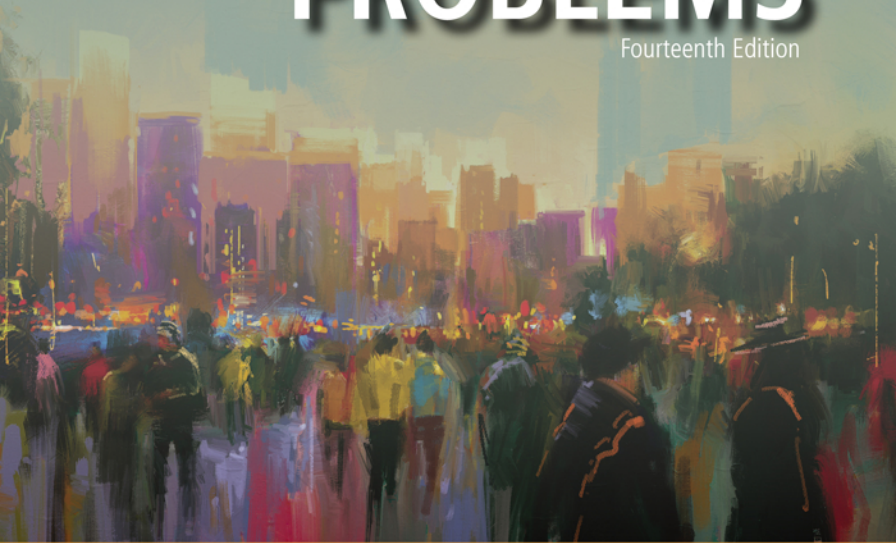


SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Fourteenth Edition



D. Stanley Eitzen | Maxine Baca Zinn | Kelly Eitzen Smith

 Pearson

Social Problems

FOURTEENTH EDITION

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Preface

S*ocial Problems*, Fourteenth Edition, examines inherently interesting subjects such as corporate crime, racism, sexism, urban decay, poverty, health care, the changing economy, the politics of drugs, antigovernment movements, and terrorism. The typical book on social problems describes these phenomena separately, using a variety of explanations. Students exposed to such a *mélange* of approaches might retain their interest in these problems, but they probably would complete the book with little grasp of how social problems are interrelated and society's role in their creation and perpetuation. This book is different. The approach is consistently sociological. There is a coherent framework from which to analyze and understand society's social problems.

The overarching goal in *Social Problems*, Fourteenth Edition, is to capture the imaginations of our readers. We want them not only to be interested in the topics but also to become enthusiastic about exploring the intricacies and mysteries of social life. We want them, moreover, to incorporate the sociological perspective into their explanatory repertoire. The sociological perspective requires, at a minimum, acceptance of two fundamental assumptions. The first is that individuals are products of their social environment. Who they are, what they believe, what they strive for, and how they feel about themselves are all dependent on other people and on the society in which they live. The incorporation of the sociological perspective requires that we examine the structure of society to understand such social problems as racism, poverty, and crime. This method, however, runs counter to the typical explanations people offer for social ills that tend to focus on individual behavior and choices. An observer cannot gain an adequate understanding

of racism, crime, poverty, or other social problems by studying only bigots, criminals, and the poor. Therefore, we focus on the social structure to determine the underlying features of the social world in an effort to understand social problems.

Because the emphasis is on social structure, the reader is required to accept another fundamental assumption of the sociological perspective. We refer to the adoption of a critical stance toward all social forms. Sociologists must ask these questions: How does the social system really work? Who has the power? Who benefits under the existing social arrangements, and who does not? We should also ask questions such as: Is the law neutral? Why are some drugs illegal and others, known to be harmful, legal? Why are so few organizations in the United States—which is characterized as a democracy—democratic? Is U.S. society a meritocratic one in which talent and effort combine to stratify people fairly? Questions such as these call into question existing myths, stereotypes, and official dogma. The critical examination of society demystifies and demythologizes. It sensitizes the individual to the inconsistencies present in society. But, most important, a critical stance toward social arrangements allows us to see their role in perpetuating social problems. In conclusion, the reader should be aware that we are not dispassionate observers of social problems.

