

## CHAPTER 1

# The Sociology of Social Problems



## CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Define "social problem."
- Apply the concept of the sociological imagination.
- Compare the major sociological perspectives on social problems.
- Explain how the major types of sociological research are used to understand social problems.

**WOULD YOU LIKE TO LIVE IN AN AMERICA** where women are forbidden to vote or hold public office, most Americans face poverty in old age, and parents have to pay thousands of dollars for their child's education from first grade through high school? Things that many Americans take for granted are the results of great popular struggles against inequality and injustice. Progressive social change throughout history has involved some people recognizing that terrible conditions and unfair practices are not necessarily inevitable or preordained and then convincing others to join them in doing something about it.

In 2008 the United States was hit by an economic downturn so severe that many people lost their jobs and many homeowners found themselves "under water": their homes had dropped in value so drastically that they actually owed more than they were worth. In response, two popular protests arose, each gaining the support of millions of Americans: the conservative Tea Party movement and the liberal Occupy Wall Street movement. Most participants in the Tea Party movement, named after the American rebels who protested against a British tax on tea by tossing British tea into Boston harbor in 1773, believe harmful intervention by the federal government, including "bailout" programs for banks and corporations, is the main cause of serious social problems. In contrast, the Occupy Wall Street movement believes that the actions of the country's economic elite (the wealthiest one percent) are the real cause of major problems, which is why this is also referred to as the 99 Percent Movement. Ninety-nine Percenters believe that harmful policies, including – but not limited to – drastic reduction in taxes on the rich and allowing banks and big business to act in reckless ways without fear of punishment, result from control of government by wealthy people and powerful corporations. They claim that a strong government that really acts in the interests of most people is needed to create fairer laws and policies.

Both the Tea Party and Occupy movements had significant impacts. The Tea Party movement pulled the Republican Party further to the right and helped get many more conservative candidates Republican nominations to run for office. It also turned out large numbers of voters in key elections, such as the crucial 2010 midterm election discussed in Chapter 3, which resulted in far more Republican-controlled state legislatures and governorships and increased Republican members in the House of Representatives. The Occupy Movement propelled the issue of increasing economic inequality into the political spotlight and set the stage for the nearly successful effort of Vermont Senator and self-described democratic socialist Bernie Sanders to win the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016.

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**W**hat the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements have in common is the view that the cause of many serious social problems is not so much personal failings or choices but powerful social forces. In this sense, both groups are employing a perspective that sociologists call the "sociological imagination." This first chapter defines "social problems" and the sociological imagination, describes the different sociological perspectives, and explains the different methods used to conduct research into social problems in an attempt to find solutions.

## WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

A **social problem** is a condition or a type of behavior that many people believe is harmful. Some conditions clearly hurt people, such as lacking enough money to buy basic food, shelter, and clothing; being unable to find a job; or suffering from the effects of a polluted environment. However, the extent to which any of these or other conditions or behaviors becomes social problems is based not only on the reality of their existence but on the level of public concern. For example, extreme poverty existed in parts of the United States in the 1950s, but many Americans were totally unaware of the level of suffering it inflicted. In 1962, writer and social activist Michael Harrington published a compelling book about impoverished Americans, *The Other America*, which caught the attention of the entire nation, including President John F. Kennedy. The book became assigned reading in thousands of college courses from coast to coast. Soon poverty became widely viewed as a social problem, leading to the federal government's "war on poverty" and programs that many Americans rely on today, such as Medicaid (federal government health care for the poor), Medicare (government health care for those 65 or older), food stamps, and more comprehensive Social Security benefits. This illustrates that any social problem has two important components: its **objective element** and its **subjective element**. In this case the objective element is the reality of the conditions of poverty: the reality of insufficient access to food, health services, and education; and high rates of infant mortality, preventable diseases, and illiteracy. The subjective element of poverty is the level of public concern about these objective conditions, the desire to alleviate them, and the belief that this is possible.

The objective elements of a social problem may either be personally experienced or measured in some way. For example, you can determine how many people are unemployed, or go bankrupt because of inability to pay medical expenses. Interpreting how troubling these situations are in terms of deeply held conceptions of right and wrong is a subjective element that can be measured through public opinion surveys.

The process in the development of a social problem begins when someone (a claims maker) makes an argument (a **claim**) that a condition or behavior is harmful and tries to convince others why something must be done about it and what specific actions are needed (Best 2013). The **claims maker** may be an expert in a related field, someone with personal experience, or a social activist who tries to assemble evidence supporting a claim that a condition or behavior is a social problem. As a writer and social activist, Michael Harrington, the author of *The Other America*, is an example of the latter. The next step is gaining favorable coverage from the media. If this effort is successful, the public will react by coming to view the objective condition or behavior as a problem. Claims makers may also try to mobilize large numbers of people in a movement to work together to deal with the problem and force lawmakers to do something about it. The effectiveness of the actions taken by lawmakers can then be evaluated.

**social problem** A condition or a type of behavior that many people believe is harmful.

**objective element** Reality of the existence of a condition or behavior recognized as a social problem.

**subjective element** Level of public concern about a condition or behavior recognized as a social problem.

**claim** An argument that a condition or behavior is harmful.

**claims maker** An expert in a related field, someone with personal experience, or a social activist who tries to assemble evidence supporting a claim that a condition or behavior is a social problem.

## Social Movements: The Movement for Free Higher Education



*Protest against student debt*

Since 1970, college tuition in the United States has increased faster than the rate of inflation. During the same period, inflation-adjusted household income has risen very little except for the upper ten percent of the population. The average tuition and fees in 2016 dollars for public four-year colleges and for private nonprofit four-year colleges more than tripled between the 1971–1972 and 2016–2017 academic years. (College Board 2017). Student loan debt for those graduating in 2016 averaged \$37,172 and by 2017 an estimated forty-four million Americans had student loan debt (Picchi 2016; Student Loan Hero 2017).

In comparison, after the German state of Lower Saxony ended tuition fees in October of 2014, all public higher education in Germany became tuition free. This was achieved through a sustained student movement advocating that education is a basic human right necessary to ensure equality of opportunity. Every German state will now fund at least one undergraduate degree and a consecutive master's degree (Hermanns 2014). The German free higher education movement began in 1999 in response to several German states introducing college tuition fees. Some two hundred student unions, political parties, labor unions, and other groups created the Alliance Against Tuition Fees. Student protests all over Germany forced an end to the fees.

Many Americans believe that tuition-free universities and colleges can also be achieved in the United States. Like the German activists, they claim this would vastly increase equality of opportunity. Heather Gautney, a

sociologist at Fordham University, and Adolph Reed, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, have been national supporters of the U.S. free higher education campaign. The movement calls for an end to tuition for persons who meet admission requirements at all four-year or two-year public institutions of higher learning (Gautney and Reed 2015; Reed 2005; Reed and Gautney 2015). This would ensure that students from working-class and middle-class families have access to college educations. Government funding of free tuition and fees is estimated to cost about one percent or less of the federal budget.

