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social PROBLEMS 7e

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Anna Leon-Guerrero

social PROBLEMS

COMMUNITY, POLICY, and SOCIAL ACTION

Social Problems

Seventh Edition

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Pacific Lutheran University

BRIEF CONTENTS

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PREFACE

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

LEARNING FEATURES OF THIS TEXT

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

- **A focus based on social inequalities.** Using a sociological perspective, we examine how social class, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and age determine our life chances. Chapters 2 through 6 focus specifically on these bases of social inequality and how each contributes to our experience of social problems.

- **A focus on social policy and social action.** Each chapter includes a discussion on relevant social policies or programs. In addition, each chapter highlights how individuals or groups have made a difference in their community. The chapters include personal stories, some from professionals in their field, others from ordinary individuals who accomplish extraordinary things. Several feature those who began their activism as young adults or college students. For example, in Chapter 8, you'll meet Wendy Kopp, the woman behind the Teach for America program; in Chapter 13, you'll meet Max Kenner, founder of the Bard Prison Initiative, an educational program for prisoners; and in Chapter 16, you'll read the story of Greta Thunberg, who began her climate change activism at the age of 15. The text concludes with a chapter titled "Social Problems and Social Action" that identifies ways you can become more involved.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SEVENTH EDITION

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

- **Expanding the sociological perspectives.** Four theoretical perspectives (functionalist, conflict, feminist, and interactionist) are presented in each chapter, identifying how each perspective defines the causes and consequences of specific problems. Additional material has been incorporated in Chapter 1 (racial capitalism), Chapter 3 (racial inequality), Chapter 4 (gender binary and transgender identity), Chapter 9 (the living wage movement), Chapter 11 (the impact of social media), and Chapter 13 (policing reform), In Chapter 1, I've included a general overview of basic sociological terms and concepts.

- **Keeping it current.** The focus of this text is unlike most other social problems texts, featuring a strong emphasis on social policy and action. It is necessary with each edition to provide an update on significant social policy decisions and debates. In this edition, the following social policy discussions have been updated: immigration (Chapter 3), LGBTQ rights (Chapter 5), the Affordable Care Act (Chapter 10), and police reform (Chapter 13). In Chapter 1, we examine the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Data matters.** Data are important for understanding the extent of our social problems and recognizing populations vulnerable to them. In each revision, I update data sources and incorporate new research findings. Closer empirical examination of social problems such as elderly income sources, minimum-wage employment, health care utilization, and Internet access are provided in this edition.

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

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

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

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

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

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Michael Clark

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

1 SOCIOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

If I asked everyone in your class what they believe is the most important social problem facing the United States, there would be many different responses. This is how we spend much of our public conversation—in the classroom, at work, on the Senate floor—arguing, analyzing, and trying to figure out which problem is most serious and what needs to be done about it. In casual or sometimes heated conversations, we offer opinions about the economy, racism, climate change, or the COVID-19 pandemic. Often, these explanations are not based on firsthand data collection or on an exhaustive review of the literature. For the most part, they are based on our opinions and life experiences.

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

Sociology: The systematic study of individuals and social structures

USING OUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

According to Mills, the sociological imagination can help us distinguish between personal troubles and public issues. The **sociological imagination** is the ability to link our personal lives and experiences with our social world. Mills (2000) described how personal troubles occur within the "character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relationships with others" (p. 8), whereas public issues are a "public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be

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

threatened" (p. 8). As a result, the individual, or those in contact with that individual, can resolve a trouble, but the resolution of an issue requires public debate about what values are being threatened and the source of such a threat.

Let's consider unemployment. One man unemployed is his own personal trouble. Resolving his unemployment involves reviewing his current situation, reassessing his skills, considering his job opportunities, and submitting his résumés or job applications to employers. Once he has a new job, his personal trouble is over.

However, what happens when there is a nationwide problem of unemployment? A personal trouble is transformed into a public issue. In April 2020, more than 20 million Americans lost their jobs as a result of public health measures meant to reduce the spread of COVID-19, a highly infectious respiratory disease caused by the SARS CoV-2 virus. While physical distancing and sheltering in place were deemed necessary by public health officials, these precautions took a staggering toll on the economy. This is a public issue not just because of how many people it affects; something becomes an issue because of the public values it threatens. Unemployment threatens our sense of economic security. It challenges our belief that everyone can work hard to succeed and that everyone has the right to work. Unemployment raises questions about society's obligations to help those without a job, no matter the circumstances.

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

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As Mills explained, "to be aware of the ideal of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieus. To be able to do that

is to possess the sociological imagination" (Mills, 2000, pp. 10–11). The sociological imagination challenges the claim that the problem is "natural" or based on individual failures, instead reminding us that the problem is rooted in society, in our social structures themselves (Irwin, 2001). For example, can we solve unemployment by telling every unemployed person to work harder? The sociological imagination emphasizes the structural bases of social problems, making us aware of the economic, political, and social structures that govern employment and unemployment trends. Individuals may have agency (the ability to make their own choices), but their actions and even their choices may be constrained by the realities of the social structure, including a global pandemic. Throughout this text, we apply our sociological imagination to the study of social problems. Before we proceed, we need to understand what a social problem is.

WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

A **social problem** is a social condition or pattern of behavior that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or our physical world. A social problem such as unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse, or COVID-19 may negatively affect a person's life and health, along with the well-being of that person's family and friends. Problems can threaten our social institutions, for example, the family (spousal abuse), education (the cost of college tuition), or the economy (unemployment). Our physical and social worlds can be threatened by problems related to urbanization (lack of affordable housing) and the environment (climate change). You will note from the examples in this paragraph that social problems are inherently social in their causes, consequences, and solutions.

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

Objective and Subjective Realities of Social Problems

A social problem has objective and subjective realities. A social condition does not have to be personally experienced by every individual to be considered a social problem. The **objective reality** of a social problem comes from acknowledging that a particular social condition exists. Objective realities of a social problem can be confirmed by the collection of data. For example, we know from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) that as of August 2021, more than 35 million Americans were infected with the coronavirus. You or I do not have to have been infected with COVID-19 to know that the disease is real, with real human and social consequences. We can confirm the realities of COVID-19 by observing infected individuals and their families in our own community or in hospitals.

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

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

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

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

From this perspective, social problems are not objectively predetermined. They become real only when they are subjectively defined or perceived as problematic. This perspective is known as **social constructionism**. Recognizing the subjective aspects of social problems allows us to understand how a social condition may be defined as a problem by one segment of society but be completely ignored by another. Much has been documented how the problem of COVID-19 has

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

been socially constructed, beginning with President Trump's declaration that the virus was no worse than the flu and would simply go away over time. Competing narratives about the threat of the virus were played out in the news media and throughout the 2020 presidential election campaign. There was acrimonious public debate regarding the need to protect the public from the virus while also preserving the economy and our way of life.

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

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

The social constructionist perspective focuses on how a problem is socially defined, in a dialectic process between individuals interacting with each other and with their social world. In April 2020, the Pew Research Center asked a sample of 1,200 Americans what they perceived as the greatest international threat to the United States. Results, organized by age group, are presented in Table 1.1. From a sociological perspective, the experience of social problems will vary by our social position, determined primarily by our social class, race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age. You'll learn more about these social positions in Chapters 2–6.

In the next section, we'll examine how identifying a social problem is part of a subjective process. Social problems just don't happen.

TABLE 1.1 ■ Percentage of Individuals Who Believe _____ Is a Major Threat to the United States, by Age, April 2020			
	18–29	**30–49**	**50+**
Large numbers of people moving from one country to another	22	41	50
Cyberattacks from other countries	58	67	81
Russia's power and influence	44	51	66
Terrorism	62	69	80
The spread of nuclear weapons	65	68	81
China's power and influence	52	61	68
Long-standing conflicts between countries or ethnic groups	29	40	43
The spread of infectious diseases	77	74	84
Global poverty	49	44	52
The condition of the global economy	54	56	55
Global climate change	71	62	54

Source: Poushter and Fagan (2020).

The History of Social Problems

Problems don't appear overnight; rather, as Malcolm Spector and John Kituse (1987) argued, the identification of a social problem is part of a subjective process. Spector and Kituse identified four stages to the process. Stage 1 is defined as a transformation process: taking a private trouble and transforming it into a public issue. In this stage, an influential group, activists, or advocates call attention to and define an issue as a social problem. In early January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that it was tracking a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China. Most of the world first learned about COVID-19 when WHO declared it as a global public health emergency on January 30. The U.S. secretary of health and human services declared a public health emergency on January 31. By the time President Trump declared a national emergency on March 13, there were more than 2,000 confirmed cases and 48 coronavirus-related deaths. Scientists and public health advocates blamed Trump's inconsistent response to the pandemic for increasing the spread of the disease and the number of deaths in the country. As of August 2021, over 600,000 deaths were attributed to COVID-19.

Stage 2 is the legitimization process: formalizing how the social problem or complaints generated by the problem are handled. For example, an organization or public policy could be created to respond to the condition. An existing organization, such as a federal or state agency, could also be charged with taking care of the situation. In either instance, these organizations begin to legitimize the problem by creating and implementing a formal response. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) mobilized its laboratories and trained specialists and surveillance systems to identify, track, and contain outbreaks of the disease. Vice President Mike Pence led the White House's COVID Task Force, which included several leading public health and infectious disease specialists. Similar response groups were convened in other countries. Although no single organization or country was in charge, all were intent on combating the disease and finding a cure.

