

A. JAVIER
TREVINO

EDITION

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INVESTIGATING
**SOCIAL
PROBLEMS**





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Miller Projection (Modified)

Investigating Social Problems

Third Edition

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Investigating Social Problems

Third Edition

Editor

A. Javier Treviño

Wheaton College



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/// BRIEF CONTENTS

PREFACE	xix
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	xxv
PART 1: THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS	
Chapter 1: Sociology and Social Problems	1
<i>A. Javier Treviño</i>	
PART 2: PROBLEMS OF INEQUALITY	
Chapter 2: Poverty and Class Inequality	26
<i>Leslie Hossfeld, E. Brooke Kelly, and Julia Waity</i>	
Chapter 3: Race and Ethnicity	56
<i>Saher Selod</i>	
Chapter 4: Gender	86
<i>Tanetta Andersson</i>	
Chapter 5: Sexualities	118
<i>Elroi J. Windsor and Rebecca F. Plante</i>	
Chapter 6: Aging	142
<i>Duane A. Matcha</i>	
PART 3: PROBLEMS OF INSTITUTIONS	
Chapter 7: Education	168
<i>Jenny Stuber</i>	
Chapter 8: Media	198
<i>William Hoynes and Nicholas Hoynes</i>	
Chapter 9: Families	228
<i>Heather E. Dillaway</i>	
Chapter 10: Work and the Economy	260
<i>Jacqueline M. Zalewski</i>	
PART 4: PROBLEMS OF HEALTH AND SAFETY	
Chapter 11: Crime	290
<i>Terrence T. Allen, Ahmed Whitt, and Ronnie A. Dunn</i>	
Chapter 12: Drugs	320
<i>Carrie B. Oser, Dina Perrone, and Brian C. Kelly</i>	

Chapter 13: Health	350
<i>Valerie Leiter</i>	
PART 5: PROBLEMS OF GLOBAL IMPACT	
Chapter 14: The Environment	380
<i>J.M. Bacon</i>	
Chapter 15: Science and Technology	410
<i>Michael Mascarenhas</i>	
Chapter 16: War and Terrorism	436
<i>Ori Swed</i>	
Chapter 17: Urbanization	464
<i>Meghan Ashlin Rich</i>	
GLOSSARY	491
REFERENCES	501
INDEX	539

/// DETAILED CONTENTS

PREFACE	xix
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	xxv

PART 1: THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Chapter 1: Sociology and Social Problems	1
<i>Author: A. Javier Treviño</i>	
The Mobility Puzzle	1
The Sociological Study of Social Problems	3
<i>Patterns and Trends</i>	4
<i>The Objective and Subjective Aspects of Social Problems</i>	5
<i>Types of Action</i>	7
The Sociological Imagination	8
Sociological Research	9
<i>Survey Research</i>	9
<i>Participant Observation</i>	10
<i>Interviewing</i>	11
<i>Mixed Methods</i>	12
Three Sociological Theories	13
<i>Structural Functionalism</i>	14
<i>Conflict Theory</i>	15
<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>	16
Applying the Three Theories to Social Problems	17
<i>Structural Functionalism and Suicide</i>	17
<i>Conflict Theory and Alcohol Consumption</i>	18
<i>Symbolic Interactionism and Precarious Living</i>	18
Social Policy	19
Service Sociology and Social Problems	20
Chapter Summary	22
Ask Yourself	23
Key Terms	23

PART 2: PROBLEMS OF INEQUALITY

Chapter 2: Poverty and Class Inequality	26
<i>Authors: Leslie Hossfeld, E. Brooke Kelly, and Julia Waity</i>	
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Patterns and Trends	30
<i>Defining Poverty</i>	30
<i>Poverty Rates Over Time and Among Different Social Groups</i>	30
<i>"Extreme" Poverty and Low Income</i>	33
<i>The "Social Safety Net"</i>	33
<i>Other Dimensions of Poverty</i>	35
Social Class	35
<i>Roots of the "Classless" Society</i>	36
<i>Class as a Social Science Concept</i>	36
<i>Social Mobility</i>	37
<i>An Alternate Way of Understanding the US Class Structure</i>	37
Inequality	38
<i>Income and Wealth</i>	39
<i>Other Dimensions of Inequality</i>	41
Using Theory to Explain Poverty, Class, and Inequality	44
<i>Functionalism</i>	44
Policy Implications of Functionalism	46
<i>Conflict Theory</i>	46
Policy Implications of Conflict Theory	48
<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>	49
Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism	49
Specialized Theories Applied to Poverty and Inequality	49
<i>Social Empathy</i>	50
<i>Social Inclusion</i>	51
<i>Distributive Justice</i>	51
Social Change: What Can You Do?	52
<i>Volunteer in Your University Food Pantry</i>	53
<i>Nonprofit Organizations and Community Agencies</i>	53
<i>Raising Awareness</i>	53
<i>Agenda for Social Justice</i>	53
Chapter Summary	54
Ask Yourself	55
Key Terms	55

Chapter 3: Race and Ethnicity

56

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(first and second editions)*

Defining Race and Ethnicity in a New Millennium 58

Patterns and Trends 60

Racial and Ethnic Groups 60

Immigration Patterns 62

From Dream Act to "Protecting the Nation" 64

Race and Ethnicity Beyond Our Borders 65

Income, Wealth, and Race 66

Criminal Justice Outcomes and Race 70

Health by Race and Ethnicity 72

Using Theory to Explain Racial Inequality 74

Structural Functionalism 74

Policy Implications of Structural
Functionalist Theories 77

Conflict Theory 77

Policy Implications of Conflict
Theories 79

Symbolic Interactionist Theories 79

Policy Implications of the Symbolic
Interactionist Perspective 80

Specialized Theories About Racial Inequality 80

Intersectionality 80

*Color-Blind Racism and Latin
Americanization Thesis* 81

Social Change: What Can You Do? 82

Color of Change 82

*National Association for the Advancement
of Colored People (NAACP)* 82

United We Dream 82

Community-Based Literacy Organizations 83

Chapter Summary 83

Ask Yourself 84

Key Terms 84

Chapter 4: Gender

86

Author: Tanetta Andersson

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Hasson (second edition)
and Robyn Ryle (first edition)*

Defining Sex and Gender 88

The Study of Gender as a Social Problem 90

Patterns and Trends 91

The Gender Binary and a Level Playing Field 92

Gender-Segregated Spaces 95

The Gender Gap in STEM 97

Gender, Work, and Family 97

*Gender Inequality From a Global
Perspective* 101

Gender Beyond Our Borders 105

Using Theory to Understand Gender Inequality 107

Structural Functionalism 107

Policy Implications of Structural
Functionalism 109

Conflict Theory 109

Policy Implications of Conflict Theory 111

Symbolic Interactionism 111

Policy Implications of Symbolic
Interactionism 112

Specialized Theory: Queer Theory 113

Social Change: What Can You Do? 114

Sylvia Rivera Law Project 115

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 115

Malala Fund 115

The National Domestic Workers Alliance 115

SisterSong 115

Chapter Summary 116

Ask Yourself 116

Key Terms 117

Chapter 5: Sexualities

118

Author: Elroi J. Windsor

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F. Plante (first and second editions)*

Understanding Social Problems Related to
Sex and Sexuality 120

Patterns and Trends 122

Defining Sex 122

*Hookup Culture and the Sexual Double
Standard* 125

Sex Work and Human Trafficking 126

*Sexually Transmitted Diseases and
Sexual Health* 128

Using Theory to Understand Sexual Violence 131

Structural Functionalism 132

Policy Implications of Structural
Functionalism 133

<i>Conflict Theory</i>	133
Policy Implications of the Conflict Perspective	134
<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>	134
Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism	135
Specialized Theories in Sexualities and Social Problems Scholarship	135
<i>Erotic Habitus: Understanding Both Marginalized and Normalized Sexualities</i>	135
<i>Black Feminist Theory: Representing Sexuality in the Media</i>	136
Social Change: What Can You Do?	138
<i>Sexuality Advocacy, Southern Style: SONG and SPARK</i>	138
<i>Sexual Assault: What Men Can Do</i>	138
<i>Trans Sexualities: INCITE! and NCTE</i>	139
Chapter Summary	139
Ask Yourself	140
Key Terms	141

Chapter 6: Aging 142

Author: Duane A. Matcha

Is Aging a Social Problem?	144
<i>The Social Construction of Aging as a Social Problem</i>	145
<i>Ageism</i>	146
Patterns and Trends	149
<i>Demographics</i>	149
<i>Family</i>	152
<i>Elder Abuse</i>	152
<i>Economics</i>	153
<i>Health</i>	155
<i>Political Power</i>	156
<i>Crime</i>	157
<i>Aging Beyond Our Borders</i>	158
Using Theory to Understand Aging	160
<i>Structural Functionalism</i>	160
Policy Implications of Structural Functionalism	162
<i>Conflict Theory</i>	162
Policy Implications of the Conflict Perspective	162

<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>	163
Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism	163
Specialized Theories About Aging	163
<i>Disengagement Theory</i>	163
<i>Activity Theory</i>	164
<i>Political Economy of Aging</i>	164
<i>Continuity Theory</i>	164
Social Change: What Can You Do?	165
<i>Advocacy</i>	165
<i>Internships</i>	166
<i>Volunteering</i>	166
Chapter Summary	166
Ask Yourself	167
Key Terms	167

PART 3: PROBLEMS OF INSTITUTIONS

Chapter 7: Education 168

Author: Jenny Stuber

Inequalities in Our Education System	170
Patterns and Trends	171
<i>Educational Achievement and the Decline of Basic Skills</i>	171
<i>Gaps in Educational Achievement</i>	172
<i>Gaps in Educational Attainment</i>	172
US Education System: A Brief History	174
<i>Education Beyond Our Borders</i>	176
<i>International Comparisons: Situating Education in the United States</i>	178
Germany	179
Finland	180
Mali	181
Using Sociological Theories In Education	182
<i>Functionalist Theory</i>	182
Policy Implications of Functionalist Theory	184
<i>Conflict Theory</i>	184
Policy Implications of Conflict Theory	184
<i>Interactionist Theory</i>	185
Policy Implications of Interactionist Theory	185

Specialized Theories in the Sociology of Education	185
<i>Theories of Language and Culture</i>	186
<i>Critical Race Theory</i>	187
<i>Institutional Theory</i>	187
Investigating Inequalities in Education	188
<i>Student-Centered Explanations</i>	188
Cultural Difference Theories	188
<i>School-Centered Explanations</i>	189
Resources and Pedagogy	189
Tracking	191
Efforts at Educational Reform	191
<i>School Choice</i>	191
<i>Teacher Quality and Comprehensive Services</i>	193
<i>Larger Structural Issues</i>	194
Social Change: What Can You Do?	194
<i>Engaging Change at the Micro Level</i>	194
<i>Engaging Change at the Meso Level</i>	195
<i>Engaging Change at the Macro Level</i>	195
Chapter Summary	195
Ask Yourself	196
Key Terms	197

Chapter 8: Media 198

<i>Authors: William Hoynes and Nicholas Hoynes</i>	
How Media Define Social Problems	200
Patterns and Trends	201
<i>Media and the Construction of Social Problems</i>	201
<i>Crime, Drugs, and Media Routines</i>	201
<i>Media Frames and Sponsors</i>	204
<i>News Coverage Builds on Culturally Resonant Themes</i>	204
<i>Entertainment Media</i>	205
<i>The Media and Moral Panics</i>	205
<i>Media Activism and Social Problems</i>	205
<i>Claims Making in the Era of YouTube and Facebook</i>	206
Debating Media as a Cause of Social Problems	207
<i>Youth and Crime: The Payne Fund Studies and Comic Books</i>	207
<i>Media and Violence</i>	208
<i>Ads, Films, and Youth Smoking</i>	211

