

Social workers respond to all kinds of social problems. Violence, criminal behavior, and victims of crime are the concerns of social workers across many domains. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, substance abuse can go hand in hand with crime. Survivors of crime and violence often have major emotional and mental health problems. This chapter explores these concerns, and highlights the ways that social workers interact with the criminal justice system.

Violence, Crime, and Punishment in the United States

There are over 10 million people in prison around the globe. Over the last three decades, the United States has consistently had the fastest-growing prison population. There are over 2 million Americans behind bars, or a per capita rate of 666 out of every 100,000. No other nation has a per capita rate over 600 (Jacobson, Heard, & Fair, 2017). When parolees and probationers are included, there are over 7 million people under the supervision of the US criminal justice system. Several factors help explain why the United States is the leading producer of prisoners, including higher levels of violent crime, easy access to guns, laws that require longer sentences, institutional racism (black men are incarcerated at seven times the rate of white men), increasing numbers of private for-profit prisons, America's deeply held values of individualism and personal responsibility, the war on drugs and the criminalization of addicts, and the lack of an effective social safety net. The growing disparity in the number of prisoners in the United States compared to those of the rest of the world did not really begin until the 1980s. During this time period, the war on drugs began, and it exponentially increased the number of drug-related offenders in prison from 40,000 to over 500,000 in 2008 (Pew Report, 2011).

Since the 1980s, serious crime has taken a somewhat uneven (there have been spikes from time to time) downward trend. However, regardless of this downward trend, since 1984 the number of prisoners serving life sentences has quadrupled. Approximately 50 percent of prisoners serving life terms are African American, and one in six are Latino (Sentencing Project, 2013).

Although the overall rate of violent crime in the United States is dropping, Americans are still the victims of seemingly random spectacular gun deaths, including drive-by gang shootings and mass murder in shopping malls, movie theaters, schools, and other public places. As alarming as these massacres are, it may be even more disturbing to learn that every day, eight children and teenagers are killed by gun violence. American children are more at risk from firearms than the children of any other industrialized nation, with a death rate that is 500 percent higher than anywhere in Europe and Japan (Grisham & Hennevey, 2016). Every year in America over 110,000 people are killed by guns. Since 1970, the number of Americans killed by guns is more than the combined US combat deaths in all the wars in all of US history (Herbert, 2007). Herbert (2007, p. 6) declared that "Americans are addicted to violent, specifically gun violence. We profess to be appalled at every gruesome outbreak of mass murder (it's no big deal when just two, three, or four people are

killed at a time), but there's no evidence that we have the will to pull the guns out of circulation, or even to register the weapons and properly screen and train their owners."

The extent of violence, crime, and victimization is significant, and social workers are often faced with the consequences of these problems. Some social workers do so as formal participants in law enforcement and legal justice systems, and some work directly with victims. Because violence and crime are part of American society, they are also part of social work practice.

The Criminal Justice System **LO1**

The primary goals of the criminal justice system are to maintain public safety and punish lawbreakers by confining or controlling them (Miller, 1995). With this emphasis on control and punishment, is the criminal justice system a place for social workers? Some of the most dedicated and idealistic social workers answer this question with an impassioned yes!

Social work in a criminal justice setting covers an enormous amount of territory. Social workers specialize in juvenile corrections, rehabilitation in the adult correctional system, case management and counseling services in probation and parole, police social work, and victim assistance services. Social workers are most often employed by federal, state, or local governments and nonprofit victim assistance agencies or lobbies. Regardless of setting, criminal justice social workers advocate for public policies that address poverty, unemployment, and hopelessness.

The prevalence of criminal behavior is closely watched by ordinary citizens, policy makers, and social workers alike. Many theories have been proposed to explain the causes and varieties of crime, and several of those theories, from all fields of social science, can help inform social workers who deal directly with crime and its effects.

The Extent and Variety of Crime in the United States

The extent of crime in the United States is measured by the annual National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), sponsored by the US Justice Department, Bureau of Justice Statistics, and the annual FBI Uniform Crime Report (UCR) (FBI, 2012). Neither measurement is entirely accurate. The NCVS survey, which makes use of statistical sampling, polls about 160,000 people every six months. It includes reported and unreported crimes and relies on people's memories. The UCR is based on data that are systematically collected from police department reports. It does not include unreported crimes. This is a substantial omission, as victims report only half of all violent crimes and one-third of property crimes to the police (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2017a).

In 2015, the rate of violent victimizations in the United States was 22.6 per 1,000 persons age 12 or older. In 2012, for every 1,000 people there were 1.3 rapes or sexual assaults, 3.8 aggravated assaults, and 2.8 robberies. Intimate partner violence impacted 3.1 out of 1,000 persons. Despite trends