Stage 3 is a conflict stage, when Stage 2 routines are unable to address the problem. During Stage 3, activists, advocates, and victims of the problem experience feelings of distrust and cynicism toward the formal response organizations. Stage 3 activities include readjusting the formal response system: renegotiating procedures, reforming practices, and engaging in administrative or organizational restructuring. Many early public health protocols were revised in response to increased understanding about how COVID-19 is spread and best treated. Patient isolation, social distancing, and the use of personal protection equipment became standard practices. Early in the pandemic and during consequent surges, hospitals had to address shortages of surgical masks, ventilators, and dedicated intensive care unit beds. In an effort to expand the availability of COVID-19 testing, many hospitals and public health departments established drive-through testing sites.

Finally, Stage 4 begins when groups believe that they can no longer work within the established system. Advocates or activists are faced with two options: to radically change the existing system or to work outside the system. Many state and local leaders maintained aggressive public health measures while the Trump administration declared the virus was contained, dismantled the COVID-19 task force, and shifted its focus on economic recovery. As an alternative to the COVID response from the federal government and public health agencies, numerous independent community and advocacy groups began providing services and support to vulnerable populations such as undocumented immigrants, prisoners, unsheltered people, and essential front line workers. Across the country mutual aid groups were established to provide temporary aid and emergency necessities, but as the pandemic continued, these groups expanded their services to include mental health support, internet access, and veterinary services (de Freytas-Tamura, 2021).

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

According to Ballantine and Roberts (2012), sociologists examine the software and hardware of society. A *society* consists of individuals who live together in a specific geographic area, who interact with each other, and who cooperate for the attainment of common goals.

The software is our *culture.* Each society has a culture that serves as a system of guidelines for living. A culture includes *norms* (rules of behavior shared by members of society and rooted in a value system), *values* (shared judgments about what is desirable or undesirable, right or wrong, good or bad), and *beliefs* (ideas about life, the way society works, and where one fits in).

The hardware comprises the enduring social structures that bring order to our lives. This includes the positions or *statuses* that we occupy in society (student, athlete, employee, roommate) and the social *groups* to which we belong and identify (our family, our local place of worship, our workplace). *Social institutions* are the most complex hardware. Social institutions, such as the family, religion, or education, are relatively permanent social units of roles, rules, relationships, and organized activities devoted to meeting human needs and to directing and controlling human behavior (Ballantine & Roberts, 2012).

The way sociologists conduct sociology and study social problems begins first with their view on how the world works. Based on a **theory**—a set of assumptions and propositions used for explanation, prediction, and understanding—sociologists begin to define the relationship between society and individuals and to describe the causes and consequences of social problems.

Theories vary in their level of analysis, focusing on a **macro** (societal) or a **micro (individual) level of analysis**. Theories help inform the direction of sociological research and data analysis. In the following section, we review four theoretical perspectives—functionalist, conflict, feminist, and interactionist (see also Table 1.2)—and how each perspective explains and examines social problems. Research methods used by sociologists are summarized in the next section.

Theory: A set of assumptions and propositions used for explanation, prediction, and understanding

Macro level of analysis: Societal level of analysis

Micro level of analysis: Individual level of analysis

TABLE 1.2 ■ Summary of Sociological Perspectives: A General Approach to Examining Social Problems			
	Functionalist	**Conflict/Feminist**	**Interactionist**
Level of analysis	**Macro**	**Macro**	**Micro**
Assumptions about society	Order. Society is held together by a set of social institutions, each of which has a specific function in society.	Conflict. Society is held together by power and coercion. Conflict and inequality are inherent in the social structure.	Interaction. Society is created through social interaction.
Questions asked about social problems	How does the problem originate from the social structure? How does the problem reflect changes among social institutions and structures? What are the functions and dysfunctions of the problem?	How does the problem originate from the competition between groups and from the social structure itself? What groups are in competition and why?	How is the problem socially constructed and defined? How is problem behavior learned through interaction? How is the problem labeled by those concerned about it?

Functionalist Perspective

Among the theorists most associated with the functionalist perspective is French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Borrowing from biology, Durkheim likened society to a human body. As the body has essential organs, each with a specific function, he theorized that society has its own organs: institutions such as the family, religion, education, economics, and politics. These organs or social structures have essential and specialized functions. For example, the institution of the family maintains the health and socialization of our young and creates a basic economic unit. The institution of education provides knowledge and skills for women and men to work and live in society. No other institution can do what the family or education does.

Durkheim proposed that the function of society is to civilize or control individual actions. He wrote, "It is civilization that has made man what he is; it is what distinguishes him from the animal: man is man only because he is civilized" (Durkheim, 1973, p. 149). The social order can be threatened during periods of rapid social change, such as industrialization or political upheaval, when social norms and values are likely to be in transition. During this state of normlessness or **anomie**, Durkheim believed, society is particularly prone to social problems. As a result, social problems cannot be solved by changing the individual; rather, the problem has to be solved at the societal level. The entire social structure or the affected part of the social structure needs to be repaired.

The **functionalist perspective**, as its name suggests, examines the functions or consequences of the structure of society. Functionalists use a macro perspective, focusing on how society creates and maintains social order. Social problems are not analyzed in terms of how "bad" they are for society. Rather, a functionalist asks, how does the social problem emerge from society? Does the social problem serve a function?

The systematic study of social problems began with the sociologists at the University of Chicago. Part of what has been called the Chicago School of Sociology, scholars such as Ernest W. Burgess, Homer Hoyt, Robert E. Park, Edward Ullman, and Louis Wirth used their city as an urban laboratory, pursuing field studies of poverty, crime, and drug abuse during the 1920s and 1930s. Through their research, they captured the real experiences of individuals experiencing social problems, noting the positive and negative consequences of urbanization and industrialization (Ritzer, 2000). Taking it one step further, sociologists Jane Addams and Charlotte Gilman studied urban life in Chicago, developed programs to assist the poor, and lobbied for legislative and political reform (Adams & Sydie, 2001).

According to Robert Merton (1957), social structures can have positive benefits as well as negative consequences, which he called dysfunctions. A social problem such as homelessness has a clear set of **dysfunctions** but can also have positive consequences or functions. One could argue that homelessness is dysfunctional and unpleasant for the women, men, and children who experience it, and for a city or community, homelessness can serve as a public embarrassment. Yet a functionalist would say that homelessness is beneficial for at least one part of society, or else it would cease to exist. The population of the homeless supports an industry of social service agencies, religious organizations, community groups, and service

Anomie: State of normlessness

Functionalist perspective: A theoretical perspective that examines the functions or consequences of the structure of society; functionalists use a macro perspective, focusing on how society creates and maintains social order

Jane Addams's (center) sociological perspective informed her connection to her Chicago community and led her to a life of social action. She developed programs to assist the poor and advocated legislative and political reforms.

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Dysfunctions: Negative consequences of social structures

workers. In addition, the homeless also highlight problems in other parts of our social structure, namely, the problems of the lack of a livable wage or affordable housing.

Conflict Perspective

Conflict perspective: A theoretical perspective that considers how society is held together by power and coercion for the benefit of those in power (based on social class, gender, race, or ethnicity)

Proletariat: The working class in a capitalist economy

Bourgeoisie: Capitalist ruling class; owners of businesses

Like functionalism, conflict theories examine the macro level of our society, its structures, and its institutions. Whereas functionalists argue that society is held together by norms, values, and a common morality, those holding a **conflict perspective** consider how society is held together by power and coercion (Ritzer, 2000) for the benefit of those in power. In this view, social problems emerge from the continuing conflict between groups in our society—based on social class, gender, race, or ethnicity—and in the conflict, the dominant groups usually win. There are multiple levels of domination; as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) described, domination "operates not only by structuring power from the top down but by simultaneously annexing the power as energy of those on the bottom for its own ends" (pp. 227–228).

As a result, this perspective offers no easy solutions to social problems. The system could be completely overhauled, but that is unlikely to happen. We could reform parts of the structure, but those in power would retain their control. The biggest social problem from this perspective is the system itself and the inequality it perpetuates.

The first to make this argument was a German philosopher and activist, Karl Marx. Conflict, according to Marx, emerged from the economic substructure of capitalism, which defined all other social structures and social relations. He focused on the conflict based on social class, created by the tension between the **proletariat** (workers) and the **bourgeoisie** (owners). Capitalism did more than separate the haves from the have-nots. Unlike Durkheim, who believed that society created a civilized man, Marx argued that a capitalist society created a man alienated from his **species being**, from his true self. **Alienation** occurred on multiple levels: Man would become increasingly alienated from his work, the product of his work, other workers, and, finally, his own human potential. For example, a salesperson might be so involved in the process of her work that she doesn't spend quality time with her coworkers, talk with her customers, or stop and appreciate the merchandise. Each sale transaction is the same; all customers and workers are treated alike. The salesperson cannot achieve her human potential through this type of mindless unfulfilling labor. According to Marx, workers needed to achieve **class consciousness**, an awareness of their social position and oppression, so they could unite and overthrow capitalism, replacing it with a more egalitarian socialist and eventually communist structure.

From a conflict perspective, all social problems can be traced back to the economic substructure of capitalism. According to Karl Marx, the organization of capitalist labor erodes one's human potential or what Marx referred to as species being.