As a step toward universal free higher education, in his January 20, 2015, State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama proposed two years of free community college education throughout the nation for persons having at least a 2.5 grade point average (LoBianco 2015). Supporters asserted that this program would provide students with skills necessary for high-technology and advanced manufacturing jobs. Other students aiming for four-year degrees would be helped by earning two years of college credits free at a community college, which they could then transfer to a four-year institution. In lower-income and working-class neighborhoods two years of free community college has the potential of making going to college the new norm (Bryant 2015). But could such a revolutionary measure actually succeed in the face of conservative opposition? Is a massive youth movement for free higher education possible in the United States, where the dominant culture has fostered a psychological acceptance of the unearned privilege of children from affluent families? During the 2016 presidential campaign, one of the major candidates, Bernie Sanders, who enjoyed overwhelming support among Democratic voters under the age of thirty, called for free public college education for all Americans.

### What are your thoughts?

Do you think that college education should be free to qualified persons? How could this be achieved in the United States?

## The Social Context of Social Problems

To learn about social problems, how they develop, and how people work together to deal with them, it is important to understand their context: the essential features of the societies in which they arise. These include the basic components of social structure and culture.

**Social structure** is the expression for relatively stable patterns of social behavior and relationships among people. It means how a society is organized. A **social institution** is a continuing pattern of social relationships intended to fulfill people's basic needs and aspirations and carry out functions essential to the operation of society. The most important institutions include the family, education, the economy, politics and government, health care, organized religion, and the communications media. Within these broad institutions, others exist to carry out specialized functions, such as the criminal justice system within government. Conditions generated by institutions may become social problems. For example, the creation of laws by the government that unfairly favor some people over others, such as tax laws that benefit the wealthy over the middle class, may come to be viewed as a social problem. A major aspect of social structure is **social stratification**, which refers to inequality among people with regard to important social factors including access to education, income, property, power, and prestige. For example, a child born into a family in the wealthiest one percent of the population is likely to be educated in private high schools where tuition and fees often equal or exceed the cost of attending America's top universities. Social stratification can be a major source of social problems if inequality of access becomes too great. Whereas social structure refers to how society is organized, **culture** refers to the knowledge, ways of thinking, shared understandings of behavior, and physical objects that characterize a people's way of life. The elements of culture particularly important for understanding social problems are values, norms, beliefs, and symbols. *Values*, which define what is good, desirable, beautiful, and worth working for, are the goals that culture gives people to strive to achieve in life and, in so doing, feel fulfilled and good about themselves. People's values can influence whether they view specific conditions or behaviors as social problems. For example, since most Americans share the value of equality of opportunity they tend to view poverty, which limits access to educational opportunity, as a social problem.

Just as culture provides values for people to strive for, it also provides guidelines for how to behave in society to achieve and maintain them. *Norms* are shared rules for behavior. The mildest norms, called *folkways*, are general expectations for behavior in particular social situations, like shaking hands when being introduced to someone new. *Mores* are stronger, more widely observed norms with greater moral significance, such as respectful behavior at a religious service. *Laws* are rules for behavior enforced by government. While laws are often also mores, this is not always the case. The National Prohibition Act of 1919 (Volstead Act), which violated the alcohol consumption folkways of many people in the United States by prohibiting the sale of alcoholic beverages, was enacted to help solve social problems such as domestic violence, child abuse, and homicide; these crimes were believed to be committed more often by drunken men. Making the sale of alcohol a crime appeared

**social structure** Relatively stable patterns of social behavior and relationships among people.

**social institution** A continuing pattern of social relationships intended to fulfill people's basic needs and aspirations and carry out functions essential to the operation of society.

**social stratification** Inequality among people with regard to important social factors including access to education, income, property, power, and prestige.

**culture** The knowledge, ways of thinking, shared understandings of behavior, and physical objects that characterize a people's way of life.

to worsen other social problems, however. Organized crime surged as groups illegally produced or imported and sold alcoholic beverages to the enormous American market. Corruption increased tremendously, as gangsters used their huge profits to bribe police officers, judges, and government officials, who often had no personal moral opposition to alcohol. As this example illustrates, laws intended to reduce social problems can in fact contribute to or escalate harmful social conditions. Another example can be seen in the effects of laws enacted between 1980 and 2007 to grow the economy more rapidly, which greatly reduced financial regulations; these measures vastly increased economic inequality and contributed to the 2008 economic recession that caused the rise of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements.

*Beliefs* are another important element of culture. They are the ideas people have about what is true and how things should be. This includes why certain events occur or conditions exist. Beliefs may be based on experience or values and norms, or on what is learned from family, friends, school, recognized experts, or communication media like TV or the Internet. Consider global climate change. Beliefs affect whether someone thinks it actually exists, whether it is a problem, and whether people or government can do anything about it. A *symbol* is anything, including words, objects, or images, which represents something beyond itself. A symbol conveys a meaning to people. The logo of a profitable oil corporation may bring feelings of well-being to its executives and shareholders but provoke hostility from those who blame it for environmental pollution. The emotions elicited by a particular symbol can play a significant role in the mobilization of people to respond to a social problem.

Values, norms, beliefs, and symbols are not necessarily the same for every member of a particular culture. A **subculture** refers to a specific set of values, norms, beliefs, symbols, and behaviors shared by a group of people unique enough to significantly distinguish them from the other members of a culture. Subcultures can be based on factors such as occupation, wealth, religion, age, region, ethnicity, or patterns of recreation. For example, Wall Street financial executives tend to share a set of values and norms somewhat different from members of labor unions such as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which includes truck drivers, warehouse workers, locomotive engineers, and airline pilots. Among religious groups in the United States, the evangelical Protestant subculture is more socially conservative and reliant on literal interpretations of the Bible than other Protestant churches such as the Methodists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians.

## Opposing Explanations for Social Problems

The elements of social structure and culture just described can have a powerful influence on which conditions or patterns of behavior are recognized as social problems and what people decide to do about them. For example, growing wealth inequality may worry middle- and working-class people, who believe that economic and political power is being concentrated in the hands of a few. In contrast, those in the upper class may view inequality as a necessary byproduct of the economic growth that is beneficial to all members of society.

**subculture** A specific set of values, norms, beliefs, symbols, and behaviors shared by a group of people unique enough to significantly distinguish them from the other members of a culture.

