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
CHAPTER

The Sociological Approach to Social Problems

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1.1 Understand how sociologists approach the study of social problems.
1.2 Explain the complex nature of defining a social problem.
1.3 Describe the two main types of social problems.
1.4 Explain and apply the sociological imagination to different social problems.
1.5 Compare/contrast the person-blame approach to social problems and the system-blame approach.
1.6 Understand the four basic research designs and research methods that sociologists use to study social problems.
The official population of the United States surpassed the 300 million mark at 7:46 a.m. EDT on October 17, 2006. In 2043, when the typical reader of this text is about 50 years old, it is estimated that the United States will have added another 100 million people, reaching 400 million. What will life in the United States be like when you reach middle age with that added 100 million? Will the problems of today be eliminated or reduced, or will they have worsened? Consider these issues:

**Immigration and the browning of America.** Immigration from Latin America and Asia is fueling the population growth. About half of the last 100 million Americans are immigrants and their U.S.-born children. Half of the next 100 million will be immigrants or their children. By 2042, the race/ethnicity mix will be such that non-Whites will surpass Whites as the numerical majority. The increasing numbers of non-Whites 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 of 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 a racial, as well as a generational, dimension because the workers will be increasingly people of color and the elderly overwhelmingly White (Harden, 2006).

**The inequality gap.** 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 than upward mobility. As the inequality gap enlarges, will it result in greater social unrest, extreme political movements, more crime?

**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. Individuals can also 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?

**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?

The plight of the poor. Nearly one in six Americans is poor: 46.2 million Americans were “officially” poor in 2010. The number of Americans without health insurance was 49.0 million. The numbers of those receiving food stamps were the highest on record. Emergency food requests and people seeking emergency shelter are increasing. The government considers those with incomes at or below 50 percent of the poverty level to be “severely poor.” In 2010, 20.466 million Americans were in this category. Two factors lead to the speculation that the needs of the poor will not be met satisfactorily in the future. First, the trend is for the federal government to reduce “safety net” programs that help the poor, such as welfare to single mothers, nutrition programs, Head Start, and the like. Moreover, the national minimum wage was only $7.25 an hour in 2012, far below a living wage.

The environmental impact. 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 is the world’s greatest producer of greenhouse gases that result in global warming. More people leads to more traffic congestion, more suburban sprawl, and more landfills. Population growth means greater demand for food, water, fossil fuels, timber, and other resources. At present, land is being converted for development (housing, schools, shopping centers, 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. The United States is the primary user of petrochemicals, and China will surpass it around 2025.

The growing global inequality. While the United States’ population will increase by 100 million before midcentury, the world will grow by 50 percent, adding 3 billion (for a total of 9 billion) people. Almost all this growth will 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. Hundreds of millions are ravaged by diseases such as malaria, chronic diarrhea, Ebola, dengue, and parasites. At the other extreme, the richest nations live lavish lifestyles, consuming and wasting most of the world’s resources. Multinational corporations 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.
Part 1 • The Political Economy of Social Problems

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, with North Korea joining the nuclear club in 2006 and Iran threatening to join the club soon. 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 dark side of social life, our hope is that readers will find this exploration intriguing, insightful, and useful (for a summary of social problems as experienced by children in the United States, see Table 1.1).

### HISTORY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS THEORY

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 that 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 that 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

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**TABLE 1.1**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>How America Ranks Among Industrialized Countries in Investing in and Protecting Children</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st in gross domestic product</td>
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<td>1st in number of billionaires</td>
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<td>1st in number of persons incarcerated</td>
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<td>1st in health expenditures</td>
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<td>1st in student expenditures</td>
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<td>1st in military technology</td>
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<td>1st in defense expenditures</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st in military weapons exports</td>
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<tr>
<td>17th in reading scores</td>
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<tr>
<td>22nd in low birthweight rates</td>
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<tr>
<td>23rd in science scores</td>
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<tr>
<td>30th in infant mortality rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31st in math scores</td>
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<tr>
<td>31st in the gap between the rich and the poor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Last in relative child poverty</td>
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<td>Last in adolescent birth rates (ages 15 to 19)</td>
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<td>Last in protecting our children against gun violence</td>
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defined such behaviors as alcoholism, suicide, theft, and murder as social problems. But this approach did not take into account the complexity inherent in a diverse society.

In a variation of the absolutist approach, sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s focused 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 vice, 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.

Most recently, some sociologists have tried to alert others to the problematic nature of social problems themselves (see Spector and Kitsuse 1987). These theorists emphasize the subjective nature of social problems. They say that what is defined as a social problem differs by audience and by time. Pollution, for example, has not always been considered a social problem. This perspective also examines how particular phenomena come to be defined as social problems, focusing on how groups of people actively influence those definitions.