Let us, then, briefly make our values more explicit. We oppose social arrangements that prevent people from developing to their full potential. That is, we reject political and social repression, educational elitism, institutional barriers to racial and sexual equality, economic exploitation, and official indifference to human suffering. Stating these feelings positively, we favor equality of opportunity, the right to dissent, social justice, an

economic system that minimizes inequality, and a political system that maximizes citizen input in decisions and provides for an adequate health care system and acceptable living conditions for all people. Obviously, we believe that U.S. society as currently organized falls short of what we consider to be an optimal society. The problem areas of U.S. society are the subjects of this edition. So, too, are structural arrangements around the globe that harm people.

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Organization of the Book

The organizing theme of this book is that many aspects of social problems are conditions resulting from cultural and social arrangements, in particular social problems resulting from wealth and power and the bias of our current system

(introduced in Part One). The focus is on power because the powerful, by making and enforcing the laws, create and define deviance. They determine which behaviors will be rewarded and which ones punished. The powerful influence public opinion, and they can attempt to solve social problems or ignore them.

Part Two focuses on problems of people, location, and the environment. Specifically, we cover social problems resulting from population changes, both in the United States and globally. We end the section with a closer look at environmental problems arising from both population growth and cultural norms.

Part Three examines a crucial element of U.S. social structure: the various manifestations of social inequality. It describes inequality based on wealth, race/ethnicity, gender, and disability.

Part Four examines the impact of social structure on individuals. Deviant behavior is activity that violates the norms of an organization, community, or society. Consequently, deviance is culturally defined and socially labeled. Certain behaviors are also labeled as deviant because they conflict with the interests of the powerful in society. Public policy, then, reflects the values and interests of those in power and is codified into law. Members of society are also taught how to respond to deviants. The law and these structured responses to deviants are societal reactions that establish deviance in social roles; paradoxically, the degraded status that results from societal reactions reinforces the deviance that society seeks to control. Deviance, then, is fundamentally the result of social structure. We examine these processes in relation to two types of deviance: crime and drug use.

Part Five describes problems found within five representative institutions: the economy, the family, the education system, the health care system, and the government.

The book concludes with a chapter that answers this question: What do we do about social problems? The solutions may come from the

bottom up—that is, people organize through human agency to change social structures, or from the top down—social policies determined by the powerful.

New to This Edition

Since the last edition of *Social Problems* was published, certain events have shaken U.S. society, and important trends have become even more significant, making a revision necessary. For example,

- The U.S. has ended its involvement in the Iraq war and is committed to do the same in Afghanistan. The U.S. budget for the military continues to rise. The threat of terrorism remains high globally, as evidenced by high-profile attacks in France and Belgium.
- World population continues to increase by about 80 million a year, almost all of the increase in poor countries.
- The U.S. population has moved past 320 million and will add another 120 million by 2050. At about 4 percent of the world's population, the United States has an enormous environmental footprint—it is the second largest emitter of the world's greenhouse gases and uses one-fourth of the world's resources.
- Racial/ethnic minorities will be the numerical majority in the United States by 2042. Immigration increases racial/ethnic tensions and conflicts in some parts of the nation. Growing conflicts between the police and minority groups have sparked protests and discussions about racial discrimination.
- Politics in the United States has become more and more polarized, resulting in factions unwilling to compromise.
- The Supreme Court has ruled that money is a form of speech and therefore cannot be curtailed in politics. As a consequence, money from large organizations and wealthy

individuals is swamping elections and making a mockery of democracy.