<i>Media and Obesity</i>	212
<i>Comparing Media Constructions of Obesity in the United States and France</i>	213
<i>Media and Eating Disorders</i>	214
Emerging Social Problems and New Media Technologies	215
<i>Distracted Driving</i>	215
<i>Cyberbullying</i>	217
<i>The Digital Divide</i>	217
<i>Media Beyond Our Borders</i>	218
Using Theory to Examine Media and Social Problems	219
<i>Functionalism</i>	219
Policy Implications of Functionalism	221
<i>Conflict Theory</i>	221
Policy Implications of Conflict Theory	221
<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>	221
Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism	222
Specialized Theories In Contemporary Media and Social Problems Scholarship	222
<i>Constructionist Approach</i>	222
<i>Public Arenas Model</i>	222
<i>Agenda-Setting Theory</i>	223
Social Change: What Can You Do?	223
<i>Media Reform</i>	223
<i>Media Literacy</i>	224
<i>Efforts to Limit Commercialism</i>	224
Chapter Summary	224
Ask Yourself	225
Key Terms	226

Chapter 9: Families 228

<i>Authors: Heather E. Dillaway and Nancy J. Mezey</i>	
<i>Previous Edition Author: Meg Wilkes</i>	
<i>Karraker (first and second editions)</i>	
Social and Historical Factors Shape Families	230
<i>The Decline of the Family?</i>	231
<i>Defining the Family</i>	231
<i>History Matters</i>	234
Patterns and Trends	235
<i>Marriage</i>	235
<i>Cohabitation</i>	240

<i>Divorce</i>	241
<i>How Adults Become Parents</i>	243
Family Problems and Two Institutional Stakeholders	245
<i>The Realities of Parenthood and Paid Work: Lack of Balance</i>	245
<i>Beyond Our Borders: Emigration and Immigration</i>	247
<i>Criminal Justice: Mass Incarceration's Impact on Families</i>	248
Using Theory to Understand Families	250
<i>Structural Functionalism</i>	250
Policy Implications of Structural Functionalism	251
<i>Conflict Theory</i>	251
Policy Implications of the Conflict Perspective	251
<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>	252
Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism	253
Specialized Theories for Understanding Families	253
<i>Life Course Theory</i>	253
<i>Feminist Intersectional Theory</i>	254
Social Change: What Can You Do?	255
<i>The Reproductive Justice Movement</i>	255
<i>The "MomsRising" Movement</i>	255
<i>The Clothesline Project</i>	256
<i>Advocates for Youth</i>	256
Chapter Summary	256
Ask Yourself	257
Key Terms	258

Chapter 10: Work and the Economy 260

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(first and second editions)

Work and the Labor Force	262
Patterns and Trends	263
<i>Employment and Unemployment</i>	264
The Consequences of Unemployment	267
Jobs, Secure and Insecure	268
<i>Technological Change and Employment</i>	268
<i>Globalization</i>	270
<i>Work and the Economy Beyond Our Borders</i>	270

Stakeholders	271
<i>Wages and Salaries: Winners and Losers</i>	271
<i>Unions and Their Decline</i>	272
<i>Is Increasing Human Capital the Answer to Wage Disparities?</i>	273
<i>Discrimination in the Workplace</i>	274
<i>Women in the Workforce</i>	275
<i>Working May Be Hazardous to Your Health</i>	278
Workplace Stress	278
Job Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction	278
<i>Work in the 21st Century</i>	279
Using Theory to Examine Work and the Economy	280
<i>Functionalism</i>	280
Policy Implications of Functionalism	281
<i>The Conflict Theory of C. Wright Mills</i>	282
Policy Implications of Mills's Conflict Theory	282
<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>	282
Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism	283
Specialized Theories: Weber and Scientific Management	283
<i>Max Weber's Theoretical Approach to Bureaucracy</i>	283
<i>Scientific Management</i>	284
Social Change: What Can You Do?	285
<i>United Students Against Sweatshops</i>	285
<i>Faculty Strikes</i>	286
<i>Service Learning, Volunteering, and You</i>	286
Chapter Summary	287
Ask Yourself	288
Key Terms	288

PART 4: PROBLEMS OF HEALTH AND SAFETY

Chapter 11: Crime 290

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Crime as a Social Problem	292	Addiction and Associated Harms	326
Crimes Are Socially Defined	295	<i>Misuse of Prescription Drugs</i>	327
Data Sources and Correlates of Crime	296	<i>The Problem of Addiction</i>	328
<i>Official Crime Measurement</i>	296	<i>Drug Treatment</i>	328
Self-Report Surveys	297	<i>Drugs and Health</i>	330
Victimization Surveys	298	<i>Drugs Beyond Our Borders</i>	331
Patterns and Trends	298	Patterns of Drug Use Across Social Groups	332
<i>Profiles of Offenders: Gender and Race</i>	298	<i>Drugs and the Life Course</i>	332
<i>Profiles of Victims: Gender and Race</i>	299	<i>Gender and Drug Use</i>	333
<i>Current Crime Trends</i>	299	<i>Race/Ethnicity and Drug Use</i>	334
<i>Crime Beyond Our Borders</i>	301	<i>Sexual Orientation and Drug Use</i>	335
The US Criminal Justice System and Its Stakeholders	303	<i>Intersections of Social Difference</i>	335
<i>Police</i>	303	Using Theory to Understand Drug Use	336
<i>Courts</i>	304	<i>Functionalism</i>	336
<i>Corrections</i>	305	Policy Implications of Functionalism	337
Using Theory to Examine Crime	307	<i>Conflict Theory</i>	338
<i>Structural Functionalism</i>	307	Policy Implications of Conflict Theory	339
Policy Implications of Structural Functionalism	310	<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>	339
<i>Conflict Theory</i>	310	Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism	341
Policy Implications of the Conflict Perspective	312	Specialized Theories on Drug Use	341
<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>	312	<i>General Strain Theory</i>	342
Policy Implications of the Symbolic Interactionist Perspective	313	<i>Social Disorganization Theory</i>	342
Specialized Theories About Crime	313	<i>Social Learning Theory</i>	343
<i>Rational Choice Theories of Criminal Behavior</i>	313	Social Change: What Can You Do?	343
<i>Environmental Theories of Crime</i>	314	<i>Educate Yourself and Your Friends</i>	343
Social Change: What Can You Do?	315	<i>Participate in Risk and Harm Reduction Activities</i>	346
<i>The March for Our Lives Movement</i>	315	<i>Engage in Social Activism to Promote Responsible Drug Policies</i>	347
<i>#MeToo Movement</i>	315	Chapter Summary	347
<i>Black Lives Matter</i>	316	Ask Yourself	348
Chapter Summary	316	Key Terms	348
Ask Yourself	317		
Key Terms	317		

Chapter 12: Drugs 320

Authors: Carrie B. Oser, Dina Perrone, and Brian C. Kelly

Drugs in Societies	323
<i>Drugs as a Social Problem</i>	324
<i>Differences Among Drug Use and Drug Use Disorder</i>	325

Chapter 13: Health 350

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What Are Disease and Illness?	352
<i>Characteristics of a Medicalized Society</i>	354
<i>Two False Assumptions About Health</i>	356
<i>Genetics Alone Explains Disease</i>	356

People Who Are Ill Have Made Poor Lifestyle Choices	357
Common Features	357
Health Inequities	357
Who Gets Sick?	357
Health Inequities by Socioeconomic Status	359
Health Inequities by Race	361
Gender Differences	361
Women's Experience of Health	362
Men's Experience of Health	362
The COVID-19 Pandemic	363
The US Health Care System and Its Stakeholders	365
The Government: Obamacare	365
Health Beyond Our Borders	367
The Medical-Industrial Complex	367
Pharmaceutical Companies	367
Alternative Treatments	368
Patients and Patient Groups	369
Using Theory to Understand Health	369
Functionalism	369
Policy Implications of Structural Functionalism	371
Conflict Theory	372
Policy Implications of the Conflict Perspective	373
Symbolic Interactionism	373
Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism	374
Specialized Theories	374
Bourdieu and Physical, Social, and Cultural Capital	374
Social Capital Theory	375
Fundamental Causes Theory	376
Social Change: What Can You Do?	376
Change the Menu	376
Improve Access to Filtered Water	376
Become a Peer Educator	376
Promote Occupational Health and Safety	377
Contribute to a Culture of Health, and to Health Systems	377
Chapter Summary	377
Ask Yourself	378
Key Terms	378

PART 5: PROBLEMS OF GLOBAL IMPACT

Chapter 14: The Environment 380

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Environmental Problems as Social Problems	382
Patterns and Trends	385
Environmental Inequalities	385
Climate Change	386
Natural Disasters	389
Waste	390
Radiation	391
Using Theory to Examine the Environment	394
Functionalism	397
Policy Implications of Structural Functionalism	397
Conflict Theory	399
Policy Implications of the Conflict Perspective	400
Symbolic Interactionism	400
Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism	402
Specialized Theories In Environmental Sociology	403
Risk Society	403
Ecological Dialogue	405
Social Change: What Can You Do?	406
Familiarize Yourself With Local Conditions	406
Find Groups Taking Action	407
Participate Mindfully and Meaningfully	407
Make Lifestyle Changes That Make a Difference	407
Chapter Summary	408
Ask Yourself	409
Key Terms	409

Chapter 15: Science and Technology 410

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Previous Edition Author: Wenda K. Bauchspies (first edition)

Science and Technology as Socially Defined	412
What Is Science?	412
What Is Technology?	414
What Is Technoscience?	415

Science and Technology as Social Problems	415	The Cost of War	442
<i>Science as a Social Problem</i>	415	<i>War Narratives, War Mobilization, and War Memory</i>	443
<i>Technology as a Social Problem</i>	416	<i>Social Rifts and War</i>	446
Patterns and Trends	417	<i>Two Societies</i>	448
<i>Values and Doing Science</i>	417	Terrorism as a Social Phenomenon	448
<i>Anti-Vaxxer Movement</i>	418	<i>Post-9/11 Attacks</i>	449
<i>Technology and Values</i>	419	<i>Radicalization</i>	450
<i>Science Constructs and Solves a Social Problem</i>	420	Counterterrorism	451
<i>Technological Fixes</i>	421	Using Theory to Examine War and Terrorism	453
<i>Industrialized Science Creates Social Problems</i>	421	<i>Functionalism</i>	453
<i>Social Problems Within Science and Technology</i>	422	Policy Implications of Structural Functionalism	454
Science, Technology, and Their Stakeholders	425	<i>Conflict Theory</i>	456
<i>Transgenic Crops</i>	425	Policy Implications of the Conflict Perspective	457
<i>Nuclear Power Beyond Our Borders</i>	426	<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>	457
Using Theory to Examine Science and Technology	427	Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism	459
<i>Functionalism</i>	427	Specialized Theories on War and Terrorism	460
Policy Implications of Structural Functionalism	429	<i>Carl von Clausewitz on War</i>	460
<i>Conflict Theory</i>	429	<i>Political Economy</i>	460
Policy Implications of the Conflict Perspective	430	<i>Social Movements and Terrorism</i>	461
<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>	430	Social Change: What Can You Do?	461
Policy Implications of Symbolic Interactionism	430	<i>Join Civil Service, Law Enforcement, or the Military</i>	461
Specialized Theories	431	<i>Join a Nongovernmental Organization</i>	461
<i>Social Construction of Science</i>	431	<i>Volunteer in Your Community</i>	462
<i>Social Construction of Technology</i>	432	Chapter Summary	462
<i>Actor–Network Theory</i>	432	Ask Yourself	463
Feminist Epistemologies	432	Key Terms	463
Social Change: What Can You Do?	433	Chapter 17: Urbanization	464
<i>Engineers Without Borders</i>	433	<i>Author: Meghan Ashlin Rich</i>	
<i>EPA Office of Water</i>	433	<i>Previous Edition Authors: Michael Ian Borer and Tyler S. Schafer (first and second editions)</i>	
<i>Educational Outreach Programs in STEM</i>	433	Urbanization, Growth, and Social Problems	466
<i>Campus Sustainability Initiatives</i>	433	Patterns and Trends	469
<i>No-Impact Living</i>	434	<i>Heterogeneity, Strangers, and Community</i>	469
Chapter Summary	434	<i>Urbanization, City Decline, and Redevelopment</i>	473
Ask Yourself	435	Rustbelt Decline and Sunbelt Growth	474
Key Terms	435		
Chapter 16: War and Terrorism	436		
<i>Author: Ori Swed</i>			
War as a Social Phenomenon	438		
The Changing Face of War	439		

City Redevelopment and Gentrification	475	Social Change: What Can You Do?	488
Urbanization in the Shadow of Global Climate Change	476	<i>Diverse Communities and Community-Based Organizations</i>	488
Water Scarcity	477	<i>NeighborWorks America</i>	488
<i>Urbanization Beyond Our Borders</i>	477	<i>Habitat for Humanity</i>	488
Theoretical Perspectives in Urban Sociology	479	<i>United Way</i>	488
<i>Structural Functionalism</i>	479	Chapter Summary	489
<i>Conflict Theory</i>	481	Ask Yourself	490
<i>Symbolic Interactionism</i>	483	Key Terms	490
Specialized Theories in Urban Sociology	485	GLOSSARY	491
<i>Urban Sustainability</i>	485	REFERENCES	501
<i>"Just" Sustainability</i>	486	INDEX	539
<i>Feminist Theory</i>	487		

“Introduction to sociology” courses and courses in “social problems” generally have a couple of things in common. First, they tend to serve as “gateway” courses that introduce students to sociology as a discipline and as a major; second, they teach students to think sociologically. But beyond that, these two kinds of courses are quite different, and the main difference has to do with the issues they cover. While general sociology courses acquaint students with fundamental concepts such as social structure and institutions, social problems courses go beyond this and focus on the troublesome situations endemic to social structures and institutions: poverty, social inequalities, crime, drug addiction, unemployment, environmental disasters, terrorism, and so on. Given the panoply of distressing, harmful, and threatening social situations and conditions—and their complexity—the study of social problems requires, indeed demands, specialized focus by experts.

