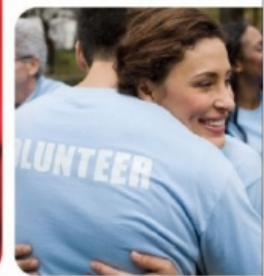
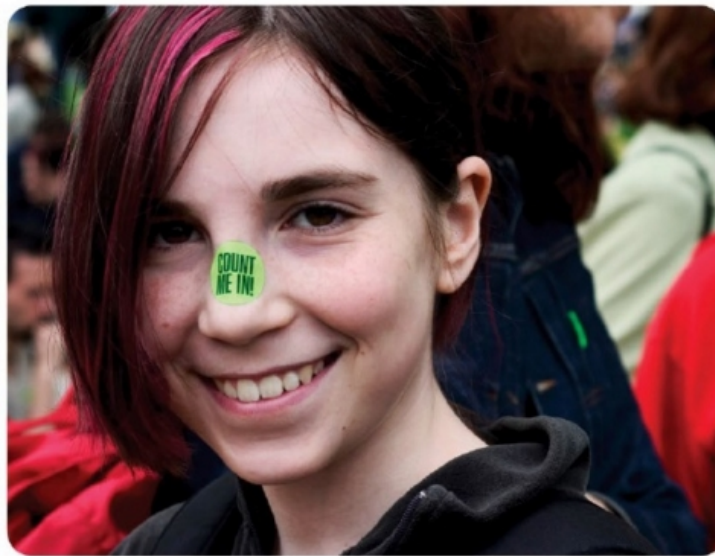


FIFTH EDITION

# social PROBLEMS

Community, Policy, and Social Action



ANNA LEON-GUERRERO



FIFTH EDITION

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*For B. D. S. and B. W. S.*



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Community, Policy, and Social Action

ANNA LEON-GUERRERO

*Pacific Lutheran University*



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
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## PREFACE

I wrote this text with two goals in mind: to offer a better understanding of the social problems we experience in our world and to begin working toward real solutions. In the pages that follow, I present three connections to achieve these goals. The first connection is between sociology and the study of social problems. Using your sociological imagination (which you'll learn more about in Chapter 1), you will be able to identify the social and structural forces that determine our social problems. I think you'll discover that this course is interesting, challenging, and sometimes frustrating (sort of like real-life discussions about social problems). After you review these different social problems, you may ask, "What can be done about all this?" The second connection is between social problems and their solutions. In each chapter, we review selected social policies along with innovative programs that attempt to address or correct these problems. The final connection is one that I ask you to make yourself: recognizing the social problems in your community and identifying how you can be part of the solution.

### LEARNING FEATURES OF THIS TEXT

The three connections are made evident in each chapter and throughout the text through a variety of specific learning features:

- **A focus on the basis of social inequalities.** Using a sociological perspective, we examine how race and ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and age determine our life chances. Chapters 2 through 6 focus specifically on these bases of social inequality and how each contributes to our experience of social problems.
- **A focus on the global experience of social problems.** Throughout the text, the consequences of social problems throughout the world are highlighted, drawing upon data and research from international scholars and sociologists. In a boxed chapter feature, Taking a World View, specific social problems or responses are examined from a global perspective. We look at China's aging population (Chapter 6), Japan's educational tracking system (Chapter 8), Mexico's maquiladoras (Chapter 9), India's all-female international news organization (Chapter 11), and marijuana legalization in other countries (Chapter 12).
- **A focus on social policy and social action.** Each chapter includes a discussion on relevant social policies or programs. In addition, each chapter highlights how individuals or groups have made a difference in their community. The chapters include personal stories, some from professionals in their field, others from ordinary individuals who accomplish extraordinary things. Several feature those who began their activism as young adults or college students. For

example, in Chapter 8, you'll meet Wendy Kopp, the woman behind the Teach for America program; in Chapter 13, you'll meet Max Kenner, founder of the Bard Prison Initiative, an educational program for prisoners; and in Chapter 17, you'll read the story of Camila Vallejo, who began her activism while she was a student at the University of Chile. The text concludes with a chapter titled "Social Problems and Social Action" that identifies ways you can become more involved.

- **"What Does It Mean to Me?" exercises.** Each chapter includes questions or activities that can be completed by small student groups or on your own. Though some questions require you to collect data and information on what is going on in your own state, city, or campus, most of the exercises ask you to reflect on the material and consider how the social problem affects you. These exercises take you out of the classroom, away from the textbook, and into your community!