- Although some large cities in the United States are showing signs of vigor, many are troubled with growing dependent populations, shrinking job markets, increasing racial tensions, and declining economic resources to meet their problems.
- The economy continues its massive transformation from a manufacturing economy to one based on service/knowledge. This causes disruptions as some companies fail while others succeed. Globalization, with jobs and tasks moving outside the country, adds to the unemployment woes accompanying the economic transformation.
- The Great Recession hit in 2007 and caused havoc on Wall Street, Main Street, and in families. Unemployment rose precipitously. Wall Street tumbled. The value of housing dropped, causing bankruptcies and foreclosures. The effects of the Recession continue to affect U.S. families.
- Government bailouts of the banks and recovery efforts such as an economic stimulus, plus the cost of conducting two wars, raised the national debt dramatically to \$19 trillion by 2016. This huge debt provides a rationale to limit government by reducing or eliminating social welfare programs.
- ObamaCare has been upheld by the Supreme Court. The public is divided on this health care reform.

This fourteenth edition of *Social Problems* considers each of these important trends and events as well as others. Some of the topics new to this edition are:

- Expanded discussion of the concentration of corporate wealth
- The Occupy Wall Street movement
- Islamophobia

- Increasing tensions over immigration
- The drought in California
- Corporate polluters and lobbying
- Increasing tension between the public and the police after a series of deaths of Black men at the hands of police
- The Black Lives Matter movement
- Campus incidents of racism
- Transgender and intersex issues
- Marijuana legalization: lessons from Colorado
- The growing gap between the rich and poor
- Same-sex marriage court ruling
- The controversy over Common Core Standards
- Affordable Care Act statistics
- Terrorism in France

Six types of feature boxes are included:

- Voices boxes provide the personal views of those affected by a social problem.
- A Closer Look elaborates on a topic in detail.
- Social Problems in Global Perspective boxes illustrate how other societies deal with a particular social problem. This global emphasis is also evident in panels and tables that compare the United States with other nations on such topics as crime/incarceration, medical care, and education.
- Social Policy boxes look at policy issues and highlight social policies that work to alleviate particular social problems.
- Looking Toward the Future boxes examine trends concerning the social problems under consideration at the beginning of a new millennium.
- Speaking to Students boxes address issues especially pertinent to college students.

Also included are:

- End-of-chapter Chapter Reviews and Key Terms.

Note on Language Usage

In writing this book, we have been especially sensitive to our use of language. Language is used to reflect and maintain the secondary status of social groups by defining them, diminishing them, trivializing them, or excluding them. For example, traditional English uses masculine words (man, mankind, he) to refer to people in general. Even in the ordering of masculine and feminine or of Whites and Blacks within the discussion, one category consistently preceding its counterpart subtly conveys the message that the one listed first is superior to the other. In short, our goal is to use language so that it does not create the impression that one social class, race, or gender is superior to any other.

The terms of reference for racial and ethnic categories are changing. In *Social Problems*, Fourteenth Edition, we use the terms Blacks and African Americans interchangeably, and Hispanics and Latinos interchangeably.

Also, we try to avoid the use of America or American society when referring to the United States. America should be used only in reference to the entire Western Hemisphere: North, Central, and South America (and then, in the plural, Americas). Its use as a reference to only the United States implies that the other nations of the Western Hemisphere have no place in our frame of reference.

Supplements

Instructor's Manual and Test Bank Each chapter in the Instructor's Manual includes the following resources: Chapter Summary, Learning Objectives, Critical Thinking Questions, Activities for Classroom Participation, and Suggested Films. Designed to make your lectures more effective and to save preparation time, this extensive resource gathers together useful activities and strategies for teaching your Social Problems course. Also included in

this manual is a test bank of more than 1,500 multiple-choice, true/false, and essay questions. The Instructor's Manual and Test Bank is available to adopters for download from the Pearson Instructors Resource Center at www.pearsonhighered.com.

MyTest This computerized software allows instructors to create their own personalized exams, to edit any or all of the existing test questions, and to add new questions. Other special features of this program include random generation of test questions, creation of alternate versions of the same test, scrambling question sequence, and test preview before printing. For easy access, this software is available for download from the Pearson Instructors Resource Center at www.pearsonhighered.com.