This brief description reveals several issues that must be addressed in looking at social problems. First, sociologists have difficulty agreeing on an adequate definition of social problems. Second, there is continuing debate over the unit of analysis: Is the focus of inquiry individuals or social systems? Related to the latter is the issue of numbers: How many people have to be affected before something is a social problem? In this regard, C. Wright Mills (1962) made an important distinction: If a situation such as unemployment is a problem for an individual or for scattered individuals, it is a “private trouble.” But if unemployment is widespread, affecting large numbers of people in a region or the society, it is a “public issue” or a “social problem.”
TOWARD A DEFINITION OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

There is an **objective reality of social problems**: There are conditions in society (such as poverty and institutional racism) that induce material or psychic suffering for certain segments of the population; there are sociocultural phenomena that prevent a significant number of societal participants from developing and using their full potential; there are discrepancies 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 nest through pollution and the indiscriminate use of natural resources (Eitzen 1984). This normative approach assumes that some kinds of actions are likely to be judged deleterious 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 differing viewpoints and respect the perspectives of the social actors involved.

In looking for objective 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 several 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 (Szasz 1970). Likewise, racism was not a social problem of the Jim Crow South, but “pushy” Blacks were. From the standpoint of U.S. public opinion, 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 several 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 (Liazos 1972). 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 healthcare and justice, and exploitation by the corporate world (Liazos 1972).

### Types of Social Problems

This book examines 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 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; people who hear God talking to them are considered schizophrenic, but people who talk to God are believed perfectly sane; murder is a social problem, but killing the enemy during wartime is rewarded with medals; a prostitute is punished, but the client is not; aliens entering the country illegally constitute a social problem and are punished, but their U.S. employers are not. The important insight here is that “deviance is not a property inherent in certain forms of behavior; it is a property conferred upon these forms by the audiences which directly or indirectly witness them” (Schur 1971:12). The members of society, especially the most powerful members, determine what is a social problem and what is not.

Powerful people play an important role in determining who gets the negative label and who does not. Because there is no absolute standard that informs citizens of what is deviant and what is not, our definition of deviance depends on which behaviors the
law singles out for punishment. Because the law is an instrument of those in power, acts that are labeled deviant are so labeled because they conflict with the interests of those in power. Thus, to comprehend the labeling process, we must understand not only the norms and values of the society but also which interest groups hold the power (Quinney 1970).

**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 healthcare 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.

When healthcare 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 bologna sandwich, 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 is permitting what is called institutionalized deviance (Doyle and Schindler 1974:13). Such a condition exists when the 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 institutionalized deviance.

In summary, here we consider **social problems** to be (1) societally induced conditions that cause psychic and material suffering for any segment of the population and (2) acts and conditions that violate the norms and values found in society. The distribution of power in society is the key to understanding these social problems. The powerless, because they are dominated by the powerful, are likely to be thwarted in achieving their basic needs (sustenance, security, self-esteem, and productivity). In contrast, the interests of the powerful are served because they control the mechanisms and institutions by which the perceptions of the public are shaped. By affecting public policy through reaffirming customs and through shaping the law and its enforcement, powerful interest groups are instrumental in designating (labeling) who is a problem (deviant) and who must be controlled. Our focus, then, is on the structure of society—especially on how power is distributed—rather than on “problem” individuals. Individual deviants are a manifestation of society’s failure to meet their needs; the sources of crime, poverty, drug addiction, and racism are found in the laws and customs, the quality of life, the distribution of wealth and power, and the accepted practices of schools, governmental units, and corporations. As the primary source of social problems, society, not the individual deviant, must be restructured if social problems are to be solved. (See the panel titled “Social Problems in Global Perspective,” which compares the United States with other nations on social problems).
Chapter 1 • The Sociological Approach to Social Problems

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 child-care 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, 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 have argued that more austere programs are needed to stimulate the economy and permit the government to pay its bills. These measures have been 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?

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Sociology is the discipline that guides this inquiry into the sources and consequences of social problems. This scholarly discipline is the study of society and other social organizations, how they affect human behavior, and how these organizations are changed by human endeavors. C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), in his classic The Sociological Imagination (1959), wrote that the task of sociology is to realize that individual circumstances are inextricably linked to the structure of society. The sociological imagination involves several related components (Eitzen and Smith 2003:8):

- The sociological imagination is stimulated by a willingness to view the social world from the perspective of others.
• It involves moving away from thinking in terms of the individual and her or his problem and focusing rather on the social, economic, and historical circumstances that produce the problem. Put another way, the sociological imagination is the ability to see the societal patterns that influence individuals, families, groups, and organizations.

• Possessing a sociological imagination, one can shift from the examination of a single family to national budgets, from a poor person to national welfare policies, from an unemployed person to the societal shift from manufacturing to a service/knowledge economy, from a single mother with a sick child to the high cost of healthcare for the uninsured, and from a homeless family to the lack of affordable housing.

• To develop a sociological imagination requires a detachment from the taken-for-granted assumptions about social life, and establishing a critical distance (Andersen and Taylor 2000:10–11). In other words, one must be willing to question the structural arrangements that shape social behavior.

When we have this imagination, we begin to see the solutions to social problems not in terms of changing problem people but of changing the structure of society.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AS THE BASIC UNIT OF ANALYSIS

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 African Americans for their aggressive behavior, with no understanding of the limits placed on social mobility for African Americans by the social system; 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, healthcare, and compensatory programs to help the disadvantaged.