Another example of opposing beliefs is the relationship between guns and crime. Many believe that easy access to handguns causes violent crimes such as homicide, but many others view gun ownership as a solution to crime. The latter point of view gained support after a mass murder in Killeen, Texas, in 1991; a man drove his pickup truck through the front window of a restaurant and proceeded to shoot and kill twenty-three people, resulting in the most lethal shooting rampage in the United States at that time. Dr. Suzanna Hupp, a chiropractor who was having lunch with her parents, had left her handgun in her car in obedience to Texas law; she survived, but both of her parents were killed. Believing she could have stopped the killings if she had taken her gun into the restaurant, Hupp campaigned in Texas and throughout the country for the passage of laws that would permit citizens with no criminal records to carry guns. Texas passed such a law in 1995, and a number of other states followed suit. Hundreds of thousands more people now carry guns legally, and many believe this change in law has helped deter crime. Others feel that more gun carrying increases the risk that arguments or incidents such as road rage will lead to shootings that otherwise would not happen (Donohue, Aneja, and Weber 2017; Ewing 2017).

## Special Topics: What Are Today's Greatest Social Problems?

What are the most serious problems facing society? Two polls of thirty-six thousand individuals in twenty-three countries on six continents conducted by the British Broadcasting Company identified the following as major social problems (BBC 2010, 2011):

- extreme poverty
- unemployment
- corruption
- crime
- pollution
- the costs of food and energy
- human rights abuses
- war
- terrorism
- climate change

Views on which problems were the most serious, however, varied widely around the globe. Residents of India, Nigeria, and Turkey were especially worried about corruption. In China and Russia, the greatest concern was the cost of food and energy. In Mexico, Brazil, and Ecuador, crime and violence were seen as the greatest problems.

In 2017, the United Nations identified these same problems along with additional concerns (United Nations 2017a): ensuring access to clean water, enhancing the rights and opportunities of women and children, protecting refugees fleeing war and other threats, and safeguarding and promoting democracy around the world.

### What are your thoughts?

Let's start by looking a little closer to home. What do you think are the seven most important social problems in the United States today? Rank them beginning with the most serious. Record your answers in the blanks and then compare your choices to those in the table below.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_

(continued)

## Special Topics (continued)

**TABLE 1.1** | Results of Gallup National Survey: Most Important Problems (March 2017)

- |  |
|--|
| 1) Dissatisfaction with government/Poor leadership |
| 2) Immigration/Illegal aliens                      |
| 3) Unemployment/jobs                               |
| 4) The economy in general                          |
| 5) Healthcare                                      |
| 6) Unifying the country                            |
| 7) Race relations/Racism                           |
| 8) Education                                       |
| 9) National security                               |
| 10) Federal budget deficit/Federal debt            |

Source: Gallup 2017.

## USING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION TO ADDRESS SOCIAL PROBLEMS

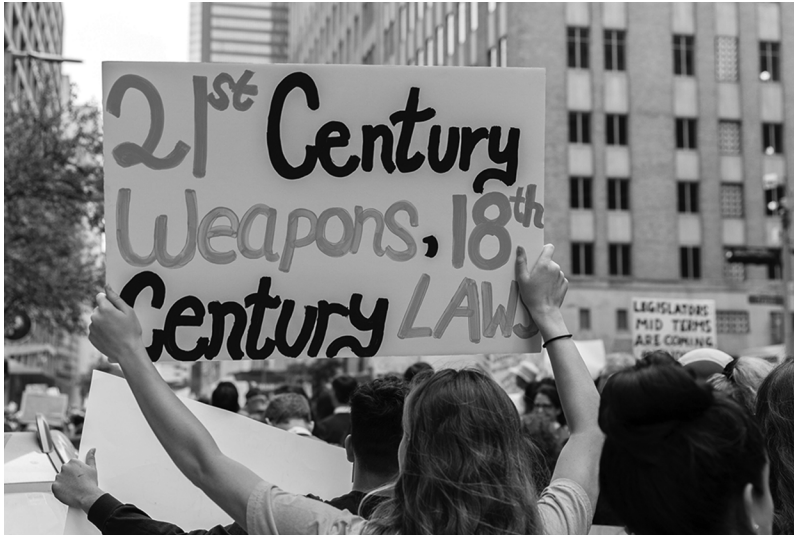
One of sociology's greatest tools for understanding and analyzing social problems is the sociological imagination. As described by legendary American sociologist C. Wright Mills, the **sociological imagination** is the ability to relate the most personal elements and problems (what Mills called “personal troubles”) of an individual's life to social forces and the flow of history. It helps us understand how our experiences, feelings, thoughts, and actions, as well as those of other people, are affected by the structure of society, culture, and social change (Mills 1959:6–7). A personal problem becomes a social problem (what Mills called a “public issue”) when society comes to view its cause as a result of social forces rather than personal characteristics.

A sociological analysis of the development of the gang problem in Los Angeles provides an excellent application of the sociological

### **sociological imagination**

The ability to relate the most personal elements and problems of an individual's life to social forces and the flow of history.





*Demonstration in favor of more effective gun laws and gun law enforcement*

imagination to a social problem. During and following World War II, Los Angeles experienced a huge industrial boom as major corporations established or expanded factories there, including automobile manufacturers. Firms recruited thousands of African Americans for well-paying manufacturing jobs, who then purchased homes and entered the middle class. The large majority of African-American children were born into two-parent families. However, in the 1960s the manufacturing plants began to move out of Los Angeles.

As advancing technology eliminated some industrial jobs, companies pulled up stakes to locate their plants in countries where they could increase their profits by paying much lower wages. The workers who lost their jobs generally did not receive training or assistance to help them develop new skills. In a short time, the Los Angeles African American middle class was decimated; the income enabling family support disappeared with the factories. More and more children began growing up in single-parent households lacking a stable male role model. As economic opportunity declined and family structure weakened, membership in new criminal youth gangs surged. Two of the most powerful gangs, the Bloods and the Crips, were founded in 1970 (Peralta 2009). The gangs provided status, a family-type environment complete with older male role models, and economic opportunities through drug trafficking. In the 1980s and 1990s, homicide rates in Los Angeles reached record levels as young members of rival gangs killed each other.

Someone watching the news coverage of gang violence in Los Angeles might conclude that an inherent immorality of African American young people caused the gang violence and drug dealing. Applying the sociological imagination allows you to see a more accurate picture: the social origins of the violent behavior of gang members. The gang youth were often the children or grandchildren of perfectly

*Shut-down factory*

law-abiding citizens. It was the change in economic and social conditions that created a generation with different attitudes and patterns of behavior. In identifying the underlying social causes of criminal youth gangs, sociological analysis also points to potential social solutions to this social problem. Perhaps government policy should prevent companies from moving manufacturing to other countries or provide incentives to move plants back to areas in the United States where unemployment levels are high. The sociological imagination allows identification of such measures as policies that could help solve the youth gang problem.

## SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS

When you apply the sociological imagination, you look for links between personal characteristics and experiences, and social forces. However, a complete understanding of the nature of those social forces requires an understanding of the nature of society itself. Sociologists have developed three major conceptual frameworks to describe how society works: the structural-functional, conflict, and symbolic-interactionist perspectives. These three perspectives serve as general frameworks on which to build distinct **theories** or explanations for the existence of particular social conditions or patterns of behavior. These approaches can be presented as mutually exclusive conceptions of society, but the most accurate and productive approach is to view them as complementary: Each one identifies important social processes that may be more or less relevant to a particular situation. In addition, each theoretical perspective suggests how social problems may develop and what can be done to address them.

**theory** An explanation for the existence of particular social conditions or patterns of behavior.

## Structural-Functional Perspective

The **structural-functional perspective**, also referred to as structural functionalism, is a conceptual framework that views society as a system of interdependent parts carrying out functions crucial to the well-being of the other parts and the system as a whole. For example, the structural-functional point of view considers the institution of the family to have the primary responsibility for maintaining the physical and emotional well-being of children, socializing them, and teaching them basic morality and how to treat other people with respect. The educational system has the function of providing the knowledge and skills for people to become productive participants in the economy. The economy combines people's knowledge and talents with technology and resources to produce goods and services, and the political system maintains order and defends society against threats. Functionalists note that institutions can have both intended and publicly recognized functions called **manifest functions**, as well as other equally real but unintended and often not well-understood functions referred to as **latent functions**. For example, the manifest function of elementary school is to educate children and provide them with a basic foundation for more advanced learning. It also has the real latent functions of supervising and protecting young children while their parents and/or guardians are at work. The structural-functional perspective provides three major approaches to explaining the development of social problems: social pathology, social disorganization, and social dysfunction.

**Social Pathology** The early pioneers of structural functionalism, Frenchmen August Comte (Coser 1977) and Emile Durkheim (1892) and the Englishman Herbert Spencer (Turner, Beeghly, and Powers 2006), viewed society as analogous to a living organism that can be healthy, evolve to a higher state, or become ill (suffer from a disease). This approach is referred to as **social pathology**. From this point of view society becomes sick and plagued with harmful conditions for several possible reasons. One is the failure to adequately teach children the cultural values and norms necessary to fit in with and abide by the rules of society. This could result from the breakdown of the family or the educational system, or the weakening of religion leading to other institutions being unable to adequately carry out their functions. Other events that might have such effects could be war or epidemics that drastically reduce the size of a society's healthy population and workforce and drain its resources.

Inspired by ideas of biological evolutionists such as Charles Darwin and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Spencer argued that the presence of too many morally or physically defective people could prevent a society from evolving to a higher state. Spencer created the expression "survival of the fittest" to represent his belief that people and societies were more likely to evolve if each individual enjoyed or suffered the consequences of his or her abilities and actions. The most "fit" would survive and prosper. Consistent with this view, he was generally against government intervention in society to aid the weak or poor or to redistribute income or resources. Spencer's view of society, which became known as "social Darwinism," provided supposedly scientific rationalizations for the

**structural-functional perspective** A conceptual framework that views society as a system of interdependent parts carrying out functions crucial to the well-being of the other parts and the system as a whole.

**manifest functions** Intended and publicly recognized functions.

**latent functions** Unintended and often hidden or not well-understood functions.

**social pathology** A structural-functional perspective that likens society to a living organism that can be healthy, evolve to a higher state, or become ill.

views of some European leaders who believed that their societies were inherently superior and had the right to dominate over nonwhite peoples. It also supported local politicians in their efforts to oppose social welfare systems, which would help “unfit” people survive and interfere with the process of evolution.

**Social Disorganization** A second functionalist explanation for social problems emerged from the work of sociologists at the University of Chicago, including Ernest Burgess and Robert Park. Observing the massive influx of immigrants from rural areas and other countries who arrived to work in the surging industrial economy, these social scientists concluded that social change that occurs too quickly causes social disorganization, the disruption of the functioning of social institutions. Schools were unprepared for the huge flood of children, good housing was scarce, and the cultural composition of neighborhoods changed rapidly and often kept changing. Many people became disillusioned when their norms did not fit with urban life or help them achieve their goals. This situation, being without meaningful or useful norms, is called **anomie**. Family life suffered and crime soared. Functionalist Robert Merton (1957) developed a theory about crime as a social problem based on the concepts of social disorganization and anomie. He claimed that because the United States had a highly materialist culture but very unequal access to legitimate opportunities such as education and jobs, those without opportunities become highly frustrated. Many of them respond by “innovating,” creating illegal patterns of behavior to obtain the materialistic values of their culture unachievable by legitimate means.

**social disorganization** A structural-functional perspective that sees problems being caused by social change that occurs too quickly, or anything else that disrupts the functioning of social institutions.

**anomie** State of lacking meaningful or useful norms (also referred to as normlessness).

**social dysfunction** A structural-functional perspective asserting that harmful conditions may be created by the positive functions of social institutions.

**conflict perspective** A conceptual approach that views society as characterized by inequalities that advantage some groups and disadvantage others, leading to conflict and the potential for social change.

**Social Dysfunction** Robert Merton described another cause of social problems: **social dysfunction**. According to this approach, the positive functions of social institutions may simultaneously create harmful (dysfunctional) conditions. For example, improvements in technology make an economic system more productive (a positive function) but may eliminate jobs and increase unemployment and poverty; these dysfunctions can disrupt or degrade the functioning of the overall society. Similarly, the use of certain energy resources, such as coal, to provide electrical power may cause environmental damage. Society must continuously be on the lookout for dysfunctions caused by its social institutions.

## Conflict Perspective

The **conflict perspective** is a conceptual approach that views society as characterized by inequalities that advantage some groups and disadvantage others, leading to conflict and the potential for social change. In contrast to the structural-functional perspective, which implies that change is generally gradual except for the occasional impact of a breakthrough scientific discovery or technological innovation, advocates of the conflict approach argue that, throughout history, social change has often been rapid and sweeping. They view social change as the product of social conflict such as that experienced in the American, French, Russian, Chinese, and Arab Spring revolutions, in which large mobilized masses of the population broke the chains of power and coercion that held the

old society together. The basis of conflict ranges from inequalities based on economic class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or other factors to differences of opinion on issues such as abortion or gun ownership.

The conflict perspective emerged from the work of the German social theorist Karl Marx (Marx 1867; Marx and Engels 1848). Marx's nineteenth-century analysis of societies throughout history led him to promote the idea that society is the product of the use of technology to obtain or produce the necessities of life and improve living conditions. As technology and the economy change over time, so does the structure and culture of society. Marx focused on the shift from agricultural economies to the industrial economies shaped by advancing technology and capitalist investments. He argued that in all societies those who dominate the economy also dominate the political system as well as other major institutions, and try to shape the institutions and culture to protect their interests.