PowerPoint Presentations The PowerPoint presentations for *Social Problems*, Fourteenth Edition, are informed by instructional and design theory. You have the option in every chapter of choosing from any of the following types of slides: Lecture, Line Art, and Image PowerPoints. 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.

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The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.

—*Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Second Inaugural Address, 1937*

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Chapter 1

The Sociological Approach to Social Problems



Learning Objectives

- 1.1** Understand the major social trends facing Americans and their potential consequences.
- 1.2** Explain the complex nature of defining a social problem.
- 1.3** Explain and apply the sociological imagination to different social problems.
- 1.4** Understand the four basic research designs and research methods that sociologists use to study social problems.

An Introduction to Social Issues

1.1 Understand the major social trends facing Americans and their potential consequences.

The official population of the United States surpassed 321 million in 2015. With a net gain of one person every twelve seconds, the United States' population is projected to reach more than 416 million by 2060. What will life in the United States be like with an additional 100 million people? Will the problems of today be eliminated or reduced, or will they have worsened? Consider the following social trends:

Immigration and the browning of America. Immigration from Latin America and Asia is fueling population growth. By 2042, the race/ethnicity mix will be such that racial minorities will surpass Whites as the numerical majority. The increasing numbers of racial minorities will likely fuel racial/ethnic unrest among them as they experience discrimination and low-paying, demeaning jobs and among the native-born, who fear that the low wages of recent immigrants either take away their jobs or keep their wages low. With the additional millions of immigrants added in the coming decades, previously White rural areas and small towns will begin to deal with the challenges of new ethnic and racial residents.

The graying of America. After 2030, one in five U.S. residents will be at least 65 (similar to the proportion in Florida today). The increase in the number of elderly will cause problems with funding Social Security and Medicare, placing a greater burden on the young to support the elderly through these programs. This divide between workers who support the old with payroll taxes will have both racial and generational dimensions because the workers will be increasingly people of color and the elderly overwhelmingly White (Harden, 2006).

The widening inequality gap and the plight of the poor. Today, the wealth and income of the affluent grows rapidly while the income of workers languishes. The inequality gap now is at record levels, resulting in a diminished middle class. As the middle class is squeezed, the trend is for more downward mobility rather than upward mobility.

At the bottom of the class system, nearly one in seven Americans is poor: 45.3 million Americans were "officially" poor in 2013. The government considers those with incomes at or below 50 percent of the poverty level to be "severely poor." In 2013, 19.9 million Americans were in this category. In the coming decades, how will poverty be addressed? The trend has been for the federal government to reduce "safety net" programs that help the poor, such as welfare to single mothers, nutrition programs, and Head Start, leading to speculation that the poor will always be with us, and their numbers will increase.

The increasing power of money to influence elections and public policy. A 2010 Supreme Court decision allows corporations and other organizations to spend unlimited amounts to elect or defeat political candidates. In a second ruling in 2014, the Supreme Court removed the aggregate limit on the amount individual donors can give to candidates, political action committees, and political parties. Individuals can thus spend millions to further their candidates and causes. Add to this the influence of organizations through their lobbyists to influence policies. The consequence of this inverse relationship between money and power

is obvious. Where, we might ask, is the voice of the poor heard? What happened to our democratic ideals?

Increasing globalization and the transformation of the economy.

The U.S. economy has undergone a dramatic shift from one dominated by manufacturing to one now characterized by service occupations and the collection, storage, and dissemination of information. As a result of this transformation, relatively well-paid employment in manufacturing products such as automobiles has dwindled and been replaced with jobs in lower-paying service industries. Most of the manufacturing is now done in foreign countries where U.S. corporations produce the same products but with cheaper labor, lower taxes, and fewer governmental controls. Some services, such as research, accounting, and call centers, have also been transferred to overseas companies to increase profits. Currently, these trends have negatively affected U.S. workers by making their jobs more insecure and reducing or eliminating their benefits.

In the coming decades, as 100 million people are added and new technologies enhancing globalization are developed, will the working conditions and standard of living of U.S. workers decline or be enhanced?