Species being: A human being's true self

Alienation: Separation from one's true self; alienation occurs on multiple levels— from one's work, the product of one's work, other workers, and one's human potential

Class consciousness: Awareness of one's social position

Widening Marx's emphasis on the capitalist class structure, contemporary conflict theorists have argued that conflict emerges from other social bases, such as values, resources, and interests. Lewis Coser (1956) focused on the functional aspects of conflict, arguing that conflict creates and maintains group solidarity by clarifying the positions and boundaries between groups. Mills (2000) argued the existence of a "power elite," a small group of political, business, and military leaders who control our society. Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) explained that conflict of

interest is inherent in any relationship because those in powerful positions will always seek to maintain their dominance.

Cedric Robinson (1983) used the term "racial capitalism" to recognize how the development of capitalism is built upon racialized ideologies. The accumulation of capital is associated with features of white supremacist capitalistic development—slavery, colonialism, genocide, and migrant exploitation (Melamed, 2015). "Racial capitalism helps us to understand how people become divided from each other in the name of economic survival or in the name of economic well-being," according to Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018, p. x). "One aspect of its techniques encompasses the processes that appear to grant differential privileges to workers and almost workers and non-workers and the social relations that flow from these differentiations."

Conflict theorists may also take a social constructionist approach, examining how powerful political, economic, and social interest groups subjectively define social problems.

Feminist Perspective

Rosemarie Tong (1989) explained that "feminist theory is not one, but many, theories or perspectives and that each feminist theory or perspective attempts to describe women's oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women's liberation" (p. 1). By analyzing the situations and lives of women in society, the **feminist perspective** defines gender and other areas of oppression (i.e., race and ethnicity, age, social class, sexual orientation, and disability) as the source of social inequality, group conflict, and social problems. For feminists, the patriarchal society is the basis of social problems. **Patriarchy** refers to a society in which men dominate women and justify their domination through devaluation; however, the definition of patriarchy has been broadened to include societies in which powerful groups dominate and devalue the powerless (Kaplan, 1994).

Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley (2004) explained that feminist theory was established as a new sociological perspective in the 1970s, largely because of the growing presence of women in the discipline and the strength of the women's movement. Feminist theory treats the experiences of women as the starting point in all sociological investigations, seeing the world from the vantage point of women in the social world and seeking to promote a better world for women and for humankind.

Although the study of social problems is not the center of feminist theory, throughout its history, feminist theory has been critical of existing social arrangements and has focused on such concepts as social change, power, and social inequality (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 2004). Major research in the field has included Jessie Bernard's (1982) study of gender inequality in marriage, Collins's (1990) development of Black feminist thought, Dorothy Smith's (1987) sociology from the standpoint of women, and Nancy Chodorow's (1978) psychoanalytic feminism and reproduction of mothering. Although sociologists in this perspective may adopt a conflict, functionalist, or interactionist perspective, their focus remains on how men and women are situated in society, not just differently but also unequally (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 2004).

Interactionist Perspective

An **interactionist perspective** focuses on how we use language, words, and symbols to create and maintain our social reality. This micro-level perspective highlights what we take for granted: the expectations, rules, and norms that we learn and practice without even noticing. In our interaction with others, we become the products and creators of our social reality. Through our interaction, social problems are created and defined. More than any other perspective,

Feminist perspective: A theoretical perspective that defines gender (and sometimes race or social class) as a source of social inequality, group conflict, and social problems

Patriarchy: Society in which the powerful (often men) dominate the powerless (often women)

Interactionist perspective: A micro-level perspective that highlights what we take for granted: the expectations, rules, and norms that we learn and practice without even noticing; interactionists maintain that through our interaction, social problems are created and defined

Individuals come together in public rallies to show their support of frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. These demonstrations galvanize the efforts of advocacy and activist groups, as well as educate the public about the pandemic.

ROBYN BECK/Contributor/Getty Images

Human agency: The active role of individuals in creating their social environment

Symbolic interactionism: Theoretical perspective that examines how we use language, words, and symbols to create and maintain our social reality

interactionists stress **human agency**—the active role of individuals in creating their social environment (Ballantine & Roberts, 2012).

George Herbert Mead provided the foundation of this perspective. Also a member of the Chicago School of Sociology, Mead (1962) argued that society consists of the organized and patterned interactions among individuals. As Mead defined it, the *self* is a mental and social process, the reflective ability to see others in relation to ourselves and to see ourselves in relation to others. Our interactions are based on language, based on words. The words we use to communicate with are symbols, representations of something else. The symbols have no inherent meaning and require human interpretation. The term **symbolic interactionism** was coined by Herbert Blumer in 1937. Building on Mead's work, Blumer emphasized how the existence of mind, self, and society emerge from interaction and the use and understanding of symbols (Turner, 1998).

How does the self emerge from interaction? Consider the roles that you and I play. As a university professor, I am aware of what is expected of me; as university students, you are aware of what it means to be a student. There are no posted guides in the classroom that instruct us where to stand, how to dress, or what to bring to class. Even before we enter the classroom, we know how we are supposed to behave and even our places in the classroom. We act based on our past experiences and based on what we have come to accept as definitions of each role. But we need each other to create this reality; our interaction in the classroom reaffirms each of our roles and the larger educational institution. Imagine what it takes to maintain this reality: consensus not just between a single professor and his or her students but between every professor and every student on campus, on every university campus, ultimately reaffirming the structure of a university classroom and higher education.

So, how do social problems emerge from interaction? First, for social problems such as juvenile delinquency, an interactionist would argue that the problem behavior is learned

from others. According to this perspective, no one is born a juvenile delinquent. As with any other role we play, people learn how to become juvenile delinquents. Although the perspective does not answer the question of where or from whom the first delinquent child learned this behavior, it attempts to explain how deviant behavior is learned through interaction with others.

Second, social problems emerge from the definitions themselves. Objective social problems do not exist; they become real only in how they are defined or labeled. A sociologist using this perspective would examine who or what group is defining the problem and who or what is being defined as deviant or a social problem. As we have already seen with the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem became real after medical and public health officials called attention to the disease.

Third, the solutions to social problems also emerge from our definitions. Helen Schneider and Anne Ingram (1993) argued that the social construction of target populations influences the distribution of policy benefits or policy burdens. Target populations are groups of individuals experiencing a specific social problem; these groups gain policy attention through their socially constructed identity and political power. The authors identified four categories: Advantaged target populations are positively constructed and politically powerful (likely to receive policy benefits), contenders are politically powerful yet negatively constructed (likely to receive policy benefits when public interest is high), dependent target populations have positive social construction but low political power (few policy resources would be allocated to this group), and deviant target populations are both politically weak and negatively constructed (least likely to receive any benefits).

Jean Schroedel and Daniel Jordan (1998) applied the target population model to U.S. Senate voting patterns between 1982 and 1992, examining the allocation of federal funds to four distinct HIV/AIDS groups. As Schneider and Ingram's (1993) theory would predict, the groups receiving the most funding were those in the advantaged category (war veterans and health care workers), followed by contenders (gay and bisexual men and the general population with AIDS), dependents (spouses and the public), and, finally, deviants (intravenous drug users, criminals, and prisoners).

SOCIOLOGY AT WORK

Doing Sociology

At the end of each chapter, the Sociology at Work feature will examine how your sociological imagination and skills can be used in the workplace.

You may be most familiar with how your sociology professors use their sociological imagination as teachers and researchers. Yet sociology is practiced in a variety of ways and settings beyond academia. Hans Zetterberg, in his 1964 article, "The Practical Use of Sociological Knowledge," identified five roles for sociologists: decision maker, educator, commentator/critic, researcher, and consultant. Notice that none of these roles includes sociologist in the title. People are doing sociology, using sociological methods and skills or applying their sociological imagination in their work, even though sociology or sociologist is not part of their job description.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), many sociology bachelor's degree holders find positions in related fields, such as social services, education, or public policy. Based on their survey of recent bachelor's degree graduates, the American Sociological Association (Spalter-Roth & Van Vooren, 2008) reported that about one-quarter of full-time working graduates were employed in social service and counseling occupations. Almost 70%

of graduates who reported that their jobs were closely related to their sociology major were very satisfied with their jobs.

In Chapters 2 through 5, we will review how your sociology learning experiences and skill development will be important for your postcollege work life. Specific occupations will be examined in Chapters 6 through 15, including social work, criminal justice, public health, education, and medicine. Told through stories of sociology alumni, these features highlight how sociology can be used in the workplace. We'll conclude with a discussion on postgraduate study in Chapter 16.

Science: A logical and systematic process to investigate social phenomena and the knowledge produced by these investigations

Empiricism: Gathering data and evidence using our five senses

Basic research: Exploration of the causes and consequences of a social problem

Applied research: Pursuit of knowledge for program application or policy evaluation

Variables: A property of people or objects that can take on two or more values

Hypothesis: Statement of a relationship between variables

Dependent variable: The variable to be explained

Independent variable: The variable expected to account for the cause of the dependent variable

Quantitative methods: Research methods that rely on the collection of statistical data and require the specification of variables and scales collected through surveys, interviews, or questionnaires

Qualitative methods: Research methods designed to capture social life as participants experience it

THE SCIENCE OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is a science of our social world, based on information derived from research (Ritzer, 2013). **Science** relies on logical and systematic methods to investigate social phenomena (Chambliss & Schutt, 2016) and encompasses the knowledge produced by these investigations (Schutt, 2012). All research begins with a theory or theories to help identify the phenomenon we're trying to explain and provide explanations for the social patterns or causal relationships between variables (Frankfort-Nachmias et al., 2017). We practice **empiricism**, using our five senses to gather data (Ballantine et al., 2018; Ritzer, 2013) and allowing the evidence to inform our theories about how the world works.

