

Social Problems

SECOND EDITION

George Ritzer



SOCIAL PROBLEMS

SECOND EDITION

George Ritzer

*UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
COLLEGE PARK*

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AS
SOCIAL PROBLEMS
by Rodney Stark



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To Mary

Second Edition

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PREFACE

This book is a dramatic revision of *Social Problems*, compiled and edited by Rodney Stark, and published by Random House in 1975. Although most of the text has been rewritten, I chose to work within the confines of the original text for several reasons. For one thing, Stark had used a format for organizing each chapter that was not only popular and extremely useful, but also similar to one that I had developed in sociological theory.¹ This format uses “levels of reality” to analyze the sources of each of the social problems discussed in the book. Although I have simplified the original schema by reducing it from five levels to three (individual, social psychological, and sociological), the basic pattern for analyzing the sources of social problems remains the same as the one used in the previous edition. In addition, I was comfortable with, and continue to employ in this edition, the basic structure devised for each of the chapters analyzing a social problem. That format involves dividing each chapter into three parts. Part One deals with a description of the problem. Part Two analyzes the sources of the problem using the levels of reality outlined above. Part Three analyzes a variety of responses to the problem under discussion.

Another attraction of the original text is that while Stark developed and defined the basic format, each chapter was written by an expert in the problem being analyzed. The result was that the substantive content of each chapter was of a much higher quality than is usually found in social problems texts. Coherence and continuity in the text was provided by the fact that each author wrote his/her chapter in accord with the structure developed by Stark. The distinguished set of authors associated with the original edition included Ronald L. Akers, Robert C. Atchley, James E. Blackwell, Katharine Briar, Scott Briar, Archie Brodsky, How-

ard S. Erlanger, Michael J. Hindelang, William Kornblum, Stanton Peele, Lynne Roberts, Rodney Stark, Marijean Suelzle, R. Jay Turner, and Rita Roffers Weisbrod.

Thus, I felt that in the original edition I had a book that I was comfortable revising because of its basic structure and one that was well worth revising because of the high quality of its content. However, the book was in need of substantial revision since it was written a decade ago and much has changed both in terms of social problems and the sociological study of those problems. The fact is that aside from the basic structure little remains from the original text. Most chapters have been substantially revised. Some chapters have been dropped. New chapters have been added. In other words, outside of the basic structure, this is in most senses an almost entirely new book, not a simple revision of an earlier edition.

I have done most of the writing and rewriting of this edition on my own. Following the pattern laid down in the original edition, however, several experts were recruited to write new chapters or, in one case, revise an existing chapter. The new chapters are *Urban Problems*, written by Richard Krannich of Utah State University; *Problems in Health Care*, written by Peter Conrad of Brandeis University; and *Problems of the International Political Economy* by Robert J. Antonio and Patrick Ackard of the University of Kansas. In addition, I have written new chapters on *Family and Sexual Violence* and *Problems of the Economy and in the Workplace*. Finally, Jill Quadagno of the University of Kansas wrote an almost total revision of the chapter on *Aging and Ageism*. Thus, of the sixteen chapters in this book, six are totally new chapters.

In many senses this is a collaborative effort involving not only myself, but also Rodney Stark, the authors of the chapters in the original text, the authors of new (or dramatically revised) chapters in this edition, as well as a slew of outside reviewers brought in by Random House to review the original edition and the components of this edition.

¹George Ritzer, *Toward an Integrated Sociological Paradigm: The Search for an Exemplar and an Image of the Subject Matter* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1981); *Sociological Theory* (New York: Random House, 1983).

Reviewers for the original edition by Rodney Stark were John Clausen, Travis Hirschi, and Wilson Record of the University of Washington, James McMillin of California State College at Bakersfield, and Larry Frye of St. Petersburg Jr. College, Florida. For this most recent edition there were both reviewers and consultants for individual chapters. The consultants were: Paul M. Roman of Tulane University, Norman Yetman of the University of Kansas, Toby Parcel of the University of Iowa, Riley Dunlap of Washington State University, James Blackwell of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, Erich Goode of SUNY at Stony Brook, Alan J. Lizotte of Indiana University, Charles Wellford of the University of Maryland, William C. Cockerham of the University of Illinois, Judith Wittner of Loyola University of Chicago, Kenneth Kammeyer of the University of Maryland, J. Ross Eshleman of Wayne State University, Jim Robbins of McGill University, Linda George of the Duke University Medical Center, Neil A. Weiner of the University of Pennsylvania, Scott Briar of the University of Washington, Arthur St. George of the University of New Mexico, and Professor Stanton Peele.

