SYG2010: SOCIAL PROBLEMS (MOLEON-MATHEWS)



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SYG2010: Social Problems (Moleon-Mathews)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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1.1: What Is a Social Problem?

Learning Objectives

1. Define "social problem."
2. Explain the objective and subjective components of the definition of a social problem.
3. Understand the social constructionist view of social problems.
4. List the stages of the natural history of social problems.

A social problem is any condition or behavior that has negative consequences for large numbers of people and that is generally recognized as a condition or behavior that needs to be addressed. This definition has both an *objective* component and a *subjective* component.

The *objective* component is this: For any condition or behavior to be considered a social problem, it must have negative consequences for large numbers of people, as each chapter of this book discusses. How do we know if a social problem has negative consequences? Reasonable people can and do disagree on whether such consequences exist and, if so, on their extent and seriousness, but ordinarily a body of data accumulates—from work by academic researchers, government agencies, and other sources—that strongly points to extensive and serious consequences. The reasons for these consequences are often hotly debated, and sometimes, as we shall see in certain chapters in this book, sometimes the very existence of these consequences is disputed. A current example is *climate change*: Although the overwhelming majority of climate scientists say that climate change (changes in the earth's climate due to the buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere) is real and serious, fewer than two-thirds of Americans (64 percent) in a 2011 poll said they "think that global warming is happening"(Leiserowitz, et. al., 2011).

This type of dispute points to the *subjective* component of the definition of social problems: There must be a perception that a condition or behavior needs to be addressed for it to be considered a social problem. This component lies at the heart of the social constructionist view of social problems (Rubington & Weinberg, 2010). In this view, many types of negative conditions and behaviors exist. Many of these are considered sufficiently negative to acquire the status of a social problem; some do not receive this consideration and thus do not become a social problem; and some become considered a social problem only if citizens, policymakers, or other parties call attention to the condition or behavior.



Sometimes disputes occur over whether a particular condition or behavior has negative consequences and is thus a social problem. A current example is climate change: although almost all climate scientists think climate change is real and serious, more than one-third of the American public thinks that climate change is not happening. Wikimedia Commons – public domain.

? Exercise 1.1.1

Which of the following would not be considered a social problem based on the definition provided above? Why?

a) Poverty

b) Climate change

c) Unemployment

Answer

Climate change because, based on a 2011 poll, more than one-third of the American public didn't think that climate change was happening.

Note

As of current, how do Americans feel about climate change? Do they see it as a condition that needs to be addressed? Use the most current poll data to support your argument.

The history of attention given to rape and sexual assault in the United States before and after the 1970s provides an example of this latter situation. These acts of sexual violence against women have probably occurred from the beginning of humanity and certainly were very common in the United States before the 1970s. Although men were sometimes arrested and prosecuted for rape and sexual assault, sexual violence was otherwise ignored by legal policymakers and received little attention in college textbooks and the news media, and many people thought that rape and sexual assault were just something that happened (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993). Thus although sexual violence existed, it was not considered a social problem. When the contemporary women's movement began in the late 1970s, it soon focused on rape and sexual assault as serious crimes and as manifestations of women's inequality. Thanks to this focus, rape and sexual assault eventually entered the public consciousness, views of these crimes began to change, and legal policymakers began to give them more attention. In short, sexual violence against women became a social problem.



Before the 1970s, rape and sexual assault certainly existed and were very common, but they were generally ignored and not considered a social problem. When the contemporary women's movement arose during the 1970s, it focused on sexual violence against women and turned this behavior into a social problem. Women's e News – Placards at the Rally To Take Rape Seriously – CC BY 2.0.

The social constructionist view raises an interesting question: When is a social problem a social problem? According to some sociologists who adopt this view, negative conditions and behaviors are *not* a social problem unless they are recognized as such by policymakers, large numbers of lay citizens, or other segments of our society; these sociologists would thus say that rape and sexual assault before the 1970s were not a social problem because our society as a whole paid them little attention. Other sociologists say that negative conditions and behaviors *should be* considered a social problem even if they receive little or no attention; these sociologists would thus say that rape and sexual assault before the 1970s were a social problem.

This type of debate is probably akin to the age-old question: If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, is a sound made? As such, it is not easy to answer, but it does reinforce one of the key beliefs of the social constructionist view: Perception matters at least as much as reality, and sometimes more so. In line with this belief, social constructionism emphasizes that citizens, interest groups, policymakers, and other parties often compete to influence popular perceptions of many types of conditions and behaviors. They try to influence news media coverage and popular views of the nature and extent of any negative consequences that may be occurring, the reasons underlying the condition or behavior in question, and possible solutions to the problem.

Social constructionism's emphasis on perception has a provocative implication: Just as a condition or behavior may not be considered a social problem even if there is strong basis for this perception, so may a condition or behavior be considered a social problem even if there is little or no basis for this perception. The "issue" of women in college provides a historical example of this latter possibility. In the late 1800s, leading physicians and medical researchers in the United States wrote journal articles,



Sometimes a condition or behavior becomes a social problem even if there is little or no basis for this perception. A historical example involves women in college. During the late 1800s, medical authorities and other experts warned women not to go to college for two reasons: they feared that the stress of college would disrupt women's menstrual cycles, and they thought that women would not do well on exams while they were menstruating. CollegeDegrees360 – College Girls – CC BY-SA 2.0.

textbooks, and newspaper columns in which they warned women not to go to college. The reason? They feared that the stress of college would disrupt women's menstrual cycles, and they also feared that women would not do well in exams during "that time of the month" (Ehrenreich & English, 2005)! We now know better, of course, but the sexist beliefs of these writers turned the idea of women going to college into a social problem and helped to reinforce restrictions by colleges and universities on the admission of women.

