Learning Objectives

1.1 Explain the sociological imagination.
1.2 Discuss the definition of a social problem.
1.3 Compare and contrast the three main sociological perspectives on social problems.
1.4 Describe the process that reveals the natural history of social problems.
1.5 Review the four themes of the text.
1.6 Assess the social policy debates between conservatives and liberals.

I live in Fullerton, a suburb about 20 to 40 minutes from Los Angeles, depending on traffic. I like where I live. I'm close to beaches, mountains, and even the desert (although I've only been to Joshua Tree National Monument once). All are only an hour or two drive away. But there is one big problem—we don't have a lot of water for the millions of people who live around here. We have droughts sometimes, and the last one was kinda scary. I saw pictures that showed our reservoirs were really low, and the mountains didn't have a lot of snow. We get our water from the mountain snowpack, so naked mountains mean big trouble! Our teachers at school were warning us that we must conserve water. We were told to take 5-minute showers, and were showed ways to save water as we brushed our teeth. It was weird, as I haven't really thought about water as something that we could actually run out of. I turn on the faucet and water flows, right? Well, apparently, not necessarily. My parents scared me because last spring they hired someone to rip out our grass and plant "drought tolerant plants," whatever that means. No grass? How am I supposed to kick around the soccer ball around this cactus? But my parents explained that we must now pay extra for water, and even pay a fine if we use too much, and it is expensive. My mom said that we are not supposed to water our yard very often or else we have to pay a fine, and these plants do well without a lot of water. Fine, but five-minute showers? "Get real," I told my mom. But then she told me about Cape Town, in South Africa. It's a nice city, and looks like home in a way, but they are totally running out of water! Is that even possible? I looked it up on the Internet (I was sure my mom was making it up), but it's true! They could actually be running out of water!

–Shelby, age 14

Record droughts in California, gun violence at schools, unarmed blacks being killed by police officers, sexual assaults on college campuses, hurricanes battering the Gulf Coast and Puerto Rico, Islamic terrorists, record social inequality, gun violence in our schools, and millions of Americans without health insurance. In such difficult times, Americans may rightly wonder whether we are capable of successfully addressing our most severe problems, let alone the world's problems. This question is one that will arise in specific ways throughout this text's chapters, but you will also see that there is little to be gained by giving in to failure. The history of efforts to address issues of environmental degradation, health problems, crime, racism and sexism, terrorism, poverty, and access to health care presents many bright spots and evidence that the more everyone understands the problems and the more citizens become engaged in seeking solutions, the more successfully society will address social problems.

The United States and other Western nations are experiencing more conflict about how to address social problems than was true in the decades after World War II. Back then, after the devastation and collective sacrifices of World War II, there was more consensus that government should play an important role in providing a "social safety net" for society's members who lacked the means to provide an adequate level of living for themselves and their children. Today, there is widespread debate about public versus private responsibility for addressing issues such as poverty, ill health, and environmental degradation. The ongoing "culture wars," as today's politically ideological divisions and debates are often called, make it far more difficult for people to arrive at a broad consensus about which social policies and programs are most effective for dealing with major social problems. This text applies a social-scientific approach to these problems, which can lead to progress in understanding their causes and arriving at policies to address them. As part of this strategy, every chapter in this text ends with a discussion of how social policies at different levels of government and in the private sector can address specific social problems.

The Sociological Imagination

1.1 Explain the Sociological Imagination.

We live in a world of more than 7.6 billion people, and we share a society with hundreds of millions. Despite the enormity of humankind, most people think of themselves as unique individuals and as having distinctive experiences like no other. However, many of their personal experiences are not unique or exceptional. Instead, they are patterned and shaped by **social structure**, which is the organized arrangements of relationships and institutions that together form the basis of society. For example, how has your sex influenced your life experience? Has being male or being female influenced your choice of a college major or your hobbies, interests, and relationships? Has your sex influenced your willingness to take drugs, commit crime, or enlist in the army and go to war? Has it influenced whether you have been sexually assaulted or battered by a partner? Perhaps another way of framing this question is how would your life be different if you were the "opposite sex"? As you can see, there is a relatively organized set of arrangements associated with your sex.

social structure

The organized arrangements of relationships and institutions that together form the basis of society.

Taking another example, how has your family affected you? You may have grown up with one parent, two parents, or with no parents at all. How did your family arrangement affect your financial well-being, your social capital, and overall opportunities? If your mother used drugs or alcohol, if your father was in jail, or if an uncle sexually abused you, how do you think those experiences may have affected your life? Families are a primary social institution in all societies and have a profound influence on personal experiences. The feature box ***A Personal View: "Running Away to My Future"*** offers an example of the ways in which early family life can shape adulthood.

A Personal View

Running Away to My Future

Viktor Pravdica/Alamy Stock Photo

Jody is a vibrant 27-year-old single mother who has a bright future ahead of her after a rocky start in life. She was awarded a $7,500 annual scholarship that will help her to attend a four-year university next fall. The scholarship award committee noted "her steadfast determination and her potential to make a difference." These words are an apt description.

Jody was born to a single mother who was poor and addicted to drugs. As a young child, Jody bounced from one home to another, often sleeping on the couch of her mother's latest boyfriend. Nourishing food was scarce, and Jody often went to school hungry. Her mother failed to fill out the forms for the school lunch program, but the school staff could see that Jody was hungry in the morning and let her eat breakfast with the other students who needed it. After school, Jody usually went home to an empty house, left on her own to do homework and make dinner.

Jody loved school, and diligently did her homework every day. School was her refuge. Because she excelled at school, was rarely absent or tardy, and completed her homework, the school assumed that Jody's home life was fine.

As the years went by, Jody did her best to hide the consequences of her family's poverty. She shopped for clothes at the Goodwill when she had a little extra money and hunted for stylish clothes that would not reveal her secret. But one night her mother's latest live-in boyfriend crawled into bed with Jody, who was by then a budding 16-year-old girl, and tried to sexually assault her. Jody screamed, hit him, and ran out of the room, stumbling over her passed-out mother in the living room. Jody vowed never to go back home as long as he was living there. When she confronted her mother the next day, her mother insisted that the boyfriend was staying, and it was Jody who could leave.

Jody took some of her mother's drug money, which amounted to a few hundred dollars, a few clothes, and ran away. With her money, she bought a sleeping bag and supplies to camp out under a bridge with other homeless people. She got a job at a fast-food restaurant making minimum wage. All the while, she continued to go to school, cleaning herself up and washing her hair in the restroom at work. Despite her hardship, she graduated from high school with a B average.

Community college was her next step, but by this time, the stress of homelessness, a dead-end job, and schoolwork were taking their toll. She suffered from depression, which caused her to make several risky choices. She became pregnant. The father did not stick around, and the thought of raising a child in her circumstances depressed her even more. Jody decided to give the baby up for adoption. She cried for weeks before and after her decision but knew in her heart it was the right thing to do. However, by this time, Jody was severely depressed, had dropped out of school, lost her job, and was begging on the street. She lived this way for several years, begging and earning just enough to buy food. Begging meant giving up her pride, but she said that part of living in poverty is blocking out how others might judge you.

By the time Jody was 22, she became pregnant a second time. However, on this occasion, she was determined to keep her baby and do whatever it would take to provide a good home. She sought out social service agencies and asked them for help. A counselor located low-income housing, arranged for medical care so Jody could get the depression medicine she needed, set her up with a part-time job, and helped her enroll back into community college. Jody began to flourish. She loved being a mother and felt that her son gave her life true meaning. She graduated from her community college with honors, and at the advice of the college's financial aid office, applied and received a scholarship to complete her degree. As she describes it, "When I left home at 16, I had no idea that I was running away to my future. With the help that others have offered, I can do this."

Critical Thinking

Using a sociological imagination, how were Jody's choices and constraints shaped by larger social forces? Why do most people consider poverty a social problem rather than simply a personal experience of a few people like Jody?

Using a sociological imagination reveals general patterns in what otherwise might be thought of as simple random events. C. Wright Mills stressed the importance of understanding the relationship between individuals and the society in which they live (**Mills, 1959**). Problems such as poverty, divorce, substance abuse, crime, and child abuse are more than just personal troubles experienced by a few people. They are issues that affect large numbers of people and originate in society's institutional arrangements. In other words, individual experiences are linked to the social structure.

Peter Berger elaborated on these ideas in his 1963 book *Invitation to Sociology*. Although we like to think of ourselves as individuals, much of our behavior (and others' behavior toward us) is actually patterned on the basis of what social categories we fall into, such as age, income, race, ethnicity, sex, and physical appearance. For example, men and women behave differently for reasons that often have nothing to do with biology. Many of these patterns are socially produced. In other words, boys and girls, men and women, are each taught and encouraged to think of themselves

differently from one another and to behave in different ways. Society lends a hand in shaping people's lives. Why are over 85 percent of students in Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) programs female (**National League for Nursing, 2018**)? This demographic fact is obviously not the result of some biological imperative, some quirk of the occupation itself, or some random event. Rather, society even has a hand in shaping something as seemingly personal and individual as the choice of a college major.

What Do You Think?

Evaluate your social class standing when you were a child. For example, did your parent(s) go to college? Did your parent(s) have a steady job? What type of house did you grow up in? Now describe how this social class standing has influenced your lifestyle and choices today.

Émile Durkheim (1897) conducted an early study of suicide, documenting how social structure affects human behavior. At first glance, what could be more private and individualized than the reasons that surround a person's decision to take his or her own life? The loss of a loving relationship, job troubles, financial worries, and low self-esteem are just a few of the many reasons that a person may have for suicide. Yet looking through official records and death certificates, Durkheim noted that suicide was not a completely random event and that there were several important patterns worthy of attention. He found that men were more likely to kill themselves than were women. He noted that Protestants were more likely to take their lives than were Catholics and Jews. He found that wealthy people were more likely to commit suicide than were the poor. Finally, it appeared that unmarried people were more likely to kill themselves than were married people.

