Service sociology is a socially responsible and mission-oriented sociology of action and alleviation. Motivated by care and compassion, service sociologists are concerned with helping people meet their pressing social needs.

A. Javier Treviño

1 SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1.1   Describe the experience of impoverished students of color.

1.2   Define what constitutes a social problem.

1.3   Explain the sociological imagination.

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

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

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

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

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

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INVESTIGATING SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS: MY STORY

A. Javier Treviño

I took my first sociology course as a high school senior, and I knew I had found my calling. Although no one in my family had ever gone to college, I took both sociology courses offered at the local community college, one of which was about social problems. My appetite whetted, I transferred to a state university to get a BA degree in sociology. After graduating and completing a year of substitute teaching at my former high school, I decided to get a master's degree in applied sociology, with an emphasis in social planning. Thinking this would be the end of my academic journey, I planned to work as a probation officer, a marriage counselor, or a sociology teacher at a community college. But I soon realized I needed to know more about *theory* to gain a better understanding of the nature and causes of social problems. Thus, I obtained a PhD in sociology, with concentrations on crime, deviance, and social control. Since then, I have looked at various issues—crime, deviance, social control—theoretically. I have served as president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) and edited the volumes *Service Sociology and Academic Engagement in Social Problems* (with Karen M. McCormack), *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Problems* (2 vols.), and *Researching Social Problems* (with Amir Marvasti).

THE MOBILITY PUZZLE

The Mobility Puzzle

Angie, an 18-year-old Latina, was a high school student living with her grandparents. She was from Port City, a small town with one of the highest poverty rates and lowest four-year high school graduation rates in the United States. Angie was a hard worker, holding down two jobs for several years, and she had big plans: to get a college degree, find a white-collar job, start a family, and live the middle-class American Dream.

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

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

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

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

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

When we look at *ethnicity* (the subject of Chapter 3), we find that in 2021, Latinx people like Angie had an unemployment rate of 6.8% compared to the unemployment rate of

whites at 4.7% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023a). As for *age*, we know there is plenty of discrimination against older persons in the labor market (as we will see in Chapter 6), but we also know that in 2022 only 32.8% of teenagers Angie's age (16 to 19 years) had jobs compared to 79.9% for older people (25 to 54 years) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023b). Concerning *gender* (the subject of Chapter 4), we know that in 2022 women's earnings were only 80% of men's earnings. As for *education* (the subject of Chapter 7), in 2022 the unemployment rate for people like Angie who only had a high school diploma was almost twice as high (4.0%) as that for people with a college degree (2.2%) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023c). Moreover, when we consider the type of *work* (the subject of Chapter 10) largely available to these young students of color, we find that 22.9% of U.S. workers were employed in the service occupations, which include low-income jobs in food preparation and cleaning and maintenance (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023d). But what are we to make of all these statistics? For the moment, simply this: an awful lot of Americans—tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions—are in the same predicament as those marginalized adolescents, like Angie, whom Ranita Ray interviewed. And though they may have felt alone and isolated, these young people were not the only ones experiencing such circumstances. In other words, unemployment and low-wage employment in service jobs are not only a matter of these young people's *personal* troubles; they are, in fact, a *collective* problem.

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

So let's now look at the demographic factor that, in addition to age, characterized all the young people with whom Ranita Ray spoke: social class (discussed in more depth in Chapter 2). A **social class** is a category of people whose experiences in life are determined by the amount of income and wealth they own and control. Remember that the young adults Ray interviewed were from poor and working-class backgrounds. No doubt you have heard and read about the various social classes that exist in U.S. society. There is no agreement, even among social scientists, on how to distinguish among social classes, much less on how many there are. But we typically hear about the *upper class* (think here about such wealthy people as SpaceX founder Elon Musk and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg); the *middle classes* (usually referred to in the plural because there are several levels within this middle rank); and the *poor* (sometimes called the "working poor," the homeless, or the indigent). The *working class*, which we can place between the middle classes and the poor, generally consists of people who have a basic education (a high school diploma, vocational skills training, certification in a service occupation); modest income (earned from hourly wages); and jobs in manufacturing or the "service economy" (e.g., factory workers, truck drivers, cooks, waiters and waitresses, nurses, police officers). Though it was the case that the adolescents whom Ranita Ray interviewed had assiduously avoided becoming teen parents, drug users, and gang members, why is it that millions of young people of color from working-class and impoverished backgrounds, just like them, remain stuck in dead-end, minimum-wage jobs without benefits and security? We'll address this important question in due course, but first we turn to the discipline of sociology and its examination of social problems.

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

Michael Matthews/Alamy Stock Photo

THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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

The phrase "social problems" as generally understood by sociologists today has had a long history (Marvasti and Treviño 2019). Throughout much of the 19th century, it appeared in the singular and referred to *the* problem of the unequal distribution of wealth in general (Schwartz 1997). By the late 19th century, there were many references to the "social question." This term, framed as a problem, was used to refer broadly to the social changes produced by industrial society that affected the well-being of the working classes. Not only did sociology take "shape around discussion of the 'social question,'" it legitimated sociology as a distinct discipline (Case 2016, 767). Also during that time, frequent reference was made to the so-called "poverty question," or the issue of urban poverty. Then, in 1910 Charles A. Ellwood's *Sociology and Modern Social Problems* appeared as "the first college textbook to fashion the arena of sociology as preeminently the arena of social problems" (Schwartz 1997, 285). By the 1920s, the phrase "social problems" had replaced all previous versions and included sociological study of such troublesome issues as overpopulation, poverty, unemployment, labor conflicts, child labor, racism, crime, and juvenile delinquency.

