

Approaches to the Study of Social Problems

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English novelist Charles Dickens characterized life in England and France in the late 1700s with these words: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. . . . It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair” (1924:1). Dickens was expressing a deep-felt ambivalence held by many people of that era regarding life in their time. England was undergoing industrialization, which promised greater levels of economic productivity, wonderful inventions, and new heights of affluence. For many, however, it also meant agonizing poverty, horrid crowding in filthy cities, and virulent disease. For the entrepreneur, it was a time to dream of riches yet to be made. For the pauper, it was a time to wonder where one’s next meal might be found.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the United States can be viewed through an equally ambivalent lens. We, too, can find promise of a better life in emerging technologies such as computers, telecommunications, and biotechnology. We, too, have seen remarkable inventions that

provide a level of comfort and security thought impossible by our ancestors. Imagine, for example, how you would be limited by the absence of but one amenity of modern living that you probably take for granted: electricity. Yet not much more than one hundred years ago most people lived without it.

But there is a dark side to all this promise—a “winter of despair”—that is the topic of this book. There remain poverty, violence, drug addiction, alcoholism, and a host of other social problems. Perhaps nuclear power provides the best symbol for the contradictions of our time: We use it to produce our electricity, but no one wants its deadly wastes stored near them. And we stand terrified at the specter of death and destruction that would surely accompany the use of nuclear weapons by some nation or terrorist group.

One can understand, then, how life in today’s world might be thought of as “the best of times . . . the worst of times.” A principal challenge that we face is to conquer these social problems or at least to alleviate their negative impacts on people’s lives. In this book, I take a sociological approach to understanding these social problems. **Sociology** is *the scientific study of societies and human social behavior*, and it provides one of the most useful approaches for understanding social problems and a most effective tool for finding solutions to them. In fact, modern sociology might be considered an offspring of industrialization, because it emerged in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century shortly after the era of which Dickens had written. A major motivation of many early sociologists was to develop a “science of society” to deal with the dislocations, disruptions, poverty, and violence that accompanied industrialization. The same purpose underlies this book: to remove, as best we can, the poverty, crime, violence, and other problems that persist as the United States and the world move into an advanced industrial era. Along with these early sociologists, this book assumes that we *can* do something to improve social conditions and to attack social problems. Furthermore, our actions regarding social problems need to be grounded *in scientific research on the problems and in scientific assessments* of the effectiveness of solutions. Uninformed or casual meddling in social problems can create more difficulties than it solves.

This chapter will serve as a framework for the study of specific problems in later chapters. First, what makes a social condition a social problem and why sociology is an essential tool in understanding and solving problems will be discussed. Then consideration will be given to the three major theoretical perspectives in sociology and how they are important in the study of social problems. Finally, it will be shown how scientific research provides the most useful information about problems and their solutions.

What Is a Social Problem?

There are some issues that practically everyone today agrees are social problems, such as crime or racial discrimination. About other issues, however, there is more disagreement. There is great debate, for example, over whether water pollution, pornography, or the use of marijuana are social problems. A commonsense approach might define a condition as a social problem if it “harms people” or is “detrimental to society.” But this is far too imprecise for our purposes. To develop a more rigorous definition of what is a social problem, it is helpful to distinguish problems that affect individuals from those that involve an entire society.

Personal Troubles, Public Issues, and Social Problems

A distinction made by sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) between personal troubles and public issues may be the best place to begin. Personal troubles are things that affect individuals and those immediately around them. When parents discover that their daughter has a serious drug problem, theirs is a personal trouble because the values and goals of only that family are threatened. The trouble is seen as being primarily that family’s difficulty. Public issues, on the other hand, have an impact on large numbers of people and are matters of public debate; collective solutions, rather than individual or familial ones, are considered. When statistics reveal that our nation loses millions of dollars every year because of accidents, suicide, and worker absenteeism due to drug abuse, we are dealing with a public issue because the values and goals of a large group are threatened. The issue is debated in public forums, and collective solutions are usually proposed. So every condition that adversely affects some individuals is not necessarily an issue of great public concern toward which we should, or could, direct societal resources. Of course, public issues may translate into personal troubles in the lives of some people, but every personal trouble is not a public issue. Mills’s distinction between personal troubles and public issues make us aware that problems need to be viewed in the broad context of their impact on society.

How do we place these issues in a broader societal context? A good start is the following definition: A **social problem** exists when *an influential group defines a social condition as threatening its values; when the condition affects a large number of people; and when the condition can be remedied by collective action* (Loschek, 1999; Spector and Kitsuse, 2000). Let’s look briefly

at each element in this definition. An *influential group* is one that can have a significant impact on public debate and social policy. For example, groups opposing discrimination against women in employment and other areas have been able to mount a campaign that has forced politicians and the public nationwide to listen to their demands. Groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, on the other hand, have not been able to generate significant debate about experimentation with animals or cruelty to animals, and relatively few people consider these to be social problems. Personal troubles do not become public issues, then, unless an influential group so defines them. The mere existence of a social condition does not make it problematic, no matter how harmful it may be. For example, smoking tobacco has been a contributing factor in lung cancer for as long as humans have used the substance, but it was not defined as a social problem until biomedical research made people aware of the link between smoking and lung cancer.

Conditions are viewed as social problems when they threaten a *group's values*. **Values** are *people's ideas about what is good or bad, right or wrong*. We use these values as guidelines for choosing goals and judging behaviors. Because values are necessarily ranked in terms of priority in any group or society, there is disagreement over which conditions will be viewed as social problems. Some groups in the United States, for example, place great value on work and industriousness. Because of this, they may view people who receive welfare with considerable disdain and even consider them threatening to their own way of life. Other groups, emphasizing religious or humanitarian values, might argue that poverty—not poor people—is the real threat and that the poor should be helped, not castigated.

Conditions do not typically become social problems unless they affect a *large number of people*. When they affect relatively few people, they are private issues and there is little public debate over them or search for collective solutions. The more people they affect, the more likely they are to be publicly debated and defined as a problem that society should address. When the unemployment rate is low, for example, relatively few people are adversely affected. It may be a terrible personal hardship for those few who are unemployed, but it does not threaten large or influential groups and there will likely be little societal pressure directed toward alleviating the problem.

Finally, a social condition may satisfy the previous criteria but not be regarded as a social problem because the condition does not have social causes and cannot be remedied by collective human action. Earthquakes, tornadoes, and other vagaries of nature, for example, are harmful and frightening natural disasters, but they would not be considered *social* problems because they

are not produced by social conditions and cannot be prevented by collective action or changes in social policy.

The Social Context of Social Problems

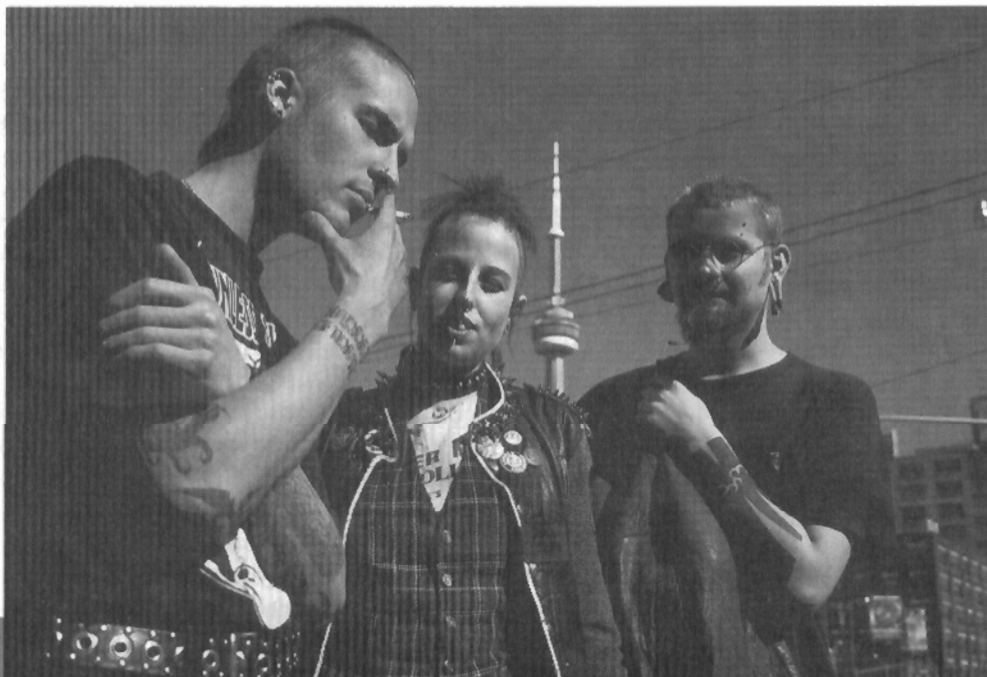
Social problems differ from personal troubles because the former are public issues rather than personal ones. In addition, social problems are fundamentally social rather than personal in nature because their causes and their solutions have something to do with the workings of society. Social problems may have an impact on individuals, but their roots are found in social life. We will illustrate the social basis of social problems here by briefly describing four distinct social conditions that can play a role in the emergence of social problems: deviation from group values and norms, a decline in the effectiveness of social institutions, extensive social and cultural diversity, and the exercise of power. The importance of these social conditions will be further elaborated in the next section on theoretical perspectives in sociology and throughout this book.

Societies are generally stable and orderly, although change and disruption do occur. This social stability arises in part because societies pass on to their members values and norms that serve to guide people in their behavior. Values have just been defined. **Norms** are much more specific and concrete than values; they are *rules of conduct that guide people's behavior*. They are expectations that people in society share about how they ought to behave. Values are general preferences, whereas norms are specific guidelines for behavior. Norms dictate, for example, that men should wear pants, not dresses, and that motor vehicles are to be driven on the right side of the road rather than the left. Note how norms, like values, can vary from one culture to another and from one group to another. In some societies, men wear dresses and in others people drive on the left side of the road.