The fundamental issue is whether social problems emanate from the pathologies of individuals (person-blame) or from the situations in which deviants are involved (system-blame), that is, whether deviants are the problem itself or only victims of it. The answer no doubt lies somewhere between the two extremes, but because the individual- or victim-blamers have held sway, we should examine their reasoning (Ryan 1976).

Person-Blame Approach versus System-Blame Approach

Let’s begin by considering some victims, such as the children in a slum school who constantly fail. Why do they fail? The victim-blamer points to their cultural deprivation. They do not do well in school because their families speak different dialects, because their parents are uneducated, because they have not been exposed to the educational

*Cultural deprivation is a loaded ethnocentric term applied by members of the majority to the culture of the minority group. It implies that the culture of the group in question is not only inferior but also deficient. The concept does remind us, however, that people can and do make invidious distinctions about cultures and subcultures. Furthermore, people act on these distinctions as if they were valid.
benefits available to middle-class children (such as visits to the zoo, computers in the home, extensive travel, attendance at cultural events, exposure to books). In other words, the defect is in the children and their families. System-blamers look elsewhere for the sources of failure. They ask, What is there about the schools that make slum children more likely to fail? The answer is found in the irrelevant curriculum, class-biased IQ tests, the tracking system, overcrowded classrooms, differential allocation of resources within the school district, and insensitive teachers, whose low expectations for poor children create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Ex-convicts constitute another set of victims. Why is their recidivism rate (reinvolvement in crime) so high? The victim-blamer points to the faults of individual criminals: their greed, their feelings of aggression, their weak control of impulse, their lack of conscience. The system-blamer directs attention to very different sources: the penal system, the scarcity of employment for ex-criminals, and even the schools. For example, 20 to 30 percent of inmates are functionally illiterate; that is, they cannot meet minimum reading and writing demands in U.S. society, such as filling out job applications. Yet these people are expected to leave prison, find a job, and stay out of trouble. Illiterate ex-criminals face unemployment or at best the most menial jobs, with low wages, no job security, and no fringe benefits. System-blamers argue that first the schools and later the penal institutions have failed to provide these people with the minimum requirements for full participation in society. Moreover, lack of employment and the unwillingness of potential employers to train functional illiterates force many to return to crime to survive.

The inner-city poor are another set of victims. The conditions of the ghetto poor, especially African Americans, have deteriorated since the mid-1960s. Some observers believe that this deterioration is the result of the transplantation of a southern sharecropper culture (Lemann 1986), welfare programs (Murray 1984), and laziness. The more compelling system-blame argument, however, is made by William J. Wilson (1987). He claims that the ghetto poor endure because of the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of low-skill jobs, those mainly involving physical labor, in the past forty years or so. Wilson’s contention, supported by research, is that the pathologies of the ghetto (such as teenage pregnancy, illegitimacy, welfare dependency, and crime) are fundamentally the consequence of too few jobs.

The strong tendency to blame social problems on individuals rather than on the social system lies in how people tend to look at social problems. Most people define a social problem as behavior that deviates from the norms and standards of society. Because people do not ordinarily examine critically the way things are done in society, they tend to question the exceptions. The system not only is taken for granted but also has, for most people, an aura of sacredness because of the traditions and customs with which they associate it. Logically, then, those who deviate are the source of trouble. The obvious question observers ask is, Why do these people deviate from norms? Because most people view themselves as law-abiding, they feel that those who deviate do so because of some kind of unusual circumstance, such as accident, illness, personal defect, character flaw, or maladjustment (Ryan 1976:10–18). The flaw, then, is a function of the deviant, not of societal arrangements.

Interpreting social problems solely within a person-blame framework has serious consequences. First, because societal causes are not
addressed, social problems remain in place (Davis-Delano 2009). Second, it frees the
government, the economy, the system of stratification, the system of justice, and the
educational system from any blame. Instead of focusing on the poor, what are those
elements of society that keep poor people poor, such as segregated schools, unfair
wages, not enough jobs, and the high cost of housing and healthcare?

This protection of the established order against criticism increases the difficulty
of trying to change the dominant economic, social, and political institutions. A good
example is the strategy social scientists use in studying the origins of poverty. Because
the person-blamer studies the poor rather than the nonpoor, the system of inequality
(buttressed by tax laws, welfare rules, and employment practices) goes unchallenged.
A related consequence of the person-blame approach, then, is that the relatively well-
off segments of society retain their advantages.

A social-control function of the person-blame approach is that troublesome
individuals and groups are controlled in a publicly acceptable manner. Deviants—
whether they are criminals, mentally ill, or social protesters—are incarcerated in
prisons or mental hospitals and administered drugs or other forms of therapy. This
approach not only directs blame at individuals and away from the system, but it also
eliminates the problems (individuals).

A related consequence is how the problem is treated. A person-blame approach
demands a person-change treatment program. If the cause of delinquency, for exam-
ple, is defined as the result of personal pathology, then the solution must clearly lie
in counseling, behavior modification, psychotherapy, drugs, or some other technique
aimed at changing the individual deviant. The person-blame interpretation of social
problems provides and legitimates the right to initiate person-change rather than
system-change treatment programs. Under such a scheme, norms that are racist, sexist,
or homophobic, for example, go unchallenged.