Sociological research is divided into two areas: basic and applied. The knowledge we gain through **basic research** expands our understanding of the causes and consequences of a social problem, for example, identifying the predictors of COVID-19 or examining the rate of infection among African Americans. Conversely, **applied research** involves the pursuit of knowledge for program application or policy evaluation (Katzer et al., 1998); effective program practices documented through applied research can be incorporated into social and medical programs serving COVID-19 patients.

Variables are a property of people or objects that can take on two or more values. For example, as we try to explain COVID-19, we may have a specific explanation about the relationship between two variables: social class and COVID-19 infection. Social class could be measured according to household or individual income, whereas COVID-19 infection could be measured as a positive test for the COVID-19 antibodies. The relationship between these variables can be stated in a **hypothesis**, a tentative statement about how the variables are related to each other. We could predict that COVID-19 infection would be higher among lower-income individuals than upper-income individuals. In this hypothesis statement, we've identified a **dependent variable** (the variable to be explained, COVID-19 infection) along with an **independent variable** (the variable expected to account for the cause of the dependent variable, social class). Data, the information we collect, may confirm or refute this hypothesis.

Research methods (i.e., how sociologists collect data) can include quantitative or qualitative approaches or a combination. **Quantitative methods** rely on the collection of statistical data. They require the specification of variables and scales collected through surveys, interviews, or questionnaires. **Qualitative methods** are designed to capture social life as participants experience it. These methods involve field observation, depth interviews, or focus groups. Following are definitions of each specific method.

Survey research: This is data collection based on responses to a series of questions. Surveys can be offered in several formats: a self-administered mailed survey, group surveys, in-person interviews, or telephone surveys. For example, information from COVID-19 patients may be collected by a survey sent directly in the mail or by a telephone or in-person interview.

Qualitative methods: This category includes data collection conducted in the field, emphasizing the observations about natural behavior as experienced or witnessed by the researcher. Methods include participant observation (a method for gathering data that involves developing a sustained relationship with people while they go about their normal activities), focus groups (unstructured group interviews in which a focus group leader actively encourages discussion among participants on the topics of interest), or intensive (depth) interviewing (open-ended, relatively unstructured questioning in which the interviewer seeks in-depth information on the interviewee's feelings, experiences, and perceptions). Sociologists can utilize various qualitative methods in COVID-19 research—collecting data through participant observation at clinics or support groups and focus groups or depth interviews with patients, health care providers, or key informants.

Historical and comparative methods: This is research that focuses on one historical period (historical events research) or traces a sequence of events over time (historical process research). Comparative research involves multiple cases or data from more than one time period. For example, researchers can examine the effectiveness of COVID-19 treatments over time and compare infection rates between men and women.

Secondary data analysis: Secondary data analysis usually involves the analysis of previously collected data that are used in a new analysis. Large public survey data sets, such as the U.S. Census, the General Social Survey, the National Election Survey, or the International Social Survey Programme, can be used, as can data collected in experimental studies or with qualitative data sets. For COVID-19 research, a secondary data analysis could be based on existing medical records or a routine health survey. The key to secondary data analysis is that the data were not originally collected by the researcher but were collected by another researcher and for a different purpose.

Empirical evidence is part of the scientific process. Some social scientists disagree about the applied use of data, arguing that the role of science is to simply describe the world as it is. Others (like me) acknowledge how research and data not only inform our understanding of a social problem but also identify a solution or a path to some desired change. Lawmakers, public leaders, professionals, and advocates utilize research and data to inform policy, programming, and education. Simply stated, social problems research and data are important not only for expanding what we know about the causes and consequences of problems but also for identifying what can be done to address them.

The U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policy Making was established in 2016 by legislation cosponsored by House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senator Patty Murray. Releasing a set of recommendations to improve access and use of government data, the commission (Commission on Evidence-Based Decision Making, 2017) stated, "The American People want a government that functions efficiently and responsibly addresses the problems that face this country. Policy makers must have good information on which to base their decision about improving the viability and effectiveness of government programs and policies." In October 2017, Ryan and Murray introduced the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act. The act is intended to improve the ability of researchers and statisticians both inside and outside the government to use government data to better inform important policy decisions, implementing many of the commission's

recommendations. President Trump signed the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act into law in January 2019 (Abraham & Haskins, 2018).

VOICES IN THE COMMUNITY
ADIA HARVEY WINGFIELD

Sociologist Adia Harvey Wingfield is the Mary Tileston Hemenway Professor in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis. Her scholarship examines how and why racial and gender inequality persists in professional occupations (Washington University in St. Louis, 2020). In 2019 she published *Flatlining: Race, Work, and Health Care in the New Economy* describing the experiences of Black workers in health care based on interviews with 60 Black doctors, nurses, and technicians. Wingfield concluded that among people of color, one's professional status within the organization has a significant effect on how one perceives instances of racial discrimination. Her research documents the racism in health care work but also identifies real solutions.

Wingfield (2020) wrote about how one unanticipated consequence of the coronavirus was "a setback of the modest advances the medical industry has made towards improving racial diversity among practitioners." Black people constitute only 5% of all doctors and 10% of all nurses despite being approximately 13% of the population. "Both professions have come to realize that more racial and gender diversity is essential for providing care in a multiracial society—especially given data indicating black patients' health outcomes improved when matched with a same-race provider."

While fellowships, training programs, and pipelines programs can attract underrepresented minority students into the field of medicine, there is more work to be done. She explains:

Programs like these will become all the more crucial if black doctors and nurses are hit as hard by the coronavirus as many of the patients they treat. But hospital administrators should also consider other ways to address the issues that adversely affect black health care practitioners' work—the routine gender discrimination black women doctors face, for example, and the unevenly implemented and enforced diversity policies."

What other social problems could a sociologist study?

THE TRANSFORMATION FROM PROBLEM TO SOLUTION

Although Mills identified the relationship between a personal trouble and a public issue, less has been said about the transformation of an issue into a solution. Mills leads us in the right direction by identifying the relationship between public issues and social institutions. By continuing to use our sociological imagination and recognizing the role of larger social, cultural, and structural forces, we can identify appropriate measures to address these social problems. Mills (2000) suggested how "the educational and political role of social science in a democracy is to help cultivate and sustain publics and individuals that are able to develop, to live with, and to act upon adequate definitions of personal and social realities" (p. 192).

Modern history reveals that Americans do not like to stand by and do nothing about social problems. Most Americans support efforts to reduce homelessness, improve the quality of education, or find a cure for COVID-19. In some cases, there are no limits to our efforts. Helping our nation's poor has been an administrative priority of many U.S. presidents. President Franklin Roosevelt proposed sweeping social reforms during his New Deal in 1935, and President Lyndon

With more than 70 national organizations around the world, Habitat for Humanity is supported primarily by local volunteers. In this photo, volunteers from the Rochester Institute of Technology are building a home during their spring break in Wichita Falls, Texas.

AP Photo/Wichita Falls Times Record News, Torin Halsey

Johnson declared the War on Poverty in 1964. President Bill Clinton offered to "change welfare as we know it" with broad reforms outlined in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. In 2003, President George W. Bush supported the reauthorization of the 1996 welfare reform bill. During his term in office, President Obama addressed poverty through community development programs like the Promise Zones Initiative. No president or Congress has ever promised to eliminate poverty; instead, each promised only to improve the system serving the poor or to reduce the number of poor in our society.

Solutions require social action—in the form of social policy, advocacy, and innovation—to address problems at their structural or individual levels. **Social policy** is the enactment of a course of action through a formal law or program. Policy making usually begins with the identification of a problem that should be addressed; then, specific guidelines are developed regarding what should be done to address the problem. Policy directly changes the social structure, particularly how our government, an organization, or our community responds to a social problem. Think about it this way: Policies reflect and shape the way we view social problems and the people affected by these problems (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). According to Jacob Lew, President Barack Obama's budget director, "the [federal] budget is not just a collection of numbers, but an expression of our values and aspirations" (quoted in Herbert, 2011, p. 11). In addition, policy governs the behavior and interaction of individuals, controlling who has access to benefits and aid (Ellis, 2003). Social policies are always being enacted.

Social advocates use their resources to support, educate, and empower individuals and their communities. Advocates work to improve social services, change social policies, and mobilize individuals. There are many examples of community members who have taken a stand against a particular social problem and dedicated their lives to addressing it. After surviving the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, student David Hogg became a gun control activist. According to Hogg, "There is no age limit to changing the world. And age is no excuse not to be involved, no matter if you're too young or too old" (quoted in Leigh, 2019). At the age of 15, Greta Thunberg started a global movement by skipping school and protesting in

Social policy: Enactment of a course of action through a formal law or program

front of the Swedish Parliament. She inspired millions to join the largest climate demonstration on September 20, 2019. Thunberg told a group of world leaders at the 2019 World Economic Forum, "I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act" (quoted in Alter et al., 2019).