Every social problems textbook currently on the market is written by one, two, or perhaps three authors who endeavor to cover a wide range of different social problems. This book is different: *It is written by a panel of more than two dozen specialists.* As such, each chapter has been prepared by one or more scholars who specialize in that particular issue. All of them are sociologists who frame the problems in question within the sociological imagination and provide the most current theories, research, and examples. That said, this is *not* a specialized text that assumes foundational knowledge on the part of the student; rather, it is intended to service a general introductory class in social problems. Additionally, although this is an edited text, it is not a reader; every effort has been made to link themes and discussions between chapters. There is, in short, no other textbook like it. The following are descriptions of some of the other unique features of *Investigating Social Problems*, third edition.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Half a dozen or so learning objectives are listed at the beginning of each chapter. These alert students to the chapter’s main themes and ask them to describe, explain, evaluate, or apply the information to be discussed. Each learning objective is repeated next to the first-level heading to which it corresponds, making it easier for students to keep track of the objectives as they read.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

Toward the end of each chapter are critical thinking questions, flagged as “Ask Yourself.” These help students apply the concepts discussed, get them to think about how the information provided relates to their everyday lives, and challenge them to think about what they would do in similar situations. These questions are also intended to spur classroom discussion.

OUR STORIES

Because each chapter is written by one or more sociologists who are experts in the social problem under discussion, chapter-opening “Investigating the Social Problem” boxes present the contributing authors’ “stories” of how they came to be interested in their particular areas of expertise. These short biographies personalize the chapters and help the students see that real people are involved in investigating real problems.

OPENING VIGNETTES

Every chapter begins with a brief opening vignette that sets the stage for the social problem to be discussed. The vignettes are summations of current

news reports, documentary films, ethnographic accounts, or trade books that vividly describe provocative scenarios to introduce students to the social problems at hand.

THE USES OF GENERAL AND SPECIALIZED THEORIES

This textbook, more than any other on the market, takes seriously the application of sociological theory in investigating social problems. As such, each chapter considers the social problem in question from the point of view of the *three general theoretical approaches* of structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. These provide the student with distinct ways of making sense of the complex realities of the social problem. Beyond that, each chapter also provides greater in-depth analysis by employing particular *specialized theories* that the expert author or authors have specifically chosen to use in further investigating the social problem of concern. No other textbook employs specific theories. The utilization of both general and specialized theories shows students that conceptual analysis has an important place in the investigation of social problems.

A FOCUS ON SOCIAL POLICY

As a set of official strategies intended to manage specific social problems, *social policy* is given special consideration in every chapter. Each author proposes policy recommendations for social change that arise from the three main theoretical perspectives. This demonstrates to students that theory has a practical utility in addressing social problems.

KEY THEMES AND BOXED FEATURES

Every chapter underscores three key themes that are of particular importance in the study of social problems. Two of these are offset as boxed features and the other is a consistent chapter heading. “Beyond Our Borders” sections demonstrate that social problems are global in scope. These help students, first, to understand the social problems

of US society in relationship to social problems in other countries. Second, these sections show students that social problems are interconnected in that they affect many countries, cultures, and people around the world. “Experiencing” boxes pertain to intersectionality; that is, the problems in question are considered in the context of how individuals experience them in reference to their interrelated statuses of social class, race/ethnicity, gender, and so on. A new boxed feature to this third edition, “Research Methods,” highlights a study or studies demonstrating how a particular research method—interviewing, survey, ethnography, participatory action research, and so on—or mixed methods have been used in studying the social problem under consideration.

PHOTOS AND OTHER VISUALS

Carefully selected photographs are placed strategically throughout the chapters. These are not merely stock photos of professional models used for visual interest; rather, they are intended to aid students in connecting personally with real-life situations. As such, all the photos are accompanied by informative captions, many of which impart the names of the real people, places, and events that are shown. This is another way in which the text reflects reality. Many of the photo captions also pose a question or questions. Other visuals include tables, figures, charts, and maps designed to help students better understand and remember the information provided in the chapter.

STUDENTS’ ROLE IN SOCIAL CHANGE

After being informed about the problems that plague society, students frequently want to know what solutions are available. Indeed, they often want to know what *they* can do to make a difference. Another unique feature of this textbook is the section, Social Change: What Can You Do?” It provides suggestions and information on opportunities available for students to help solve a particular social problem—through volunteer work, service learning, community activism, and other forms of civic engagement.

GLOSSARIES

This text features marginal glossaries, offering students easy access to definitions and descriptions of concepts and other important terms and phrases. Key terms are bolded in the text on their first substantive use, and a comprehensive glossary appears at the end of the book.

CHAPTER REVIEW

Each chapter ends with a summary that encapsulates the main learning points and a set of discussion questions designed to help students review what they have learned and to foster critical thinking about the material.

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CHAPTER

1

SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

A. Javier Treviño

Visitors at the 2015 Social Innovation Exhibition in Beijing, China. Exhibits were meant to inspire innovation and call attention to social problems.

Xinhua/Alamy Stock Photo

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1** Describe the experience of impoverished students of color.
- 1.2** Define what constitutes a social problem.
- 1.3** Explain the sociological imagination.
- 1.4** Discuss how sociological research can be used to study social problems.
- 1.5** Explain the three main sociological perspectives of structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.
- 1.6** Evaluate how each of the three theoretical perspectives can be applied to improve our understanding of social problems.
- 1.7** Discuss the role of social policy in managing social problems.
- 1.8** Identify ways in which service sociology can make a difference.



Investigating Sociology and Social Problems: My Story

A. Javier Treviño



I took my first sociology course as a high school senior, and I knew I had found my calling. Although no one in my family had ever gone to college, I took both sociology courses offered at the local community college, one of which was about social problems. My appetite whetted, I transferred to a state university to get a BA degree in sociology. After graduating and completing a year of substitute teaching at my former high school,

I took my first sociology course as a high school senior, and I knew I had found my calling. Although no one in my family had ever gone to college, I took both sociology

I decided to get a master's degree in applied sociology, with an emphasis in social planning. Thinking this would be the end of my academic journey, I planned to work as a probation officer, a marriage counselor, or even a sociology teacher at a community college. But I soon realized I needed to know more about *theory* to gain a better understanding of the nature and causes of social problems. Thus, I obtained a PhD in sociology, with concentrations on crime, deviance, and social control. Since then I have looked at various issues—crime, deviance, social control—theoretically. I have served as president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) and edited the volumes *Service Sociology and Academic Engagement in Social Problems* (with Karen M. McCormack), *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Problems* (2 vols.), and *Researching Social Problems* (with Amir Marvasti).

The Mobility Puzzle

- 1.1** Describe the experience of impoverished students of color.

Angie, an 18-year-old Latina, was a high school student living with her grandparents. She was from Port

City, a small town with one of the highest poverty rates and lowest four-year high school graduation rates in the United States. Angie was a hard worker, holding down two jobs for several years, and she had big plans: to get a college degree, find a white-collar job, start a family, and live the middle-class American Dream.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Angie felt that leaving Port City would improve her chances for a better life, so she moved to Florida. After only a few weeks in Florida, with no family support and no job prospects, she returned to Port City and enrolled in the local community college. After several difficult semesters of taking and withdrawing from college classes and working several part-time jobs, in addition to not having convenient transportation to get to either, Angie decided that a college degree and white-collar job were not realistic goals for her.

*Angie is one of several Black and Latinx youth, aged 17 through 20, growing up in poor and working-class families whom sociologist Ranita Ray interviewed and observed for her book *The Making of a Teenage Service Class* (2018). Ray found that these young people's haphazard and uncertain experiences with family, school, and work held them back from becoming upwardly mobile. Although they avoided risk behaviors such as teen pregnancy, drugs, gangs, and violence, they nonetheless ultimately ended up as low-wage service workers. As they transitioned to adulthood, it became obvious that their aspirations of obtaining a professional job, a suburban home, and a stable family remained hopelessly out of reach for these economically and racially marginalized young women and men.*

What is the social problem in the scenario above? Let's see.

Due to their difficult situation, these young people experience a whole range of feelings: anger, helplessness, embarrassment, frustration, hope. They deal with the uncertainty and precariousness of their lives by drawing on random explanations such as “bad genes,” “fate,” and “unknown conspiracies.” Ray found that **social institutions**—any set of persons cooperating together for the purpose of organizing stable patterns of human activity—such as work, education, family, and peer groups both supported and created barriers to these adolescents' efforts to achieve economic security and social status.

But let's look at the larger picture and consider these young adults not on a case-by-case basis but as a generational **cohort**—a group of individuals of similar age within a population who share a

particular experience—and let's focus on educational attainment. Now we see that for the cohort of students that started college in 2011, the same year as Angie, the overall national completion rate was 56.9 percent. However, for the type of institution—community college—that Angie and her friends were likely to attend, the completion rate was only 37.5 percent. Also, in the 2011 cohort, only 48.6 percent of Latinx students and 39.5 percent of Black students completed a college degree compared to 66.1 percent of White students (Shapiro et al. 2017). Now, you may say that not completing college is an unfortunate situation for those who desire to do so, but that situation is not a *social* problem. Fair enough. But let's also look at a situation in which many of the young people Ray interviewed found themselves, and that most of us would agree generally *is* regarded as a social problem: unemployment (the subject of Chapter 10). And let's consider unemployment on the basis of **demographic factors**, or social characteristics of a population—in particular, ethnicity, age, and gender.

When we look at *ethnicity* (the subject of Chapter 3), we find that in 2018, Latinx people like Angie had an unemployment rate of 4.7 percent compared to the unemployment rate of Whites at 3.5 percent (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019a). As for *age*, we know there is plenty of discrimination against older persons in the labor market (as we will see in Chapter 6), but we also know that in 2018 only 30.6 percent of teenagers Angie's age (16 to 19 years) had jobs compared to 79.4 percent for older people (25 to 54 years) (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019b). Concerning *gender* (the subject of Chapter 4), we know that in 2018 women's earnings were only 81.1 percent of men's earnings. As for *education* (the subject of Chapter 7), in 2018 the unemployment rate for people like Angie who only had a high school diploma was twice as high (4.1 percent) as that for people with a college degree (2.1 percent) (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019c). Moreover, when we consider the type of *work* (the subject of Chapter 10) largely available to these young students of color, we find that 21.1 percent of US workers were employed in the service occupations, which include low-income jobs in food preparation and cleaning and maintenance (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019d). But what are we to make of all these statistics? For the moment, simply this: an awful lot of

Americans—tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions—are in the same predicament as those marginalized adolescents, like Angie, whom Ranita Ray interviewed. And though they may have felt alone and isolated, these young people were not the only ones experiencing such circumstances. In other words, unemployment and low-wage employment in service jobs are not only a matter of these young people's *personal* troubles; they are, in fact, a *collective* problem.

Another important issue to consider briefly now, to which we will be paying greater attention in the rest of this textbook, is that some groups of people experience social conditions such as unemployment and lack of a college degree at higher levels than do other groups. It is for this reason that sociologists look at **intersectionality**, or the ways in which several demographic factors combine to affect people's experiences. In Angie's case, we would consider how her age (young adult), ethnicity (Latina), gender (female), and social class (working poor) combine to shape her life.