Reviewers for the second edition were: Ira M. Wasserman of Eastern Michigan University, Patrick M. Horan of the University of Georgia, James Orcutt of Florida State University, Barbara Johnston of North Hennepin Community College, Michael Grimes of Louisiana State University, William Feigelman of Nassau Community College, Robert Lovely of Indiana University Northwest, Vern L. Bengston of the University of Southern California, Walter E. Clark of St. Louis Community College, David L. Westby of Pennsylvania State University, Christopher Hurn of the University of Massachusetts, Camille Miller of the University of Virginia, Minta Littlejohn of Illinois Central College, Paul M.

Roman of Tulane University, Rosamund Robbert of Western Michigan University, Joseph Schneider of Drake University, Paul Montagna of Brooklyn College, Paul Chalfant of Texas Tech, Kurt Tausky of the University of Massachusetts, Ray Rist of the Institute for Program Evaluation in Washington, D.C., David P. Aday of the College of William and Mary, Marvin Krohn of the University of Iowa, Raymond Bradley of the University of Minnesota, Larry Baron of the University of New Hampshire, James E. Rosenbaum of Northwestern University, Naomi Aronson of Northwestern University, Vicki McNickle Rose of Southern Methodist University, Irving Tallman of Washington State University, Hilary Silver of Brown University, and Donald Light of the College of Dentistry and Medicine of New Jersey.

In the end, however, this edition is my responsibility, as well as that of the new authors brought in to help with it. Rodney Stark has not been involved in this revision. The same is true of most of the authors in the first edition chapters, although in some cases they have served as reviewers for the current edition. Special thanks must be given to the people at Random House, especially Barry Fetterolf for suggesting this project and Sylvia Shepard for her enormous contributions as developmental editor for the book.

In many ways, this is a highly unusual text. The way in which the original edition was put together was innovative. This edition builds on those innovations, as well as the many talents utilized in the first edition. In addition, a number of new talents and ideas have been brought to bear on the second edition. The result, I believe, is a social problems text that is unlike any of its competitors.