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

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

Malcolm Spector and John I. Kitsuse (1987, 5) brought renewed focus to "the subjective side of social problems," which became commonly known as the *constructionist* perspective. Spector and Kitsuse depicted social problems as involving the process of *claims-making*: "*the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions*" (75, emphasis in original).

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

Patterns and Trends

To begin with, in discussing social problems we are talking about conditions, events, or behaviors that occur locally, nationally, or globally and cause or threaten to cause harm to all or some segment of the population. Consider the failure of U.S. schools to teach children basic literacy skills as a social *condition* that means many students (particularly poor and minority children) will not be well prepared to enter the job market and that the United States will be less competitive in the world economy. Or consider the series of *events* that began when the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease) pandemic was first reported from China in late 2019. By the summer of 2023 the virus had spread globally, resulting in more than 768 million infected and nearly 7 million deaths worldwide. Many governments, including that of the United States, responded with quarantines, nationwide lockdowns, and school and business closings. Finally, consider as a social problem a *pattern of behavior* like the increased use of e-cigarette and other vaping products by young adults, which, as of early 2020, had led to 68 lung injury deaths and 2,807 hospitalizations (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020).

Because social problems affect large numbers of people, sociologists typically discuss them in terms of *patterns* and *trends* and use measures of *rates* to describe how frequent and pervasive their occurrence is. For example, we've all heard about how politicians, civic leaders, religious leaders, and average citizens are concerned about the crime rates in their cities and communities. In studying rates of crime, sociologists and criminologists rely on certain **data sources**, or collections of information, like the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR; to be discussed in Chapter 11). When we look at the UCR's percentage of violent crime by U.S. region, we see that in 2019, the South had the highest rate of violent crime (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault), at 41.0%, compared to the Northeast region, with 13.1% (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2019a).

Patterns and trends can be visually presented in a variety of formats, including charts, tables, and graphs. Throughout this textbook you will see data depicted in this way. Back in the 1920s and 1930s the sociologists at the University of Chicago were interested in studying the incidence

and prevalence of alcoholism, suicide, mental illness, and crime and delinquency in the city. Knowing that these problems tend to be more concentrated in some areas than in others, they wanted to identify their distribution throughout Chicago. For this they used maps. One of the most common types was the *spot map*, on which the researchers plotted the locations where a particular social problem was present. For example, Figure 1.1 is a map in which the spots indicate the home addresses of 8,591 alleged male juvenile delinquents in 1927.

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Example of a Spot Map

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

The Objective and Subjective Aspects of Social Problems

We will come back to the way sociologists use and produce information about social problems when they do research but, for now, notice that in measuring the rate of crime—or, for that matter, of hunger and food insecurity, population growth, or sex trafficking—we are able to call attention to the **objective aspect of social problems**. In other words, data allow us to show, concretely, how much crime is really out there. Again, in looking at the UCR we can see that in 2019, 319 murders were reported in New York City compared to 295 the year before, and that there were 492 murders in Chicago in 2019 compared to 563 in 2018 (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2019b). These statistics tell us two things in straightforward terms: first, Chicago—with one-third the population of New York—had 173 *more* murders than New York, and second, the murder rate in Chicago *went down* while in New York it went up from one year to the next.

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

TABLE 1.1 ■ A Ranking of Social Problems		
Rank	**Problem**	**Percentage**
1	The government/poor leadership	20
2	Economy in general	11
3	High cost of living/inflation	8
4	Immigration	8
5	Crime/violence	5

Note: In a Gallup public opinion poll conducted in July 2023, a random national sample of respondents was asked, "What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?" This table shows the top five results.

Source: Gallup. n.d. "Most Important Problem." Accessed October 9, 2023. https://news.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx.

But even without a direct interaction between the objective and the subjective, people can be troubled about a particular social condition, event, or pattern of behavior. Consider that, on average, nearly twice as many people in the United States die from injuries sustained in motor vehicle crashes as die from HIV infection: in 2020, fatalities from these two causes were 35,766 and 18,489, respectively (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2022; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration 2020). Yet there are far more organizations and campaigns for HIV awareness in the United States and worldwide—such as Let's Stop HIV Together, I Am A Work of ART, the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, and the Elton John AIDS Foundation—than there are for car crashes. No doubt there are many justifiable reasons for this disproportionate focus, but while *objectively* the problem of auto fatalities causes twice as much harm to people and society, *subjectively* people are much more concerned about the problem of HIV/AIDS. In other words, if one troubling condition is more pervasive or more detrimental than another

(and even if there's factual information indicating this), that doesn't necessarily mean people will perceive the condition as more problematic.