So let's now look at the demographic factor that, in addition to age, characterized all the young people with whom Ranita Ray spoke: social class (discussed in more depth in Chapter 2). A **social class** is a category of people whose experiences in life are determined by the amount of income and wealth they own and control. Remember that the young adults Ray interviewed were from poor and working-class backgrounds. No doubt you have heard and read about the various social classes that exist in US society. There is no agreement, even among social scientists, on how to distinguish among social classes, much less on how many there are. But we typically hear about the *upper class* (think here about such wealthy people as Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg); the *middle classes* (usually referred to in the plural because there are several levels within this middle rank); and the *poor* (sometimes called the "working poor," the homeless, or the indigent). The *working class*, which we can place between the middle classes and the poor, generally consists of people who have a basic education (a high school diploma, vocational skills training, certification in a service occupation); modest income (earned from hourly wages); and jobs in manufacturing or the "service economy" (e.g., factory workers, truck drivers, cooks, waiters and waitresses, nurses, police officers). Though it was the case that the adolescents



Michael Matthews/Alamy Stock Photo

Black and Latinx lower-class youth find it difficult to achieve a middle-class lifestyle.

whom Ranita Ray interviewed had assiduously avoided becoming teen parents, drug users, and gang members, why is it that millions of young people of color from working-class and impoverished backgrounds, just like them, remain stuck in dead-end, minimum-wage jobs without benefits and security? We'll address this important question in due course, but first we turn to the discipline of sociology and its examination of social problems.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

1.2 Define what constitutes a social problem.

As the study of social behavior and human society, **sociology** is the field most likely to examine systematically social problems such as poverty; social discrimination (on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, or age); crime; drug abuse; immigration; climate change; terrorism; and more. The Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) and its official journal, *Social Problems*, are sources for examining the main trends in social problems theory and research. SSSP consists of sociologists and other scholars, practitioners, advocates, and students interested in the application of critical, scientific, and humanistic perspectives to the study of vital social problems.

The phrase "social problems" as generally understood by sociologists today has had a long history (Marvasti and Treviño 2019). Throughout much of the nineteenth century, it appeared in the singular and referred to *the* problem of the unequal distribution of wealth in general (Schwartz 1997). By the late

nineteenth century, there were many references to the “social question.” This term, framed as a problem, was used to refer broadly to the social changes produced by industrial society that affected the well-being of the working classes. Not only did sociology take “shape around discussion of the ‘social question,’” it legitimated sociology as a distinct discipline (Case 2016, 767). Also during that time, frequent reference was made to the so-called “poverty question,” or the issue of urban poverty. Then, in 1910 Charles A. Ellwood’s *Sociology and Modern Social Problems* appeared as “the first college textbook to fashion the arena of sociology as preeminently the arena of social problems” (Schwartz 1997, 285). By the 1920s, the phrase “social problems” had replaced all previous versions and included sociological study of such troublesome issues as overpopulation, poverty, unemployment, labor conflicts, child labor, racism, crime, and juvenile delinquency.

A shift in the term occurred when Willard Waller (1936) emphasized two important variables: the *state of mind* of the people observing a social problem and their *value judgments*. A few years later, Richard C. Fuller and Richard R. Myers (1941) argued that while every social problem consists of an objective condition, cultural values are what determine whether the objective condition is seen as detrimental. Fuller and Myers noted that due to the conflict of values, some people will see a given situation as troublesome while others will not.

Robert K. Merton (Merton and Nisbet 1971) stated that his concern was not with defining but with *diagnosing* social problems. This requires that the sociologist identify several criteria that enter into the diagnosis. One of the most significant of these criteria is that social problems must be defined by their *consequences*, not their origins. Whether the origins are society-made or nature-made, they are nonetheless socially disruptive. In pointing this out, Merton called indirect attention to nature-made social problems that are the result of earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, famines, epidemics, and so on.

Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse (1987, 5) brought renewed focus to “the subjective side of social problems,” which became commonly known as the *constructionist* perspective. Spector and Kitsuse depicted social problems as involving the process of *claims-making*: “the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and

claims with respect to some putative conditions” (75, emphasis in original).

This textbook consists of 17 chapters on various social problems. They were written by sociologists who are experts in the social problems they discuss. While social problems may sometimes differ in their extent, and while we may research and analyze them differently, we define a **social problem** as a social condition, event, or pattern of behavior that negatively affects the well-being of a significant number of people (or a number of significant people) who believe that the condition, event, or pattern needs to be changed or ameliorated. Let’s consider the various aspects of our definition, and some of their implications, in turn.

Patterns and Trends

To begin with, in discussing social problems we are talking about conditions, events, or behaviors that occur locally, nationally, or globally and cause or threaten to cause harm to all or some segment of the population. Consider the failure of US schools to teach children basic literacy skills as a social *condition* that means many students (particularly poor and minority children) will not be well prepared to enter the job market, and that the United States will be less competitive in the world economy. Or consider the series of *events* that began when COVID-19 (coronavirus disease) was first reported from China in late 2019. This led to the locking down of Wuhan, the city at the epicenter of China’s outbreak. Within three months the virus had spread globally, resulting in more than 4 million infected and over 300,000 deaths. Many governments responded with quarantines, nationwide lockdowns, and school and business closings. Finally, consider as a social problem a *pattern of behavior* like the increased use of e-cigarette and other vaping products by young adults, which, as of early 2020, had led to 60 lung injury deaths and 2,711 hospitalizations (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020).

Because social problems affect large numbers of people, sociologists typically discuss them in terms of *patterns* and *trends*, and use measures of *rates* to describe how frequent and pervasive their occurrence is. For example, we’ve all heard about how politicians, civic leaders, religious leaders, and average citizens are concerned about the crime rates in their

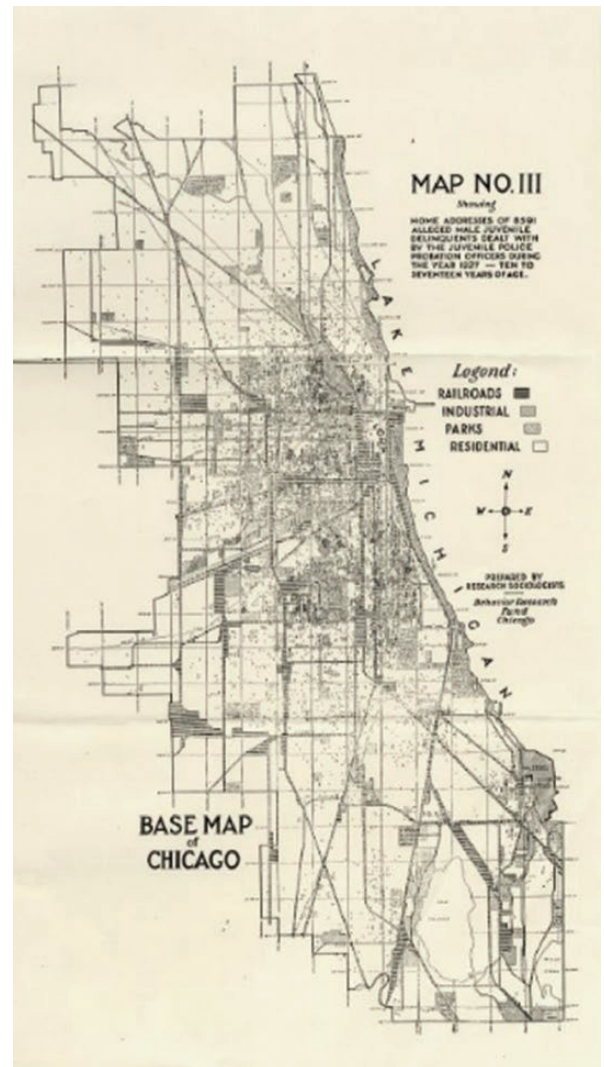
cities and communities. In studying rates of crime, sociologists and criminologists rely on certain **data sources**, or collections of information, like the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR; to be discussed in Chapter 11). When we look at the UCR's percentage of violent crime by US region, we see that in 2018, the South had the highest rate of violent crime (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault), at 40.5 percent, compared to the Northeast region, with 13.2 percent (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2018a).

Patterns and trends can be visually presented in a variety of formats, including charts, tables, and graphs. Throughout this textbook you will see data depicted in this way. Back in the 1920s and 1930s the sociologists at the University of Chicago were interested in studying the incidence and prevalence of alcoholism, suicide, mental illness, and crime and delinquency in the city. Knowing that these problems tend to be more concentrated in some areas than in others, they wanted to identify their distribution throughout Chicago. For this they used maps. One of the most common types was the *spot map*, on which the researchers plotted the locations where a particular social problem was present. For example, Figure 1.1 is a map in which the spots indicate the home addresses of 8,591 alleged male juvenile delinquents in 1927.

The Objective and Subjective Aspects of Social Problems

We will come back to the way sociologists use and produce information about social problems when they do research but, for now, notice that in measuring the rate of crime—or, for that matter, of divorce, population growth, or sex trafficking—we are able to call attention to the **objective aspect of social problems**. In other words, data allow us to show, concretely, how much crime is really out there. Again, in looking at the UCR we can see that in 2018, 295 murders were reported in New York City compared to 292 the year before, and that there were 563 murders in Chicago in 2018 compared to 653 in 2017 (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2018b). These statistics tell us two things in straightforward terms: first, Chicago—with one-third the population of New York—had 268 *more* murders than New York, and second, the murder rate in Chicago *went down* from one year to the next, while that in New York remained basically the same.

Figure 1.1 /// Example of a Spot Map



Source: Originally published in *Delinquency Areas*, by Clifford R. Shaw, with the collaboration of Frederick M. Zorbaugh, Henry D. McKay, & Leonard S. Cottrell, 1929. Reprinted with permission from the University of Chicago Press.

More complicated, however, is the **subjective aspect of social problems**. Here we are talking about what people *define* as a social problem (see Table 1.1). There is often a close link between the objective and subjective aspects of a problem. For example, people are made objectively aware (usually through official data) that the murder rate in their community has doubled over the past five years, and, as a

Table 1.1 /// A Ranking of Social Problems

Rank	Problem	Percentage
1	Government/poor leadership	32
2	Immigration	11
3	Health care	10
4	Unifying the country	6
5	Environment/pollution/ climate change	5

In a Gallup public opinion poll conducted in February 2020, a random national sample of respondents was asked, “What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?” Above are the top five results.

Source: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx>

consequence, they become subjectively concerned about their safety and that of their community.

But even without a direct interaction between the objective and the subjective, people can be troubled about a particular social condition, event, or pattern of behavior. Consider that, on average, over twice as many people in the United States die from injuries sustained in motor vehicle crashes as die from HIV infection: in 2017, fatalities from these two causes were 37,133 and 16,350, respectively (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2018; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration 2019). Yet there are far more organizations and campaigns for HIV awareness in the United States and worldwide—such as Let’s Stop HIV Together, ACT UP, the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, and the Elton John AIDS Foundation—than there are for car crashes. No doubt there are many justifiable reasons for this disproportionate focus, but while *objectively* the problem of auto fatalities causes twice as much harm to people and society, *subjectively* people are much more concerned about the problem of HIV/AIDS. In other words, if one troubling condition is more pervasive or more detrimental than another (and even if there’s factual information indicating this), that doesn’t necessarily mean people will perceive the condition as more problematic.

Another subjective aspect of social problems is the *relativity* with which people identify them. First, what is viewed as a social problem in one time and place may not be viewed as a social problem in another time and place. As we will see in Chapter 6, public attitudes toward the aged have fluctuated between positive and negative over the past 200 years. Currently, politicians and policy makers worry that the rapidly growing segment of the US population aged 65 and older will strain government programs like Social Security and Medicare; contrast this attitude with the past, when elderly people were more respected and were valued for their wisdom and insight. Second, relativity ensures that some segments of the population experience the social problem and others do not, or they experience it to a different extent. For example, the pervasiveness of military-style rifles in US society is a social problem to advocates of stricter gun laws, but not to supporters of gun ownership rights.

