

JOHN J. MACIONIS

SOCIAL PROBLEMS

EIGHTH EDITION



Social Problems



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Most of the readers of this book are among the world's privileged people—those who have enough to eat, a comfortable place to sleep, and who have the special opportunity to study the human condition. I offer this book in the hope that it will stimulate thinking about those who are in need, the state of our planet, and spark action toward making our world a better place.

John J. Macdonald

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EIGHTH EDITION

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What's New in *Social Problems*, Eighth Edition

New chapter on social media. The new edition contains the first social media chapter to be found in a social problems title.

Total updating of all data and research. There are more than one thousand statistics in *Social Problems*. In the Eighth Edition, each one is new and represents the latest available data. More than five hundred new research citations support descriptions and analysis in this revision.

Major revision to the chapter on sexuality. The Seventh Edition's "Sexuality" chapter is now a new chapter called "Sexuality and Inequality," which has been moved to Part II and deals with social inequality. The chapter now has a focus not only on the diversity of sexual identity in our society but also how sexuality is linked to social stratification.

New topics plus the latest examples and illustrations. The new edition provides students with the latest on sexual harassment, including the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements; the extent of gun violence, including school shootings; the rise and significance of the alt-right in U.S. politics; the continuing trend toward greater economic inequality; the increasing number of women in political office; recent changes to laws and public attitudes about marijuana use; the expanding opioid crisis; the expansion of the gig economy; the state of same-sex marriage around the world; how the Trump administration has reacted to global warming; and the latest trends in global conflict, including war and terrorism. This revision includes discussion of the 2016 presidential election and its consequences, including immigration policy, the 2017 changes to the tax law, and the 2018 midterm elections.

New "Understanding the Other" interactive learning exercises. These five interactive exercises, written by John Macionis, are unique to this social problems title. The five exercises, based on recent research, present real-life, everyday situations in which race, class, gender, and sexual identity have profound—and often unrecognized—effects on social outcomes. As students see the world through the eyes of others, they come to understand the power of society to confer disadvantage as well as privilege on categories of people.

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This title is available as part of the Revel program. Revel is the new and powerful digital learning experience.

Compared to a bound book, Revel offers a number of clear advantages.

Interactivity. Bound books encourage passive reading. Revel transforms graphs and maps into interactive learning exercises that spark curiosity and encourage active engagement.

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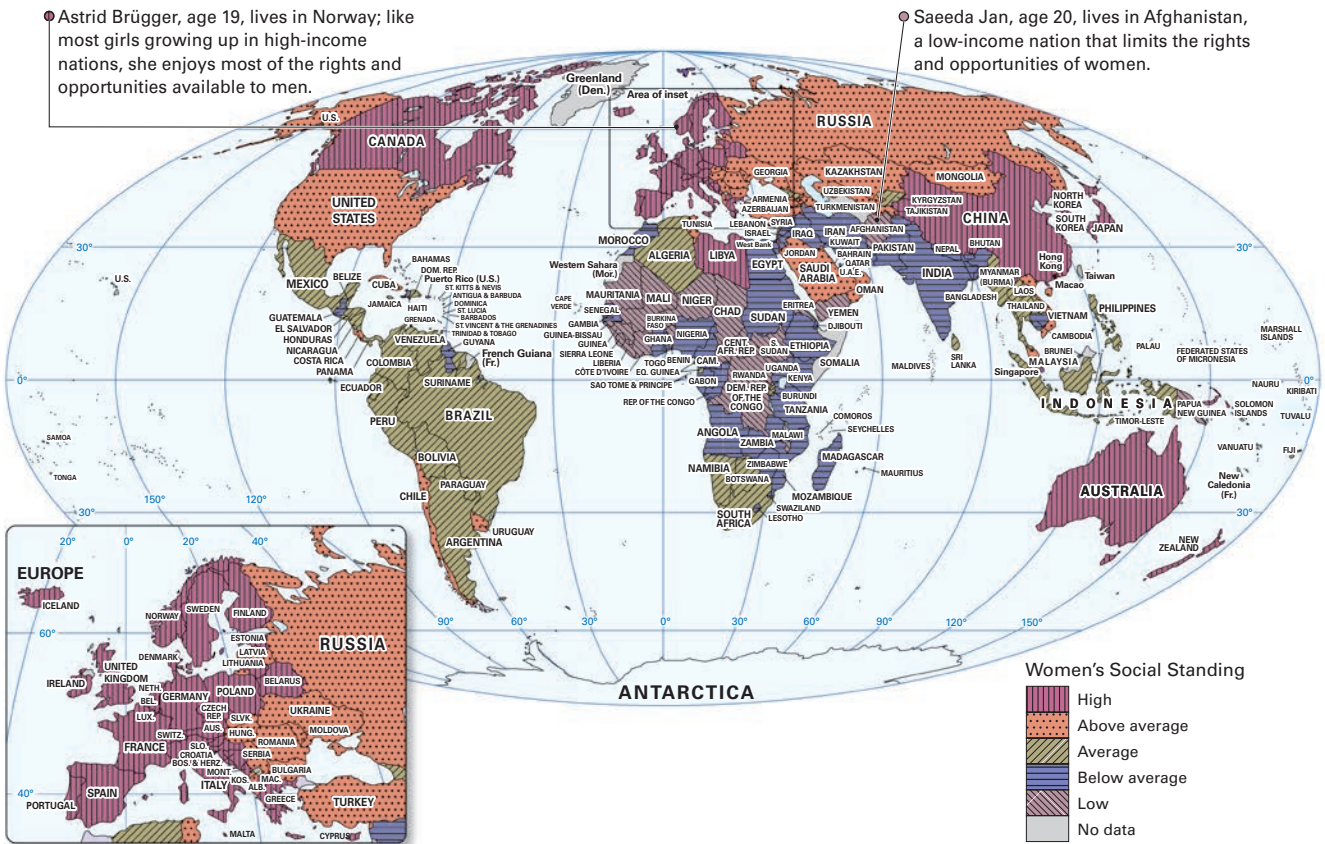
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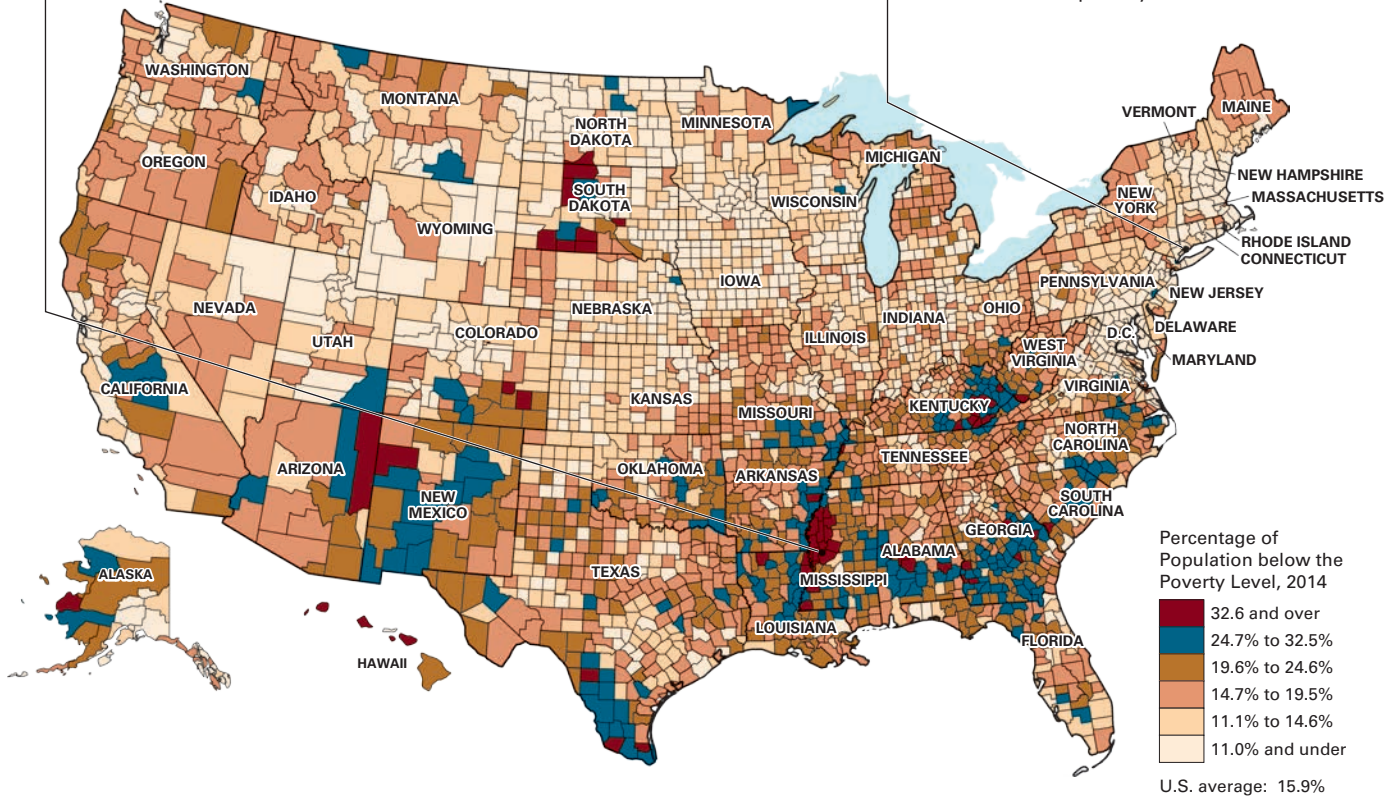
SOURCE: Data from United Nations Development Programme (2015).