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FIFTH EDITION

I have made a number of revisions in response to comments and feedback from the many instructors who adopted the earlier editions and from other interested instructors and their students.

- **Expanding the sociological perspectives.** Four theoretical perspectives (functionalist, conflict, feminist, and interactionist) are presented in each chapter, identifying how each perspective defines the causes and consequences of specific problems. Additional material has been incorporated in Chapter 3 (the 1.5 generation), Chapter 7 (cultural norms and sex education), Chapter 9 (the living wage movement), Chapter 11 (the boundary-less workplace), Chapter 13 (racial profiling), and Chapter 15 (climate change). In Chapter 1, I've included a general overview of basic sociological terms and concepts.
- **Keeping it current.** The focus of this text is unlike most other social problems texts, featuring a strong emphasis on social policy and action. It is necessary with each edition to provide an update on significant social policy decisions and debates. In this edition, the following social policy discussions have been updated: immigration (Chapter 3); same-sex marriage rights, including the U.S. Supreme Court's 2013 ruling (Chapter 5); and an expanded discussion on the Affordable Care Act (Chapter 10).
- **Data matters.** Data are important for understanding the extent of our social problems and recognizing populations vulnerable to them. In each revision I update data sources and incorporate new research findings. In this edition, each chapter includes a new feature, Exploring Social Problems, offering a closer empirical examination of social problems like HIV/AIDS, teen pregnancy, minimum-wage employment, and health care access.



- **Life after college.** What can you do with a sociology undergraduate degree? Almost anything. And to prove it to you, each chapter includes a new Sociology at Work feature, reviewing the invaluable workplace skills that you'll develop as a sociology major and presenting stories of sociology graduates who continue to rely on their sociological imaginations in their field of work.

I wanted to write a book that captured the experiences that I've shared with students in my own social problems course. I sensed the frustration and futility that many felt by the end of the semester—imagine all those weeks of discussing nothing else but “problems”! I decided that my message about the importance of *understanding social problems* should be complemented with a message on the importance of *taking social action*.

Social action doesn't happen just in Washington, DC, or in your state's capital, and political leaders aren't the only ones engaged in such efforts. Social action takes place on your campus, in your neighborhood, in your town, in whatever you define as your “community.”

There were stories to be told by ordinary people—community, church, business, or student leaders—who recognized that they had the power to make a difference in the community. No act is too small to make a difference. Despite the persistence and severity of many social problems, members of our community have not given up.

I hope that by the time you reach the end of this text, with your newfound sociological imagination, you will find your own path to social action. Wherever it leads you, I wish you all the best.

## ANCILLARIES



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- Chapter-by-chapter **study questions** to help you prepare for quizzes and tests

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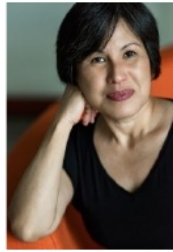
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# CHAPTER 1

## Sociology and the Study of Social Problems

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

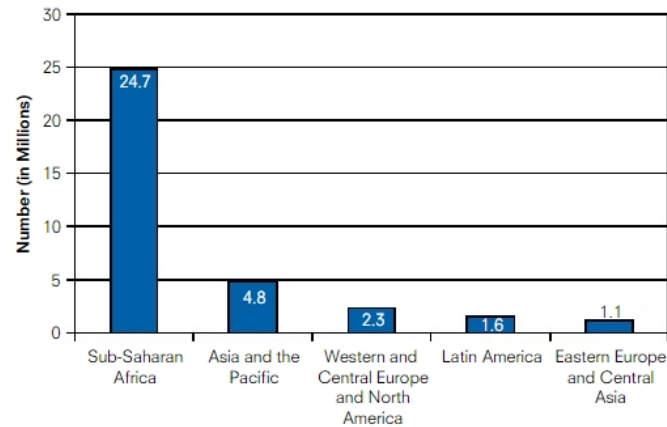
- 1.1 Define the sociological imagination
- 1.2 Identify the characteristics of a social problem
- 1.3 Compare the four sociological perspectives
- 1.4 Explain how sociology is a science
- 1.5 Identify the role of social policy, advocacy, and innovation in addressing social problems

If I asked everyone in your class what they believe is the most important social problem facing the United States, there would be many different answers: the economy, immigration, health care, unemployment. Most would agree that some or all of these are social problems. But which is the most important, and how would we solve it?