A final consequence of a person-blame interpretation is that it reinforces social
myths about the degree of control individuals have over their fate. It provides justi-
fication for a form of social Darwinism: that the placement of people in the stratification
system is a function of their ability and effort. By this logic, the poor are poor because
they are the dregs of society. In short, they deserve their fate, as do the successful in
society. Thus, in this viewpoint, little sympathy exists for government programs to
increase welfare to the poor. (See the insert on William Graham Sumner for an example
of this ideology.)

Reasons for Focusing on the System-Blame Approach

We emphasize the system-blame approach in this book. We should recognize,
however, that the system-blame orientation has dangers. First, it is only part of the
truth. Social problems are highly complex phenomena that have both individual and
systemic origins. Individuals, obviously, can be malicious and aggressive for purely
psychological reasons. Clearly, society needs to be protected from some individuals.
Moreover, some people require particular forms of therapy, remedial help, or special
programs on an individual basis if they are to function normally. But much behavior
that is labeled deviant is the end product of social conditions.

A second danger of a dogmatic system-blame orientation is that it presents a rig-
idly deterministic explanation of social problems. Taken too far, this position views
individuals as robots controlled totally by their social environment. A balanced view
1.5

William Graham Sumner and Social Darwinism

William Graham Sumner (1840–1910), the sociologist who originated the concepts of folkways and mores, was a proponent of social Darwinism. This doctrine, widely accepted among elites during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was a distorted version of Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection. From this viewpoint, success is the result of being superior. The rich are rich because they deserve to be. By this logic, the poor also deserve their fate because they are biological and social failures and therefore unable to succeed in the competitive struggle.

Social Darwinism justified not only ruthless competition but also the perpetuation of the status quo. Superior classes, it was believed, should dominate because their members were unusually intelligent and moral. The lower classes, on the other hand, were considered inferior and defective. Their pathology was manifested in suicide, madness, crime, and various forms of vice.

On the basis of this philosophy, Sumner opposed social reforms such as welfare to the poor because they rewarded the unfit and penalized the competent. Such reforms, he argued, would interfere with the normal workings of society, halting progress and perhaps even contributing to a regression to an earlier evolutionary stage.

acksnowledges that human beings may choose between alternative courses of action. This issue raises the related question of the degree to which people are responsible for their behavior. An extreme system-blame approach absolves individuals from responsibility for their actions. To take such a stance would be to argue that society should never restrict deviants; this view invites anarchy.

Despite these problems with the system-blame approach, it is the guiding perspective of this book for three reasons. First, because average citizens, police officers, legislators, social scientists, and judges tend to interpret social problems from an individualistic perspective, a balance is needed. Moreover, as noted earlier, a strict person-blame perspective has many negative consequences, and citizens must recognize these negative effects of their ideology.

A second reason for using the system-blaming perspective is that the subject matter of sociology is not the individual—who is the special province of psychology—but society. Because sociologists focus on the social determinants of behavior, they must make a critical analysis of the social structure. An important ingredient of the sociological perspective is the development of a critical stance toward social arrangements. Thus, the sociologist looks behind the facades to determine the positive and negative consequences of social arrangements. The sociologist’s persistent questions must be, Who benefits under these arrangements? Who does not? For this reason, there should be a close fit between the sociological approach and the system-blaming perspective.

A final reason for the use of the system-blame approach is that the institutional framework of society is the source of many social problems (such as racism, pollution, unequal distribution of healthcare, poverty, and war). An exclusive focus on the individual ignores the strains caused by the inequities of the system and its fundamental intransigence to change. A guiding assumption of this book is that because institutions are made by human beings (and therefore are not sacred), they should be changed whenever they do not meet the needs of the people they were created to serve.
SOCIOLOGICAL METHODS: THE CRAFT OF SOCIOLOGY

The analysis of social problems depends on reliable data and logical reasoning. These necessities are possible, but some problems must be acknowledged. Before we describe how sociologists gather reliable data and make valid conclusions, let us examine the kinds of questions sociologists ask and the two major obstacles sociologists face in obtaining answers to these questions.

Sociological Questions

To begin, sociologists try to ascertain the facts. For example, let’s assume that we want to assess the degree to which the public education system provides equal educational opportunities for all youngsters. To determine this, we need to conduct an empirical investigation to find the facts concerning such items as the amount spent per pupil by school districts within each state and by each state. Within school districts we need to know the facts concerning the distribution of monies by neighborhood schools. Are these monies appropriated equally, regardless of the social class or racial composition of the school? Are curriculum offerings the same for girls and boys within a school? Are extra fees charged for participation in extracurricular activities, and does this affect the participation of children by social class?

Sociologists also may ask comparative questions—that is, how does the situation in one social context compare with that in another? Most commonly, these questions involve the comparison of one society with another. Examples here might be the comparisons among industrialized nations on infant mortality, poverty, murder, leisure time, or the mathematics scores of 16-year-olds.