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● Anna Mae Peters lives in Nitta Yuma, Mississippi. Almost everyone she knows lives below the government's poverty line.

○ Julie Garland lives in Greenwich, Connecticut, where people have very high income and there is little evidence of poverty.



SOURCE: US Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) Program 2017.

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Preface

Our nation's Pledge of Allegiance ends with the words "... with liberty and justice for all." This statement may reflect our collective hope, but does it describe our reality? Certainly, some categories of the population (the rich, men, white people, heterosexual people) have greater freedom than others (the poor; women; people of color; homosexual, bisexual, and transgender people). Then, too, a large share of this country's population has serious questions about the extent of social justice, especially in the Trump era. We are living in a time of political division and widespread frustration: Two-thirds of all U.S. adults say that the country is "on the wrong track." Globally, armed conflict and terrorism threaten the planet's peace, and there is increasing concern about the state of the natural environment and the future consequences of global warming. Clearly, this is a time when we need to understand more about social problems.

Facts, Theory, and Politics

Sociology offers a path to understanding the problems that we face in today's world. Sociology is also a path to change. Our discipline extends an invitation to action—to become involved in the political debates and movements that are reshaping society. As the leading title for this course, *Social Problems, Eighth Edition*, offers a broad investigation of social problems, both domestic and global. This title provides all the *facts*, highlighting historical trends and explaining today's social controversies. We build this understanding using *sociological theory*, which ties facts together to create meaning and deepen insight.

Just as important, this title stands alone by providing readers with *political analysis*. As a source of understanding and a call to action, *politics matters*. Where a person or a society stands on the political spectrum shapes what issues are defined as social problems. Just as important, political position also shapes what policies are defined as solutions. Becoming a good citizen depends on learning about various issues and also gaining fluency in politics so that one can decide which positions are worth supporting and which are worth resisting.

Social Problems, Eighth Edition, not only urges people to become involved, but it also explains what politics is all about. From the first chapter to the last, this title explains the attitudes and values that define various positions on the political spectrum. *Social Problems* applies these political points of view to dozens of issues—from increasing economic inequality to terrorism—so that students understand today's debates and are able to develop and defend political positions for themselves.

A guiding principle of this text is that *politics involves competing points of view*. *Social Problems* presents diverse political viewpoints for four reasons. First, all points of view are part of the political debate that goes on across the United States. Second, no one can hold personal political beliefs with any conviction without understanding the arguments of those who disagree. In other words, to be, say, a good liberal, one needs to understand not just progressive politics but conservative, far-right, and radical-left positions as well. Third, while anyone is likely to favor one political position over others, most of us can find, in all the political positions, at least some element of truth. In the political arena, as in the classroom, reasonable people can and do disagree. Understanding all positions is a major step toward reducing our nation's angry political divide and, in its place, promoting civil and respectful discourse. Fourth, and finally, by being inclusive, *Social Problems* invites all students to share their ideas, which encourages more lively class discussion.

The Social-Constructionist Approach

The most important reason to put the politics in when teaching a social problems course is to understand how politics guides the process of defining and responding to social problems. This title differs from all others in that it does not adopt one (implicit or explicit) political point of view by presenting a series of "problems" and identifying a sequence of "solutions" as if everyone agreed about what these are. Rather, all chapters highlight the importance of political attitudes in the selection of some issues and not others as problems, as well as in the favoring of certain policies as solutions. With this fact in mind, we can understand why people disagree about what the problems and their solutions are. Indeed, one person's problem may well be another's solution. From this insight, true conversation can begin.

Another benefit of using a social-constructionist approach is recognizing how and why our society came to recognize a problem at a certain point in our history, often as a result of claims made by social movements. For example, the behaviors we now call child abuse, environmental racism, and sexual harassment may always have been with us, but our society did not always define these as problems. On the contrary, problems came into being only after courageous individuals sparked successful social movements that brought about change both in our hearts and, more importantly, in our laws.

Your Fully Involved Author

John Macionis is personally involved in every element of *Social Problems*. In addition to keeping the manuscript up to date with the latest research, data, and relevant examples and illustrations, he selects all the photos and other images, writes all the captions, develops all the testing material, prepares the instructor's manual, and creates all the interactive content in the Revel electronic version. John corresponds regularly with colleagues and students, which makes *Social Problems* an always-evolving project. For the latest in the Macionis texts, visit his personal website: www.TheSociologyPage.com or www.macionis.com. Among other things, you will find there a series of new PowerPoint presentations, based on current research and free for downloading. A full suite of instructor resources is available from Pearson at www.pearsonhighereducation.com.

What's New in the Eighth Edition

The new edition of *Social Problems* is different and improved in the following ways:

Chapter 1: Studying Social Problems Find the latest data on the share of the public claiming that this country is on the wrong track. There is new and expanded analysis of the state of U.S. politics in the wake of the 2016 presidential election and the 2018 midterms. Included are the latest survey data identifying what the public thinks are the most serious social problems and the distribution of U.S. adults on the political spectrum. Discussion is supported by inclusion of recent social movements, including #MeToo and #TimesUp. A new Understanding the Other interactive exercise, "First Day of College: The Invisible Baggage of Class," explores how social class shapes the experience of being on campus. This revised chapter is supported by twenty-two new research citations.

Chapter 2: Economic Inequality The revised chapter has the latest on the distribution of both income and wealth. New data provide a profile of people in the richest 1 percent. Economic data by class, race, and ethnicity have all been updated. The most recent statistics document increasing economic inequality between 1980 and 2016. The discussion of poverty in the United States provides updated analysis by age, race, ethnicity, gender, and region. The changes in the 2017 tax law are discussed. This revised chapter is supported by forty-one new research citations.

