# Part I. Social Problems—Personal Troubles or Public Issues?

## Visual Essay I. Seeing Problems Sociologically

### 1. Sociology and the Study of Social Problems

- Using Our Sociological Imagination
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  - *The Negative Consequences of Social Problems*
  - *Objective and Subjective Realities of Social Problems*
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## Main Points

- Internet and Community Exercises
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   **Main Points**
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互联网和社区练习

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About the Author
During the 2008 presidential campaign, most Americans identified the economy, health care, and the U.S.-Iraq war as our most important social problems. (It is worth noting that the list is relatively unchanged from the 2004 presidential campaign.) When surveyed, individuals explained that they were supporting a particular candidate because of how well they thought he or she would handle these issues.

Although social problems are an important part of our lives, even determining the outcome of presidential elections, many still do not understand the problems we face. Perhaps you are like the many students in my classroom who have never met a homeless person, never been a victim of a violent crime, or never experienced discrimination. How much do you really know about homelessness, violent crime, or discrimination?

I wrote this text with two goals in mind: to offer a better understanding of social problems and to begin working toward real solutions. In the pages that follow, I present three connections to achieve these goals. The first connection is the one between sociology and the study of social problems. Using your sociological imagination (which you'll learn more about in Chapter 1), you will be able to identify the social and structural forces that determine our social problems. I think you'll discover that this course will be interesting, challenging, and sometimes frustrating. After you review these different social problems, you may ask, “What can be done about all this?” The second connection that will be made is between social problems and their solutions. In each chapter, we will review selected social policies along with innovative community programs that attempt to address or correct these problems. The final connection is the one that I ask you to make yourself: recognizing the social problems in your community and identifying how you can be part of the solution. To assist your learning, this text includes a variety of special features.

- *A focus on the basis of social inequalities.* Throughout the text, we will examine how race and ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and age determine our life chances. Chapters 2 through 6 focus on the bases of social inequality and how each contributes to our experience of social problems.
- *A focus on social policy and social action.* Each chapter includes a discussion on relevant social policies or programs. In addition, each chapter highlights how individuals or groups have made a difference in their community. The text concludes with a chapter titled “Social Problems and Social Action” that identifies ways you can become more involved.
- *Voices in the Community.* The chapters include personal stories from people attempting to make a difference in their community. Some of these stories come from...
professionals in their field; others come from ordinary individuals who accomplish extraordinary things. For example, in Chapter 4, you’ll be introduced to Bernice R. Sandler, the woman behind Title IX, and in Chapter 13, Max Kenner, student founder of the Bard Prison Initiative, an educational program for prisoners.

- What Does It Mean to Me? and Internet and Community Exercises. Each chapter includes questions or activities that can be completed by small student groups or on your own. Some of the exercises ask you to reflect on the material in the chapter. But many of the exercises require you to collect data and information on what is going on in your own state, city, or campus. These exercises take you out of the classroom, away from the textbook, and into your community!

- Taking a World View. In this boxed feature, social problems are examined from a global perspective. We will look at Japan’s educational tracking system (Chapter 8), Mexico’s maquiladora (Chapter 9), and India’s all female international news organization (Chapter 11).

I wanted to write a book that captured the experiences that I’ve shared with students in my own social problems course. I sensed the frustration and futility that many felt by the end of the semester—imagine all those weeks of discussing nothing else but “problems”! I decided that my message about the importance of understanding social problems should be complemented with a message on the importance of taking social action.

Social action doesn’t just happen in Washington, D.C., or in your state’s capital, and political leaders aren’t the only ones engaged in such efforts. Social action takes place on your campus, in your neighborhood, in your town, in whatever you define as your “community.” I knew that there were stories to be told by ordinary people—community, church, business, or student leaders—who recognized that they had the power to make a difference in the community. Each semester, I brought these individuals into the classroom to share their stories, but also to illustrate that despite the persistence of many social problems, members of our community have not given up. Their stories inspired me and my students to find our own paths to social action.

I hope that by the time you reach the end of this text, with your newfound sociological imagination, you will find your own path to social action. Wherever it leads you, good luck.

Acknowledgments

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The following sociologists served as the first audience and reviewers for this text. Thank you all for your encouragement and for your insightful comments and suggestions, many of which have been incorporated in this second edition.
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I wish to express my appreciation to my family, friends, and colleagues, all of whom endured my never-ending stories about this project. Mahalo nui loa for supporting my work.

I dedicate this book to the two people who have been there from the very beginning of this journey: to my mentor, Byron D. Steiger, and to my husband, Brian W. Sullivan. From Byron, I learned the importance of loving one’s work. Thank you for showing me what an excellent teacher can and should be. From Brian, I learned the value of caring for one’s community and the environment. Thank you for all that you do—this book would not have been possible without you.