Although his study was conducted over 100 years ago, recent research indicates that these patterns persist. Suicide today is a major social problem, with about 40,000 individuals taking their lives each year. It is the tenth leading cause of death for all Americans, and the second leading cause for youths ages 10 to 34 (**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 19, 2016**).

The sociological imagination draws attention to the fact that seemingly private issues are often public ones (**Mills, 1959**). Moreover, when these issues affect the quality of life for a large number of people, they are called social problems.

1.2 Discuss the definition of a social problem.

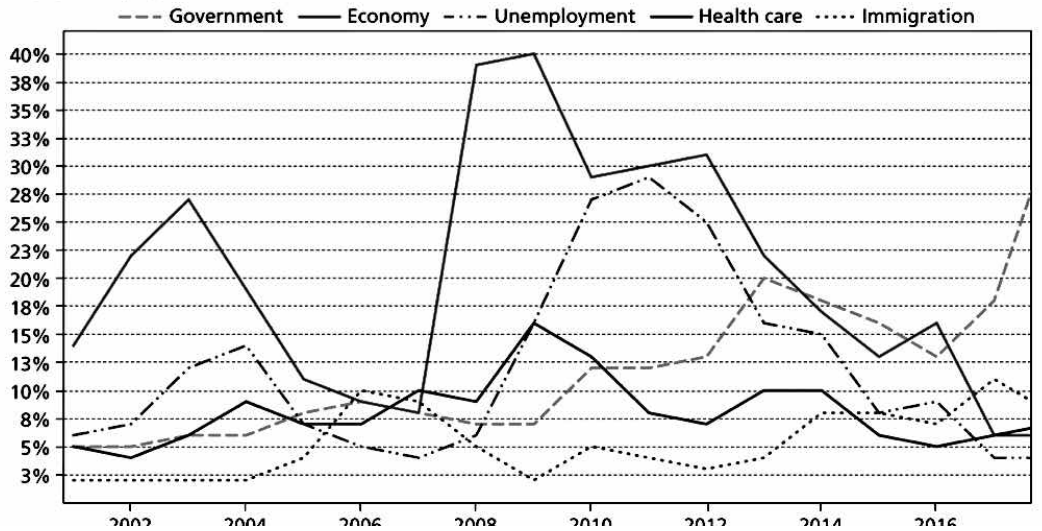
When enough people in a society agree that a condition exists that threatens the quality of their lives and their most cherished values, *and* they agree that something should be done to remedy that condition, sociologists say that the society has defined that condition as a **social problem**. In other words, the society's members have reached a consensus that a condition that affects some people is a problem for the entire society, not just for those who are directly affected. **Figure 1–1** illustrates trends in the issues considered to be the top five social problems between 2001 and 2018: the economy, unemployment, the government, health care, and immigration (**Gallup, 2018**; **Riffkin, 2015**; **Smith and Saad, 2016**). As you can see, there is a fair amount of fluctuation in opinion. For example, during the recession, the economy and unemployment were considered the most important social problems. Today, government itself is seen as number one. Today's top social problems are explored in the slideshow, ***"Where People Stand on Social Issues."***

social problem

Widespread agreement that a condition threatens the quality of life and cherished values and that something should be done to remedy that condition.

Figure 1–1

Most Important Problems Facing the United States by Percentage, 2001–2018



Sources: ***Gallup, 2018;*** *Rifkin, December 14, 2015;* ***Smith and Saad, December 19, 2016****.*

You will see that for every social problem, arguments arise about the nature of the problem, its severity, and the best remedies—laws, social programs, or other policies—to address it. There must be enough consensus among people in a society that a problem exists for action to take place, but consensus on a problem does not indicate consensus on the solution. For example, most Americans are concerned about crime, but what to do about it is wide open for discussion. Some people favor mandatory sentencing for specific crimes, while others feel that a judge or jury should have some discretion. Some people support the death penalty for heinous crimes, while others oppose the death penalty and believe that life in prison without parole is the most appropriate punishment. Moreover, this text will also show that not all people have an equal ability to define social problems and to propose remedies; those with power often have more say in the matter and are listened to most closely.

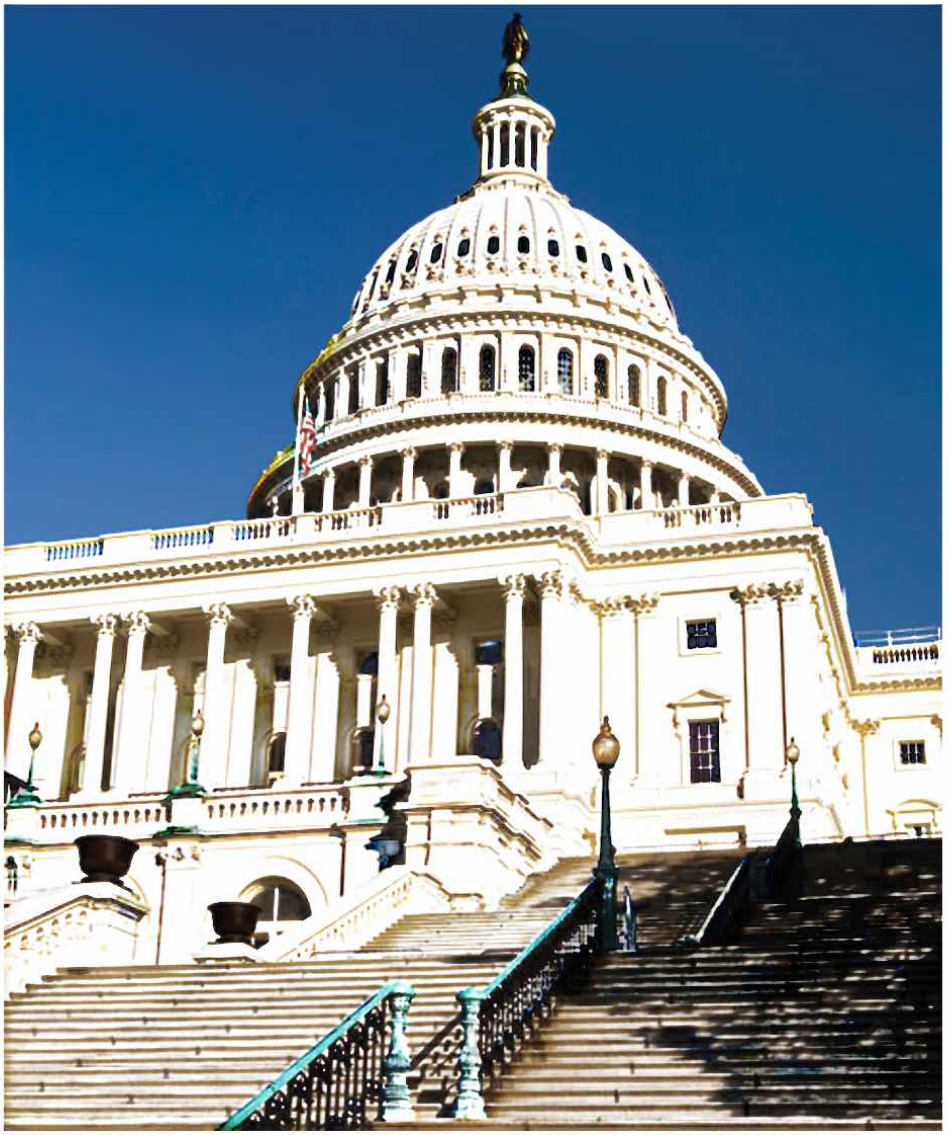
Social problems are often closely interrelated. Crime, poor school performance, poverty, lack of medical care, unsafe working conditions, violence, drug abuse, environmental degradation, and many other behaviors or situations that we commonly think of as social problems rarely exist in isolation. And for any one of these problems, the causes, responsibilities, and solutions are vigorously debated. Are we responsible, some ask, for the sins of others? For example, are not many people poor because they choose to drop out of school or have a baby before they are financially prepared to do so? Or are many people poor because of the erosion of the purchasing power of the minimum wage and social conditions like racism and sexism? These and similar arguments assert not only the causes of social problems but also what should be done about them. People may agree that certain conditions are social problems. Most members of society agree that these conditions ought to be remedied through intentional action. However, people disagree about, and politicize, what the causes are and what the precise intentional action should be.