Chapter 3: Racial and Ethnic Inequality In the age of Trump, political analysis has been expanded to explain how the alt-right views race, ethnicity, and immigration. New discussion explores immigration policy—including the border wall and the fate of the Dreamers—since the

2016 presidential election. New data provide the latest on the social standing of various racial and ethnic categories of the U.S. population. A new Understanding the Other interactive exercise, "Traffic Stops by Police: The Difference Race Makes," provides a data-driven analysis of racial bias on the streets. Twenty-one new research citations inform the revised chapter.

Chapter 4: Gender Inequality New data track the increasing number of women in Congress between 1918 and 2018. Updates include analysis of women's roles in recent films, contrast the power of women in relation to men in nations around the world, report the share of women in the U.S. labor force, indicate the share of degrees earned by U.S. women, identify the most sex-segregated occupations, track the pay gap between women and men, and indicate the share of women in the U.S. military. There is expanded discussion of gender, housework, and child rearing. The coverage of sexual harassment has been updated and expanded to include the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. New discussion traces the rising power of feminism in the United States since the 2016 presidential election. The revised chapter is informed by thirty-two new research citations.

Chapter 5: Sexuality and Inequality This chapter has been moved to a new position and recast to focus on how sexuality is linked to social stratification. The chapter-opening story highlights the national attention now directed at sexual harassment. Coverage of the transgender movement has been greatly expanded. The discussion of teenage pregnancy has been updated and expanded to include teenage parenthood. Attention is given to Trump administration efforts to limit access to abortion. Updates include the latest on violence directed against LGBTQ people, the extent of homosexual and bisexual identity, the extent of same-sex marriage worldwide, the extent of pornography use in the United States, patterns of arrest and the extent of public support for prostitution, the rate of births to teenage women in nations around the world, the extent of abortion in the United States, public attitudes about abortion under various circumstances, the extent of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and new national and global data on HIV and AIDS. There is a new Understanding the Other interactive exercise called "Jobs and Income: The Hidden Injuries of Transgender Workers." There are thirty-four new research citations in this revised chapter.

Chapter 6: Aging and Inequality There is updated discussion of euthanasia laws across the United States and in other nations. Attention is given to the effects of Trump administration policies on older people. Find the latest statistical data on the number of seniors in the United States, the increasing average age of retirement, the extent

of elder abuse, living patterns among older people, the increasing number of complaints of age discrimination, and income and poverty data contrasting older and younger people. New discussions include the increasing pay gap between older women and men, why older stars such as Meryl Streep and Samuel L. Jackson are the exceptions rather than the rule in the entertainment business, and a nod to Mick Jagger, who has turned seventy-five. There are thirty-four new research citations in this revised chapter.

Chapter 7: Crime, Violence, and Criminal Justice There is updated and expanded coverage of mass shootings in the United States. Recent global data show that two-thirds of all mass shooting fatalities occur in the United States. There is also expanded discussion of the national debate over guns and deadly violence. Coverage of hate crimes is also expanded. The chapter reflects changes in marijuana laws right up to 2018. The revised chapter has the latest crime statistics for all major property and person crimes, new profiles of who is arrested for serious crimes, and arrest data for street crime that are analyzed by age, gender, race and ethnicity, and social class. All the crime statistics show trends over the last half century and provide the latest data for 2016. A National Map provides the most recent laws, state by state, regulating gun ownership. The latest data inform the discussions of mass incarceration and the death penalty in the United States. Current examples and illustrations include the 2017 automobile murder of an anti-white-supremacy protestor in Charlottesville, the 2018 mass shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Santa Fe High School, the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, the ongoing gang violence crisis in Chicago, and expanding violence linked to the opioid epidemic throughout the United States. Where appropriate, new Trump administration policies and their consequences are noted. A new Understanding the Other interactive exercise called “On the Street: Do I Look Dangerous to You?” links race to perceptions of criminality. Forty-eight new research citations inform the revised chapter.

Chapter 8: Alcohol and Other Drugs There is updated and expanded discussion of the opioid crisis in the United States. New topics include the shifting federal drug policy under the Trump administration. There are updates on a record high in public support for legal marijuana, the latest in state laws permitting marijuana use, changes in European laws regarding marijuana, binge drinking by college students, the share of U.S. adults who define drug use as a social problem, the share of the adult population using various categories of legal and illegal drugs, and the extent of cigarette smoking around the world. Fifty-five new research citations inform this revised chapter.

Chapter 9: Physical and Mental Health The revised chapter has updated and expanded coverage of AIDS around the world; the discussion reflects the increasing share of minorities among people infected with HIV. The profiles of health care systems in the United States and various other nations have all been updated to reflect the latest policies and trends. The chapter highlights changes to the nation’s health care system under the Trump administration. There are new data on longevity in the United States including analysis by race, class, and gender. The chapter reports the share of the U.S. population defined as obese, the share experiencing a mental illness, the link between poverty and illness in the United States and around the world, and trends in infant mortality in the United States and around the world. Find the latest statistics and research on the cost of providing health care in the United States, salaries paid to nurses and physicians in the United States, and patterns of mental health on campus. Thirty-six new research citations inform the revised chapter.

Chapter 10: Social Media This entirely new chapter responds to perhaps the most important development in the last generation—the rise of social media and the rapid expansion of internet-based communication. The chapter briefly traces the rise of mass media and explains its importance for modern societies. Attention then turns to social media, pointing out ways in which it differs from earlier mass media. There is extensive discussion of social networking sites and other apps.

Problems linked to the media begin with ways in which various media shape the content that they transmit. An issue with special importance in the wake of the 2016 presidential election is media bias and claims of fake news. Discussion highlights what we know about bias in the media and also instructs readers in pursuit of greater media literacy. Analysis of differential access to the internet and social media explains the digital divide both in the United States and around the world.

Individuals use social media to construct a social identity and build self-esteem. Research suggests that use of social media reduces people’s capacity for empathy, encourages conformity, and may reduce attention span. Research links use of social media to the experience of cyber-bullying and also increasing rates of clinical depression. There is mounting evidence to support the conclusion that social media may become addictive. Social media also shapes our relationships, including patterns of dating and parenting. Social media is also linked to the problem of online predators.

Social media brings change to popular culture and encourages young people to develop an oversexualized social identity. Social media also bring both positive and negative changes to the workplace, politics, and other institutions.

The new chapter highlights the power of social media to advance social movements, including the #MeToo and #TimesUp responses to sexual harassment. The content of this new chapter reflects several dozen recent research citations.

Chapter 11: Economy and Politics The chapter contains a new discussion of the rising power of the far right in U.S. politics. There is updated and expanded discussion of Trump administration policies and increasing political polarization in the United States. There is new and expanded discussion of campaign financing and how money drives U.S. politics. The revised chapter analyzes the role of women voters in the 2016 presidential election. There are updates on the level of trust the U.S. public has in government and other national institutions, the extent of political freedom in nations around the world, the share of the economy represented by government for the United States and other nations, and the size of economic conglomerates in the United States. Also covered is voting turnout in the 2016 elections by age, race, ethnicity, and gender. Twenty-three new research citations support this revised chapter.

Chapter 12: Work and the Workplace A new chapter-opening story describes gender imbalance in the workforce of high-tech companies in the United States. The revised chapter has a new discussion of the gig economy and also describes changes to conditions in the workplace under the Trump administration. There are updates on the unemployment rate, including data by age, gender, and race; the median income for U.S. workers by race, ethnicity, and gender; the distribution of U.S. workers in three sectors of the economy; the intersection of race and ethnicity with the type of jobs people hold; relative wages for workers around the world; the number of workers killed or injured in the workplace; the level of workplace violence; and the current state of labor unions in the United States. There is a new Understanding the Other interactive exercise called “Finding a Job: The Hidden Importance of Race.” This revised chapter is supported by seventeen new research citations.