In a related dynamic, various parties can distort certain aspects of a social problem that does exist: politicians can give speeches, the news media can use scary headlines and heavy coverage to capture readers' or viewers' interest, businesses can use advertising and influence news coverage. News media coverage of violent crime provides many examples of this dynamic (Robinson, 2011; Surette, 2011). The news media overdramatize violent crime, which is far less common than property crime like burglary and larceny, by featuring so many stories about it, and this coverage contributes to public fear of crime. Media stories about violent crime also tend to be more common when the accused offender is black and the victim is white and when the offender is a juvenile. This type of coverage is thought to heighten the public's prejudice toward African Americans and to contribute to negative views about teenagers.

? Exercise 1.1.2

Which of the following is true of the social constructionist view of social problems?

a) Any condition or behavior that has negative consequences for large numbers of people.

b) Negative social conditions or behaviors do not become social problems unless citizens, policymakers etc... call attention to them and define them as social problems.

Answer

Correct answer: b

The Natural History of a Social Problem

We have just discussed some of the difficulties in defining a social problem and the fact that various parties often try to influence public perceptions of social problems. These issues aside, most social problems go through a *natural history* consisting of several stages of their development (Spector & Kitsuse, 2001).

Stage 1: Emergence and Claims Making

A social problem emerges when a social entity (such as a social change group, the news media, or influential politicians) begins to call attention to a condition or behavior that it perceives to be undesirable and in need of remedy. As part of this process, it tries to influence public perceptions of the problem, the reasons for it, and possible solutions to it. Because the social entity is making claims about all these matters, this aspect of Stage 1 is termed the claims-making process. Not all efforts to turn a condition or behavior into a social problem succeed, and if they do not succeed, a social problem does not emerge. Because of the resources they have or do not have, some social entities are more likely than others to succeed at this stage. A few ordinary individuals have little influence in the public sphere, but masses of individuals who engage in protest or other political activity have greater ability to help a social problem emerge. Because politicians have the ear of the news media and other types of influence, their views about social problems are often very influential. Most studies of this stage of a social problem focus on the efforts of social change groups and the larger social movement to which they may belong, as most social problems begin with bottom-up efforts from such groups.

Stage 2: Legitimacy

Once a social group succeeds in turning a condition or behavior into a social problem, it usually tries to persuade the government (local, state, and/or federal) to take some action—spending and policymaking—to address the problem. As part of this effort, it tries to convince the government that its claims about the problem are legitimate—that they make sense and are supported by *empirical* (research-based) evidence. To the extent that the group succeeds in convincing the government of the legitimacy of its claims, government action is that much more likely to occur.



A social problem emerges when a social change group successfully calls attention to a condition or behavior that it considers serious. Protests like the one depicted here have raised the environmental consciousness of Americans and helped put pressure on businesses to be environmentally responsible. ItzaFineDay – Financing Climate Change – CC BY 2.0.

Stage 3: Renewed Claims Making

Even if government action does occur, social change groups often conclude that the action is too limited in goals or scope to be able to successfully address the social problem. If they reach this conclusion, they often decide to press their demands anew. They do so by reasserting their claims and by criticizing the official response they have received from the government or other established interests, such as big businesses. This stage may involve a fair amount of tension between the social change groups and these targets of their claims.

Stage 4: Development of Alternative Strategies

Despite the renewed claims making, social change groups often conclude that the government and established interests are not responding adequately to their claims. Although the groups may continue to press their claims, they nonetheless realize that these claims may fail to win an adequate response from established interests. This realization leads them to develop their own strategies for addressing the social problem.

Exercise 1.1.3

Which of the following is **not** one of the stages of development of a social problem?

a) Emergence and claims making.

b) Legitimacy

c) Renewed of alternative strategies

d) Development of Alternative Strategies

Answer

c) Renewed of alternative strategies.

Exercise 1.1.4

Which of the following would be considered a social entity?

a) News Media

b) Social Change Group

c) Influential Politicians

d) All of the above

Answer

All of the above.

Key Takeaways

- The definition of a social problem has both an objective component and a subjective component. The objective component involves empirical evidence of the negative consequences of a social condition or behavior, while the subjective component involves the perception that the condition or behavior is indeed a problem that needs to be addressed.
- The social constructionist view emphasizes that a condition or behavior does not become a social problem unless there is a perception that it should be considered a social problem.
- The natural history of a social problem consists of four stages: emergence and claims making, legitimacy, renewed claims making, and alternative strategies.

For Your Review: Answer the questions below....

1. What do you think is the most important social problem facing our nation right now? Explain your answer.
2. Do you agree with the social constructionist view that a negative social condition or behavior is not a social problem unless there is a perception that it should be considered a social problem? Why or why not?

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1.2: Sociological Perspectives on Social Problems

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section you should be able to:

1. Define the sociological imagination.
2. Explain what is meant by the blaming-the-victim belief.
3. Summarize the most important beliefs and assumptions of functionalism and conflict theory.
4. Summarize the most important beliefs and assumptions of symbolic interactionism and exchange theory.

The sociological understanding of social problems rests heavily on the concept of the *sociological imagination*. We discuss this concept in some detail before turning to various theoretical perspectives that provide a further context for understanding social problems.

The Sociological Imagination

Many individuals experience one or more social problems personally. For example, many people are poor and unemployed, many are in poor health, and many have family problems, drink too much alcohol, or commit crime. When we hear about these individuals, it is easy to think that their problems are theirs alone, and that they and other individuals with the same problems are entirely to blame for their difficulties.