Values and norms, then, serve as a script for how to behave, and they enable us, to an extent, to predict how others will behave and to coordinate our behavior with theirs. Thus, values and norms lend stability and orderliness to society. A basic tenet of the sociological view of society is that people live in a socially created reality in which their behavior is shaped by social objects, such as values and norms, as much as by physical objects. However, people do not always behave in conformity with accepted values and norms. *Behaviors or characteristics that violate important group norms and as a consequence are reacted to with social disapproval* are called **deviance**. Laypeople often approach deviant or unconventional behaviors in an absolute way,

judging them to be good or bad, right or wrong, by comparing them with some fixed standards, such as some religious teachings. Sociologists view deviance as relative, or based on the social definitions of some group. For sociologists, it is not behaviors or characteristics in themselves that are deviant. Rather, it is the judgments of some group whose norms have been violated that make a behavior unconventional or deviant. This makes deviance relative in the sense that a behavior is deviant only when so defined by some group. So, deviance can be understood only within the context of the norms and values of a particular culture, subculture, or group. As one sociologist put it: “Deviance, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder” (Simmons, 1969:4). Deviance does not refer only to the violation of group norms; some stigma, or mark of disgrace, must also be attached to the violation that sets the deviant apart from others. When people violate the values and norms of the influential or powerful, the reaction against the deviant can be very strong. So, some social problems—prostitution, alcoholism, and drug abuse, to name a few—arise in part because they are defined as deviant and stigmatized. Some people are unwilling or unable to conform their behavior to the dictates of influential groups.

Beyond values and norms, another important element of society is **social institutions**: *relatively stable clusters of social relationships that involve people working together to meet some basic needs of society*. The family, for example, is a social institution ensuring that children will be born and raised properly to be contributing members of society. These institutions—the family, religion, politics, education, and others—serve as further guides for people’s behavior and also involve social relationships that offer people a sense of community involvement and self-worth. In fact, many behaviors and personal qualities—happiness, mental stability, morality, respect for the law, and others—arise out of such social relationships, out of a sense of community and personal involvement with others. A person who is fired from his job, for example, experiences a social loss that can result in psychological problems as well as physical ailments. Industrialization has threatened such traditional sources of support and authority as the family and religion. Unless their decline is replaced by other sources of support, crime, substance abuse, and other problems may increase. In other words, many social problems arise from the ineffectiveness of social institutions in guiding behavior and offering people a sense of community and self-worth.



As the clothing, hairstyles, and body piercings of these youth in the United States suggest, there is much social and cultural diversity in most societies. Subcultural diversity is an important element in the study of social problems because differing subcultures create the potential for conflicts over values and lifestyles.

Social and cultural diversity is another important element of societies. The United States, for example, is extremely diverse. The norms of the inner-city slum are light-years away from those of the middle-class suburb; the values of the young have little meaning for the elderly; and many beliefs of the affluent are foreign to the poor. One result of all this diversity is that many groups in the United States inhabit their own social worlds, called "subcultures." A **subculture** is *a group within a culture that shares some of the beliefs, values, and norms of the larger culture but also has some that are distinctly its own*. Each of the following could be considered a subculture: teenagers, Cubans in Miami, gays in most large cities, skinheads, the drug set, prison inmates, hip-hop youth of the 1990s, even the few hippies left over from the 1960s. In fact, everyone in the United States belongs to a wide array of subcultures based on age, sex, social standing, religion, leisure pastimes, or other characteristics.

Subcultural diversity is an important element in the study of social problems because it points to the potential for conflict between groups: The values of one group may clash with the values of another. One group, for example, may find the widespread availability of abortion offensive to its religious tenets, whereas another views restrictions on abortion as a threat to women's reproductive choices. Such conflicts are enhanced by **ethnocentrism**, *the tendency to view one's own culture or subculture as the best and to judge other cultures or subcultures in comparison to it*. Because of ethnocentrism, people may view the practices of another subculture as a social problem because they differ from their own practices. For example, are prostitution or the use of marijuana truly problems for society, or are they just offensive to the values of some particular subcultures?

A final element of society to be mentioned here is the exercise of power. **Power** is *the ability of one group to realize its will, even in the face of resistance from other groups* (Boulding, 1989; Weber, 1958, originally published 1919). Power can arise from many sources: the strength of numbers, efficient organization, access to wealth or status, or control of the political and economic institutions that dominate society. Whatever its source, power enables its possessor to compel others to act in a particular fashion. Ultimately, societies can use force or coercion to induce conformity to values and norms or to reduce conflicts or threats to a way of life. **Authority** refers to *legitimate power that is obeyed because people believe it is right and proper that they obey*. For example, most U.S. citizens believe that the Congress and the president, working together, have the legitimate authority to declare war on another country and to compel military service on the part of the citizenry. Many people may prefer not to fight in

a war, but they would go because they believe the government has the authority to require that of them. Most social problems are related to the exercise of power and the use of authority, either as forces that intensify problems or as crucial elements in their solution. After all, a group needs some power in order to have a condition defined as a social problem to begin with. Then, which solutions are settled on often depends on which groups can most effectively utilize the power and authority available to them.

This brief description of four elements of society suggests the ways in which social problems are "social" in nature: They are both created and alleviated by social mechanisms. To understand and solve social problems, then, we need to know something about how society works.

The Sociological Imagination

Before going on to a more detailed analysis of the sociological perspective and social problems, it is valuable to step back and consider the implications of this perspective for your own life. The sociological perspective on human beings is a unique and remarkable one, recognizing as it does that human behavior consists of far more than individuals acting independently of one another. It emphasizes the powerful role that group membership and social forces play in shaping behavior. Sociologists focus on social interaction and social relationships rather than on individuals. The sociological perspective offers a special awareness of the world that enables people to approach their own lives with introspection and insight. Peter Berger (1963) referred to the sociological perspective as an "emancipated vista" that can free people from blind submission to social forces that they do not understand. C. Wright Mills (1959) coined the term **sociological imagination** to refer to *the ability to understand the relationship between what is happening in people's personal lives and the social forces that surround them*. For both Berger and Mills, the more people learn about society and social problems, the better equipped they will be to understand their own lives and the impact—both desired and intrusive—of society and social problems on them. To be emancipated, of course, is not always pleasant because we often learn that social problems hinder us from achieving sought-after goals. Poverty-stricken parents, for example, may not welcome the realization that their children will be penalized by the inequities of the school system in the United States, which has adverse effects on the poor. Nevertheless, it is precisely a better understanding of the role of such inequities that can open the door to making improvements in the educational process. So the sociological imagination offers not only emancipation but also *empowerment*: It assists

people in taking control of their lives and circumstances through the struggle against social problems.

Theoretical Perspectives on Social Problems

Every science, including sociology, accumulates knowledge through an interplay between theory and research. First, we need to provide a more detailed account of the theories commonly used in the sociological analysis of social problems. A **theory** is *a set of statements that explains the relationship between phenomena*. The key role of theories is to tell us why something occurred. They help us organize the data from research into a meaningful whole. In this section, we will discuss the most general and important theoretical approaches in sociology. In the next section, we will return to the importance of research.

Some sociological theories focus on specific social problems, such as the causes of juvenile delinquency, or the explanations for divorce. We will discuss quite a few of these theories in this book. In addition to these specialized theories, however, there are a number of broader explanations of social reality that are called **theoretical perspectives**. These perspectives *provide some fundamental assumptions about the nature and operation of society and commonly serve as sources of the more specific theories* mentioned previously. Most sociologists today are guided by one or more of the following theoretical perspectives: functionalism, conflict theory, and interactionism. The functionalist and conflict approaches are frequently referred to as *macrosociology* because they focus on large groups and social institutions and on society as a whole. The interactionist perspective falls under the category of *microsociology* because it concentrates on the intimate level of everyday interactions between people. This section first summarizes the perspectives and then suggests how you should use them in analyzing social problems.

The Functionalist Perspective

The functionalist perspective grew out of the similarities early sociologists observed between society and biological organisms. The human body, for example, is composed of many different parts—the heart, the eyes, and the kidneys, to name but three—each of which performs a particular function. The heart pumps blood to the other organs of the body, the eyes transmit information about the external world to the brain, and the kidneys remove waste materials from the blood. These parts of the body do not exist in isola-

tion, however; rather, they are interrelated and interdependent. If one of them ceases to perform its function—if the heart stops, the eyes go blind, or the kidneys fail—the effective operation of the whole body is threatened and survival itself may be in doubt.

Society, functionalists argue, operates in a way somewhat analogous to that of a biological organism. According to the **functionalist perspective**, *society is a system made up of a number of interrelated elements, each performing a function that contributes to the operation of the whole* (Parsons, 1951; Turner and Maryanski, 1979). The elements of society include, for example, institutions such as the family, education, and the economy. The family provides for the bearing and rearing of children until they can live on their own. Educational institutions provide training in the various skills needed to fill jobs in society. The economy is responsible for producing food, clothing, and other necessities needed by families to survive, as well as for providing the books and other supplies needed for education. The family and the schools could not survive without the goods provided by the economy, and economic organizations need workers who have been socialized by the family and trained by the schools to work industriously. In addition to institutions, society is also made up of many social roles, social groups, and subcultures, and all these parts fit together into a reasonably well-integrated whole. For functionalists, then, all parts of society are interdependent and function together to provide the things that are essential to maintain society. In addition, there needs to be considerable agreement among the members of society regarding the content of important values and norms.