Chapter 13: Family Life A new chapter-opening story illustrates change over time in our cultural definition of the family. Discussion of gay and lesbian families in the United States and around the world has been expanded and updated. The revised chapter provides the latest data on trends in marital status, cohabitation, age at first marriage, single parenting, and divorce. The most recent statistics inform analysis of the links between income, poverty, and type of family. International data contrast divorce rates in the United States to rates in other nations. Maps showing divorce across the United States and the legal status of same-sex marriage around the world have been updated. This revised chapter is supported by twenty-two new research citations.

Chapter 14: Education The revised chapter has new discussion of the 2018 teachers’ movement for higher salaries and greater public investment in education. There is expanded and updated discussion of school violence and coverage of the student movement to end mass murder in schools. There is new discussion of education policy under the Trump administration. The revised chapter has updates on the educational attainment of the U.S. population and the share of women and men in U.S. higher education. Updated coverage includes educational performance according to race, class, and gender; rates of illiteracy in the United States and around the world; the global ranking of the United States in measures of academic performance; and the rates of dropping out of school for various categories of the U.S. population. The chapter notes with sadness and respect the death of racial segregation activist Linda Brown. This revised chapter is supported by twenty-six new research citations.

Chapter 15: Urban Life The revised chapter has updates on the extent of racial segregation in U.S. cities, the extent of bankruptcy of U.S. cities, the rate of urban sprawl, the poverty rates for various sectors of urban and rural places, the extent of homelessness in U.S. society, the population shift from snowbelt to sunbelt cities, and the increasing size of cities in developing nations. This revised chapter is supported by seventeen new research citations.

Chapter 16: Population and Global Inequality There is updated and expanded discussion of how women’s social standing is fueling global population increase. There is expanded coverage of the importance of gender in patterns of global poverty and also the extent of global poverty among children. The revised chapter provides the latest data for all demographic indicators, including fertility, mortality, and population increase. Find the latest statistics for world population and its rate of increase. There are also the most current data for global inequality with comparisons to national inequality data in the United States. Discussions of global slavery and global sweatshops have been expanded and updated. This revised chapter is supported by twenty-nine new research citations.

Chapter 17: Technology and the Environment The revised chapter has updated and expanded discussion of the increasing global shortage of fresh water. There is also new and expanded discussion of climate change, including the Trump administration withdrawal from the Paris climate accords. The revised chapter has updates on the upward trend in global carbon emissions, the declining rate of population increase, the environmental consequences of rising global affluence, and the increasing production of solid waste. This revised chapter has the most recent data available and is supported by twenty-six new research citations.

Chapter 18: War and Terrorism This revised chapter has updates on the “doomsday clock” indicating the risk of global destruction, the number of active military conflicts in the world, the loss of life in all U.S. wars, the size of the U.S. military budget, and the number of recent acts of terrorism. Changes in military policy under the Trump administration are also highlighted. The revised chapter is supported by twenty-five new research citations.

Revel for *Social Problems*

Providing educational technology for the way today’s students read, think, and learn, Revel is an interactive learning environment that offers a fully digital experience. It uses frequent updates of articles and data to illustrate the current state of society. Students can interact with multiple types of media and assessments integrated directly within the author’s narrative:

- Chapter-opening **Trending Now** features provide articles written by the author that put breaking news and current events into the context of sociology. Examples include the increasing suicide rate in the United States, the record level of racial and ethnic diversity in the Congress that opened in 2019, the record level on women in positions of political leadership in 2019, Trump administration efforts to define sex in binary terms, recent mass shootings and the debate over gun control, the controversy over vaping, concerns about addiction to social media, the increasing number of states that have increased the minimum wage, the controversy over separating parents and children on the border, activism among the nation’s public school teachers, and the record loss of life from wild fires in California.
- **Understanding the Other** interactive learning exercises in five chapters offer data-driven snapshots of day-to-day situations from the perspective of marginalized individuals, providing the opportunity for students to see the world from a new perspective.
- **Interactive maps, figures, and tables** feature Social Explorer technology, which allows for real-time data updates and rollover information to support the data and show movement over time.
- **Chapter Evaluate features** include a reflection question to encourage students to critically assess the insights gained from theoretical analysis.
- **Assessments** tied to primary chapter sections, as well as full chapter exams, allow instructors and students to track progress and get immediate feedback. All assessments are written by the author, John Macionis.
- **Integrated Writing Opportunities:** To help students reason and write more clearly, each chapter offers three varieties of writing prompts:
 - **Journal assignments** at the end of each major section ask students to apply what they learn to their own lives.
 - **Where Do You Stand?** writing opportunities ending each Defining Solutions feature encourage students to state their own positions on controversial issues and choose policies that support their solutions to social problems.
 - **Shared Writing: Envisioning a Better Society** prompts, found at the end of each chapter, encourage students to use what they have learned to imagine how to improve their social world. These exercises can form the basis of lively class discussion.
 - **Essay prompts** are from Pearson’s Writing Space, which allow instructors to assign both automatically graded and instructor-graded prompts. Writing Space is the best way to develop and assess concept mastery and critical thinking through writing. Writing Space provides a single place within Revel to create, track, and grade writing assignments, access writing resources, and exchange meaningful, personalized feedback quickly and easily to improve writing. Writing Space provides everything students need to complete and track their writing assignments, to access assignment guides and checklists, to write or upload completed assignments, and to receive grades and feedback—all in one convenient place. For educators, Writing Space makes assigning, receiving, and evaluating writing assignments easy. It’s simple to create new assignments and upload relevant materials, to see student progress, and to receive alerts when students submit work. Writing Space uses customized grading rubrics so students can receive personalized feedback. Writing Space can also check students’ work for improper citation or plagiarism by comparing it against the world’s most accurate text comparison database available from Turnitin.

The *Documentary Sociology/Pearson Originals* highlight stories that bring sociological concepts and today’s political controversies to life. These outstanding videos connect students with the problems, politics, and controversies of today’s world.

Supplements

Make more time for your students by using instructor resources that offer effective learning assessments and increase classroom engagement. Pearson’s partnership with educators does not end with the delivery of course materials; Pearson is there with you on the first day of class and beyond. A dedicated team of local Pearson representatives will work with you to not only choose course materials but also integrate them into your class and assess their

effectiveness. Our goal is your goal—to improve the quality of instruction with each semester.

Pearson is pleased to offer the following resources to qualified adopters of Macionis's *Social Problems*. Several of these supplements are available to instantly download from Revel or on the Instructor Resource Center (IRC); please visit the IRC at www.pearsonhighered.com/irc to register for access.

Instructor's Manual Create a comprehensive road map for teaching classroom, online, or hybrid courses. John Macionis has prepared this Instructor's Manual and Test Bank for every chapter in this title. Each chapter in the Instructor's Manual includes the following resources: Chapter Update; Author's Note; Chapter Outline; Learning Objectives; Detailed Teaching Objectives; John's Chapter Close-Up; John's Personal Video Selection; Research for a Cutting-Edge Classroom; Teaching Suggestions, Exercises, and Projects; Revel Features; Essay Questions; and Film and Video List. Designed to save preparation time and to make your lectures more effective, this extensive resource gathers together useful activities and strategies for teaching the *Social Problems* course. Available within Revel and on the IRC.

Test Bank Also available is a Test Bank of more than 900 multiple-choice and essay questions. You can easily customize the assessment to work in any major learning management system and to match what is covered in your course. Word, Black-Board, and WebCT versions are available on the IRC, and Respondus versions are available on request from www.respondus.com.

