CENGAGE

Understanding
Social
Problems

Eleventh   Edition

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UNDERSTANDING
Social Problems

11e

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IN MEMORIAM

This book is dedicated to the memory of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg (1933–2020), Congressman John Lewis (1940–2020), and Senator John McCain (1936–2018), who lived their lives with integrity, humility, and righteousness.

IN HONOR

Of the lesser known heroes of the world—the doctors, nurses, and other health care workers, teachers, agricultural laborers, bus and truck drivers, first responders, retail workers, and all the other essential workers who risk their lives daily for others.

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Preface

We are living in unprecedented times. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, the social and political institutions of the United States have come under attack by both domestic and foreign actors. Millions have questioned the legitimacy of the 2020 election fomented by former president Trump and his allies, leading to an attack on the U.S. Capitol, the first since 1814. How are we to understand, and work to solve, the problems facing our society today?

Understanding Social Problems is intended for use in college-level sociology courses. We recognize that many students enrolled in undergraduate sociology classes are not sociology majors. Thus we have designed our text with the aim of inspiring students—no matter what their academic major or future life path may be—to think critically about the problems facing our society today and their potential role in addressing those problems.

In addition to providing a sound theoretical and research basis for sociology majors, *Understanding Social Problems* also speaks to students who are headed for careers in business, psychology, health care, social work, criminal justice, and the nonprofit sector, as well as those pursuing degrees in education, fine arts, and the humanities, or those who are "undecided." Social problems, after all, affect each and every one of us, directly or indirectly. Regardless of their eventual career paths, all students are also members of society—at the local, national, and global levels—and have an obligation to be informed and active participants in that society. We hope that *Understanding Social Problems* plants the seeds of social awareness that will grow no matter what academic, occupational, and life path a student chooses.

New to This Edition

The eleventh edition of *Understanding Social Problems* features coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on social problems. It also addresses political polarization in the United States and its consequences, including the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. There is expanded coverage of inequality and minority populations, including the social, legal, and political responses to Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, the rise of toxic masculinity, anti-Semitism, and white supremacy, renewed attacks on gay and transgender women and men, and the xenophobic immigration policies of the previous administration.

Learning objectives are presented at the beginning of each chapter to guide student understanding. Other pedagogical features that students and professors have found useful have been retained, including a running glossary, list of key terms, chapter reviews, and *Test Yourself* sections. All of the opening vignettes in the eleventh edition are new, as are many of the *What Do You Think?* questions, which are designed to engage students in critical thinking and stimulate classroom discussion. Most of the boxed chapter features (*The Human Side*, *Self and Society, Social Problems Research Up Close*) have been replaced with new content. A new feature, *The World in Quarantine*, highlights how COVID-19 has exacerbated existing social problems including domestic violence, disinformation campaigns, unemployment, and economic inequality. Finally, the eleventh edition has new data, tables, figures, and photos, and over 50 2019, 2020, and 2021 citations in each chapter. The terminology used throughout the book to refer to race and LGBTQ status is also new and is now consistent with the publisher's policy on inclusivity and diversity. There is also new and revised material, as detailed next.

Chapter 1 ("Thinking about Social Problems"), in response to the increasing politicization of social problems, now begins with new sections on "The Social Context: A Divided Nation, Politics in America" (with subsections on "The Roots of Political Partisanship," "The Growth of Political Partisanship," and "State of the Union"). All *What Do You Think?* features are new and address such topics as the meaning of democracy, the role of social sciences in fighting the pandemic, former President Trump's alleged culpability in the January 2021 attempted coup, and the impact of political partisanship on family relations. There are three new features in this heavily revised chapter, including *The Human Side*, which offers advice from student activists on getting involved in "good trouble," and a *Social Problems Research Up Close*, which examines generational variations in following the news on the 2020 election, COVID-19, and Black Lives Matter protests. New topics include globalization, the American political spectrum, political polarization, populist movements, and the media's role in defining social problems.

Chapter 2 ("Physical and Mental Health and Health Care") begins with the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, from contrasting country-level response strategies to the impact of testing initiatives, and from factors that contributed to failures within the U.S. public health system to the politicization of mask wearing. The new opening vignette focuses on the demanding role that health care workers played in providing emotional support to dying COVID-19 patients in the absence of families. A newly titled section on health disparities integrates the impact of inequality on COVID-19 patient outcomes as well as on other health conditions. The new *Social Problems Research Up Close* feature examines the increasing importance of education in relationship to life expectancy by race. An updated section on mental illness includes a new *The Human Side* feature that describes what it is like to live with mental illness during a pandemic, and a new *Self and Society* that asks students to examine their own mental health risks.

The chapter integrates updated information on the Affordable Care Act, Medicaid expansion, trends in health insurance coverage, and factors affecting the cost of health care in the United States compared to other countries. A revised "Strategies for Action" section examines policy initiatives to expand health care coverage, increased services to the mentally ill, and preparation for the next pandemic. New *What Do You Think?* questions throughout the chapter prompt students to consider such issues as what cultural values would promote universal mask wearing and social distancing, whether U.S. women should have access to over-the-counter birth control pills as in other countries, and what factors might explain why education is a stronger contributor to life expectancy in some U.S. states than in others. New key terms include health disparities, pandemic, contact tracing, positivity rate, death rate, and the criminalization of mental illness.

Chapter 3 ("Alcohol and Other Drugs") is thoroughly revised with all new features and *What Do You Think?* questions. Changes to the organization of the chapter reflect the emerging patterns in state-level decriminalization and prescription drug abuse that are blurring the lines between legal and illegal drug use. The chapter has an increased emphasis on the impact of the opioid addiction crisis, including a new opening vignette and *The Human Side* that focus on families mourning losses from drug overdose as well as coverage of recent lawsuits against pharmaceutical companies. The chapter also offers expanded and updated coverage on the impact of the War on Drugs, the growing shift toward a medical model of drug and alcohol abuse in public policy, the relationship between poverty and substance abuse, and the growing trend of vaporizers and e-cigarettes. Other updates and new topics include polling data on Americans' views about marijuana decriminalization and drug abuse as a social problem, updated data on drug use and abuse patterns globally and within the United States, and the complex relationships between poverty, mental health, and substance abuse.

Chapter 4 ("Crime and Social Control") has been thoroughly revised and begins with a new opening vignette. There is also new content in this chapter's three features. The *Self and Society* feature allows students to assess their fear of various crimes, the *Social Problems Research Up Close* feature examines the media's portrayal of serial killers, and in *The Human Side* a victim of a campus rape emotionally describes its impact on every facet of her life. New topics include the BLM protests and responses to them, police

reform initiatives, the militarization of police, political crime, prisoners and COVID-19, the cost to families of having an incarcerated relative, several new pieces of legislation including the *George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020*, and the Biden administration's proposed reform of the criminal justice system.

All of the *What Do You Think?* questions in this chapter are new and address such topics as the impact of COVID-19 on property and violent crime rates, whether sitting or former presidents should have criminal charges levied against them, the disconnect between actual crime statistics and the public's perception of crime, and accountability for lethal police violence.

Chapter 5 ("Family Problems") begins with a new opening vignette spotlighting the problem of domestic violence, as exemplified by the Turpins who were convicted of imprisoning and torturing their 13 children. Domestic violence is also addressed in the new *The World in Quarantine* feature documenting the victimization of women during the pandemic and in a revised section examining the types of domestic violence as well as factors associated with it. The chapter includes updated data on family trends, expanded coverage of foster and blended families, and a fuller integration of same-sex couples/families. A new section examines unplanned pregnancies, as well as access to contraception and abortion.

The new *Social Problems Research Up Close* feature examines how racialized immigration policies force women in mixed-status families into the role of single parents. A new *The Human Side* features a woman who was forced into an arranged marriage as a teenager, and a new *Self and Society* feature prompts students to consider their own views on abortion in a variety of circumstances. The "Strategies for Action" section has been fully revised, including strategies for improving access to contraception. New *What Do You Think?* questions prompt students to consider issues such as what age is too young to get married, why arranged marriages result in fewer divorces, and why more women over 30 are planning to be single parents.

Chapter 6 ("Economic Inequality, Wealth, and Poverty") opens with a new vignette about a family living in their car after losing their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. This fully revised chapter includes all new tables and figures featuring the most up-to-date data available on poverty rates and wealth inequality. The chapter focuses extensively on the growing levels of inequality globally and within the United States, with special attention given to the wealth accumulated by the world's billionaires. The chapter also includes new topics on social mobility trends, the impact of climate change on low-income Americans, anti-poverty social movements, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on poverty, housing instability, and food insecurity. A new *Social Problems Research Up Close* feature examines the effectiveness of Housing First programs to address homelessness, and a new *The Human Side* feature explores how Americans with college debt increasingly see the American Dream as out of reach. New *What Do You Think?* questions ask students to think about how much CEOs should be paid, what the new minimum wage should be, what types of limits should be placed on welfare usage, and how much wealth should be considered "extreme."

Chapter 7 ("Work and Unemployment") contains extensive coverage of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of working Americans, including workplace health and safety, unemployment, the employment prospects for the "unlucky cohort" of 2020 graduates, work/life balance and stress, and family and medical leave policies. The chapter's new *The World in Quarantine* feature delves into the unique plight facing working mothers during the 2020 pandemic.

This chapter provides updated data on Americans' shifting attitudes about capitalism and socialism, while a new *Self and Society* feature asks students to assess their own attitudes toward capitalism and socialism. The chapter also examines work from the perspective of the global supply chain, with a new *The Human Side* feature in which child garment factory workers tell their stories, expanded coverage of the ongoing global impact of the Great Recession, new coverage of changes to international free trade agreements under the Trump administration, and a new discussion on the pattern of policy drift as it relates to globalization and outdated labor laws. Other new and updated topics include the generational divide in perceptions about capitalism and socialism, the

growth of the gig economy, the role of prison labor in American manufacturing, and the impact of Right to Work (RTW) laws on labor unions. The impact of RTW laws on local economies and worker pay is also examined in depth in a new *Social Problems Research Up Close* feature.

Chapter 8 ("Problems in Education") includes a new section focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers, students, and their families, including the challenges of virtual learning and hybrid education, conflict over mask policies in schools, and the impact of the digital divide on K–12 and university students. The chapter's new *The World in Quarantine* feature examines the potential impact of the pandemic on the already critical teacher shortages in the United States. Ongoing problems contributing to teacher shortages are depicted in the chapter's opening vignette featuring a teacher whose resignation in a televised school board meeting went viral in 2020.

Other new topics include the debate between later school start times versus lengthening the school day and year to accommodate working parents, factors contributing to the declining educational outcomes among boys, inadequate and declining school facilities, and the lack of federal compliance with loan forgiveness and anti-predatory lending policies. New *What Do You Think?* questions ask students to think critically about President Biden's proposal for universal preschool, what age students should be allowed to drop out of school, and what role they believe the phrases "China virus" and the "kung flu" had on the bullying of Asian students in schools. The chapter's new *Social Problems Research Up Close* feature examines the impact of income segregation between school districts on the educational outcomes for students. The chapter's new *Self and Society* feature allows students to assess their skills against a list of skills employers have identified as critical for new employees. A new *The Human Side* feature, written by a former school superintendent, appeals to teachers to first address the emotional needs of children returning to school before imposing academic expectations.

Chapter 9 ("Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration") begins with a new vignette about one southern town's efforts to provide financial reparations for slavery. The chapter includes all new features and *What Do You Think?* questions that encourage students to think critically about the social construction of race and the lived experiences of racism. The impact of racism is described in a new *The Human Side* feature in which individuals share their experiences of racism while at school, while a new *Social Problems Research Up Close* feature details one possible strategy to combat racism in the criminal justice system—implicit bias training.

The World in Quarantine feature examines the events of the summer of 2020 as a "Tale of Two Pandemics": COVID-19 and structural racism. The chapter focuses extensively on current events surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement and the threat of alt-right and white supremacist movements to national security. New and updated topics include statistics on immigration and hate crimes and new coverage of cyber-racism and the role of social media in propagating racist ideologies. This chapter also covers the sweeping changes to immigration policy under the Trump administration, as well the proposed reversals to these policies under the Biden administration. New terms, including coercive pluralism and sanctuary city, are introduced to enhance students' understanding of the historical trajectory and power dynamics embedded in the United States' immigration policies.

Chapter 10 ("Gender Inequality") has been thoroughly revised and updated and includes new topics and terms such as "red pill," the domestic and global #MeToo movements, cisgender, dowry killings, femicide, gender-based violence, toxic masculinity, attributional gender bias, patriarchy, men's rights groups versus men's liberation groups, and "say their name," i.e., protests against violence directed toward transgender people of color. There are expanded sections on gender-based violence including a subsection on misogyny and men's rights groups, a new section on social movements with a subsection on feminism and the women's movement and, under that, Black feminism and marching for equality. There are also new sections on the men's equality movement and online activism, as well as an expanded section on sexual harassment including three types: sexual coercion, unwanted sexual attention, and gender harassment.

All the *What Do You Think?* questions are new and, for example, ask students to think about (1) whether transgender individuals should have the same legal rights as

cisgender individuals, (2) why the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths is lower in countries with female leaders, (3) should teachers be required to inform parents if their child is acting outside of their assigned gender role, (4) why religious institutions (e.g., churches, synagogues, and mosques) are allowed to discriminate on the basis of gender when it is illegal to discriminate in the workplace, and (5) why, when gender is more fluid than ever before, young men compared to older men are more likely to act in stereotypical masculine ways. New feature content includes a new *The Human Side* by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez entitled, "I Am Someone's Daughter Too" and a new *Self and Society* assessment on the division of household labor.

    Chapter 11 ("Sexual Orientation and the Struggle for Equality") features a new *Self and Society: Attitudes toward Sexual and Gender Minorities around the World*, a new *Social Problems Research Up Close: Microaggressions toward Sexual Orientation and Gender Minority Families*, and a new *The Human Side: Billy Porter, Better than Ever!*. New *What Do You Think?* topics for discussion include whether gender should be assigned at birth or be self-determined; the implications of Pete Buttigieg, an openly gay man's high-profile primary campaign for president and subsequent cabinet appointment; the transgender bathroom ban; who should make the decision whether or when a transgender minor can transition; and whether or not religious objections should be able to be used to violate a state's LGBTQ nondiscrimination clause.

    New topics include the history of "homosexuality" from sin to mental disorder, the role of medicine and psychiatry in pathologizing "homosexuality," *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia* 2020, the legitimacy hypothesis, the polarization hypothesis, the *Do No Harm Act of 2019,* and the *Student Non-Discrimination Act.* New key terms include homophobia, pansexual, queer, the Stonewall Uprising, the *Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA),* corrective rape, and cisgenderism. This chapter has been reorganized to include a new section entitled, "The LGBTQ Population in the United States," a new subsection on "Non-Heterosexuality as Pathology" under the "Cultural Origins of Anti-LGBTQ Bias," and a new section under "Discrimination against Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals" on "The Health Care Industry." Lastly, there is also a new subsection on "The Equality Act" under "Strategies for Action."