Social innovation | Policy, program, or advocacy that features an untested or a unique approach

Social innovation may take the form of a policy, a program, or advocacy that features an untested or unique approach. Innovation usually starts at the community level, but it can grow into national and international programming. Millard and Linda Fuller developed the concept of "partnership housing" in 1965, partnering those in need of adequate shelter with community volunteers to build simple interest-free houses. In 1976, the Fullers' concept became Habitat for Humanity International, a nonprofit, ecumenical Christian housing program responsible for building more than 1 million houses worldwide. When Millard Fuller was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, President Clinton described Habitat for Humanity as "the most successful continuous community service project in the history of the United States" (Habitat for Humanity, 2004).

Service and volunteer opportunities are available to college and university students in the United States and abroad. This student is doing her service work in Kingston, Jamaica, through Emory University's nursing program.

Karen Kasmauski/Getty Images

In his book *Social Things: An Introduction to the Sociological Life*, Charles Lemert (1997) wrote that sociology is often presented as a thing to be studied. Instead, he argued that sociology is something to be "lived," becoming a way of life. Lemert (1997) wrote,

> To use one's sociological imagination, whether to practical or professional end, is to look at the events in one's life, to see them for what they truly are, then to figure out how the structures of the wider world make social things the way they are. No one is a sociologist until she does this the best she can. (p. 105)

We can use our sociological imagination, as Lemert (1997) recommended, but we can also take it a step further. As Marx (1972) maintained, "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" (p. 107).

Throughout this text, we explore three connections. The first connection is the one between personal troubles and public issues. Each sociological perspective—functionalist, conflict, feminist, and interactionist—highlights how social problems emerge from our social structure or social interaction. While maintaining its primary focus on problems within the United States, this text also addresses the experience of social problems in other countries and nations. The comparative perspective will enhance your understanding of the social problems we experience here.

The sociological imagination will also help us make a second connection: the one between social problems and social solutions. Mills believed that the most important value of sociology is in its potential to enrich and encourage the lives of all individuals (Lemert, 1997). In each chapter, we review selected social policies, advocacy programs, and innovative approaches that attempt to address or solve these problems.

Textbooks on this subject present neat individual chapters on a social problem, reviewing the sociological issues and sometimes providing some suggestions about how it can and should be addressed. This book follows the same outline but takes a closer look at community-based approaches, ultimately identifying how *you* can be part of the solution in your community.

I should warn you that this text will not identify a perfect set of solutions to our social problems. Individual action may be powerless against the social structure. Some individuals or groups will have more power or advantage over others. Solutions, like the problems they address, are embedded within complex interconnected social systems (Fine, 2006). Sometimes solutions create other problems. For example, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) chief of health Mickey Chopra reports that as countries, such as the United States, have focused their attention and funding on the AIDS epidemic worldwide, deaths due to preventable or treatable diseases (e.g., diarrhea and pneumonia) have increased. Diarrhea kills 1.5 million children a year in developing countries, more than AIDS, malaria, and measles combined (Dugger, 2009). A program may have worked, but it might no longer exist because of a lack of funding or political and public support. Programs and policies are never permanent; they can be modified. Consistent with standards established in many European countries, in 2014 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration lifted the prohibition on blood donation from gay and bisexual men but kept the prohibition in place for men who have had sex with a man in the last year.

In communities such as yours and mine, individuals and community groups are taking action against social problems. They are adults and children, common citizens and professionals, from different backgrounds and experiences. Whether they are working within the system or working to change the system, these individuals are part of their community's solution to a problem. The goal might be to solve one social problem or several or to create what Joel Feagin (2002) described as a "new global system that reduces injustice, is democratically accountable to all people, offers a decent standard of living for all, and operates in a sustainable relation to earth's other living systems" (p. 17). What Feagin (2002) described has also been referred to as *social justice.* Although the term is widely used, there is no single definition. Social justice has different meanings and will vary depending on one's ideology, discipline, and experience. One way to think of social justice is to consider what constitutes a "perfect" society and what it takes to make that happen

In the end, I hope you agree that it is important that we continue to do something about the social problems we experience. Gary Fine (2006) observed, "those who care about social problems are obligated to use their best knowledge to increase the store of freedom, justice and equality" (p. 14).

In addition, I ask you to make the final connection to social problems and solutions in your community. For this quarter or semester, instead of focusing only on problems reported in your

local newspaper or the morning news program, start paying attention to the solutions offered by professionals, leaders, and advocates. Through the Internet or through local programs and agencies, take this opportunity to investigate what social action is taking place in your community. Regardless of whether you define your "community" as your campus, your residential neighborhood, or the city where your college is located, consider what avenues of change can be taken and whether you can be part of that effort. As civil rights icon John R. Lewis said, "When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something" (quoted in Christian, 2020).

I often tell my students that the problem with being a sociologist is that my sociological imagination has no "off" switch. In almost everything I read, see, or do, there is some sociological application, a link between my personal experiences and the broader social experience that I share with everyone else, including you. As you progress through this text and your course, I hope that you will begin to use your own sociological imagination and see connections between problems and their solutions that you never saw before.

CHAPTER REVIEW

1.1 Define the sociological imagination.

The sociological imagination is the ability to recognize the links between our personal lives and experiences and our social world.

1.2 Identify the characteristics of a social problem and its stages.

A social problem is a social condition that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or the physical world. A social problem has objective and subjective realities. The identification of a social problem is part of a subjective process that includes four stages: transformation, legitimization, conflict, and creation.

1.3 Compare the four sociological perspectives.

A functionalist considers how the social problem emerges from society itself. From a conflict perspective, social problems arise from conflict based upon social class or competing interest groups. By analyzing the situations and lives of women in society, feminist theory defines gender (and sometimes race or social class) as a source of social inequality, group conflict, and social problems. An interactionist focuses on how we use language, words, and symbols to construct and define social problems.

1.4 Explain how sociology is a science.

Sociology is a science of our social world. Sociology relies on logical and systematic methods to investigate social phenomena. The knowledge we gain through basic research expands our understanding of the causes and consequences of a social problem, whereas applied research involves the pursuit of knowledge for program application or policy evaluation.

1.5 Explain the roles of social policy, advocacy, and innovation in addressing social problems.

Solutions require social action—in the form of social policy, advocacy, and innovation—to address problems at their structural or individual levels. Social policy is the enactment of a course of action through a formal law or program. Social advocates use their resources to support, educate, and empower individuals and their communities. Social innovation may take the form of a policy, a program, or advocacy that features an untested or unique approach. Innovation usually starts at the community level but can be applied to national and international programming.

KEY TERMS

alienation (p. 10)

anomie (p. 9)

applied research (p. 14)

basic research (p. 14)

bourgeoisie (p. 10)

class consciousness (p. 10)

conflict perspective (p. 10)

dependent variable (p. 14)

dysfunctions (p. 9)

empiricism (p. 14)

feminist perspective (p. 11)

functionalist perspective (p. 9)

human agency (p. 12)

hypothesis (p. 14)

independent variable (p. 14)

interactionist perspective (p. 11)

macro level of analysis (p. 7)

micro level of analysis (p. 7)

objective reality (p. 5)

patriarchy (p. 11)

proletariat (p. 10)

qualitative methods (p. 14)

quantitative methods (p. 14)

science (p. 14)

social construction of reality (p. 5)

social constructionism (p. 5)

social innovation (p. 18)

social policy (p. 17)

social problem (p. 5)

sociological imagination (p. 3)

sociology (p. 3)

species being (p. 10)

subjective reality (p. 5)

symbolic interactionism (p. 12)

theory (p. 8)

variables (p. 14)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does the sociological imagination help us understand social problems?

2. Select two of the sociological perspectives introduced in this chapter. Compare and contrast how each defines a social problem. What solutions does each perspective offer?

3. Apply your sociological imagination to the problem of the increasing cost of college. Is the increasing cost of tuition a public issue? Why or why not?

4. Using the social constructionist perspective, analyze how the primary messages in the 2020 presidential campaign were defined by the candidates, political leaders, the media, and public interest groups. In your opinion, what was defined as a social problem?

5. Explain how science and the scientific method help us understand social problems. How is this different from a commonsense understanding of social problems?

6. Select two research methods and explain how each could be used to examine the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on higher education.

7. What is the relationship among social advocacy, innovation, and policy?

THE BASES OF INEQUALITY

Sociologists use the term *social stratification* to refer to the ranking of individuals into social strata or groups. We are divided into groups such as women and men or African Americans and Asian Americans. Our lives are also transformed because of our group membership. In U.S. society, being different has come to mean that we are unequal.

The differences between social strata become more apparent when we recognize how some individuals are more likely to experience social problems than others are. Attached to each social position are *life chances*, a term Max Weber used to describe the consequences of social stratification, how each social position provides particular access to goods and services such as wealth, food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care. Sociologists refer to the unequal distribution of resources, services, and positions as *social inequality*.

In the next five chapters, we will explore two basic sociological questions: Why does social inequality exist, and how are we different from one another? We will review sociological theories that attempt to explain and examine the consequences of social inequality. Although the five bases of inequality are discussed in separate chapters, real life happens at the intersection of our social class, racial and ethnic identity, gender, sexual orientation, and age. These bases of inequality simultaneously define and affect us. We need to recognize how each social characteristic (class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or age) shapes the history, experiences, and opportunities of men, women, and children in the United States (Shapiro, 2004) and throughout the world. Your life experience may have less to do with your ability or your hard work and more to do with how you are positioned in society. Ultimately, this includes your experience of social problems.