MyTest This powerful assessment generation program includes all of the questions in the Test Bank. Quizzes and

exams can be easily authored and saved online and then printed for classroom use, giving you ultimate flexibility to manage assessments anytime and anywhere. To learn more, visit www.pearsonhighered.com/mytest.

PowerPoint Presentations The Lecture PowerPoint slides follow the chapter outline and feature images from the textbook integrated with the text. Additionally, all of the PowerPoints are uniquely designed to present concepts in a clear and succinct way. They are available to adopters for download from the Pearson Instructors Resource Center at www.pearsonhighered.com/irc.

In order to support varied teaching styles while making it easy to incorporate dynamic Revel features in class, two sets of PowerPoint presentations are available for this edition: (1) A set of accessible lecture PowerPoint slides outlines each chapter of the text. (2) An additional set of the lecture PowerPoint slides includes LiveSlides, which link to each Social Explorer data visualization and interactive map within the Revel product. These presentations are available to adopters in digital formats at the Instructor's Resource Center (www.pearsonhighered.com/irc) or in the Instructor's Resources folder within the Revel product.

I offer this new edition of *Social Problems* in the hope that this new digital age will elevate teaching and learning to a new level of excellence.

As always, please feel free to contact me by email:
Macionis@kenyon.edu
With my best wishes to my colleagues,

John J. Macionis

About the Author

JOHN J. MACIONIS [pronounced ma-SHOW-nis] has been in the classroom teaching sociology for more than forty years. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, John earned a bachelor's degree from Cornell University and a doctorate in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania.

His publications are wide-ranging, focusing on community life in the United States, interpersonal intimacy in families, effective teaching, humor, new information technology, and the importance of global education.

In addition to authoring this best-seller, Macionis has also written *Society: The Basics*, the most popular introductory title in the field, now in its fifteenth edition. The full-length Macionis introductory title is *Sociology*, which is now in its seventeenth edition. He collaborates on international editions of these titles: *Society: The Basics: Canadian Edition*, *Sociology: Canadian Edition*, and *Sociology: A Global Introduction*. All the Macionis titles are available for high school students and in various foreign-language editions.

All the texts are now offered in low-cost electronic editions in the Revel program. These exciting learning materials encourage students to read and provide an interactive learning experience on a variety of electronic devices. Unlike other authors, John takes personal responsibility for writing all electronic content, just as he authors all the assessment and supplemental materials. John proudly resists the trend toward outsourcing such material to non-sociologists.

In addition, Macionis edited the best-selling anthology *Seeing Ourselves: Classic, Contemporary, and Cross-Cultural Readings in Sociology*, also available in a Canadian edition. Macionis and Vincent Parrillo have written the leading urban studies text, *Cities and Urban Life*, currently in a sixth edition.

Follow John on his Facebook author page, John J. Macionis, [author page, John J. Macionis, and find the latest information on all the books. You can also access downloadable teaching material at his website: www.macionis.com or www.TheSociologyPage.com. A full suite of instructor resources is found at the Pearson site: www.pearsonhighered.com.

In 2002, the American Sociological Association presented Macionis with the Award for Distinguished Contributions to Teaching, citing his innovative use of global material as well as the introduction of new teaching technology in his textbooks.



John Macionis recently retired from full-time teaching at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, where he served as Professor and Distinguished Scholar of Sociology. During his long career at Kenyon, he chaired the Sociology Department, directed the college's multidisciplinary program in humane studies, presided over the campus senate, was president of the college's faculty, and taught sociology to thousands of students. Kenyon recognized his decades of service by awarding him an honorary doctorate of humane letters in 2013.

Professor Macionis has been active in academic programs in other countries, having traveled to some fifty nations. He writes, "I am an ambitious traveler, eager to learn and, through the texts, to share much of what I discover with students, many of whom know little about the rest of the world. For me, traveling and writing are all dimensions of teaching. First and foremost, I am a teacher—a passion for teaching animates everything I do."

At Kenyon, Macionis taught a number of courses, but his favorite classes were always Introduction to Sociology and Social Problems. He continues to enjoy contact with students across the United States and around the world.

John works every day on his Pearson titles. In his free time, he enjoys tennis, swimming, hiking, and playing oldies rock-and-roll. Macionis is an environmental activist in the Lake George region of New York's Adirondack Mountains, working with a number of organizations, including the Lake George Land Conservancy, where he served for more than a decade as president of the board of trustees.

Chapter 1

Sociology: Studying Social Problems

Learning Objectives

- 1.1 Explain the benefits of learning about sociology and using the sociological imagination.
- 1.2 Define the concept “social problem” and explain how the people in a society come to define some issues—and not others—as social problems.
- 1.3 Apply sociological theory to the study of social problems.
- 1.4 Discuss the methods sociologists use to study social problems.
- 1.5 Identify factors that shape how societies devise policy to respond to social problems.
- 1.6 Analyze how political attitudes shape the process of constructing social problems and defining solutions.

Constructing the Problem



William Thomas Cain/Stringer/Getty Images.

What turns an issue into a social problem?

Social problems come into being as people define an issue as harmful and in need of change.



Alex Wong/Getty Images.

Aren't we always dealing with the same problems?

Most of today's problems differ from those that concerned the public several generations ago.



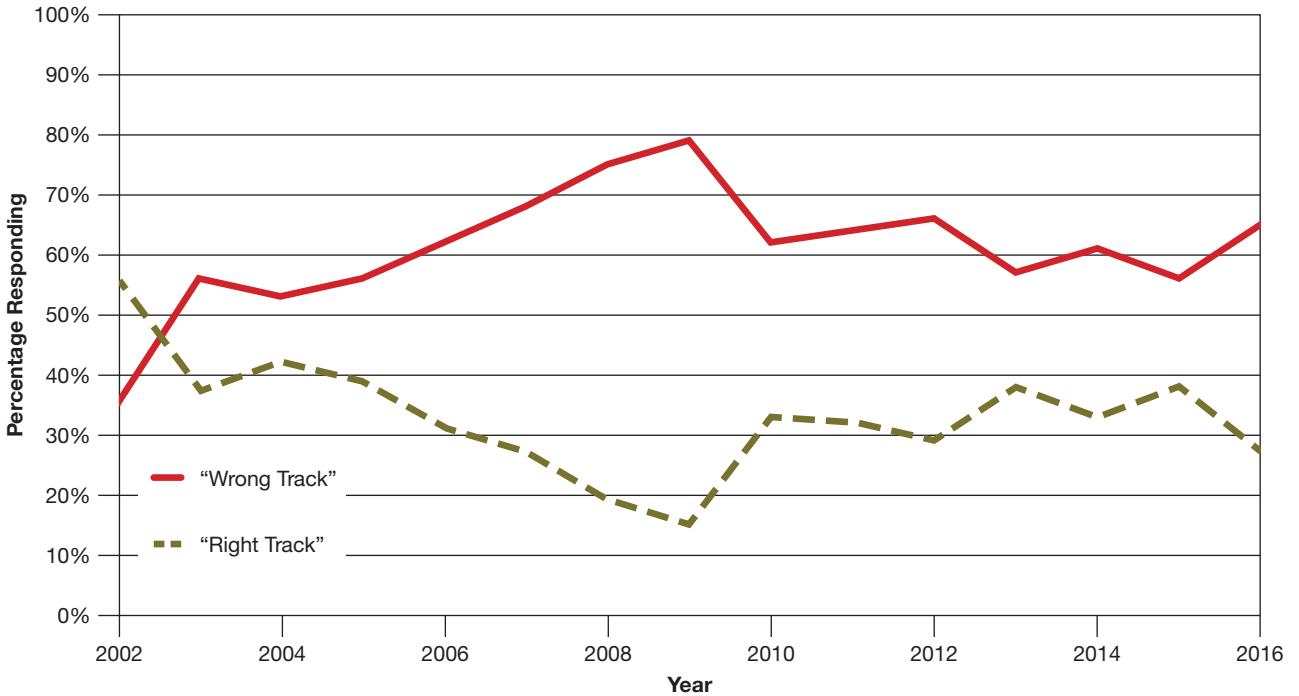
Conor Caffrey/Science Source.