Suppose I asked the same question in a South African college classroom. AIDS is likely to be one of the responses from South African college students. According to UNAIDS (2014), 35 million adults and children worldwide were living with HIV in 2013. Africa remains the epicenter of the pandemic, with more than 25 million HIV-infected adults and children (refer to Figure 1.1). The prevalence of HIV is predicted to triple during the next decade, especially in Africa, but also in the former USSR, China, and India. The AIDS pandemic has been described as a threat to global stability (Lichtenstein 2004). However, effective risk-reduction strategies, along with new treatments for HIV/AIDS, have saved countless lives in the United States. During the early 1980s, nearly 150,000 Americans were infected with the disease each year, but by the early 1990s, the number of new infected cases had dropped to 50,000 per year, where it remains today (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007, 2013).





**Figure 1.1** Number of individuals living with HIV, regional data for 2013

**SOURCE:** UNAIDS 2014.

**NOTE:** The total number of HIV infections is 35 million. HIV infection data for the Caribbean (250,000) and Middle East and North Africa (230,000) are not reported in the figure.

**Globalization**, defined as the process of increasing transborder connectedness (Hyttek and Zentgraf 2007)—whether economically, politically, environmentally, or socially—poses new challenges and opportunities for understanding and solving social problems. We cannot understand the nature of social problems by simply taking a national or local perspective. Taking a global perspective allows us to look at the interrelations between countries and their social problems (Heiner 2002). We are not the only country to experience social problems. Knowledge based on research to understand and policies to address social problems here could be applied in other countries, and what other countries have learned based on their social problems could be applied in the United States. Finally, we all need a little help from our neighbors—we can increase our connectedness and goodwill with other countries through implementing solutions collaboratively rather than alone. So what do you think? Is HIV/AIDS in South Africa a problem only for South Africans, or is it also a problem for those living in the United States?

**Globalization:**

A process of increasing transborder connectedness; the basis may be economic, political, environmental, or social

**What Does It Mean to Me?**

What would be at the top of your social problems list? Would your list include AIDS? Why or why not?

This is how we spend much of our public conversation—on the Senate floor, on afternoon talk shows, at work, or in the classroom—arguing, analyzing, and just trying to figure out which problem is most serious and what needs to be done about it. In casual or sometimes heated conversations, we offer opinions about the economy, the wars in the Middle East, the Affordable Care Act, or appropriate policies for the African AIDS pandemic. Often, these explanations are not based on firsthand data collection or on an exhaustive review of the literature. For the most part, they are based on our opinions and life experiences, or they are just good guesses.

What this text and your course offer is a sociological perspective on social problems. Unlike any other discipline, sociology provides us with a form of self-consciousness, an awareness that our personal experiences are often caused by structural or social forces. **Sociology** is the systematic study of individuals, groups, and social structures. A sociologist examines the relationship between individuals and society, which includes such social institutions as the family, the military, the economy, and education. As a social science, sociology offers an objective and systematic approach to understanding the causes of social problems. From a sociological perspective, problems and their solutions don't just involve individuals; they also have a great deal to do with the social structures in our society. C. Wright Mills ([1959] 2000) first promoted this perspective in his 1959 essay, "The Promise."

## USING OUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

According to Mills, the sociological imagination can help us distinguish between personal troubles and public issues. The **sociological imagination** is the ability to link our personal lives and experiences with our social world. Mills ([1959] 2000) describes how personal troubles occur within the "character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relationships with others" (p. 8), whereas public issues are a "public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened" (p. 8). As a result, the individual, or those in contact with that individual, can resolve a trouble, but the resolution of an issue requires public debate about what values are being threatened and the source of such a threat.

Let's consider unemployment. One man unemployed is his own personal trouble. Resolving his unemployment involves reviewing his current situation, reassessing his skills, considering his job opportunities, and submitting his résumés or job applications to employers. Once he has a new job, his personal trouble is over. However, what happens when your city or state experiences high levels of unemployment? What happens when there is a nationwide problem of unemployment? This affects not just one person but, rather, thousands or millions. A personal trouble has been transformed into a public issue. This is the case not just because of how many people it affects; something becomes an issue because of the public values it threatens. Unemployment threatens our sense of economic security. It challenges our belief that everyone can work hard to succeed. Unemployment raises questions about society's obligations to help those without a job.

**Sociology:** The systematic study of individuals and social structures

**Sociological imagination:** The ability to link our personal lives and experiences with our social world





Archive Photos / stringer

A key distinction between a personal trouble and a public issue is how each one can be remedied. According to C. Wright Mills, an individual may be able to solve a trouble, but a public issue can only be resolved by society and its social structures.