    Chapter 12 ("Population Growth and Aging") begins with a new vignette illustrating the isolation of the elderly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fully revised chapter includes an expanded list of key population terms such as birth rate, mortality rate, and population growth rate, and introduces students to population pyramids as a method of understanding challenges facing populations. The new *Social Problems Research Up Close* examines why a mother's education impacts child mortality. The chapter includes an expanded discussion of demographic transition theory, presentation of the world system theory, inclusion of food insecurity as a consequence of population growth, and an expanded discussion of the impacts of informal caregiving as well as changes in retirement benefits. The chapter's new *The Human Side* provides three perspectives on what life is like for homeless elderly people.

    In this chapter's *The World in Quarantine* feature, factors by which the pandemic will impact population growth are discussed. The updated *Self and Society* feature prompts students to test their knowledge of aging and the elderly. The chapter's new *What Do You Think?* questions ask students to consider issues such as whether societies should invest in efforts toward radical life extension, whether the United States should support the World Health Organization in assisting low-income countries, and why the pharmaceutical industry has not yet developed contraception for men.

    Chapter 13 ("Environmental Problems") has been completely revised with a larger focus on global warming and climate change, including coverage of global efforts to address these issues. A new section examines how energy sources impact environmental problems, as well as the influence of corporate interests on policy makers. As an illustration of the consequences of global warming, the new opening vignette discusses the frequency and devastating impact of wildfires in the United States. The revised "Strategies for Action" section includes the work of youth activists like Greta Thunberg, cap and trade programs, the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Climate Agreement, the Green New Deal, and Biden's Build Back Better Plan. New *What Do You Think?*

questions include whether politicians should be allowed to buy and sell stock while in office and whether social media sites should be able to block posts that promote climate denial.

A new *Social Problems Research Up Close* examines why property owners allow fracking on their land and what happens when they do. The new *The Human Side* documents the retaliation and violence Kenyan environmental activist and whistleblower Phyllis Omido experienced in calling out lead pollution by a company in her village. A new *Self and Society* allows students to compare their opinions on the environment and climate change with those of the U.S. public. Key terms include mountaintop removal mining, strip mining, community solar gardens, solar farms, and coral bleaching, among others.

Chapter 14 ("Science and Technology") contains a new opening vignette and all new *What Do You Think?* questions on such topics as artificial intelligence, the use of algorithms in corroborating jury sentences, workplace surveillance technology, the banning and/or labeling of social media posts, and deepfake videos. Given the events of the last three years, this chapter has been reorganized and thoroughly revised to include five new subsections under the heading "Technology and the Workplace": "Robotics, Software Robotics," "Worker Error and Technological Failure," "Telecommute and Telepresence," and "Technology and Social Control"; new subsections on "Algorithms" and "Computers as Big Business" under the heading "The Computer Revolution"; a new subsection on "Smart Technologies" under "The Digital Divide"; and, under the heading Malicious Use of the Internet, four new subsections including "The Deep and Dark Web," "Malware and Hacking," "Disinformation, Deepfakes, and Conspiracy Theories," and "Politics and Election Tampering."

New topics and key terms include new social media (e.g., Triller, Tik-Tok, Parler), the anti-science administration, the science administration, Internet censorship, the use of predictive algorithms, artificial intelligence, election tampering, the use of social media for activism (e.g., #BLACKLIVESMATTER), CRISPR, three types of genetic cloning, replacement therapy, heritable genome editing, problems associated with facial recognition technology, QAnon, and national and international efforts to fight disinformation. Finally, *The World in Quarantine: The Other Virus That Kills* feature in this chapter is on the harmful effects of disinformation campaigns, along with new content for each of the other three features including a *Self and Society* that allows students to evaluate their "science and technology IQ."

Chapter 15 ("Conflict, War, and Terrorism") begins with a vignette telling the story of Nobel Peace Prize winner Nadia Murad, a former ISIS sex slave and human rights activist. New features in the chapter include *The Human Side* and *Social Problems Research Up Close,* which examine the long-term impact of experiencing war on U.S. veterans and Syrian refugees. The chapter provides extensive coverage of the impact of President Trump's America First agenda on the U.S. role in international relations, as well as a discussion of likely foreign policy changes to occur during the Biden administration. Throughout this thoroughly revised chapter, students are encouraged to critically examine their own perspectives on the role of the United States in global affairs. A new *Self and Society* feature asks students to assess the extent to which they think the United States should be involved in global affairs. New *What Do You Think?* questions ask, for example, (1) whether the United States should withdraw from NATO, (2) whether the abrupt withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan is worth the potential long-term risks, (3) the conditions under which the United States is justified in using force against foreign governments, and (4) whether policies limiting refugee admission is an appropriate response to the threat of terrorism.

The chapter includes updated data on military spending, the arms trade, and the costs of war as well as war trends and conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. New and updated topics also include the establishment of a new Space Force branch of the military, coverage of women's combat roles and transgender policies in the military, updated coverage of the ongoing global refugee crisis, and new coverage of the legal and ethical issues associated with private military and security contractors. Coverage of terrorism is expanded and reorganized, reflecting the blurring boundaries between domestic and international terrorism, and includes a new section on white supremacist terrorism.

Features and Pedagogical Aids

We have integrated a number of features and pedagogical aids into the text to help students learn to think about social problems from a sociological perspective. *Understanding Social Problems* was designed to actively engage students in examining social issues from a variety of perspectives. Through content that is visually appealing, connected to current events, and relevant to their everyday lives, *Understanding Social Problems* provides students with the tools to sharpen their sociological imaginations.

Boxed Features

Self and Society. Each chapter includes a *Self and Society* feature designed to help students assess their own attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, or behaviors regarding some aspect of the social problem under discussion. In Chapter 4 ("Crime and Social Control"), for example, the "Fear of Crime Assessment" invites students to evaluate their own fear of criminal victimization. The *Self and Society* feature in Chapter 11 ("Sexual Orientation and the Struggle for Equality") allows students to assess their attitudes toward gay and transgender men and women and compare their responses to a sample of respondents from all over the world.

The Human Side. Each chapter includes a boxed feature that describes personal experiences and views of individuals who have been directly affected by social problems. *The Human Side* feature in Chapter 10 ("Gender Inequality"), for example, describes U.S. House of Representatives member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's response to an unprovoked verbal attack by a congressman on the U.S. Capitol steps, and *The Human Side* feature in Chapter 7 ("Working and Unemployment") poignantly describes "life as a child worker in a garment factory." *The Human Side* in Chapter 14, sadly, describes the tensions between family members and friends as a result of the unfounded conspiracy theories put forth by QAnon.

Social Problems Research Up Close. This feature, found in every chapter, presents examples of social science research, summarizing the sampling and methods involved in data collection and presenting the findings and conclusions of the research study. Examples of *Social Problems Research Up Close* topics include opposition to needle exchange programs, media portrayals of serial killers, implicit bias training to reduce racial disparities, the relationship between mother's education and decreased child mortality rates, and variables that predict belief in scientific conspiracies.

In-Text Learning Aids

Learning Objectives. We have developed a set of learning objectives that are presented at the beginning of each chapter. The learning objectives are designed to help students focus on key concepts, theories, and terms as they read each chapter.

Vignettes. Each chapter begins with a vignette designed to engage students and draw them into the chapter by illustrating the current relevance of the topic under discussion. For example, Chapter 8 ("Problems in Education") begins with a teacher describing her frustration with the profession and her decision to leave it, and Chapter 10 ("Gender Inequality") introduces students to Max, a non-binary youth who must decide whether to go through female or male puberty. The opening vignette in Chapter 14 ("Science and Technology") documents the miracle of medical technology that is helping young boys with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy to run, jump, and play.

Key Terms and Glossary. Important terms and concepts are highlighted in the text where they first appear. To reemphasize the importance of these words, they are listed at the end of every chapter and are included in the glossary at the end of the text.

Running Glossary. This eleventh edition continues the running glossary that highlights the key terms in every chapter by putting the key terms and their definitions in the text margins.

What Do You Think? Feature. Each chapter contains multiple feature boxes called *What Do You Think?* These features invite students to use critical thinking skills to answer questions about issues related to the chapter content. For example, one *What Do You Think?* in Chapter 4 ("Crime and Social Control") asks students to consider whether or not the "law should require the use of algorithms in murder cases," and a *What Do You Think?* question in Chapter 8 ("Problems in Education") asks students, "Do you think standardized tests should be eliminated entirely and, if not, how long after the end of the pandemic should they be reinstated?"

Margin Quotes and Margin Tweets. New to this edition, margin quotes and margin tweets connect with students through their interest in social media, while introducing students to alternative points of view, perhaps from someone they are "following." They also encourage students to apply sociology to everyday life as they see celebrities, politicians, authors, and the like, doing so. Margin quotes and margin tweets come from a diverse array of commentators and organizations, including, for example, former Presidents Obama and Trump, Lady Gaga, Pharrell Williams, and Taylor Swift, as well as the LGBT Foundation, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and the United Nations.

Understanding [Specific Social Problem] Sections. All too often, students, faced with contradictory theories and research results, walk away from social problems courses without any real understanding of their causes and consequences. To address this problem, chapter sections titled "Understanding [a specific social problem]" cap the body of each chapter just before the chapter summaries. Unlike the chapter summaries, these sections sum up the present state of knowledge and theory on the chapter topic and convey the urgency for rectifying the problems discussed in the chapter.

Supplements

The eleventh edition of *Understanding Social Problems* comes with a full complement of supplements designed for both faculty and students.

Supplements for Instructors

Online Instructor's Resource Manual. This supplement offers instructors learning objectives, key terms, lecture outlines, student projects, classroom activities, exercises, and video suggestions.

Online Test Bank. Test items include multiple-choice and true-false questions with answers and text references, as well as short-answer and essay questions for each chapter.

Cengage Learning Testing Powered by Cognero. The Test Bank is also available through Cognero, a flexible, online system that allows instructors to author, edit, and manage test bank content as well as create multiple test versions in an instant. Instructors can deliver tests from their school's learning management system, classroom, office, or home.

Online PowerPoints. These vibrant, Microsoft® PowerPoint® lecture slides for each chapter assist instructors with lectures by providing concept coverage using images, figures, and tables directly from the textbook.

MindTap™: The Personal Learning Experience

MindTap for *Understanding Social Problems* represents a highly personalized, online learning platform. A fully online learning solution, MindTap combines all of a student's learning tools, readings, and multimedia activities—into a Learning Path that guides the student through the social problems course. Highly interactive activities

challenge students to think critically by exploring, analyzing, and creating content, while developing their sociological lenses through personal, local, and global issues.

MindTap Understanding Social Problems is easy to use and saves instructors time by allowing you to:

- Break course content down into manageable modules to promote personalization, encourage interactivity, and ensure student engagement.
- Bring interactivity into learning through the integration of multimedia assets (apps from Cengage and other providers) and numerous in-context exercises and supplements; student engagement will increase, leading to better student outcomes.
- Track students' use, activities, and comprehension in real-time, which provides opportunities for early intervention to influence progress and outcomes. Grades are visible and archived so students and instructors always have access to current standings in the class.
- Assess knowledge throughout each section: after readings and in automatically graded activities and assignments.
- A digital implementation guide will help you integrate the new MindTap Learning Path into your course.

Learn more at **www.cengage.com/mindtap.**

Acknowledgments

> ❝ Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.❞
>
> **DR. SEUSS**
> The Lorax

1

Thinking about Social Problems

Chapter Outline

Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to . . .

1 Describe the American political party system.

2 Discuss the causes of political partisanship in the United States.

3 Define a social problem.

4 Discuss the elements of the social structure and culture of society.

5 Explain the connections between private troubles and public issues, as well as how they relate to the sociological imagination.

6 Summarize structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism and their respective theories of social problems.

7 Describe the stages in conducting a research study.

8 Distinguish between the four methods of data collection used by sociologists.

The year 2020 was a year of activism as Black Lives Matters and supporters protested police violence, student strikes marked Sweden's day of climate action, lockdown opponents rallied against government mandates, and election results in the United States were met with both celebrations and demonstrations questioning the results.

IN AN OCTOBER 2020 survey, respondents were asked, "What is the most important problem facing this country today?" Only 14 percent of respondents reported economic problems such as the economy in general, unemployment, and the gap between the rich and poor. Eighty-seven percent of respondents reported noneconomic social problems, from the most to the least frequent, coronavirus/diseases, poor government leadership, race relations/racism, unifying the country, crime/violence, health care, the judicial system/courts, and the environment (Gallup Poll 2020a). Moreover, a 2020 survey indicates that just 14 percent of Americans are satisfied "with the way things are going in the United States"—a decrease from 33 percent in the previous year (Gallup Poll 2020b). The increase in dissatisfaction is likely, among other things, a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, racial unrest, and a contentious political environment.

> " We reject globalism and embrace the doctrine of patriotism."
>
> **–DONALD TRUMP, FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES**

globalization The growing economic, cultural, and technological interdependence between countries and regions.

populist movements Emphasize "the people" rather than the "government elite" and their political parties, tend to be conservative, right to far-right leaning, anti-immigrant, nationalistic, and anti-globalist.

Problems related to government leadership, COVID-19, race, crime and violence, divisiveness, health care, and environmental destruction, as well as many other social issues, are both national and international concerns. Because of **globalization**, i.e., the growing economic, cultural, and technological interdependence between countries and regions, some social problems are clearly universal such as climate change, while others *appear* to only impact the nation in which they occur. The economy, for example, is often discussed in terms of the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP), the U.S. inflation rate, or Americans' consumer confidence. And yet U.S. economic indicators don't operate in a vacuum. Even before COVID-19 was considered a significant threat to the United States, as it spread from Asia to Europe, U.S. financial markets fell to their lowest point in years as a result of what was happening overseas (Imbert and Huang 2020).

Globalization was championed by the United States and other Western nations after World War II as a way to deter future international conflict (Goodman 2019; Posen 2018). Facilitated by advances in technology and transportation, population growth and geographic mobility, and the expansion of multinational corporations, countries became reliant on one another for the production and consumption of goods and services. Raw materials and labor, rather than coming from a single country, were drawn from all over the world leading to a global marketplace. Free trade zones were established, tariffs eliminated, trade agreements forged, and dispute resolution processes put into place.

However, fears that globalization would reduce the importance of nation-states and lead to cultural homogenization wherein the lynchpins of American society—individual achievement, self-determination, hard work, and national unity—would be lost continue today. In fact, some research suggests that Brexit (i.e., the exit of Great Britain from the European Union, framed by the slogan "take back control"), the election of Donald Trump ("America First"), and other populist movements in Europe are a direct response to such fears (Adnane 2019; Silver, Schumacher, and Mordecai 2020). **Populist movements**, which claim to represent "the people" rather than government elites and their political parties, tend to be conservative, right to far-right leaning, anti-immigrant, nationalistic, and anti-globalist (Ruzza and Salgado 2020).