Sociology takes a different approach, as it stresses that individual problems are often rooted in problems stemming from aspects of society itself. This key insight informed C. Wright Mills's (1959) (Mills, 1959) classic distinction between personal troubles and public issues. *Personal troubles* refer to a problem affecting individuals that the affected individual, as well as other members of society, typically blame on the individual's own personal and moral failings. Examples include such different problems as eating disorders, divorce, and unemployment. *Public issues*, whose source lies in the social structure and culture of a society, refer to social problems affecting many individuals. Problems in society thus help account for problems that individuals experience. Mills felt that many problems ordinarily considered private troubles are best understood as public issues, and he coined the term sociological imagination to refer to the ability to appreciate the structural basis for individual problems.

To illustrate Mills's viewpoint, let's use our sociological imaginations to understand some contemporary social problems. We will start with unemployment, which Mills himself discussed. If only a few people were unemployed, Mills wrote, we could reasonably explain their unemployment by saying they were lazy, lacked good work habits, and so forth. If so, their unemployment would be their own personal trouble. But when millions of people are out of work, unemployment is best understood as a public issue because, as Mills (Mills, 1959) put it, "the very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals."



When only a few people are out of work, it is fair to say that their unemployment is their personal trouble. However, when millions of people are out of work, as has been true since the economic downturn began in 2008, this massive unemployment is more accurately viewed as a public issue. As such, its causes lie not in the unemployed individuals but rather in our society's economic and social systems. Rawle C. Jackman – The line of hope – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

The high US unemployment rate stemming from the severe economic downturn that began in 2008 provides a telling example of the point Mills was making. Millions of people lost their jobs through no fault of their own. While some individuals are undoubtedly unemployed because they are lazy or lack good work habits, a more structural explanation focusing on lack of opportunity is needed to explain why so many people were out of work. If so, unemployment is best understood as a public issue rather than a personal trouble.

Another social problem is eating disorders. We usually consider a person's eating disorder to be a personal trouble that stems from a lack of control, low self-esteem, or another personal problem. This explanation may be OK as far as it goes, but it does not help us understand why so many people have the personal problems that lead to eating disorders. Perhaps more important, this belief also neglects the larger social and cultural forces that help explain such disorders. For example, most Americans with eating disorders are women, not men. This gender difference forces us to ask what it is about being a woman in American society that makes eating disorders so much more common. To begin to answer this question, we need to look to the standard of beauty for women that emphasizes a slender body (Boyd, et. al., 2011). If this cultural standard did not exist, far fewer American women would suffer from eating disorders than do now. Because it does exist, even if every girl and woman with an eating disorder were cured, others would take their places unless we could somehow change this standard. Viewed in this way, eating disorders are best understood as a public issue, not just as a personal trouble.

Picking up on Mills's insights, William Ryan (1976) (Ryan, 1976) pointed out that Americans typically think that social problems such as poverty and unemployment stem from personal failings of the people experiencing these problems, not from structural problems in the larger society. Using Mills's terms, Americans tend to think of social problems as personal troubles rather than public issues. As Ryan put it, they tend to believe in blaming the victim rather than blaming the system.

To help us understand a blaming-the-victim ideology, let's consider why poor children in urban areas often learn very little in their schools. According to Ryan, a blaming-the-victim approach would say the children's parents do not care about their learning, fail to teach them good study habits, and do not encourage them to take school seriously. This type of explanation, he wrote, may apply to some parents, but it ignores a much more important reason: the sad shape of America's urban schools, which, he said, are overcrowded, decrepit structures housing old textbooks and out-of-date equipment. To improve the schooling of children in urban areas, he wrote, we must improve the schools themselves and not just try to "improve" the parents.

As this example suggests, a blaming-the-victim approach points to solutions to social problems such as poverty and illiteracy that are very different from those suggested by a more structural approach that blames the system. If we blame the victim, we would spend our limited dollars to address the personal failings of individuals who suffer from poverty, illiteracy, poor health, eating disorders, and other difficulties. If instead we blame the system, we would focus our attention on the various social conditions (decrepit schools, cultural standards of female beauty, and the like) that account for these difficulties. A sociological understanding suggests that the latter approach is ultimately needed to help us deal successfully with the social problems facing us today.

Theoretical Perspectives

Three theoretical perspectives guide sociological thinking on social problems: *functionalist* theory, *conflict* theory, and *symbolic interactionist* theory. These perspectives look at the same social problems, but they do so in different ways. Their views taken together offer a fuller understanding of social problems than any of the views can offer alone. Table 1.1 "Theory Snapshot" summarizes the three perspectives.

Table 1.1 Theory Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions	Views of social problems
Functionalism	Social stability is necessary for a strong society, and adequate socialization and social integration are necessary for social stability. Society's social institutions perform important functions to help ensure social stability. Slow social change is desirable, but rapid social change threatens social order.	Social problems weaken a society's stability but do not reflect fundamental faults in how the society is structured. Solutions to social problems should take the form of gradual social reform rather than sudden and far-reaching change. Despite their negative effects, social problems often also serve important functions for society.
Conflict theory	Society is characterized by pervasive inequality based on social class, race, gender, and other factors. Far-reaching social change is needed to reduce or eliminate social inequality and to create an egalitarian society.	Social problems arise from fundamental faults in the structure of a society and both reflect and reinforce inequalities based on social class, race, gender, and other dimensions. Successful solutions to social problems must involve far-reaching change in the structure of society.
Symbolic interactionism	People construct their roles as they interact; they do not merely learn the roles that society has set out for them. As this interaction occurs, individuals negotiate their definitions of the situations in which they find themselves and socially construct the reality of these situations. In so doing, they rely heavily on symbols such as words and gestures to reach a shared understanding of their interaction.	Social problems arise from the interaction of individuals. People who engage in socially problematic behaviors often learn these behaviors from other people. Individuals also learn their perceptions of social problems from other people.