Slide Show

Where People Stand on Social

Issues

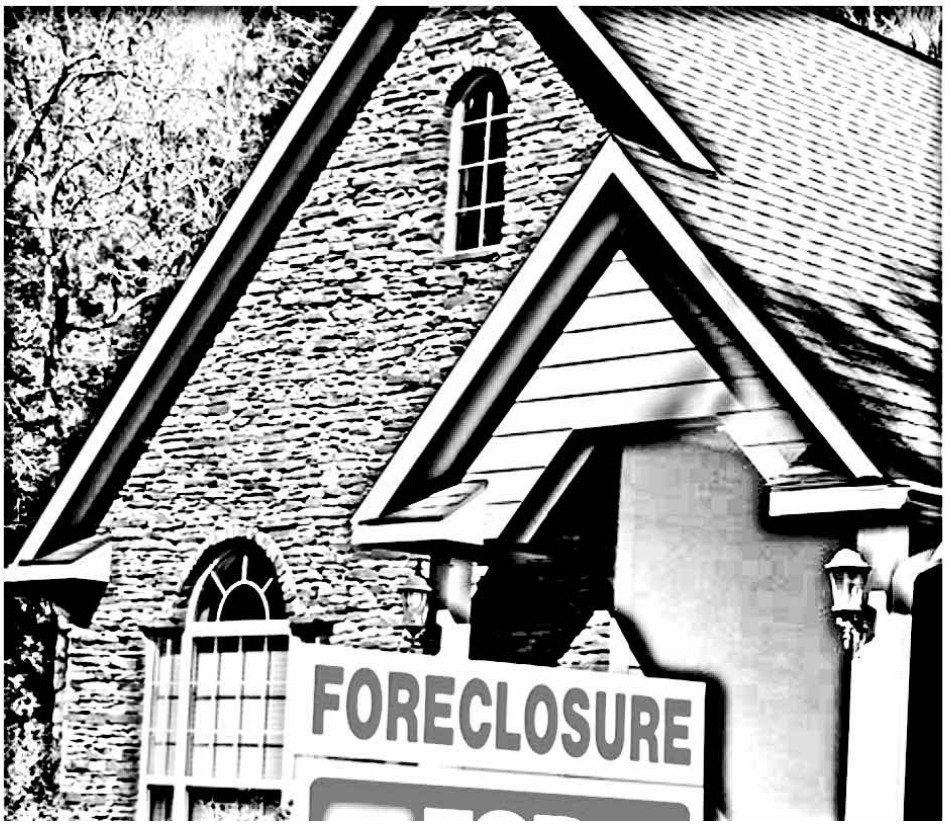
Surveys based on representative samples of adults in the United States provide an important gauge of where people stand on social issues. A recent Gallup Poll survey reports that the top social problems in American society today are considered to be the government, economy, immigration, health care, and unemployment, shifting somewhat in the ranking over the past couple of decades. This slide show looks at these issues.



The most recent national sample of adults ranked government first in a list of social problems. The majority of both conservatives and liberals say that they often or always do not trust the federal government, and that they feel angry toward it. The level of agreement is striking, given that these two groups see the role of government very differently.
VisualField/Getty Images

Many Americans are concerned about health care. They see rapidly escalating costs and worry about a lack of access as fewer employers offer health insurance as a fringe benefit. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) was created during President Obama's administration to decrease these problems and has met with some success. However, the ACA has experienced political backlash from Republican lawmakers as they have attempted to dismantle it.

stevecoleimages/Getty Images



people. The anthropologist might be interested in how the homeless and others in their communities understand their situation and what might be done about it.

Psychology and Social Psychology

Psychology focuses on human mental and emotional processes, primarily on individual experience. Rooted in biology, it is more experimental than the other social sciences. An understanding of the psychological pressures that underlie individual responses can illuminate social attitudes and behavior. Thus, a psychologist would tend to study the influences of homelessness on the individual's state of mind or, conversely, how the individual's personality and ways of looking at life might have contributed to his or her situation.

Social psychology involves the study of how psychological processes, behavior, and personalities of individuals influence or are influenced by social processes and social settings. It is of special value for the study of social problems. A social psychologist would be likely to study how life on the streets damages the individual in various ways.

Economics

Economists study the levels of income in a society and the distribution of income among the society's members. To understand how the resources of society—its people and their talents, its land and other natural resources—can be allocated for the maximum benefit of that society, economists also study the relationship between the supply of resources and the demand for them. Confronted with the problem of homelessness, an economist would tend to study how the supply of and demand for different types of housing influence the number of homeless people in a given housing market.

Political Science

Political scientists study the workings of government at every level of society. As **Harold Lasswell (1941)**, a leading American political scientist, put it, "Politics is the study of who gets what, when, and how."[1] A political scientist, therefore, would be likely

Unemployment, as a problem, was highly ranked during and immediately after the recession as more people realized that it is more than just a personal problem. At the height of the recession, when the national unemployment rate was over 10 percent, the federal government extended the number of weeks a person could collect unemployment. That policy reflected the idea that unemployment is a social problem, not simply an individual issue. *Jim West/Alamy Stock Photo*

Critical Thinking

> Why do you think that these five social problems were rated as the most significant? What changes would you make in this list, and why?

For instance, many Americans are appalled at the level of gun violence in their nation, but many others are equally appalled at the prospect of more government restrictions on their freedom to buy and use guns as they wish. Clearly, recognition that a social problem exists is far different from arriving at a consensus about a cause and a solution to the problem.

It is worth noting that the idea that a society should intervene to remedy conditions that affect the lives of its citizens is a fairly recent innovation. Until the eighteenth century, for example, most people worked at exhausting tasks under poor conditions for long hours; they suffered from severe deprivation all their lives, and they often died young, sometimes of terrible diseases. But no one thought of these things as problems to be solved. They were accepted as natural, inevitable conditions of life. It was not until the so-called "enlightenment" of the late eighteenth century that philosophers began to argue that poverty is not inevitable, but a result of an unjust social system. As such, changing the system itself through means such as redistribution of wealth and elimination of inherited social status could alleviate many problems.

Sociological Perspectives on Social Problems

1.3 Compare and contrast the three main sociological perspectives on social problems.

Everyone has opinions about the causes of social problems and what should be done about them. In addition to Sociology, other disciplines in the social sciences are concerned with the analysis of human behavior, and sociologists often draw on the results of their research. The work of historians, for example, is vital to an understanding of the origins of many social problems. Anthropologists look at other societies and offer contrasting views of how humans have learned to cope with various kinds of social problems. Perhaps the greatest overlap is between sociology and political science, both of which are concerned with the development of social policies to curb social problems. Other social-scientific approaches to the study of social problems are described in **Table 1–1**.

Table 1–1

Other Approaches to the Study of Social Problems

History History is the study of the past. However, historical data can be used by sociologists to understand present social problems. In studying homelessness, for example, historians would focus on changes in how people obtained shelter in a society and what groups or individuals tended to be without shelter in different historical periods.
Cultural Anthropology Cultural anthropologists study the social organization and development of smaller, nonindustrial societies, both past and present. Because cultural anthropology is closely related to sociology, many of the same techniques can be used in both fields, and the findings of cultural anthropologists regarding primitive and traditional cultures shed light on related phenomena in more complex, modern societies. An anthropological study of homelessness would look closely at one or a few groups of homeless

people. The anthropologist might be interested in how the homeless and others in their communities understand their situation and what might be done about it.

Psychology and Social Psychology

Psychology focuses on human mental and emotional processes, primarily on individual experience. Rooted in biology, it is more experimental than the other social sciences. An understanding of the psychological pressures that underlie individual responses can illuminate social attitudes and behavior. Thus, a psychologist would tend to study the influences of homelessness on the individual's state of mind or, conversely, how the individual's personality and ways of looking at life might have contributed to his or her situation.

Social psychology involves the study of how psychological processes, behavior, and personalities of individuals influence or are influenced by social processes and social settings. It is of special value for the study of social problems. A social psychologist would be likely to study how life on the streets damages the individual in various ways.

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Economists study the levels of income in a society and the distribution of income among the society's members. To understand how the resources of society—its people and their talents, its land and other natural resources—can be allocated for the maximum benefit of that society, economists also study the relationship between the supply of resources and the demand for them. Confronted with the problem of homelessness, an economist would tend to study how the supply of and demand for different types of housing influence the number of homeless people in a given housing market.

Political Science

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to see homelessness as a problem that results from the relative powerlessness of the homeless to influence the larger society to respond to their needs. The political scientist would tend to focus on ways in which the homeless could mobilize other political interest groups to urge legislators to deal with the problem.

1Lasswell, H. D., 1941. "The Garrison State." *American Journal of Sociology*, 46:455–468.

Contemporary sociology is founded on three basic perspectives, or sets of ideas, that offer theories about why societies hang together and how and why they change. These perspectives are not the only sociological approaches to social problems, but they can be extremely powerful tools for understanding them. Each of these perspectives—(1) functionalism, (2) conflict, and (3) symbolic interactionism—gives rise to a number of useful and distinctive approaches to the study of social problems, as identified in **Table 1–2**  . The following sections explore these three approaches, using criminal deviance as an example to show the unique contributions of each perspective.

Table 1–2

Major Sociological Perspectives on Social Problems

Perspective	View of Society and Social Problems	Origins of Social Problems	Proposed Solutions
Functionalist	Views society as a vast organism whose parts are interrelated; social problems are disruptions of this system. Also holds that problems of social institutions produce patterns of deviance and that institutions must address such patterns through strategic so-	Social expectations fail, creating normlessness, culture conflict, and breakdown. Social problems also result from the impersonal operations of existing institutions, both	Engage in research and active intervention to improve social institutions. Create new organizations to address social problems.

	cial change.	now and in the past.	
Conflict	Views society as marked by conflicts due to inequalities in class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and other divisions that produce conflicting values. Defines social problems as conditions that do not conform to society's values.	Groups with different values and differing amounts of power meet and compete.	Build stronger social movements among groups with grievances. The conflicting groups may then engage in negotiations and reach mutual accommodations.
Symbolic Interactionist	Holds that definitions of deviance or social problems are subjective; separates deviant and nondeviant people not by what they do but by how society reacts to what they do.	Society becomes aware that certain behaviors exist and labels them as social problems.	Resocializes deviants by increasing their contacts with accepted patterns of behavior; makes the social system less rigid. Changes the definition of what is considered deviant.

1.3.1 The Functionalist Perspective

From the day a person is born until the day that person dies, he or she holds a position—a **status** —in a variety of groups and organizations. In a hospital, for example, the patient, the nurse, the doctor, and the orderly are all members of a social group con-

cerned with health care. Each of these individuals has a status that requires the performance of a certain set of behaviors, known as a **role**. Taken together, the statuses and roles of the members of this medical team and other teams in hospitals throughout the country make up the social institution known as the health care system. A **social institution** is a relatively stable structure of statuses and roles devoted to meeting the basic needs of people in a society. The health care system is an institution; hospitals, insurance companies, and private medical practices are examples of organizations within this institution.

status

A social position.

role

The performance of a certain set of behaviors that go with a status.

social institution

A more or less stable structure of statuses and roles devoted to meeting the basic needs of people in a society, for example, the health care system.