George Ritzer

CONTENTS

Preface

iii

Part II Deviant Behavior

Part I Analyzing Social Problems

1 Social Problems and Social Science 3

What Are Social Problems? 4

The Social Careers of Social Problems 8

A Sociological Framework for Analyzing Social Problems 14

Causes and Consequences of Social Problems 15

Responses to Social Problems 22

Sociological Theories 22

Plan of the Book 32

Summary 33

Suggested Readings 34

2 Doing Social Problems Research 37

Getting Busted: Participant Observation 38

Delinquency Treatment: The Experimental Method 48

The Causes of Delinquency: Survey Research 56

The Invention of Delinquency: Historical Research 64

Summary 69

Suggested Readings 70

3 Problems with Drugs and Alcohol 75

Drugs: Some Basic Definitions; Types of Drug Dependence 75

Part I: The Problem 77

Part II: Causes and Consequences 88

Individual Level 88

Social-Psychological Level 93

Sociological Level 95

Part III: Responses 97

Individual Responses 97

Social-Psychological Responses 100

Sociological Responses 102

Summary 105

Suggested Readings 106

4 Mental Illness 111

Part I: The Problem 112

Part II: Causes and Consequences 121

Individual Level 121

Social-Psychological Level 129

Sociological Level 131

Part III: Responses 134

Summary 140

Suggested Readings 141

5 Crime	147	Social-Psychological Level	233
<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	147	Sociological Level	237
<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	158	<i>Part III: Responses</i>	243
Individual Level	158	Summary	255
Social-Psychological Level	163	Suggested Readings	256
Sociological Level	165		
<i>Part III: Responses to Crime</i>	168	<i>Part III Problems of Conflict and Inequality</i>	
The Correctional System and Its Failings	172		
Summary	179	8 Majority and Minority Relations	261
Suggested Readings	180	<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	262
		<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	277
6 Family and Sexual Violence	185	Sociological Level	277
Family Violence	187	Individual Level	285
<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	187	<i>Part III: Responses</i>	289
<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	190	Summary	292
<i>Part III: Responses</i>	195	Suggested Readings	293
A Note on Incest	198		
Rape	201	9 Gender Inequality	299
<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	202	<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	299
<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	204	Inequality: The Changing Conditions	299
Individual Level	204	<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	311
Social-Psychological Level	207	Individual Level	311
Sociological Level	209	Social-Psychological Level	316
<i>Part III: Responses</i>	211	Sociological Level	319
Summary	216	<i>Part III: Responses</i>	326
Suggested Readings	218	Summary	335
		Suggested Readings	336
7 Aging, by Jill Quadagno	225		
<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	225	10 Poverty	341
<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	231	<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	342
Individual Level	231	<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	349

Sociological Level	349	13 Urban Problems, by Richard S. Krannich	453
Social-Psychological Level	360	<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	454
Individual Level	363	<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	462
<i>Part III: Responses</i>	365	Sociological Level	462
Summary	371	Social-Psychological and Individual Levels	471
Suggested Readings	373	<i>Part III: Responses</i>	478
 <i>Part IV Problems of Human Progress</i>		Summary	488
 11 Problems of the Economy and in the Workplace	379	Suggested Readings	489
Changes in the Labor Force	379	 14 Population Problems	495
<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	383	<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	496
<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	386	<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	508
Sociological Level	386	Sociological Level	510
Individual Level	395	Individual Level	516
<i>Part III: Responses</i>	399	<i>Part III: Responses</i>	517
Macrolevel Responses	400	Summary	524
Microlevel Responses	407	Suggested Readings	525
Summary	409	 15 Ecological Problems	531
Suggested Readings	410	<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	531
 12 Problems in Health Care, by Peter Conrad	415	<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	542
<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	415	Sociological Level	542
<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	425	Individual Level	550
Sociological Level	425	<i>Part III: Responses</i>	552
Social-Psychological Level	436	Summary	558
<i>Part III: Responses</i>	438	Suggested Readings	559
Summary	445	 16 Militarism and International Political Economy, by Robert J. Antonio and Patrick J. Akard	563
Suggested Readings	447	<i>Part I: The Problem</i>	565

<i>Part II: Causes and Consequences</i>	571	Summary	604
Approaches to Development and Underdevelopment	571	Suggested Readings	606
The Economics of Development	578	Appendix: Review of Basic Sociological Concepts	611
East-West Conflict and Third-World Instability	588	Index	617
<i>Part III: Responses</i>	597	About the Author	632

I

*Analyzing
Social Problems*

Aristotle: When one is running fast, it is hard to divert the whole body from its impetus in one direction to some other movement. 330 B.C.



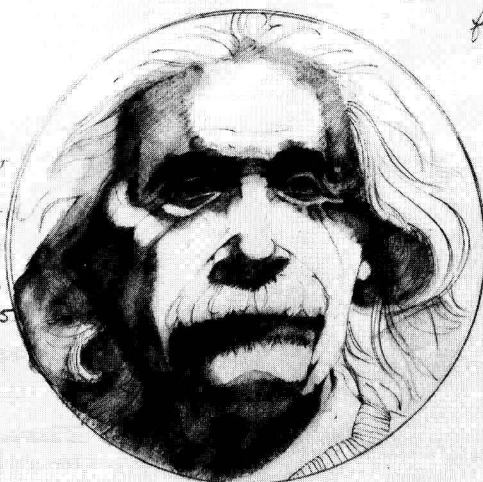
"The progress of a science is proven by the progress toward solution of the problems it treats. It is said to be advancing when laws, hitherto unknown, are discovered, or when at least new facts are acquired modifying the formulation of these problems even though not furnishing a final solution."