According to Marx, as those at the top of a capitalist society (the *bourgeoisie*) expand their wealth and power, inequality grows to a level unbearable for the working-class majority of the population (the *proletariat*) because of deteriorating living standards. Eventually the proletariat launch a rebellion to overthrow the bourgeoisie. The goal of a proletarian revolution is the establishment of a new economic and social system called *socialism*, in which major resources, big businesses, and large industries are collectively owned, and income and opportunities are distributed more equally. Obviously, no sweeping transformation from capitalism to socialism has occurred in the technologically advanced societies, but Marx's ideas have inspired several modern forms of the conflict approach.

**Economic-Conflict Perspective** The **economic-conflict perspective** focuses on factors such as poverty, the concentration of power in the hands of the wealthy, and the profit motive of capitalist culture as major causes of social problems. The capitalist system's pursuit of profits at the expense of human welfare is the ultimate cause of harmful economic conditions and the social problems that arise from them. These social problems include street and white-collar crime, environmental pollution, political corruption, war, and many others. According to this view, the solution to social problems lies in efforts by the majority to develop a more humane economic system; replacing an intensely profit driven system should greatly reduce inequality and eliminate poverty.

**Racial/Ethnic-Conflict Perspective** The **racial/ethnic-conflict perspective** emphasizes that inequality and conflict are not only rooted in economic factors; they can also result from discrimination against people on the basis of skin color or ethnic heritage. The settlers of the colonies that became the United States, primarily white Protestants from Britain and other northern European countries, established a culture that ranked themselves on top, with all other racial and religious groups below. This had a dramatic influence on political rights and economic opportunities. Slavery was the worst example, but following the end of slavery after the Civil War, racism and cultural prejudice continued to flourish, limiting access to jobs and education, along with the right

**economic-conflict perspective** A conflict perspective that focuses on factors such as poverty, the concentration of power in the hands of the wealthy, and the profit motive of capitalist culture as major causes of social problems.

**racial/ethnic-conflict perspective** A conflict perspective that focuses on discrimination based on skin color or ethnic heritage as the cause of social problems.

to vote and a positive social identity. Despite massive struggles against racism and ethnic prejudice, including the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, many Americans still discriminate on the basis of race and/or ethnicity. This disadvantages certain groups, increasing their risk of being poor and their probability of engagement in and victimization by crime.

**Feminist-Conflict Perspective** The **feminist-conflict perspective** focuses on gender inequality. Gender was neglected by early sociologists, whose studies were dominated by the male point of view. Feminist scholars note that functionalists like Talcott Parsons adopted the position that women's biology (the ability to bear children) determined their role in society, limiting them to child-rearing and caring for the household. However, they viewed the original conflict perspective as inadequate because it paid too little attention to the oppression of women inherent in *patriarchy*, the male dominated social system characteristic of almost all societies. Feminists view patriarchy as the cause of many social problems, including physical and sexual violence against women, gender discrimination, and the high female poverty rate. Feminist sociologists make women the central focus of sociological analysis. Gender inequality is not due to women's "nature." It is instead the product of self-serving patriarchal beliefs that men created about women's "appropriate" social roles, capabilities, and limitations. Feminist theorists believe research on social problems should focus on improvements to society, especially efforts to eliminate inequality between men and women in all areas of life.

**feminist-conflict perspective** A conflict perspective that focuses on gender inequality as the cause of social problems.

**false consciousness** A lack of understanding about the existence or cause of a harmful condition or behavior.

**true consciousness** Awareness of the existence and real cause of a harmful condition or behavior and that this harmful condition or behavior can be eliminated if people work together.

**symbolic-interactionist perspective** A sociological perspective that focuses on the analysis of person-to-person interaction and the actual meanings people give to their experiences and environments.

**False and True Consciousness in the Conflict Perspective** All conflict theories are concerned with the importance of moving people away from a state of **false consciousness**, a lack of understanding about the existence or cause of a harmful condition or behavior. The aim is to replace false consciousness with **true consciousness** of the existence and cause of a harmful condition or behavior. (Marx in his theory called true consciousness *class consciousness*, the awareness of real economic interests and how they are affected by existing social arrangements.) According to the conflict perspective, those who benefit from existing social arrangements promote false consciousness in those they dominate and exploit. For example, in the past governing elites in many societies fostered cultural beliefs and religious doctrines that made workers, slaves, and/or women believe that their limited opportunities were due to their own inferiority or to the will of their Creator. Social activists attempt to create true consciousness by making people aware of harmful conditions and by promoting the idea that these conditions can be eliminated if people work together.

## Symbolic-Interactionist Perspective

Both the structural-functional and conflict approaches are macrosociological in that they analyze society on a large scale, focusing on social institutions and the relationships of population groups to those institutions. The **symbolic-interactionist perspective** (also called symbolic

interactionism), in comparison, is a microsociological approach that focuses on the analysis of person-to-person interaction and the actual meanings people give to their experiences and environments. This perspective attempts to explain the origin of certain harmful conditions or behaviors at a more personal level. Adopting the learning theory of crime developed by the famous criminologist Edwin Sutherland, symbolic interactionists believe that many lawbreakers, from professional burglars to corporate white-collar criminals, become criminals by learning certain attitudes and skills from others.

According to symbolic interactionism, society is continually constructed through social interaction. American pioneers of this perspective Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead (Turner, Beeghly, and Powers 2006) believed that a person's sense of self and personality are not simply the outgrowth of genetic makeup. Rather, the self is continuously constructed through ongoing human interaction. Cooley called this concept the *looking glass self*. People's understanding of their own identity, as well as traits such as values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior toward others, all originate from how they think others perceive them and what they expect of them.

Two other sociologists, W. I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas (1928:572), developed an important contribution to symbolic interactionism and the study of social problems called the Thomas theorem. According to the Thomas theorem, if situations are defined as real, their consequences are real. In other words, people's subjective interpretations of reality, rather than objective reality, determine how they behave. Consider the aforementioned belief held that women's biology naturally limits their capabilities and confines them to childrearing and taking care of household chores. This belief prevented many men and women from recognizing women's true capabilities and that an oppressive social system, not nature, was limiting women's potential for achievement. Symbolic interactionism identifies why people learn to ignore certain conditions or behaviors and define them as "normal," or come to see them as social problems.

## The Benefit of a Combined Perspective

Each of the three major perspectives has both important insights and limitations that suggest they might be best used in combination. The structural-functional perspective fits with what appear to be the normal patterns of interdependency that people experience every day, and the concepts of social disorganization and social dysfunction are appealing explanations for harmful conditions. It views inequality as created by the superior abilities and efforts of individuals functioning within the social system. The structural-functional perspective, however, tends to ignore excessive inequalities and divisions based on factors such as class, race, and gender, as well as the roles of coercion, exploitation, oppression, and discrimination, assuming that the organization of society is inherently functional. In addition, it neglects the importance of privileged status in protecting and increasing advantages and power.