A third type of question that a sociologist may ask is historical. Sociologists are interested in trends. What are the facts now concerning divorce, crime, and political participation, for example, and how have these patterns changed over time? Figure 1.1 provides an example of a trend over time by examining the earnings of men and women in the United States from 1959 to 2010. What accounts for the plateau of men’s earnings from 1972 on and the gradual increase in the earnings of women during those years? While the gap between men and women has narrowed, why is the female-to-male ratio still so low? What kept this ratio stable at around 60 percent from 1959 to 1982?

The three types of sociological questions considered so far determine the way things are. But these types of questions are not enough. Sociologists go beyond the factual to ask why. Why have real wages (controlling for inflation) declined since 1973 in the United States? Why are the poor, poor? Why do birthrates decline with industrialization? Why is the United States the most violent (as measured by murder, rape, and assault rates) industrialized society?

A sociological theory is a set of ideas that explains a range of human behavior and a variety of social and societal events. The late Michael Harrington said this regarding the necessity of theory: “The data of society are, for all practical purposes, infinite. You need criteria that will provisionally permit you to bring some order into that chaos of data and to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant factors” (Harrington 1985:1). Thus, theory not only helps us to explain social phenomena, but it also guides research.

Problems in Collecting Data

A fundamental problem with the sociological perspective is that bane of the social sciences—objectivity. We are all guilty of harboring stereotyped conceptions of such social categories as Muslims, hard hats, professors, gays and lesbians, fundamentalists, business tycoons, socialists, the rich, the poor, and jocks. Moreover, we interpret
events, material objects, and people’s behavior through the perceptual filter of our religious and political beliefs. When fundamentalists oppose the use of certain books in school, when abortion is approved by a legislature, when the president advocates cutting billions from the federal budget by eliminating social services, or when the Supreme Court denies private schools the right to exclude certain racial groups, most of us rather easily take a position in the ensuing debate.

Sociologists are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they are members of society with beliefs, feelings, and biases. On the other hand, though, their professional task is to study society in a disciplined (scientific) way. This latter requirement is that scientist–scholars be dispassionate, objective observers. In short, if they take sides, they lose their status as scientists.

This ideal of value neutrality (to be absolutely free of bias in research) can be attacked from three positions. The first is that scientists should not be morally indifferent to the implications of their research. Should we, for example, participate in research that shows how to manipulate people politically? Or should we be involved in finding out more efficient ways to get prisoners to reveal their secrets? Science has constructive and destructive potentials. Shouldn’t we make value judgments in what we choose to investigate or not? (Gouldner 1962:212). Or, put another way, this time by the late historian Howard Zinn, explaining his style of classroom teaching:

_I would start off my classes explaining to my students—because I didn’t want to deceive them—that I would be taking stands on everything. They would hear my point of view in this course, that this would not be a neutral course. My point to them was that in fact it was impossible to be neutral. You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train [the title of Zinn’s memoir] means that the world is already moving in certain directions. Things are_
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already happening. Wars are taking place. Children are going hungry. In a world like this—already moving in certain, often terrible directions—to be neutral or to stand by is to collaborate with what is happening. (Quoted in Barsamian 1997:37–38)

The second argument against the purely neutral position is that such a stance is impossible. Howard Becker, among others, has argued that there is no dilemma—because it is impossible to do research that is uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies (Becker 1967; see also Gould 1998:19). This argument is based on several related assumptions. One is that the values of the scholar–researcher enter into the choices of what questions will be asked. For example, in the study of poverty, a critical decision involves the object of the study—the poor or the system that tends to perpetuate poverty among a certain segment of society. Or, in the study of the problems of youth, we can ask either of these questions: Why are some youths troublesome for adults? Or, Why do adults make so much trouble for youths? In both illustrations, quite different questions will yield very different results.

Similarly, our values lead us to decide from which vantage point we will gain access to information about a particular social organization. If researchers want to understand how a prison operates, they must determine whether they want a description from the inmates, from the guards, from the prison administrators, or from the state board of corrections. Each view provides useful insights about a prison, but obviously a biased one. If they obtain data from more than one of these levels, researchers are faced with making assessments of which is the more accurate view, clearly another place in the research process where the values of the observers have an impact.

Perhaps the most important reason why the study of social phenomena cannot be value free is that the type of problems researched and the strategies used tend either to support the existing societal arrangements or to undermine them. Seen in this way, social research of both types is political. Ironically, however, there is a strong tendency to label only the research aimed at changing the system as political. By the same token, whenever the research sides with the powerless, the implication is that the hierarchical system is being questioned—thus, the charge that this type of research is biased (Becker 1967:240, 242).

In summary, bias is inevitable in the study and analysis of social problems. The choice of a research problem, the perspective from which one analyzes the problems, and the solutions proposed all reflect a bias that either supports the existing social arrangements or does not. Moreover, unlike biologists, who can dispassionately observe the behavior of sperm and the egg at conception, sociologists are participants in the social life they seek to study and understand. As they study homelessness, poor children, or urban blight, sociologists cannot escape from their own feelings and values. They must, however, not let their feelings and values render their analysis invalid. In other words, research and reports of research must reflect reality, not as the researcher might want it to be. Sociologists must display scientific integrity, which requires recognizing biases in such a way that these biases do not invalidate the findings (Berger 1963:5). When research is properly done in this spirit, an atheist can study a religious sect, a pacifist can study the military-industrial complex, a divorced person can study marriage, and a person who abhors the beliefs of the Ku Klux Klan can study that organization and its members.