Given globalization and its inevitable continuation (Goodman 2019), it is important that America maintain its standing as a world leader. And yet, in a 2020 survey of 14 countries, only respondents from South Korea and Japan named the United States as the world's leading economic power with, for example, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Australia, and Germany naming China (Poushter and Moncus 2020).

In response to an anti-globalist stance, the Biden administration has made it clear that they reject the former president's "America First" policy and has assured foreign leaders that the United States has returned to the world stage (Ordonez 2020). President Biden is working with prominent allies to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, and rejoined the World Health Organization (WHO) (see Chapter 2). His administration is also focused on the environmental crisis by, for example, rejoining the Paris climate accord (see Chapter 13), and on restructuring foreign policy, including the Iran nuclear deal that former President Trump withdrew from in 2018 (see Chapter 15). After his election, President Biden also announced a "Democracy Summit" of heads of states from leading democratic countries to be held in the United States in 2021 (Holpuch et al. 2020)

> Krupnikov and Ryan (2020) argue that there is an "attention divide" in the United States between those who follow politics closely, about 15 to 20 percent of the population, and the remainder who follow it casually or not all. Democrats and Republicans who don't follow politics closely are much more likely to agree on the most important problems facing America than Democrats and Republicans who do follow politics closely. Why do you think there is much more disagreement about the importance of social problems between Democrats and Republicans who follow the news closely when compared to those who don't?

What do you think?

Figure 1.1 graphically portrays the thoughts of American and United Kingdom focus group participants who were tasked with discussing "how people in the U.K. and the U.S. feel about globalization and how this relates to their views about their communities and their country" (Silver, Shoemaker, and Mordecai 2020, p. 1). Most participants, American and British, had difficulty defining globalization but were able to voice concerns (e.g., "diluting our culture") as well as elements of cooperation (e.g., "learning from other cultures") leading to the emergence of five key themes as indicated in Figure 1.1.
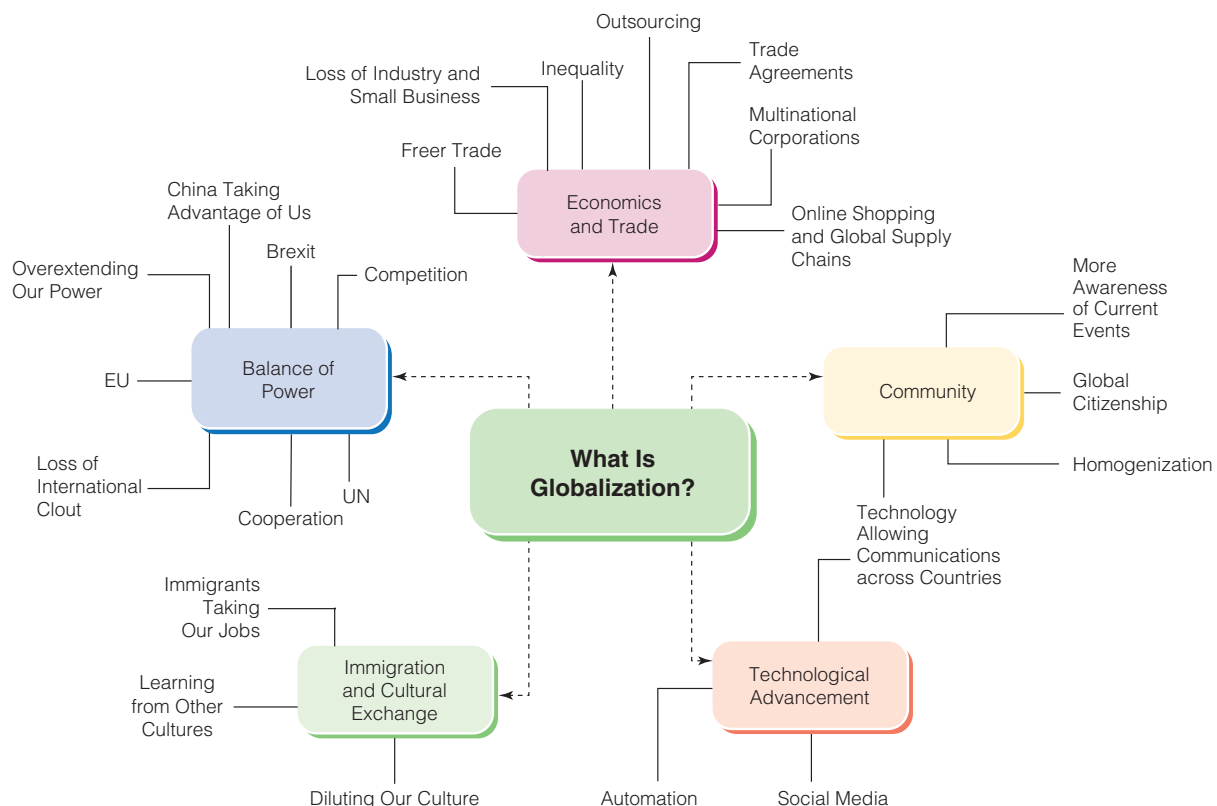
Figure 1.1 Key Themes of Globalization, Focus Group Participants, U.S. and U.K., 2020*
*When asked to define globalization, focus group participants found it easier to illustrate than to define.
SOURCE: Silver, Schumacher, and Mordecai 2020.

Because many Americans are often unfamiliar with world events, with the exception of this chapter, every subsequent chapter begins with a section on the global context of the social problem under discussion; at the end of each chapter, policy initiatives from the United States and, where appropriate, from around the world are highlighted.

The topics covered in this book vary widely; however, all chapters share common objectives: to explain how social problems are created and maintained; to indicate how they affect individuals, social groups, and societies as a whole; and to examine programs and policies for change. We begin by looking at the sociopolitical climate surrounding social problems in America.

The Social Context: A Divided Nation

In the United States, social problems are often framed within the context of *culture wars* whereby various groups, often based on political party affiliation, disagree as to what constitutes a social problem and/or how it should be addressed. In the following section, the American political spectrum, political polarization, and the state of the union are examined.

Politics in America

Although there are smaller and lesser known political parties such as the Libertarian Party, the Green Party, and the Constitutional Party, historically the United States has been characterized by a two-party system with either Democrats or Republicans winning the White House since the 1860s. Democratic presidents include Franklin D. Roosevelt, John Kennedy, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and presently Joe Biden. Republican presidents include Abraham Lincoln, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and, most recently, Donald Trump.

The two parties differ in their philosophy of the role of government in society and on social and economic policies (see Figure 1.2). Democrats and progressives are often referred to as being on the left, while Republicans and reactionaries are often referred to as being on the right
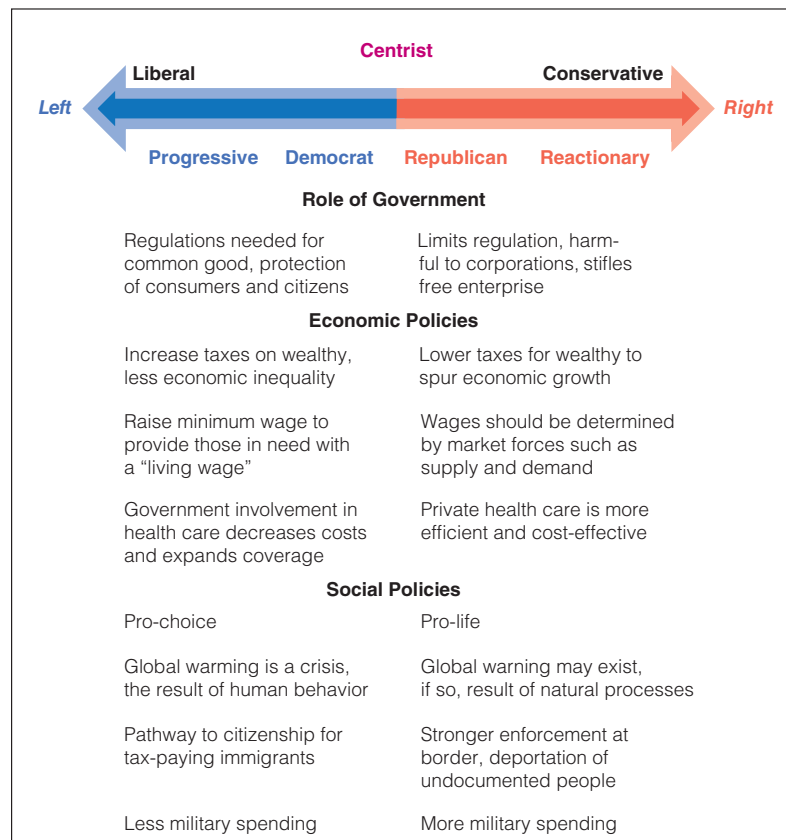
Figure 1.2 The American Political Spectrum

political partisanship
Supporters of a political party are entrenched in their party's policies, with little to no motivation to compromise with opposing political views.

6 | **CHAPTER 1** Thinking about Social Problems

(Tanenhaus 2016). In general, the left is considered liberal, and the right is considered conservative. However, as political scientists note, "the very meaning of 'liberalism' and 'conservatism' changes" over time (Lewis 2019, p. 1).

The Roots of Political Partisanship. When supporters of a political party are entrenched in their party's policies, with little to no motivation to compromise with opposing political views, it is called **political partisanship**. Like today, the 1960s and 1970s were characterized by political and social divisiveness as those opposed to America's involvement in the Viet Nam war (i.e., doves) and those in favor it (i.e., hawks), Democrats and Republicans, battled in Congress and on the streets.

After the killing of four students by the Ohio National Guard at an antiwar protest at Kent State University in 1970, student demonstrations in support of the protesters erupted across the nation. The majority of Americans, however, supported the National Guard and when antiwar demonstrations broke out in New York City, four days after the Kent State killings, groups of construction workers, defining the students as "un-American," attacked them with crowbars, resulting in several serious injuries. Thus, as explained by Paul Kuhn (2020), author of *The Hardhat Riot: Nixon, New York City, and the Dawn of the White Working-Class Revolution*, "[I]f there's an era when tribalization … began, it's this time … between Kent State and the hardhat riot [where] you have the best microcosm that there is of the beginning of the polarization that haunts America today" (McGreal 2020).

AP Images/Sipa USA

The 2020 presidential election was one of the most contentious in American history. Here supporters of President-Elect Joe Biden drive by a group of supporters of the former president following the announcement of the outcome of the election.

The Growth of Political Partisanship. Political partisanship has increased dramatically over the last several decades. In 1960, just 4 percent of Republicans and 4 percent of Democrats said they would be "somewhat or very unhappy" if their son or daughter married someone from the opposite political party. In 2019, however, 45 percent of Democrats and 35 percent of Republicans said they would be "somewhat or very unhappy" if their son or daughter married someone from the opposite political party (Najle and Jones 2019). Interestingly, research indicates that ideological position as either a liberal or a conservative is a better predictor of partisan dislike of ideological opponents than positions on social issues; i.e., political party and its accompanying ideology has become a social identity in and of itself (Mason 2018). Given the significance of social identity, it is not surprising that the term *political tribalism* is sometimes used to describe unquestioning loyalty to a political belief or party.

> After months of claiming that the 2020 presidential election had been stolen, on January 6, 2021, President Trump encouraged a crowd of his supporters to go to the U.S. Capitol and "take back our country." Thousands stormed the Capitol, breaking windows, assaulting Capitol police, and ransacking lawmakers' offices. As a result of the insurrection, six people died, hundreds were arrested, and Donald Trump was impeached for a second time, charged with incitement of insurrection. Do you think Donald Trump should have been impeached so close to leaving office?

What do you think?

@Mitt Romney

The President is within his rights to request recounts, to call for investigation of alleged voting irregularities where evidence exists, and to exhaust legal remedies—doing these things is consistent with our election process. He is wrong to say that the election was rigged, corrupt and stolen—doing so damages the cause of freedom here and around the world, weakens the institutions that lie at the foundation of the Republic, and recklessly inflames destructive and dangerous passions.

-Mitt Romney

Political partisanship is thought to be the result of several interacting social forces in the United States (Mansbridge 2016; Bail et al. 2018; Blankenhorn 2018; Carothers and O'Donohue 2019). These social forces include:

- movement from the center of the political spectrum;
- greater racial, religious, and ethnic diversity;
- increased division between socioeconomic classes;

- polarizing leaders who demonize opponents;
- residential and geographical homogeneity;
- "media ghettos" segregated by political party (e.g., MSNBC, *Huffington Post* vs. Fox News, *Breitbart*);
- viral misinformation and disinformation;
- exposure to "news" consistent with existing beliefs, i.e., social media as an echo chamber.

Note, however, it is difficult to establish causality. For example, do people with polarized beliefs seek news outlets that are consistent with those beliefs, or does consuming ideologically slanted media create polarized beliefs? The answer is probably both.

Figure 1.3 displays the differences between Republicans and Democrats who, when asked about a particular social problem, reported they believed it was a "very big problem in the country today" (Dunn 2020, p. 1). With the exception of the federal budget deficit, violent crime, terrorism, and illegal immigration, Democrats were more likely to report each of the social problems listed as a "very big problem" compared to Republicans. When political party is held constant, more Americans report that ethics in government, COVID-19, and the affordability of health care are significant problems today than, for example, those who cite illegal immigration or terrorism.