Increasing threats to the environment. Currently, the United States, at about 4.5 percent of the world's population, consumes one-fourth of the world's energy, most particularly oil, and it is the world's greatest producer of greenhouse gases, which cause global warming. Population increases lead to more traffic congestion, more suburban sprawl, and more landfills. Population growth also means greater demand for food, water, fossil fuels, timber, and other resources. At present, land is being converted for development (housing, schools, shopping centers, and roads) at about twice the rate of population growth. Adding another 100 million people with today's habits (large houses, gas-guzzling transportation, suburban sprawl, and the consumption of products designed to be obsolete) will lead to an ecological wasteland. But perhaps recognition of the negative environmental impacts of current usage patterns will lead to our reducing waste, finding alternative energy sources, making greater use of mass transit, increasing housing density, and finding other ways to sustain and even enhance the environment.

At the global level, the earth is warming because of human activities, most prominently the use of oil and other carbons. Global warming will have disastrous effects during this century—coastal flooding, shifting agricultural patterns, violent weather, spread of tropical diseases, and loss of biodiversity, to name a few.

Growing global inequality. While the United States' population will increase by nearly 100 million before midcentury, the world will grow by 50 percent, adding 3 billion (for a total of 9 billion) people. Almost all of this growth will



The numbers seeking refuge in homeless shelters have increased dramatically in recent years.



More than one billion people worldwide do not have access to safe drinking water.

tions profit from exploiting the resources and labor of the poorest countries. This gap between the fortunate few and the impoverished, desperate masses continues to widen.

The underdeveloped world, already in dire straits, will face enormous obstacles in providing the minimum of food, water, housing, and medical attention for their peoples as they add billions in population. The result will be ever-greater numbers of desperate people on this planet, making the world less safe. Unless the affluent nations and international organizations make structural changes to aid the underdeveloped countries, conflicts over scarce resources will increase, as will sectarian and tribal violence and acts of terrorism. Although the United States is considered one of the wealthiest nations, see Table 1.1 for a summary of social problems experienced by children.

An increasingly dangerous world. September 11, 2001, unleashed a chain of negative events. Those terrorist acts on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon caused death and destruction and redirected government policies. The United States responded with a war on Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and a preemptive war on Iraq, presumably to squelch terrorism and spread democracy throughout the Middle East. To fight the war on terror, the United States suspended the civil rights of prisoners, including their protection from the use of techniques that many would define as torture, and spied on American citizens. Suicide bombers (the “guided missiles” of the militarily weak) have destabilized the Middle East and threaten terror worldwide. There is the growing threat of nuclear proliferation, most notably from North Korea and Iran. As the world’s population soars, with its consequent poverty, hunger, water shortages, disease, and political chaos, the United States will be increasingly unsafe. Will we face these incredible problems and find solutions? That is the ultimate question.

These issues highlight the social problems addressed in this book. Although the focus is on the problematic side of social life, our hope is that readers will find this exploration intriguing, insightful, and useful.

occur among the poorest nations. Today, an estimated 1.1 billion people are undernourished. Most do not have clean water and adequate sanitation. Half of the world’s people live on less than \$2 a day, one-sixth on less than \$1 a day. Diseases such as malaria, chronic diarrhea, Ebola, dengue, and parasites ravage hundreds of millions across the globe. At the other extreme, the richest nations live lavish lifestyles, consuming and wasting most of the world’s resources. Multinational corporations

Table 1.1 How America Ranks Among Industrialized Countries in Investing in and Protecting Children**Are America's Children Ready to Compete in the Global Arena?**1st in gross domestic product1st in number of billionaires

Second to worst in child poverty rates (just ahead of Romania)

Largest gap between the rich and the poor

1st in military spending1st in military weapons exports1st in number of people incarcerated

Worst in protecting children against gun violence

30th in preschool enrollment rates24th in reading scores for 15-year-olds28th in science scores for 15-year-olds36th in math scores for 15-year-olds1st in health expenditures25th in low birthweight rates26th in immunization rates31st in infant mortality rates

Second to worst in teenage births (just ahead of Bulgaria)

The U.S. is the only country in the world besides Somalia—which lacks a legally constituted government—that has failed to ratify the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.