Functionalism

Functionalism, also known as the functionalist theory or perspective, arose out of two great revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first was the French Revolution of 1789, whose intense violence and bloody terror shook Europe to its core. The aristocracy throughout Europe feared that revolution would spread to their own lands, and intellectuals feared that social order was crumbling.

The Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century reinforced these concerns. Starting first in Europe and then in the United States, the Industrial Revolution led to many changes, including the rise and growth of cities as people left their farms to live near factories. As the cities grew, people lived in increasingly poor, crowded, and decrepit conditions, and crime was rampant. Here was additional evidence, if European intellectuals needed it, of the breakdown of social order.

In response, the intellectuals began to write that a strong society, as exemplified by strong social bonds and rules and effective socialization, was needed to prevent social order from disintegrating. Without a strong society and effective socialization, they warned, social order breaks down, and violence and other signs of social disorder result.

This general framework reached fruition in the writings of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), a French scholar largely responsible for the sociological perspective, as we now know it. Adopting the conservative intellectuals' view of the need for a strong society, Durkheim felt that human beings have desires that result in chaos unless society limits them (Durkheim, 1952). It does so, he

wrote, through two related social mechanisms: socialization and social integration. Socialization helps us learn society's rules and the need to cooperate, as people end up generally agreeing on important norms and values, while social integration, or our ties to other people and to social institutions such as religion and the family, helps socialize us and integrate us into society and reinforce our respect for its rules.



Emile Durkheim was a founder of sociology and is largely credited with developing the functionalist perspective. Marxists.org – public domain.

File:A_Structural-Functionalist_Understanding_of_Deviance.png Today's functionalist perspective arises out of Durkheim's work and that of other conservative intellectuals of the nineteenth century. It uses the human body as a model for understanding society. In the human body, our various organs and other body parts serve important *functions* for the ongoing health and stability of our body. Our eyes help us see, our ears help us hear, our heart circulates our blood, and so forth. Just as we can understand the body by describing and understanding the functions that its parts serve for its health and stability, so can we understand society by describing and understanding the functions that its parts—or, more accurately, its social institutions—serve for the ongoing health and stability of society. Thus functionalism emphasizes the importance of social institutions such as the family, religion, and education for producing a stable society.

Similar to the view of the conservative intellectuals from which it grew, functionalism is skeptical of rapid social change and other major social upheaval. The analogy to the human body helps us understand this skepticism. In our bodies, any sudden, rapid change is a sign of danger to our health. If we break a bone in one of our legs, we have trouble walking; if we lose sight in both our eyes, we can no longer see. Slow changes, such as the growth of our hair and our nails, are fine and even normal, but sudden changes like those just described are obviously troublesome. By analogy, sudden and rapid changes in society and its social institutions are troublesome according to the functionalist perspective. If the human body evolved to its present form and functions because these made sense from an evolutionary perspective, so did society evolve to its present form and functions because these made sense. Any sudden change in society thus threatens its stability and future.

As these comments might suggest, functionalism views social problems as arising from society's natural evolution. When a social problem does occur, it might threaten a society's stability, but it does not mean that fundamental flaws in the society exist. Accordingly, gradual social reform should be all that is needed to address the social problem.

Functionalism even suggests that social problems must be functional in some ways for society, because otherwise these problems would not continue. This is certainly a controversial suggestion, but it is true that many social problems do serve important functions for our society. For example, crime is a major social problem, but it is also good for the economy because it creates hundreds of thousands of jobs in law enforcement, courts and corrections, home security, and other sectors of the economy whose major role is to deal with crime. If crime disappeared, many people would be out of work! Similarly, poverty is also a major social problem, but one function that poverty serves is that poor people do jobs that otherwise might not get done because other people would not want to do them (Gans, 1972). Like crime, poverty also provides employment for people across the nation, such as those who work in social service agencies that help poor people.

Exercise 1.2.5

Which of the following is true of the functionalist view of social problems?

a) Social problems weaken a society's social stability but do not reflect fundamental fault in how society is structured.

b) Solutions to social problems should take the form of sudden and far-reaching change

c) Despite their negative effects, social problems also serve important functions for society

Answer

Correct answer: b.

Conflict Theory

In many ways, conflict theory is the opposite of functionalism but ironically also grew out of the Industrial Revolution, thanks largely to Karl Marx (1818–1883) and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). Whereas conservative intellectuals feared the mass violence resulting from industrialization, Marx and Engels deplored the conditions they felt were responsible for the mass violence and the capitalist society they felt was responsible for these conditions. Instead of fearing the breakdown of social order that mass violence represented, they felt that revolutionary violence was needed to eliminate capitalism and the poverty and misery they saw as its inevitable results (Marx, 1906; Marx & Engels, 1962).