Unfortunately, beliefs about political polarization in America, whether accurate or not, increase the likelihood of further polarization. Fewer than 10 percent of Americans define themselves as at the extremes of the political spectrum. Yet extreme views, whether far right or far left, are more likely to be popularized in the news, posted on social media, and shared with others (Heltzel and Laurin 2020). As a result, Americans see their political opponents as extremists, which reinforces and hardens their own partisan resolve. In a 2020 survey, 81 percent of Republicans said that "the Democratic Party has been taken over by socialists," and 78 percent of Democrats said that "the Republican Party has been taken over by racists" (Public Religion Research Institute 2020).
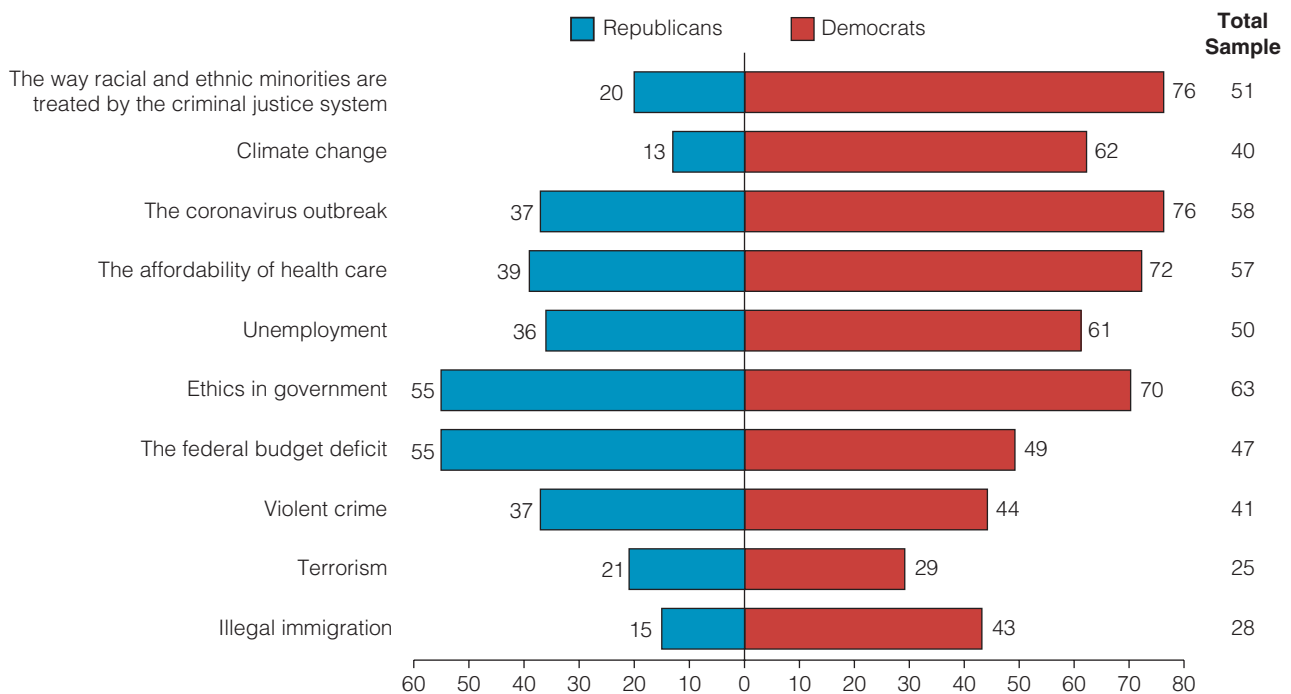
Figure 1.3 Percentage Who Said _____ Is a **Very Big Problem** in the Country Today, by Political Party, 2020*

*Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16–22, 2020; Republicans include Republicans and those leaning toward Republican, and Democrats include Democrats and those leaning toward Democratic.
SOURCE: Dunn 2020.

Although few Americans adhere to extreme far left or right ideologies:

> political differences are ripping our country apart … Political scientists find that our nation is more polarized than it has been at any time since the Civil War. This is especially true among partisan elites – leaders who, instead of bringing us together, depict our differences in unbridgeable, apocalyptic terms. (Brooks 2019 p. 2)

Former President Trump, for example, accused then Vice President Biden as "running on the most extreme far-left platform of any nominee in American history" and called Black Lives Matters protesters "thugs" (quoted in Wise 2020, p. 1). In the first debate, candidate Biden, after being bullied and repeatedly interrupted by former President Trump, called him a "liar" and a "clown" (quoted in Manchester 2020, p. 1). It is thus not surprising that the political divide between right- and left-leaning Americans, often seems insurmountable.

State of the Union

The results of the 2016 election and, to a lesser extent, the 2020 election, signaled Americans'—and particularly White working-class Americans'—dissatisfaction with the status quo. Although Democrats Joe Biden and Kamala Harris won, the results documented just how polarized the United States was at the time of the election. A record number of Americans voted, with over 72 million, 47.5 percent of the electorate, voting for Republican incumbents Donald Trump and Mike Pence (Fox News 2020). As Deane and Gramlich (2020, p. 1) note, one takeaway from the election is the:

> continuing political polarization that has come to define the United States. Democrats and Republicans could both walk away from the election with cause for disappointment, and [a] divided government in Washington. … The elected officials who take the oath of office in January [2021] will be representing two broad coalitions of voters who are deeply distrustful of one another and who fundamentally disagree over policies, plans and even the very problems that face the country today.

Thus, one of the most daunting tasks of the Biden administration, as President Biden noted in his post-election speech, is to heal America, "to put away the harsh rhetoric, lower the temperature, see each other again, listen to each other again, [in order] to make progress" (Biden 2020, p. 1).

Although the Trump administration had some notable successes, President Biden, Vice President Harris, and Democrats in general are "eager to systematically erase what they view as the destructive policies that the president pursued on the environment, immigration, healthcare, gay rights, trade, tax cuts, civil rights, abortion, race relations, military spending, and more" (Shear and Friedman 2020, p. 1). For example, the Trump administration was responsible for the largest tax reform in 30 years. Critics, however, were quick to note that while reducing the corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 21 percent, providing a corporate windfall, it did so at the expense of middle-class Americans. Since 2016, the income gaps between upper-income, middle-income, and lower-income households increased, and the percentage of income held by middle-income households decreased (Horowitz, Igielnik, and Kochhar 2020) (see Chapter 6 and Chapter 7).

🐦 **@ladygaga**

🙌 Queen Kamala

–Lady Gaga

🔁 **ReTweeting @KamalaHarris**

I hope every little girl watching tonight sees that this is a country of possibilities.

–Kamala Harris

AP Images/Andrew Harnik

On January 6, 2021, in an attempted coup, rioters attacked the U.S. Capitol in the hopes of stopping lawmakers from tallying the electoral votes for the 2020 presidential election. With some of the extremists calling for the execution of then Vice President Mike Pence (R) and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D), here Capitol police, with guns drawn and furniture stacked to prevent entry, defend the integrity of the "peoples' house."

President Biden has proposed raising the corporate tax rate from the prior administration's preferred rate of 21 percent to 28 percent (Ember 2020).

The Trump administration also lobbied for the repeal of the *Affordable Care Act* (ACA), an Obama-era legislative initiative supported by then Vice President Biden. With the repeal of the individual mandate and the end to subsidies to insurance companies in the exchanges after President Trump took office, the number of *uninsured* Americans increased by 2.3 million, including over 725,000 children (Gee 2020) (see Chapter 2). Further, the Trump administration removed health care and health insurance non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ citizens (Simmons-Duffin 2020) (see Chapter 11). There were also concerns that the repeal of the ACA would make substance abuse services financially out of reach for many in need (Firozi 2019) (see Chapter 3). Not surprisingly, one of President Biden's first official actions was to sign an executive order strengthening the ACA by opening enrollment thereby allowing more Americans to sign up for health care during the pandemic (Deliso 2021) (see Chapter 2).

Concerns, primarily by Republicans, over immigration from Mexico and Central America led to a national policy of family separation in 2017 and 2018 that became a significant point of contention in the 2020 election. As of this writing, 545 children remain separated from their parents or guardians as the Trump administration has been unable to track down their families after detaining them at the U.S.–Mexico border (Lantry 2020) (see Chapter 9). Further, the former administration's delays in approving student visas has resulted in fewer international students at American colleges and universities (see Chapter 8). Some analysts believe that the Biden administration would be wise to "make a clean break from the Trump era by undoing all executive orders and proclamations on immigration that are not directly tied to health concerns related to COVID-19" (Anderson 2020, p. 1). To that end, President Biden has signed several immigration-related orders including one terminating the construction of and funding for the border wall between the United States and Mexico (Deliso 2021) (see Chapter 9).

Existing social problems, of course, have been exasperated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and by the former administration's anti-science stance (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 14). Just prior to the election, the unemployment rate hovered around 8 percent nationally (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020), an increase of nearly 5 percent from the same time period in the previous year (see Chapter 7). Moreover, by the fall of 2020, economic growth had dropped by over 30 percent (BBC 2020) and student repayment of loans, with debt at an all-time high, had to be deferred as less educated workers, including college students, were the most likely to lose their jobs (Baum and Looney 2020) (see Chapter 8).

Acknowledging the devastating impact of the pandemic on the economy, the Biden administration believes that it is time to "build back better" and to address the "old economy's structural weaknesses and inequalities" (Economic Recovery 2020, p. 1). More specifically, for example, the new administration supports student loan forgiveness for low-income families, increasing Social Security payments, federal grants for small businesses, and creation of a Public Health Job Corps to help fight the pandemic and reduce unemployment (Economic Recovery 2020; Sherman 2020) (see Chapter 2, Chapter 7, Chapter 8, and Chapter 12).

Not surprisingly, given the trajectory of the country over the last several years, many Americans have questioned the future of the country, and political polarization has led to a lack of confidence in traditional institutions (Gallup 2020c). For example, a 2020 poll of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 found that, at the time, fewer than 10 percent of respondents believed that the government was working as it should. Fifty-one percent of Democrats surveyed believed, "Our government has problems, and in order for them to be solved, we need to replace and create new institutions to address those challenges" compared to 38 percent of Independents and just 19 percent of Republicans (Harvard Kennedy School 2020).

Finally, in 2020, Americans reported being unhappier than they've been since 1972 (see Chapter 2), as well as more pessimistic about the future of their children with only 42 percent responding that their children will have a higher standard of living than they have, the lowest recorded level since 1994 (Lush 2020) (see Chapter 6). Although there is little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the higher rates of personal unhappiness and pessimism about the future, the increases for both began in 2018, pre-dating the pandemic.

We now turn our attention to the objective and subjective components of social problems and the role of the media in defining them. We also examine the variability of social problems, i.e., how definitions of social problems change over time, both within and between societies.

What Is a Social Problem?

There is no universal, constant, or absolute definition of what constitutes a social problem. Rather, social problems are defined by a combination of objective and subjective criteria that vary across societies, among individuals and groups within a society, and across historical time periods.

Objective and Subjective Elements of Social Problems

Although social problems take many forms, they all share two important elements: an objective social condition and a subjective interpretation of that social condition. The **objective element of a social problem** refers to the existence of a social condition. We become aware of social conditions through our own life experiences, through the media, and through education. We see homelessness, hear gunfire in the streets, and see battered women in hospital emergency rooms. We read about employees losing their jobs and businesses shutting down as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In television news reports, we see the anguished faces of parents whose children have been killed in Afghanistan.

The **subjective element of a social problem** refers to the belief that a particular social condition is harmful to society or to a segment of society and that it should and can be changed. We know that crime, drug addiction, poverty, racism, and global warming exist. These social conditions are not considered social problems sociologically, unless at least a segment of society believes that these conditions diminish the quality of human life.

By combining these objective and subjective elements, we arrive at the following definition: A **social problem** is a social condition that a segment of society views as harmful to members of society and is in need of remedy.

Media and Social Problems

Media, including social media, print media, and television and radio, increasingly play a critical role in how social problems are defined. Ironically, a majority of Americans see intentionally misleading information in the media as *the* "major problem" in the United States, of greater concern than illegal drugs, crime, gun violence, or political partisanship (McCorkindale 2020) (see Chapter 14).

One reason for the variation between Democrats' and Republicans' rankings of social problems, with discrepancies as high as 50 percentage points in some cases (see Figure 1.3), may be attributed to differences in media consumption. When Democrats and Republicans were asked the source(s) they trust for political news, 65 percent of Republicans responded Fox News and 33 percent ABC News. Democrats, on the other hand, were much more likely to report getting their news from a variety of sources, the top five varying in frequency by just over 10 percent from a high of 67 percent (CNN) to a low of 56 percent (PBS) (Gramlich 2020). In 2021, after the assault on the U.S. Capitol, some Republicans abandoned fact-checking social media such as Twitter and Facebook in favor of, for example, Gab, which describes itself as a social network that "champions free speech, individual liberty and the free flow of information online" (Gab 2021, p.1).

Information about COVID-19, like information about climate change, on conservative-leaning media versus liberal-leaning media is very different. Calvillo et al. (2020), in an analysis of COVID-19 and media consumption, report that respondents with higher Fox News consumption were less likely to perceive themselves as personally vulnerable or to be knowledgeable about the disease, and more likely to believe that the threat is exaggerated (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 14).

objective element of a social problem Awareness of social conditions through one's own life experiences, through the media, and through education.

subjective element of a social problem The belief that a particular social condition is harmful to society, or to a segment of society, and that it should and can be changed.

social problem A social condition that a segment of society views as harmful to members of society and in need of remedy.

Not surprisingly, research also indicates those who feel less vulnerable and are less well-informed about the risks of the disease are more likely to oppose government interventions such as lockdowns, school closures, and mask and social distancing mandates (Jorgenson et al. 2020). Given the foregoing, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that watching Fox News may be linked to opposition to state lockdown orders. Indeed, research from several countries documents the relationship between right-leaning political beliefs and anti-lockdown protests (Vieten 2020). In fact, former President Trump, a Republican, called for the "liberation" of U.S. states with lockdown orders (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020), and Fox News "covered the [protests] favourably while criticising the governors who implemented the lockdowns" (Ananyev, Poyker, and Tian 2020, p. 1). Thus, variability in what is defined as the *real* social problem, in this example, lockdowns or the pandemic, can be traced, at least in part, to variations in media presentations.

Variability in Definitions of Social Problems

Individuals and groups, often on the basis of demographic variables such as age, race, gender, and political party, frequently disagree about what constitutes a social problem. For example, some Americans view gun control as a necessary means of reducing gun violence, whereas others believe that gun control is a threat to civil rights and individual liberties. Similarly, some Americans view the availability of abortion as a social problem, whereas others view restrictions on abortion as a social problem.

Definitions of social problems, and their importance, vary not only within societies but also *across societies and geographic regions*. Just 3 percent of Americans listed health care as an important problem facing the country today compared to 21 percent of a sample of 16- to 64-year-olds from 27 countries. Similarly, 30 percent of the global respondents identified crime and violence as a top concern compared to just 8 percent of Americans (Gallup 2020a; Ipsos 2020). Country-specific rankings of COVID-19 also vary dramatically with 72 percent of South Koreans compared to 27 percent of Swedes ranking the virus as their country's top concern.

What constitutes a social problem varies by individuals, groups, time, and place. On October 22, 2020, the Handmaid's Brigade demonstrated against the Senate Judiciary Committee's vote to confirm Amy Coney Barrett's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court. Justice Barrett, who was eventually approved by the full U.S. Senate, has been a vocal opponent of the pro-choice movement.

What constitutes a social problem also *varies over time.* For example, before the 19th century, a husband's legal right and marital obligation was to discipline and control his wife through the use of physical force. Today, the use of physical force is regarded as a social problem rather than a marital right. Even a matter of months can make a significant difference. In February 2020, just 3 percent of Americans thought race relations and racism were the most important problems facing the country; five months later, 19 percent thought race relations and racism were the most important problems facing the United States (Gallup 2020a).