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

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

Win McNamee/Getty Images

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

An alternative to constructionism that more closely combines the objective and subjective aspects of social problems is **societalization**: the sequential process by which a social problem becomes a societal *crisis*. According to Jeffrey C. Alexander (2019), the process begins when an institution's severe internal strains are made public, usually by the news media. The language of scandal emerges so that the institution's strains appear to threaten the larger society, and moral outrage is aroused. This results in interventions from prosecutors, special investigators, journalists, and other representatives of society. The institution's authorities retaliate and a standoff between the institution and society ensues. Widespread institutional reforms are launched and sometimes achieved. However, in time, the crisis subsides and there is a return to the institution's putative stability. Consider as an example of societalization the pedophilia in the U.S. Catholic

Church that was exposed by newspapers like the *Boston Globe*. District attorneys and grand juries investigated and prosecuted the sexually abusive priests. Church leaders dismissed allegations of pedophilia by priests, shifted blame, and generally covered up. As a result of the scandal, mandatory laws reporting suspected sexual abuse to the police were extended to the church.

A word must now be said about the *denial* of social problems. Sociologist Jared Del Rosso (2022) notes that people often hide, ignore, or explain away distressing information and events such as, for example, the effects of climate change. Denial cultivates ignorance of social problems and gives the impression that "everything is fine," even as the world experiences intense droughts, wildfires, rising sea levels, flooding, and catastrophic storms that adversely affect the lives of millions of people. Denial of problems empowers perpetrators and allows harm and injustice to intensify. Del Rosso maintains that collective denial of social problems requires their collective acknowledgment, which in turn can mobilize those harmed by the problem to effect consequential social change.

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

Sociologists also acknowledge that, when it comes to who decides which conditions are problematic, some people and groups are more significant or have greater influence than others. This speaks to the issue of political *power.* For example, as criminologist Richard Quinney (1970) noted, the more the powerful segments of society—such as politicians, bankers, and corporate executives—are concerned about crime, the greater the probability that laws will be created to prohibit such behaviors as muggings, store thefts, and drug use. Conversely, there will be fewer laws to prohibit behaviors like profiting from campaign financing, insider trading, and price fixing. According to Quinney, definitions of crime align with the interests of those segments of society with the power to shape social policy. We will discuss the relationship between social problems and social policy shortly. But first, let's consider why, once people perceive a social situation as detrimental to their well-being or that of others, they believe some sort of *action* must be taken to change or improve the situation.

Types of Action

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

Actions meant to ameliorate (from the Latin *melior*, to improve) a problematic condition are usually aimed at helping those in need. This means providing, in some cases, the material relief necessary for physical survival (money, food, clothes); in most cases, however, it means providing nonmaterial services such as counseling (employment, parenting); dispute resolution (peace talks, mediation, restorative practices); education (instruction and encouragement); and

professional consultation (on specific troublesome issues). People hoping to take or support these kinds of actions typically engage in community service, civic engagement, and advocacy. Think about organized forms of volunteerism and activism like AmeriCorps, Teach For America, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, DoSomething, Save the Children, Oxfam, and the Food Recovery Network.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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

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

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

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

The sociological imagination provides us with insight into the social conditions of our lives. It helps us understand why we feel trapped and insecure, isolated and powerless. The sociological imagination helps us make the connection between history and biography, between our own society and our private

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

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

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

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

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

SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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

TABLE 1.2 ■ Some Data Sources for Social Problems Research	
Data Source	**Description**
National Center for Education Statistics (http://nces.ed.gov)	Government agency (part of the U.S. Department of Education) that collects data on a variety of issues related to education, including academic achievement and performance, illiteracy, dropout rates, homeschooling, adult learning, teacher qualifications, and public and private school comparisons
National Center for Health Statistics (http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/index.htm)	Government agency (part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) responsible for collecting data from birth and death records, medical records, nutrition records, and interview surveys, as well as through direct physical exams and laboratory testing, in order to provide information to help identify and address critical health problems in the United States

Data Source	Description
Pew Research Center (http://www.pewresearch.org)	Nonpartisan "fact tank" that provides information on social issues, public opinion, and demographic trends shaping the United States and the world
U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (http://www.bls.gov)	Government agency (branch of the U.S. Department of Labor) responsible for collecting data about employment, unemployment, pay and benefits, consumer spending, work productivity, workplace injuries and fatalities, and employment productivity
U.S. Census Bureau (http://www.census.gov)	Government agency (a branch of the U.S. Department of Commerce) responsible for conducting the decennial U.S. Census; serves as a leading source of data about the American people and economy

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

Survey Research

For quantitative research, the method most commonly used is the **survey**, a technique in which respondents are asked to answer questions on a written questionnaire. A *questionnaire* is a set of questions a researcher presents to respondents for their answers. Questionnaires typically ask questions that measure *variables*, such as attitudes (say, political affiliation); behaviors (religious services attendance); and statuses (marital, employment). Researchers may administer questionnaires in a variety of ways: in person or by telephone, or they can send them through the mail, or they can use email, social media websites such as Facebook or Twitter, or web-based survey programs like SurveyMonkey and Google Forms. Because it is often impractical to survey every subject in a population of interest—for example, every person experiencing homelessness in a large city—the researcher selects a *sample* of subjects that represents that population. In this way the researcher tries to reach conclusions about all the unhoused people in a city by studying a smaller number of them. In other words, by measuring relationships between variables, survey research quantifies data and generalizes findings from the sample group to some larger population.