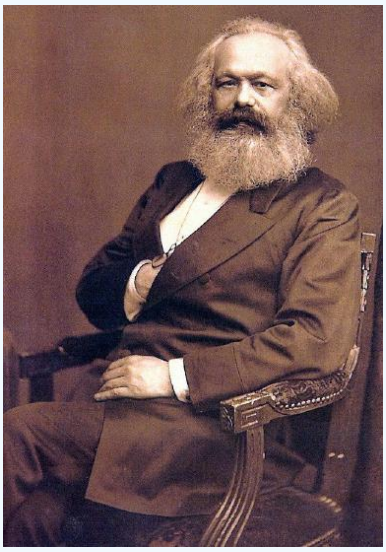
According to Marx and Engels, every society is divided into two classes based on the ownership of the means of production (tools, factories, and the like). In a capitalist society, the *bourgeoisie*, or ruling class, owns the means of production, while the *proletariat*, or working class, does not own the means of production and instead is oppressed and exploited by the bourgeoisie. This difference creates an automatic conflict of interests between the two groups. Simply put, the bourgeoisie is interested in maintaining its position at the top of society, while the proletariat's interest lies in rising up from the bottom and overthrowing the bourgeoisie to create an egalitarian society.

In a capitalist society, Marx and Engels wrote, revolution is inevitable because of structural contradictions arising from the very nature of capitalism. Because profit is the main goal of capitalism, the bourgeoisie's interest lies in maximizing profit. To do so, capitalists try to keep wages as low as possible and to spend as little money as possible on working conditions. This central fact of capitalism, said Marx and Engels, eventually prompts the rise of class consciousness, or an awareness of the reasons for their oppression, among workers. Their class consciousness in turn leads them to revolt against the bourgeoisie to eliminate the oppression and exploitation they suffer.

Marx and Engels' view of conflict arising from unequal positions held by members of society lies at the heart of today's conflict theory. This theory emphasizes that different groups in society have different interests stemming from their different social positions. These different interests in turn lead to different views on important social issues. Some versions of the theory root conflict in divisions based on race and ethnicity, gender, and other such differences, while other versions follow Marx and Engels in seeing conflict arising out of different positions in the economic structure. In general, however, conflict theory emphasizes that the various parts of society contribute to ongoing inequality, whereas functionalist theory, as we have seen, stresses that they contribute to the ongoing stability of society. Thus while functionalist theory emphasizes the benefits of the various parts of society for ongoing social stability, conflict theory favors social change to reduce inequality.

Feminist theory has developed in sociology and other disciplines since the 1970s and for our purposes will be considered a specific application of conflict theory. In this case, the conflict concerns gender inequality rather than the class inequality emphasized by Marx and Engels. Although many variations of feminist theory exist, they all emphasize that society is filled with gender inequality such that women are the subordinate sex in many dimensions of social, political, and economic life (Lorber, 2010). Liberal feminists view gender inequality as arising out of gender differences in socialization, while Marxist feminists say that this inequality is a result of the rise of capitalism, which made women dependent on men for economic support. On the other hand, radical feminists view gender inequality as present in all societies, not just capitalist ones. Several chapters in this book emphasize the perspectives of feminist sociologists and other social scientists.

Conflict theory in its various forms views social problems as arising from society's inherent inequality. Depending on which version of conflict theory is being considered, the inequality contributing to social problems is based on social class, race and ethnicity, gender, or some other dimension of society's hierarchy. Because any of these inequalities represents a fundamental flaw in society, conflict theory assumes that fundamental social change is needed to address society's many social problems.



Karl Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels were intense critics of capitalism. Their work inspired the later development of conflict theory in sociology. Wikimedia Commons – public domain.

Which of the following are major assumptions **about social problems** associated with the conflict perspective?

a) Social problems arise from fundamental faults in the structure of society

b) Social problems reflect and reinforce social inequalities based on social class, race, gender, and other social dimensions.

c) Successful solutions to social problems must involve far-reaching change in the structure of society

d) All of the above

Answer

Correct answer: d

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the interaction of individuals and on how they interpret their interaction. Its roots lie in the work of early 1900s American sociologists, social psychologists, and philosophers who were interested in human consciousness and action. Herbert Blumer (1969) (Blumer, 1969), a sociologist at the University of Chicago, built on their writings to develop symbolic interactionism, a term he coined. Drawing on Blumer's work, symbolic interactionists feel that people do not merely learn the roles that society has set out for them; instead they construct these roles as they interact. As they interact, they negotiate their definitions of the situations in which they find themselves and socially construct the reality of these situations. In doing so, they rely heavily on symbols such as words and gestures to reach a shared understanding of their interaction.



Symbolic interactionism focuses on individuals, such as the people conversing here. Sociologists favoring this approach examine how and why individuals interact and interpret the meanings of their interaction. Wikimedia Commons – public domain.

An example is the familiar symbol of shaking hands. In the United States and many other societies, shaking hands is a symbol of greeting and friendship. This simple act indicates that you are a nice, polite person with whom someone should feel comfortable. To reinforce this symbol's importance for understanding a bit of interaction, consider a situation where someone *refuses* to shake hands. This action is usually intended as a sign of dislike or as an insult, and the other person interprets it as such. Their understanding of the situation and subsequent interaction will be very different from those arising from the more typical shaking of hands. As the term *symbolic interactionism* implies, their understanding of this encounter arises from what they do when they interact and from their use and interpretation of the various symbols included in their interaction. According to symbolic interactionists, social order is possible because people learn what various symbols (such as shaking hands) mean and apply these meanings to different kinds of situations. If you visited a society where sticking your right hand out to greet someone was interpreted as a threatening gesture, you would quickly learn the value of common understandings of symbols.