As we have seen, the subjective element of social problems is framed by a theoretical approach called **social constructionism**, which describes the social process by which people define a social problem into existence. Simply put, “social problems are what people think they are” (Spector and Kitsuse 1987, 73). Throughout the chapters in this textbook you will find many of the authors taking a constructionist approach in their analyses of various social phenomena.

Returning to our definition of a social problem, we’ve said that a sufficient or significant number of people must conceptualize the condition as problematic. This means that enough people—a critical mass, in fact—must be concerned about the troubling or objectionable situation to call attention to it (in the chapters to follow they are generally called *claims-makers*). Because social problems are collective in nature, large collections of people are required to define them as such.

Sociologists also acknowledge that, when it comes to deciding which conditions are problematic, some people and groups are more significant or have greater influence than others. This speaks to the issue of political *power*. For example, as criminologist Richard Quinney (1970) notes, the more the powerful segments of society—such as politicians, bankers, and corporate executives—are



Win McNamee/Getty Images

Protesters supporting “Medicare for All” hold a rally outside the headquarters of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America in Washington, DC. Do you think these types of protests are effective in bringing about social change?

concerned about crime, the greater the probability that laws will be created to prohibit such behaviors as muggings, store thefts, and drug use. Conversely, there will be fewer laws to prohibit behaviors like profiting from campaign financing, insider trading, and price fixing. According to Quinney, definitions of crime align with the interests of those segments of society with the power to shape social policy. We will discuss the relationship between social problems and social policy shortly. But first, let’s consider why, once people perceive a social situation as detrimental to their well-being or that of others, they believe some sort of *action* must be taken to change or improve the situation.

Types of Action

The type of action needed to bring about large-scale social change is usually aimed at transforming the **social structure**, or the pattern of interrelated social

institutions. Such action typically includes organizing and mobilizing large numbers of people into **social movements**, which are collective efforts to realize social change in order to solve social problems. Think about how the Black Lives Matter movement, the #MeToo movement, and the Youth Strike for Climate movement used various forms of demonstration to bring attention to the issues of racial violence, sexual assault, and climate change, respectively. In order to bring about greater justice and equality for people of color, women, and environmentalist youth, these social movements seek to change, among other things, police practices, women’s rights, and fossil fuel reliance.

Actions meant to ameliorate (from the Latin *melior*, to improve) a problematic condition are usually aimed at helping those in need. This means providing, in some cases, the material relief necessary for physical survival (money, food, clothes); in most cases, however, it means providing nonmaterial

services such as counseling (employment, parenting); dispute resolution (peace talks, mediation, restorative practices); education (instruction and encouragement); and professional consultation (on specific troublesome issues). People hoping to take or support these kinds of actions typically engage in community service, civic engagement, and advocacy. Think about organized forms of volunteerism and activism like AmeriCorps, Teach For America, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, DoSomething, Save the Children, Oxfam, and the Food Recovery Network.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

1.3 Explain the sociological imagination.

We now return to the question of what social factors have caused millions of marginalized young adults

like Angie to struggle to get through college, obtain well-paying jobs, and achieve upward social mobility. Remember that these adolescents—though they try hard to achieve the American Dream of finding stable jobs, getting married, and owning their own homes—largely rely on illogical and individualized explanations such as fate, having bad genes, and institutional conspiracies to account for their unstable life conditions. They feel insecure, powerless, and isolated. They feel trapped.

More than half a century ago, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–1962) wrote the following lines, which could easily be describing the lives of young marginalized men and women today:

Nowadays men [and women] often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles. . . . Underlying this sense of being trapped are seemingly impersonal changes in the very *structure* of continent-wide societies. . . . Neither *the life of an individual* nor the *history* of a society can be understood without understanding both. (Mills 1959, 3; emphasis added)

Mills is saying that in order to understand our personal hardships and our own individual feelings, we must be aware of the larger forces of history and social structure. To gain this awareness, he proposes, we should use a way of thinking that he calls the sociological imagination. The **sociological imagination** is a form of self-consciousness that allows us to go beyond our immediate environments (of family, neighborhood, work) and understand the major structural transformations that have occurred and are occurring. For poor young people of color, some of these transformations have to do with increased inequality of income and wealth, depressed wages, the growth in student loan debt, and the rise in racism and sexism. These are some of the structural factors that in many ways operate against those attempts by Black and Latinx students to create stable and predictable middle-class lives.

The sociological imagination provides us with insight into the social conditions of our lives. It helps us understand why we feel trapped and



Photo by Yanoslava Mills, by permission of the Estate of C. Wright Mills.

C. Wright Mills was a leading critic of US society in the 1950s and made contributions to the sociological perspective known as conflict theory. He taught at Columbia University and wrote about the power arrangements in US society in such books as *White Collar* and *The Power Elite*. His most famous book, *The Sociological Imagination*, was published in 1959.

insecure, isolated and powerless. The sociological imagination helps us make the connection between history and biography, between our own society and our private lives, and become aware of all individuals in similar circumstances. In short, the sociological imagination allows us to *see our personal troubles as social problems*. In this way we are not only able to confront social problems, but we are also aware of the social problems' origins. We come to understand that what we see and feel as personal misfortunes (for example, our inability to achieve upward mobility) are predicaments shared by many others and difficult for any one individual to solve.

But Mills (1959, 150) also asserts that the “problems of [our] societies are almost inevitably problems of the world.” In other words, the sociological imagination requires that we take a **global perspective**, comparing our own society to other societies in all the world's regions. When we can understand the social problems of US society in relationship to social problems in other countries, we are using the sociological imagination even more broadly. You will see that, in discussing social problems, the authors of the following chapters take a global perspective. In addition, each chapter contains a “Beyond Our Borders” section featuring discussion of the problem in a global context.

Also be aware that the expert authors writing on various social problems in these chapters have all been trained in sociology. And regardless of the fact that they specialize in one or a few social problems in their research and writing, as sociologists they have several things in common. First, they employ the sociological imagination, frequently from a global perspective. Second, they rely on sociological research. And third, they make use of sociological theory.

SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

1.4 Discuss how sociological research can be used to study social problems.

In discussing the *objective* aspect of social problems, we noted that sociologists look at patterns and trends regarding police brutality, poverty, the opioid epidemic, auto fatalities, and so on. In order

to identify these patterns and trends, they require numerical facts such as rates, percentages, and ratios. Sometimes these facts are available in data sources such as the General Social Survey (GSS). One of the largest sources for social scientific data in the United States, the GSS includes data on social trends, demographics, behaviors, opinions, and attitudes. GSS data are freely available over the internet (<http://www.gss.norc.org>) to policy makers, researchers, government officials, students, and the general public. Other data sources from which sociologists draw numerical facts for conducting social problems research include the ones listed in Table 1.2. Often, however, sociologists need to collect their own original data firsthand. In either case, we refer to these types of data collection as **quantitative research** because they rely on the empirical investigation of social problems through statistical analysis.

When it comes to the *subjective* aspects of social problems, sociologists tend to be less interested in facts and figures and more interested in the ways people define, experience, or understand problematic situations. In order to achieve this understanding, they engage in **qualitative research**, much as Ranita Ray did when she talked with young women and men of color living in poverty to learn about their lives and feelings. When sociologists conduct studies of social problems, they can employ several **research methods** or techniques for obtaining information. Let's look at three of these research methods.

Survey Research

For quantitative research, the method most commonly used is the **survey**, a technique in which respondents are asked to answer questions on a written questionnaire. A *questionnaire* is a set of questions a researcher presents to respondents for their answers. Questionnaires typically ask questions that measure *variables*, such as attitudes (say, political affiliation); behaviors (religious services attendance); and statuses (marital, employment). Researchers may administer questionnaires in a variety of ways: in person or by telephone, or they can send them through the mail, or they can use email, social media websites such as Facebook or Twitter, or a web-based survey program like

Table 1.2 /// Some Data Sources for Social Problems Research

Data Source	Description
National Center for Education Statistics (http://nces.ed.gov)	Government agency (part of the US Department of Education) that collects data on a variety of issues related to education, including academic achievement and performance, illiteracy, dropout rates, homeschooling, adult learning, teacher qualifications, and public and private school comparisons
National Center for Health Statistics (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/index.htm)	Government agency (part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) responsible for collecting data from birth and death records, medical records, nutrition records, and interview surveys, as well as through direct physical exams and laboratory testing, in order to provide information to help identify and address critical health problems in the United States
Pew Research Center (http://www.pewresearch.org)	Nonpartisan “fact tank” that provides information on social issues, public opinion, and demographic trends shaping the United States and the world
U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (http://www.bls.gov)	Government agency (branch of the US Department of Labor) responsible for collecting data about employment, unemployment, pay and benefits, consumer spending, work productivity, workplace injuries and fatalities, and employment productivity
U.S. Census Bureau (http://www.census.gov)	Government agency (a branch of the US Department of Commerce) responsible for conducting the decennial US Census; serves as a leading source of data about the American people and economy

SurveyMonkey. Because it is often impractical to survey every subject in a population of interest—for example, every homeless person in a large city—the researcher selects a *sample* of subjects that represents that population. In this way the researcher tries to reach conclusions about all the homeless people in a city by studying a smaller number of them. In other words, by measuring relationships between variables, survey research quantifies data and generalizes findings from the sample group to some larger population.

Although they also used interview data, sociologists Edward Telles and Christina A. Sue (2019) relied extensively on survey research in their study examining why ethnic identification tends to endure across several generations of Mexican Americans, to a greater extent than it does with European Americans. Telles and Sue used survey data derived from a longitudinal and multi-generational study of Mexican Americans living in Los Angeles and San Antonio in 1965–1966. They followed this with about 1,500 surveys of the same individuals and their children in

1998–2002. These data sets revealed three main findings about the intergenerational integration of Mexican Americans. First, while Mexican Americans define themselves as being American first and foremost, when compared to European Americans, they have a stronger and more persistent *ethnic core*—a set of structural and institutional forces that foster ethnicity. Second, Mexican Americans exhibit a *durable ethnicity*, or a cultural identity that persists into the fourth generation and beyond. Third, in contrast to European Americans, Mexican Americans experience a *consequential* ethnic identity, one that is consistent and externally imposed on them. These findings from large sample populations could have been obtained only from such large-scale surveys as the one used by Telles and Sue.

Participant Observation

Because qualitative researchers seek to understand the social world from the subject’s point of view, they frequently employ **participant observation**

(sometimes also called ethnography), a method in which the researcher observes and studies people in their everyday settings. The researcher collects data through direct observation and, in this way, gains a deep understanding of and familiarity with the workings of a particular group, community, or social event. Groups and settings that sociologists observe include impoverished neighborhoods, elite schools, homeless shelters, religious groups, secret societies, gangs, domestic workers, undocumented immigrants, and pregnant teens.

A good example of participant observation research is a study in which sociologist Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve (2016) examined how the criminal courts in Cook County (Chicago) dispensed racialized punishments to African American and Latinx defendants before they were found guilty, during their trials, and after they were found guilty. Van Cleve spent nine months working as a law clerk in order to incorporate both participant and observer roles. During that time she observed open-court interactions and private plea-bargaining exchanges. She interacted with court officials and defendants in attorneys' offices, courtrooms, hallways, jails, and judges' chambers. Van Cleve learned how racial meanings become ingrained within the courthouse culture despite the procedural protections available to the defendants—most of whom were people of color. She found that the race-neutral or “color-blind” ideology espoused by the White attorneys and judges masked the racial divides and unequal treatment that were endemic in the criminal courts she studied. Van Cleve could not have revealed the culture of racialized justice that exists in the Cook County court system had she not spent long periods of time observing the everyday nature of the courthouse.

Interviewing

Quantitative research has the advantages of providing precise numerical data and generalizing research findings. Qualitative research, on the other hand, has the advantage of providing in-depth information that describes complex phenomena in rich detail. One research method that may include both quantitative and qualitative elements is **interviewing**, the form of data collection in which the researcher asks respondents a series

of questions. Interviews can be conducted face-to-face or on the phone; on a number of issues (sexual harassment, texting while driving, cut-backs to social welfare programs); and in a variety of settings (at home, on the street, on the internet). Researchers record the subjects' responses in writing or by audio recording. Once recorded, the responses can be treated quantitatively when researchers assign numerical values to them, enter the values into a data analysis program, and then run various statistical commands to identify patterns across responses. Researchers can use the patterns to make comparisons between different sample groups. Interviews can also be treated qualitatively, as guided conversations that let respondents talk at length and in detail. In this case the researcher listens carefully and may ask follow-up



Andrea Neal, a sociology student at Pierce College, interviews Nathan Jaffe, a retired engineer. She is attempting to find out what it means to be a senior citizen in the community. What do you think are some of the merits of conducting interviews in doing research?