The **functionalist perspective** looks at the ways major social institutions like the family, the military, the health care system, and the police and courts actually operate. According to this perspective, the role behavior associated with any given status has evolved as a means of allowing a social institution to fulfill its function in society. Thus, the nurse's role requires specific knowledge and behaviors that involve treatment of the patient's immediate needs and administration of care according to the doctor's orders. The patient, in turn, is expected to cooperate in the administration of the treatment. When all members of the group perform their roles correctly, the group is said to be functioning well.

functionalist perspective

A way of thinking that considers the way major social institutions such as the family, the military, the health care system, and the police and courts actually operate.

In a well-functioning group, there is general agreement about how roles are to be performed by each member. These expectations are reinforced by the society's basic values, from which are derived rules about how people should and should not behave toward one another in different situations. The Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, the Bill of Rights, and the teachings of all the world's religions are examples of sets of rules that specify how people should behave in different social roles.

But if a society is made up of groups in which people know their roles and adhere to the underlying values, why does that society have social problems like crime and warfare? From the functionalist perspective, the main reason for the existence of social problems is that societies are always changing and having to adapt to new conditions; failure to adapt successfully leads to social problems.

The early French social theorist Émile Durkheim observed that changes in a society can drastically alter the goals and functions of human groups and organizations. As a society undergoes a major change—say, from agricultural to industrial production—the statuses people assume and the roles they play also change, with far-reaching consequences. Thus, for example, the tendency for men and women from rural backgrounds to have many children, which was functional in agrarian societies because it produced much-needed farmhands, can become a liability in an urban-industrial society, where housing space is limited and the types of jobs available are constantly changing. From the standpoint of society's smooth functioning, it can be said that the roles of the father and mother in the rural setting that stresses long periods of childbearing and many children become dysfunctional in an urban setting. Currently developed nations, such as the United States, are undergoing another radical change moving from an Industrial to an Information/Service age. We are beginning to witness the economic consequences of this, such as the closing of manufacturing plants, outsourcing jobs, and a 24/7 economy, all which we explore in **Chapter 12**.

Wars; colonial conquest; disease and famine; population increases; changing technologies of production, communication, or health care—all these major social forces can change societies and thereby change the roles their members are expected to perform. As social groups strive to adapt to the new conditions, their members may feel that they are adrift—unsure of how to act or troubled by conflict over how to perform as parents or wage earners or citizens. They may question the values they learned as children and wonder what to teach their own children. This condition of social disequilibrium can lead to an increase in social problems like crime and mental illness as individuals seek their own, often antisocial, solutions to the dilemmas they face.

Criminal Deviance: A Functionalist View

From the functionalist perspective, all societies produce their own unique forms of crime and have their own ways of responding to them. Of course, sociologists recognize that there are causes within the individual that help explain why one person becomes a criminal while another, who may have experienced the same conditions, does not. But sociologists dig deeper. For the sociologist, using the functionalist perspective, an important question may be why particular crimes are committed and punished in some societies and not in others. Why is it that until quite recently a black man who was suspected of making advances to a white woman was often punished more severely than a black man who was suspected of stealing? Why was the theft of a horse punishable by immediate death on the early western frontier?

The functionalist answer is that societies fear most the crimes that seem to threaten their most cherished values, and individuals who dare to challenge those values will receive the most severe punishment. Thus, the freedom to allow one's horses to graze on common land was an essential aspect of early western frontier society that was threatened by the theft of horses. The possibility that a white woman could entice a black man and that their relationship could be interpreted as anything other than rape threatened the foundations of the American racial caste system, which held that blacks were inferior to whites. In both cases, immediate, sometimes brutal, punishment was used to reinforce the central values of the society.

Social Problems as Social Pathology

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, functionalist theorists regarded crime and deviance as a form of "social disease" or social pathology. This view was rooted in the organic analogy that was popular at the time. Human society was seen as analogous to a vast organism, all of whose complex, interrelated parts function together to maintain the health and stability of the whole. Social problems arise when either individuals or social institutions fail to keep pace with changing conditions and thereby disrupt the healthy operation of the social organization; such individuals or institutions are considered "sick" (hence the term *social pathology*).

Today most sociologists reject this notion and believe that the social-pathology approach is not very useful in generating empirical research; its concepts of sickness and morality are too subjective to be meaningful to many sociologists. It attempts to apply a biological analogy to social conditions even when there is no empirical justification for doing so. Modern functionalists do not focus on the behaviors and problems of individuals, per se; instead, they see social problems as arising out of the failure of institutions like the family, the schools, and the economy to adapt to changing social conditions.

Social-Disorganization Theory

Rates of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization increased rapidly after World War I. European immigrants, rural whites, and southern blacks were often crowded together in degrading slums and had trouble learning the language, manners, and norms of the dominant urban culture. Many of those who managed to adjust to the city were discriminated against because of their religion or race, and others lost their jobs because technological advances made their skills obsolete. Alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, crime, and delinquency rates rose drastically as people tried to cope with these conditions. As sociologists began to question whether the social-pathology viewpoint could adequately explain the widespread existence of these social problems, they developed a new concept that eventually became known as social-disorganization theory to explain a wide variety of social problems.

A group of teenagers experience a sense of normlessness. They are neither adults nor children, and our culture has unclear expectations for people in this age group. They are told to go to high school, get good grades, play sports, and go to college. But this path is not of interest to all adolescents.
Monkey Business/Fotolia

This theory views society as being organized by a set of expectations or rules. **Social disorganization** results when these expectations fail, and it is manifested in three major ways: (1) normlessness, which arises when people have no rules that tell them how to behave; (2) culture conflict, which occurs when people feel trapped by contradictory rules; and (3) breakdown, which takes place when obedience to a set of rules is not rewarded or is punished. Rapid social change, for example, might make traditional standards of behavior obsolete without providing new standards, thereby giving rise to normlessness. The children of immigrants might feel trapped between the expectations of their parents and those of their new society—an example of culture conflict. And the expectations of blacks might be frustrated when they do well in school but encounter job discrimination; their frustration, in turn, might lead to breakdown.

social disorganization

The result when rules break down; it is manifested in three major ways: normlessness, culture conflict, and breakdown.

The stress experienced by victims of social disorganization may result in a form of personal disorganization such as drug addiction or crime. The social system as a whole also feels the force of disorganization. It may respond by changing its rules, keeping contradictory rules in force, or breaking down. Disorganization can be halted or reversed if its causes are isolated and corrected.

Modern Functionalism: Building Institutions

In this text, you will see many instances in which social-disorganization theory has been used to explain social problems. A more modern version of the functionalist perspective attempts to show how people reorganize their lives to cope with new conditions. Often this reorganization results in new kinds of organizations and sometimes in whole new institutions. This research focus is known as the institutional approach, or **institution building** **(Caplan, 2005)**. Research on how to improve the organization of public schools to meet new educational demands is an example.

institution building

A modern version of the functionalist perspective, which attempts to show how people reorganize their lives to cope with new conditions.

1.3.2 The Conflict Perspective

By no means do all sociologists adopt the functionalist view of society and social problems. A **conflict perspective** claims that the functionalist idea (that social problems can be corrected by reforming institutions that are not functioning well) is misleading because it ignores dimensions of power. The conflict perspective is based on the belief that social problems arise out of major contradictions in the way societies are organized, contradictions that lead to conflict between those who have access to the good life and those who do not. This perspective owes much of its early development to the writings of Karl Marx (1818–1883), the German social theorist who developed many of the central ideas of modern socialism.

conflict perspective

A way of thinking that is based on the belief that social problems arise out of major contradictions in the way societies are organized, contradictions that lead to large-scale conflict between those who have access to the good life and those who do not.

In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (**Marx and Engels, 1848**), *Capital* (**Marx, 1867**), and other works, Marx attempted to prove that social problems such as unemployment, poverty, crime, corruption, and warfare are not usually the fault of individuals or of poorly functioning organizations. Instead, he argued, their origins may be found in the way societies arrange access to wealth and power. According to Marx, the social problems of modern societies arise from capitalism. An inevitable outcome of capitalism is class conflict, especially conflict between those who own the means of production (factories, land, and so forth) and those who sell their labor for wages. In such a system, workers are exploited by their bosses, for whom the desire to make a profit outweighs any humanitarian impulse to take care of their employees.

In the capitalist system as Marx described it, the capitalist is driven by the profit motive to find ways to reduce labor costs—for example, through the purchase of new machinery that can do the work of several people or by building factories in places where people will work for less money. These actions continually threaten the livelihood of workers. Often, they lose their jobs, and their lives are thrown into disarray. Sometimes they resort to crime or even begin revolutions to overturn the system in which they are the have-nots, and the owners of capital are the haves. In general, for Marx and modern Marxian sociologists, social problems may be attributed to the ways in which wealth and power become concentrated in the hands of a few people and to the many forms of conflict engendered by these inequalities.

Marxian conflict theory can be a powerful tool in the analysis of contemporary social problems. To illustrate this point, the following section looks at how this theory explains criminal deviance in societies like the United States.

Deviance: A Marxian Conflict View

Marxists believe that crime and deviance do not occur merely because such organizations as the police and the courts function in certain ways or do not function as they were intended to. Instead, Marxian theorists believe such situations are a result of differences in the power of various groups or classes in society. For example, top organized-crime figures have the money and power to influence law enforcement officials or to hire the best attorneys when they are arrested. Street drug dealers, in contrast, are relatively powerless to resist arrest. Moreover, they serve as convenient targets for an official show of force against drug trafficking. From the Marxian perspective, the rich and powerful can determine what kinds of behaviors are defined as social problems because they control major institutions such as the government, the schools, and the courts. They are also able to shift the blame for the conditions that produce those problems to groups that are less able to defend themselves, namely, the poor and the working class.