Lastly, social problems change over time not only because definitions of conditions change, as in the example of the use of force in marriage but also because the *conditions themselves change*. The use of cell phones while driving was not considered a social problem in the 1990s, as cell phone technology was just beginning to become popular. Now, with most U.S. adults having a cell phone, the issue of "distracted driving" has

become a national problem. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), every day, approximately nine people are killed and over 1,000 injured in crashes involving a distracted driver. The majority of those injured or killed are between the ages of 20 and 29. The average time a distracted driver is not paying attention is five seconds. At 55 mph, it's like driving the length of a football field blindfolded (CDC 2020a).

Because social problems can be highly complex, it is helpful to have a framework within which to view them. Sociology provides such a framework. Using a sociological perspective to examine social problems requires knowledge of the basic concepts and tools of sociology. In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss some of these concepts and tools: social structure, culture, the "sociological imagination," major theoretical perspectives, and types of research methods.

Elements of Social Structure and Culture

Although society surrounds us and permeates our lives, it is difficult to "see" society. By thinking of society in terms of a picture or image, however, we can visualize society and therefore better understand it. Imagine that society is a coin with two sides: On one side is the structure of society, and on the other is the culture of society. Although each side is distinct, both are inseparable from the whole. By looking at the various elements of social structure and culture, we can better understand the root causes of social problems.

Elements of Social Structure

The **structure** of a society refers to the way society is organized. Society is organized into different parts: institutions, social groups, statuses, and roles.

Institutions. An **institution** is an established and enduring pattern of social relationships. The five traditional institutions are family, religion, politics, economics, and education, but some sociologists argue that other social institutions—such as science and technology, mass media, medicine, sports, and the military—also play important roles in modern society. Many social problems are generated by inadequacies in various institutions. For example, unemployment may be influenced by the educational institution's failure to prepare individuals for the job market and by alterations in the structure of the economic institution.

Social Groups. Institutions are made up of social groups. A **social group** is defined as two or more people who have a common identity, interact, and form a social relationship. For example, the family in which you were reared is a social group that is part of the family institution. The religious association to which you may belong is a social group that is part of the religious institution.

Social groups can be categorized as primary or secondary. **Primary groups**, which tend to involve small numbers of individuals, are characterized by intimate and informal interaction. Families and friends are examples of primary groups. **Secondary groups**, which may involve small or large numbers of individuals, are task oriented and characterized by impersonal and formal interaction. Examples of secondary groups include employers and their employees and clerks and their customers.

Statuses. Just as institutions consist of social groups, social groups consist of statuses. A **status** is a position that a person occupies within a social group. The statuses we occupy largely define our social identity. The statuses in a family may consist of mother, father, stepmother, stepfather, wife, husband, partner, child, and so on. Statuses can be either ascribed or achieved. An **ascribed status** is one that society assigns to an individual on the basis of factors over which the individual has no control. For example, we have no control over the sex, race, ethnic background, and socioeconomic status into which we are born. Similarly, we are assigned the status of child, teenager, adult, or senior citizen on the basis of our age—something we do not choose or control.

structure The way society is organized including institutions, social groups, statuses, and roles.

institution An established and enduring pattern of social relationships.

social group Two or more people who have a common identity, interact, and form a social relationship.

primary groups Usually small numbers of individuals characterized by intimate and informal interaction.

secondary groups Involving small or large numbers of individuals, groups that are task oriented and are characterized by impersonal and formal interaction.

status A position that a person occupies within a social group.

ascribed status A status that society assigns to an individual on the basis of factors over which the individual has no control.

An **achieved status** is assigned on the basis of some characteristic or behavior over which the individual has some control. Whether you achieve the status of college graduate, spouse, parent, bank president, or prison inmate depends largely on your own efforts, behavior, and choices. One's ascribed statuses may affect the likelihood of achieving other statuses, however. For example, if you are born into a poor socioeconomic status, you may find it more difficult to achieve the status of college graduate because of the high cost of a college education.

Every individual has numerous statuses simultaneously. You may be a student, parent, tutor, volunteer fund-raiser, female, and Hispanic. A person's *master status* is the status that is considered the most significant in a person's social identity. In the United States, a person's occupational status is typically regarded as a master status. If you are a full-time student, your master status is likely to be student.

Roles. Every status is associated with many **roles**, or the set of rights, obligations, and expectations associated with a status. Roles guide our behavior and allow us to predict the behavior of others. As students, you are expected to attend class, listen and take notes, study for tests, and complete assignments. Because you know what the role of teacher involves, you can predict that your teachers will lecture, give exams, and assign grades based on your performance on tests.

A single status involves more than one role. The status of prison inmate includes one role for interacting with prison guards and another role for interacting with other prison inmates. Similarly, the status of nurse involves different roles for interacting with physicians and with patients.

Elements of Culture

Whereas the social structure refers to the organization of society, the **culture** refers to the meanings and ways of life that characterize a society. The elements of culture include beliefs, values, norms, sanctions, and symbols.

Beliefs. **Beliefs** refer to definitions and explanations about what is assumed to be true. The beliefs of an individual or group influence whether that individual or group views a particular social condition as a social problem. Does secondhand smoke harm nonsmokers? Does wearing a mask protect others from COVID-19? Does violence in movies and on television lead to increased aggression in children? Our beliefs regarding these issues influence whether we view the issues as social problems. Beliefs influence not only how a social condition is interpreted but also the existence of the condition itself.

> Our shared values define us more than our differences. And acknowledging those shared values can see us through our challenges today if we have the wisdom to trust in them again."
>
> **–JOHN McCAIN, U.S. SENATOR FROM ARIZONA**

| What *do you* think? | Beliefs often determine values. For example, if I believe in democracy, I value voting, free speech, and freedom. One common element of a shared culture is agreement about beliefs and values, and yet in a recent poll there was only one value Republicans and Democrats agreed on—"freedom" (Luntz 2018). While Democrats thought of freedom as **freedom from** (e.g., discrimination, poverty), Republicans thought of it as **freedom to** (e.g., own a gun, practice your religion). What do you think is the meaning of the fundamental American value freedom? |

achieved status A status that society assigns to an individual on the basis of factors over which the individual has some control.

roles The set of rights, obligations, and expectations associated with a status.

Values. **Values** are social agreements about what is considered good and bad, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable. Frequently, social conditions are viewed as social problems when the conditions are incompatible with or contradict closely held values. For example, poverty and homelessness violate the value of human welfare; crime contradicts the values of honesty, private property, and nonviolence; racism, sexism, and heterosexism violate the values of equality and fairness. Often responses to opinion surveys (see this chapter's *Self and Society* feature) reveal an individual's values. For example, agreeing with the statement that "a chief benefit of a college

Indicate with a check mark whether you agree (either somewhat agree or strongly agree) or disagree (either somewhat disagree or strongly disagree) with the following statements. When you are done, compare your responses to those that follow.

	Agree	Disagree
1. Racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America.	_____	_____
2. Abortion should be legal.	_____	_____
3. Colleges have the right to ban extreme speakers from campus.	_____	_____
4. Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now.	_____	_____
5. Addressing global climate change should be a federal priority.	_____	_____
6. The federal government should have stricter gun control laws.	_____	_____
7. Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished.	_____	_____
8. The federal government should raise taxes to reduce the deficit.	_____	_____
9. Gay men and lesbians should have the legal right to adopt a child.	_____	_____
10. The U.S. government should create a clear path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.	_____	_____
11. My political views closely resemble those of my parent(s)/guardian(s).	_____	_____

The following percentages are from a national sample of first-semester, first-year college students, at bachelor-granting institutions in the United States who "somewhat agree" or "strongly agree" with the following statements.*

	Percentage Agreeing
1. Racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America.	17.8
2. Abortion should be legal.	73.1
3. Colleges have the right to ban extreme speakers from campus.	51.0
4. Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now.	67.9
5. Addressing global climate change should be a federal priority.	85.8
6. The federal government should have stricter gun control laws.	76.3
7. Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished.	50.2
8. The federal government should raise taxes to reduce the deficit.	36.2
9. Gay men and lesbians should have the legal right to adopt a child.	90.5
10. The U.S. government should create a clear path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.	85.9
11. My political views closely resemble those of my parent(s)/guardian(s).	65.6

*Percentages are rounded.

SOURCE: Stolzenberg, E.B., M.C. Aragon, E. Romo, V. Couch, D. McLennan, M.K. Eagan, and N. Kang. 2020. *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

education is that it increases one's earning power" reflects the American value of economic well-being.

Values play an important role not only in the interpretation of a condition as a social problem but also in the development of the social condition itself. For example, most Americans view capitalism, characterized by free enterprise and the private accumulation of wealth, positively. Nonetheless, a capitalist system, in part, is responsible for the inequality in American society as people compete for limited resources.

Norms and Sanctions. **Norms** are socially defined rules of behavior. Norms serve as guidelines for our behavior and for our expectations of the behavior of others.

There are three types of norms: folkways, laws, and mores. *Folkways* refer to the customs, habits, and manners of society—the ways of life that characterize a group or society. In many segments of our society, it is customary to shake hands when being introduced to a new acquaintance, to say "excuse me" after sneezing, and to give presents to family and friends on their birthdays. Although no laws require us to do these things,

culture The meanings and ways of life that characterize a society, including beliefs, values, norms, sanctions, and symbols.

beliefs Definitions and explanations about what is assumed to be true.

values Social agreements about what is considered good and bad, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable.

norms Socially defined rules of behavior, including folkways, laws, and mores.

Elements of Social Structure and Culture | 15

TABLE 1.1 Types and Examples of Sanctions

	Positive	Negative
Informal	Being praised by one's neighbors for organizing a neighborhood recycling program	Being criticized by one's neighbors for refusing to participate in the neighborhood recycling program
Formal	Being granted a citizen's award for organizing a neighborhood recycling program	Being fined by the city for failing to dispose of trash properly

we are expected to do them because they are part of the cultural tradition, or folkways, of the society in which we live.

Laws are norms that are formalized and backed by political authority. It is normative for a Sikh to wear a turban and to have long hair and a beard. However, when Kanwar Singh requested a religious exemption to the Army's grooming regulations in 2014, he was denied a commission, beginning a four-year quest to join the National Guard. In 2016, Mr. Singh was granted a temporary religious accommodation and in 2018, after the Army passed a directive making the wearing of religious articles permissible, Kanwar Singh was sworn in as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army (Lacdan 2020).

Mores are norms with a moral basis. Both littering and child sexual abuse are violations of law, but child sexual abuse is also a violation of our mores because we view such behavior as immoral.

All norms are associated with **sanctions**, or social consequences for conforming to or violating norms. When we conform to a social norm, we may be rewarded by a positive sanction. These may range from an approving smile to a public ceremony in our honor. When we violate a social norm, we may be punished by a negative sanction, which may range from a disapproving look to the death penalty or life in prison. Most sanctions are spontaneous expressions of approval or disapproval by groups or individuals—these are referred to as informal sanctions. Sanctions that are carried out according to some recognized or formal procedure are referred to as formal sanctions. Types of sanctions, then, include positive informal sanctions, positive formal sanctions, negative informal sanctions, and negative formal sanctions (see Table 1.1).

Symbols. A **symbol** is something that represents something else. Without symbols, we could not communicate with one another or live as social beings.

The symbols of a culture include language, gestures, and objects whose meanings the members of a society commonly understand. In our society, Uncle Sam has come to symbolize the government of the United States, a peace sign symbolizes the value of non-violence, and a white-hooded robe symbolizes the Ku Klux Klan. Sometimes people attach different meanings to the same symbol. The Confederate flag is a symbol of Southern pride to some and a symbol of racial bigotry to others.

The elements of the social structure and culture just discussed play a central role in the creation, maintenance, and social responses to various social problems. One of the goals of taking a course in social problems is to develop an awareness of how the elements of social structure and culture contribute to social problems. Sociologists refer to this awareness as the "sociological imagination."

sanctions Social consequences for conforming to or violating norms.

symbol Something that represents something else.

JEFF KOWALSKY/AFP/Getty Images

Symbolic interactionists emphasize the significance of language, gestures, and objects and their social meaning in determining human behavior. One of the most universal symbols in the United States is the American flag. Here supporters of Senator Bernie Sanders, a 2020 presidential hopeful, rally in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The Sociological Imagination

The **sociological imagination**, a term C. Wright Mills (1959) coined, refers to the ability to see the connections between our personal lives and the social world in which we live. When we use our sociological imagination, we are able to distinguish between "private troubles" and "public issues" and to see connections between the events and conditions of our lives and the social and historical context in which we live.

For example, that one person is unemployed constitutes a private trouble. That millions of people are unemployed in the United States constitutes a public issue. Once we understand that other segments of society share personal troubles such as intimate partner abuse, drug addiction, criminal victimization, poverty, and racism, we can look for the elements of the social structure and culture that contribute to these public issues and private troubles. If the various elements of the social structure and culture contribute to private troubles and public issues, then society's social structure and culture must be changed if these concerns are to be resolved.

Rather than viewing the private trouble of obesity and all of its attending health concerns as a result of an individual's faulty character, lack of self-discipline, or poor choices regarding food and exercise, we may understand the obesity epidemic as a public issue that results from various social and cultural forces, including government policies that make high-calorie foods more affordable than healthier, fresh produce; powerful food lobbies that fight against proposals to restrict food advertising to children; and technological developments that have eliminated many types of manual labor and replaced them with sedentary "desk jobs."

> Although being unable to talk about politics to family and/or friends may feel like a private trouble, of late, it is actually a public issue. In a 2019 survey of 12,043 U.S. adults, nearly half reported that they had stopped talking about politics with someone as a result of something someone said either online or in person (Jurkowitz and Mitchell 2020). There are, however, demographic differences. For example, White Americans were more likely than Black or Hispanic Americans to stop talking with someone about politics. Why do you think that is true?

What do you think?

Theoretical Perspectives

Theories in sociology provide us with different perspectives with which to view our social world. A perspective is simply a way of looking at the world. A **theory** is a set of interrelated propositions or principles designed to answer a question or explain a particular phenomenon; it provides us with a perspective. Sociological theories help us to explain and predict the social world in which we live.

Sociology includes three major theoretical perspectives: the structural-functionalist perspective, the conflict perspective, and the symbolic interactionist perspective. Each perspective offers a variety of explanations about the causes of and possible solutions to social problems.

Structural-Functionalist Perspective

The structural-functionalist perspective is based largely on the works of Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and Robert Merton. According to structural functionalism, society is a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole. For example, each of the social institutions contributes important functions for society: Family provides a context for reproducing, nurturing, and socializing children; education offers a way to transmit a society's

sociological imagination The ability to see the connections between our personal lives and the social world in which we live.

theory A set of interrelated propositions or principles designed to answer a question or explain a particular phenomenon.

skills, knowledge, and culture to its youth; politics provides a means of governing members of society; economics provides for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services; and religion provides moral guidance and an outlet for worship of a higher power.

The structural-functionalist perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of society by focusing on how each part influences and is influenced by other parts. For example, the increase in dual-earner families has contributed to the increase in day cares and after-school programs. As a result of changes in technology, colleges are offering more technical programs, and many adults are returning to school to learn new skills that are required in the workplace. The increasing number of women in the workforce has contributed to the formulation of policies against sexual harassment and job discrimination.