If we compare Black child well-being in America to child well-being in other nations, according to UNICEF:

- 72 nations have lower infant mortality rates including Sri Lanka, Cuba, and Romania.
- 132 nations have a lower incidence of low birthweight including the Congo, Cambodia, and Guatemala.

SOURCE: Courtesy of The Children's Defense Fund.

Defining Social Problems

1.2 Explain the complex nature of defining a social problem.

Typically, social problems have been thought of as social situations that a large number of observers felt were inappropriate and needed remedying. Early U.S. sociologists applied a medical model to the analysis of society to assess whether some pathology was present. Using what were presumed to be universal criteria of normality, sociologists commonly assumed social problems resulted from “bad” people—maladjusted people who were abnormal because of mental deficiency, mental disorder, lack of education, or incomplete socialization. These social pathologists, because they assumed the basic norms of society are universally held, viewed social problems as behaviors or social arrangements that disturb the moral order. For them, the moral order of U.S. society defined such behaviors as alcoholism, suicide, theft, and murder as social problems.

Sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s began to focus more broadly on the conditions of society that fostered problems. Societies undergoing rapid change from the processes of migration, urbanization, and industrialization were thought to have pockets of social disorganization. Certain areas of the cities undergoing the most rapid change, for example, were found to have disproportionately high rates of crime, family breakdowns, and mental disorders.

In the past few decades, many sociologists have returned to a study of problem individuals—deviants who violate the expectations of society. The modern study of deviance developed in two directions. The first sought the sources of deviation within the social structure. Sociologists saw deviance as the result of conflict between the culturally prescribed goals of society (such as material success) and the obstacles to obtaining them that some groups of people face. The other, of relatively recent origin, has focused on the role of society in creating and sustaining deviance through labeling those people viewed as abnormal. Societal reactions are viewed as the key in determining what a social problem is and who is deviant.

The Objective and Subjective Nature of Social Problems

Objective reality of social problems

The notion that societal conditions harm certain segments of the population and therefore are social problems.

There is an **objective reality of social problems**. In other words, conditions in society (such as poverty and institutional racism) induce material or psychic suffering for certain segments of the population; sociocultural phenomena prevent a significant number of societal participants from developing and using their full potential; discrepancies exist between what a country such as the United States is supposed to stand for (equality of opportunity, justice, democracy) and the actual conditions in which many of its people live; and people are fouling their own nests through pollution and the indiscriminate use of natural resources. This objective approach assumes that some kinds of actions are likely to be judged a problem in any context. Therefore, one goal of this book is to identify, describe, and explain situations that are objective social problems.

There are several dangers, however, in defining social problems objectively. The most obvious is that subjectivity is always present. To identify a phenomenon as a problem implies that it falls short of some standard. But what standards are to be used? Will the standards of society suffice? In a pluralistic society such as the United States, there is no uniform set of guidelines. People from different social strata and other social locations (such as region, occupation, race, and age) differ in their perceptions of what a social problem is and, once defined, how it should be solved. Is marijuana use a social problem? Is pornography? Is the relatively high rate of military spending a social problem? Is abortion a social problem? There is little consensus in U.S. society on these and other issues. All social observers, then, must be aware of the **subjective nature of social problems**.

Subjective nature of social problems

The idea that what is and what is not a social problem is a matter of definition. Thus, social problems vary by time and place.

In defining social problems, we must also guard against the tendency to accept the definitions of social problems provided by those in power. Because the powerful—the agencies of government, business, and the media—provide the statistical data (such as crime rates), they may define social reality in a way that manipulates public opinion, thereby controlling behaviors that threaten the status quo (and their power). The congruence of official biases and public opinion can be seen in historical examples. Slavery, for instance, was not considered a social problem by the powerful in the South, but slave revolts were. In colonial New England, the persecution of witches was not a social problem, but the witches were. From the standpoint of U.S. government, dispossessing Native Americans of their lands was not a social problem, but the Native Americans who resisted were.