Scholars who adopt a Marxian perspective tend to be cautious of proposals to reform existing institutions. Since they attribute most social problems to underlying patterns of class conflict and power differentials, they do not believe that tinkering with existing institutions such as prisons and courts can address the basic causes of those problems unless issues related to power and inequality are addressed. Usually, therefore, their research looks at the ways in which the material conditions of society, such as inequalities of wealth and power, seem to account for the distribution of social problems in a population. Or they conduct research on social movements among the poor and the working class to understand how those movements might mobilize large numbers of people into a force that could bring about major changes in the way society is organized.

Value Conflict Theory

The Marxian theory of class conflict cannot explain all the kinds of conflict that occur around us every day. In families, for example, conflicts may range from seemingly trivial arguments over television programs to intense disputes over issues like drinking or drug use; in neighborhoods, conflicts may occur between landlords and tenants, between parents and school administrators, or between groups of parents who differ on matters of educational policy such

as sex education or the rights of female athletes. Such conflict often focuses not on deep-seated class antagonisms but on differences in values. For most feminist groups, for example, abortion is a social problem if women cannot freely terminate a pregnancy. In contrast, many religious groups define legal abortion as a social problem. The debate over legalization versus criminalization of abortion reflects the conflicting values of important groups in society.

Value conflict theorists define social problems as conditions that are incompatible with group values.[2] Such problems are normal, they add, because in a complex society there are many groups whose interests and values are bound to differ. According to value conflict theory, social problems occur when groups with different values meet and compete. Returning to the example of criminal deviance, value conflict theorists would say that deviance from society's rules results from the fact that some groups do not agree with those rules and therefore feel free to break them if they can. For example, whenever a society prohibits substances like alcohol or drugs, some groups will break the rules to obtain the banned substance. This conflict stimulates the development of criminal organizations that employ gangsters and street peddlers to supply the needs of those who deviate. The underlying cause of the problem is conflicting values concerning the use of particular substances.

2Rubington, E. & Weinberg, M. S. 1971. *The study of social problems: five perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

From the value conflict viewpoint, many social problems need to be understood in terms of which groups hold which values and which groups have the power to enforce them against the wishes of other groups. Once these distinctions have been determined, this approach leads to suggestions for adjustments, settlements, negotiations, and compromises that will alleviate the problem. These suggestions, in turn, may result in new policies, such as civilian review boards, arbitration of disputes, juvenile drug courts, and changes in existing laws to reflect a diversity of opinions (**Larana, Johnston, and Gusfield, 1994**).

The Idea of a "Culture War" in the United States

When headlines claim conflict between different political parties, religious groups, or communities about gun violence, same-sex marriage, abortion, or any number of issues that arouse people's moral passions, it is easy to agree with some commentators that these conflicts are evidence of a "culture war." This supposed broad conflict over deeply held values is said to sway elections and determine the fate of many social policy issues, from gun control to "morning-after pills" to prevent pregnancy, and much more.

Americans are becoming increasingly polarized with respect to social issues (**Kiley, 2017**). An overwhelming majority (86 percent) of Americans say conflicts between Democrats and Republicans are either strong or very strong, according to a recent Pew Research Center survey. This is greater than the 65 percent of Americans who see strong or very strong conflicts between blacks and whites, and 60 percent who see them between the rich and the poor (**Gramlich, 2017**).

There has been increasing polarization in recent years over most political, social, and economic issues. Liberals and conservatives seem to be going in completely different directions.
Jane/Fotolia

1.3.3 The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Why do certain people resort to crime while the vast majority seeks legitimate means to survive? A functionalist would point out that individuals who do not adhere to society's core values or who have been uprooted by social change are most likely to become criminals. When they are caught, their punishment reinforces the desire of the majority to conform. But this explanation does not help us understand why a certain individual or group deviates.

Conflict theorists explain deviance as the result of conflict over access to wealth and power or over values. But how is that conflict channeled into deviant behavior? Why do some groups that experience value conflict act against the larger society while others do not? Why, for example, do some gays come out publicly while others hide their sexual preference? Presumably, both groups know that their sexual values may conflict with some people of the larger society, but what explains the difference in behavior? The conflict perspective cannot provide an adequate answer to this question.

The **symbolic interactionist perspective** offers an explanation that gets closer to the individual level of behavior by looking at the symbols people use in everyday interaction—words, gestures, appearances—and how these symbols are interpreted by others. People's interactions with others are based on how these symbols are interpreted.

symbolic interactionist perspective

A way of thinking that offers an explanation that gets closer to the individual level of behavior by looking at the symbols people use in everyday interaction—words, gestures, appearances—and how these symbols are interpreted by others. People's interactions with others are based on how symbols are interpreted.

Research based on this perspective looks at the processes whereby different people become part of a situation that the larger society defines as a social problem. The interactionist approach focuses on the ways in which people take on the values of the group of which they are members. It also explores how different groups define their situation and in so doing "construct" a version of life that promotes certain values and behaviors and discourages others.

A key insight of the interactionist perspective originated in the research of W. I. Thomas and his colleagues in the early decades of the twentieth century. In their classic study of the problems of immigrants in the rapidly growing and changing city of Chicago, these pioneering sociologists found that some groups of Polish immigrant men believed it would be easier to rob banks than to survive in the mills and factories, where other immigrants worked long hours under dangerous conditions. The sociologists discovered that the uneducated young immigrants often did not realize how little chance they had of carrying out a successful bank robbery. They defined their situation in a certain way and acted accordingly. "Situations people define as real," Thomas stated, "are real in their consequences" (**Thomas and Znaniecki, 1922**).[3] Thus, from the interactionist perspective, an individual's or group's definition of the situation is central to understanding the actions of that individual or group.

3Thomas, W.I., & F. Znaniecki. 1922. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. New York: Knopf.

Another early line of interactionist research is associated with Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead. Cooley, Mead, and others realized that, although we learn our basic values and ways of behaving early in life, especially in our families, we also participate throughout our lives in groups made up of people like ourselves; these groups are known as peer groups. From these groups, we draw much of our identity and our sense of who we are, and within these groups, we learn many of our behaviors and values. Through our interactions in peer groups—be they teams, adolescent friendship groups, or work groups—we may be taught to act in ways that are different from those our parents taught us. Thus, when interactionists study social problems like crime, they focus on the ways in which people are recruited by criminal groups and learn to conform to the rules of those groups.

Labeling: An Interactionist View of Deviance

Labeling theory is an application of the interactionist perspective that explains certain kinds of social deviance. Labeling theorists think the label "deviant" reveals more about the society applying it than about the act or person being labeled. In certain societies, for

example, concern about the environment is far more accepted than it is in the United States. Labeling theorists suggest there are groups and organizations in American society that benefit from labeling environmental activists as deviant— the fossil fuel industries, for example. In short, labeling theory separates deviant and nondeviant people, not by what they do but by how society reacts to what they do.

According to labeling theorists, social problems are conditions under which certain behaviors or situations become defined as social problems. The cause of a social problem is simply society's awareness that a certain behavior or situation exists. A behavior or situation becomes a social problem when someone can profit in some way by applying the label "problematic" or "deviant" to it. Such labeling causes society to suffer in two ways. First, one group unfairly achieves power over another; "deviants" are repressed through discrimination, prejudice, or force. Second, those who are labeled deviant may accept this definition of themselves, and the label may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The number and variety of deviant acts may be increased to reinforce the new role of deviant. A person who is labeled a drug addict, for example, may adopt elements of what is popularly viewed as a drug addict's lifestyle: resisting employment or treatment, engaging in crime, and so on. Sociologists term this behavior **secondary deviance**  .

secondary deviance

A state in which a person who is labeled "deviant" may then adopt elements of what is popularly viewed as a deviant lifestyle.

According to labeling theory, the way to solve social problems is to change the definition of what is considered deviant. It is thought that the acceptance of a greater variety of acts and situations as normal would automatically eliminate concern about them. Decriminalization of the possession of small amounts of marijuana for personal use is an example of this approach.

Labeling theory is only one of numerous applications of the interactionist perspective to social problems. Another common approach focuses on the processes of socialization that occur in groups and explores the possibility of resocialization through

group interaction—as occurs, for example, in groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. At many points, this text will discuss situations in which intentional resocialization has been used in efforts to address social problems.

The Social Construction of Social Problems

The interactionist perspective also contributes to what is known as the **social construction** approach to social problems. This approach argues that some claims about social problems become the dominant discourse, while other claims get little or no attention. Powerful people and institutions in society shape our perceptions about social problems and, more generally, our understanding of the social world. The press, television, radio, universities and colleges, government agencies, and civic voluntary associations are examples of institutions that often have a stake in defining what social problems are, how they come about, or what should be done about them. Journalists, television commentators, editorial writers, professors who take public stands on issues, scientists who appear before the cameras, and many other lobbyists and "opinion makers" are in fact involved in selecting some claims and rejecting others. In so doing, they "construct" the way we think about the issues (**Griswold, 2012**).

> ***social construction***
>
> The process by which some claims about social problems become dominant and others get little or no attention; these claims develop through the activities of actors and institutions in society that shape our understanding of the social world more generally.

Consider an example: The tobacco industry knew that smoking caused cancer and other serious health problems, yet continued to encourage people to smoke through their strong media campaigns, campaign contributions to public officials, and political lobby. The tobacco industry is very powerful, and their dominant claims about smoking being harmless overshadowed the scientific claims about the health hazards associated with tobacco. They successfully encouraged people to see smoking as sophisticated,

mature, liberating, and "cool." Do you remember "Joe Camel," or the cigarette targeted to women—Virginia Slims—with their slogan, "You've come a long way, baby"?[4] It took many years to shift the dominant discourse about tobacco, so that now most people recognize its dangerous effects.