Structural functionalists use the terms *functional* and *dysfunctional* to describe the effects of social elements on society. Elements of society are functional if they contribute to social stability and dysfunctional if they disrupt social stability. Some aspects of society can be both functional and dysfunctional. For example, crime is dysfunctional in that it is associated with physical violence, loss of property, and fear. But according to Durkheim and other functionalists, crime is also functional for society because it leads to heightened awareness of shared moral bonds and increased social cohesion.

Sociologists have identified two types of functions: manifest and latent (Merton 1968). **Manifest functions** are consequences that are intended and commonly recognized. **Latent functions** are consequences that are unintended and often hidden. For example, the manifest function of education is to transmit knowledge and skills to society's youth. But public elementary schools also serve as babysitters for employed parents, and colleges offer a place for young adults to meet potential mates. The babysitting and mate selection functions are not the intended or commonly recognized functions of education; hence, they are latent functions.

Structural-Functionalist Theories of Social Problems

Two dominant theories of social problems grew out of the structural-functionalist perspective: social pathology and social disorganization.

Social Pathology. According to the social pathology model, social problems result from some "sickness" in society. Just as the human body becomes ill when our systems, organs, and cells do not function normally, society becomes "ill" when its parts (i.e., elements of the structure and culture) no longer perform properly. For example, problems such as crime, violence, poverty, and juvenile delinquency are often attributed to the breakdown of the family institution; the decline of the religious institution; and inadequacies in our economic, educational, and political institutions.

Social "illness" also results when members of a society are not adequately socialized to adopt its norms and values. People who do not value honesty, for example, are prone to dishonesties of all sorts. Early theorists attributed the failure in socialization to "sick" people who could not be socialized. Later theorists recognized that failure in the socialization process stemmed from "sick" social conditions, not "sick" people. To prevent or solve social problems, members of society must receive proper socialization and moral education, which may be accomplished in the family, schools, places of worship, and/or through the media.

Social Disorganization. According to the social disorganization view of social problems, rapid social change (e.g., the cultural revolution of the 1960s) disrupts the norms in a society. When norms become weak or are in conflict with one another, society is in a state of **anomie**, or *normlessness.* Hence, people may steal, physically abuse their spouses or children, abuse drugs, commit rape, or engage in other deviant behavior because the norms regarding these behaviors are weak or conflicting.

According to this view, the solution to social problems lies in slowing the pace of social change and strengthening social norms. For example, although the use of alcohol by teenagers is considered a violation of a social norm in our society, this norm is weak. The media portray young people drinking alcohol, teenagers tell each other where to buy fake

manifest functions Consequences that are intended and commonly recognized.

latent functions Consequences that are unintended and often hidden.

anomie A state of normlessness in which norms and values are weak or unclear.

identification cards (IDs) to purchase alcohol, and parents model drinking behavior by having a few drinks after work or at a social event. Solutions to teenage drinking may involve strengthening norms against it through public education, restricting media depictions of youth and alcohol, imposing stronger sanctions against the use of fake IDs to purchase alcohol, and educating parents to model moderate and responsible drinking behavior.

Conflict Perspective

Contrary to the structural-functionalist perspective, the conflict perspective views society as composed of different groups and interests competing for power and resources. The conflict perspective explains various aspects of our social world by looking at which groups have power and benefit from a particular social arrangement. For example, feminist theory argues that we live in a patriarchal society—a hierarchical system of organization controlled by men. Although there are many varieties of feminist theory, most would hold that feminism "demands that existing economic, political, and social structures be changed" (Weir and Faulkner 2004, p. xii).

The origins of the conflict perspective can be traced to the classic works of Karl Marx. Marx suggested that all societies go through stages of economic development. As societies evolve from agricultural to industrial, concern over meeting survival needs is replaced by concern over making a profit, the hallmark of a capitalist system. Industrialization leads to the development of two classes of people: the bourgeoisie, or the owners of the means of production (e.g., factories, farms, businesses), and the proletariat, or the workers who earn wages.

The division of society into two broad classes of people—the "haves" and the "have-nots"—is beneficial to the owners of the means of production. The workers, who may earn only subsistence wages, are denied access to the many resources available to the wealthy owners. According to Marx, the bourgeoisie use their power to control the institutions of society to their advantage. For example, Marx suggested that religion serves as an "opiate of the masses" in that it soothes the distress and suffering associated with the working-class lifestyle and focuses the workers' attention on spirituality, God, and the afterlife rather than on worldly concerns such as living conditions. In essence, religion

THE HAVES AND THE HAVE NOTS
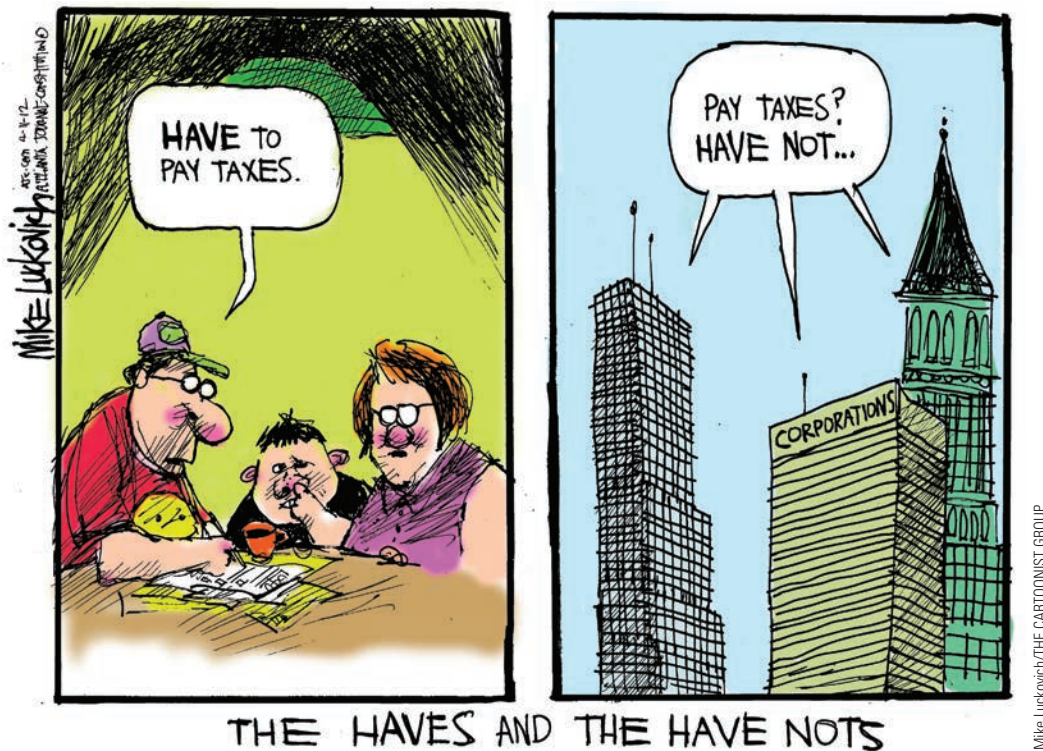
diverts the workers so that they concentrate on being rewarded in heaven for living a moral life rather than on questioning their exploitation.

Conflict Theories of Social Problems

There are two general types of conflict theories of social problems: Marxist and non-Marxist. Marxist theories focus on social conflict that results from economic inequalities; non-Marxist theories focus on social conflict that results from competing values and interests among social groups.

Marxist Conflict Theories. According to contemporary Marxist theorists, social problems result from class inequality inherent in a capitalistic system. A system of haves and have-nots may be beneficial to the haves but often translates into poverty for the have-nots. For example, in 2019, the average annual pay for chief executive officers (CEOs) of the top 350 U.S. corporations was $21.3 million, an increase of 105 percent over the last 10 years. Alternatively, during the same time period, the average worker at one of these large corporations saw their average annual compensation, including wages and benefits, grow by just 7.6 percent (Mishel and Kandra 2020). As we will explore later in this book, many social problems, including physical and mental illness, low educational achievement, and substandard housing and homelessness, are linked to poverty.

In addition to creating an impoverished class of people, capitalism also encourages "corporate violence." *Corporate violence* can be defined as actual harm and/or risk of harm inflicted on consumers, workers, and the general public as a result of decisions by corporate executives or managers. Corporate violence can also result from corporate negligence; the quest for profits at any cost; and willful violations of health, safety, and environmental laws (Reiman and Leighton 2020). Our profit-motivated economy encourages individuals, some of whom are otherwise good, kind, and law abiding, to knowingly participate in the manufacturing and marketing of defective products.

Take, for example, Boeing's 737 Max jetliner. The jetliner crashed twice within five months in 2018 and 2019. The first crash occurred off the coast of Jakarta, Indonesia, killing 189 people, and the second took place when an Ethiopian Airline, like the Indonesian flight, crashed shortly after takeoff, killing all 157 passengers. Boeing defended its safety record insisting that both crashes were the result of a "chain of events" rather than "any single item" (Chicago Tribune Wire 2019). Nonetheless, there is evidence that both crashes were the result a financial decision (i.e., to save money) by Boeing to exclude two sensors that would have displayed the angle of the nose of the jetliner and would have allowed the pilots to override the misfunctioning MAX software system (Shin 2019). In 2021, Boeing agreed to pay $2.5 billion in a settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice after it brought criminal charges against the airline manufacturer (Schaper 2021).

Marxist conflict theories also focus on the problem of **alienation**, or powerlessness and meaninglessness in people's lives. In industrialized societies, workers often have little power or control over their jobs, a condition that fosters in them a sense of powerlessness. The specialized nature of work requires employees to perform limited and repetitive tasks; as a result, workers may come to feel that their lives are meaningless.

Alienation is bred not only in the workplace but also in the classroom. Students have little power over their education and often find that the curriculum is not meaningful to their lives. Like poverty, alienation is linked to other social problems, such as low educational achievement, violence, and suicide.

Marxist explanations of social problems imply that the solution lies in eliminating inequality among classes of people by creating a classless society. The nature of work must also change to avoid alienation. Finally, stronger controls must be applied to corporations to ensure that corporate decisions and practices are based on safety rather than on profit considerations.

Non-Marxist Conflict Theories. Non-Marxist conflict theorists, such as Ralf Dahrendorf, are concerned with conflict that arises when groups have opposing values and interests. For example, anti-abortion activists value the life of unborn embryos and fetuses; pro-choice activists value the right of women to control their own bodies and reproductive decisions. These different value positions reflect different subjective interpretations of

alienation A sense of powerlessness and meaninglessness in people's lives.

what constitutes a social problem. For anti-abortionists, the availability of abortion is the social problem; for pro-choice advocates, the restrictions on abortion are the social problem. Sometimes the social problem is not the conflict itself but rather the way that conflict is expressed. Even most pro-life advocates agree that shooting doctors who perform abortions and blowing up abortion clinics constitute unnecessary violence and lack of respect for life. Value conflicts may occur between diverse categories of people, including non-White versus White, gay versus straight, young versus old, Democrats versus Republicans, and environmentalists versus industrialists.

Solving the problems that are generated by competing values may involve ensuring that conflicting groups understand one another's views, resolving differences through negotiation or mediation or agreeing to disagree. Ideally, solutions should be win-win, with both conflicting groups satisfied with the solution. However, outcomes of value conflicts are often influenced by power; the group with the most power may use its position to influence the outcome of value conflicts. For example, when Congress could not get all states to voluntarily increase the legal drinking age to 21, it threatened to withdraw federal highway funds from those that would not comply.

Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Both the structural-functionalist and the conflict perspectives are concerned with how broad aspects of society, such as institutions and large social groups, influence the social world. This level of sociological analysis is called *macro-sociology*: It looks at the big picture of society and suggests how social problems are affected at the institutional level.

Micro-sociology, another level of sociological analysis, is concerned with the social-psychological dynamics of individuals interacting in small groups. Symbolic interactionism reflects the micro-sociological perspective and was largely influenced by the work of early sociologists and philosophers such as Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Charles Horton Cooley, G. H. Mead, W. I. Thomas, Erving Goffman, and Howard Becker. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that human behavior is influenced by definitions and meanings that are created and maintained through symbolic interaction with others.

Sociologist W. I. Thomas (1931/1966) emphasized the importance of definitions and meanings in social behavior and its consequences. He suggested that humans respond to their definition of a situation rather than to the objective situation itself. Hence, Thomas noted that situations that we define as real become real in their consequences.

Symbolic interactionism also suggests that social interaction shapes our identity or sense of self. We develop our self-concept by observing how others interact with us and label us. By observing how others view us, we see a reflection of ourselves, what Cooley called the "looking glass self."

Last, the symbolic interactionist perspective has important implications for how social scientists conduct research. German sociologist Max Weber argued that, to understand individual and group behavior, social scientists must see the world through the eyes of that individual or group. Weber called this approach *verstehen,* which in German means "to understand." *Verstehen* implies that, in conducting research, social scientists must try to understand others' views of reality and the subjective aspects of their experiences, including their symbols, values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Symbolic Interactionist Theories of Social Problems

A basic premise of symbolic interactionist theories of social problems is that a condition must be *defined or recognized* as a social problem for it to *be* a social problem. Three symbolic interactionist theories of social problems are based on this general premise.

Blumer's Stages of a Social Problem. Herbert Blumer (1971) suggested that social problems develop in stages. First, social problems pass through the stage of *societal recognition*—the process by which a social problem, for example, drunk driving, is "born." Drunk driving wasn't illegal until 1939, when Indiana passed the first state law regulating alcohol consumption and driving (Indiana State Government 2013). Second, *social legitimation* takes

@Sociology Dictionary

Thomas theorem definition: The theory that if we define something as real, or believe that something is real, it is real in its consequences.

–Sociology Dictionary

place when the social problem achieves recognition by the larger community, including the media, schools, and churches. As the visibility of traffic fatalities associated with alcohol increased, so did the legitimation of drunk driving as a social problem. The next stage in the development of a social problem involves *mobilization for action*, which occurs when individuals and groups, such as Mothers against Drunk Driving, become concerned about how to respond to the social condition. This mobilization leads to the *development and implementation of an official plan* for dealing with the problem, involving, for example, highway checkpoints, lower legal blood-alcohol levels, and tougher regulations for driving drunk.

Blumer's stage development view of social problems is helpful in tracing the development of social problems. For example, although sexual harassment and date rape occurred throughout the 20th century, these issues did not begin to receive recognition as social problems until the 1970s. Social legitimation of these problems was achieved when high schools, colleges, churches, employers, and the media recognized their existence. Organized social groups mobilized to develop and implement plans to deal with these problems. Groups successfully lobbied for the enactment of laws against sexual harassment and the enforcement of sanctions against violators of these laws. Groups also mobilized to provide educational seminars on date rape for high school and college students and to offer support services to victims of date rape.