In addition to bias, people gather data and make generalizations about social phenomena in a number of faulty ways. In a sense, everyone is a scientist seeking to find valid generalizations to guide behavior and make sense of the world. But most people are, in fact, very unscientific about the social world. The first problem, as we have noted, is the problem of bias. The second is that people tend to generalize from
their experience. Not only is one’s interpretation of things that happen to him or her subjective, but there also is a basic problem of sampling. The chances are that one’s experience will be too idiosyncratic to allow for an accurate generalization. For example, if you and your friends agree that abortion is appropriate, that does not mean that other people in the society, even those of your age, will agree with you. Very likely, your friends are quite similar to you on such dimensions as socioeconomic status, race, religion, and geographic location.

Another instance of faulty sampling leading to faulty generalizations is when we make assumptions from a single case. An individual may argue that African Americans can succeed economically in this country as easily as Whites because she or he knows a wealthy African American. Similarly, you might argue that all Latinos are dumb because the one you know is in the slowest track in high school. This type of reasoning is especially fallacious because it blames the victim (Ryan 1976). The cause of poverty or crime or dropping out of school or scoring low on an IQ test is seen as a result of the flaw in the individual, ignoring the substantial impact of the economy or school.

Another typical way that we explain social behavior is to use some authority other than our senses. The Bible, for example, has been used by many people to support or condemn activities such as slavery, capital punishment, war, homosexuality, or monogamy (Spong 2005). The media provide other sources of authority for individuals. The media, however, are not always reliable sources of facts. Stories are often selected because they are unusually dramatic, giving the faulty impression of, for example, a crime wave or questionable air safety.

Our judgments and interpretations are also affected by prevailing myths and stereotypes. We just “know” certain things to be true, when they actually may be contradicted by scientific evidence. As examples, six common beliefs about the poor and racial minorities are presented and discussed.

1. Most homeless people are disabled by drugs, mental disease, or physical afflictions. The facts show, however, that the homeless, for the most part, are not “deficient and defective” but rather not much different than the nonhomeless. Most people are not homeless because of their individual flaws but because of structural arrangements and trends that result in extreme impoverishment and a shortage of affordable housing (Timmer, Etizen, and Talley 1994).

2. African American and Latino youth are more likely than White youth to smoke tobacco and be heavy binge drinkers of alcohol. The facts belie this myth (Centers for Disease Control study, reported in McClam 2000).

3. Welfare makes people dependent, lazy, and unmotivated. Contrary to this image, however, the evidence is that most daughters of welfare recipients do not become welfare recipients as adults (Sklar 1993). Put another way, most women on welfare did not receive welfare as children (Center on Social Welfare and Law 1996).

4. Welfare is given more generously to the poor than to the nonpoor. Farm subsidies, tax deductibility for taxes and interest on homes, tax write-offs for business expenses, low-interest loans to students and victims of disasters, and pork-barrel projects are examples of government welfare and even the dependency of nonpoor people on government largesse. Most important, these government handouts to the nonpoor are significantly greater than the amounts given to the poor.

5. There are more African Americans than Whites in poverty. In 2010, 31.7 million Whites were below the poverty line, compared to 13.2 million Latinos, and 10.7 million African Americans.

6. Unmarried women have babies to increase their welfare payments. Three facts show that this belief of political conservatives is a myth (Males 1996): (a) From 1972 to
1996, the value of the average Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) check declined by 40 percent, yet the ratio of out-of-wedlock births rose in the same period by 140 percent; (b) states that have lower welfare benefits usually have more out-of-wedlock births than states with higher benefits; and (c) the teen out-of-wedlock birthrate in the United States is much higher than the rate in countries where welfare benefits are much more generous.

Conventional wisdom is not always wrong, but when it is, it can lead to faulty generalizations and bad public policy. Therefore, it is imperative to know the facts, rather than accept myths as real.

A similar problem occurs when we use aphorisms to explain social occurrences. The problem with this common tactic is that society supplies us with ready explanations that fit contradictory situations and are therefore useless. For instance, if we know a couple who are alike in religion, race, socioeconomic status, and political attitudes, that makes sense to us because “birds of a feather flock together.” But the opposite situation also makes sense. If partners in a relationship are very different on a number of dimensions, we can explain this by the obvious explanation: “opposites attract.” We use a number of other proverbs to explain behavior. The problem is that there is often a proverb or aphorism to explain the other extreme. These contradictory explanations are commonly used and, of course, explain nothing. The job of the sociologist is to specify under what conditions certain rates of social behaviors occur.