4Virginia Slims Cigarette, Virginia Slims.

What Do You Think?

Identify a current social problem, and, using a social construction approach, describe how the media, certain people with power, and specific social institutions have framed this problem.

The Natural History of Social Problems

1.4 Describe the process that reveals the natural history of social problems.

To readers of daily websites and news sites, and to faithful watchers of television news, social problems may often resemble fads. People hear a great deal about a particular problem for a while, and then it fades from public attention, perhaps to reappear some time later if there are new developments in its incidence or control. With AIDS, crack cocaine, driving while intoxicated, serial killers, financial scandals, racial violence, terrorism, and so many other problems demanding attention, it is little wonder that the focus on any given subject by the press and the public tends to last only a few days or weeks.

To a large extent, the short attention span of the media can be explained by the need to attract large numbers of viewers or readers; the media can be expected to be rather fickle and to constantly pursue stories that will capture the public's attention. However, sociologists distinguish between the nature of media coverage of a social problem and the way a problem is perceived by the public and political leaders. They have devoted considerable study to the question of how social problems develop from underlying conditions into publicly defined problems that engender social policies and sustained social movements. This subject is often referred to as the "natural history" of social problems.

Early in the twentieth century, sociologists recognized that social problems often seemed to develop in a series of phases or stages. They called the study of this process the **natural history approach** because their effort was analogous to the work of biologists who study the development of a great many individual organisms to chart the stages of development of a species (**Edwards, 1927**; **Park, 1955**; **Shaw, 1929**; **Wirth, 1927**). But whereas sociologists recognize that social problems often follow certain regular stages of development, they also know that there are many deviations from the usual sequence.

natural history approach

The idea that social problems develop in a series of phases or stages.

In a useful formulation of the natural history approach, **Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse (1987)** outlined the following major stages that most social problems seem to go through.

- **Stage 1—Problem definition.** Groups in society attempt to gain acknowledgment by a wider population (and the press and government) that some social condition is "offensive, harmful, or otherwise undesirable." These groups publicize their claims and attempt to turn the matter into a political issue.
- **Stage 2—Legitimacy.** When the groups pressing their claims are considered credible and their assertions are accepted by official organizations, agencies, or institutions, there may be investigations, proposals for reform, and even the creation of new agencies to respond to claims and demands.
- **Stage 3—Reemergence of demands.** Usually, the original groups are not satisfied with the steps taken by official agencies; they demand stronger measures, more funding for enforcement, speedier handling of claims, and so on. They renew their appeals to the wider public and the press.
- **Stage 4—Rejection and institution building.** The complainant groups usually decide that official responses to their demands are inadequate. They seek to develop their own organizations or counterinstitutions to press their claims and enact reforms.

This natural history approach can be applied to the idea that the easy availability of guns—especially handguns, automatic rifles and pistols, and assault weapons—contributes to higher murder rates. In the 1980s, musician John Lennon of the Beatles and President Ronald Reagan were victims of gun violence. Lennon was killed, and while President Reagan escaped serious harm, the bullets hit his press secretary, James Brady, who suffered a serious head injury and permanent disability.

Incidents like these, and many more, *defined the problem* of violence as being due to the easy availability of guns. This definition gained credibility and *legitimacy* as citizen groups pressed their lawmakers for gun control legislation. The Brady Bill, for example, was passed and required identity checks for gun purchasers and a ban on certain types of assault weapons. However, the National Rifle Association and other groups argued that guns are not the problem. The issue is mental illness, they claimed, and legal gun owners should not be denied their rights because a few mentally ill people do the wrong thing.

Gun regulation advocates confront a pro-gun counter protester at one of the March for Our Lives protests held throughout the United States, in 2018. In Chicago, thousands of gun control advocates marched in support of increased gun regulation.
Todd Bannor/Alamy Stock Photo

Meanwhile, by the 1990s, mass shootings began to occur in public venues. Over the past several decades, there have been many of these horrific shootings. Sandy Hook Elementary School: 26 elementary students, teachers, and staff were killed. Virginia Tech University: 56 were killed or injured. Outside a Safeway shopping area where Congresswoman Gabriella Giffords was speaking: 19 people were injured or killed. An Army base in Texas: 43 people were killed or injured. Forty-nine people were killed in an Orlando nightclub. Fifty-eight people were killed while attending a music festival in Las Vegas. Seventeen students were killed at their high school in Parkland, Florida. These acts of violence have led to a *reemergence of demands* for more stringent gun control legislation. Gun control advocates have made their appeals publicly but are growing frustrated by what they see as an inadequate response from the government. They are *rejecting and building their own institutions* to push their agendas and enact reforms.

Interview	that are not directly observed, such as values, opinions, and other self-reports. Useful for getting in-depth information about a topic. Conducted in person, conversation is usually audiotaped and later transcribed. Generates qualitative data.	high-quality data. Interviewer can probe or ask follow-up questions for clarification or to encourage the respondent to elaborate. Can establish a genuine rapport with respondent.	ing to conduct and transcribe. Self-reports may be biased. Respondent may feel uncomfortable revealing personal information.
Experiment	For explanatory research that examines cause-and-effect relationship among variables. Several types: classical experimental design and quasi-experimental designs based on degree of controlling the environment. Generates quantitative data.	Provides greatest opportunity to assess cause and effect. Research design relatively easy to replicate.	The setting may have an artificial quality to it. Unless the experimental and control group are randomly assigned or matched on all relevant variables, and the environment is carefully controlled, bias may result.
Focus Groups	For obtaining information from small groups of people who are brought together to discuss a particular topic. Often exploratory in na-	Group interaction may produce more valuable insights than individual surveys	Setting is contrived. Some people may feel uncomfortable speaking in a group and others may

	ture. Particularly useful for studying public perceptions. Facilitator may ask only a few questions; goal is to get group to interact with one another. Generates qualitative data.	or in-depth interviews. Researcher can obtain data quickly and inexpensively. Good for eliciting unanticipated information.	dominate.
Observation	For exploratory and descriptive study of people in a natural setting. Researcher can be a participant or nonparticipant. Generates qualitative data.	Allows study of real behavior in a natural setting. Does not rely on self-reports. Researchers can often ask questions and take notes. Usually inexpensive.	Can be time-consuming. There could be ethical issues involved in certain types of observation studies, namely, observing without consent. Researcher must balance roles of participant and observer. Replication of research is difficult.
Secondary Analysis	For exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory research with data that were collected for some other purpose. Diverse. Can be large data sources based on	Saves the expense and time of original data collection. Can be longitudinal, with data collected at	Because data were collected for another purpose, the researcher cannot control what variables were included

	national samples (e.g., U.S. Census) or can be historical documents or records. Generates quantitative or qualitative data, depending on the source of data used.	more than one point in time. Good for analyzing national attitudes or trends. Makes historical research possible.	or excluded. Researcher has no control over sampling or other biases in the data.

Some researchers focus on **quantitative methods** in which data are collected that can be measured numerically. Examples are found in surveys, experiments, or doing further analyses on available government statistics (such as from the U.S. Census Bureau or U.S. Department of Justice) or another source (such as the United Nations). This research yields percentages and other statistics that can be easily interpreted.

quantitative methods

A research strategy in which data can be measured numerically.

Violence among intimates is a serious social problem affecting millions of women and men. Sociological research provides a window

into this phenomenon, including how often it occurs, who is most likely to be victimized, what types of violent acts are most common, and the effectiveness of different programs and policies to help victims.
Horizons WWP/TRVL/Alamy Stock Photo

Others use **qualitative methods** that focus on narrative description with words rather than numbers to analyze patterns and their underlying meanings. Examples of qualitative research methods include in-depth interviews, focus groups, observational studies, and in-depth analysis using narrative documents such as letters or diaries. Qualitative research does not usually offer statistics but can reveal a rich description and understanding of some phenomena.

> ***qualitative methods***
>
> A research strategy that focuses on narrative description with words rather than numbers to analyze patterns and their underlying meanings.

None of these methods are inherently better or worse than the others. The method used depends on the research questions that are posed. For example, if you want to better understand what family life was like in the nineteenth century, you would not want to conduct a survey today. How would people who are alive today best inform you of what happened 150 years ago? Obviously, the best method would be to conduct a further analysis of documents that were written during that period. Diaries, letters or other lengthy correspondence between people, and other such qualitative data could help you understand the common everyday experiences within families. Likewise, you could analyze quantitative data from historical records to get an aggregate picture about, for example, immigration trends, age at first marriage, or the average length of time between marriage and first birth. Census records; birth, marriage, and death registers; immigration records; slave auctions and other transactions; church records; newspapers and magazine articles; employment ledgers; and tax records can also provide insight into the family lives of large numbers of ordinary people.

However, if you want to assess today's opinions or behaviors, perhaps a survey or in-depth interviews would be best. You may want

to ask the same questions of everyone in your sample and offer a standard set of answers from which they can choose, such as "Have you ever been hit by a spouse or partner?" (yes, no). "If yes, would you say you have been hit 1–5 times, 6–10 times, more than 10 times?" You can easily quantify this information. Or, if you are interested in broader questions that allow each person in your study to elaborate in his or her own words (such as "How did you come to the decision to leave the violent spouse or partner?"), you would likely use in-depth interviews, which then yield qualitative data.

> ## What Do You Think?
>
> If you were conducting a study about violence, would you prefer qualitative or quantitative methods, and why? What could you hope to learn?