Although they also used interview data, sociologists Edward Telles and Christina A. Sue (2019) relied extensively on survey research in their study examining why ethnic identification tends to endure across several generations of Mexican Americans, to a greater extent than it does with European Americans. Telles and Sue used survey data derived from a longitudinal and multigenerational study of Mexican Americans living in Los Angeles and San Antonio in 1965–1966. They followed this data collection with about 1,500 surveys of the same individuals and their children in 1998–2002. These data sets revealed three main findings about the intergenerational integration of Mexican Americans. First, while Mexican Americans define themselves as being American first and foremost, when compared to European Americans, they have a stronger and more persistent *ethnic core*—a set of structural and institutional forces that foster ethnicity. Second, Mexican Americans exhibit a *durable ethnicity*, or a cultural identity that persists into the fourth generation and beyond. Third, in

contrast to European Americans, Mexican Americans experience a *consequential* ethnic identity, one that is consistent and externally imposed on them. These findings from large sample populations could have been obtained only from such large-scale surveys as the one used by Telles and Sue.

Participant Observation

Because qualitative researchers seek to understand the social world from the subject's point of view, they frequently employ **participant observation** (also called *ethnography*), a method in which the researcher observes and studies people in their everyday settings. The researcher collects data through direct observation and, in this way, gains a deep understanding of and familiarity with the workings of a particular group, community, or social event. Groups and settings that sociologists observe include impoverished prisons, hospitals, homeless shelters, religious groups, secret societies, gangs, domestic workers, ambulance drivers, and gang members.

A good example of participant observation research is a study in which sociologist Derron Wallace (2023) examined how ethnic expectations differently inform the educational outcomes of Black Caribbean students in the United States and in Britain. In the United States these young people are seen as having "good culture" and treated as model minorities, but in the United Kingdom they are seen as having "bad culture" and treated as failing minorities. These perceptions influence Black Caribbean students' distinct academic achievement and behavior in the two countries. Wallace spent 16 months serving as a university advisor in a high school in New York City and another in London, both with large Black Caribbean populations. During that time, he observed classroom interactions between students and teachers. He engaged with students in classrooms and sports fields, gymnasiums and auditoriums, guidance counseling offices and detention rooms. Wallace learned about the specific situations in which cultural beliefs emerged and how they shaped the thinking and behavior of Black Caribbean young people's educational experiences. Wallace could not have revealed the "culture trap"—the ethnic expectations and structural forms of racism—those Black Caribbean students encountered had he not spent long periods of time observing the everyday nature of the schools.

Interviewing

Quantitative research has the advantages of providing precise numerical data and generalizing research findings. Qualitative research, on the other hand, has the advantage of providing in-depth information that describes complex phenomena in rich detail. One research method that may include both quantitative and qualitative elements is **interviewing**, the form of data collection in which the researcher asks respondents a series of questions. Interviews can be conducted face-to-face or on the phone; on a number of issues (sexual harassment, texting while driving, cutbacks to social welfare programs); and in a variety of settings (at home, on the street, on the internet). Researchers record the subjects' responses in writing or by audio or video recording. Once recorded, the responses can be treated quantitatively when researchers assign numerical values to them, enter the values into a data analysis program, and then run various statistical commands to identify patterns across responses. Researchers can use the patterns to make comparisons between different sample groups. Interviews can also be treated qualitatively, as guided conversations that let respondents talk at length and in detail. In this case the researcher listens carefully and may ask follow-up questions. Once the responses have been recorded, the

researcher can identify categories or themes across them. This helps the researcher determine which issues from the interviews are significant.

One study that relied heavily on interviews was done by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, Manuel Pastor, and their team of researchers (2021). Wanting to find out how Latino immigrants to South Los Angeles developed a special attachment to place, the researchers conducted over 150 in-depth interviews with Latino and Black residents, civic leaders, and participants of that community. They discovered that second-generation Latinos raised in South L.A. formed a new racial identity based on their experiences with Black people, culture, and traditions. As they listened carefully to what their respondents had to say, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Pastor discovered a new type of Latino immigrant integration that was based on "homemaking"—on establishing a sense of place and rootedness in South L.A.

Interviewing involves the interviewer asking questions of a respondent. In this face-to-face encounter, the interviewer can probe the respondent to elaborate on a response. What do you think are some of the merits of conducting interviews in doing research?

Jerry Holt/Star Tribune via Getty Images

Mixed Methods

Because each method offers its own advantages, sociologists often rely on **triangulation**, a multimethod approach used to achieve a fuller picture of the social problems they are studying. One example is Josh Seim's (2020) study exploring the experiences of an ambulance crew working in urban neighborhoods. Seim augmented his participant observation data with 88,027 patient care reports completed by an ambulance crew that provided information on location of events, type of medical intervention performed, severity of calls, and number of crew interactions with the police. By combining ethnography with the use of medical records, Seim discovered, first, that ambulance crews are disproportionately sent to neighborhoods where Black and Latino residents live, and second, that the level of neighborhood poverty is associated with higher ambulance responses. This helped Seim see the ambulance as a street-level institution involved in the "bandaging, sorting, and hustling" of people from disadvantaged populations.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

INTERVIEW WITH SOCIOLOGIST DONILEEN R. LOSEKE

Photo courtesy of Donileen R. Loseke

You have published several important books that focus on understanding how people depict and experience social problems. These include Thinking About Social Problems, The Battered Woman and Shelters, *and* Current Controversies on Family Violence. *How, in brief, do social problems emerge?*

At any one time there are countless social conditions that can cause measurable harm. Yet, because people in general do not see many of these conditions as requiring change, we must study who creates public concern and how it is created. Sociologists study social activists, politicians, bloggers, podcasters, social media influencers, celebrities, and others who inspire people to *think* and *feel* that troublesome conditions are intolerable and must be changed.