The conflict perspective, in contrast, is criticized for overlooking evidence that large sectors of society seem to function relatively

smoothly for extended periods of time, providing valuable goods and services through a process of exchange and interdependency. It is also criticized for exaggerating the degree of division and conflict in society to levels that are unrealistic, except during periods of exceptional conflict. However, the conflict approach does direct attention to how the wealthy can dominate government and shape laws to benefit them and allow them to exert great influence over the mass media and other institutions that influence the masses. The conflict perspective appears better suited than the structural-functional perspective to explaining the development of certain objective conditions, such as economic inequality and environmental pollution, that come to be viewed as social problems. Although the structural-functional approach provides a broad overview of how society functions, the conflict perspective is better at uncovering how particular social arrangements benefit certain groups more than others.

Symbolic-interactionism focuses on how people construct their understandings of society through communication. Thus, it is especially useful in understanding how a particular condition or behavior comes to be viewed as a social problem. The symbolic-interactionist perspective emphasizes the microsociological processes of learning and interaction, in comparison to the structural-functional and conflict macrosociological approaches that focus mainly on social structure. But symbolic-interactionism has been criticized for not paying enough attention to the influence of social structures on people's lives and learning experiences. For example, many young people become involved in certain criminal behaviors like drug dealing or burglary because they learn them from others, but having these learning experiences is much more likely to happen to young people who live in high-poverty areas where decent-paying jobs are scarce. Like the conflict perspective, symbolic-interactionism stresses the importance of exploring who wants people to believe a particular social condition or behavior is not a problem, who wants them to believe it is, and what they are attempting to accomplish.

## SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS

In modern societies when a condition or a behavior becomes widely viewed as a social problem, it is likely to become the subject of scientific research in order to develop a better understanding of the problem, its cause, and potential solutions. Social activists may cite research findings to bolster their points of view. Politicians and organizations often rely on research to guide them in formulating policies and allocating resources to deal with social problems. Ideally, everyone should understand the essential features and basic types of social research and how to evaluate the significance and validity of research findings.

The research process begins with a **research question**, the topic that the researcher wants to investigate (Babbie 2016; Neuman 2011). For example, a researcher concerned with the problem of millions of Americans lacking health insurance might decide to investigate how

**research question** The topic that the researcher wants to investigate.



other wealthy, technologically advanced nations provide universal health care coverage for their citizens. Or a researcher concerned with the unemployment problem might examine how effective community colleges are in providing new skills for laid-off workers that actually result in getting jobs. A second step is to learn what is known about the topic from previous research. This is called the **literature review**. This can help the researcher decide what type of research to conduct and what further aspects her or his research will involve.

Depending on the research question and what previous research has revealed about the topic, a study may be exploratory, descriptive, explanatory, or applied. An *exploratory study* is useful as a starting point when there is little or no prior research on the issue. It can provide guidance for the design of later studies. For example, if a new pattern of behavior develops, such as prostitution among teenagers from middle-class families, a researcher might initially explore the topic by interviewing some of the young people and law enforcement officers involved. This effort could lead to the identification of key groups involved in the activity and an improved understanding that guides the researcher in developing descriptive studies. *Descriptive studies* gather detailed observations on the characteristics of the condition or behavior that exploratory or past research indicates are important to examine. If sufficient descriptive material is available, a sociologist might conduct an *explanatory study* that attempts to explain why a particular social condition or pattern of behavior exists. For example, if a series of descriptive studies finds that most of the members of juvenile gangs are high-school dropouts, a sociologist might develop a theory that poor academic performance causes young people to join gangs.

In the gang example, academic performance and gang membership are referred to as variables. A **variable** is anything that can have two or more values and can be measured in some way. When you decide how to measure a variable, you are operationalizing it. For example, let's consider the theory that poor academic performance causes young people to join gangs. The variable for academic performance could be operationalized as a student's grade point average. This variable is called the **independent variable**. An independent variable is the one that the theory says determines the value of another variable called the **dependent variable**. In our example, gang membership is the dependent variable. Here it could be operationalized simply as "joined" or "did not join." An explanatory study involves testing a **hypothesis**. A hypothesis is a prediction derived from a theory about how one variable is related to another variable. If the hypothesis is found to be true, then the theory receives support. Say that a sociologist tests the hypothesis that young people join gangs after receiving poor grades. The researcher is gathering information not only to see if there is a link between a low grade point average and joining a gang but to determine which comes first. If the study finds that a person joins a gang *after* getting a low grade point average, the hypothesis is confirmed. But if the study finds that young people with high grade point averages join gangs and *then* their grade point averages go down, the hypothesis is not confirmed.

If repeated studies continue to confirm a theory, then some type of intervention might be developed. For example, if subsequent studies

**literature review** A researcher's review of previous research on her or his topic of interest.

**variable** Anything that can have two or more values and can be measured in some way.

**independent variable** The variable that a theory says determines the value of another variable.

**dependent variable** The variable whose value is determined by the independent variable.

**hypothesis** A prediction derived from a theory about how one variable is related to another variable.



Responding to a multiple-choice question on a questionnaire survey

**applied research** (also called evaluation research) Testing the effectiveness of any program, strategy, or policy intended to affect society.

**survey research** A type of research that involves asking people questions about a topic.

**sample** The persons chosen for a study to represent a larger population you want to learn about.

**experiment** The type of research in which the independent variable is manipulated to see if this is followed by the predicted change in the dependent variable while controlling for other factors thought to affect the dependent variable.

confirm that young people's poor school performance is followed by joining gangs, a special tutoring program might be created to assist children whose grades begin to deteriorate. Testing the effectiveness of such a program or any strategy or policy intended to affect society is called **applied research**.

## Survey Research

Once you have decided on your research question and whether your study is explor-

atory, descriptive, explanatory, or applied, you need to select your research method. **Survey research**, one of the most widely used sociological research methods, involves asking people questions about a topic. The survey approach includes personal interviews and questionnaire surveys. The *personal interview* is a relatively intimate form of survey research in which the interviewer meets face-to-face or over the telephone or similar electronic devices with research participants to ask questions about a topic. The interactive nature of the interview allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions to obtain an in-depth understanding of the respondent's thoughts and feelings about a subject, but interviews are relatively time consuming, expensive to conduct, and lack anonymity. Respondents may be unwilling to give honest verbal answers to certain questions. Relatively brief personal interviews, typically conducted by phone leading up to a major election to gauge support for candidates or issues on the ballot, may be conducted by news agencies, universities, or other institutions to inform the public, or by partisan political groups or consulting firms to help them advise their candidates or groups.