Isn't a social problem any condition that is harmful?

Many conditions harmful to thousands of people are never defined as social problems.

Tracking the Trends

Survey Question: “Do you feel things in this country are generally going in the right direction or do you feel things have pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track?”



SOURCE: CBS News/New York Times Poll, January 12, 2016.

Researchers try to gauge the public’s confidence in the country by asking general questions such as this one:

“Do you think the country is on the right track or the wrong track?”

In early 2016, 65 percent of U.S. adults said they thought that the country was “on the wrong track,” more than twice the share who thought the country was “going in the right direction.” Back in 2002, just 35 percent of U.S. adults said the country was on the wrong track. In recent years, dissatisfaction with government emerged as the most commonly cited social problem in the United States. Polls taken at the end of 2017 show two-thirds of U.S. adults disapprove of President Trump’s performance in office—further evidence of widespread dissatisfaction with the country’s direction. Do you think the country can continue without the confidence of a majority of the people?

Chapter Overview

This chapter introduces the study of social problems by defining the sociological imagination, explaining sociology's theoretical approaches, and describing the ways sociologists carry out research. You will learn how people's political attitudes define the issues they are likely to view as social problems and what policies they are likely to favor as solutions. You will gain the ability to describe the political spectrum and to analyze social issues from various positions on the political spectrum. ■

Marcos Jorman was already late as he rushed out the door of his apartment. He ran down the stairs, briefcase in hand, and crashed through the old wooden door of the apartment building. He looked north up Chestnut Street. What luck! The bus was right there, just half a block away! Catching his breath, Marcos climbed aboard as the bus pulled out into the heavy traffic. He saw Jan, a neighbor and co-worker, standing in the rear of the bus.

"I just got a text from Sandra," Jan blurted out, looking a little desperate. "She says everyone is getting laid off. *We're all out.* The company is shutting down the whole division and moving operations out of the country." Her head dropped along with her spirit. "What am I going to do? How am I going to manage with my kids?"

Marcos checked his own phone. He, too, had messages—several from co-workers who had already arrived at work and confirmed the bad news. "Oh, man, it's true," he said softly. The two stood silently for the rest of the ride.

The day turned out to be one of the toughest in Marcos's entire life. He knew the start-up company was struggling with rising costs and heavy competition. Only two months earlier, new management had come in to "reorganize" and to cut costs. The decision to close local operations was the result.

As he entered his workstation, he was handed a short letter spelling out the dismissal. He joined dozens of others at a brief meeting with a human relations officer and then went back to pack up his things. He was home again by early afternoon.

Marcos sat in his apartment with a cup of tea looking out the window at nothing in particular. He felt weak, almost ill. He kept telling himself that we live in a world full of risks. He knew the company was in trouble. But, somehow, he could not shake the idea that the job loss was his own fault, his own personal failure.

This story could be told millions of times because millions of people—including those who work in construction, sales, communications, management, and teaching—lose their jobs every year.

Seeing Patterns: The Sociological Imagination

1.1 Explain the benefits of learning about sociology and using the sociological imagination.

Living in a society that teaches us to feel personally responsible for whatever happens to us—good or bad—we easily understand Marcos's reaction to being laid off. We imagine Marcos second-guessing himself: Should he have majored in something else? If only he had taken that other job in Atlanta! If only he had listened to his father and stayed in school. We all tend to personalize our lives and blame ourselves for our troubles.

However, when we apply the **sociological imagination**, a point of view that highlights how society affects the experiences we have and the choices we make, the picture changes. Using the sociological imagination, we see that the operation of U.S. society—including an economy that makes unemployment a normal part of doing business—causes the loss of millions of jobs every year. These losses are far greater in times of economic recession. For this reason, losing a job can hardly be said to be simply a matter of bad personal choices.



Francisreporter/E+/Getty Images

SOCIAL POLICY

C. Wright Mills: Turning Personal Troubles into Social Issues

All of us struggle with our own problems, which might include unemployment, falling into debt, falling out of love, drug or alcohol abuse, poor health, or suffering from violence. We experience these problems; we *feel* them, sometimes on a gut-wrenching level. Our problems are personal. But C. Wright Mills (1959) claimed that the roots of such “personal” problems lie in society itself, often involving the ways our economic and political systems work. After all, the normal operation of our society favors some categories of people over others: the rich over the poor, white people over people of color, middle-aged people over the very young and the very old. When people see their problems as personal, all they can do is try to deal with their troubles as one *individual*. Isolating one life in this way keeps people from seeing the bigger picture of how society operates. In the end, as Mills explained, people feel that “their lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles” (1959:3). Because we live in an individualistic culture, we are quick to conclude that the troubles we experience are simply our own fault.

A more accurate and more effective approach is to understand that it is society that shapes our lives. The sociological imagination transforms personal troubles into social issues by showing us that these issues affect not only us but also countless people *like* us. This knowledge gives us power because, joining with others, we can improve our lives—and break free of our traps—as we set out to change society.

What Do You Think?

1. Provide three examples of personal problems that Mills would define as social issues.
2. To what extent do you think people in the United States believe that problems such as unemployment result from bad personal choices or even bad luck? Explain.
3. Have you ever taken part in a movement seeking change? What was the movement trying to achieve? What were your reasons for joining?

Sociology is the systematic study of human societies. **Society** refers to people who live within some territory and share many patterns of behavior. As sociologists study society, they pay attention to **culture**, a way of life including widespread values (about what is good and bad), beliefs (about what is true), and behavior (what people do every day).

Cultural patterns in the United States are diverse, but one widely shared value is the importance of individualism, the idea that, for better or worse, people are responsible for their own lives. In the case of Marcos Jorman, it is easy to say, “Well, he lost his job because he decided to sign on with a start-up company in the first place. He really brought this on himself.” In other words, our common sense often defines personal problems—even when the problems affect millions of people—as the result of *personal choice*. Without denying that individuals do make choices, sociologists point to ways in which society shapes all our lives. Thinking sociologically, we see that widespread unemployment may be a personal problem (especially to people who lose their jobs), but it is also a *social issue*.

Sociology’s key insight is that *many of the personal troubles people face are really social issues with their roots in the operation of the larger society*. As the U.S. sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–1963) explained, using the sociological imagination helps us “kick it up a level” and see how society shapes our personal lives. The Social Policy box takes a closer look at how sociology can help you do this for yourself.

By helping us to see the world in a new way, the sociological imagination gives us power to bring about change. But a sociological viewpoint can also be a bit disturbing. A course in social problems asks us to face the fact that many people in our communities lose their jobs, become victims of crime, and go to bed hungry through no fault of their own. When the economy turns bad, as it did when a recession began in 2008, tens of millions of people suddenly find that they are unemployed and many of them may still be out of work a decade later. In this richest of nations, even during “good times,” some 45 million people (especially women and children) are poor. The study of social problems helps us see these truths more clearly. It also encourages us to play a part in shaping the future of our nation and the world.

Social Problems: The Basics

- 1.2 Define the concept “social problem” and explain how the people in a society come to define some issues—and not others—as social problems.**

A **social problem** is a condition that undermines the well-being of some or all members of a society and is usually a matter of public controversy. In this definition, the term “condition” refers to any situation that at least some people define as troublesome, such as not having a job, having huge college loans, living in fear of crime, being overweight or living in poor health, or worrying about the effects of toxic chemicals in our drinking water.