1.5.2 Linking Individual Experiences with Social Structure

As the sociological imagination has revealed, most people are so embedded in their own lives that they fail to see the connections between their personal experiences and broader social concerns. By extension, many people perceive the lives of others around them also in this way: He's unemployed, and therefore he must not be working hard enough to get a job. She is stressed out from combining work and family, and therefore she needs better time management skills. He committed a crime; therefore, he should go to prison. Social scientists suggest that the best way to truly understand social problems is to see the connections between social structure and personal experience. Therefore, the second theme of this text emphasizes that, while people may initially think of experiences solely in personal terms, their experiences are shaped in large part by the social structure in society, which, as you recall, is the organized arrangements of relationships and institutions that together form the basis of society.

For example, many people are concerned about the number of poor single-parent households headed by women. People often wonder why women do not marry the men who father their children. Terry Lynn is one of these women, and if you look closer, you can see that her life choices are grounded in a social context.

Terry Lynn is a single mother who has never married and is raising a daughter alone, with the temporary help of cash welfare assistance (**Seccombe, 2015**). She is a shy young woman, yet at the same time, she is eager to tell her story. Terry Lynn works part-time at a bowling alley, a good job considering her weak reading and writing skills. She takes the bus to work, and various shifts sometimes keep her at work well into the night. She is savvy about the additional help she needs to support her child, and therefore deliberately keeps her employment hours below a certain threshold so that she and her daughter will continue to qualify for a childcare subsidy. Even at the age of 24, Terry Lynn knows that providing quality daycare for her daughter is vital. She and her daughter live with a sister in a cramped, rundown, two-bedroom apartment in an unfashionable part of town. The furniture is secondhand, and the couch is threadbare. Nonetheless, Terry Lynn is proud of herself and her daughter for "making it" on their own. You may wonder where the child's father is. He comes around now and then, she says, usually when he wants money or sex from her. Does Terry Lynn ever plan to marry him? Her answer is a definite "No."

Terry Lynn represents one of the millions of women raising children alone without significant contribution from the child's father. Would she want to marry him? Her answer is a definite "No." If he doesn't do much for her now, she doesn't think he will do much for her if she married him either.
Cultura RM/Alamy Stock Photo

Single-parent households have been blamed extensively for a wide variety of social ills. They are far more likely than other fami-

lies to be poor (**Semega, Fontenot, and Kollar, 2017**). Why are so many women, especially poor and low-income women like Terry Lynn, having children without marrying their children's fathers?

You might be tempted to look at individual-level factors and ask what is happening within intimate relationships, specifically the couple's values and choices. Certainly, these are important; but many people have found that poor women seem to value marriage quite highly. In fact, if anything, perhaps they value it *too* highly. They believe that their own relationships will never meet the "gold standard" they have set for themselves, such as a partner with a steady job, the chance to own their own home, and a reasonably lavish wedding ceremony. As a result, they shy away from marriage (**Edin and Kefalas, 2005**; **Seccombe, 2015**).

Therefore, you would need to look at structural factors to explain why poor women have children outside of marriage but are often hesitant to marry their partners. William Julius Wilson has suggested that the high unemployment rate of inner-city urban dwellers contributes to their low marriage rate. In his well-known books, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (**Wilson, 1987**) and *When Work Disappears* (**Wilson, 1996**), Wilson pointed out that many poor women see marriage to inner-city men as risky because the men cannot support families on their meager wages (**Wilson, 1987**, **1996**). Furthermore, as factories and businesses move out to the suburbs or overseas, unemployment and poverty escalate. Consequently, there is a shortage of employed men whom these women see as good marriage prospects. Wilson shows that our changing economy (a structural condition) has a substantial effect on individual relationship choices.

In addition to high unemployment, or perhaps interrelated with it, there are many other structural reasons why poor women often do not marry when they have children. For example, homicide, violence, drug addiction, and incarceration have all taken a tremendous toll on poor men, especially poor black men. In Terry Lynn's case, the father of her child was unemployed and had been in and out of jail, so she did not see him as a reliable "good catch." Although she cared for him, why would she want to marry him?

It is critical to move beyond just an individual perspective to really understand single parenthood among the poor. Social problems may be personally experienced, but they exist in a social context.

1.5.3 Recognizing That Social Inequality Contributes to Social Problems

A third theme of this text is that social inequality is a critical organizing feature in society and contributes mightily to social problems. Most Americans believe that the United States provides nearly equal opportunities for everyone. However, as detailed in upcoming chapters, American society is highly stratified based on economics, power, and social status. Americans fantasize that they can be anything they want to be, but really there is little substantial upward (or downward) social mobility. People usually live out their lives in generally the same social class in which they were born. Families pass on their wealth and social capital (or their lack of it) to their newest members, and this practice perpetuates social inequality. For example, because of the U.S. inheritance laws, affluent parents can distribute their wealth to their children after their death. Relatively little of the wealth is taxed and redistributed, as is the case in other countries. Consequently, some of America's richest people have only marginal employment histories. They do not need to work for a living, yet others who work relentlessly, often in the unglamorous but growing service sector, find no real route to a better life. Their wages are low; they may not receive health insurance or other benefits; and they live on the margins, only one paycheck away from impoverishment. What type of wealth or social capital do these parents have to pass on to their children?

Inequality is woven into many basic social structures and institutions, and this inequality contributes to social problems, including poor health, immigration, mental illness, crime, poor race relations, overpopulation, violence among intimates, school dropout rates, war, discrimination against women, and environmental degradation.

For example, blacks, Hispanics, and American Indian/Alaska Native youths are less likely to finish high school than are their Asian and white counterparts. This educational disparity has serious long-term economic consequences, leading to higher poverty rates and more economic stress. But *why* are some groups more likely to quit high school?

One structural reason has to do with the quality of schools. Traditionally, schools reflect the socioeconomic and racial profile of the

surrounding neighborhood; therefore, most schools have a long history of segregation. Desegregation effectively began with the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which was based on the argument that segregation had negative effects on black students even when their school facilities were equal to those of white students. But many schools remained highly segregated because white or upper-income families transferred to private schools. Moreover, politicians often gerrymandered districts to change school attendance boundaries (Chang, 2018; **Richards, 2014**). Consequently, today's typical minority student attends school with fewer whites than his or her counterpart did in 1970 (**Fiel, 2013**).

A black student is escorted to a waiting car by National Guard troops enforcing school integration in 1956.
Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

Another structural reason has to do with the quality of the teachers in the schools. A teacher is estimated to have two to three times the impact of any other school factor on student performance on reading and math tests (**RAND Education, 2012**). Schools with large numbers of low-income and minority students are more likely than other schools to have teachers who have fewer years of experience, lower licensure exam scores, and lower student test score gains (**Goldhaber, Lavery, and Theobald, 2015**). Also, classrooms are often segregated into achievement levels, racial composition, and socioeconomic composition, and it is the teachers with less experience who tend to be assigned to the most challenging classes (**Kalogrides and Loeb, 2013**; **Kalogrides, Loeb, and Béteille, 2013**).

Patterns of social inequality filter down and shape all components of life—including educational achievement. This text examines the assumptions, values, and ideologies that are used to justify or explain social inequality and how inequality contributes to social problems.

1.5.4 Using a Comparative Perspective

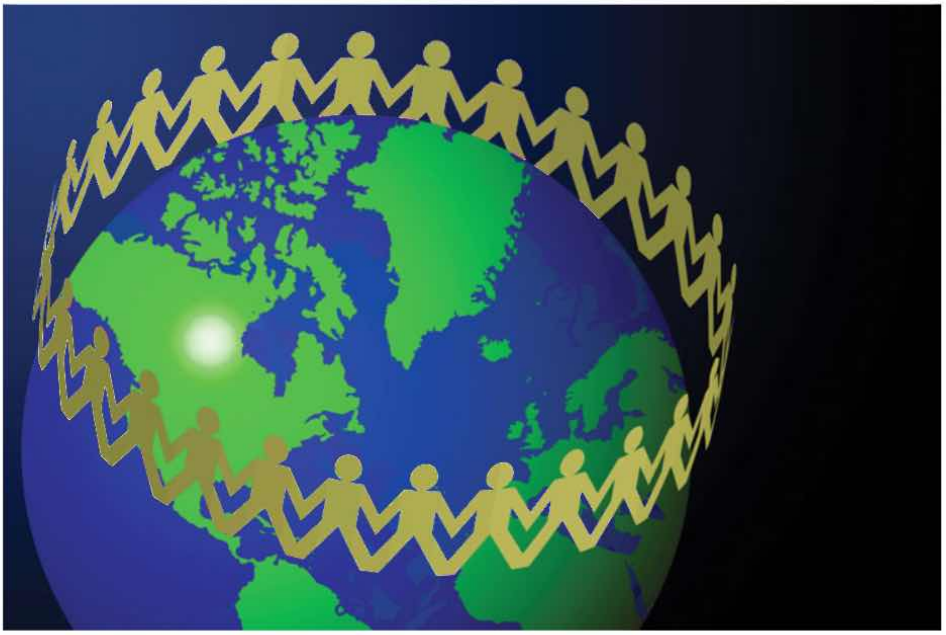
The final theme of this text focuses on the importance of learning about other cultures and other historical periods to better understand American social problems. In the past, it was easier to ignore what was happening in the world beyond U.S. borders, but now, societies are becoming increasingly interconnected. New technologies, immigration, commerce across borders, and greater ease in world travel have increased visibility, and the United States can no longer remain isolated. Societies see other ways of doing things and sometimes adopt pieces of another's culture. One can now travel to many distant parts of the world and still find American fast food, such as McDonald's or Kentucky Fried Chicken. Likewise, the United States also has adopted foods and cultural artifacts from other countries. Tacos and pizza are staples in our diets today, but once were considered exotic or regional ethnic food. Social problems, too, move beyond borders. As shown in the box ***A Global View: "World Population: 7.6 Billion and Counting,"*** we are all affected by unchecked population growth.