Emile Durkheim

Newton: Change of a body's motion is proportional to any force acting upon it, and in the exact direction of that force. 1687



Einstein: Motion, time, and distance are not absolute, but relative to moving frames of reference. 1905



Bruce M. Dean

1

Social Problems and Social Science

We all know what social problems are, right? There is no question in our minds that the following *are* social problems:

- Supermarkets are robbed.
- Joggers are mugged in early morning runs through the park.
- Computer geniuses use their expertise to illegally transfer millions of dollars to their own accounts.
- United States Senators and Representatives take bribes from FBI agents posing as foreign officials.
- Presidents of the United States try to cover up illegal governmental activities.
- The city of Los Angeles chokes through a fifth consecutive day of a smog alert.
- An epidemic of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) sweeps through the United States and panics its citizens.
- The unemployment rate approaches 20 percent for the black population as a whole and 50 percent for black teenagers.
- The likelihood of nuclear war increases as stockpiles of increasingly advanced nuclear weapons grow.
- The elderly struggle to survive by foraging through litter baskets.
- Achievement scores in public schools plummet.
- Heroin addiction begins to become a major problem not only in the lower classes, but in all social classes.
- Family violence, in the form of battered spouses, battered children, and incest victims, attracts greater public attention.

The list, of course, could go on and on, but little would be gained by adding to it. We all know that *these* are social problems, but does that mean that we always know what social problems are? Before answering

this question you might be interested to know that not too many years ago narcotics abuse was *not* thought of as a social problem. During the late nineteenth century many patent medicines for sale in this country contained narcotics, and many Americans were as dependent on drugs as are today's drug addicts. For a long time no one considered this state of affairs a problem. Even after many people thought of drug abuse as a problem, it was not yet a *social* problem. It did not become one until people who regarded drug abuse as harmful began to organize and agitate that something be done about drug use. Beyond the case of drug abuse, you might be surprised by the following list of items that were *not* considered, at least at some point in recent

history, to be social problems, or at least potential sources of social problems:

- ___ The creation of the atomic bomb.
- ___ The invention of the automobile.
- ___ The migration of massive numbers of people to urban areas.
- ___ The definition of a woman's place as being in the home.
- ___ Racial segregation.
- ___ The use of cocaine in Coca-Cola.
- ___ Cigarette smoking.
- ___ Population growth.
- ___ Being overweight.
- ___ Use of asbestos as a building material.



A new social problem, unknown prior to the 1980s, is Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Here a gay organization seeks to mobilize people to urge the government to divert funds from warfare to health care for AIDS victims. (Bettye Lane/Photo Researchers)

With the hindsight of history, as well as recent scientific research, we now know that all the items on this list either produced social problems or are considered themselves to be social problems. To complicate matters further, we even have conditions that in the past were considered to be social problems, but which are now less and less likely to be viewed in this way. The best examples of this are in the realm of human sexuality. In the not too distant past there was a strong consensus in American society that the following were social problems: homosexuality, premarital sex, extramarital sex, and abortion. Although there is considerable variation in attitudes toward each, it is clear at least that a significant proportion of the population no longer regards these sexual issues as social problems. At the same time, a new social problem (AIDS), highly linked to human sexuality (especially homosexuality), has arisen in the 1980s. Thus, the question of what phenomena are (or are not) social problems is not as clearcut as it first appears. In order to be better able to answer this question we need a definition of social problems.

WHAT ARE SOCIAL PROBLEMS?

We may define *social problems* as *social conditions of which a significant proportion of the population is aware, defines as social problems, and sees in need of remedial collective action. These social conditions have causes and consequences at the individual, social-psychological, and/or sociological levels.*

1. *Social problems are social conditions.* By this, we mean simply that social problems involve a relatively large number of

people, perhaps even society as a whole. Conversely, purely personal problems are *not* social problems.¹ An individual who suffers losses because of bad investment decisions is faced with a personal problem, but an individual who loses money in the stock market as a result of a stock market crash resulting from an economic depression is confronted by a social problem. In the case of a depression, the individual is not alone, but is one of many suffering from larger economic problems.

2. *Social problems are caused by individual, social-psychological, and/or sociological factors.* At the individual level, physiological and psychological abnormalities may cause people to become mentally ill, drug addicts, or criminals. Such individuals, especially taken together, cause social problems for large numbers of people, as well as for the society as a whole. At the social-psychological level we can say that people learn certain kinds of behaviors (for example, crime techniques, methods of drug use) from others and that these learned behaviors cause problems for the larger society. Also at the social-psychological level, it is possible to argue that groups of people, rather than individuals, often cause problems for society. In the area of crime, for example, juvenile gangs and organized crime cause society considerable difficulties.

