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# Looking beyond What You Already Know

## Becoming Curious about Social Problems

## Learning Objectives

1.  Explain what social problems are and discuss the importance of conventional wisdom in how society views them.

2.  Define sociology and discuss its importance.

3.  Describe the sociological perspective and its impacts on social problems.

4.  Explain the importance of sociological case studies in understanding social problems.

# Social Problems Are Everywhere

1.1  Explain what social problems are and discuss the importance of conventional wisdom in how society views them.

Think for a moment how often you hear about issues like police brutality, teenage pregnancy, discrimination against LGBTQ people, or mass shootings. Maybe you and your friend recently had a conversation about struggling with anxiety or depression, a student who's been bullied, your mother's coworker who's addicted to prescription painkillers, or the deportation of undocumented immigrants. Perhaps you know someone who doesn't have health insurance or who has experienced sexual assault. Maybe there was a racist incident recently on your campus. Each of these examples is a **social problem**—a harm in our society that people believe should and can be fixed.

Much of what you know about social problems is at your fingertips.
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I wrote this book to show you fascinating new ways to understand these important topics that may directly impact your life. Rest assured—this is *not* a boring textbook filled with lots of facts for you to memorize and master. You've probably had enough experience with such books over the years that the very thought of having to read another one would produce yawns. Instead, my goal is to tap into what you know about drug addiction, cyberbullying, police brutality, and other timely issues because they're mentioned on social media or dramatized in YouTube videos, Hollywood movies, and TV shows. Therefore, this book will engage the curiosities you already have about the world around you, motivating you to connect new ideas with what you currently understand. Each chapter highlights thought-provoking ways to see a different social problem, offering you a lens for making sense of the world that you likely haven't considered before or even knew existed.

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Chapters begin with a story that encourages you to become aware of your **conventional wisdom**, or what you think is true about a topic based on information you've acquired over the course of your life. For example, it's commonly believed that teenage pregnancy results from unsafe sex, bullies exploit kids who don't fit in, and online predators harm those who are not careful about whom they friend on social media. Such beliefs give you a basic understanding of events and issues that shape the world and your place in it. Yet if you've never had the chance to explore beyond your conventional wisdom, you might think what you know about poverty, obesity, mass shootings, or any other social problem is all you need to know. Since this knowledge comes from authority figures—police officers, therapists, scientists, journalists, politicians, and other experts—it's easy to take for granted that they're giving you the whole story. In reading this book, you'll discover that often they're not.

You've learned many valuable things about social problems from teachers. However, it's useful to do your own investigations too, by looking beyond what teachers have told you.
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This book offers you a lens for expanding upon your conventional wisdom. Maybe you knew a boy in high school who attempted suicide. Chapters 12 and 13 explore reasons why. Perhaps he suffered from depression. He may also have felt that it wouldn't be "manly" to share his pain with others. Taking a comprehensive approach highlights that there's no simple explanation for suicide. The same is true for other social problems. In building upon what you already know about these familiar topics, you will recognize how you can see them in eye-opening new ways.

Has anyone ever suggested that you get a second opinion on a medical treatment? While doctors recommend what they view as the best course of action, getting multiple perspectives illustrates that there is usually more than one option. The same can be said for how we view social problems.
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Throughout this book, I will share with you how my life connects to the topics at hand in order to encourage you to think about how yours does too. Let's start with the irony of the title *Seeing Social Problems*, given that I have a congenital visual impairment. Focusing clearly on the world around me is a daily challenge. You might be wondering, therefore, how I could possibly be qualified to show you ways to acquire a greater perception of the social world. I had similar thoughts before I took my first sociology course in college. Little could I have imagined at the time that this subject would enhance my vision in a way no medical intervention ever

could. In fact, being a person who doesn't see well is, in part, what led me to embrace a way of thinking that has enabled me to see better. My aim in this book is to share that vision with you.

> ### FIRST IMPRESSIONS?
>
> 1. Jot down a social problem that interests you. What do you know about the problem? Where have you gotten that knowledge?
>
> 2. Why do people typically put trust in what experts say about social problems?

This book will show you that seeing isn't something we do with our eyes, but with our minds. iStockphoto.com/ metamorworks

## The Virtue of Sociology: Opening Your Eyes to the Hidden World around You

1.2  Define sociology and discuss its importance.

Many years ago, a Unitarian Universalist minister named Robert Fulghum wrote a book with a catchy title that people continue to find inspiring. *All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* struck a chord with millions of readers because of its simple, yet powerful message. Fulghum is right in that we acquire a lot of our most important knowledge very early in life. But when it comes to the workings of our society, there's a lot we cannot know unless we learn how to look for it.

**Sociology** offers tools for seeing the world in refreshing new ways and opening your eyes to the intricate workings of society. You're already familiar with the basic rules that guide daily life, and you know which behaviors violate those rules. Yet things are often not as they appear. Sociology can enable you to push past your own blinders. Learning about social problems will uncover hidden truths about how our society operates.