Just as with culture, it is easy to ignore history and focus only on the here and now, yet many of our current social problems are

rooted in the traditions of the past. For example, to better understand the current and heated debate over abortion, one should be aware that at one time religious groups did not oppose abortion, including the Catholic Church. Likewise, to truly understand the high rate of divorce in the United States, one should be aware of the ways in which the current notion of love, which evolved in the eighteenth century, changed the entire basis on which mates were chosen, and thereby increased the likelihood of couples ending an unhappy marriage (**Coontz, 2005**).

A GLOBAL VIEW

World Population: 7.6 Billion and Counting



Design Pics Inc/Alamy Stock Photo

As this feature box is being written on July 11, 2018, at 7:57 P.M., 7,635,277,683 people live on planet Earth. Is this a lot of people? Actually, all these people could fit into an area the size of Los Angeles if they squeezed together. So space is not really the problem. The real issue is one of resources: food, water, energy, and overall use of environmental resources. How can all these people feed themselves nutritious food, drink clean water, heat their homes, drive to work, and dispose of their wastes? This question is an important one, and many people suspect that Earth has already exceeded its carrying capacity.

The United States overuses Earth's resources, given the size

of its population. Americans use a higher proportion of natural resources and live less sustainably than people in any other country. Americans have a uniquely high standard of living and have come to expect that cheap food, clean water, and gasoline will be available to us whenever we want it. Now, unsurprisingly, other countries want this standard of living, too. But Earth would be in especially bad shape if everyone on Earth lived like an American.

Take energy, for example. Americans constitute 5 percent of the world's population, but they consume 24 percent of the energy. On average, one American uses as much energy as 2 Japanese, 6 Mexicans, 13 Chinese, 31 Indians, 128 Bangladeshis, 301 Tanzanians, and 370 Ethiopians (**Mindfully.org, 2015**). All the energy that Americans use pollutes the air, water, and soil. It also heats up the atmosphere. But China is right there with Americans, and in fact the Chinese have eclipsed Americans in the use of fossil fuels. The Chinese do, however, have almost five times the population of the United States, so, per person, they still use considerably less than do Americans.

So, what does this mean? Simply put, the example that Americans have set will be copied by other countries around the world. Can Earth support this many people if they live so unsustainably? How many people are we talking about? It's now 8:05 P.M., and Earth's count is up to 7,635,278,747. In other words, in just 8 minutes, Earth's population grew by over a thousand people.

Critical Thinking

> What do you think is the carrying capacity of Earth? If you think Earth has surpassed its carrying capacity, what do you propose be done about it? If you think that Earth has not surpassed its carrying capacity, when do you think that might happen, and with what effects?

A **comparative perspective** helps enlighten a current situation because it reveals alternative social arrangements and presents new ways to frame an issue or policy solution. A comparative perspective offers an opportunity for reflection. Nonetheless, this reflection doesn't always mean that we radically change our policies or ways of doing things, but instead, helps us understand,

culturally, why we do what we do. For example, some people are concerned about the "demise" of marriage and families: people marry later or not at all, people divorce and remarry, children are raised in stepfamilies, same-sex couples can now legally wed—all changes that will be discussed in **Chapter 10**. A comparative perspective can show us how marriages and families are constructed elsewhere. For example, in many parts of the world, an arranged marriage is the norm.

comparative perspective

A process to learn about other cultures and other historical periods to better understand social problems within one's own culture.

As another example, how can a comparative perspective help people understand the nature and role of adolescence in U.S. culture? This concern is an important one because it is well known that adolescents commit a disproportionate number of crimes, experience higher-than-average unemployment, and face a host of other social problems, such as teen pregnancy or drug use.

A comparative perspective shows that adolescence, as it is known today, is largely a new social construction, originating in the West in the late nineteenth century as a result of newly created child labor laws and the changing nature of the labor market (**Leeder, 2004**; **Mintz, 2004**). Until then, children's labor was needed on farms and even young teenagers were considered mini-adults. However, with urbanization and industrialization in the late nineteenth century, a movement arose to increase the protection of young people. Social reformers known as "child savers" were particularly interested in developing social programs that were age-based and targeted toward children. Compulsory education increased the length of time children spent in school until well into their teenage years. Adolescence became a new period of transition between childhood and adulthood, but without clear-cut norms about what to expect during this period. By the twentieth century, the concept of adolescence as a separate stage of life had taken hold, and it now represents a substantial component of popular culture segregated from adult-oriented culture. Unique clothing, music, and food are directly marketed toward this relatively new consumer group. Nonetheless, it is not completely clear what the developmental tasks of this age group are and how ado-

lescents can best serve the needs of society. Separating adolescents from adults, while giving them an unclear or unknown set of developmental tasks, has not necessarily served adolescents well. This may be part of the reason that adolescence and young adulthood are expanding, with large numbers of people living with their parents well into their mid- to late-twenties (**Cohn and Passel, 2018**).

How do other cultures construct this age period, and how do adolescents engage in society? How are these social constructions related to the level of technology or wealth in a society? A comparative perspective can shed light on our social problems and new ways to eliminate them.

What Do You Think?

Have you had the opportunity to travel to other cultures? If so, did you see anything that the United States could learn from?

Social Policy

1.6 Assess the social policy debates between conservatives and liberals.

Much of the research conducted by sociologists is designed to provide information to be used in formulating social policies as well as in evaluating existing policies and suggesting improvements and new directions. **Social policies** are formal procedures designed to remedy a social problem. Generally, they are designed by officials of government at the local, state, or federal level, but they can also be initiated by private citizens in voluntary associations, by corporations, and by nonprofit foundations.

social policies

Formal procedures designed to remedy a social problem; can be designed by officials of government at the local, state, or federal level or by private citizens in voluntary associations, by corporations, and by nonprofit foundations.

1.6.1 Social Policy Debates

There is generally a good deal of debate about social problems and any proposed social policy. Much of the debate consists of discussion and analysis of how well a proposed policy appears to address the problem. Such analysis tends to be considered technical in the sense that, although there is general agreement on the need to address the problem, the debate hinges on the adequacy of the proposed means to achieve the agreed-on ends. Increasingly, however, policy debates have become ideological rather than technical, and in the United States, such debates frequently pit conservatives against liberals.

Generally, conservatives believe in limited government, free markets, individual liberty, personal responsibility, and a strong national defense. They believe the role of government should be to provide people the freedom necessary to pursue their own goals. Conservative policies generally emphasize empowerment of the individual to solve social problems, and they usually seek to limit

the involvement of government in the solutions. Conservatives believe private firms, governed by the need to compete in markets and make profits, are the best type of organization for coping with most social problems.

In contrast, liberals tend to believe that government has a responsibility to address social problems. Liberals consider government action necessary to achieve equal opportunity and to protect civil liberties and human rights. Liberals are cautious of the dominance of the market (and, hence, the profit motive) and believe that it can be unfair and exploitive to certain groups in society. Therefore, the free market needs to be regulated to protect consumers, employees, and the environment, according to liberals. While liberals do not abdicate personal responsibility, they believe that the government has a responsibility to provide a structure that is fair to all.

Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the government's role in attempting to solve social problems has increased steadily, despite the ideological stands of various administrations. For example, America's role as a world military power, along with new problems of terrorism, has required the continual expenditure of public funds on military goods and services. These costs have increased dramatically with every war and every major change in military technology. Similarly, the fight against drug commerce has added greatly to the cost of maintaining the society's judicial and penal institutions. Every function of government has a similar history of escalating costs because of increases in the scale of the society or the scope of the problem.

1.6.2 Future Prospects

At this writing, the nation's voters have an increasingly ideological approach to social problems, sometimes at the expense of understanding and using empirical research. For example, public attitudes about climate change have become increasingly contentious (Funk and Kennedy, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2017). Despite near scientific consensus that the Earth's climate is changing rapidly due to the emissions of fossil fuels related to human use, 29 percent of adults believe that climate change is mostly caused by natural patterns in the Earth's environment (**Saad, 2017**). Even among young people who will experience the most severe effects during their lifetime of any group, only 57 percent agree that "global warming will seriously threaten one's way of life"

(Jones, 2014).[5] Furthermore, opinions about climate change are largely split along political party lines, with Republicans far more likely than Democrats to deny climate change or attribute it to natural patterns, consistent with their views towards government regulation and individual liberty (Brenan and Saad, 2018). Only 18 percent of Republicans say that they are "very concerned" about climate change or global warming as compared to 66 percent of Democrats (Norman, March 17, 2017).

5Jones, J. M. "In U.S., Most Do Not See Global Warming as Serious Threat," *Gallup* (March 13, 2014).

This conflict is typical of many current controversies over the best ways to handle social issues, with conservatives stressing private or market solutions and liberals calling for public or government actions. These conflicting approaches are discussed in the Social Policy sections that conclude each chapter of this text.

Climate change is one example of division between conservatives and liberals on important social problems. Many conservatives deny that the problem exists or suggest that any change is due to natural fluctuations in the Earth's temperature. The preponderance of scien-

Going Beyond Left and Right

Sociologists conduct research to provide critical information about social problems, including crime, social inequality, mental illness, racism, environmental degradation, and a host of other important issues. This information, gleaned from research, can then be used to formulate policies and to create programs to help solve social problems, or at least minimize their effects. This is the ideal. The reality, however, is more complicated. People often bring their own set of values and beliefs—which may have little to do with scientific facts—into play as they conceptualize a problem or think of solutions. In fact, the values and beliefs that contradict scientific evidence have even been given a nickname—"alternative facts." Sociology is a fascinating field because it uses empirical methods to collect and analyze real information about the issues that we all care about and about which we all have opinions. People feel strongly about social problems and their solutions. These feelings are increasingly becoming ideologically polarized.