Courses in the Sociology of Social Problems encourage us to explore how our reactions to the world are shaped by others.

You have also written several books on how to research social problems. These include Methodological Thinking, Narrative as Topic and Method in Social Research, *and* Narrative Productions of Meanings. *How can we use research methods to understand how people think about and experience social problems?*

Our current era is characterized by disagreements about how to understand and assess the social world. Media sites instantly and widely distribute all sorts of competing information, and artificial intelligence can blur fact and fiction. Social research methods can help us navigate through this confusion. When used correctly, research methods produce reliable facts and offer guidelines for how to evaluate the trustworthiness of information produced by others.

In the conference talk that you gave as president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, you ended by saying that you believe sociology can be a tool to achieve social justice. How can sociology help us to be effective agents of change?

Sociological perspectives encourage us to think about how expectations, opportunities, costs, and benefits are distributed throughout society. They also reveal the importance of complex relationships among people, organizations, and institutions. Sociology promotes multiple ways to think about social problems and their solutions. This can help us to design programs of social change that will not be burdened by negative consequences.

Source: Author interview conducted July 28, 2023.

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

THREE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

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

Concepts are ideas sociologists have about some aspect of the social world. They tend to be articulated as terms—words or phrases that make up the vocabulary of sociology. So far in this chapter, we have used and defined several sociological concepts, including "social institution," "social class," "social problem," "social constructionism," and "social structure." Throughout this textbook you will meet many concepts, introduced in boldface blue type. These terms are defined in the text, and the glossary at the end of the book provides a comprehensive listing of these concepts and their definitions.

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

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

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism (or functionalism) is the sociological theory that considers how various social phenomena function, or work in a positive way, to maintain unity and order in society. The theory of structural functionalism dates back to the beginnings of sociology, and some of its ideas can be traced to several 19th-century sociologists, including Herbert Spencer.

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) viewed society as an organism, which is to say as an integrated *system* made up of different social institutions, all working together to keep it going. Just as the human body (a biological organism) has many organs (the heart, brain, liver, kidneys, etc.), all

of which are necessary for its survival, so too does society need the various institutions of the economy, the government, the family, religion, and so on, to keep it orderly and cohesive. Each institution works in different ways to benefit society. For example, some of the **functions**— that is, positive consequences—of the family are that it provides an expedient way for humans to reproduce themselves biologically; it provides emotional support to family members; and it teaches, or *socializes*, children in the rules of society. Some of the functions of religion are that it gives answers to the larger questions of existence (What existed before the Big Bang? What happens after death?); it presents us with ideas about what is right and wrong; and it brings members of a particular religious group closer together in their shared beliefs. In short, social institutions have functions for society.

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

Sociologist Robert K. Merton (1910–2003) agreed that social institutions and social structures can have functions. But he saw that they can also have **dysfunctions**, or negative consequences. Consider how the family can be a refuge from the larger world, where family members can get nurturance, love, and acceptance in ways that are not available to them in other institutional settings. But also consider how the family can be the setting where domestic violence, contentious divorce, and the sexual and emotional abuse of children may occur.

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

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is the sociological theory that focuses on dissent, coercion, and antagonism in society. In this sense we may see conflict theory as the opposite of structural functionalism. It too has its roots in the 19th century, particularly in the ideas of Karl Marx.

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

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

Ralf Dahrendorf departed from Marx's focus on the conflict between social classes and looked instead to the conflict between **interest groups**, or organized associations of people mobilized into action because of their membership in those associations. For Dahrendorf (1959), social inequalities have their basis not only in economic differences but also in *political power*. Simply put, those with power give orders and those without power take orders. Power relationships lead to the tensions between interest groups (also called advocacy groups or lobbying groups). Thus, for Dahrendorf, social conflict in relationship to social problems occurs among special interest groups—such as NextGen America, the Christian Coalition of America, Demand Universal Healthcare, and Citizens United—some of which are politically progressive while others are politically conservative.
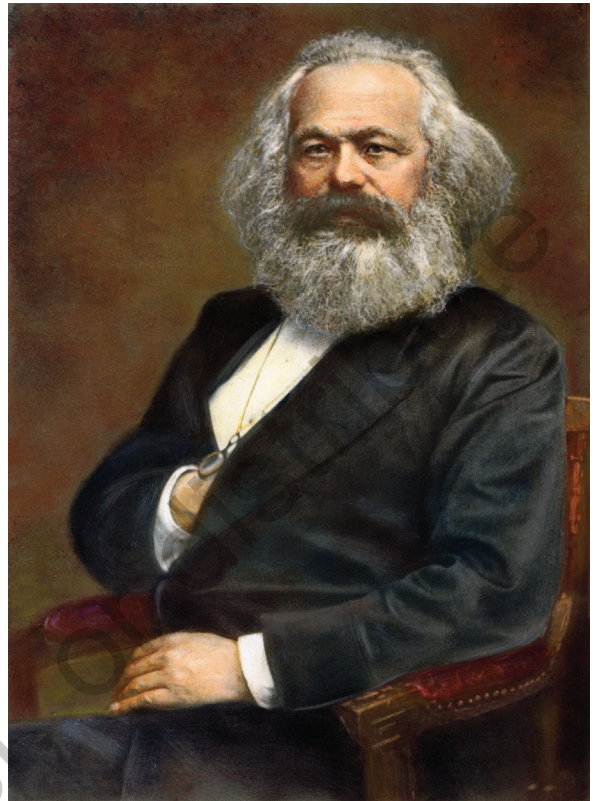
Those groups with sufficient political power use it, usually by influencing legislation, to protect their interests. Consider the politically powerful interest groups on opposite sides of the issue of gun control, such as those that support required background checks for all gun purchases (Everytown for Gun Safety) and those that oppose such checks (National Rifle Association). Or consider interest groups that favor abortion rights (Emily's List and Planned Parenthood) and those that favor ending abortion (Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America and the National Right to Life Committee).