*Questionnaire surveys* are a relatively quick and inexpensive way to gather a lot of information from a lot of people. Questionnaires may be mailed, passed out in person, or sent electronically. Since they are anonymous and can be filled out in private, participants are more likely to give honest responses than in face-to-face interviews. On the other hand, questionnaires often provide more superficial information than well-constructed interviews, and the response rate is low. When conducting personal interviews or questionnaire surveys, you must make sure that the people in the **sample** (the persons chosen for a study to represent a larger population about which you want to learn) have been selected in such a way that they are representative of the population that interests you. For example, say that you would like to know the opinions of nurses throughout the United States about access to affordable health care. Since it's impractical to question hundreds of thousands of nurses, you would randomly select a sample of nurses to interview.

## Experiments

The **experiment** is a form of research especially useful for testing for a cause-and-effect relationship between variables. The independent

variable is manipulated while other factors thought to affect the dependent variable are controlled. If manipulation of the independent variable is followed by the predicted change in the dependent variable, there is evidence of a causal relationship. In 2010 George Mason University professor David Weisburd was awarded the Stockholm Prize in Criminology for his experiments showing that concentrating police patrols in high-crime areas did not just shift criminal behavior to other locations but actually reduced it (Greif 2010). In one crucial experiment in a large Midwestern city, 110 high-crime city blocks or crime “hot spots” were identified. The hot spots were randomly assigned either to the *experimental (treatment) condition* (concentrating police patrols) or to the *control or untreated condition* (not concentrating police patrols) (Weisburd 2005). Preventive police patrols were two to three times more frequent in the blocks in the experimental condition than in the blocks in the control condition. The results showed a decrease in crime in the blocks with heightened police patrols compared to those with the standard number of police patrols.

One potential limitation of experiments is that the more tightly the researcher controls the elements of the experiment, the more unrealistic the experimental condition may become, which decreases the relevance of the findings to life outside the experimental setting.

## Field Research

**Field research**, often called *ethnography*, involves gathering data on assumed natural behavior in the field, the real-world setting. This involves careful observation and accurate recording of people’s behavior and the meanings and explanations they give to their own actions. This may be accomplished by taking plentiful notes while making the observations or from memory following a period of observations or by recording observations electronically. The researcher may simply observe people’s behavior. Or she or he may actually participate in their activities and possibly form a long-term relationship with the people whose behavior she or he is observing. This second option is called **participant observation**. Mitchell Duneier’s (2000) *Sidewalk* is an important participant observer study. In this five-year effort the author observed, interviewed, and worked as an assistant for poor sidewalk book and other merchandise vendors, many of them homeless persons, and sold magazines himself on three New York City blocks. Duneier’s research revealed the struggles and strategies of these individuals trying to earn a living in their typically illegal businesses. Another notable example of participant observer research is Jeffrey Kidder’s (2005) “Style and Action: A Decoding of Bike Messenger Symbols” in which he worked for a year as a New York City bicycle messenger learning about the experiences, thoughts, interactions, and way of life of people involved in this unique, exciting, and potentially dangerous job.

Field research is intended to provide a much deeper and comprehensive understanding of social behavior than is possible through the use of surveys or experiments. It is especially well suited for studying groups of special interest to society (such as juvenile gangs), unique occupations or subcultures, and unusual activities such as episodes of social conflict or protest.

**field research** A type of research that involves gathering data on what is assumed to be natural behavior in a real-world setting.

**participant observation** A type of research that involves the researcher actually participating in the activities of the people she or he is observing.

## Focus Groups

A **focus group** is a group discussion, usually one to two hours in length, in which group members are asked to focus on a selected topic under the guidance of a researcher who acts as a moderator and facilitator. According to Morgan (1996:2), “The hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group.” Focus groups can be used, for example, to evaluate alternate approaches to winning support for a particular cause, political candidate, or product. Morgan (1996:34–35) indicates that, except for special circumstances, the groups should be composed of strangers who are similar in terms of race, class, gender, and age. Similarity is thought to facilitate free communication, and strangers are more likely to express their ideas openly. Morgan also recommends that a focus group be limited to six to ten members and have a well-structured plan with a predetermined set of essential questions.

## Secondary Data Analysis

**Secondary data analysis** involves analyzing data that have been collected by others. Secondary data can be obtained from the U.S. Census; the FBI Uniform Crime Reports; large surveys such as the National Election Survey, the General Social Survey, and the National Crime Victimization Survey; or any government, business, institutional, or historical records or documents. Social scientists can use such data to gain insights into the size, characteristics, and causes of social problems. For example, in 2012 the Center for Public Integrity (Ginley 2012) published the results of a study of state laws and policies about the provision of information to the public regarding government finances and private lobbyists, political campaigns financing, and ethics enforcement. States received scores on their level of vulnerability to corruption. None of the states achieved an “A” rating. The five states receiving B-level grades were California, Connecticut, Nebraska, New Jersey, and Washington State. More than 50 percent of the states scored below a C–, and eight (Georgia, Maine, Michigan, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Virginia, and Wyoming), got an “F.” Later research showed generally similar state rankings (Kusnetz 2015). While Virginia reduced its vulnerability to corruption, there was little evidence of any improvement for the large majority of states.

**focus group** A group discussion, usually one to two hours in length, in which group members are asked to focus on a selected topic under the guidance of a researcher who acts as a moderator and facilitator.

**secondary data analysis** A type of research that involves analyzing data that have been collected by others.

**historical and comparative research** Sociological analyses and comparisons of societies.

## Historical and Comparative Research

**Historical and comparative research**, sociological analyses and comparisons of societies, was the preferred research method of early social theorists, including Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim. Marx’s historical and comparative analyses led to the development of conflict theory. After studying a number of societies, another German sociologist, Max Weber (1904–1905; 1915), concluded that the development of unique ideas could bring about massive social change. He claimed that major religions, such as Catholicism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, lacked the qualities of the Protestant work ethic that gave rise to the spirit of capitalism and the rapid capitalist acceleration of technological advances, productivity, and commerce in northern Europe following the Protestant Reformation.

A contemporary example of historical and comparative research is an attempt by multiple researchers to identify the factors that brought about revolutions during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (DeFronzo 2015; Foran 2005; Goldfrank 1979; Goldstone 1980, 1982; Goodwin 2001). This work involved examining the pre-revolution population, economic, and political characteristics of each nation; reviewing the writings, ideologies, and biographies of revolutionary leaders; evaluating the actions of governments; and analyzing newspaper and eye witness accounts. Elements strongly related to revolution included high levels of discontent in wide sectors of a society's population; divisions among the elite; unifying motivations that cut across economic class lines and unite the majority of a society's population behind the goal of revolution; severe political crises that paralyzed the administrative and coercive capabilities of the state; and a permissive world context in which other nations do not intervene effectively to prevent revolution.