Given the perspective of this book, the *most important* causes of social problems are to be found at the sociological level. Among other things, we can say that the nature of the American economy causes unemployment, the city causes many problems for those who live in it, and the system of social stratification has adverse effects on those who are at the bottom of that hierarchy.

Although we have discussed the indi-

vidual, social-psychological, and sociological causes of social problems separately in this section, it is crucial that we understand that in most cases they are *all* involved in the causation of social problems. We need to be constantly attuned to the ways in which individual, social-psychological, and sociological factors *interrelate* to cause social problems.

3. *Social problems have individual, social-psychological, and/or sociological consequences.* Social problems generally have negative effects on individuals. It is individuals who suffer from crime, overpopulation, and ecological problems. Not every individual suffers from every social problem, but large numbers of individuals are affected by the various social problems discussed throughout this book. Social psychologically, we can say that relationships between and among people are adversely affected by social problems. Thus, the array of problems associated with city life forces many people to be wary and suspicious of each other. Similarly, the sexism and racism characteristic of our society affect the way males and females and blacks and whites relate to one another. As was true of causes, the *most important* concern in this book is the sociological consequences of social problems. We have in mind such issues as the impact of ageism on the older population, the effect of overpopulation on the economic well-being of a society, and the impact of high crime rates on the quality of life in society as a whole.

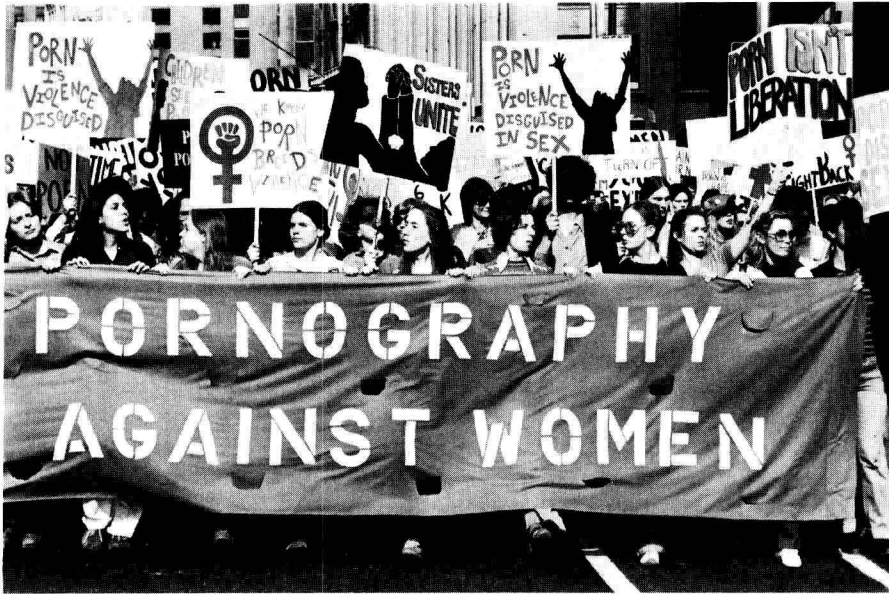
4. *A significant proportion of the population must be aware of the problem.* In order for a social problem to exist, a large portion of the population must be aware of the existence of the condition. This means that a social condition of which people are not aware is not a social problem even if that social condition has adverse individ-

ual, social-psychological, and sociological consequences. The public awareness that a problem exists is a necessary prerequisite to the final component of our definition of a social problem.

5. *A social problem must be so defined by a large portion of the population and seen as a condition in need of remedial collective action.* It is only when a large number of people are aware of the existence of a problem that they can define it as a social problem. And, in our definition, a social problem can only come into existence if it is defined as such by large numbers of people.² Thus, for example, cigarette smoking has always caused people health problems, but it did not become a social problem until it was so defined by large numbers of people. More recently, coffee drinking has begun to be defined as a social problem because of a growing awareness of the link between coffee drinking and various health problems.³ To take one other recent example, wife-beating has gone on for ages, but is only now coming to be recognized as a social problem.⁴