Karl Marx was a 19th-century revolutionary and critic of the economic institution known as capitalism. He believed that capitalist societies like England and the United States would eventually become communist societies. His best-known work, which he coauthored with Friedrich Engels, is *The Communist Manifesto*, first published in 1848.

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

Symbolic Interactionism

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

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) was interested in understanding the relationship between mind, self, and society (Mead 1934). For Mead, **mind** refers to the internal conversations we have within ourselves. In other words, we continuously think about ourselves and about what is going on around us, and all this requires the use of language. Language is nothing more

than a system of **symbols** (objects that represent something else) that we interpret. For example, you are reading the words on this page because you have learned to interpret the symbols (the written words) of the English language. But unless you can read Russian, the following words are not meaningful to you: Этѐ слова сля вас не ѐмеют нѐкакого значенѐя. In the same way you learned to read words, you learned to read or "define" a clock (symbolic of time), a map (symbolic of a particular physical place), a smile (symbolic of an emotion), and so on.

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

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

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

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

APPLYING THE THREE THEORIES TO SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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

Structural Functionalism and Suicide

To illustrate how functionalism has been applied to the real world, we turn to the pioneering French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and his classic study on the social problem of suicide. Durkheim understood that all societies, in order to continue as they are, need two

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

Turning to the differences in suicide rates among various groups, Durkheim ([1897] 1979) found, for example, that suicide rates are higher among men than among women, higher for those who are single than for those who are married, and higher among Protestants than among Catholics or Jews. He explained these and other group differences by looking at the degree of social integration and social regulation and identified four types of social suicide.

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

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim is regarded as one of the early founders of sociology. Working in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he made many contributions to the topics of social solidarity, suicide, and religion. His most famous books include *The Division of Labor in Society, Suicide*, and *The Rules of Sociological Method*.

Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo

Too much social regulation, or excessive social control over people's behavior, can cause **fatalistic suicide**. Members of certain groups end their lives because they see no escape from their oppressive situation. For example, among women in Iranian society, fatalistic is the dominant type of suicide due to a traditional male-dominated social structure that, among other things, forces women into marriage at an early age and prohibits divorce, even in the case of domestic violence (Aliverdinia and Pridemore 2009). On the other hand, too little social regulation, which leads to the absence of norms, causes an increase in **anomic suicide**. This means that people kill themselves because they lack rules to give them social direction for meeting their needs. For example, according to Anne Case and Angus Deaton (2020), "deaths of despair" from suicide, drug overdose, and alcoholism have risen dramatically in the United States over the past two decades. These deaths disproportionately occurred in white working-class men between the ages of 25 and 64 years without a college degree. A key driver of these deaths was economic hardship

or the loss of work or wages. Echoing Durkheim's notion of anomie, Case and Deaton conclude, "Jobs are not just the source of money; they are the basis for the rituals, customs, and routines of working-class life. Destroy work and, in the end, working-class life cannot survive. It is the loss of meaning, of dignity, of pride, and of self-respect that comes with the loss of marriage and of community that brings on despair" (Case and Deaton 2020, 8).

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

Conflict Theory and Alcohol Consumption

The use of conflict theory is demonstrated by Joseph R. Gusfield's (1986) examination of how a particular group—rural, middle-class, evangelical Protestants—tried to preserve its own **culture**, or style of life, in U.S. society during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This cultural group, which Gusfield calls "the Dry forces," were reformers who wanted to correct what they saw as a major social problem: the drinking habits of ethnic immigrants. The ethnic immigrants who threatened the moral way of life of the Dry forces, and who therefore needed to be reformed and controlled, were mainly urban, lower-class Irish and Italian Catholics and German Lutherans whose cultures did not prohibit the consumption of alcohol. These ethnic groups were also generally ranked at the bottom of the U.S. social and economic ladder and thus had limited political power.