Sociologists conduct research by directly observing people doing their daily activities, interviewing them, or asking survey questions. These research techniques produce **sociological data**—evidence about how people behave or think—that reveal the ways groups shape individuals' thoughts and behaviors. If you stop and think for a moment, you can name many groups to which you belong. I don't mean just the ones you've officially joined, but all of your sources of identity. These include your gender, race, social class, family, sexual orientation, religion, where you live, and when you were born. And this is hardly a complete list.

Most college students born after the mid-1990s are part of Generation Z. From a young age, you likely developed an expectation that people should be readily available via mobile devices. What are other examples of how your beliefs have been shaped by being a member of this generation? Zoonar GmbH/Alamy Stock Photo

NASCAR events illustrate the core sociological idea that each of us is shaped by others with whom we spend significant time. Fans don't just share a love of auto racing; they also often work in similar types of jobs and have common political views.
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Because golf enables people to be with others who can similarly afford to spend money and time playing this sport, it contributes to their tastes about how to enjoy leisure time.
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This book shows you how to discover the hidden workings of our society.
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Let's consider other groups that may be important to you. For example, it can be sociologically meaningful whether you are a "dog person," a "cat person," or dislike pets altogether. The same goes for people who prefer Instagram versus Snapchat versus don't use social media at all (such people exist!). Even more significant are the differences between those who have served in the military and those who have lived an entirely civilian life, between religious fundamentalists and atheists, and between pro-choice and pro-life abortion activists.

A person must do substantial research, often lasting several years, in order to earn a Ph.D. and become a sociologist. However, you need no prior training to begin thinking like one. All that's required is an interest in exploring how data about human behavior can expand your current understanding about the workings of society. I recall having this insight when I took my first sociology course in college. During the ensuing thirty plus years that I've studied and taught sociology, I've learned again and again how to think in refreshing ways I didn't know were possible. One of my greatest joys has been seeing students come to this same realization.

## Viewing Our Society through Different Lenses

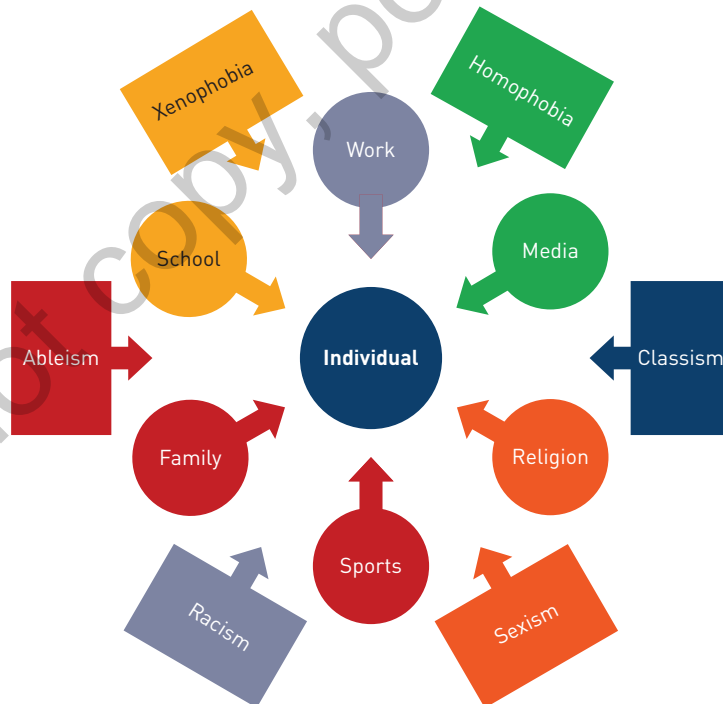1.3    Describe the sociological perspective and its impacts on social problems.

The topics in this book may lead you to revisit social media posts you've read or written, movies you've seen, and TV shows you've watched. Your mind may wander

across diverse subjects such as the overweight person who orders supersize meals at McDonald's, the runner who takes performance-enhancing drugs and breaks a world record, or the gunman who shoots randomly at the mall. These examples highlight the **individual perspective** toward social problems, which focuses on the person who commits wrongdoing. From this perspective, their behavior is **deviance**. It violates **social norms**—rules people have agreed upon for appropriate conduct—and therefore highlights flaws in the person who acts this way. The individual perspective is an appealing way to understand social problems because it places blame on people whom you or I can easily cast as distinct from the rule followers we believe we are. Because this perspective is widespread in American society, it's understandable if you assumed it to be the only possible way to understand social problems.

*Seeing Social Problems* shows how you can also understand these issues through a **sociological perspective** by recognizing the **social forces** that shape individual behavior (see Figure 1.1). Just as gravity is a physical force causing objects to fall downward instead of flying into the sky, groups are social forces that influence a person's likelihood of following or deviating from social norms. Paying attention to social

**FIGURE 1.1 ● Uncovering the Hidden Story**

The sociological perspective exposes social forces that influence how each of us behaves, thinks, and feels.

forces will enable you to get to the root of why some people bully their classmates, abuse drugs, or commit sexual assault. The sociological perspective exposes the contexts that give rise to deviance. This way of thinking doesn't make excuses for wrongdoing but explains why some individuals make rational decisions to break the rules.

