974).

Regardless of the scale of human social relationships that they study, most sociologists agree with the central insight of sociology: that social interaction and social relationships crucially shape people’s lives, their ideas, and their behavior. Scott Sernau (1997) suggests that sociology has essentially two main topics: social interaction and social organization. **Social interaction** tends to be the focus of **micro-sociology**, the study of small-scale interaction; **social organization** refers to the study of larger-scale social units and processes characteristic of **macro-sociology**. Whether sociologists focus on social interaction or on social organization tends to affect how they define social problems and how they decide that a social problem exists.



Some sociologists argue that a social problem exists when a *significant number* of people *believe* that a certain condition is, in fact, a problem (Spector and Kitsuse 1973). By stressing the phrase “significant number,” this position makes a distinction between what Mills called a “private trouble”—a problem for an individual or for scattered individuals—and a “public issue”—a condition defined as a problem by large numbers of people (Mills 1959).

This position also focuses on the importance of belief and therefore presents a **subjective view** of social problems. If people believe that a problem exists, it exists; and unless people define a condition as a problem, it cannot be so considered. Sociologists who emphasize social interaction tend to take this point of view and are sometimes referred to as **subjectivists**.

Others reject the view that a significant number of people can define problems by their beliefs. Because the public is frequently uninformed or misinformed, relying on public perceptions may lead to error. The use of crack cocaine, for example, has been seen as a more serious problem than the use of powder cocaine, but much evidence suggests that this is not the case (Reinarman and Levine 1997). Poverty and racism, on the other hand, may be overlooked as social problems because the primary victims lack power or wealth. Should we then not see poverty and racism as social problems?

The position called the objective or **objectivist view** focuses on conditions that experts, such as sociologists, define as problems even though many people are initially unaware that a problem exists. The role of experts or professionals varies depending on whether the perspective is subjective or objective. With a subjective approach, a sociologist’s job is to determine which problems are of public concern and how many people are upset. These social problems analysts often study how some condition or social arrangement becomes defined and accepted as a social problem. As an example, consider welfare reform, a topic that has received considerable attention in recent years. A social problems analyst within the subjective tradition might study how people came to perceive flaws in the welfare system and to see it as a social problem in need of reform.

With an objective approach, a sociologist’s job is to identify actual or potential problems and to educate the public as to their dangers. The goal is still public awareness of an undesirable condition, but with the objective approach the sociologist helps to create such awareness rather than merely to measure its existence. Another fundamental task for sociologists working within objective approaches is to investigate how some objective condition or social arrangement developed in the first place and why it continues to exist. For example, sociologists using objective approaches would ask how and why the welfare system was created in the first place and why many aspects of it are viewed as problems. Macro-sociologists, who emphasize social organization, are more likely to take an objective approach.

Remember that those who take the subjective approach emphasize that the general public defines social problems. Taking this perspective leads to three troubling questions: (1) What happens if different segments of the public have differing views as to whether a condition is a social problem? (2) How many people must view a condition as undesirable before it becomes a social problem? (3) What occurs if differences of opinion exist between lay people and professional social scientists over whether a condition is a problem.