Symbolic interactionism views social problems as arising from the interaction of individuals. This interaction matters in two important respects. First, socially problematic behaviors such as crime and drug use are often learned from our interaction with people who engage in these behaviors; we adopt their attitudes that justify committing these behaviors, and we learn any special techniques that might be needed to commit these behaviors. Second, we also learn our perceptions of a social problem from our interaction with other people, whose perceptions and beliefs influence our own perceptions and beliefs.

Because symbolic interactionism emphasizes the perception of social problems, it is closely aligned with the social constructionist view discussed earlier. Both perspectives emphasize the subjective nature of social problems. By doing so, they remind us that perceptions often matter at least as much as objective reality in determining whether a given condition or behavior rises to the level of a social problem and in the types of possible solutions that various parties might favor for a particular social problem.nings and social patterns created during social interactions.

? Exercise 1.2.1

Which of the following are major assumptions **about social problems** associated with the interactionist perspective?

a) Social problems arise from the interaction of individuals

b) People who engage in socially problematic behaviors often learn these behaviors from other people

c) Individuals learn their perceptions of social problems from other people

d) All of the above

Answer

Correct answer: d

Applying the Three Perspectives



To explain armed robbery, symbolic interactionists focus on how armed robbers decide when and where to rob a victim and on how their interactions with other criminals reinforce their own criminal tendencies. Geoffrey Fairchild – The Robbery – CC BY 2.0.

To help you further understand the different views of these three theoretical perspectives, let's see what they would probably say about *armed robbery*, a very serious form of crime, while recognizing that the three perspectives together provide a more comprehensive understanding of armed robbery than any one perspective provides by itself.

A functionalist approach might suggest that armed robbery actually serves positive functions for society, such as the job-creating function mentioned earlier for crime in general. It would still think that efforts should be made to reduce armed robbery, but it would also assume that far-reaching changes in our society would be neither wise nor necessary as part of the effort to reduce crime.

Conflict theory would take a very different approach to understanding armed robbery. It might note that most street criminals are poor and thus emphasize that armed robbery is the result of the despair and frustration of living in poverty and facing a lack of jobs and other opportunities for economic and social success. The roots of street crime, from the perspective of conflict theory, thus lie in society at least as much as they lie in the individuals committing such crime. To reduce armed robbery and other street crime, conflict theory would advocate far-reaching changes in the economic structure of society.

For its part, symbolic interactionism would focus on how armed robbers make such decisions as when and where to rob someone and on how their interactions with other criminals reinforce their own criminal tendencies. It would also investigate how victims of armed robbery behave when confronted by a robber. To reduce armed robbery, it would advocate programs that reduce the opportunities for interaction among potential criminal offenders, for example, after-school programs that keep at-risk youths busy in "conventional" activities so that they have less time to spend with youths who might help them get into trouble.

Key Takeaways

- According to C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination involves the ability to recognize that private troubles are rooted in public issues and structural problems.
- Functionalism emphasizes the importance of social institutions for social stability and implies that far-reaching social change will be socially harmful.
- Conflict theory emphasizes social inequality and suggests that far-reaching social change is needed to achieve a just society.
- Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the social meanings and understandings that individuals derive from their social interaction.

For Your Review

1. Select an example of a "private trouble" and explain how and why it may reflect a structural problem in society.
2. At this point in your study of social problems, which one of the three sociological theoretical perspectives sounds most appealing to you? Why?

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1.3: Continuity and Change in Social Problems

Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to do the following:

1. Explain what is meant by this book's subtitle, "Continuity and Change."
2. List the three sources of changes to social problems.
3. Describe how the United States compares to other democracies regarding the seriousness of social problems.

This book's subtitle, "Continuity and Change," conveys a theme that will guide every chapter's discussion. Social problems are, first of all, *persistent*. They have continued for decades and even centuries, and they show no sign of ending anytime soon. In view of social problems' long history, certainty of continuing for some time to come, and serious consequences, it is easy to feel overwhelmed when reading about them, to think that little can be done about them, and even to become a bit depressed. As a result, it is easy for students to come away from social problems courses with a rather pessimistic, "doom and gloom" outlook (Johnson, 2005).



An important source of change in social problems is protest by a social change group or movement. M 2 – Fantasia Protest, Castro Theater, 1991 – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

That is why this book stresses the second part of the subtitle, *change*. Although social problems are indeed persistent, it is also true that certain problems are less serious now than in the past. Change is possible. As just one of many examples, consider the conditions that workers face in the United States. As Chapter 10 "Work and the Economy" discusses, many workers today are unemployed, have low wages, or work in substandard and even dangerous workplaces. Yet they are immeasurably better off than a century ago, thanks to the US labor movement that began during the 1870s. Workers now have the eight-hour day, the minimum wage (even if many people think it is too low), the right to strike, and workplaces that are much safer than when the labor movement began. In two more examples, people of color and women have made incredible advances since the 1960s, even if, as Chapter 3 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality" and Chapter 4 "Gender Inequality" discuss, they continue to experience racial and gender inequality, respectively. To repeat: Change is possible.

How does change occur? One source of change in social problems is social science theory and research. Over the decades, theory and research in sociology and the other social sciences have pointed to the reasons for social problems, to potentially successful ways of addressing them, and to actual policies that succeeded in addressing some aspect of a social problem. Accordingly, the discussion in each chapter of this book is based on sound social science theory and research, and each chapter will present examples of how the findings from sociological and other social science research have either contributed to public policy related to the chapter's social problem or have the potential of doing so.