In a system with all the parts so tightly interdependent, a change in one element of society will probably lead to changes in other parts. For example, the establishment of compulsory education in the United States caused significant alterations in the economic sphere by removing children and eventually adolescents from the labor force, which made more jobs available for adults. Compulsory education also affected the family; with young people no longer working, the financial burden on parents was increased. When children could no longer help support the family financially, a gradual shift to smaller families began. Thus, changes in the educational sphere had important ramifications for family and economic structures. Small changes can usually be absorbed with relative ease, but large or sudden changes can cause major social disruption and lead to problems. Because of this, functionalists argue, social systems are characterized by stability and a tendency toward equilibrium—a state of balance in which the relationships among the various parts of the system remain the same.

A central concern of the functionalist approach is the determination of just what functions each part of society performs. This is not always easy to do because some functions are not as obvious as those in our previous example. In fact, sociologist Robert K. Merton (1968) suggests that there are two different types of functions: manifest and latent. *Manifest functions* are the intended consequences of some action or social process and refer to what most people expect to result. *Latent functions* are consequences that are unexpected or unintended. For example, one of the manifest functions of colleges and universities is to provide people with specialized training. However, institutions of higher education perform a number of latent functions. For instance, they serve as a marriage market, and they reduce unemployment by keeping some adults out of the job market. These latent functions are just as much a part of the system of higher education as its manifest purposes. In addition, some social practices may be *dysfunctional*; that is, they may disrupt social equilibrium rather than contribute to it. For example, encouraging large families, as some religious teachings do, would be dysfunctional in a society that is already overpopulated.

According to the functionalist perspective, a social problem can arise when some element in society becomes dysfunctional and interferes with the efficient operation or stability of the system or the achievement of societal goals. In other words, social problems arise from social disorganization, in which the parts of society work at cross-purposes rather than together. One sign of this disorganization is the decline in the effectiveness of social institutions, discussed in the preceding section. Functionalists search for the sources of this societal breakdown. Consider how divorce might be viewed by functionalists: Marital dissolution involves the breaking up of what is perhaps society's most basic institution, the family. Divorce could be seen as a social problem if those functions that are typically served by the family were to go unperformed, such as children not being raised properly to become contributing members of society (see Chapter 3).

The functionalist perspective is a very useful one, but it does tend to overemphasize the extent of stability and order in society and to downplay the fact that social practices that are beneficial to one group in society may be dysfunctional to another. These cautions should be kept in mind when using this perspective.

The Conflict Perspective

Conflict theorists emphasize the inevitability of coercion, domination, conflict, and change in society. The **conflict perspective** is based on *the idea that society consists of different groups who struggle with one an-*

other to attain the scarce societal resources that are considered valuable, be they money, power, prestige, or the authority to impose one's values on society. Karl Marx provided the foundation for the conflict perspective when he viewed society as consisting of different social classes (1967, originally published 1867–1895). The two central classes of his era were the proletariat, or the workers, and the bourgeoisie, or those who owned the businesses, factories, and textile mills in which the proletariat toiled. Marx saw these classes as being in constant struggle with one another to improve their respective positions in society. The workers tried to gain more income and control over their work; the owners tried to make more profits by lowering labor costs and getting workers to work more. For Marx, this conflict was irreconcilable, because what benefits one group necessarily works to the disadvantage of the other. Furthermore, if those in one group can gain an advantage in this struggle, they will use it to dominate and oppress the other group and enhance their own position. They might, for example, gain control of the government and pass legislation that limits the ways the subordinate groups could otherwise compete. A century ago in the United States, for example, it was illegal for workers to organize for the purposes of collective bargaining. This benefited the factory owners because workers were unable to use their strength of numbers to gain higher wages or better working conditions.

Although Marx limited his focus to class conflict, modern versions of conflict theory in sociology hold that domination, coercion, and the exercise of power occur to some degree in all groups and societies because they are the basic social mechanisms for regulating behavior and allocating resources (Collins, 1990; Dahrendorf, 1959; Duke, 1976). In addition to class conflict, groups and subcultures can engage in conflict over contrasting values. For example, some religious groups, such as the Mormons, place great value in family life, whereas other groups view the traditional family as only one of a number of ways people can organize their personal lives. These two perspectives on family are likely to assess social problems such as divorce and childbirth outside marriage in quite different ways. In fact, as we have seen, whether these conditions are even viewed as social problems depends on one's values. Another source of conflict in society is the gap that can arise between values and social practices. The United States, for example, professes to value equality for all. Yet at one time or another, African Americans, Italian Americans, Irish Americans, women, and Jewish Americans, to name but a few, have suffered severe discrimination.

In the conflict view, then, groups exert what power they possess over others when this serves their interests,



The conflict perspective makes us aware that people vary substantially in terms of the social and economic resources available to them. The social programs and policies that would benefit the fur-coated woman in this photo are, in all likelihood, quite different from those that would benefit the homeless person huddled under a blanket.

and society consists of a wide array of such interest groups struggling to acquire a share of societal resources. An **interest group** is a *group whose members share distinct and common concerns and who benefit from similar social policies and practices*. Things that benefit one interest group may work to the disadvantage of others. Some interest groups are formally organized, such as the National Rifle Association, the Sierra Club, the National Manufacturers Association, or the American Civil Liberties Union. Other interest groups are informal, and people may not fully recognize that they are members of them. For example, college students constitute an informal interest group because all college students benefit from such things as lower tuition and increased government funding of student loans. Taxpayers without children of college age, however, might oppose such policies because their taxes would increase.

In the conflict view, social change involves redistributing scarce resources among various interest groups. A *vested interest group* is an interest group that benefits from existing policies, practices, and social arrangements, and generally resists social changes that might threaten their privileges. However, the in-

evitable clash of interests ensures that any existing social arrangements eventually will be rearranged. Out of the resulting struggle, new winners will emerge and uneasy truces will be established. These truces, however, will be temporary, because new conflicts will develop that will lead to further struggle and change.

For the conflict theorist, a social problem arises when a group of people, believing that its interests are not being met or that it is not receiving a sufficient share of resources, works to overcome what it perceives as a disadvantage. Unlike functionalists, conflict theorists might view a phenomenon such as divorce as normal under some circumstances because it represents one way of dealing with marital discord. This does not mean that the disruptive effects of divorce are ignored or that divorce is not a social problem. Rather, it means that divorce becomes a social problem when particular groups that have power regard their interests as being threatened by the extent of divorce in society.

Some caution is also called for in using the conflict perspective, especially the tendency to overemphasize the importance of conflict and inequality and to disregard the prevalence of stability and consensus in so-

ciety. This can lead one to overlook factors important to social problems.

The Interactionist Perspective

Although the functionalist and conflict perspectives offer competing views of social life, the interactionist perspective is more of a supplement to the first two, showing how the social processes described in those perspectives enter into people's daily lives and shape their behavior. The **interactionist perspective** *focuses on everyday social interaction among individuals rather than on large societal structures such as politics, education, and the like* (Blumer, 1962; Hewitt, 2003). For interactionists, society consists of people interacting with one another; to understand society we must understand social interaction. It is through such interactions that groups, organizations, and society as a whole are created, maintained, and changed. The operation of educational institutions can be observed, for example, through students interacting with teachers and through school administrators making decisions. It is these day-to-day interactions that give education its shape and substance.

A central assumption of the interactionist perspective can be summarized in a paraphrase of a statement by sociologists William and Dorothy Thomas (1928): If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. In other words, people act on the basis of their beliefs and perceptions about situations. The term **definition of the situation** refers to *people's perceptions and interpretations of what is important in a situation and what actions are appropriate*. A central part of social interaction, then, is people's interpretations or definitions of others' behavior.

This process of definition and interpretation rests on the ability of human beings to use symbols. It is our symbol-using capabilities that enable us to attach complex social meanings to objects, events, or people. A *symbol* is something that stands for, represents, or takes the place of something else. Anything—any object, event, or word—can serve as a symbol. A crucifix, for example, symbolizes the beliefs of Roman Catholicism, whether it is made from wood, metal, or plastic; the Star of David likewise symbolizes Judaism. The meaning attached to a symbol is derived from social consensus. We simply agree that a particular object will represent something.

Because of our ability to use symbols, we live in a world that we create ourselves, through the meanings we attach to phenomena. In other words, we respond to symbolic or social meanings rather than to actual physical objects or actions, and what we do is the result of how we define and interpret those meanings. For example, we attach meanings to people through the

use of labels, including deviant labels that carry some stigma with them. We call people “whores,” “queers,” “crooks,” and “crazies.” These labels influence how we relate to these people. And when people have been labeled, we come to expect them to behave in certain ways. A central tenet of the interactionist approach is that such social expectations, or norms, tend to influence the behavior of people who have been labeled, especially when the people themselves accept the meaning of the label attached to them. The prostitute, for example, who internalizes the social meaning implied by the label “cheap whore” may not aspire toward any other way of life. Her world and behavior are shaped by the fact that she accepts the stigmatizing label, whether it is true or not. This fact points to another important assertion of the interactionist perspective: What is important is not whether a particular definition of the situation is actually true but rather whether people believe the definition to be true.

Social life rests on the development of consensus about expected behavior. Such shared expectations guide our activities and make cooperative action possible. If this consensus breaks down, some sort of change must occur. Thus, for interactionists, social change involves developing some new consensus with different meanings and expectations.

From the interactionist perspective, a social problem exists when some social condition is defined by an influential group as stigmatizing or threatening to their values and disruptive of normal social expectations. For example, the interactionist would observe that there have been important changes in attitudes toward divorce in industrial societies. In addition to being more common today, divorce has less stigma attached to it than it did one hundred years ago. At the same time, however, divorce is viewed by many groups as a social problem because they see marital dissolution as posing a threat to family stability. If the family is such a basic social institution, divorce may challenge shared meanings and definitions that these groups hold about this institution.