It is often the case that some specific group must take the lead in defining a social problem and making the public aware of it.⁵ However, it is also important to recognize that just because some group is successful in having something defined as a social problem, this does not mean that it will remain defined in this way. Efforts to define a problem may meet with initial success (as well as failure), but later developments may lead to the rejection of the idea that it is a problem.⁶

Most conditions that come to be defined as social problems have some basis in reality. People do not usually get upset over nothing or over mere imaginings.⁷ It is more likely, for example, that people would call narcotics use a social problem if



For a social problem to exist, large numbers of people must be aware of the condition. Groups of people sometimes mobilize to raise the level of awareness of the population as a whole. In this case, a women's group seeks to make it clear that pornography is a social problem. (Jim Anderson/Woodfin Camp. © Assoc.)

the drugs did have some negative influence on the psychological states of individuals than if they did not.

However, it is possible for people to define a condition as a serious social problem even though there is little or nothing to support such a claim. For example, during the 1930s, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party rose to absolute power in Germany partly on the basis of claims that the presence of Jews in German society constituted a severe social problem. According to Hitler, the Jews were a subhuman species dedicated to perverting and subverting the German people and were the cause of widespread social harm through their secret manipulation of the economic system (the Jew as capitalist), as well as through their efforts to incite revolution among the workers (the Jew as communist). By the time the Nazi reign ended, its leaders had

murdered six million Jews in an effort to solve this "pressing social problem."

To understand how and why social problems arise, it is important to understand that objective social conditions may well differ from people's perceptions of them and that there is no direct one-to-one relationship between such conditions and the presence or absence of claims that a social problem exists. Harmful social conditions do not always become the focus of group assertions that something is wrong and needs righting. And, sometimes, such assertions are made on the basis of a wholly inaccurate perception of social conditions.

In addition to the issue of its definition, a social problem must be seen as a condition that can, at least potentially, be ameliorated or even eliminated by collective action. Thus, cigarette smoking has not only come to be defined as a social problem, but

large numbers of people have undertaken actions to begin to cope with the problem. Among other things, we have health warnings on cigarette packages, restrictions on cigarette advertising, and limitations on smoking in certain locations.

THE SOCIAL CAREERS OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

The issue in this section is what happens to a social problem once a group of people is aware of it and defines it as a social problem in need of solution. Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse surveyed a variety of prominent social problems and found that there are a number of elements common to all.⁸

Stage 1: Agitation

Once some group of people defines a social problem, they direct their activity toward two goals: (1) convincing others outside the group that a problem exists and (2) trying to initiate action to improve conditions and to attack the alleged cause of the grievance.

To a considerable extent this initial stage is devoted to transforming "private troubles into public issues." However, not all, and perhaps very few, such attempts are successful. To be successful in convincing large numbers of people that a social problem exists, the complaining group must overcome or avoid a number of potential impediments such as making demonstrably false claims, adopting ineffective strategies, or arousing powerful opposition from groups with conflicting values or competing interests.

Claims

The extent to which a group correctly identifies a troublesome condition and its

cause will greatly influence the group's course of action and its consequences. When a group has a clearcut sense of what is wrong and advocates specific action programs, it is more likely to succeed in its efforts and to alleviate conditions. When people are incorrect about what is bothering them or misunderstand the cause of the problem, they may still succeed in convincing others of their claim, but their success will be less likely. If a group wrongly assesses their problem, it may attempt to place responsibility inaccurately and call for irrelevant remedies. When groups with vague and misdefined grievances succeed in generating a social problem, the results are frequently harmful—for example, drug laws and programs that deepen the drug problem, criminal-justice systems that produce crime.

Power

Groups composed of the rich, groups that are very large, groups that are well organized, or groups accorded high social honor are more likely to succeed in getting sympathetic hearings for their grievances than small, poor, disorganized, or stigmatized groups. No matter how powerful the group, a critical task faced by all social movements attempting to define a social problem is to build up its strength. Typically, considerable effort is made in the beginning to enlist powerful supporters. However, efforts designed to increase the power of a movement also often serve to increase the extent of opposition.

Strategy

In the beginning, a major task in creating a social problem is to attract attention—to get society to listen. At any given moment, hundreds of groups with hundreds of messages are trying to get public attention. Most fail. All groups have a similar problem in strategy: to attract attention in a