A condition that “undermines the well-being” hurts people, either by causing them immediate harm or, perhaps, by draining their spirit or limiting their choices. For example, poverty not only deprives people of nutritious food and safe housing, but it also takes away their dignity, leaving them passive and powerless.

Because any issue affects various segments of our population differently, a particular social problem is rarely harmful to *everyone*. During the recent recession, some executives earned huge salaries and bonuses, just as some corporations (such as Walmart, which sells at very low prices) actually did pretty well. Even war that brings injury and death to young soldiers brings wealth to the companies that make and sell weapons and confers greater power on the military leaders who head our country’s armed forces. As a result, the full consequences of any particular social problem are rarely simple or easy to understand.

Social problems spark public controversy. Sometimes a social problem (such as the mass shooting in Las Vegas in 2017) rocks the whole world. In other cases (such as the spread of the Zika virus in 2016), a small number of government leaders and public health officials take action, perhaps by stockpiling vaccine and restricting travel to areas where infections have been reported (Tavernise, 2016).

Social Problems over Time

What are our country’s most serious social problems? The answer depends on when you ask the question. As shown in Table 1–1, the public’s view of problems changes over time. Back in 1935, a survey of U.S. adults identified the ten biggest problems facing the country, which we can compare to a similar survey completed in 2017 (Gallup, 2017). In the mid-1930s, the Great Depression was the major concern because as much as 25 percent of U.S. adults were out of work. Not surprisingly, unemployment topped the list of problems that year. After years of gridlock in

Washington, D.C., and the election of Donald Trump as president, dissatisfaction with government and political leadership topped the list in 2017. Of course, concern about the economy was still with us in 2017, along with fears about terrorism, immigration, and deep political division across the nation.

Comparing the two lists in the table, we find three issues on both: the economy, unemployment, and dissatisfaction with government. But the other issues are different, showing that the public’s view of social problems changes over time. Terrorism, for example, was not a widespread concern in 1935, although it has become a major issue today. Sometimes, public opinion shifts dramatically even over short periods. In the months after the allegations of sexual assault against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein in 2017, women as well as men across the country mobilized against sexual harassment leading to additional allegations against hundreds of important people and millions of women breaking their silence as they joined the #MeToo movement (Chira, 2017; Patel & Miller, 2017).

The Social-Constructionist Approach

The fact that over time, people define different issues as social problems points to the importance of the **social-constructionist approach**, the assertion that social problems arise as people define conditions as undesirable and in need of change. This approach states that social problems have a subjective foundation, reflecting people’s judgments about their world. For example, the public has yet to include obesity on the list of serious social problems, even though health officials say that most adults in the United States are at risk of poor health because they are overweight. This is true despite the objective fact that illness brought on by obesity claims the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in our country each year, which is many times the number of people who die as a result of terrorist attacks or the number of soldiers who were killed in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Figure 1–1 explains the subjective and objective foundations of social problems. Box A includes issues—such as homicide—that are objectively very harmful (more than 16,000 people are murdered each year in the United States) and cause widespread concern (polls show that a majority of U.S. adults worry about gun violence and want the government to reduce crime) (Pew Research Center, 2016). Box B includes issues—such as the use of automobiles—that, objectively speaking, cause even greater harm (more than 32,000 people in the United States die each year in auto accidents), and yet hardly anyone sees these issues as social problems. Of course, one reason people overlook the high death toll on our highways is that we can’t imagine our way of life without automobiles. Box C represents issues—such as school shootings—that, objectively speaking, cause relatively limited harm (only a few dozen people have

Table 1–1 Serious Social Problems, 1935 and 2017

1935	2017
1. Unemployment and a poor economy	1. Dissatisfaction with government/poor leadership
2. Inefficient government	2. Terrorism
3. Danger of war	3. Health care/insurance
4. High taxes	4. Economy in general
5. Government overinvolvement	5. Unemployment/jobs
6. Labor conflict	6. Race relations/racism
7. Poor farm conditions	7. Lack of national unity
8. Inadequate pensions for the elderly	8. Illegal immigration
9. High concentration of wealth	9. Moral/ethical/family decline
10. Alcohol consumption	10. International problems

SOURCE: Gallup (2017).

died from such incidents, which is actually fewer than the number of people who die each year from bee stings), but these issues are widely viewed as horrifying and serious problems all the same (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2017; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). Finally, Box D includes the use of cell phones, football, and a host of other activities that are not thought to be harmful and do not show up on survey listings of “problems.”

Over time, issues may move from one box to another. In the years after the invention of cell phones in the 1980s, for example, few people worried about their use even by those operating motor vehicles. With little evidence that this practice posed a threat, cell phones belonged in Box D. More recently, however, studies have reported that the use of cell phones by people driving automobiles plays some part in more than 1.6 million accidents a year, claiming thousands of lives. As the number of deaths linked to cell phone use increases, this issue will move toward Box B. By 2018, as a result of increasing public concern, fifteen states (California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia) plus the District of Columbia banned talking on handheld phones while driving; thirty-eight states have outlawed cell phone use by new drivers, and forty-seven states have prohibited texting by anyone behind the wheel. Before long public opinion could define cell phone use in cars as a serious problem, moving the issue from Box B to Box A (Governors Highway Safety Association, 2017; National Safety Council, 2017).

Any issue that is not considered a problem now may be viewed quite differently at some point in the future. For example, there are few things as American as football, a game that has gained popularity over recent decades and is now the most popular sport in the country. In recent years, however, an increasing number of players and ex-players have spoken out about possible concussion-related brain injury called chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). The National Football League has acknowledged that a problem exists and that efforts are being made to more carefully monitor the well-being of players. Exactly how widespread CTE is among players remains an open question. The 2015 film *Concussion* starring Will Smith raised concern about CTE among the general public (Siegel, 2015; Kindelan, 2016). Should this concern over potential injuries increase, football might well move from Box D to Box C, Box B, or even Box A, depending on how many people are found to be harmed.

Another change in public opinion involves government efforts to track people’s movement, telephone calls, and internet activity. In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, most people in the United States did not know much about efforts by the National Security Administration and other government agencies to identify suspicious behavior on the part of potential terrorists. When asked about government

		Is it subjectively considered a very serious problem?	
		Yes	No
Does it objectively cause serious harm to thousands of people?	Yes	A Homicide	B Use of automobiles
	No	C School shootings	D Use of cell phones

Figure 1–1 The Objective and Subjective Assessment of Social Issues

This figure shows that some issues (such as homicide) are both objectively harmful and widely seen as problems. But many issues that are objectively harmful (the use of automobiles results in more than 32,000 deaths each year) are not perceived as serious social problems. Likewise, some issues that are viewed as serious social problems (school shootings, for example) may be tragic but they actually harm relatively few people. Many other issues (such as using cell phones or playing football) are not viewed by most people as harmful, although this may change at some point in the future.

tracking of individuals, most people offered the opinion that this was good and necessary. There was little public awareness of how government can use computer technology to threaten personal privacy (Scherer, 2013). As a result, the government’s use of computer technology fell in Box D. In recent years, revelations about the extent of government monitoring of people’s movement and communication have convinced an increasing share of the public that this issue poses a real danger to the personal freedom of everyone. For this reason, this issue appears to be moving to Box B. Perhaps, at some point in the future, *most* people will consider government monitoring of the public to be a serious social problem, placing the issue in Box A.