Once again caution is called for in using the perspectives. Because of the emphasis on face-to-face interaction in shaping social reality, the interactionist approach can lead one to deemphasize the part that social institutions, such as religion and politics, and large-scale social forces, such as industrialization, play in molding human behavior.

Using the Theoretical Perspectives

This discussion of the sociological perspectives is brief and simplified, and more detail will be provided in later chapters. The major elements of each perspective and its view on social problems have been outlined in

TABLE 1.1 An Outline of the Sociological Perspectives

	Functionalism	Conflict Theory	Interactionism
View of Society	A system of interrelated and interdependent parts.	Made up of groups struggling with one another over scarce resources.	Individuals in face-to-face interaction create social consensus.
View of the Individual	People are shaped by society to perform important functions for society.	People are shaped by the position of their groups in society.	People are symbol manipulators who create their social world through social interaction and consensus.
View of Social Change	The social system tends to resist change as disruptive.	Change is inevitable and continuous.	Change occurs when there is no shared consensus about expected behavior and a newly found consensus develops.
View of Social Problems	Caused by dysfunctional activities or disorganization in the social system.	Arise when a group believes its interests are not being served and works to overcome perceived disadvantage.	Arise when a condition is defined as stigmatizing or disruptive of normal social expectations.
Key Concepts	integration, interdependence, stability, equilibrium	interest, power, dominance, conflict, coercion	interpretation, consensus, shared expectations, socially created reality

Table 1.1. The three perspectives should not be viewed as either right or wrong, nor should one select a favorite and ignore the others. Instead, the perspectives should be seen as three different “tools,” each of which is useful in analyzing particular social problems. The three perspectives are not equally useful for examining every social problem, nor can any single perspective explain all aspects of human behavior and society. To gain a full understanding of any particular problem, the use of more than one approach may be required.

Constructing Social Problems: The Mass Media and Other Influences

Use of the theoretical perspectives can be illustrated by looking at an important element of the study of social problems: how a social condition becomes a social problem. This chapter has stressed the point that a condition is considered a social problem when an influential group perceives the condition as a threat to its values or way of life and can do something about it. In other words, the existence of a condition alone, even when the condition produces negative consequences, does not make it a social problem; to become a social problem, it must be so defined by some group (Holstein and Miller, 2003; Spector and Kitsuse, 2000). This process of social definition or construction involves a number of elements: how and why groups identify conditions as problems, how the groups develop an understanding of the causes of the

problems, and how solutions are developed and implemented. Each of the three perspectives contributes to our understanding of this process.

From the *functionalist perspective*, the social construction of social problems depends, at least in part, on the extent of social disruption or social disorganization produced by a social condition. Conditions that are more disruptive are more likely to be defined as social problems by significant groups or large numbers of people. A highly disruptive condition—a large-scale nuclear war, for example—would be defined as a problem by virtually everyone because the level of social disorganization that results from it is so extensive, universal, and profound. But many social conditions disrupt the lives of only some people, and these conditions may be defined as problems by some groups but not others. In other words, with lower levels of social disruption, the definition of social problems would be characterized by more debate and controversy and less consensus.

The *conflict perspective* helps us recognize that elites and others with access to resources or power play a greater role in this process of social definition: It is the conditions that negatively affect their values and way of life that are most likely to be defined as social problems. Or at least, the views and interests of the powerful will be influential in shaping how all social problems and their solutions are defined, even those problems that affect mostly the less powerful. So, definitions of social problems are constructed out of the clash of competing interest groups.

The *interactionist perspective* recognizes the importance of symbols and social meanings in shaping hu-

man life, and it points out that defining a “condition” as a “problem” is a matter of attaching certain negative meanings to the condition. The process of interpretation is central to human social life, and people have to interpret a set of objective conditions as something that is “bad” or “negative” before they will act on it. Beyond defining a condition as a problem, the meaning of the problem can vary from one group to another, and this can affect what kind of solutions are sought. So, divorce may be seen as a problem by two groups, but one group sees the problem as the too easy accessibility of divorce while the other sees the problem as divorce being too difficult to obtain.

This brief illustration of constructing social problems demonstrates how using the three perspectives can provide a more complete understanding of a topic. This social construction of social problems has to do with rhetoric, or persuasive communication: Under what conditions are one group’s claims about a social condition accepted by others, and when do those claims serve as the basis for social policy and social action? This social construction process is complex and continuous, and the resulting social definitions are constantly shifting and changing. Although many things play a part in this process of persuasive communication, the mass media are especially influential in the modern, global world. In one fashion or another, media attention has become critical to influencing people’s definitions of social problems. Groups with access to the media are much more likely to have their interpretations of social conditions given serious consideration and to have their solutions seriously debated. This text considers the myriad of forces that contribute to the social construction of social problems, and in a number of chapters special attention is devoted to the role of the media in this process.

Research on Social Problems

Until research has been done to test a theory, it is merely speculative. **Research** refers to *the systematic examination of empirical data*. Research can provide the most coherent and objective information about the causes of social problems, their extent, and the effectiveness of solutions. Without a foundation in research, our approach to problems is likely to be surrounded by speculation, misunderstanding, and bias, and we may expend resources in the pursuit of ineffective solutions. If this occurs, we have not only wasted resources but also left the real source of the problem to grow more serious. For these reasons, we must understand what good research is and how we can use its principles in our everyday assessment of social problems.

The Scientific Method

Research conducted by sociologists is based on the scientific method. **Science** is *a method of obtaining objective and systematic knowledge through observation*. The foundation of the scientific approach is the belief that claims about what is correct or incorrect must be demonstrated to be true through some observations in the world (Sullivan, 2001). Intuition, speculation, or common sense can never replace the empirical test of one’s claims. Scientific theories are linked to scientific research through **hypotheses**, which are *tentative statements that can be tested regarding relationships between two or more factors*. Hypotheses are statements whose accuracy can be assessed through observation. If hypotheses are verified through observation, this provides support for the theory; if they are not, our confidence in the theory is reduced. The more empirical support there is for a theory, the more useful it is in attacking social problems.

Science is not foolproof, but it is the most effective means available for acquiring systematic, verifiable knowledge about the world and about social problems and their solutions. In the Applied Research insert, science is compared with some other ways of gaining knowledge, showing what makes the scientific approach superior in this realm. Science does have its limitations, however, and it is crucial to understand which issues it cannot resolve. Science is the preferred source of knowledge on issues that can be resolved *through observation*. Some issues are not amenable to such resolution. For example, science cannot verify the existence of a supreme deity or say which religious beliefs are correct because these are not issues that can be settled through observation. They are matters of faith, choice, or revelation but not of science. Likewise, science cannot tell us which personal values are right and preferable because these are again matters of personal choice or judgment.

Conducting Research

In conducting research on social problems, social scientists are very careful and systematic about how they make their observations, which serve as the evidence for their scientific conclusions. It is important to understand a little about these research methods in order to appreciate and evaluate the scientific conclusions drawn.

Basically, four types of research are conducted (Sullivan, 2001). *Direct observation* is research in which the social scientist sees or hears something himself or herself. This might occur, for example, if the researcher joined in the daily activities of drug sellers, watching how they purchased and sold their drugs, talking to them about how they organized to protect themselves, and observing how they dealt with police interference.

Untangling Myths and Facts About Social Problems

Sociologists take the position that scientific research provides the most accurate and useful knowledge with which to cope with social problems. Science, of course, is not the only way to gain an understanding of the world. For example, people often use tradition as a source of guidance. This might take the form of religious teachings about sex and marriage or proverbs such as “Birds of a feather flock together” and “Two heads are better than one.” People also turn to their own personal experience for direction. If we visit a prison and see that most inmates are nonwhite, this can lead us to believe that crime rates are much higher among nonwhites than whites. Knowledge from tradition and experience often accumulates and blends together to form what people call “common sense”: practical wisdom that encourages people to make decisions that they believe are sound without having any special training or expertise.

In fact, sociology has been called “the science of common sense” by critics who assume that it

merely “proves” what everybody else already knows through common sense. However, research often shows that people’s commonsense beliefs about social problems are false, or at least oversimplified. Consider these statements:

1. The crime rate is much higher in the lower class than it is in the middle class.
2. Reading pornography increases the likelihood that men will commit acts of sexual violence against women.
3. Because of the civil rights movement and affirmative action legislation, the gap in income between blacks and whites has narrowed substantially in the past four decades.
4. A person who does not engage in homosexual activities or use drugs intravenously has very little risk of becoming infected with the virus for acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

At one time or another, each of us has probably believed that at

least some of these statements are true. Yet social science research has shown each one to be false, or at least to be far too simple.

1. If we use arrest statistics as our data, then this statement is supported, but most people who commit crimes are not arrested. A growing body of evidence based on self-reports of criminal activity suggests that what distinguishes the social classes is not the amount of crime but rather the types of crimes and the likelihood of being arrested. The poor are more likely to commit highly visible crimes, such as homicide or assault, which are likely to be reported to the police and result in arrests. Middle-class people commit crimes such as embezzlement, fraud, or tax evasion that often go unreported (see Chapter 9).
2. There is little convincing evidence that pornography predisposes a person to commit sexual violence, although people who commit such crimes may also read pornography. Much

These direct observations would then serve as the evidence for verifying hypotheses.

The term *surveys* refers to research in which people are asked questions about their beliefs, attitudes, feelings, or behavior. A study of drug use, for example, might involve showing people a list of illegal drugs and asking them which they had used in the past month. Their answers to the questions are the data or evidence used to test hypotheses. It is important to understand that, with surveys, we have not observed the people’s behavior (such as whether they have actually taken drugs) but only what they say about their behavior.