Carlos Chavez/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

questions. Once the responses have been recorded, the researcher can identify categories or themes across them. This helps the researcher determine which issues from the interviews are significant.

One study that relied heavily on interviews was done by sociologist Orly Clergé (2019). Wanting to find out how Black middle-class residents of two New York City suburbs framed their cultural and racial identities, Clergé conducted interviews with Black Americans, Haitians, and Jamaicans living in those communities. She discovered that these Black New Yorkers of different nationality groups interpreted their “Black” identities on a spectrum of racial consciousness. As she listened carefully to what her respondents had to say, Clergé realized that their different understandings of being Black

and of doing “Blackness” were constructed around issues of race, class, and nationality.

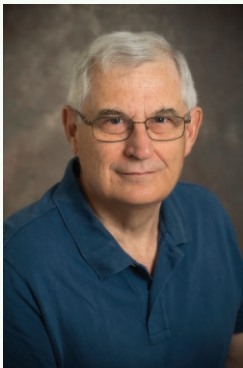
Mixed Methods

Because each method offers its own advantages, sociologists often combine them to achieve a fuller picture of the social problems they are studying. One example is Cinzia D. Solari’s (2018) research exploring the everyday lives of middle-aged grandmothers who migrated from Ukraine to either Italy or the United States. Solari relied on participant observation and on 160 interviews with these grandmothers and their families. Solari presents much of the data she obtained from her observations and interviews through the personal



Understanding Social Problems

Interview With Sociologist Joel Best



You have written many important books that focus on understanding how and why people become concerned with particular social problems. These include The Stupidity Epidemic: Worrying About Students, Schools, and America’s Future; How Claims Spread: Cross-National Diffusion of

Social Problems; and Images of Issues: Typifying Contemporary Social Problems. How, in brief, do social problems emerge?

We start thinking that something is a social problem after someone makes a claim and other folks start to pay attention. Imagine a guy standing on the sidewalk warning about invading extraterrestrials—that’s a claim, but if no one responds to it, then the

alien invasion doesn’t become a social problem. All sorts of people can make claims: people who have been victimized, activists, experts, journalists, and so on. Typically, there is a social problems process: the original claim attracts attention, which leads to media coverage that brings the topic to a wider audience, which in turn affects public opinion, and that leads to policy makers trying to establish some way of dealing with the troubling condition. In my view, it is not the nature of a social condition that makes something a social problem; rather, social problems emerge through this process of collective definition. If people don’t define something as a social problem, then it isn’t one.

You have also written several books on how questionable statistics influence how we think about social problems. These include Damned Lies and Statistics; More Damned Lies and Statistics; and Stat-Spotting: A Field Guide to Identifying Dubious Data. How can we deal with statistics and other

data intended to influence how we think about social problems?

Social problems can be big and messy. We need statistics to understand them. At the same time, we need to realize statistics about social problems may come from people who worry more about the problem than the accuracy of their numbers. “This is a big problem,” they reason, “and here’s a big number, so it must be about right.” This doesn’t mean they’re trying to spread false numbers, just that they may not be thinking carefully about the statistics they use. Therefore, it is important that we think critically about the social problems statistics we hear. In particular, when you encounter a statistic that seems particularly alarming, it’s a good idea to take a deep breath and start asking some questions. Who did the counting? What did they count? How did they count it, and why? Statistics may be accurate, but sometimes we discover that a figure is little more than a guess.

Source: Author interview conducted April 7, 2017.

In the conference talk that you gave as president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, you ended by saying that you believe in the value of the sociological perspective. What value does sociology have for understanding social problems?

Sociology is like a pair of glasses: put them on and you’ll see the world differently. Our commonsense reasoning tells us that of course the world is the way it is, while everyday explanations for people’s behavior tend to emphasize personality traits. In contrast, sociology teaches us to look for the ways people affect one another, for the patterns in social life. It encourages us to stop taking things for granted, to question why our lives take the forms they do. Psychologists tend to focus on the behavior of individuals, just as economists try to understand life in terms of rational choices. Each of these perspectives can be illuminating when we ask some sorts of questions. Sociology offers another, distinctive perspective. I find the questions it can answer particularly interesting, and that’s why I became a sociologist.

life stories of 10 of the Ukrainian grandmother migrants. By employing these various techniques Solari discovered, first, that the grandmothers experienced a “double marginalization” due to the differing expectations these countries had of them, and second, that depending on whether these grandmothers migrated to the United States or Italy, they experienced their migration as either forced or voluntary.

In addition to these three research methods, others that have been used to study social problems include narrative inquiry, institutional ethnography, participatory action research, autoethnography, experimentation, and visual research methods (Marvasti and Treviño 2019). In each of the chapters to follow you will find a boxed section, “Research Methods,” that features a study demonstrating how a particular research method or mixed methods have been used in studying the social problem under consideration.

THREE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

1.5 Explain the three main sociological perspectives of structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Once researchers have collected the information they need—whether through data sources, surveys, participant observation, interviewing, or other research methods—they must then *make sociological sense* of that information. In other words, they need to manage the data in a way that tells them something new or different about the social issue under consideration. In order to do this, they use **theory**, a collection of related concepts.

Concepts are ideas sociologists have about some aspect of the social world. They tend to be articulated as terms—words or phrases that make up

the vocabulary of sociology. So far in this chapter, we have used and defined several sociological concepts, including “social institution,” “social class,” “social problem,” “social constructionism,” and “social structure.” Throughout this textbook you will meet many concepts, introduced in bold-face blue type. These terms are defined in the text, and the glossary at the end of the book provides a comprehensive listing of these concepts and their definitions.

Concepts are also the building blocks of theory, and in this sense a theory is an attempt to articulate the relationship between concepts. Sociologists, for example, may want to examine the connection between certain types of social structure and certain types of social problems. Thus, they may pose such questions as the following: Does the kind of economic institution we have contribute to high levels of poverty? How does our political system prevent us from providing adequate health care to everyone? Why do some communities have higher rates of violent crime than others? Or sociologists may want to analyze the relationship between social problems and certain behaviors and attitudes. In that case they might ask questions like these: How might sexist attitudes prevent the country from maximizing the numbers of scientists and engineers it produces? Why do students in some countries have uniformly high scores on math, science, and literacy exams, while in the United States there are large gaps in performance between the highest-scoring and the lowest-scoring students?

While sociology encompasses many theories, there are three main theories with which all sociologists, regardless of their specialty areas, are familiar: structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. Because these theories are very broad, they are sometimes called **paradigms**, or theoretical perspectives. Let’s get familiar with each of these in turn before we look at how policy makers can apply them to addressing social problems.

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism (or functionalism) is the sociological theory that considers how various social phenomena function, or work in a positive

way, to maintain unity and order in society. The theory of structural functionalism dates back to the beginnings of sociology, and some of its ideas can be traced to several nineteenth-century sociologists, including Herbert Spencer.

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) viewed society as an organism, which is to say as an integrated *system* made up of different social institutions, all working together to keep it going. Just as the human body (a biological organism) has many organs (the heart, brain, liver, kidneys, and so on), all of which are necessary for its survival, so too does society need the various institutions of the economy, the government, the family, religion, and so on to keep it orderly and cohesive. Each institution works in different ways to benefit society. For example, some of the **functions**—that is, positive consequences—of the family are that it provides an expedient way for humans to reproduce themselves biologically; it provides emotional support to family members; and it teaches, or *socializes*, children in the rules of society. Some of the functions of religion are that it gives answers to the larger questions of existence (What existed before the Big Bang? What happens after death?); it presents us with ideas about what is right and wrong; and it brings members of a particular religious group closer together in their shared beliefs. In short, social institutions have functions for society.

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) was the most famous theorist of structural functionalism. His theory of the functions of social systems is very complex, but here we are concerned only with what he called “the problem of order.” Simply put, Parsons believed that for society as a social system to keep functioning smoothly, it needs to maintain social order. And because the social institutions already provide functions for society, social order is common. However, sometimes strains and tensions threaten to disrupt social integration and stability. Think of wars, revolutions, political polarization, racial tensions, and terrorist attacks. Parsons believed that one way societies can prevent such disruptions is by encouraging people to conform to society’s expectations. This is best achieved by having them abide by the same shared **norms**, or rules, and **values**, or beliefs. Thus, for Parsons, consensus produces social order.

Sociologist Robert K. Merton (1910–2003) agreed that social institutions and social structures can

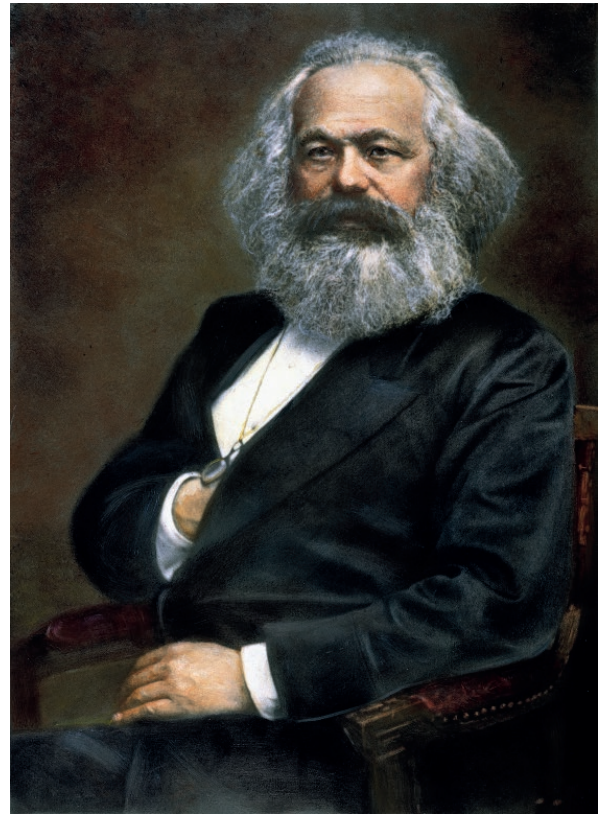
have functions. But he saw that they can also have **dysfunctions**, or negative consequences. Consider how the family can be a refuge from the larger world, where family members can get nurturance, love, and acceptance in ways that are not available to them in other institutional settings. But also consider how the family can be the setting where domestic violence, contentious divorce, and the sexual and emotional abuse of children may occur.

Merton would have us examine both the functions and the dysfunctions of social phenomena, and he would also have us ask of our social structures, “Functional for whom?” In other words, we must be aware that while a social phenomenon like income inequality in the social structure of US society is dysfunctional for one group (the poor), it may be quite functional for another (the wealthy). This may be one reason why the rich, as stakeholders in the economic institution, may not define income inequality as a social problem or may not want to change the social structure that creates it.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is the sociological theory that focuses on dissent, coercion, and antagonism in society. In this sense we may see conflict theory as the opposite of structural functionalism. It too has its roots in the nineteenth century, particularly in the ideas of Karl Marx.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was first and foremost engaged in critiquing **capitalism**, the economic system that includes the ownership of private property, the making of financial profit, and the hiring of workers. Marx saw two main antagonistic social classes in capitalist society. The first, the **capitalists** (or bourgeoisie), make up the economically dominant class that privately owns and controls human labor, raw materials, land, tools, machinery, technologies, and factories. The second social class consists of the **workers** (or proletariat), who own no property and must work for the capitalists in order to support themselves and their families financially. In their effort to maximize their profits, capitalists exploit workers by not paying them the full value of their work. Because their labor is bought and sold by the capitalists who hire and fire them, workers are treated as machines, not as human beings. Many sociologists have been influenced by Marx’s



Karl Marx was a nineteenth-century revolutionary and critic of the economic institution known as capitalism. He believed that capitalist societies like England and the United States would eventually become communist societies. His best-known work, which he coauthored with Friedrich Engels, is *The Communist Manifesto*, first published in 1848.

conflict theory and examine the frictions that exist between the powerful social classes (the rich, the 1%, the wealthy) and the powerless social classes (the working class, the 99%, the poor), and that give rise to a variety of social problems related to the unequal distribution of wealth.