Sources of Data

Sociologists do not use aphorisms to explain behavior, nor do they speculate based on faulty samples or authorities. Because we are part of the world that is to be explained, sociologists must obtain evidence that is beyond reproach. In addition to observing the canons of science scrupulously, four basic sources of data yield valid results for sociologists: survey research, experiments, observation, and existing data. We describe these techniques only briefly here.

Survey Research. Sociologists are interested in obtaining information about people with certain social attributes. They may want to know how political beliefs and behaviors are influenced by differences in sex, race, ethnicity, religion, and social class. Or sociologists may wish to know whether religious attitudes are related to racial antipathy. They may want to determine whether poor people have different values from other people in society, the answer to which will have a tremendous impact on the ultimate solution to poverty. Or they may want to know whether voting patterns, work behaviors, or marital relationships vary by income level, educational attainment, or religious affiliation.

To answer these and similar questions, the sociologist may use personal interviews or written questionnaires to gather the data. The researcher may obtain information from all possible subjects or from a selected sample (a representative part of a population). Because the former method is often impractical, a random sample of subjects is selected from the larger population. If the sample is selected scientifically, a relatively small proportion can yield satisfactory results—that is, the inferences made from the sample will be reliable about the entire population. For example, a probability sample of only 2,000 from a total population of 1 million can provide data very close to what would be discovered if a survey were taken of the entire 1 million.

Typically with survey research, sociologists use sophisticated statistical techniques to control the contaminating effects of confounding variables to determine whether the
findings could have occurred by chance, to determine whether variables are related, and to see whether such a relationship is a causal one. A variable is an attitude, behavior, or condition that can vary in magnitude and significance from case to case.

A special type of survey research, longitudinal surveys, has special promise. This type of research collects information about the same persons over many years and in doing so allows the observing researcher to “record the antecedents of current events and transitions” (Butz and Torrey 2006:1898). For example, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics at the University of Michigan has followed the same people for forty years, allowing the researchers to document the transitions from health to infirmity; from work to unemployment or retirement; and from singlehood to marriage, parenthood, divorce, and widowhood (Butz and Torrey 2006:1898).

- **Experiments.** To understand the cause-and-effect relationship among a few variables, sociologists use controlled experiments. Let us assume, for example, that we want to test whether White students in interracial classrooms have more positive attitudes toward African Americans than Whites in segregated classrooms have toward them. Using the experimental method, the researcher would take a number of White students previously unexposed to Blacks in school and randomly assign a subset to an integrated classroom situation. Before actual contact with the Blacks, however, all the White students would be given a test of their racial attitudes. This pretest establishes a benchmark from which to measure any changes in attitudes. One group, the control group, continues school in segregated classrooms. (The control group is a group of subjects not exposed to the independent variable.) The other group, the experimental group, now has Blacks as classmates. (The experimental group is a group of subjects who are exposed to the independent variable.) Otherwise, the two groups are the same. Following a suitable period of time, the Whites in both groups are tested again for their racial attitudes. If this post-test reveals that the experimental group differs from the control group in racial attitudes (the dependent variable), then it is assumed that interracial contact (the independent variable) is the source of the change. (The dependent variable is a variable that is influenced by the effect of another variable. The independent variable is a variable that affects another variable.) As an example of a less-contrived experiment, a researcher can test the results of two different treatments on the subsequent behavior of juvenile delinquents. Delinquent boys who had been adjudicated by the courts can be randomly assigned to a boys’ industrial school or a group home facility in the community. After release from incarceration, records are kept on the boys’ subsequent behavior in school (grades, truancy, formal reprimands) and in the community (police contacts, work behavior). If the boys from the two groups differ appreciably, then we can say with assurance, because the boys were randomly assigned to each group, that the difference in treatment (the independent variable) was the source of the difference in behavior (the dependent variable).

- **Observation.** Famed baseball great Yogi Berra once said in his unique way: “You can observe a lot by just watching.” The researcher, without intervention, can observe as accurately as possible what occurs in a community, group, or social event. This type of procedure is especially helpful in understanding such social phenomena as the decision-making process, the stages of a riot, the attraction of cults for their members, or the depersonalization of patients in a nursing home. Case studies of entire communities have been very instrumental in the understanding of power structures and the complex interaction patterns in cities. Longtime participant observation studies of slum neighborhoods and gangs have been insightful in showing the social organization present in what the casual observer might think of as disorganized activity.
• **Existing Data.** The sociologist can also use existing data to test theories. The most common sources of information are the various agencies of the government. Data are provided for the nation, regions, states, communities, and census tracts on births, deaths, income, education, unemployment, business activity, health delivery systems, prison populations, military spending, poverty, migration, and the like. Important information can also be obtained from such sources as corporations, athletic teams and leagues, unions, and professional associations. Statistical techniques can be used with these data to describe populations and the effects of social variables on various dependent variables.

One goal of this book is to help the reader understand the social nature of social problems. Accepting the system-blame perspective is a necessary first step in efforts to restructure society along more humane lines. The job of social scientists in this endeavor should be to provide alternative social structures (based on theory and research) for those about which we complain. To do this job, social scientists must ask very different research questions from those posed in the past, and they must study not only the powerless but also the powerful.