Archival research is research that uses information collected by some organization, agency, or individual for reasons other than research. Studies of drug use, for example, have been based on criminal justice system records of arrests and convictions for drug pos-

session or selling and of hospital emergency room records of treatment for drug overdoses. If this recorded information is relevant to the research question and available to the researcher, then it can serve as the evidence for testing hypotheses.

The fourth type of research is *experiments*, which are controlled methods of collecting evidence that give us confidence in stating that one factor caused another to happen. If we wanted to assess the effectiveness of a drug education program in reducing drug use among high school students, for example, we could conduct an experiment in which the students’ level of drug use is measured both before and after they have been exposed to the program. A decline in drug use after the program would be evidence of its effectiveness, especially if a control group that was not exposed to the program did not show a similar decline. Actually, the term *experiment*

pornography portrays violence against women, and it may well be the violence rather than the sexual content of pornography that encourages violence against women (see Chapter 11).

3. Unfortunately, research shows that the gap has hardly changed over the past three decades. Although many blacks have benefited from such legislation, the gap between the incomes of blacks and whites has been especially impervious to change (see Chapter 6).
4. Although it is true in the United States that most of those who contract AIDS are men who have sex with other men or people who engage in intravenous drug use, heterosexual transmission of AIDS has been growing rapidly, currently accounting for 30 percent of new AIDS cases. And worldwide, 60 percent of HIV infections result from heterosexual intercourse (see Chapter 4).

What is wrong with common sense in these realms? Basically, common sense does not normally

involve an empirical and systematic effort to distinguish fact from fiction. Rather, it tends to accept untested and unquestioned assumptions because “everyone knows” they are true. In other words, some commonsense knowledge is a “myth” in that there is little evidence of its truth, although some people still accept it as true. Commonsense knowledge is also very slow to change—even when change seems called for—because the change may threaten cherished values or social patterns.

Even when common sense contains some truth, reality is often vastly more complicated than common sense suggests. Sociological research incorporates procedures that advance our knowledge by establishing facts through observation and by using procedures that reduce bias. Common sense is important and should not be ignored, but an unthinking and unverified acceptance of commonsense beliefs can blind people to social realities. This has important implications for social policy. It is only through the development of an accurate, scientifically verified understanding of social

problems that we can hope to overcome them—even if it means relinquishing some of our most cherished commonsense preconceptions.

Each of the remaining chapters includes two features that emphasize these points. At the beginning of each chapter, a Myths and Facts section will contrast some inaccurate or misleading commonsense beliefs about some problem with the facts as they have been established through research. This comparison encourages students to distinguish between beliefs that have no empirical foundation and may in fact be myths from facts that have been substantiated through observation. Elsewhere in each chapter, an Applied Research section is also included that illustrates the use of sociological research in solving problems or evaluating how well solutions work. This emphasizes the theme that the development of social policies about social problems should be influenced by systematic and scientific assessment of their impact as well as by our own personal values.

refers to a method of organizing observations. The actual observations in an experiment might be done through direct observation, surveys, or archival records.

Whatever kind of research is involved, social scientists tend to follow a series of systematic steps in conducting the research. They first formulate the research problem and develop a detailed research design that describes exactly how the research will be conducted. This research design is carefully reviewed by other experts to ensure that the problem is one that can be resolved through scientific investigation. These experts also review the design to make sure the researcher used the most modern and effective methods for studying the problem. Then the actual observations are made and the resulting data carefully analyzed to see what conclusions could be drawn from them. The data analysis and conclusions are also carefully reviewed by other

experts to make sure that the conclusions are accurate and warranted. Only after this elaborate review process is the research and its results publicly disseminated through publication in a book or professional journal.

This methodical process gives scientists confidence in the accuracy of their conclusions. The process does not guarantee accuracy, but it does make the scientific method the process of gaining knowledge that is more likely than other methods to give us accurate knowledge of the world.

Values, Interest Groups, and Objectivity

An issue that is especially important and quite controversial regarding research on social problems is that of scientific objectivity, or the attempt by scientists to

prevent their personal values from affecting the outcome of their research. This does not mean that scientists are without values or passions. Many are intensely concerned about social problems such as crime, divorce, family violence, and nuclear war. At the same time, scientists realize that their personal values can, and probably will, bias their research. Early in the twentieth century, sociologist Max Weber laid out one position on this issue when he argued that sociology should remain as *value free* as possible because human values can distort sound scientific investigation (1958, originally published 1919). Weber argued that sociologists should suspend their personal and political values when engaging in scientific research. Contemporary advocates of Weber's position would concede that such suspension is difficult to accomplish but that abandoning the effort would be disastrous: There would be no means of acquiring an accurate body of knowledge to guide our consideration of ways of alleviating social problems (Gordon, 1988).

Karl Marx (1964, originally published 1848) eloquently stated a position opposite to that of Weber's on this controversy. Marx was a strong champion of the cause of the poor and the downtrodden, and he wanted to use science to improve their plight. He argued that social scientists should bring strong moral commitments to their work and use science to change inequitable or immoral social conditions. Likewise, there are sociologists today who believe that social research should be guided by personal and political values and directed toward alleviating social ills (Fay, 1987; Shostak, 2001).

Sociologist Alvin Gouldner (1976) has suggested a middle ground between these two positions. He agreed that scientists have values and that the influence of those values on research, which is often very subtle, can never be totally eliminated. But Gouldner proposed that we should deny neither our values nor the negative impact they can have on research. He urged that scientists should be explicit about what their values are. In this way, other scientists are forewarned and are thus better able to spot ways in which research findings may be influenced by personal bias.

The problem of enhancing scientific objectivity can be especially difficult for scientists who are closely associated with some interest group. Close involvement with an interest group can lead, often unknowingly, to distortions and misperceptions that throw into question the scientist's research on topics of interest to that group. For example, sociologists who are actively involved in such environmental groups as Greenpeace or Campaign for the Earth may have difficulty in recognizing ways in which the outcome of their research might be influenced by their personal position on the issues. Any research on environmental issues conducted by these people should be reviewed carefully for such sources of bias.

Assessing Data: Problems and Pitfalls

How can we detect error or bias in what we read? There are, of course, no foolproof guidelines, but we can draw some lessons from scientific research to become better-informed consumers of information.

SAMPLING PROBLEMS A basic question to ask about any set of data is: Upon whom or what were the observations made? In scientific research, collecting data on all the people or events about whom you are interested is normally impossible. In a study of divorce in the United States, for example, interviewing all couples who have divorced would be too expensive and time consuming, because more than a million do so every year. Instead, researchers typically study a **sample**, which consists of *elements that are taken from a group or population and that serve as a source of data*. To be useful, samples should be *representative*, or reflect the group or population that is under study in ways that are considered important.

The sampling problems that can arise when unrepresentative samples are used in the analysis of social problems—and the misleading conclusions that can result—are well illustrated by investigations of homosexuality. In the 1940s and 1950s, studies of gay men by psychologists and psychiatrists typically came to the conclusion that homosexuality is the result of a personality disturbance stemming from disordered relationships with parents during childhood. They also concluded that, as a group, gay men were unhappy and maladjusted individuals. The samples used in these studies consisted of gay men who were the patients of psychologists or psychiatrists. Virtually all the gay men in these samples were unhappy, maladjusted, and had disordered relationships with their parents—a strong association indeed. Yet the problem with the sampling in these studies should be fairly obvious: Gay men who seek psychological counseling are probably not representative of all gay men. People who seek counseling, irrespective of their sexual orientation, do so because they already have personal problems. Gay men who do not have such problems do not seek counseling, and they do not appear in samples of gays collected in this fashion. These early studies, then, contained a built-in bias, caused by poor sampling procedures, toward the conclusion that gay men are psychologically disturbed. Studies using more representative samples have concluded that sexual orientation, by itself, probably does not lead to personality disturbances or unhappiness (Cabaj and Stein, 1996; Ross, Paulsen, and Stalstrom, 1988). When studies do find higher rates of psychological disorders among gays, they are almost always caused by social circumstances, sometimes involving the stigma and hostility

that is often directed toward gays. A basic question to ask regarding any data or information, then, is whether it is based on a representative sample.

ASSESSING CAUSALITY One of the major goals in the study of social problems is to find their causes. By **causality**, we mean that *one factor has an effect on or produces a change in some other factor*. Once we have established the causes of a social problem, we are in a better position to determine what programs or policies might alleviate it. However, discovering causal relationships can be a difficult task because causality cannot be directly observed. Rather, we infer causality from the observation of *associations* or *correlations* between things in the world. If changes in one factor are regularly associated with changes in the other factor, then the first factor may be causing those changes.

The early studies of gay men mentioned previously had established an association between sexual orientation and psychological maladjustment, but a little thought will show that this association alone is not sufficient to infer that psychological disturbance causes homosexuality. It is equally logical to infer that being gay, especially in a society in which homosexuality is highly stigmatized, produces psychological disturbance and unhappiness. Thus, in addition to establishing an association, a second criterion to be satisfied before inferring causality is that the *time sequence* be correct: The causal factor must occur before whatever it is presumed to cause.

A third criterion to be satisfied in assessing causality is that the association not be spurious. A *spurious relationship* is one in which the association between two factors occurs because each is independently associated with some third factor. For example, there is a strong association between rates of ice cream consumption and juvenile delinquency, but few people would argue that eating ice cream causes delinquency or vice versa. Obviously, the relationship is a spurious one in which both ice cream consumption and delinquency are related to a third factor, the summer season. School vacations and warm weather offer greater opportunity to eat ice cream and to engage in delinquent acts.