The actions of individuals and groups may also make a difference. Many people have public-service jobs or volunteer in all sorts of activities involving a social problem: they assist at a food pantry, they help clean up a riverbank, and so forth. Others take on a more activist orientation by becoming involved in small social change groups or a larger social movement. Our nation is a better place today because of the labor movement, the Southern civil rights movement, the women's movement, the gay rights movement,

the environmental movement, and other efforts too numerous to mention. According to Frances Fox Piven (2006) (Piven, 2006), a former president of the American Sociological Association, it is through such efforts that “ordinary people change America,” as the subtitle of her book on this subject reads.

Sharing this view, anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Change thus is not easy, but it can and does occur. Eleanor Roosevelt (Roosevelt, 1960) recognized this when she wrote, “Surely, in the light of history, it is more intelligent to hope rather than to fear, to try rather than not to try. For one thing we know beyond all doubt: Nothing has ever been achieved by the person who says, ‘It can’t be done.’” In the optimistic spirit of these two famous women, we will see examples throughout this book of people making a difference in their jobs, volunteer activities, and involvement in social change efforts.



Many other democracies rank higher than the United States on poverty, health, and other social indicators. For this reason, the United States may have much to learn from their positive examples. Alex Loach – Houses of Parliament, London, England – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Change also occurs in social problems because policymakers (elected or appointed officials and other individuals) pass laws or enact policies that successfully address a social problem. They often do so only because of the pressure of a social movement, but sometimes they have the vision to act without such pressure. It is also true that many officials fail to take action despite the pressure of a social movement, so those who do take action should be applauded. A recent example involves the governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, who made the legalization of same-sex marriage a top priority for his state when he took office in January 2011. After the New York state legislature narrowly approved same-sex marriage six months later, Cuomo’s advocacy was widely credited for enabling this to happen (Barbaro, 2011).

A final source of change is the lessons learned from other nations’ experiences with social problems. Sometimes these lessons for the United States are positive ones, as when another nation has tackled a social problem more successfully than the United States, and sometimes these lessons are negative ones, as when another nation has a more serious problem than the United States and/or has made mistakes in addressing this problem. The United States can learn from the good examples of some other nations, and it can also learn from the bad ones. For this reason, each chapter of this book discusses such examples. In this regard, the United States has much to learn from the experiences of other long-standing democracies like Canada, the nations of Western Europe, and Australia and New Zealand. Despite its great wealth, the United States ranks *below* most of its democratic peers on many social indicators, such as poverty, health, and so on (Holland, 2011; Russell, 2011). A major reason for this difference is that other democratic governments are far more proactive, in terms of attention and spending, than the US federal and state governments in helping their citizens. Because the United States has much to learn from their positive example, this book’s chapters all discuss policies that enable other democracies to address certain social problems far more successfully than the United States has addressed them.

Key Takeaways

- Social problems are persistent, but they have also changed over the years, and many social problems are less serious now than in the past.
- Three sources of change to social problems include social science research, the efforts of citizens acting alone or especially in social change groups, and the experiences of other nations.

For Your Review

1. Have you participated in any volunteer or other activity involving a social problem? If so, why did you do so? If not, why have you not participated in such an effort?
2. Do you share Eleanor Roosevelt's optimism that social change is possible? Why or why not?

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1.4: Doing Research on Social Problems

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to

1. List the major advantages and disadvantages of surveys, observational studies, and experiments.
2. Explain why scholars who study social problems often rely on existing data.

Sound research is an essential tool for understanding the sources, dynamics, and consequences of social problems and possible solutions to them. This section briefly describes the major ways in which sociologists gather information about social problems. Table 1.2 “Major Sociological Research Methods” summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of each method.

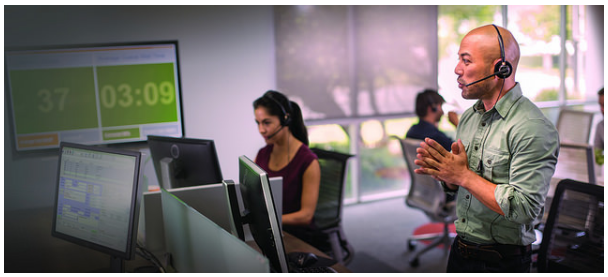
Table 1.2 Major Sociological Research Methods

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Survey	Many people can be included. If given to a random sample of the population, a survey’s results can be generalized to the population.	Large surveys are expensive and time consuming. Although much information is gathered, this information is relatively superficial.
Experiments	If random assignment is used, experiments provide fairly convincing data on cause and effect.	Because experiments do not involve random samples of the population and most often involve college students, their results cannot readily be generalized to the population.
Observation (field research)	Observational studies may provide rich, detailed information about the people who are observed.	Because observation studies do not involve random samples of the population, their results cannot readily be generalized to the population.
Existing data	Because existing data have already been gathered, the researcher does not have to spend the time and money to gather data.	The data set that is being analyzed may not contain data on all the variables in which a sociologist is interested or may contain data on variables that are not measured in ways the sociologist prefers.

Surveys

The *survey* is the most common method by which sociologists gather their data. The Gallup poll is perhaps the most well-known example of a survey and, like all surveys, gathers its data with the help of a questionnaire that is given to a group of respondents. The Gallup poll is an example of a survey conducted by a private organization, but sociologists do their own surveys, as does the government and many organizations in addition to Gallup. Many surveys are administered to respondents who are randomly chosen and thus constitute a random sample. In a random sample, everyone in the population (whether it be the whole US population or just the population of a state or city, all the college students in a state or city or all the students at just one college, etc.) has the same chance of being included in the survey. The beauty of a random sample is that it allows us to generalize the results of the sample to the population from which the sample comes. This means that we can be fairly sure of the behavior and attitudes of the whole US population by knowing the behavior and attitudes of just four hundred people randomly chosen from that population.