Thus, to consider as social problems only those occurrences so defined by the public is fraught with related dangers. First, to do so may mean overlooking conditions that are detrimental to a relatively powerless segment of the society. In other

words, deplorable conditions heaped on minority groups tend to be ignored as social problems by the people at large. If sociologists accept this definition of social problems as their sole criterion, they have clearly taken a position that supports existing inequities for minority groups.

Second, defining social problems exclusively through public opinion diverts attention from what may constitute the most important social problem: the existing social order. If defined only through public opinion, social problems are limited to behaviors and actions that disrupt the existing social order. From this perspective, social problems are manifestations of the behaviors of abnormal people, not of society; the inadequacies and inequalities perpetuated by the existing system are not questioned. The distribution of power, the system of justice, how children are educated—to name but a few aspects of the existing social order—are assumed to be proper by most of the public, when they may be social problems themselves.

By overlooking institutions as a source of social problems (and as problems themselves), observers disregard the role of the powerful in society. To focus exclusively on those who deviate—the prostitute, the delinquent, the drug addict, the criminal—excludes the unethical, illegal, and destructive actions of powerful individuals, groups, and institutions in U.S. society and ignores the covert institutional violence brought about by racist and sexist policies, unjust tax laws, inequitable systems of health care and justice, and exploitation by the corporate world.

Types of Social Problems

The previous description reveals issues that must be addressed while examining social problems. First, sociologists have difficulty agreeing on an adequate definition of social problems. Second, debate continues over the unit of analysis: Are individuals or social systems the focus of inquiry? In this book, we examine two main types of **social problems**: (1) acts and conditions that violate the norms and values present in society and (2) societally induced conditions that cause psychic and material suffering for any segment of the population.

NORM VIOLATIONS Sociologists are interested in the discrepancy between social standards and reality for several reasons. First, this traditional approach directs attention to society's failures: the criminals, the mentally ill, the school dropouts, and the poor. Sociologists have many insights that explain the processes by which individuals experience differing pressures to engage in certain forms of **deviant behavior** (actions that violate the norms of a social organization) because of their location in the social structure (social class, occupation, age, race, and role) and in space (region, size of community, and type of neighborhood). A guiding assumption of our inquiry here, however, is that norm violators are symptoms of social problems, not the disease itself. In other words, most deviants are victims and should not be blamed entirely by society for their deviance; rather, the system they live in should be blamed. A description of the situations affecting deviants (such as the barriers to success faced by minority group members) helps explain why some categories of persons participate disproportionately in deviant behavior.

Another reason for the traditional focus on norm violation is that deviance is culturally defined and socially labeled. The sociologist is vitally interested in the social and cultural processes that label some acts and persons as deviant and others

Social problems
Societally induced conditions that harm any segment of the population and acts and conditions that violate the norms and values found in society.

Deviant behavior
Activity that violates the norms of a social organization.

as normal. Because by definition some social problems are whatever the public determines, social problems are inherently relative. Certain behaviors are labeled as social problems, whereas other activities (which by some other criteria would be a social problem) are not. People on welfare, for example, are generally considered to constitute a social problem, but slumlords are not; murder is a social problem, but killing the enemy during wartime is rewarded with medals; a prostitute is punished, but the client is not. The important insight here is that there is nothing inherently deviant in any behavior—it is the label given to that behavior by society that makes it deviant. The members of society, especially the most powerful members, determine what is a social problem and what is not.

SOCIAL CONDITIONS The second type of social problem emphasized in this text involves conditions that cause psychic and material suffering for some category of people in the United States. Here, the focus is on how the society operates and who benefits and who does not under existing arrangements. In other words, what is the bias of the system? How are societal rewards distributed? Do some categories of persons suffer or profit because of how schools are organized or juries selected because of the seniority system used by industries or because of how health care is delivered? These questions direct attention away from individuals who violate norms and toward society's institutions as the generators of social problems.