Unfortunately, much research on social problems can satisfy only one or two of the criteria, and this leaves us less confident regarding causality. The central point here is to be cautious and critical about any claims regarding causal relationships.

MEASURING SOCIAL PROBLEMS All scientific research involves *measurement*, which refers to making observations that are presumed to be evidence that something exists or that something has a certain value. The observations that are made are referred to as "indicators."

An indicator of juvenile delinquency, for example, might be vandalism at a school gymnasium. Likewise, severe bruises on a child's forearm might be considered indicators of child abuse.

A central concern in the study of social problems is that the indicators of variables have *validity*, or that they accurately measure what they are intended to measure. A thermometer, for example, is a valid measure of temperature but not of volume. The study of child abuse provides illustrations of some of the difficulties of finding valid measures of social problems. If we define child abuse as injuring a child not by accident but in anger or with deliberate intent, then most would agree that a cigarette burn on a child's buttocks is a valid indicator of child abuse; there is no other imaginable reason why such burns should occur (Gelles, 1987). But what about a bruise on the arm? Some groups in our society approve of physically striking a child for disciplinary reasons, even if some bruising results. Other groups define any physical punishment as unacceptable.

Social policy based on conclusions drawn from invalid measures can be very harmful. It may lead us to think we are moving toward alleviating a problem when in fact we are not. Meanwhile, the problem may become more serious as we experiment with untested and ineffective solutions.

ASSESSING CLAIMS If information about sampling, measurement, or causality is not available, what can you do to reduce the chance of deception or distortion? There are a number of additional guidelines that should be kept in mind:

1. Is the claim made by a person or group of people with a strong self-interest in a particular interpretation or conclusion? Their personal interest may be biasing their presentation or interpretation of the data.
2. Can the claim be verified by yourself or others? Even reputable newspapers and magazines sometimes report data, in good faith, that cannot later be verified.
3. Are the claims presented in a propagandistic fashion? There are a number of propaganda techniques that are used to persuade the public. For example, "glittering generalities" involve the use of highly attractive but vague and meaningless words and phrases such as "restoring law and order" or "communism." "Testimonial" is the technique of using famous and respected people to support a program or policy as a means of engendering public support. Any claims using such techniques should be assessed very carefully.

Future Prospects: Solving Social Problems

What Can We Do About Social Problems?

Our goal is not only to understand social problems but also to solve them or at least to alleviate some of their more undesirable consequences. To deal with this aspect of the issue, each chapter in this book concludes with a Future Prospects section where various attempts to deal with the problems discussed in the chapter are explored. Solutions to problems, of course, can take a number of different forms, some rather surprising at first. Solutions to social problems can fall into one of the following categories:

1. *Prevention.* Some efforts focus on preventing a problem from arising in the first place. Drug education programs, for example, attempt to stop young people from taking drugs before they start.
2. *Intervention.* When prevention is not possible or is ineffective, programs often focus on intervening after a problem has emerged with an effort to reduce or eliminate it. Drug treatment programs focus on this—weaning people off drugs after they have become addicted.
3. *Social reform.* Some forms of prevention or intervention focus on social reform, which involves significant change in some social institutions or social practices. Social reform suggests that the problem stems, at least in part, from some serious failings in social organization or social institutions. It suggests that society is not healthy, and the persistence of the social problem is a symptom of this. Widespread drug abuse, for example, may reflect persistent poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunity among some groups—suggesting that economic institutions are failing to provide a place where all people can work and support themselves and their families. Keep in mind that social reform may be a form of prevention or intervention, but prevention and intervention do not necessarily involve social reform.
4. *Reconstruction.* It may be possible in some cases to alleviate social problems by redefining their nature and extent. Groups that do not consider a particular condition to be a social problem may become more prominent in the arena where social problems are socially constructed. When this happens, they may become influential in changing policies so that fewer societal resources are directed at changing those conditions.
5. *Alleviating consequences.* Whether or not we can solve a particular problem, we may also want to

direct attention toward alleviating the negative consequences of the problem. For example, even though the problem of drug abuse persists, we can still do such things as help the victims of crimes that are committed as a part of the problem of drug abuse.

Each Future Prospects section in later chapters explores policies that fall into some or all of these categories.

The Interplay of Social Policy and Research

Solutions to social problems never magically appear. Some action must be taken if solutions are to be effected. These actions develop into what is called **social policy**: *laws, administrative procedures, and other formal and informal social practices that are intended to promote social changes focused on alleviating particular social problems* (Jencks, 1992; Koppel, 2002). Social policies are inherently controversial because they are based, in part, on human values. Groups with differing values will often push for very different solutions to the same problem. Or they may, as we have seen, disagree over which social conditions are social problems. This controversy and disagreement is an inevitable feature of the debate over social problems and their solutions.

Within the confines of this debate, however, sociological theory and research can be applied as tools for assessing the validity and effectiveness of particular solutions. Science, as we have seen, cannot tell us what values to hold, but it can help us assess whether the factors we believe underlie a problem are the actual sources of the problem. Scientific observation can also assess whether particular solutions to problems actually work.

To emphasize the role of social policy in identifying and solving social problems, each chapter contains a Policy Issues insert. Each insert explores the different positions on an issue discussed in the chapter and evaluates what support social science research provides for these positions. This serves to stress the theme of the interplay between social policy and social research. The Policy Issues insert in this chapter focuses on solutions to the problem of spouse abuse. Some further linkages between social policy and research are outlined in Table 1.2. In fact, there is a specialty area in the social sciences—variously called applied sociology, applied social research, or evaluation research—that is devoted precisely to this endeavor (Straus, 2002; Sullivan, 1992).

Who Provides Solutions?

Social problems, as we have seen, are conditions that can be remedied through some form of collective action. “Collective action” merely means that people work to-

Domestic Violence: How to Intervene?

Domestic violence is a particularly tragic social problem with its jarring intrusion of injury and cruelty into the intimacy of the family. It is also a difficult problem for police officers who are often first on the scene of such violence and whose job it is to make decisions about how to handle the alleged perpetrator of the violence. In the past, such decisions have been left to the discretion and judgment of the officer in the field. Applied social research now offers a basis for developing social policies regarding this issue. Working with the Police Foundation, a research organization in Washington, DC, criminologist Lawrence Sherman and sociologist Richard Berk (1984) designed a study to assess which actions by police officers actually reduce the likelihood that a spouse abuser would be involved in future domestic violence incidents. When police officers respond to a domestic violence call, they have basically three alternatives: arrest the person accused of abuse; separate the couple for a time by ordering the alleged abuser to leave the premises; or attempt to serve as mediators between the parties.

Sherman and Berk asked police officers in Minneapolis to randomly apply one of these three intervention strategies—arrest, separation, or mediation—to each domestic violence call of which they were a part. For ethical and practical reasons, they limited the study to simple, or misdemeanor, assault where there was no severe injury or life-threatening situation. Their measure of the effectiveness of these interventions was whether an alleged abuser was involved in another domestic violence incident in the six months following the original police intervention.

Their basic finding supported the policy of arrest: Those arrested were significantly less likely to be involved in a repeat episode of domestic violence. This was not, however, a result of the fact that being jailed left them with less opportunity than others to commit acts of domestic violence, because those arrested were released very quickly and were thus equally able to engage in such acts as were those who experienced separation or mediation.

After Sherman and Berk reached their conclusions, the Minneapolis and many other police departments established administrative policies encouraging or requiring officers to use the arrest strategy when responding to spouse

abuse calls. Thus, many law enforcement agencies began to take a stronger stand in protecting women from domestic assault, a stand that was shown empirically by Sherman and Berk to have a better chance of reducing the problem.

Because social problems are complicated, sociologists recognize that one research study is not likely to tell us all we need to know. To see if the results would hold up in other places and at other times, variations on the Sherman-Berk study have been done in a number of other cities (Dunford, Huizinga, and Elliott, 1990; Hirschel, Hutchison, and Dean, 1992; Maxwell, Garner, and Fagan, 2001). Generally, the results have been supportive of the efficacy of arrest over other approaches in reducing spouse abuse, but the studies also show that the effect of arrest is not nearly as strong or as consistent as earlier studies had suggested. Why the difference in findings? It may be that Sherman and Berk, given the way they designed their study, inadvertently studied a select group of abusers on whom arrest was particularly effective. This illustrates the concern with sampling problems affecting research, mentioned previously in this chapter. The later studies, looking at a broader sampling of abusers, found that arrest may work well with people whose reputations would be more negatively affected by an arrest, such as the affluent or those with middle-class jobs. On the other hand, for those who are unemployed or irregularly employed, arrest may not be as significant a threat to their reputations or as disruptive to their lifestyles. In addition, research has been extended beyond the issue of arrest to explore such things as severity of sentencing, finding that more severe sentences (such as jail time rather than probation) tend to reduce future episodes of domestic violence (Thistlethwaite, Wool-dredge, and Gibbs, 1998). So, sociologists continue to do research in an effort to narrow down their understanding of which batterers of women are deterred by arrest or by severe sentences.

These studies on domestic violence illustrate the continuous interplay between research and policy, showing how social policy emerges, at least in part, from scientifically supported recommendations about how to handle social problems.

gether toward a solution. In some cases, this takes the form of interest groups working through the normal political process. In the United States, this could occur at the federal, state, or local level. Politicians who are aware of a problem pass legislation to alleviate it, judges make rulings that have an impact on a problem, or private corporations and foundations develop programs to

solve a problem. The solution to a problem may even be developed in good part by people who are unaffected, or at best indirectly affected, by it.