In order to retain the dominance of their way of life, the middle-class Protestants attempted to reform the ethnic drinkers. They did this, first, by trying to persuade them to stop their "immoral" drinking voluntarily and by inviting them to membership in the middle class. However, by the last quarter of the 19th century, as the United States was becoming more urban, secular, and Catholic, the Dry forces changed their tactics, substituting for persuasion a method that was more hostile and antagonistic: they tried to *coerce* reform through legislation. This coercive strategy culminated in a national policy of prohibition in 1919, when Congress ratified the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited the manufacture, sale, and transportation of intoxicating liquors. This application of conflict theory clearly shows that the interest group with the most political power can prohibit behaviors it considers problematic.

Symbolic Interactionism and Precarious Living

Waverly Duck (2015) takes a symbolic interactionist perspective to explain how the residents of a low-income Black neighborhood where drug dealing was prevalent were able to survive their precarious existence. He found that they lacked decent jobs and schools, were likely to get in trouble with the criminal justice system, had little public assistance, and so on. Duck also found that the young Black male residents who sold cocaine to white suburbanites were well integrated into the community. Duck's most important finding, however, was that the community possessed a local **interaction order**. This was a lifestyle that shaped residents' everyday interactions with each other in order to help them cope with their poverty and racial isolation.

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

and their children, and to make money. Indeed, it gave everyone—law-abiding citizens and drug dealers—a sense of order, predictability, and solidarity.

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

PHOTOS.com/Getty Images Plus

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

Structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism are the three most general theoretical frameworks in sociology. But given that the study of society and social behavior is a complicated business, and that there is a wide variety of social problems to consider, sociologists have constructed specialized theories to deal with this complexity and variety. Specialized concepts and theories examine narrower features of society (e.g., the institution of the economy) or specific social problems (the rising rates of unemployment). There are many such specialized concepts and theories within sociology—hundreds, in fact. We will not examine them all in this book, however.

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

SOCIAL POLICY

We noted earlier that one possible way to deal with pervasive social problems like poverty is to change the social structure radically. However, short of a **social revolution**—a total and complete transformation in the social structure of society (such as the French Revolution of 1789, the

Russian Revolution of 1917, the Chinese Revolution of 1948)—most social change is achieved piecemeal, and frequently reforms are begun through **social policy**, a more or less clearly articulated and usually written set of strategies for addressing a social problem.

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

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

SERVICE SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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

Concerns about the problems of urban life and ways to alleviate them go back to the early days of U.S. sociology, at the beginning of the 20th century. As sociology became a more popular subject of study in colleges and universities around the country, it took two basic forms: the study of sociological theory and the practice of ameliorative reform and service. At that time, most people thought of sociology as a form of philanthropy (Ward 1902), and courses with titles such as Methods of Social Amelioration, Charities and Corrections, and Preventive Philanthropy were common (Breslau 2007). Undergraduate sociology programs were even more focused on training in charity and social service work.

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

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

day nursery, implementing various enterprises for neighborhood improvement, and establishing a relief station.

Devoted to the practical amelioration of social problems and with the early U.S. sociology of relief and reform as its heritage, a new type of sociology emerged. **Service sociology** is a socially responsible and mission-oriented sociology of action and alleviation (Karraker 2018; Treviño 2011, 2012, 2013, 2018, 2019; Treviño and McCormack 2014). Motivated by care and compassion, service sociologists are concerned with helping people meet their pressing social needs. They believe the personal needs of one individual are not so different from the collective needs of others in similar life circumstances. This belief is the reason why service sociologists treat individuals as people in community with each other. Their main goal is to help people by meeting their essential needs and concerns through service, including community counseling, coaching, mentoring, tutoring, conflict resolution, community gardening, friendly visiting, community cleanup, block activities, giving circles, crime prevention, community organizing, advocacy, voter registration, participatory action research, service learning, disaster response, and mediation. Academic programs that offer a degree in some aspect of service sociology include those at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Friends University, Northeastern University, Monmouth College, Colby-Sawyer College, University of North Georgia, and Oregon State University.

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

George Rinhart/Corbis via Getty Images

Today, more than ever, we need service sociology and student involvement in it. Consider that, during the Barack Obama presidency, there was a renewed interest in volunteering and social service—a so-called compassion boom. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, between September 2020 and 2021, about 23.2% of Americans took part in some form of community service, with more than 60.7 million people serving. These volunteers dedicated about 4.1 billion hours to volunteer service, and the economic value of this service was about $122.9 billion (AmeriCorps 2023). Across the country, millions of volunteers are engaged in a range of critical areas, including tutoring and teaching; participating in fundraising activities or selling items to raise money for charitable or religious organizations; collecting, preparing, distributing, or serving food; conducting wellness checks on isolated older adults; and supporting food banks.

What is more, no less than 20.3% of Generation Z Americans volunteered in 2021. In addition to being involved in community service, many citizens across the country are engaged civically. Indeed, millions of U.S. adults participated in civic organizations, fixed things in their community, attended public meetings, and voted in local elections. Nearly 51% of Americans (124.7 million people) also engaged in "informal helping," such as doing favors for neighbors like housesitting, watching each other's children, lending tools, and running errands (AmeriCorps 2023).