**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. It therefore begins by examining the fundamental organization of U.S. society. The remainder of Part One elaborates on the political economy of social problems, emphasizing the political and economic organization of society and its impact on social problems. 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. Through policies for taxation and subsidies, the powerful determine the degree to which wealth is distributed in society. They also determine which group interests will be advanced and at whose expense.

The economy is equally important. The particular form of the economy establishes a distribution process not only for wealth but also for goods and services. In many important ways, Karl Marx was correct: The economy is the force that determines the form and substance of all other institutions—the church, school, family, and polity.

Critical scrutiny of the polity and the economy provides clues for the bias of society. It helps explain the upside-down qualities of society whereby the few benefit at the expense of the many; how reality gets defined in contested issues; how political and economic processes affect what is currently being done about social problems; and thus, why so many social policies fail.

Part Two focuses on the context of social problems in the United States. Chapter 3 examines world population and global inequality. Chapter 4 looks at environmental degradation globally and domestically. Chapter 5 focuses on two major population changes in the United States: the browning and the graying of America. The final chapter in Part Two provides a useful overview to social problems by focusing on the problems of location: urban, suburban, and rural.


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. Chapter 14 returns the focus to the economy and jobs. The number and types of jobs are undergoing a major shift with globalization and as society deindustrializes and moves toward a service economy. Although the resulting changes bring many opportunities, they also bring many problems, such as the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots and the emergence of a new form of poverty. Chapter 15 looks at the family-related problems of childcare, violence, and divorce. Chapter 16 illustrates how education, although necessary as the source for transmitting the necessary skills and shared understandings to each generation, is also a generator of social problems. Thus, it shows once again how social problems (in this case, inequality) originate in the basic structure of society. Chapter 17 focuses on the reasons for the high cost of healthcare in the United States and the effort to reform the healthcare system. National security, especially the threat of terrorism, is the final topic of Part Five.

The book concludes with a chapter that answers the question, What do we do about social problems? The solutions come from the bottom up—that is, people organize through human agency to change social structures (Eitzen and Stewart 2007). Solutions also come from the top down—social policies determined by the powerful (Eitzen and Sage 2007). Both of these forces and the interaction between the top and the bottom are the topics of the concluding chapter.
the objective approach to social problems entails acceptance of the definitions provided by the powerful. The acceptance of these definitions diverts attention away from the powerful and toward those the powerful wish to label negatively, thus deflecting observations away from what may constitute the most important social problem—the existing social order.

5. This book examines two types of social problems: (a) acts and conditions that violate the norms and values of society and (b) societally induced conditions that cause psychic and material suffering for any segment of the population. The key to understanding both types of social problems is the distribution of power.

6. The sociological imagination involves (a) a willingness to view the social world from the perspective of others; (b) focusing on the social, economic, and historical circumstances that influence families, groups, and organizations; (c) questioning the structural arrangements that shape social behavior; and (d) seeing the solutions to social problems in terms not of changing problem people but of changing the structure of society.

7. The focus is on the structure of society rather than on “problem” individuals. A guiding assumption of our inquiry is that norm violators are symptoms of social problems. These deviants are, for the most part, victims and should not be blamed entirely for their deviance; the system in which they live should also be blamed.

8. The person-blame approach, which we do not use, has serious consequences: (a) The social sources of social problems are ignored. (b) It frees the institutions of society from any blame and efforts to change them. (c) It controls “problem” people in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes. (d) It legitimizes person-control programs. (e) It justifies the logic of social Darwinism, which holds that people are rich or poor because of their ability and effort or lack thereof.

9. The system-blame orientation also has dangers. Taken dogmatically, it presents a rigidly deterministic explanation for social problems, suggesting that people are merely robots controlled by their social environment.

10. Sociology depends on reliable data and logical reason. Although value neutrality is impossible in the social sciences, bias is minimized by the norms of science.

11. Sociologists use a variety of methods: surveys, experiments, observation, and the use of existing data sources.

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**KEY TERMS**

**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.

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

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

**Institutionalized deviance.** When a society is organized in such a way as to disadvantage some of its members.

**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.

**Sociological imagination.** C. Wright Mills’s term emphasizing that individual troubles are inextricably linked to social forces.

**Person-blame.** The assumption that social problems result from the pathologies of individuals.

**System-blame.** The assumption that social problems result from social conditions.

**Cultural deprivation.** The assumption by the members of a group that the culture of some other group is not only inferior but also deficient. This term is usually applied by members of the majority to the culture of a minority group.

**Recidivism.** Reinvolvement in crime.

**Social Darwinism.** The belief that the place of people in the stratification system is a function of their ability and effort.

**Sociological theory.** A set of ideas that explains a range of human behavior and a variety of social and societal events.

**Value neutrality.** To be absolutely free of bias.

**Sample.** A representative part of a population.
Variable. An attitude, behavior, or condition that can vary in magnitude and significance from case to case.

Longitudinal survey. The collection of information about the same persons over many years.

Control group. The subjects not exposed to the independent variable.

Experimental group. The subjects exposed to the independent variable.

Dependent variable. The variable that is influenced by the effect of another variable.

Independent variable. A variable that affects another variable.