Ralf Dahrendorf departed from Marx’s focus on the conflict between social classes and looked instead to the conflict between **interest groups**, or organized associations of people mobilized into action because of their membership in those associations. For Dahrendorf (1959), social inequalities have their basis not only in economic differences but also in *political power*. Simply put, those with power give orders and those without power take orders. Power relationships lead to the tensions between interest groups (also called advocacy groups or lobbying

groups). Thus, for Dahrendorf, social conflict in relationship to social problems occurs among special interest groups—such as NextGen America, the Christian Coalition of America, Demand Universal Healthcare, and Citizens United—some of which are politically progressive while others are politically conservative.

Those groups with sufficient political power use it, usually by influencing legislation, to protect their interests. Consider the politically powerful interest groups on opposite sides of the issue of gun control, such as those that support required background checks for all gun purchases (Everytown for Gun Safety) and those that oppose such checks (National Rifle Association). Or consider interest groups that favor abortion rights (Emily's List and Planned Parenthood) and those that favor ending abortion (the Susan B. Anthony List and the National Right to Life Committee).

In short, conflict theory looks at how one group or social class tries to dominate another in situations it perceives as threatening to its interests and well-being. In this sense, what one group considers to be a social problem (say, the sale of military-style rifles), another group may not.

Symbolic Interactionism

As mentioned above, in the discussion of the subjective element of social problems, the social constructionist approach says that certain social conditions, events, or patterns of behavior are social problems because people *define* them as such. The third major sociological theory, symbolic interactionism, also takes a definitional approach to understanding social problems, but rather than looking at the social structure it tends to focus on **social interaction**, or the communication that occurs between two or more people. **Symbolic interactionism** is the sociological perspective that sees society as the product of symbols (words, gestures, objects) that are given meaning by people in their interactions with each other. Symbolic interactionism has its origins in the ideas of George Herbert Mead.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) was interested in understanding the relationship between mind, self, and society (Mead 1934). For Mead, **mind** refers to the internal conversations we have

within ourselves. In other words, we continuously think about ourselves and about what is going on around us, and all this requires the use of language. Language is nothing more than a system of **symbols** (objects that represent something else) that we interpret. For example, you are reading the words on this page because you have learned to interpret the symbols (the written words) of the English language. But unless you can read Russian, the following words are not meaningful to you: Этè слова сля вас не ёмеют нёкакого значенёя. In the same way you learned to read words, you learned to read or “define” a clock (symbolic of time), a map (symbolic of a particular physical place), a smile (symbolic of an emotion), and so on.

Just as important as our ability to define symbols is our ability to define our *self*. The **social self** is a process by which we are able to see ourselves in relationship to others. We are not born with a social self, which is why newborns do not have a sense of who they are. They have no self-consciousness. We can acquire the social self only after we have learned to consider who we are in relationship to the attitudes and expectations of others, of *society*.

Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929) went further and proposed the concept of the **looking-glass self**, or the idea that we see ourselves as we think others see us (Cooley 1902). For example, if our friends, family, and teachers continually tell us we are clever, then we are likely to see ourselves as clever. If, on the other hand, teachers, police, and judges define, or “label,” us as delinquent, we are likely to take on the identity of delinquent.

In addition to defining symbols (words, gestures, objects) and our social self (who we are), we define social situations. Long ago, sociologist W. I. Thomas noted that *if people define a social situation as real, it will be real in its consequences* (Thomas and Thomas 1928). This means, for example, that if you and other students define what is going on in the classroom as a lecture, you will then listen closely to the speaker and take lecture notes. But if you define it as a funeral or a religious revival (admittedly harder to do), then it is that situation instead, and you will act appropriately. And if you define it as a party, then the consequences are that you stop taking notes and stop raising your hand to ask questions and instead mingle, talk to your friends, and have a good time.

As an extension of these ideas, we may also propose a concept originated by Merton: the **self-fulfilling prophecy**, or the social process whereby a false definition of a situation brings about behavior that makes the false definition “come true.” Let’s combine and apply the self-fulfilling prophecy and the looking-glass self. Imagine a five-year-old child, Marisol, who is a recent immigrant from Guatemala and speaks only Spanish. Her parents enroll her in an English-only school, and her teacher notices that Marisol does not say much in class, does not raise her hand to ask questions like the other students, and does not interact with playmates on the playground. After a while the teacher—and other teachers and students—may label Marisol as shy, introverted, a slow learner, asocial, and so on. Now, Marisol is actually none of these things, but she eventually starts to see herself that way and then becomes timid and unsure of herself. A couple of years later, Marisol is placed in a classroom for slow learners with interpersonal issues.

APPLYING THE THREE THEORIES TO SOCIAL PROBLEMS

1.6 Evaluate how each of the three theoretical perspectives can be applied to improve our understanding of social problems.

Let us now consider how we can apply each of the three main theoretical perspectives in sociology to gain a better understanding of social problems.

Structural Functionalism and Suicide

To illustrate how functionalism has been applied to the real world, we turn to the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and his classic study on the social problem of suicide. Durkheim understood that all societies, in order to continue as they are, need two things. The first, **social integration**, describes a certain degree of unity. In other words, people need to come together and stay together. The opposite of social integration is *social disintegration*, which leads to the collapse of society. The second necessary condition, **social regulation**,

means that to maintain social order, societies need to have a certain degree of control over the behavior of their members. This is typically achieved by having people follow social norms. The opposite of social regulation is *social disorder*, which may lead to what Durkheim called **anomie**, or a state of normlessness. Both social integration and social regulation are functional for society, but they can become dysfunctional and lead to social problems when there is too much or too little of them.

Turning to the differences in suicide rates among various groups, Durkheim ([1897] 1979) found, for example, that suicide rates are higher among men than among women, higher for those who are single than for those who are married, and higher among Protestants than among Catholics or Jews.



Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim is regarded as one of the early founders of sociology. Working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he made many contributions to the topics of social solidarity, suicide, and religion. His most famous books include *The Division of Labor in Society*, *Suicide*, and *The Rules of Sociological Method*.

He explained these and other group differences by looking at the degree of social integration and social regulation and identified four types of social suicide.

When a group has too much social integration, when it is overly cohesive, conditions lead to **altruistic suicide**. Here, group members sacrifice their lives for the group. For example, although many complex reasons motivate suicide bombers, suicide bombing is a type of altruistic suicide because it requires that the bombers place less value on their own lives than on the group's honor, religion, or some other collective interest (Hassan 2011). By contrast, when a society has too little social integration, when its social bonds are weak, **egoistic suicide** may result. In this case, persons in certain populations kill themselves due to extreme isolation. For example, several studies indicate that while a number of risk factors cause older adults to commit suicide, one of the leading ones is social disconnectedness, which stems from living alone, losing a spouse, experiencing loneliness, or having low social support (Van Orden and Conwell 2011).

Too much social regulation, or excessive social control over people's behavior, can cause **fatalistic suicide**. Members of certain groups end their lives because they see no escape from their oppressive situation. For example, among women in Iranian society, fatalistic is the dominant type of suicide due to a traditional male-dominated social structure that, among other things, forces women into marriage at an early age and prohibits divorce, even in the case of domestic violence (Aliverdinia and Pridemore 2009). On the other hand, too little social regulation, which leads to the absence of norms, causes an increase in **anomic suicide**. This means that people kill themselves because they lack rules to give them social direction for meeting their needs. For example, a long-term causal relationship exists between the unemployment rate and men's suicide rate. One study explains that when men lose their jobs, society's regulating influence on their need to work is disrupted, causing an increase in their suicides (Riley 2010).

In sum, Durkheim demonstrates how an unbalanced degree of social integration and social regulation can be dysfunctional for society, resulting in high rates of suicide.

Conflict Theory and Alcohol Consumption

The use of conflict theory is demonstrated by Joseph R. Gusfield's (1986) examination of how a particular group—rural, middle-class, evangelical Protestants—tried to preserve its own **culture**, or style of life, in US society during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This cultural group, which Gusfield calls “the Dry forces,” were reformers who wanted to correct what they saw as a major social problem: the drinking habits of ethnic immigrants. The ethnic immigrants who threatened the moral way of life of the Dry forces, and who therefore needed to be reformed and controlled, were mainly urban, lower-class Irish and Italian Catholics and German Lutherans whose cultures did not prohibit the consumption of alcohol. These ethnic groups were also generally ranked at the bottom of the US social and economic ladder and thus had limited political power.

In order to retain the dominance of their way of life, the middle-class Protestants attempted to reform the ethnic drinkers. They did this, first, by trying to persuade them to stop their “immoral” drinking voluntarily and by inviting them to membership in the middle class. However, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as the United States was becoming more urban, secular, and Catholic, the Dry forces changed their tactics, substituting for persuasion a method that was more hostile and antagonistic: they tried to *coerce* reform through legislation. This coercive strategy culminated in a national policy of prohibition in 1919, when Congress ratified the 18th Amendment to the US Constitution, which prohibited the manufacture, sale, and transportation of intoxicating liquors. This application of conflict theory clearly shows that the interest group with the most political power can prohibit behaviors it considers problematic.

Symbolic Interactionism and Precarious Living

Waverly Duck (2015) takes a symbolic interactionist perspective to explain how the residents of a low-income African American neighborhood where drug dealing was prevalent were able to

survive their precarious existence. He found that they lacked decent jobs and schools, were likely to get in trouble with the criminal justice system, had little public assistance, and so on. Duck also found that the young Black male residents who sold cocaine to White suburbanites were well integrated into the community. Duck's most important finding, however, was that the community possessed a local **interaction order**. This was a lifestyle that shaped residents' everyday interactions with each other in order to help them cope with their poverty and racial isolation.

Because this interaction order involved personal interactions that differed sharply with those of the American mainstream, outsiders saw the neighborhood as disordered, and community routine activities appeared to them as senseless and chaotic. For the residents, however, it was the opposite. The interaction order allowed them to accurately interpret and appropriately respond to the social situations in which they daily found themselves. It helped them to define what was meant by a particular gaze, a way of walking, or a way of dressing. It made it possible for residents to move safely through their community's organized drug trade, to educate themselves and their children, and to make money. Indeed, it gave everyone—law-abiding citizens and drug dealers—a sense of order, predictability, and solidarity.

The local interaction order provided residents with a shared understanding of reciprocity and respect. For example, it ensured that no one broke into the homes of elderly people or mugged them on the street. In taking a symbolic interactionist approach, Waverly Duck shows how neighborhood residents navigated challenges by defining their everyday interactions as involving relationships of trust, mutual understanding, and cohesiveness.

Structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism are the three most general theoretical frameworks in sociology. But given that the study of society and social behavior is a complicated business, and that there is a wide variety of social problems to consider, sociologists have constructed specialized theories to deal with this complexity and variety. Specialized concepts and theories examine narrower features of society (say, the institution of the economy) or specific social problems (the rising rates of unemployment).



Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images

Inspired by Marx's writings, Vladimir Lenin became the chief architect of the first successful socialist revolution, the Russian Revolution of 1917. This photo shows him giving a speech in Red Square on May Day 1919. Now that the Soviet Union has collapsed and communism is waning, do you think that Marx's ideas are still relevant today?

There are many such specialized concepts and theories within sociology—hundreds, in fact. We will not examine them all in this book, however.

All the chapter authors have expertise in particular areas of social problems research, and they employ specialized concepts and theories intended to address their concerns. You will see that some of these concepts and theories are interrelated across chapters, whereas others are more narrowly focused. In either event, the idea is to go beyond—deeper and further—what the three theoretical perspectives can offer.

SOCIAL POLICY

1.7 Discuss the role of social policy in managing social problems.

We noted earlier that one possible way to deal with pervasive social problems like poverty is to change

the social structure radically. However, short of a **social revolution**—a total and complete transformation in the social structure of society (such as the French Revolution of 1789, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Chinese Revolution of 1948)—most social change is achieved piecemeal, and frequently reforms are begun through **social policy**, a more or less clearly articulated and usually written set of strategies for addressing a social problem.

Governmental implementation of social policy takes the form of **legislation** that makes some condition or pattern of behavior legal or illegal. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, a piece of legislation passed by Congress and signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, made racial segregation in public accommodations illegal in the United States. Another type of social policy consists of an organization's guidelines about what ought to happen or not happen between members in regard to a particular issue, such as sexual harassment, bullying, smoking, infection control, and conflicts of interest. These guidelines are usually disseminated through handbooks, manuals, and official websites.