Some disagree with the symbolic interactionist view that social problems exist only if they are recognized. According to this view, individuals who were victims of date rape in the 1960s should be considered victims of a problem, even though date rape was not recognized as a social problem at that time.

Labeling Theory. Labeling theory, a major symbolic interactionist theory of social problems, suggests that a social condition or group is viewed as problematic if it is labeled as such. According to labeling theory, resolving social problems sometimes involves changing the meanings and definitions that are attributed to people and situations. For example, so long as teenagers define drinking alcohol in a positive way, they will continue to abuse alcohol. So long as our society defines providing sex education and contraceptives to teenagers as inappropriate or immoral, the teenage pregnancy rate in the United States will continue to be higher than that in other industrialized nations. Individuals who label their own cell phone use while driving as safe will continue to use their cell phones as they drive, endangering their own lives and the lives of others.

Social Constructionism. Social constructionism is another symbolic interactionist theory of social problems. Similar to labeling theorists and symbolic interactionism in general, social constructionists argue that individuals who interpret the social world around them socially construct reality. Society, therefore, is a social creation rather than an objective given. As such, social constructionists often question the origin and evolution of social problems. For example, social constructionist theory has been used to:

> analyze the history of the temperance and prohibition movements[,] . . . the rise of alcoholism as a disease movement in the post-prohibition era[,] . . . and the crusade against drinking and driving in the 1980s in the United States. . . . These studies [each] analyzed the shifts in social meanings attributed to alcohol beverage use and to problems within the changing landscapes of social, economic, and political power relationships in American society. (Herd 2011, p. 7)

Central to this idea of the social construction of social problems are the media, universities, research institutes, and government agencies, which are often responsible for the public's initial "take" on the problem under discussion.

Table 1.2 summarizes and compares the major theoretical perspectives, their criticisms, and social policy recommendations as they relate to social problems. The study of social problems is based on research as well as on theory, however. Indeed, research and theory are intricately related. As Wilson (1983, p. 1) stated:

> Most of us think of theorizing as quite divorced from the business of gathering facts. It seems to require an abstractness of thought remote from the practical activity of

TABLE 1.2 Comparison of Theoretical Perspectives

	Structural Functionalism	Conflict Theory	Symbolic Interactionism
Representative theorists	Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton	Karl Marx, Ralf Dahrendorf	George H. Mead, Charles Cooley, Erving Goffman
Society	Society is a set of interrelated parts; cultural consensus exists and leads to social order; natural state of society—balance and harmony.	Society is marked by power struggles over scarce resources; inequities result in conflict; social change is inevitable; natural state of society—imbalance.	Society is a network of interlocking roles; social order is constructed through interaction as individuals, through shared meaning, make sense of their social world.
Individuals	Individuals are socialized by society's institutions; socialization is the process by which social control is exerted; people need society and its institutions.	People are inherently good but are corrupted by society and its economic structure; institutions are controlled by groups with power; "order" is part of the illusion.	Humans are interpretive and interactive; they are constantly changing as their "social beings" emerge and are molded by changing circumstances.
Cause of social problems?	Rapid social change; social disorganization that disrupts the harmony and balance; inadequate socialization and/or weak institutions.	Inequality; the dominance of groups of people over other groups of people; oppression and exploitation; competition between groups.	Different interpretations of roles; labeling of individuals, groups, or behaviors as deviant; definition of an objective condition as a social problem.
Social policy/ solutions	Repair weak institutions; assure proper socialization; cultivate a strong collective sense of right and wrong.	Minimize competition; create an equitable system for the distribution of resources.	Reduce impact of labeling and associated stigmatization; alter definitions of what is defined as a social problem.
Criticisms	Called "sunshine sociology"; supports the maintenance of the status quo; needs to ask "functional for whom?"; does not deal with issues of power and conflict; incorrectly assumes a consensus.	Utopian model; Marxist states have failed; denies existence of cooperation and equitable exchange; cannot explain cohesion and harmony.	Concentrates on micro-issues only; fails to link micro-issues to macro-level concerns; too psychological in its approach; assumes label amplifies problem.

empirical research. But theory building is not a separate activity within sociology. Without theory, the empirical researcher would find it impossible to decide what to observe, how to observe it, or what to make of the observations.

> For the first time in 208 years, the editors of the *New England Journal of Medicine* endorsed a presidential candidate stating that the former administration, rather than relying on science, "turned to uninformed 'opinion leaders' and charlatans who obscure[d] the truth and facilitate[d] the promulgation of outright lies" (The Editors 2020, p. 1480). Alternatively, President Biden has repeatedly said that his administration will "follow the science." How do you think sociology, as one of the four social sciences, can help in the fight against pandemics?

What do you think?

Social Problems Research

Most students taking a course in social problems will not become researchers or conduct research on social problems. Nevertheless, we are all consumers of research that is reported in the media. Politicians, social activist groups, and organizations attempt to justify their decisions, actions, and positions by citing research results. As consumers of research, we need to understand that our personal experiences and casual observations are less reliable than generalizations based on systematic research. One strength of scientific research is that it is subjected to critical examination by other researchers (see this chapter's *Social Problems Research Up Close* feature). The more you understand how research is done, the

Each chapter in this book contains a *Social Problems Research Up Close* box describing a research study that examines some aspect of a social problem and is presented in a report, book, or journal. Academic sociologists, those teaching at community colleges, colleges, or universities, as well as other social scientists, primarily rely on journal articles as the means to exchange ideas and information. Some examples of the more prestigious journals in sociology are the *American Sociological Review*, the *American Journal of Sociology*, and *Social Forces*. Most journal articles begin with *an introduction and review of the literature*. Here, the investigator examines previous research on the topic, identifies specific research areas, and otherwise "sets the stage" for the reader. Often in this section, research hypotheses are set forth, if applicable. A researcher, for example, might want to investigate the media habits of U.S. adults in reference to three of the biggest news stories of 2020—the presidential election, George Floyd's killing, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the lower likelihood of getting seriously ill from COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2020b) or of voting in an election (Misra 2019), along with greater involvement in demonstrations for racial equality (Barroso and Minkin 2020), a researcher might hypothesize that younger Americans were less likely to follow news about COVID-19 or the 2020 election and more likely to follow news about George Floyd's death when compared to older Americans.

The next major section of a journal article is *sample and methods*. In this section, an investigator describes how the research sample was selected, the characteristics of the research sample, the details of how the research was conducted, and how the data were analyzed (see Appendix A). Given the proposed research topic,

a sociologist might obtain data from the American Trends Panel survey conducted by the Pew Research Center. The American Trends Panel survey is a nationally representative survey of randomly selected U.S. adults who complete a self-administered web-based questionnaire.

The final section of a journal article includes the *findings and conclusions*. The findings of a study describe the results, that is, what the researcher found as a result of the investigation. Findings are then discussed within the context of the hypotheses and the conclusions that can be drawn. Often, research results are presented in tabular form. Reading tables carefully is an important part of drawing accurate conclusions about the research hypotheses. Using the table on the next page, follow these steps to assess the association between news topic and readers' ages:

1. *Read the title of the table and make sure that you understand what the table contains.* The title of the table indicates the unit of analysis (U.S. adults), the dependent variable (media viewing habits), the independent variables (age and news topic), and what the numbers represent (percentages).
2. *Read the information contained at the bottom of the table, including the source and any other explanatory information.* For example, the information at the bottom of this table indicates that there were 9,654 respondents and how the column variables were constructed. For example, following a topic "closely" combined the responses of those who answered that they followed the news item either "very closely" or "fairly closely." Alternatively, "not closely" sums the responses by those who reported following a topic "not too closely" or "not

at all closely." Finally, the exact wording of the questions used to ask about the three news items is also listed under the table.
3. *Examine the row and column headings.* This table looks at the percentage of U.S. adults in four age groups who reported closely or not closely following three 2020 news stories. The three news stories were the 2020 presidential election candidates, the demonstrations protesting the death of George Floyd, and the outbreak of COVID-19. The age groups are young adults (18–29 years old), younger middle-aged adults (30–49 years old), older middle-aged adults (50–64 years old), and the elderly (65 years old or older).
4. *Thoroughly and carefully examine the data in the table, looking for patterns between variables.* As indicated in the table, young adults, those between the ages of 18 and 29, were the least likely to closely follow news about the 2020 presidential election candidates. Alternatively, those 65 and over were the most likely to closely follow news about the 2020 presidential candidates. In fact, looking at the first column, the older respondents are, the more likely they were to report following the presidential election candidates. Note that as the numbers in the first column increase with age, the numbers in the second column decrease with age since, when looking at an age group, 18- to 29-year-olds for example, the sum of the two numbers must equal 100 percent (35 + 65 = 100 percent), the total number of respondents for that age group.

The age pattern detected for following news about the presidential election candidates is not replicated for following news

about the George Floyd demonstrations. The numbers vary little by age, differing at most by just 10 percent between 30- to 49-year-old respondents (80 percent) and those 65 and older (90 percent) in terms of closely following news about the demonstrations. Although there is more variation in the percentages of those closely following news about the outbreak of COVID-19 than those following news about the demonstrations, the range is still fairly small, 75 percent compared to 94 percent. Note that as age increases, so does the percentage of respondents who reported closely following news about COVID-19, the same pattern that existed for respondents closely following the 2020 election.

Now compare percentages across rows. Young adults were most likely to closely follow news related to George Floyd's killing, followed by COVID-19 and the 2020 presidential candidates. Respondents in each of the remaining three age groups were most likely to closely follow news related to COVID-19, followed by the George Floyd demonstrations, and, lastly, the 2020 presidential election. As indicated by the last row in the table where

it reads "Total," regardless of age, respondents were the most likely to follow the George Floyd demonstrations, followed by COVID-19, and the 2020 election candidates.

5. *Use the information you have gathered in step 4 to address the hypotheses.* Clearly, as hypothesized, young adults were the most likely to closely follow news about the demonstrations around the country to protest the death of George Floyd. And, although no specific hypothesis was made about the relative differences between young adults following news about COVID-19 versus news about the 2020 presidential election candidates, it is interesting to note that 75 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds closely followed news about COVID-19 compared to just 35 percent who closely followed news about the 2020 presidential election candidates. Not surprisingly, given the increased risk of contracting COVID-19, respondents over the age of 65 were not only the most likely to follow news about the pandemic, they had the highest rate of any age group following any of the three news topics.

6. *Draw conclusions consistent with the information presented.* From the results of the study, we can

conclude that younger adults, that is, those between the ages of 18 and 29, were more likely to follow news reports of the demonstrations protesting the death of George Floyd when compared to the two other biggest new stories of 2020—the presidential election candidates and the COVID-19 pandemic. We can also conclude that as age increases, the likelihood of following news about the pandemic closely also increases, as does the likelihood of following news about the 2020 presidential election candidates. We cannot, however, determine the reason for these results without more information. For example, although it has been suggested that respondents 65 years of age and older were more likely to follow COVID-19 news because of being at a higher risk to contract the disease, it may simply be that those over the age of 65 have more time to follow *all* news stories. Supporting this contention, respondents over the age of 65 were more likely than each of the other age groups to follow news stories about the presidential election, the demonstrations over George Floyd's death, and the pandemic.

SOURCE: Jurkowitz 2020.

Percentage of U.S. Adults Following Each Topic "Closely" or "Not Closely" by Age Group, 2020*

| | 2020 NEWS TOPICS: | | | | | |
| | 2020 Election[1] | | George Floyd[2] | | COVID-19[3] | |
AGE GROUPS:	Closely	Not Closely	Closely	Not Closely	Closely	Not Closely
Ages 18–29	35	65	83	17	75	25
Ages 30–49	46	46	80	20	83	16
Ages 50–64	60	40	84	16	91	9
Ages 65 and over	74	26	90	10	94	6
Total	65	34	83	17	81	18

[1]Percentage of each age group who have been following news about the 2020 election candidates.
[2]Pecentage of each age group who have been following news about the demonstrations around the country to protest the death of George Floyd.
[3]Percentage of each age group who have been following news about the outbreak of the coronavirus strain known as COVID-19.
*N = 9,654; numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding error; survey conducted between June 4, 2020, and June 10, 2020.

> " The function of sociology, as of every science, is to reveal that which is hidden."
>
> **–PIERRE BOURDIEU, FRENCH SOCIOLOGIST**

better able you will be to critically examine and question research rather than to passively consume research findings. In the remainder of this section, we discuss the stages of conducting a research study and the various methods of research that sociologists use.

Stages of Conducting a Research Study

Sociologists progress through various stages in conducting research on a social problem. In this section, we describe the first four stages: (1) formulating a research question, (2) reviewing the literature, (3) defining variables, and (4) formulating a hypothesis.

Formulating a Research Question. A research study usually begins with a research question. Where do research questions originate? How does a particular researcher come to ask a particular research question? In some cases, researchers have a personal interest in a specific topic because of their own life experiences. For example, a researcher who has experienced spouse abuse may wish to do research on such questions as, "What factors are associated with domestic violence?" and "How helpful are battered women's shelters in helping abused women break the cycle of abuse in their lives?" Other researchers may ask a particular research question because of their personal values—their concern for humanity and the desire to improve human life. Researchers may also want to test a particular sociological theory or some aspect of it in order to establish its validity or conduct studies to evaluate the effect of a social policy or program. Research questions may also be formulated by the concerns of community groups and social activist organizations in collaboration with academic researchers. Government and industry also hire researchers

Jay Paull/Archive Photos/ Getty Images

Sociology is the scientific study of society. The first academic department of sociology was established in 1892 at the University of Chicago, and the discipline's leading journal, the *American Journal of Sociology*, was founded in 1895. Pictured is an advertisement for a subscription to the Journal, which, in 1907, was $2.00 a year. Journals are the primary means by which research is communicated among professional sociologists.

to answer questions such as, "How many vehicle crashes are caused by 'distracted driving' involving the use of cell phones?" and "What types of cell phone technologies can prevent the use of cell phones while driving?"

Reviewing the Literature. After a research question is formulated, researchers review the published material on the topic to find out what is already known about it. Reviewing the literature also provides researchers with ideas about how to conduct their research and helps them formulate new research questions. A literature review serves as an evaluation tool, allowing a comparison of research findings and other sources of information, such as expert opinions, political claims, and journalistic reports.

Defining Variables. A **variable** is any measurable event, characteristic, or property that varies or is subject to change. Researchers must operationally define the variables they study. An *operational definition* specifies how a variable is to be measured. For example, an operational definition of the variable "religiosity" might be the number of times the respondent reports going to church, temple, or other religious gatherings. Another operational definition of "religiosity" might be the respondent's answer to the question, "How important is religion in your life?" (For example, 1 is not important; 2 is somewhat important; 3 is very important.)

Operational definitions are particularly important for defining variables that cannot be directly observed. For example, researchers cannot directly observe concepts such as "mental illness," "sexual harassment," "child neglect," "job satisfaction," and "drug abuse." Nor can researchers directly observe perceptions, values, and attitudes.