Social problems of this type generate individual psychic and material suffering. Thus, societal arrangements can be organized in a way that is unresponsive to many human needs. (See "Social Problems in Global Perspective: Social Welfare States," which compares the United States with other nations.)

Social Problems in Global Perspective

Social Welfare States: A Mixture of Capitalism and Socialism

The nations of Western Europe, Scandinavia, and Canada have generous welfare policies for their citizens, certainly much more generous than those available in the United States (the description here is general, characterizing all the nations to a degree, although there are variations among them). These nations are capitalistic, permitting private property and privately owned businesses, but to a much greater degree than in the United States, these nations have publicly owned enterprises and some nationalization of industry, typically transportation, mineral resources, and utilities.

Most important, these nations provide an array of social services to meet the needs of their citizens that is much greater than in the United States. These

services include a greater subsidy to the arts (symphony orchestras, art exhibitions, artists, auditoriums), more public spaces (parks, public squares, recreation facilities), more resources for public libraries, universal preschool education, free public education through college, universal health insurance, housing subsidies to help low-income families, paid leave for new parents (mother and father), the provision of safe government childcare facilities, extended unemployment benefits, paid vacations, and excellent retirement benefits, including paid long-term care if necessary.

These services are expensive, resulting in relatively high taxes, almost double the rate in the United States, but if you add to taxes the costs of private health

insurance, medical care, and the cost of private social services such as daycare, the total is more or less equal (Feagin, Feagin, and Baker 2006:483).

As a result of this extensive and universality of social services, the people in the social welfare states have several advantages over those living in the United States: longer life expectancy, lower infant and maternal mortality, greater literacy, less poverty and homelessness, lower rates of violent crime, a lower proportion of single-parent households, and a proportionately larger middle class.

Are the people in these countries less free than Americans? There is freedom of speech and freedom of the press in each of the nations. The governments in these countries, for the most part, permit greater individual freedom than in the United States for personal behaviors (greater acceptance of homosexuality, legalization of prostitution, few restrictions on abortion, and so on).

Is there a downside? These countries are not immune to economic problems such as recessions, high unemployment, and citizen unrest over high taxes. In the past few years, the governments in these countries have reduced some of their social programs, but they are still much more generous than the United States (which has also curbed its more meager welfare programs). Typically, government leaders in each of these countries have argued that more austere programs are needed to stimulate the economy and permit the government to pay its bills. These measures have met with citizen protest, particularly from the labor unions, which are much stronger than in the United States. It will be interesting to see how reduction in the welfare state plays out. If the austerity measures hold, will the countries follow the U.S. example and become more unequal, experience increased social unrest, see a rise in social problems? Or, as conservatives argue, will more capitalism and less socialism make these nations more efficient and more prosperous?

When health care is maldistributed, when poverty persists for millions, when tax laws permit a business to write off 50 percent of a \$100 luncheon but prohibit a truck driver from writing off a sandwich eaten at a truck stop, when government is run by the few for the benefit of the few, when businesses supposedly in competition fix prices to gouge the consumer, when the criminal justice system is biased against the poor and people of color, then society and its formal organizations are not meeting the needs of individuals. But these conditions often escape criticism and are rarely identified as social problems. Instead, the focus has often been on individuals who vent their frustration in socially unacceptable ways. A major intent of this book is to view individual deviance as a consequence of existing societal arrangements.

The Sociological Perspective

1.3 Explain and apply the sociological imagination to different social problems.

There is a very strong tendency for individuals—laypeople, police officers, judges, lawmakers, and social scientists alike—to perceive social problems and prescribe remedies from an individualistic perspective. For example, they blame the individual for being poor, with no reference to the maldistribution of wealth, low-wage work, and other socially perpetuated disadvantages that blight many families generation after generation; they blame dropouts for leaving school prematurely, with no understanding that the educational system fails to meet their needs. This type of thinking helps explain the reluctance of people in authority to provide adequate welfare, health care, and compensatory programs to help the disadvantaged.