Organized protest and social action outside the normal political process represent another way that solutions to social problems can emerge. Groups affected by a problem can strike, riot, or march in the streets

TABLE 1.2

Linkage Between Social Policy and Social Science Research

Stages in the Policy Process	Possible Research Contribution
Problem Formulation	Assess extent of problem, who is affected, and costs of doing nothing
Policy Formulation	Assess positive or negative impact of various policy alternatives
Policy Implementation	Assess whether a program achieves policy goals in an efficient and effective manner
Evaluation	Assess whether and how a solution has an impact on a problem or on other groups in society; determine whether any new problems are created
Closure	Assess whether any further policy application would be warranted

to force government or private organizations to change their practices. In some cases, a **social movement**, a collective, organized effort to promote or resist social change through some noninstitutionalized or unconventional means, may emerge. The civil rights movement, the environmental movement, and the antiglobalization movement are examples of social movements that have used demonstration and protest to force recalcitrant politicians and corporations to change their practices related to social problems. All three of these movements, by the way, have had significant support from college student-led collective action.

In recent years, there has been vigorous debate over the role of the government in identifying and solving social problems. Beginning with the New Deal of the 1930s and continuing through the 1960s, there was considerable support for the government to take responsibility for trying to solve social problems such as crime, poverty, and environmental pollution. In particular, the government used its ability to raise revenue through taxation—its fiscal policy—to attack social problems. For example, it raised money to support such programs as Medicare and Social Security. In addition, in times of economic downturn, the government went into debt, creating a budget deficit, to provide support for the unemployed, stimulate business activity, and create jobs to put people to work temporarily. The size of the government grew, and many social programs were established. At the risk of oversimplification, we can call this approach to the role of the government in social problems the *interventionist* approach.

With Ronald Reagan’s election as president of the United States in 1980, pressure from another direction regarding social problems mounted. This pres-

sure was based on the belief that government can be a hindrance to the solution of many problems and should play only a limited role in attacking them. Rather, the government’s primary role should be to create a climate that promotes business expansion, which will produce prosperity that will alleviate many, although certainly not all, social problems. Where possible, solutions to problems should arise from a competitive, market-driven economy. Some even promote the “privatization” of government services and activities, with businesses and corporations doing many things that government once did. Furthermore, many policy analysts support “devolution” or shifting the focus of attention away from higher levels of government, such as the federal level, and toward state and local levels that are closer to the problems being addressed. Finally, some proponents of this approach argue for reemphasizing the importance of individualism, of people using their own efforts in a competitive environment to improve their lot in life. Social policy,



Organized protest outside the normal political process is one important way to arrive at solutions to social problems. These protestors at the World Economic Forum in New York City in 2002 were opposing various aspects of global corporate expansion.

in short, should be less related to government intervention and more dependent on the actions of individuals or private groups and the working of impersonal, economic forces. Again, at the risk of oversimplification, this approach is labeled the *laissez-faire* approach. The French term *laissez-faire*, meaning “to let do” or to leave people alone, refers to the belief that government should intervene as little as possible in people’s lives or the workings of society.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1986) argues that the United States experiences a cyclical shift in national involvement between these extremes—changing from an emphasis on public action to that of private interest and self-fulfillment and back again—every twenty-five years or so. Whether it is cyclical or not, these contrasting views of the government’s role in solving social problems certainly have been joined in debate in recent decades as never before. The outcome of this debate shapes which policies will be developed to attack the problems that we will address in later chapters. This book will, therefore, discuss the interventionist and *laissez-faire* positions at greater length when they are relevant to particular social problems; especially in the Policy Issues inserts, the extent to which policies are interventionist or *laissez-faire* in nature will be discussed.

Should We Solve the Problem?

Once a social condition has been judged to be a social problem, the search for solutions begins. At this point, there may be widespread agreement, at least in the abstract, that the problem should be solved. There are still, however, some final issues that need to be weighed.

1. *Can we accept the costs of a solution?* Because economic resources are limited, money used to clean up the environment is not available to fight crime or build defense weapons. Any effort to solve social ills will mean that fewer resources are available to solve other problems.
2. *Does a solution to one problem create yet other problems?* As we emphasized in discussing the sociological perspectives, a society is a complex intertwining of many parts, and changing one part may have consequences for other parts. If, for example, we could effectively eliminate prostitution and drug dealing, what would happen to the people who earn a living that way? Would they turn to other crimes to support themselves? There may be times when we decide that the “cure” is worse than the “disease.”
3. *Is a particular solution feasible?* Given the political and social climate and the cultural values in the United States, are there some solutions to problems that would be impossible to accomplish

because of resistance from some groups? Coping with alcoholism, for example, by banning all use of alcohol is simply not feasible, as the experiment with Prohibition in the 1920s showed.

International Perspectives: Social Problems in Other Societies

People in the United States, of course, tend to be most concerned about social problems in their own country. However, there are three reasons why we should focus some of our attention on social problems in other societies and cultures (Schaeffer, 1997). First of all, we can gain additional insight into problems and their solutions when we observe them in cultures different from our own. Is the nature and extent of some social problem in the United States different from that in other countries? If so, then we can look for the factors unique to the American experience that produce this difference. We can also examine which solutions have worked elsewhere. This does not mean that they will automatically work here, but it does give us some insight into which solutions to consider.

A second reason for taking an international perspective is that nations today are intertwined in complex relationships in which we all depend on one another to an extent. International trade agreements affect the jobs available to people in Portland, Maine, and Albuquerque, New Mexico; Bolivian farmers survive by growing coca plants, which produce illegal drugs available in the United States; political instability in Southeast Asia sends immigrants to the United States, increasing cultural diversity here and contributing to racial and ethnic conflict. Therefore, to find the causes of and solutions for social problems affecting the United States, it is sometimes necessary to explore social and economic developments in other parts of the world.

A third reason for a more global perspective is that some social problems are inherently global rather than national or regional in nature. This is true of many environmental problems. The sources of acid rain and global warming, for example, are found in many nations, and these problems will affect all the peoples of the world. By their very nature, the spread of such problems will not be stopped by national boundaries.

So, where most appropriate, illustrations of the nature and extent of social problems in other societies and cultures are included in the discussion of problems in the United States. To focus attention on this issue, each chapter contains an International Perspectives insert, which elaborates on some of the global connections and issues relevant to the problem discussed in the particular chapter. Global issues are further explored in the text itself.

Researching Social Problems on the Internet

The Internet has become an invaluable resource in trying to understand social problems and their solutions. Each chapter of this text offers suggestions for useful explorations of the Internet relevant to the topics in this course. One good way to begin is to look for Web sites relevant to the discipline of sociology and the study of social problems. For example, to learn more about sociology, go to the search vehicle called Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com) and begin by selecting "Social Science" and then "Sociology." At this point, by selecting "Organizations," you will have choices of going to the home pages of many sociological organizations in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and others. Start by choosing "American Sociological Association." The American Sociological Association (ASA) is the main national organization for the discipline of sociology. At its Web site, you can learn more about sociology and about the way in which the national professional organization supports the work of sociologists. Look at some of the other sociology organizations whose links are in the Yahoo! search. What information do you find there relevant to your study of sociology? You can use other search engines, such as Google or AltaVista, to do the same search. Type "sociology" in the search field, and they will locate hundreds of Web pages related to sociology, many of them university departments of sociology.

To learn more about the focus of sociology on the understanding and solution of social problems, go to the Web site of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (www.ssspi.org). This is an interdisciplinary organization of researchers engaged in the scientific study of social problems. There, you can read the organization's newsletter, learn about its annual meeting, and find links to other relevant Web sites. Another excellent Web site is Sociosite: Sociological Information System based at the University of Amsterdam (www.fmg.uva.nl/sociosite/). It contains an enormous number of links to other Web sites about particular sociologists, organizations in sociology, newsletters, and journals, as well as information about how sociologists investigate and attempt to find solutions to social problems.

Also, Allyn and Bacon, which publishes this book, maintains a Social Problems Web Site for the use of students in sociology (www.ablongman.com/socprobs/). At that site, you will find a variety of materials to assist you in the study of sociology and social problems. One set of materials is a list of Problem Areas in the study of social problems. There is at least one Problem Area for each of the chapters in this book, and you will find additional materials on the chapter topic there.

LINKAGES

Social problems do not exist in isolation from one another.

Rather, problems tend to be linked together such that the worsening of one problem can contribute to the worsening of other problems. For example, an epidemic disease such as AIDS is a health problem discussed in Chapter 4, whereas the use of crack cocaine is related to drug abuse discussed in Chapter 10. Yet, these two problems are linked because some crack addicts use dirty needles and share equipment,

which can further spread the AIDS virus. So, as intravenous drug use becomes more prevalent, the AIDS virus has a better chance of spreading. Alleviate one problem, and we will have made some progress toward alleviating the other. To encourage this consideration of linkages, each chapter includes a brief insert that suggests one or two of the less obvious ways in which the problems in that chapter are linked to problems in other chapters.

STUDY AND REVIEW

Summary

1. Sociology offers one of the most useful approaches to understanding social problems and finding solutions to them. Social problems involve public issues and are not merely personal troubles. They are fun-

damentally social in nature because their causes and solutions have to do with the workings of society. Four social conditions that can play a part in the emergence of social problems are: deviation from group values and norms, a decline in the effectiveness of social institutions, extensive social and cultural diversity, and the exercise of power.