There are also high-profile national service initiatives, such as the annual Martin Luther King Jr. National Day of Service and the 9/11 National Day of Service and Remembrance. In addition, Americans participate in civil society programs such as AmeriCorps, which engages over 5 million people in intensive national service work, and City Year, with over 3,000 young
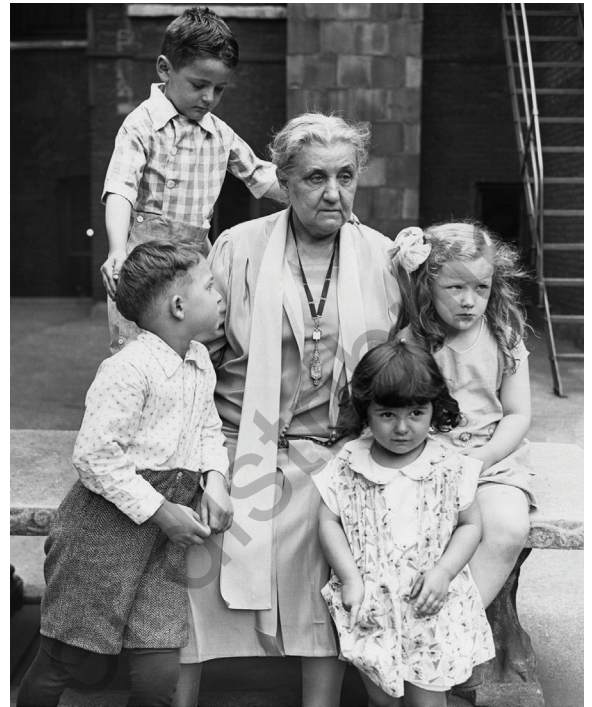
adults devoting one year of full-time community service to help students in underserved schools reach their full potential and graduate from high school. This service work is being done by many ordinary people who are picking up the slack for a city, a state, a nation unwilling or unable to attend to many critical matters that directly affect thousands, even millions, of people (Coles 1993).

On his travels through the United States during the early 19th century, the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville famously remarked on the American spirit of voluntary cooperation. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville (1899, 185) observed that Americans, "if they do not proffer services eagerly, yet they do not refuse to render them." Proffering helpful services to others in the context of civil society has been a core American value since the beginning of the republic. That value is practiced today as a **culture of service**—including various forms of civic engagement, community service, and volunteerism—that allows citizens to work together to ease or mitigate the predicaments and uncertainties created by poverty, hunger, racism, sexism, epidemics, calamities, and so on. It is in this culture of service, with its numerous pressing needs and concerns, that we can consider the emergence of a sociology of social problems based on service. At the ends of the chapters to follow, the authors suggest ways in which you can get personally engaged in helping to alleviate social problems.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Durkheim's functionalism demonstrates how the degree of social integration and social regulation can result in high rates of suicide. Conflict theory shows how the interest group that has the most political power can prohibit behaviors it considers to be problematic. The symbolic interactionist perspective can help us explain how people with clinical depression make sense of their identity and illness.

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

Most social change happens piecemeal, and frequently the transformations are begun through social policy. Governmental implementation of social policy takes the form of legislation. Other forms are the delivery of services, the regulation of certain practices (such as drug use), and the establishment of welfare programs.

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

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

ASK YOURSELF

1. Think of a social issue about which you and your peers have expressed concern. How do you think this issue affects other people your age but from a social class different from yours? A different race or ethnicity? Think of the ways in which you do or do not identify with the racially and economically marginalized young adults Ranita Ray interviewed.

2. What troubling situations do you see in your community (neighborhood, campus)? How do these fit, or not fit, the definition of social problems given earlier? Do they have both objective and subjective aspects? Explain.

3. Do people you know feel trapped in their daily lives? How or why? Explain the sociological imagination in your own words.

4. Think of a social problem you would like to research. Which of the three theoretical perspectives discussed earlier do you think is best suited for your purposes? Why?

5. Think of three different social problems. What are the strengths of each of the theoretical perspectives in helping you to understand each of the social problems? What are the weaknesses?

6. Think of a social problem you would like to research. In what ways are the three sociological theories discussed earlier too broad to provide a specific understanding of that

social problem? Imagine some characteristics of a specialized theory that might give you less breadth but more depth on the issue. What types of questions about your research area would it help you answer?

7. Think of some policies (rules and regulations) of a workplace where you have been employed. Do you think these policies may have prevented unacceptable or harmful behaviors in that workplace? How?

KEY TERMS

Altruistic suicide

Anomic suicide

Capitalism

Capitalists

Cohort

Concepts

Conflict theory

Culture

Culture of service

Data sources

Demographic factors

Dysfunctions

Egoistic suicide

Fatalistic suicide

Functions

Global perspective

Interaction order

Interest groups

Intersectionality

Interviewing

Legislation

Looking-glass self

Mind

Norms

Objective aspect of social problems

Paradigms

Participant observation

Qualitative research

Quantitative research

Research methods

Self-fulfilling prophecy

Service sociology

Settlement houses

Social class

Social constructionism

Social institutions

Social integration

Social interaction

Social movements

Social policy

Social problem

Social regulation

Social revolution

Social self

Social structure

Societalization

Sociological imagination

Sociology

Structural functionalism (or functionalism)

Subjective aspect of social problems

Survey

Symbolic interactionism

Symbols

Theory

Triangulation

Values

Workers