Recognizing that the subjective and objective importance of social issues may differ opens the door for a deeper understanding of social change. Consider this curious pattern: A century ago, it was objectively true that the social standing of women was far below that of men. In 1900, nine out of ten adult men worked for income, and nine out of ten adult women remained in the home doing housework and raising children. Women didn’t even have the right to vote.

Although some people condemned what they saw as blatant inequality, most people did not define this situation as a problem. Why not? Most people believed that because women and men have some obvious biological differences, the two sexes must have different abilities. Thinking this way, it seemed natural for men to go out to earn a living while women—who were thought back then to be the “weaker sex”—stayed behind to manage the home.

Objectively, gender inequality was huge; subjectively, however, it was rarely defined as a social problem.

Today, women and men are far closer to being socially equal than they were in 1900. Yet awareness of a “gender problem” in the United States has actually become greater. Why? Our cultural standards have changed, to the point that people now see the two sexes as mostly the same, and so we *expect* women and men to be socially equal. As a result, we view even small instances of gender inequality as a problem.

Would anyone doubt that sexual violence was a bigger problem in 1900 than it is today? The norms of the time—and, in many cases, the laws as well—made husbands’ use of physical discipline against wives either “acceptable” or a “private matter” to be resolved within a household. Today, despite a decline in sexual assault and the fact that such behavior is now widely condemned and everywhere against the law, public concern is greater than ever. Just consider how many millions of women and men have signed on in support of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements.

When we investigate social issues, it is important to consider both objective facts and subjective perceptions. Both factors play a part in the social construction of social problems.

What powerful people say about issues can have big consequences for public opinion. In 2016, for the first time, immigration showed up on the public’s list of the most serious social problems. To some extent, this concern reflects the fact that thousands of people cross the southern U.S. border illegally each year. But much of the concern reflects fear that immigrants from the Middle East might engage in terror. After his election in 2016, President Donald Trump fanned these fears and called for “building a wall” and enacted a “travel ban” barring people from a number of mostly Muslim countries from entering the United States until the government could ensure that no would-be jihadists were admitted (Suleiman, 2018).

Does this subjective fear square with the objective facts? The truth is that, since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, some 390 people have been charged with crimes relating to jihadist terrorism, but nine in ten of these people have been U.S. citizens or people who have permanent legal residency (green cards). An isolated case of a recent immigrant engaging in deadly jihadist terrorism is Tashfeen Malik (a legal U.S. resident) who, along with her husband Syed Rizwan Farook (a natural-born U.S. citizen), killed fourteen people in a 2015 terror attack in San Bernardino, California.

Almost all terrorism that takes place in the United States is “home grown” and is not the work of immigrants. In addition, the number of people killed by right-wing extremists (who strike out against the power of the U.S. government) is also high. But while fears of jihadist terrorism have figured into national political debate (especially on the part of Republicans), far-right terrorism is not widely viewed as a social problem.

A much greater threat to the public than any terrorism is gun violence. For years, more than 30,000 deaths due to gun violence (including murder, suicide, and accidents) have occurred annually, which is about 100 deaths *every day*. And for years, few people defined gun violence as a social problem. In the 2017 listing of the most serious social problems in the United States, gun violence is not to be found.

The point is that much public concern is directed against immigrants, the vast majority of whom pose very little danger to anyone; far less public concern is directed against far-right extremists who pose far greater danger. Even more significant, gun violence involving tens of thousands of deaths each year has long been ignored and has only recently gained widespread public attention. Put another way, someone in the United States is 5,000 times more likely to be killed by gun violence than by a jihadist terrorist. Subjective fear does not necessarily reflect objective facts (Kristof, 2015; Bergen, 2016; Blinder & Victor, 2018).

Claims Making

For gun violence to be defined as a serious social problem, more of the political leadership in the United States—starting with the president—will have to stand up to special interests and recognize the harm involved.

Claims making refers to *efforts by officials, individuals, and organizations to convince others that a particular issue or situation should be defined as a social problem*. This process begins by rejecting the *status quo* (Latin words meaning “the situation as it is”) and calling for change. Put another way, claims making creates controversy by defining the existing situation as unacceptable. The process continues as people explain exactly *what* changes are needed and *why* they are needed.

Claims making is illustrated in the history of another issue that has been with us for almost forty years. Back in 1981, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention first received reports of a strange disease that was killing people. The victims were mostly homosexual men. The disease came to be known as “acquired immune deficiency syndrome” (AIDS). For several years, even as the numbers of cases in the United States climbed into the thousands, AIDS received limited media coverage and there was little public outcry. By 1985, however, the public as a whole had become concerned about the danger of AIDS, and this disease was defined as a serious social problem.

What brought about this change? For any condition to be defined as a social problem, people—usually a small number at first—make claims that the situation is unacceptable and that change is needed. In the case of AIDS, medical officials first sounded the alarm, and the gay communities in large cities (notably San Francisco and New York) mobilized to spread information about the dangers posed by this deadly disease.

Claims making is the process of defining certain issues as social problems. In 2017, sexual harassment rose to the level of a national problem as a result of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements that carry forward the message that women would no longer remain silent about the experience of sexual abuse.



Sundry Photography/ Shutterstock.

Of course, public officials and powerful individuals often engage in the “loudest” claims making. We can see this process today with increasing attention given to the opioid epidemic of government officials. But ordinary people can make claims more powerful by joining their voices. In 2016, people in the city of Flint, Michigan, began to come together and speak out about the dirty-looking and foul-tasting tap water that was coming into their homes from the city water supply. Scientists at a university laboratory were engaged and confirmed the presence of dangerously high levels of lead in the city’s water (Smith, 2016).

Social media have greatly increased the potential impact of claims making. Along with television, radio, and newspapers, our computers and smart phones quickly spread information to tens of millions of people who can join together in groups actively seeking change. Stories in the mass media about the dangers of tap water in Flint, Michigan, as well as the use of social media by the public, not only elevated this situation into a major problem that led to criminal charges against public officials but also alerted people in other cities to the risk of water contamination. In the last year, social media have been responsible for fueling the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements in opposition to sexual harassment and assault.

In general, the greater the media coverage of a topic and the more media stories argue for change, the more likely the issue in question is to develop into a social problem. Media outlets devote far more attention to tornados than they do to a disease like asthma. Perhaps this is why the public perceives tornados as more serious despite the fact that such storms kill several dozen people a year while the death toll from asthma runs well into the thousands (Pinker, 2018).

In an age when social media connect people as never before, success in claims making can occur quickly. In 2013, shortly after a Florida jury acquitted George Zimmerman in

the shooting death of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, an activist in California posted a statement that “black lives matter.” Another activist transformed these words into the hashtag #blacklivesmatter, and this claim suddenly spread across the country, sparking a social movement. By 2018, in response to the deaths of African Americans at the hands of police, the phrase “black lives matter” was tweeted some 50 million times.

In other cases, the process of claims making may result in change only after many years. As noted earlier, although experts estimate that talking on handheld cell phones while driving causes hundreds of deaths every year, only fifteen states have passed laws banning this practice (Governors Highway Safety Association, 2017). The people of Flint, Michigan, spoke out for several years before public officials began to respond. Individual women have complained about sexual harassment and assault for decades before, helped by the power of social media, they succeeded in defining this issue as a serious social problem in 2017.

As the process of claims making gains public attention, it is likely to prompt counterclaims from opponents. In other words, most controversial issues involve claims making from at least two different positions. Take the abortion controversy, for example. One side of the debate claims that abortion is the wrongful killing of unborn babies. The other side claims that abortion is a woman’s right, a reproductive choice that should be made only by the woman herself. Politics—how power plays out in a society—is a process built around claims and counterclaims about what should and should not be defined as social problems.

How do we know when claims making brings about change? The people of Flint will know they have been heard when scientists confirm that their water is safe. In