If this is your first sociology course, these chapters will provide you with an overview of several core sociological concepts. If you have already had a sociology course, welcome back; these chapters should provide a good review.

2 SOCIAL CLASS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

2.1 Explain the difference between income and wealth.

2.2 Compare the four sociological perspectives on social class and poverty.

2.3 Identify the major consequences of poverty.

2.4 Explain the evolution of U.S. welfare policy.

The United States is perceived as one of the world's richest countries. Nonetheless, economic inequality is one of the most important and visible of America's social problems (McCall, 2002). President Barack Obama identified "the combined trends of increased inequality and decreasing mobility" as "the defining challenge of our time" (White House, 2013). Sociologists Steve McNamee and Robert Miller (2014) observed:

> Opinion polls consistently show that Americans continue to embrace the American Dream. But as they strive to achieve it, they have found that it has become more difficult simply to keep up and make ends meet. Instead of "getting ahead," Americans often find themselves working harder just to stay in place, and despite their best efforts, many find themselves "falling behind"—worse off than they were earlier in their lives or compared to their parents at similar points in their lives. (p. 217)

Economic anxiety, a concern about future finances (e.g., job security, saving for retirement or college), was identified as a contributing factor in the 2016 election of President Donald Trump. By many measures the pre-pandemic U.S. economy was doing well, but public opinion polls revealed how most Americans believed there was too much economic inequality (Horowitz et al., 2020) and that the economy was boosting wealthy Americans (Igielnik & Parker, 2019). In fact, data indicate how the American middle class has been shrinking. The share of middle-class American families decreased from 61% in 1971 to 51% in 2019 (Horowitz et al., 2020). Income growth is the largest and fastest among families in the top 5%.

In this chapter, we will examine how the overall distribution of wages and earnings has become more unequal and how the distance between the wealthy and the poor has widened considerably in recent decades and worsened during the Great Recession of 2007–2009 and the coronavirus pandemic. The Occupy Wall Street movement highlighted wealth and income inequality through its central protest question: Are you a member of the wealthy 1% or part of the remaining 99%? Martin Marger (2002) wrote, "Measured in various ways, the gap between rich and poor in the United States is wider than [in] any other society with comparable economic institutions and standards of living" (p. 48).

INCOME AND WEALTH IN THE UNITED STATES

According to the U.S. Census, for 2019 the median income was $68,703 (Semega et al., 2020). The U.S. Census examines income distribution by dividing the U.S. household population into fifths or quintiles. If all U.S. income were equally divided, each quintile would receive one fifth of the total income. However, based on U.S. Census data for 2019, 52% of the total U.S. income was earned by households in the highest quintile or among households making an average of $254,449. The lowest 20% of households (earning an average of $15,286 per year) had 3.1% of the total income (Semega et al., 2020). Since 1981, the incomes of the top 5% of earners have increased faster than the incomes of other families. (Refer to Table 2.1 for the share of aggregate income for 2019.)

TABLE 2.1 ■ Share of Aggregate Income Received by Each Fifth, 2019		
Fifth	**Mean Income**	**Share**
Top fifth	$254,449	52%
Second fifth	$111,112	22.6%
Third fifth	$68,938	14.1%
Fourth fifth	$40,652	8.3%
Lowest fifth	$15,286	3.1%

Source: Semega et al. (2020).

Wealth, rather than income, may be more important in determining one's economic inequality. Wealth is usually defined as the value of assets (checking and savings accounts, property, vehicles, and stocks) owned by a household (Keister & Moller, 2000) at a point in time. Wealth is measured in two ways: gross assets (the total value of the assets someone owns) and net worth (the value of assets owned minus the amount of debt owed) (Gilbert, 2003). Wealth is more stable within families and across generations than is income, occupation, or education (Conley, 1999) and can be used to secure or produce wealth, enhancing one's **life chances**.

Life chances: Access provided by social position to goods and services

As Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro (1995) explained,

> Wealth is a particularly important indicator of individual and family access to life chances. Wealth is a special form of money not used to purchase milk and shoes and other life necessities. More often it is used to create opportunities, secure a desired stature and standard of living, or pass class status along to one's children. . . . The command over resources that wealth entails is more encompassing than income or education, and closer in meaning and theoretical significance to our traditional notions of economic well-being and access to life chances. (p. 2)

Wealth preserves the division between the wealthy and the nonwealthy, providing an important mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of inequality (Gilbert, 2003). Scott Sernau (2001) wrote,

> Wealth begets wealth. . . . It ensures that those near the bottom will be called on to spend almost all of their incomes and that what wealth they might acquire, such as an aging automobile or an aging house in a vulnerable neighborhood, will more likely depreciate than increase in value, and the poor will get nowhere. (p. 69)

Data reveal that wealth is more unequally distributed and more concentrated than income. Since the early 1920s, the top 1% of wealth holders have owned an average of 30% of household wealth (Fry & Kochhar, 2014). As of 2016, the median wealth of upper-income families ($848,400) was 7.4 times greater than the median wealth of middle-income families ($115,200) and 75 times greater than the wealth of lower-income Americans ($11,300) (Horowitz et al., 2020). Richard Fry and Rakesh Kochhar (2014) attribute the decline in middle-class and lower-class family wealth to the Great Recession of 2007–2009, describing these families as "financially stuck" and that "the economy recovery has yet to be felt for them." Upper-income families were the only income tier to build on their wealth from 2001 to 2016, benefiting from a rebounding stock market after the recession ended (Horowitz et al., 2020). The racial and ethnic wealth gap widened further after the Great Recession. According to Rakesh Kochhar and Anthony Cilluffo (2017), in 2016, the median wealth of white households was $171,000, ten times the wealth of Black households ($17,100) and eight times the wealth of Hispanic households ($20,600).

What Does It Mean to Be Poor?

The often-cited definition of poverty offered by the World Bank is an income of $1.90 per day. This represents "extreme poverty," the minimal amount necessary for a person to fulfill his or her basic needs. According to the organization (World Bank, 2009),

> Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not being able to go to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom.

Due to significant improvements in education, gender equality, health care, environmental degradation, and hunger, there has been a decline in both the overall poverty rate and the number of poor, according to the World Bank. In 2015, a total of 734 million people (10% of the world's population) in the developing world had consumption levels below $1.90, lower than the 1.85 billion (35% of the population) in 1990 (World Bank, 2020). Half of those who live in extreme poverty live in five countries: India, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank predicted that an additional 40 to 60 million people would be pushed into extreme poverty, measured at the poverty line of $1.90 per day (Mahler et al., 2020). Residents in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia would be hit hardest.

Though most of China's citizens have increased their household income and standard of living, poverty still exists in the country. According to the United Nations, about 3 percent of the country lives on less than $1.90 per day.

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Absolute poverty: Lack of basic necessities

Relative poverty: Failure to achieve society's average income or lifestyle

Sociologists offer two definitions of poverty: absolute poverty and relative poverty. **Absolute poverty** refers to a lack of basic necessities, such as food, shelter, and income. **Relative poverty** refers to a situation in which some people fail to achieve the average income or lifestyle enjoyed by the rest of society. Our mainstream standard of living defines the "average" American lifestyle. Individuals living in relative poverty may be able to afford basic necessities, but they cannot maintain a standard of living comparable to that of other members of society. Relative poverty emphasizes the inequality of income and the growing gap between the richest and poorest Americans. A definition reflecting the relative nature of income inequality was adopted by the European Council of Ministers: "The poor shall be taken to mean persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and societal) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the member state in which they live" (European Commission, 1985).

Not everyone in our society can achieve the dream of owning a home. For almost 600,000 Americans, home is life on the streets, in shelters, and in transitional housing.

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Poverty threshold: The original federal poverty measure, based on the economy food plan

The Federal Definitions of Poverty

There are two federal policy measures of poverty: the poverty threshold and the poverty guidelines. These measures are important for statistical purposes and for determining eligibility for social service programs.

The **poverty threshold** is the original federal poverty measure developed by the Social Security Administration and updated each year by the U.S. Census Bureau. The threshold is used to estimate the number of people in poverty. Originally developed by Mollie Orshansky for the Social Security Administration in 1964, the original poverty threshold was based on the economy food plan, the least costly of four nutritionally adequate food plans designed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Based on the 1955 Household Food Consumption Survey, the USDA determined that families of three or more people spent about one third of their after-tax income on food. The poverty threshold was set at three times the cost of the economy food plan. The definition of the poverty threshold was revised in 1969 and 1981. Since 1969, annual adjustments in the levels have been based on the consumer price index instead of changes in the cost of foods in the economy food plan.

The poverty threshold considers money or cash income before taxes and excludes capital gains and noncash benefits (public housing, Medicaid, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). The threshold does not apply to people residing in military barracks or institutional group quarters or to unrelated individuals younger than age 15 (foster children). The threshold does not consider housing costs or any variability in health insurance coverage or the medical needs of family members. In addition, the definition of the poverty threshold does not vary geographically.

Poverty guidelines: Used to determine family or individual eligibility for relevant federal programs

The **poverty guidelines**, issued each year by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, are used to determine family or individual eligibility for federal programs such as Head Start, the National School Lunch Program, or the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. The poverty guidelines are designated by the year in which they are issued. For

example, the guidelines issued in January 2020 are designated as the 2020 poverty guidelines, but the guidelines reflect price changes through the calendar year 2019. There are separate poverty guidelines for Alaska and Hawaii. The current poverty threshold and guidelines are presented in Tables 2.2 and 2.3.