One context that produces deviance is **social inequality**—the disparities among people in their amount of money, power, or status. For example, Chapter 11 reveals that the teens most likely to ignore stranger-danger warnings and forge relationships with online sexual predators are kids who've grown up with significant emotional vulnerabilities stemming from family violence. Another context is **culture**, or the beliefs, values, and behaviors that a particular group of people shares in common. Chapter 7 shows that cheating often stems from being in a workplace or school environment that puts a premium on doing whatever it takes to beat the competition. Cheaters, therefore, may not see their actions as shortcuts to success but as ways to level the playing field. Highlighting the significance of social inequality and culture isn't a justification for irresponsible behavior but a recognition that actions that appear deviant from the perspective of our own personal experiences are explainable when we acknowledge the social forces underlying them.

Let's illustrate what this shift in perspective looks like by focusing on a social problem that's become more pronounced during your lifetime. In the United States, one out of every three adults—and one in six children—is obese. Many people have a narrow understanding of those who are overweight. My guess is that your beliefs probably align with the message echoed in *The Biggest Loser*, a popular TV show from 2004 to 2016: Obese people choose to overeat and prefer being sedentary to exercising. In other words, the conventional wisdom is that they are personally responsible for the health problems they experience.



The sociological perspective enables you to build upon the conventional wisdom that obesity and other social problems stem from personal irresponsibility.
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It's a sensible viewpoint in that people make choices about how much they eat and exercise. However, there's more to this picture than meets the eye. If you have a friend who's overweight, seeing obesity sociologically can enable you to look upon that person with greater awareness of what is entailed in the struggle to lose pounds. It's hardly as simple as being a more disciplined eater or getting up early every morning to go to the gym. We can see why by considering data indicating that obesity is concentrated among lower-income Americans. Poorer people face constraints in their ability to make healthy food choices and in their access to fitness opportunities that those who live in wealthier communities seldom experience.

The sociological perspective recognizes that while each of us makes choices that affect our body size, these choices reflect the constraints or opportunities of living in an unequal society. Whereas many people are inclined to see the obese as having failed to conform to social norms about thinness, obese individuals behave in ways

that mirror the variable distribution of resources in American society. Both individual and sociological perspectives are useful ways to understand obesity. Overweight people may irresponsibly care for their bodies *and* also may experience income-related challenges in accessing nutritious foods and fitness opportunities. Chapter 5 offers a fuller discussion of this topic.

The particular perspective people use to understand obesity or any other social problem informs the strategies they believe can remedy it. Those who see weight strictly through an individual perspective favor diets and vigorous exercise. Embracing the sociological perspective doesn't preclude exerting greater self-discipline, but it does highlight why this often isn't enough. A sociologically informed remedy would be to promote greater access to nutritious foods and fitness opportunities. This might involve the government creating incentives for supermarket chains to open stores in low-income neighborhoods, where fresh fruits and vegetables are often unavailable to residents.

# Recognizing That Social Problems Have Diverse Explanations

1.4   Explain the importance of sociological case studies in understanding social problems.

In my Social Problems course, on the first day of the semester I ask people to jot down the sorts of topics they expect to learn about in the course. All of the issues students mention are included in this book: poverty, racism, sexism, drug addiction, mass shootings, cyberbullying, obesity, and teenage pregnancy. There are also chapters about subjects that students rarely anticipate yet find fascinating: mental illness, animal cruelty, online predators, and cheating.

Each chapter is a **case study**—an example that exposes and illustrates a broader theme. This book's twelve case studies highlight the rich ways the sociological perspective builds on what you already know about social problems. It's important to explore multiple case studies because they collectively uncover fascinating features of our society that you may not have ever given much thought to before. As you read in subsequent chapters about diverse topics, you'll discover how these case studies speak to one another in teaching you about the hidden workings of our society.

The case studies each begin with a vignette highlighting the sorts of beliefs you may currently hold about a particular social problem. This vignette is the springboard for discussion of research aimed at expanding your understanding of the issue. Because they will open your eyes to new ways of understanding timely issues, the case studies as a whole offer models for how you can better understand *any* social problem.

Studying social problems may be the gateway to the major you choose or it may be your only exposure to sociology during college. Either way, this book is written for you. By offering a set of tools for applying the sociological perspective to your own life, it aims to instill in you a lifelong curiosity about the hidden workings of our society. You will discover how groups that seem to have little influence on you significantly impact the choices you make and the beliefs you hold close to your heart.

This perspective opens your eyes to noticing how your life connects to the broader society around you. Therein lies the beauty of sociology.

## What Do You Know Now?

1. Jot down three different groups that you are part of, as well as specific ways each group has shaped who you are.

2. What is the difference between the individual and sociological perspectives toward social problems?

3. Why is it important to investigate multiple case studies of social problems?

## Key Terms

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Social problem  1 | Individual perspective  5 | Social forces  5 |
| Conventional wisdom  2 | Deviance  5 | Social inequality  6 |
| Sociology  3 | Social norms  5 | Culture  6 |
| Sociological data  3 | Sociological perspective  5 | Case study  7 |

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