Although social policy has many goals, our concern here is with its role in managing social problems. Each chapter includes a section proposing policy recommendations for social change that arise from the three main theoretical perspectives.

SERVICE SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

1.8 Identify ways in which service sociology can make a difference.

This is a textbook about social *problems*, which means we will be dealing with many issues that are troubling, harmful, or just plain distressing. It is understandable that you may feel “it’s all bad news,” that something needs to be done, that things need to change. But how? If sociology is the discipline that studies social problems, you may want to know what solutions it has to offer. Indeed, you may be interested in finding out what *you* can do to make a difference.

Concerns about the problems of urban life and ways to alleviate them go back to the early days

of US sociology, at the beginning of the twentieth century. As sociology became a more popular subject of study in colleges and universities around the country, it took two basic forms: the study of sociological theory and the practice of ameliorative reform and service. At that time, most people thought of sociology as a form of philanthropy (Ward 1902), and courses with titles such as Methods of Social Amelioration, Charities and Corrections, and Preventive Philanthropy were common (Breslau 2007). Undergraduate sociology programs were even more focused on training in charity and social service work.

After its founding in 1892, the University of Chicago established the first full-fledged department of sociology in the country. At least initially, sociologists there were diligently engaged with applied social reform and philanthropy (Calhoun 2007). Indeed, the founder of the department, Albion W. Small (1903, 477), pointed out that sociology “is good for nothing unless it can enrich average life; our primary task is to work out correct statements of social problems and valid methods of solving them.”

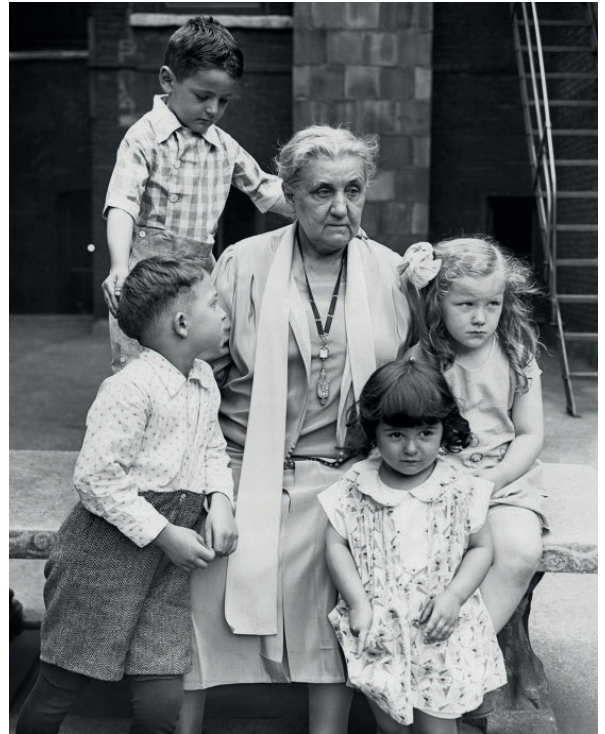
Along with the development of sociology at Chicago, between 1885 and 1930 a unique, active, and engaged sociology was being implemented in many of the **settlement houses**—neighborhood centers providing services to poor immigrants—that had been founded in major cities throughout the United States. Settlement sociologists considered the settlement an experimental effort in the solution of the social problems of the modern city. Jane Addams (1860–1935), who in 1889 cofounded the most famous of the settlement houses, Hull-House, in one of Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods, was among them. Addams, and others like her, sought to compile empirical data on various social problems by gathering detailed descriptions of the conditions of groups living in poverty. In addition, Hull-House provided a wide variety of community services, including securing support for deserted women, conducting a kindergarten and day nursery, implementing various enterprises for neighborhood improvement, and establishing a relief station.

A new type of sociology, devoted to the practical amelioration of social problems and with the early US sociology of relief and reform as its heritage, has emerged. **Service sociology** is a socially responsible

and mission-oriented sociology of action and alleviation (Karraker 2018; Treviño 2011, 2012, 2013, 2018, 2019; Treviño and McCormack 2014). Motivated by care and compassion, service sociology is concerned with helping people meet their pressing social needs. Its practitioners believe the personal needs of one individual are not so different from the collective needs of others in similar life circumstances. This belief is the reason why service sociology treats individuals as people in community with each other. Its main goal is to help people by meeting their essential needs and concerns through service, including community counseling, coaching, mentoring, tutoring, conflict resolution, community gardening, friendly visiting, community cleanup, block activities, giving circles, crime prevention, community organizing, advocacy, voter registration, participatory action research, service learning, and mediation.

Today, more than ever, we need service sociology, and student involvement in it. Consider that, during the Barack Obama presidency, there had been a renewed interest in volunteering and social service—a so-called compassion boom—particularly among the millennial generation. Today, over 30 percent of all US adults take part in some form of community service, with more than 77 million volunteers serving. In 2018, these volunteers dedicated nearly seven billion hours to volunteer service, and the economic value of this service was about \$167 billion (Corporation for National and Community Service 2018b). Across the country, millions of volunteers are engaged in a range of critical areas, including tutoring and teaching; participating in fundraising activities or selling items to raise money for charitable or religious organizations; collecting, preparing, distributing, or serving food; and contributing general labor (Corporation for National and Community Service 2018b).

What is more, no less than 26.1 percent of Generation Y Americans volunteered in 2018, and over six million of them dedicated more than 474 million hours of service to communities across the country, primarily in activities like youth mentoring, fundraising, and teaching and tutoring (Corporation for National and Community Service 2018a). In addition to community service, many citizens across the country are engaged civically. Indeed, in 2018, millions of US adults participated



George Rinhart/Corbis via Getty Images

In 1889, Jane Addams cofounded Hull-House, a settlement house in a poor neighborhood in Chicago. Hull-House provided a wide variety of community services for poor immigrants, especially women and children. Addams received the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her work in 1931.

in civic organizations, fixed things in their community, attended public meetings, and voted in local elections. Many also engaged in “informal volunteering” such as supporting friends and family (43.1 percent) and doing favors for their neighbors (51.4 percent) (Corporation for National and Community Service 2018b).

There are also high-profile national service initiatives, such as the annual Martin Luther King Jr. National Day of Service and the 9/11 National Day of Service and Remembrance. In addition, Americans participate in civil society programs such as AmeriCorps, which engages over 75,000 people in intensive public service work, and City Year, with over 3,000 young adults devoting one year of full-time community service to help students in underserved schools reach their full potential and graduate from high school. This service work is being done by many ordinary people who are picking up the slack for a city, a state, a nation unwilling or unable to attend to many critical matters that

directly affect thousands, even millions, of people (Coles 1993).

On his travels through the United States during the early nineteenth century, the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville famously remarked on the American spirit of voluntary cooperation. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville (1899, 185) observed that Americans, “if they do not proffer services eagerly, yet they do not refuse to render them.” Proffering helpful services to others in the context of civil society has been a core American value since the beginning of the republic. That value

is practiced today as a **culture of service**—including various forms of civic engagement, community service, and volunteerism—that allows citizens to work together to ease or mitigate the predicaments and uncertainties created by poverty, hunger, racism, sexism, epidemics, calamities, and so on. It is in this culture of service, with its numerous pressing needs and concerns, that we can consider the emergence of a sociology of social problems based on service. At the ends of the chapters to follow, the authors suggest ways in which you can get personally engaged in helping to alleviate social problems.

/// CHAPTER SUMMARY

- 1.1** Describe how poor and working-class young adults of color are currently experiencing their lives.

When we look at young adults as a generational cohort and consider demographic factors, we get a larger picture of their life situation. Many people’s personal troubles are, in fact, also collective problems. Because some groups of people experience social conditions differently from other groups, sociologists examine the intersectionality of several demographic factors.

- 1.2** Define what constitutes a social problem.

The objective aspect of social problems relies on statistical data and other empirical facts to identify patterns, trends, and rates of occurrence. The subjective aspect of social problems considers how people define a certain condition, event, or pattern of behavior as a social problem. Social constructionism states that social problems are social problems for no other reason than that people say they are. The type of action needed to bring about large-scale social change is usually aimed at transforming the social structure. The type of action needed to ameliorate a problematic condition is usually aimed at helping people in need.

- 1.3** Explain the sociological imagination.

The sociological imagination allows us to see personal troubles as social problems. When we take a global perspective, we compare our own society to other societies in all the world’s regions. In this way we understand the social problems of US society in relationship to social problems in other countries.

- 1.4** Discuss how sociological research can be used to study social problems.

Quantitative research investigates social problems through statistical analysis. Qualitative research explains how people define, experience, or understand problematic situations. Three common research methods are survey, participant observation, and interviewing. Using multiple methods gives sociologists a fuller picture of the social problems they are studying.

- 1.5** Explain the three main sociological perspectives of structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Functionalism is the sociological theory that considers how various social phenomena function, or work in a positive way, to maintain unity and order in society. Conflict theory is the sociological theory that focuses on dissent, coercion, and antagonism among groups in society. Symbolic interactionism sees society as the product of symbols (words, gestures, objects) that are given meaning by people in their interactions with each other.

- 1.6** Evaluate how each of the three theoretical perspectives can be applied to improve our understanding of social problems.

Durkheim’s functionalism demonstrates how the degree of social integration and social regulation can result in high rates of suicide. Conflict theory shows how the interest group that has the most political power can prohibit behaviors it considers to be problematic. The symbolic

interactionist perspective can help us explain how people with clinical depression make sense of their identity and illness.

1.7 Discuss the role of social policy in managing social problems.

Most social change happens piecemeal, and frequently the transformations are begun through social policy. Governmental implementation of social policy takes the form of legislation. Other forms are the delivery of services,

the regulation of certain practices (such as drug use), and the establishment of welfare programs.

1.8 Identify ways in which service sociology can make a difference.

Service sociology is a socially responsible and mission-oriented sociology of action and alleviation. A culture of service—including various forms of civic engagement, community service, and volunteerism—allows citizens, including students, to work together to alleviate social problems.

/// ASK YOURSELF

1. Think of a social issue about which you and your peers have expressed concern. How do you think this issue affects other people your age but from a social class different from yours? A different race or ethnicity? Think of the ways in which you do or do not identify with the racially and economically marginalized young adults Ranita Ray interviewed.
2. What troubling situations do you see in your community (neighborhood, campus)? How do these fit, or not fit, the definition of social problems given earlier? Do they have both objective and subjective aspects? Explain.
3. Do people you know feel trapped in their daily lives? How or why? Explain the sociological imagination in your own words.
4. Think of a social problem you would like to research. Which of the three theoretical perspectives discussed earlier do you think is best suited for your purposes? Why?
5. Think of three different social problems. What are the strengths of each of the theoretical perspectives in helping you to understand each of the social problems? What are the weaknesses?
6. Think of a social problem you would like to research. In what ways are the three sociological theories discussed earlier too broad to provide a specific understanding of that social problem? Imagine some characteristics of a specialized theory that might give you less breadth but more depth on the issue. What types of questions about your research area would it help you answer?
7. Think of some policies (rules and regulations) of a workplace where you have been employed. Do you think these policies may have prevented unacceptable or harmful behaviors in that workplace? How?

/// KEY TERMS

altruistic suicide	18	data sources	5	interviewing	11
anomic suicide	18	demographic factors	2	legislation	20
anomie	17	dysfunctions	15	looking-glass self	16
capitalism	15	egoistic suicide	18	mind	16
capitalists	15	fatalistic suicide	18	norms	14
cohort	2	functions	14	objective aspect of social problems	5
concepts	13	global perspective	9	paradigms	14
conflict theory	15	interaction order	19	participant observation	10
culture	18	interest groups	15	qualitative research	9
culture of service	22	intersectionality	3	quantitative research	9

research methods	9	social policy	20	subjective aspect of social	
self-fulfilling prophecy	17	social problem	4	problems	5
service sociology	20	social regulation	17	survey	9
settlement houses	20	social revolution	20	symbolic interactionism	16
social class	3	social self	16	symbols	16
social constructionism	6	social structure	7	theory	13
social institutions	2	sociological imagination	8	values	14
social integration	17	sociology	3	workers	15
social interaction	16	structural functionalism (or			
social movements	7	functionalism)	14		