TABLE 2.2 ■ Poverty Threshold in 2019 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years (in Dollars)									
Size of Family Unit	**Related Children Under 18 Years**								
	None	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8+**
One person under 65	13,300								
65 years or older	12,261								
Two people	17,120	17,622							
Householder under 65	15,453	17,565							
Householder 65 or older									
Three	19,998	20,578	20,598						
Four	26,370	26,801	25,926	26,017					
Five	31,800	32,263	31,275	30,510	30,044				
Six	36,576	36,721	35,965	35,239	34,161	33,522			
Seven	42,085	42,348	41,442	40,811	39,635	38,262	36,757		
Eight	47,069	47,485	46,630	45,881	44,818	43,470	42,066	41,709	
Nine or more	56,621	56,895	56,139	55,503	54,460	53,025	51,727	51,406	49,426

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2019).

TABLE 2.3 ■ 2020 Federal Poverty Guidelines (in Dollars)			
Size of Family Unit	**48 Contiguous States and District of Columbia**	**Alaska**	**Hawaii**
1	12,760	15,950	14,680
2	17,240	21,550	19,830
3	21,720	27,150	24,980
4	26,200	32,750	30,130
5	30,680	38,350	35,280
6	35,160	43,950	40.430
7	39,640	49,550	45,580
8	44,120	55,150	50,730
For each additional person, add	4,480	5,600	5,150

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2020).

Who Are the Poor?

The 2019 poverty rate was 10.5% or 34 million, the lowest estimate since 1959 (Semega et al., 2020). In 2019, the South had the highest poverty rate (12%) followed by the Midwest (9.7%), the West (9.5%), and the Northeast (9.4%) (Semega et al., 2020; see also Map 2.1). The variation in regional rates of poverty may be due to people-specific characteristics (percentage of racial/ethnic minorities, female heads of households) or characteristics based on place (labor market, cost of living). Your social position determines your life chances of being poor (refer to Figures 2.1 through 2.3).
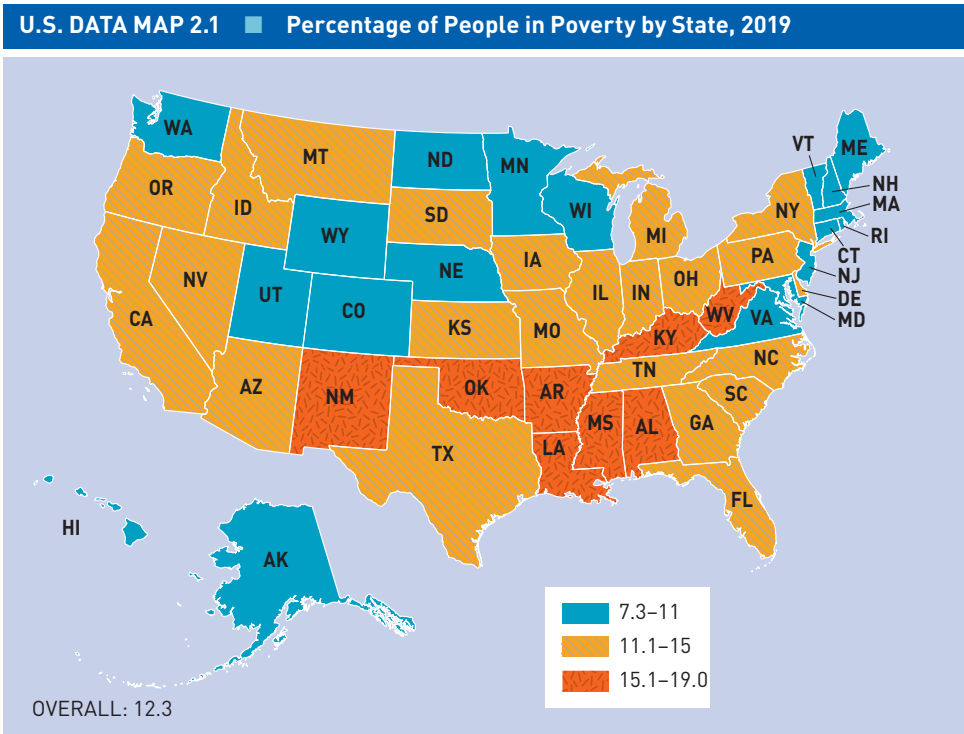
U.S. DATA MAP 2.1 ■ **Percentage of People in Poverty by State, 2019**

7.3–11
11.1–15
15.1–19.0

OVERALL: 12.3

Source: Benson (2020).

FIGURE 2.1 ■ **Percentage Below Poverty Level by Gender, 2019**

Source: Semega et al. (2020).

FIGURE 2.2   ■   Percentage Below Poverty by Age, 2019

Source: Semega et al. (2020).

FIGURE 2.3   ■   Percentage Below Poverty by Race and Ethnicity, 2019
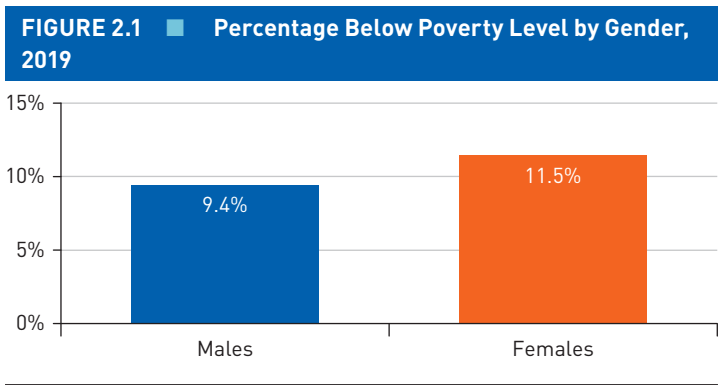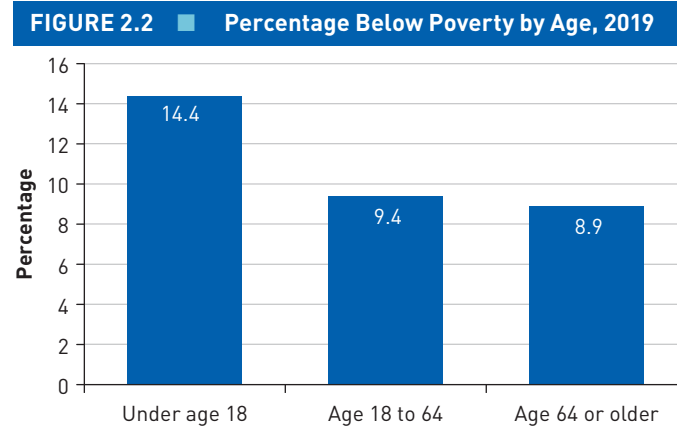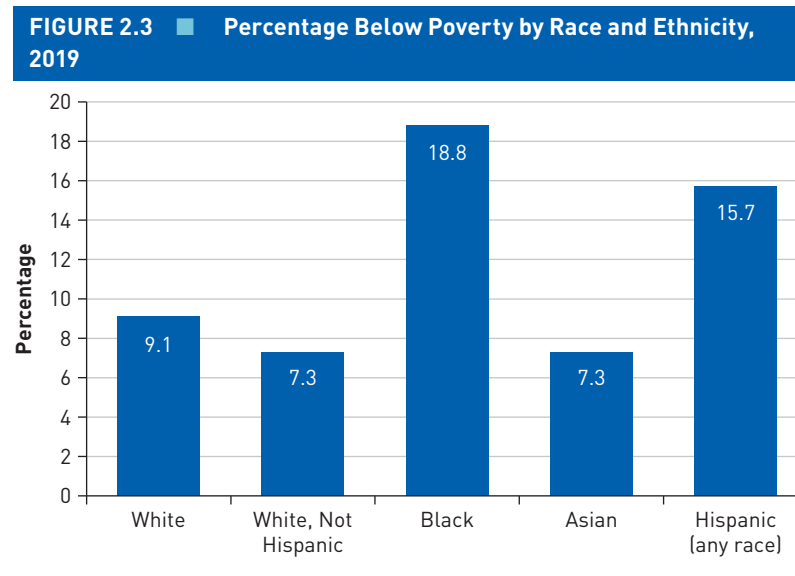
Source: Semega et al. (2020).

Based on 2019 U.S. poverty figures and redefined racial and ethnic categories, whites (who reported being white and no other race category, along with whites who reported being white plus another race category) compose the largest group of poor individuals in the United States. Although 60% of the U.S. poor are non-Hispanic whites, the poverty rate for non-Hispanic whites is the lowest, at 7.3%. Blacks continue to have the highest poverty rate, 18.8%, followed by Hispanics with a rate of 15.7% (Semega et al., 2020). Though individual factors are often identified as the primary cause of poverty, from a sociological perspective, the social structure is responsible for economic inequality. Racial segregation and institutional racism have contributed to the high rate of minority poverty in the United States. Minority groups are disadvantaged by their lower levels of education, lower levels of work experience, lower wages, and chronic health problems—all characteristics associated with higher poverty rates (Iceland, 2003).

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (2001), children are more likely to live in poverty than Americans in any other age group. Family economic conditions affect the

material and social resources available to children. The quality of their education, the neighborhood environment, and exposure to environmental contaminants may reinforce and widen the gaps between poorer and more affluent children and adults (Holzer et al., 2008).