2. The sociological imagination is the ability to recognize the relationship between what is happening in your own personal life and the social forces that surround you.
3. Sociological insights are formulated into theories. Very general explanations of social reality are called theoretical perspectives. The three major theoretical perspectives in sociology today are functionalism, conflict theory, and interactionism.
4. From the functionalist perspective, society is viewed as a system made up of interrelated and interdependent parts, each performing a function that contributes to the operation of the whole society. Social problems arise when some element of society becomes dysfunctional and interferes with the efficient operation or stability of the system or the achievement of societal goals.
5. From the conflict perspective, society is viewed as consisting of a variety of groups who struggle with one another to attain scarce societal resources that are considered valuable. Social problems arise when a group, believing that its interests are not being met or that it is not receiving sufficient scarce resources, works to overcome what it perceives as a disadvantage.
6. The interactionist perspective focuses on everyday social interaction among people rather than on larger societal structures. It emphasizes the importance of definition and interpretation and the role of shared expectations in shaping behavior. Social problems arise when a condition is defined by an influential group as stigmatizing or threatening to its values and disruptive of normal social expectations.
7. Theories must be tested through research, which for sociologists is based on the scientific method. Science emphasizes objective and systematic observation as a source of knowledge. Theories are linked to research through hypotheses, which are tentative statements that can be tested about the relationship between two or more factors.
8. Although the subject is controversial, most scientists emphasize the importance of objectivity, or the attempt to prevent personal values from affecting the outcome of research. There are a number of things to watch for in assessing research data, including sampling problems, the assessment of causality, measurement problems, and assessing the claims people make.
9. Solutions to social problems can focus on prevention, intervention, social reform, reconstruction, or alleviating consequences. The best means for finding effective solutions to social problems is through an interplay between the development of social policy and its assessment through scientific research. However, not all problems can or should be solved, because the costs may be too high or there may be disagreement over how to solve them.

Key Terms

authority	research
causality	sample
conflict perspective	science
definition of the situation	social institutions
deviance	social movement
ethnocentrism	social policy
functionalist perspective	social problem
hypotheses	sociological imagination
interactionist perspective	sociology
interest group	subculture
norms	theoretical perspectives
power	theory
	values

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Public issues are different from personal troubles in that public issues
 - a. affect large numbers of people.
 - b. affect mostly the elite.
 - c. lead to the disintegration of family life.
 - d. involve the violation of societal values and norms.
 - e. involve personal rather than collective solutions.
2. Sociologists refer to rules of conduct that guide people's behavior as
 - a. values.
 - b. deviance.
 - c. authority.
 - d. subcultures.
 - e. norms.
3. Ethnocentrism can play a role in the emergence of social problems because ethnocentrism
 - a. reduces group cohesion.
 - b. works at counterpurposes to social institutions.
 - c. can enhance conflicts between subcultures.
 - d. involves criminal behavior.
4. The term *macrosociology* refers to theoretical perspectives in sociology that
 - a. focus on large groups and social institutions and on society as a whole.
 - b. derive from the functionalist perspective.
 - c. focus on the intimate level of everyday interactions between people.
 - d. focus on people's ability to use symbols and to interpret social meanings in social interaction.
5. Which sociological perspective posits that social problems arise from social disorganization in society?
 - a. conflict perspective
 - b. functionalist perspective
 - c. sociological imagination
 - d. interactionist perspective
 - e. evaluation research

6. Which sociological perspective has at its core the idea that coercion and the exercise of power are basic social mechanisms for regulating behavior and allocating resources?
 - a. the functionalist perspective
 - b. the conflict perspective
 - c. the sociological imagination
 - d. the interactionist perspective
7. Which of the following statements would be most consistent with the interactionist perspective?
 - a. Society is made up of groups struggling with one another over scarce resources.
 - b. People are symbol manipulators who create their own world.
 - c. Social problems arise when some element in society becomes dysfunctional.
 - d. Society is a system made up of interrelated and interdependent parts.
8. In conducting research on social problems, the best kind of sample to use is one that
 - a. focuses only on people who are suffering from the problem being studied.
 - b. will confirm the hypotheses of the research.
 - c. is consistent with the values of the researcher.
 - d. represents the population under study.
9. According to the text, commonsense knowledge
 - a. is often superior to scientific knowledge.
 - b. is based on systematic observation.
 - c. usually involves representative samples.
 - d. tends to accept untested and unquestioned assumptions.
10. The laissez-faire approach to social problems is based on the idea that
 - a. the government should take prime responsibility for solving social problems.
 - b. the conflict perspective is most useful in understanding social problems.
 - c. the government should play a limited role in seeking solutions to social problems.
 - d. most social problems are global in nature rather than national in scope.

True/False Questions

1. The definition of a social problem given in the text includes both conditions that can be remedied through collective action as well as those that cannot.
2. In comparison to values, norms are much more specific and concrete rules of conduct that guide people's behavior.
3. Authority can also be referred to as "legitimate power."
4. Conflict theory is the sociological perspective that grew out of the similarities sociologists observed between society and biological organisms.
5. One of the core ideas of the interactionist perspective is that society consists of parts that are interrelated and interdependent.

6. The functionalist perspective views social problems as being caused by dysfunctional activities or disorganization in the social system.
7. Max Weber is the sociologist who argued that sociology should remain as value free as possible.
8. Sociologists do not conduct research on commonsense beliefs because they mostly turn out to be true.
9. Social policy is influenced by both scientific research and social and cultural values.
10. The interventionist approach is the approach arguing that government is generally a hindrance to the solution of many social problems.

Fill-In Questions

1. According to the text, a social problem exists when _____ defines a social condition as threatening its values.
2. Teenagers, skinheads, the elderly, and prison inmates are all examples of _____.
3. The ability to understand the relationship between what is happening in people's personal lives and the social forces that surround them is what C. Wright Mills called _____.
4. According to the functionalist perspective, social practices that disrupt social equilibrium rather than contribute to it are called _____.
5. Two key concepts of the conflict perspective are _____ and _____.
6. The concept of _____ is attributed to sociologists William and Dorothy Thomas and is a key concept of the interactionist perspective.
7. Scientific theories are linked to scientific research through _____, which are tentative statements that can be tested regarding relationships between factors.
8. The three criteria used to assess whether there is a causal relationship between two phenomena are (1) a correlation be found between the two, (2) the correlation not be spurious, and (3) _____.
9. When we consider issues of measurement, a central concern is that the indicators of social problems have _____.
10. The specialty area in the social sciences that is devoted to assessing the effectiveness of solutions to social problems is _____.

Matching Questions

- | | |
|-------|--------------------------------|
| _____ | 1. authority |
| _____ | 2. Karl Marx |
| _____ | 3. definition of the situation |
| _____ | 4. value-free sociology |
| _____ | 5. social movement |
| _____ | 6. deviance |
| _____ | 7. functionalist perspective |

- _____ 8. samples
- _____ 9. social institution
- _____ 10. norms

- A. legitimate power
- B. interactionist perspective
- C. Max Weber
- D. civil rights movement
- E. conflict perspective
- F. representative
- G. macrosociology
- H. rules of conduct
- I. the family
- J. stigma

Essay Questions

1. Give the text's definition of what a social problem is. Draw out the implications of each element in that definition.
2. How do social institutions and subcultures play a role in the emergence of social problems?
3. What are the basic assumptions of the functionalist perspective regarding the nature and operation of society?
4. Describe how the conflict and interactionist theories would define whether a social problem exists.
5. Describe the various positions that sociologists have taken on the issue of scientific objectivity. Include in your answer a discussion of values and interest groups.
6. What is commonsense knowledge? What are its weaknesses? How does scientific knowledge differ from common sense? How does science overcome the weaknesses associated with commonsense knowledge?
7. Describe some of the difficulties that sociologists confront in measuring social problems. Include in your answer a discussion of the concepts of "measurement" and "validity."
8. Describe the contributions that social science research makes to the social policy process and the search for solutions to social problems.
9. Compare and contrast the interventionist and laissez-faire approaches to understanding and solving social problems.
10. What are some of the considerations to be taken into account when deciding whether solutions to social problems should be sought at all?

For Further Reading

Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. *The Good Society*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991. This

is a thought-provoking book about the extent to which the confidence of people in the United States about their society has been shaken. It suggests ways to transform such institutions as the family, politics, and the economy. Such transformations may well be an integral part of the attack on social problems.

Joel Best. *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. This is an excellent and readable little book on how statistics about social problems can deceive as well as inform. The author helps the reader to assess when statistical presentations are legitimate.

Randall Collins. *Sociological Insight*, 2d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. This book, in the vein of Mills's sociological imagination, tries to impart the power and insight of the general perspective of sociology.

Willard Gaylin, Ruth Macklin, and Tabitha Powledge, eds. *Violence and the Politics of Research*. New York: Plenum, 1981. This book raises issues regarding whether researchers should be bound by moral or ethical considerations when they conduct research on social problems and whether they should be responsible for making decisions about these problems.

Robert Heiner. *Social Problems: An Introduction to Critical Constructionism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. This book combines the conflict and the interactionist perspectives into an approach called "critical constructionism," which views social problems as constructed in such a way that they reflect the interests of elites in society to the detriment of those with the least power.

Sam D. Sieber. *Fatal Remedies: The Ironies of Social Intervention*. New York: Plenum, 1981. An excellent book on the many efforts at social intervention that become self-defeating when their outcomes run counter to their intentions. This book preaches a healthy dose of caution when considering social intervention.

Roger A. Straus, ed. *Using Sociology: An Introduction from the Applied and Clinical Perspectives*, 3d ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. This book offers an overview of the field of applied and clinical sociology, including many examples of the work of applied sociologists in settings such as health care, the workplace, and the criminal justice field. It describes sociological practitioners actively intervening to improve social conditions.

Thomas J. Sullivan. *Applied Sociology: Research and Critical Thinking*. New York: Macmillan, 1992. This book provides a brief introduction to applied social science research that is easily understandable to the undergraduate. It presents the many ways in which social science research can be used to shape social policy and alleviate social problems.