Examine the data in the table below:

1. What research questions would you like to develop?
2. Is your study going to be exploratory, descriptive, explanatory, or applied?
3. What research method would you like to employ for your study?

Why do you think your method is most suitable for your study?

<b>TABLE 1.2   Differences in Health Care Insurance and Health</b>		<b>2013–2016 Average Percentage of People without Health Insurance</b>	<b>2016 Infant Mortality Rate (Deaths per 1,000 Live Births)</b>	<b>2016 Stroke Mortality Rate (Deaths per 100,000 Population)</b>	<b>2016 Cancer Mortality Rate (Deaths per 100,000 Population)</b>	<b>2016 Heart Disease Mortality Rate (Deaths per 100,000 Population)</b>
The ten most uninsured states	Texas	18.7%	5.7	42.0	148.5	167.7
	Alaska	16.2%	5.4	39.0	158.7	141.0
	Florida	15.6%	6.1	37.3	146.9	146.2
	Georgia	15.4%	7.5	44.3	160.2	179.0
	Oklahoma	15.2%	7.4	41.8	177.8	228.2
	Nevada	14.9%	5.7	35.9	157.3	205.9

(continued)

**TABLE 1.2 | Differences in Health Care Insurance and Health (continued)**

		<b>2013–2016 Average Percentage of People without Health Insurance</b>	<b>2016 Infant Mortality Rate (Deaths per 1,000 Live Births)</b>	<b>2016 Stroke Mortality Rate (Deaths per 100,000 Population)</b>	<b>2016 Cancer Mortality Rate (Deaths per 100,000 Population)</b>	<b>2016 Heart Disease Mortality Rate (Deaths per 100,000 Population)</b>
	Mississippi	14.0%	8.6	50.6	187.7	233.1
	Louisiana	13.4%	8.0	46.0	171.9	213.1
	New Mexico	13.3%	6.2	35.5	138.8	150.6
	Arizona	12.9%	5.4	29.8	136.8	138.9
	<b>Average</b>	<b>15.0%</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>40.2</b>	<b>158.5</b>	<b>180.4</b>
The ten states with the smallest percent uninsured	Pennsylvania	7.6%	6.1	37.0	164.7	176.2
	Rhode Island	7.3%	5.7	26.8	158.0	152.4
	Delaware	7.1%	7.9	41.6	170.8	163.2
	Wisconsin	6.9%	6.3	33.3	158.0	154.9
	Connecticut	6.8%	4.8	26.3	144.9	144.3
	Iowa	5.9%	6.1	32.3	159.8	162.8
	Minnesota	5.7%	5.1	32.5	148.6	114.9
	Vermont	4.9%	0.0	29.2	158.4	158.8
	Hawaii	4.9%	6.1	34.3	128.7	127.0
	Massachusetts	3.1%	3.9	27.9	150.2	134.8
	<b>Average</b>	<b>6.0%</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>32.1</b>	<b>154.2</b>	<b>148.9</b>

Sources: Percentage Uninsured from U.S. Census, 2013 to 2016 1-Year American Community Surveys.

Health Data – Centers for Disease Control, 2017 [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/nhis\\_insured/nhisuninsured.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/nhis_insured/nhisuninsured.htm)

## CHAPTER REVIEW

**What Is a Social Problem?**

A social problem is a condition or a type of behavior that many people believe is harmful. The extent to which conditions or behaviors become social problems is based not only on the reality of their existence (objective element) but on the level of public concern (subjective element). Social institutions and social stratification provide a structural context for social problems. The cultural context of social problems includes values, norms, beliefs, and symbols.

**Using the Sociological Imagination to Address Social Problems**

The sociological imagination is the ability to relate the most personal elements and problems of an individual's life to social forces and historical events. It helps you to understand how your experiences, feelings, thoughts, and actions, and those of other people, are affected by the structure of society, culture, and social change. Personal problems become social problems when they come to be viewed as caused by social forces rather than by personal characteristics.

**Sociological Perspectives on Social Problems**

There are three primary sociological perspectives. The structural-functional perspective,

which views society as a system of interdependent parts carrying out functions crucial to the well-being of the other parts and the system as a whole, includes three major approaches: social pathology, social disorganization, and social dysfunction. The conflict perspective views society as characterized by inequalities that advantage some groups and disadvantage others, and that lead to conflict and the potential for social change. Modern forms of the conflict approach include the economic-conflict, racial/ethnic-conflict, and feminist-conflict perspectives. The symbolic-interactionist perspective is a microsociological approach that views behavior and consciousness as the products of the meanings people develop through the process of person-to-person interaction.

**Sociological Research on Social Problems**

Sociological research methods include survey research (asking people questions), experiments, field research (observing natural behavior in a real-world setting), focus groups, secondary data analysis (using data collected by others), and historical and comparative research.

## KEY TERMS

anomie, p. 12  
 applied research (also called evaluation research), p. 18  
 claim, p. 3  
 claims maker, p. 3  
 conflict perspective, p. 12  
 culture, p. 5  
 dependent variable, p. 17  
 economic-conflict perspective, p. 13  
 experiment, p. 18  
 false consciousness, p. 14  
 feminist-conflict perspective, p. 14  
 field research, p. 19  
 focus group, p. 20  
 historical and comparative research, p. 20

hypothesis, p. 17  
 independent variable, p. 17  
 latent functions, p. 11  
 literature review, p. 17  
 manifest functions, p. 11  
 objective element, p. 3  
 participant observation, p. 19  
 racial/ethnic-conflict perspective, p. 13  
 research question, p. 16  
 sample, p. 18  
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 social disorganization, p. 12  
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 social institution, p. 5  
 social pathology, p. 11

social problem, p. 3  
social stratification, p. 5  
social structure, p. 5  
sociological imagination, p. 8  
structural-functional perspective, p. 11  
subculture, p. 6

subjective element, p. 3  
survey research, p. 18  
symbolic-interactionist perspective, p. 14  
theory, p. 10  
true consciousness, p. 14  
variable, p. 17

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do people differ regarding what conditions or behaviors they consider to be social problems?
2. Select a major social problem and describe opposing points of view about its causes.
3. Using your sociological imagination, explain how a personal issue that you or someone you know experiences is affected by social forces.
4. Who do you think is best suited for solving social problems: the federal government, local government, private individuals working together, business people, or some other group? Does the type of social problem affect your choice? Explain your answer.
5. What are the major social problems on your campus? What do you think can be done about them?
6. Select one of today's social institutions, such as the economy, politics and government, religion, or the media. Which sociological perspective (structural-functional, conflict or symbolic-interactionist) is best suited for explaining the way this institution operates?
7. Pick a major social problem. Which method or methods of sociological research would you select to study this social problem?