We can make the personal trouble–public issue connection with regard to another issue, one that you might already be aware of—the cost of higher education. In 2014, during a rally in Florida’s Coral Reef High School, President Barack Obama announced an initiative to help students complete the federal student aid application form, part of an effort to broaden access to higher education. Coral Reef senior David Scherker, an aspiring filmmaker, was in the audience. At the time, David was waiting to hear about the status of his admission to several colleges and universities, including Florida State University and USC. He worried about his financial aid offers and whether he would be able to attend the school of his choice (NPR 2014). Is this a personal trouble facing only David? Or is this a public issue?

College cost has become a serious social problem because the “barriers that make higher education unaffordable serve to erode our economic well being, our civic values, and our democratic ideals” (Callan and Finney 2002:10). Although most Americans still believe that a college education is essential for one’s success, increasingly they also believe that qualified and motivated students do not have the opportunity to attend

college (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and Public Agenda 2010). The data support this. Nearly one half of all college-qualified, low- and moderate-income high school graduates are unable to afford college and have lower rates of bachelor’s degree attainment than their middle- and high-income peers (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance 2006). Though only about a third of students pay the published tuition or sticker price, the cost of tuition has risen at a faster rate than family income or student financial aid. At a four-year public institution, for academic year 2013–2014, in-state total fees (tuition, room, and board) were \$18,391 (a 3.2% increase from 2012–2013); at four-year private institutions, the average cost was \$40,917 (a 3.7% increase from 2013–2014) (College Board 2014).

The majority of students receive some form of assistance through scholarships, federal grants, or state aid. The financial burden of a college education is unevenly distributed, with low- and moderate-income students and families experiencing the burden most. In 2007, even after grant aid, low-income families paid or borrowed an amount equivalent to 72% of their family income to cover one year of tuition. In contrast, families with incomes between \$54,001 and \$80,400 had to finance the equivalent of 27% of their family income for tuition. The percentage was lowest for families with incomes over \$115,400 at 14% (Education Trust 2009). The average indebtedness for a graduating college senior was \$28,400 for 2013 (Institute for College Access & Success 2014).



As Mills explains, “to be aware of the ideal of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieus. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination” (Mills [1959] 2000:10–11). The sociological imagination challenges the claim that the problem is “natural” or based on individual failures, instead reminding us how the problem is rooted in society, in our social structures themselves (Irwin 2001). For example, can we solve unemployment by telling every unemployed person to work harder? Can David solve his tuition problem by taking out student loans? Or will this create additional problems? The sociological imagination emphasizes the structural bases of social problems, making us aware of the economic, political, and social structures that govern employment and unemployment trends and the cost of higher education. Individuals have may agency, the ability to make their own choices, but their actions and even their choices may be constrained by the realities of the social structure. Throughout this text, we apply our sociological imagination to the study of social problems. Before we proceed, we need to understand what a social problem is.

.....

**What Does It Mean to Me?**

What is the annual cost of attending your college or university? What did you and/or your family consider before making your final school decision? How much were finances included in your considerations?

.....

## WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

### The Negative Consequences of Social Problems

A **social problem** is a social condition or pattern of behavior that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or our physical world. A social problem such as unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse, or HIV/AIDS may negatively affect a person’s life and health, along with the well-being of that person’s family and friends. Problems can threaten our social institutions, for example, the family (spousal abuse), education (the rising cost of college tuition), or the economy (unemployment). Our physical and social worlds can be threatened by problems related to urbanization (lack of affordable housing) and the environment (climate change). You will note from the examples in this paragraph that social problems are inherently social in their causes, consequences, and solutions.

**Social problem:** A social condition that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or our physical world

### Objective and Subjective Realities of Social Problems

A social problem has objective and subjective realities. A social condition does not have to be personally experienced by every individual to be considered a social problem. The **objective reality** of a social problem comes from acknowledging that a particular social condition does exist. Objective realities of a social problem can be confirmed by

**Objective reality:** Actual existence of a particular condition



Unemployment and  
the Great Recession

collection of data. For example, we know from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2013) that more than 1.1 million Americans are living with HIV/AIDS. Refer to this chapter's Exploring Social Problems feature for more information about HIV infections in the United States. You or I do not have to have been infected with HIV to know that the disease is real, with real human and social consequences. We can confirm the realities of HIV/AIDS by observing infected individuals and their families in our own community, at AIDS programs, shelters, or hospitals.