Formulating a Hypothesis. After defining the research variables, researchers may formulate a **hypothesis**, which is a prediction or educated guess about how one variable is related to another variable. The **dependent variable** is the variable that researchers want to explain; that is, it is the variable of interest. The **independent variable** is the variable that is expected to explain change in the dependent variable. In formulating a hypothesis, researchers predict how the independent variable affects the dependent variable. For example, Kmec (2003) investigated the impact of segregated work environments on minority wages, concluding that "minority concentration in different jobs, occupations, and establishments is a considerable social problem because it perpetuates racial wage inequality" (p. 55). In this example, the independent variable is workplace segregation, and the dependent variable is wages.

Methods of Data Collection

After identifying a research topic, reviewing the literature, defining the variables, and developing hypotheses, researchers decide which method of data collection to use. Alternatives include experiments, surveys, field research, and secondary data.

Experiments. **Experiments** involve manipulating the independent variable to determine how it affects the dependent variable. Experiments require one or more experimental groups that are exposed to the experimental treatment(s) and a control group that is not exposed. After a researcher randomly assigns participants to either an experimental group or a control group, the researcher measures the dependent variable. After the experimental groups are exposed to the treatment, the researcher measures the dependent variable again. If participants have been randomly assigned to the different groups, the researcher may conclude that any difference in the dependent variable among the groups is due to the effect of the independent variable.

An example of a "social problems" experiment on crime would be to randomly assign men on parole to a group who receive counseling (experimental group) or a group that does not receive counseling (control group). The independent variable would be counseling and the dependent variable would be whether the parolee re-offended within six months of being released from prison. The researcher might hypothesize that men who receive counseling will be less likely to re-offend than those who do not.

variable Any measurable event, characteristic, or property that varies or is subject to change.

hypothesis A prediction or educated guess about how one variable is related to another variable.

dependent variable The variable that researchers want to explain; that is, it is the variable of interest.

independent variable The variable that is expected to explain change in the dependent variable.

experiments Manipulating the independent variable to determine how it affects the dependent variable. Experiments require one or more experimental groups that are exposed to the experimental treatment(s) and a control group that is not exposed.

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The major strength of the experimental method is that it provides evidence for causal relationships, that is, how one variable affects another. A primary weakness is that experiments are often conducted on small samples, often in artificial laboratory settings; thus, the findings may not be generalized to other people in natural settings.

Surveys. **Survey research** involves eliciting information from respondents through questions. An important part of survey research is selecting a sample of those to be questioned. A **sample** is a portion of the population, selected to be representative so that the information from the sample can be generalized to a larger population. For example, instead of asking all middle school children about their delinquent activity, the researcher would ask a representative sample of them and assume that those who were not questioned would give similar responses. After selecting a representative sample, survey researchers either interview people, ask them to complete written questionnaires, or elicit responses to research questions through web-based surveys. Some surveys are conducted annually or every other year so that researchers can observe changes in responses over time. This chapter's *Self and Society* feature allows you to voice your opinion on various social issues through the use of a written questionnaire. After completing the survey you can compare your responses to a national sample of first-year college students.

Interviews. In interview survey research, trained interviewers ask respondents a series of questions and make written notes about or tape-record the respondents' answers. Interviews may be conducted over the phone or face-to-face.

One advantage of interview research is that researchers are able to clarify questions for respondents and follow up on answers to particular questions. Researchers often conduct face-to-face interviews with groups of individuals who might otherwise be inaccessible. For example, some AIDS-related research attempts to assess the degree to which individuals engage in behavior that places them at high risk for transmitting or contracting HIV. Street youth and intravenous drug users, both high-risk groups for HIV infection, may not have a telephone or address because of their transient lifestyle. These groups may be accessible, however, if the researcher locates their hangouts and conducts face-to-face interviews.

The most serious disadvantages of interview research are cost and the lack of privacy and anonymity. Respondents may feel embarrassed or threatened when asked questions that relate to personal issues such as drug use, domestic violence, and sexual behavior. As a result, some respondents may choose not to participate in interview research on sensitive topics. Those who do participate may conceal or alter information or give socially desirable answers to the interviewer's questions (e.g., "No, I do not use drugs" or "No, I do not text while driving").

Questionnaires. Instead of conducting personal or phone interviews, researchers may develop questionnaires that they either mail, post online, or give to a sample of respondents. Questionnaire research offers the advantages of being less expensive and less time-consuming than face-to-face or telephone surveys. Questionnaire research also provides privacy and anonymity to the research participants, thus increasing the likelihood that respondents will provide truthful answers.

The major disadvantage of mail or online questionnaires is that it is difficult to obtain an adequate response rate. Many people do not want to take the time or make the effort to complete a questionnaire. Others may be unable to read and understand the questionnaire.

@cdixon

Poll: retweet/favorite polls are an effective and unbiased polling mechanism.
retweet = agree
favorite = disagree

–Chris Dixon

survey research Eliciting information from respondents through questions.

sample A portion of the population, selected to be representative so that the information from the sample can be generalized to a larger population.

A sign in Pennsylvania reads in both English and Spanish: "You Count! Census 2020." The U.S. Census is the largest and most comprehensive survey in the United States. In 2020, as result of soaring costs and the pandemic, households were able to respond to the questionnaire online for the first time. Concerns over a citizenship question and mistrust of the government contributed to concerns that the results may not be reliable. The Census is conducted every 10 years as mandated by the U.S. Constitution.

Reading Eagle/MediaNews Group/Getty Images

Web-based surveys. In recent years, technological know-how and the expansion of the Internet have facilitated the use of online surveys. Web-based surveys, although still less common than interviews and questionnaires, are growing in popularity and are thought by some to reduce many of the problems associated with traditional survey research. For example, the response rate of telephone surveys has been declining as potential respondents have caller ID, unlisted telephone numbers, answering machines, or no home (i.e., landline) telephone (Farrell and Petersen 2010). On the other hand, the use of and access to the Internet continue to grow. In 2020, the number of Americans connected to the Internet was higher than in any other single year (Internet Live 2020).

Field Research. **Field research** involves observing and studying social behavior in settings in which it occurs naturally. Two types of field research are participant observation and nonparticipant observation.

In *participant observation research*, researchers participate in the phenomenon being studied so as to obtain an insider's perspective on the people and/or behavior being observed. Palacios and Fenwick (2003), two criminologists, attended dozens of raves over a 15-month period to investigate the South Florida drug culture. In *nonparticipant observation research*, researchers observe the phenomenon being studied without actively participating in the group or the activity. For example, Simi and Futrell (2009) studied White power activists by observing and talking to organizational members but did not participate in any of their organized activities.

Sometimes sociologists conduct in-depth detailed analyses or case studies of an individual, group, or event. For example, Fleming (2003) conducted a case study of young auto thieves in British Columbia. He found that, unlike professional thieves, the teenagers' behavior was primarily motivated by thrill seeking—driving fast, the rush of a possible police pursuit, and the prospect of getting caught.

The main advantage of field research on social problems is that it provides detailed information about the values, rituals, norms, behaviors, symbols, beliefs, and emotions of those being studied. A potential problem with field research is that the researcher's observations may be biased (e.g., the researcher becomes too involved in the group to be objective). In addition, because field research is usually based on small samples, the findings may not be generalizable.

Secondary Data Research. Sometimes researchers analyze secondary data, which are data that other researchers or government agencies have already collected or that exist in forms such as historical documents, police reports, school records, and official records of marriages, births, and deaths. A major advantage of using secondary data in studying social problems is that the data are readily accessible, so researchers avoid the time and expense of collecting their own data. Secondary data are also often based on large representative samples. The disadvantage of secondary data is that researchers are limited to the data already collected.

Ten Good Reasons to Read This Book

Most students reading this book are not majoring in sociology and do not plan to pursue sociology as a profession. So why should students take a course on social problems? How can reading this textbook about social problems benefit you?

1. *Understanding that the social world is too complex to be explained by just one theory will expand your thinking about how the world operates.* For example, juvenile delinquency doesn't have just one cause—it is linked to (1) an increased number of youths living in inner-city neighborhoods with little or no parental supervision (social disorganization theory); (2) young people having no legitimate means of acquiring material wealth (anomie theory); (3) youths being angry and frustrated at the inequality and racism in our society (conflict theory); and (4) teachers regarding youths as "no good" and treating them accordingly (labeling theory).

field research Observing and studying social behavior in settings in which it occurs naturally.

2. *Developing a sociological imagination will help you see the link between your personal life and the social world in which you live.* In a society that values personal responsibility, there is a tendency to define failure and success as consequences of individual free will. The sociological imagination enables us to understand how social forces influence our personal misfortunes and failures and contribute to personal successes and achievements.

3. *Understanding globalization can help you become a safe, successful, and productive world citizen.* Social problems cross national boundaries. Problems such as COVID-19, war, climate change, human trafficking, and overpopulation are global problems. Problems that originate in one part of the world may affect other parts of the world and may be caused by social policies in other nations. Thus, understanding social problems requires consideration of the global interconnectedness of the world. And solving today's social problems requires collective action among citizens across the globe.

4. *Understanding the difficulty involved in "fixing" social problems will help you make decisions about your own actions, for example, whom you vote for or what charity you donate money to.* It is important to recognize that "fixing" social problems is a very difficult and complex enterprise. One source of this difficulty is that we don't all agree on what the problems are. We also don't agree on what the root causes are of social problems. Is the problem of gun violence in the United States a problem caused by gun availability? Violence in the media? A broken mental health care system? Masculine gender norms? If we socialized boys to be more nurturing and gentler, rather than aggressive and competitive, we might reduce gun violence, but we would also potentially create a generation of boys who would not want to sign up for combat duties in the military, and our armed forces would not have enough recruits. Thus solving one social problem (gun violence) may create another social problem (too few military recruits). It should also be noted that although some would see low military recruitment as a problem, others would see it as a positive step toward a less militaristic society.

5. *Although this is a social problems book, it may actually make you more rather than less optimistic.* Yes, all the problems discussed in the book are real, and they may seem insurmountable, but they aren't. You'll read about positive social change; for example, the number of people who smoke cigarettes in the United States has declined dramatically in recent years, as has the crime rate. Life expectancy has increased, and more people go to college than ever before. Change for the better can and does happen.

6. *Knowledge is empowering.* Social problems can be frightening, in part, because most people know very little about them beyond what they see on the news, read on social media, or hear from their friends. Thus, a new feature has been added called *The World in Quarantine*, which includes such topics as the impact of the pandemic on minority communities, the rise of domestic violence as a result of lockdowns, the effect of COVID-19 on population growth, and online disinformation campaigns that question the severity of the virus.

7. *The* Self and Society *exercises increase self-awareness and allow you to position yourself within the social landscape.* For example, earlier in this chapter, you had the opportunity to assess your opinions on a variety of social problems and to compare your responses to a national sample of first-year college students' attitudes toward the same issues.

8. The Human Side *features make you a more empathetic and compassionate human being by personalizing the topic at hand.* The study of social problems is always about the quality of life of individuals. By conveying the private pain and personal triumphs associated with social problems, we hope to elicit a level of understanding that may not be attained through the academic study of social problems alone. *The Human Side* in this chapter highlights college students' advice on how to be an activist, regardless of what cause you want to champion. Other *The Human Side* features in the book include the cost of the opiate epidemic; college, debt, and the American dream; experiencing racism at school; being elderly and homeless; and the devastating effect of having a friend or loved one in QAnon.

Getting in Good Trouble

Representative John Lewis, longtime congressman from Georgia, devoted his life to racial justice as an organizer and as an activist. In 2018 he tweeted, "Be hopeful, be optimistic. … Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble." Congressman Lewis, who died in 2020, was referring to actions that lead to positive social change through individual and collective action. Here, student activists give their advice on how to get into some "good trouble."

They must first have a topic or issue that they are passionate about. They have to know that there is work involved. They have to know that they need to put everything they have and everything they have got into growing their movement and making a change. A successful person is not defined as someone who never fails. A successful person is defined as someone who fails … but never gives up.

—Zuriel Oduwole, founder of Dream Up, Speak Up, Stand Up, an organization that advocates for quality education for all children

Begin with a problem that is close to home, both physically and emotionally. What has been bothering you, what issue can you not get out of your heart and mind? Start there. From there it takes a simple Google search to find a local organization that tackles that issue. Just sit in on a meeting and take it from there!

—Jamie Margolin, author of *Youth to Power: Your Voice and How to Use It*, a guide book for young activists

Some advice for youth who want to get more involved is to reach out to your local community and start there. Reach out to whatever cause or movement is in your area and get involved. It's super fun and easy. We are standing to keep our earth pretty, clean, and green. Listen to each other, learn from each other, and fight [alongside] each other.

—Quannah Chasinghorse, climate justice advocate whose work helped pass the Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act

If you have an idea, or if you want to start a campaign, it's achievable through the power of social media and getting together with your friends and just talking openly and often about quite difficult and often taboo subjects, you can make change.

—Amika George, founder of Free Periods, a global organization that helps girls get personal hygiene products so they don't miss school during their menstrual cycles

Taking the first step is the hardest part but once you do it and focus on the activism that matters to you, you will find you are not alone.

—Mari Copeny, an activist in Flint, Michigan, helping to make sure children have access to clean water

Start small. Look within—and towards the communities—you come from, and ask yourself about all the stories you and people know. Is there a common thread connecting all these stories? For me, I thought a lot about the floods and hurricanes, and the effects they have on the different communities I come from. As a young person who could not even vote to give these issues the limelight, activism looked a lot like me educating myself, and all those around me. The goal is not to change the world alone but to do something—anything—that can create a ripple. So, start small.

—Aryaana Khan, climate advocate dedicated to ensuring that "the voices that don't get to negotiate with global leaders" are heard

To me, youth activism means that young people are not just limited to knowledge and awareness on socially relevant issues, but are actually taking initiatives to bring about a positive change. My advice for young activist hoping to make a difference would be:

Be bold: Young activists need to be bold, to voice their opinion and make their voices heard. We should not be demotivated by the negativity that surrounds us.

Be patient: We need to learn to be patient, because we often might not get to our intended outcome when we want.

Synergize: It is very important that young activists find like-minded people and synergize their efforts in achieving their common goal.

—Franklin Gnanammuthu, contraception and sexual health activist in India who is passionate about helping young people through the use of digital technology

SOURCE: silvia li sam. (October 11, 2019).

9. *The* Social Problems Research Up Close *features teach you the basics of scientific inquiry, making you a smarter consumer of "pop" sociology, psychology, anthropology, and the like.* These boxes demonstrate the scientific enterprise, from theory and data collection to findings and conclusions. Examples of research topics featured in later chapters of this book include the portrayal of serial killers in popular films, micro-aggressions toward LGBTQ families, the relationship between education and life expectancy among Black and White Americans, attitudes toward