The 2016 poverty rate among children is higher in the United States than in most other major Western industrialized nations, ranking 9th, at 20%. (Refer to Figure 2.4.) The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) released its 2016 report on child well-being in rich countries, identifying the percentage of children living in relative poverty (in households with income below 50% of the national median income). Israel ranks highest at 27.5%, while the lowest relative child poverty rate is in Finland (3.7%) (UNICEF Office of Research, 2016).

FIGURE 2.4   ■   The Percentage of Children (Age up to 17) Living in Households With Income Below 50% of the National Median Income, 2016
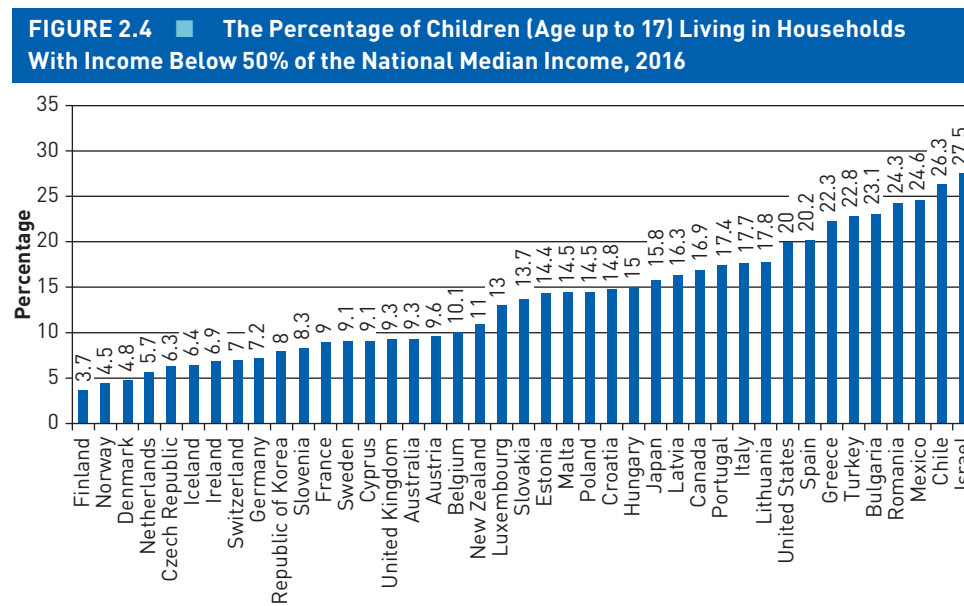
Source: Adapted from UNICEF Office of Research (2016).

The poverty rate for U.S. children peaked in 1993 at 22.5%. In 2019, the poverty rate among U.S. children was 14.4% (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2007; Semega et al., 2020). The risk of being poor remains high among specific groups. In 2018, there were more poor Hispanic children (4.4 million) than poor white (3.3 million) or poor Black children (3.0 million). More than two thirds of poor children lived in families with at least one working family member. There remains a wide variation in children's poverty rates among states; in 2018, rates ranged from 9.5% in Utah to 27.8% in Mississippi among children under age 18 (Children's Defense Fund, 2020).

In 2019, families with a female householder and no spouse present were more likely to be poor than were families with a male householder and no spouse present, 22.2% versus 11.5%. In contrast, the poverty rate for married-couple families was 4.0% (Semega et al., 2020). Single-parent families are more vulnerable to poverty because there is only one adult income earner, and female heads of household are disadvantaged even further because women, in general, make less money than men do. Karen Kramer and her colleagues (2015) argue how single mothers are in double jeopardy: "their earnings are lower not only because of their gender, but also because they have more children than single fathers" (p. 37). Based on their analysis of income data for single mothers and fathers, the researchers found that single mothers are penalized for having more children (each additional child decreases the mother's work income), while single fathers experience an increase in their work income with each additional child.

In their analysis of data from the Luxembourg Income Study, Lee Rainwater and Timothy Smeeding (2003) concluded that American single mothers' children fare worse than the majority of their global counterparts. The poverty rate among U.S. children living in single-mother families is close to 50%; the rate is slightly lower in Germany (48%) and Australia (46%). Countries with poverty rates below 20% include Sweden (7%), Finland (8%), Denmark (11%), Belgium (13%), and Norway (14%). Generous social wages (e.g., unemployment) and social welfare programs reduce the poverty rate in these Nordic countries. Rainwater and Smeeding noted that, all combined, U.S. wage and welfare programs are much smaller than similar programs in other countries.

Poverty rates vary across geographic areas because of differences in person-specific and place-specific characteristics (Levernier, Partridge, and Rickman, 2000). A region may have a higher rate of poverty because it contains disproportionately higher shares of demographic groups associated with greater poverty, such as racial/ethnic minority groups, female heads of household, and low-skilled workers. Area poverty is also related to place-specific factors, such as the region's economic performance, employment growth, industry structure, and cost of living.

There is an additional category of poverty—the working poor. These are men and women who have spent at least 27 weeks working or looking for work but whose incomes have fallen below the official poverty level. In 2017, there were 6.9 million working poor (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Black and Hispanic workers were more than twice as likely as white or Asian workers to be working poor. Individuals with less than a high school diploma were more likely to be classified as working poor than college graduates were. Service occupations accounted for more than one third (38%) of all those classified as working poor (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

David Brady et al. (2010) compared the status of the working poor in the United States to that of 17 other affluent Western democracies. The rate of working poverty was highest in the United States (14.5% of the population). Belgium had the lowest rate of working poor at 2.23%. The sociologists documented how several demographic characteristics were related to the likelihood of being working poor—individuals from households with one income earner, with more children, or with a young household head with low educational attainment.

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL CLASS AND POVERTY

Why do some prosper while others remain poor? Why does poverty persist in some families, but other families can improve their economic situation? In this section, we will review the four sociological perspectives to understand the bases of class inequality.

Functionalist Perspective

Functionalists assume that not everyone in society can and should be equal. From this perspective, inequality is necessary for the social order, and it is equally important how each of us recognizes and accepts our status in the social structure. Erving Goffman (1951), an interactionist, offered a functional explanation of **social stratification**, defining it as a universal characteristic of social life. Goffman argued that as we interact with one another, accepting our status in society and acknowledging the status of others, we provide "harmony" to the social order. But "this kind of harmony requires that the occupant of each status act toward others in a manner which conveys the impression that his conception of himself and of them is the same as their conception of themselves and him" (Goffman, 1951, p. 294).

Social stratification: The ranking of individuals into social strata or groups

Functionalists contend that some individuals are more important to society because of their function to society. For example, society values the lifesaving work of a medical surgeon more than the retail function of a grocery store cashier. Based on the value of one's work or talent, society rewards individuals at the top of the social structure (surgeons) with more wealth, income, or power than those lower down in the social structure (grocery cashiers). According to this perspective, individuals are sorted according to their abilities or characteristics—their age, strength, intelligence, physical ability, or even sex—to play their particular role in society. Certain individuals are better suited for their positions in society than others. Our social institutions, especially education, sort everyone into their proper places and reward them accordingly. Because not all of us can (or should) become surgeons, the system ensures that only the most talented and qualified become surgeons. In many ways, the functionalist argument reinforces the belief that we are naturally different.

Functionalists observe that poverty is a product of our social structure. Specifically, rapid economic and technological changes have eliminated the need for low-skilled labor, creating a population of workers who are unskilled and untrained for this new economy. In many ways, theorists from this perspective expect this disparity among workers, arguing that only the most qualified should fill the important jobs in society and be rewarded for their talent.

Herbert Gans (1971) argued that poverty exists because it is functional for society. Gans explained that the poor uphold the legitimacy of dominant norms. The poor help reinforce cultural ideals of hard work and the notion that anyone can succeed if only he or she tries (so if you fail, it is your fault). Poverty helps preserve social boundaries. It separates the haves from the have-nots by their economics and according to their educational attainment, marriage, and residence. The poor also provide a low-wage labor pool to do the "dirty work" that no one else wants to do. Gans (1995) maintained that the positive functions of poverty should be considered in any antipoverty policy.

Our social welfare system, designed to address the problem of poverty, has been accused of being dysfunctional itself; critics suggest that the welfare bureaucracy is primarily concerned with its own survival. Poverty helps create jobs for the nonpoor, particularly the social welfare system designed to assist the poor. As a result, the social welfare bureaucracy will develop programs and structures that will only ensure its survival and legitimacy. Based on personal experience working with and for the system, Theresa Funiciello (1993) observed, "Countless middle class people were making money, building careers, becoming powerful and otherwise benefiting from poverty. . . . The poverty industry once again substituted its own interests for that of poor people" (p. xix). We will discuss this further in the next perspective.

Conflict Perspective

Like the functionalist perspective, the conflict perspective argues that inequality is inevitable, but for different reasons. For a functionalist, inequality is necessary because of the different positions and roles needed in society. From a conflict perspective, inequality is systematically created and maintained by those trying to preserve their advantage over the system.

For Karl Marx, one's social class is solely determined by one's position in the economic system: You are either a worker or an owner of the means of production. Nancy Krieger et al. (1997) offered this explanation of class:

> Class, as such, is not an a priori property of individual human beings, but is a social relationship created by societies. One additional and central component of class relations involves an asymmetry of economic exploitation, whereby owners of resources (e.g. capital) gain economically from the labor effort of non-owners who work for them. (p. 346)