The **subjective reality** of a social problem addresses how a problem becomes defined as a problem. This idea is based on the concept of the **social construction of reality**. Coined by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), the term refers to how our world is a social creation, originating and evolving through our everyday thoughts and actions. Most of the time, we assume and act as though the world is a given, objectively predetermined outside our existence. However, according to Berger and Luckmann, we also apply subjective meanings to our existence and experience. In other words, our experiences don't just happen to us. Good, bad, positive, or negative—we attach meanings to our reality.

From this perspective, social problems are not objectively predetermined. They become real only when they are subjectively defined or perceived as problematic. This perspective is known as **social constructionism**. Recognizing the subjective aspects of social problems allows us to understand how a social condition may be defined as a problem by one segment of society but be completely ignored by another. For example, do you believe AIDS is a social problem? Some may argue that it is a problem only if you are the one infected with the disease or if you are morally corrupt or sexually promiscuous. Actually, some would not consider AIDS a problem at all, considering the medical and public health advances that have successfully reduced the spread of the disease in the United States. Yet others would argue that AIDS still qualifies as a social problem.

Sociologist Denise Loseke (2003) explains, "Conditions might exist, people might be hurt by them, but conditions are not social problems until humans categorize them as troublesome and in need of repair" (p. 14). To frame their work, social constructionists ask the following set of questions:

What do people say or do to convince others that a troublesome condition exists that must be changed? What are the consequences of the typical ways that social problems attract concern? How do our subjective understandings of social problems change the objective characteristics of our world? How do these understandings change how we think about our own lives and the lives of those around us? (Loseke and Best 2003:3–4)

The social constructionist perspective focuses on how a problem is socially defined, in a dialectic process between individuals interacting with each other and with their social world. In the next section, we'll learn how the problem of HIV/AIDS was socially constructed.

**Subjective reality:**  
Attachment of meanings  
to our reality

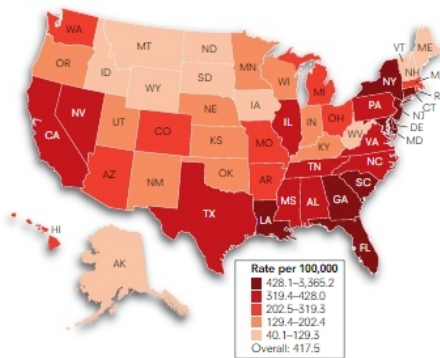
**Social construction  
of reality:** The world  
regarded as a social  
creation

**Social  
constructionism:**  
Subjective definition or  
perception of conditions

# EXPLORING social problems

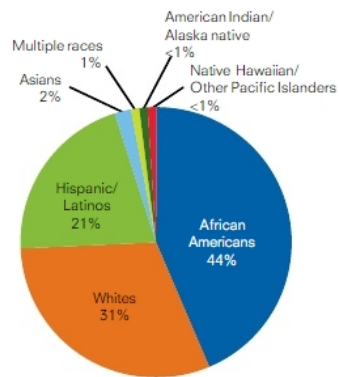
## HIV and AIDS

**U.S. Data Map 1.1** Rates of persons aged 18–64 years living with a diagnosis of HIV infection, 2008



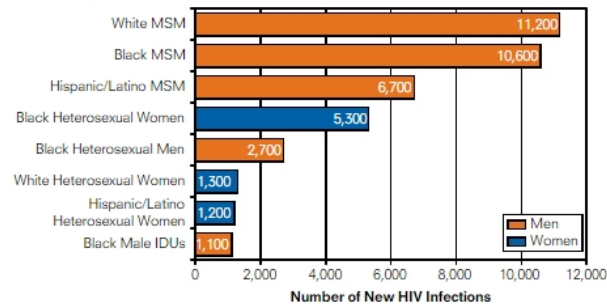
Data Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2013.

**Figure 1.2** New HIV infections by race/ethnicity, 2010



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2014.

**Figure 1.3** Estimated new HIV infections, 2010, for the most affected subpopulations



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2014.

NOTE: MSM stands for "men who have sex with men." IDU stands for "injecting drug user."

### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

More than 1.1 million Americans are living with HIV/AIDS (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2013).

Despite representing 12% of the U.S. population, African Americans accounted for 44% of all new HIV infections among adults and adolescents (13 years or older) in 2010 (refer to Figure 1.2). Gay and bisexual men account for most of the new infections

among whites and African Americans. Men who have sex with men (MSM) are most at risk for HIV infections (refer to Figure 1.3).

How should health programs or policies address the risk factors for these populations? What structural barriers might make these populations difficult to reach?

Which groups have the lowest number of new HIV infections?