Some surveys are *face-to-face* surveys, in which interviewers meet with respondents to ask them questions. This type of survey can yield much information, because interviewers typically will spend at least an hour asking their questions, and a high response rate (the percentage of all people in the sample who agree to be interviewed), which is important to be able to generalize the survey’s results to the entire population. On the downside, this type of survey can be very expensive and time consuming to conduct.



Surveys are very useful for gathering various kinds of information relevant to social problems. Advances in technology have made telephone surveys involving random-digit dialing perhaps the most popular way of conducting a survey. plantronicsgermany – Encore520 call center man standing – CC BY-ND 2.0.

Because of these drawbacks, sociologists and other researchers have turned to telephone surveys. Most Gallup polls are conducted over the telephone. Computers do random-digit dialing, which results in a random sample of all telephone numbers being selected. Although the response rate and the number of questions asked are both lower than in face-to-face surveys (people can just hang up the phone at the outset or let their answering machine take the call), the ease and low expense of telephone surveys are making them increasingly popular. Surveys done over the Internet are also becoming more popular, as they can reach many people at very low expense. A major problem with web surveys is that their results cannot necessarily be generalized to the entire population because not everyone has access to the Internet.

Surveys are used in the study of social problems to gather information about the behavior and attitudes of people regarding one or more problems. For example, many surveys ask people about their use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs or about their experiences of being unemployed or in poor health. Many of the chapters in this book will present evidence gathered by surveys carried out by sociologists and other social scientists, various governmental agencies, and private research and public interest firms.

Experiments

Experiments are the primary form of research in the natural and physical sciences, but in the social sciences they are for the most part found only in psychology. Some sociologists still use experiments, however, and they remain a powerful tool of social research.

The major advantage of experiments, whether they are done in the natural and physical sciences or in the social sciences, is that the researcher can be fairly sure of a cause-and-effect relationship because of the way the experiment is set up. Although many different experimental designs exist, the typical experiment consists of an experimental group and a control group, with subjects *randomly assigned* to either group. The researcher does something to the experimental group that is not done to the control group. If the two groups differ later in some variable, then it is safe to say that the condition to which the experimental group was subjected was responsible for the difference that resulted.

Most experiments take place in the laboratory, which for psychologists may be a room with a one-way mirror, but some experiments occur in the field, or in a natural setting (*field experiments*). In Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the early 1980s, sociologists were involved in a much-discussed field experiment sponsored by the federal government. The researchers wanted to see whether arresting men for domestic violence made it less likely that they would commit such violence again. To test this hypothesis, the researchers had police do one of the following after arriving at the scene of a domestic dispute: They either arrested the suspect, separated him from his wife or partner for several hours, or warned him to stop but did not arrest or separate him. The researchers then determined the percentage of men in each group who committed repeated domestic violence during the next six months and found that those who were arrested had the lowest rate of recidivism, or repeat offending (Sherman & Berk, 1984). This finding led many jurisdictions across the United States to adopt a policy of mandatory arrest for domestic violence suspects. However, replications of the Minneapolis experiment in other cities found that arrest sometimes reduced recidivism for domestic violence but also sometimes increased it, depending on which city was being studied and on certain characteristics of the suspects, including whether they were employed at the time of their arrest (Sherman, 1992).

As the Minneapolis study suggests, perhaps the most important problem with experiments is that their results are not *generalizable* beyond the specific subjects studied. The subjects in most psychology experiments, for example, are college students, who obviously are not typical of average Americans: They are younger, more educated, and more likely to be middle class. Despite this problem, experiments in psychology and other social sciences have given us very valuable insights into the sources of attitudes and behavior. Scholars of social problems are increasingly using field experiments to study the effectiveness of various policies and programs aimed at addressing social problems. We will examine the results of several such experiments in the chapters ahead.

Observational Studies

Observational research, also called *field research*, is a staple of sociology. Sociologists have long gone into the field to observe people and social settings, and the result has been many rich descriptions and analyses of behavior in juvenile gangs, bars, urban street corners, and even whole communities.

Observational studies consist of both participant observation and nonparticipant observation. Their names describe how they differ. In participant observation, the researcher is part of the group that she or he is studying, spends time with the group, and might even live with people in the group. Several classical social problems studies of this type exist, many of them involving people in urban neighborhoods (Liebow, 1967; Liebow, 1993; Whyte, 1943). In nonparticipant observation, the researcher observes a group of people but does not otherwise interact with them. If you went to your local shopping mall to observe, say, whether people walking with children looked happier than people without children, you would be engaging in nonparticipant observation.

Similar to experiments, observational studies cannot automatically be generalized to other settings or members of the population. But in many ways they provide a richer account of people's lives than surveys do, and they remain an important method of research on social problems.

Existing Data

Sometimes sociologists do not gather their own data but instead analyze *existing data* that someone else has gathered. The US Census Bureau, for example, gathers data on all kinds of areas relevant to the lives of Americans, and many sociologists analyze census data on such social problems as poverty, unemployment, and illness. Sociologists interested in crime and the criminal justice system may analyze data from court records, while medical sociologists often analyze data from patient records at hospitals. Analysis of existing data such as these is called secondary data analysis. Its advantage to sociologists is that someone else has already spent the time and money to gather the data. A disadvantage is that the data set being analyzed may not contain data on all the topics in which a sociologist may be interested or may contain data on topics that are not measured in ways the sociologist might prefer.

The Scientific Method and Objectivity

This section began by stressing the need for sound research in the study of social problems. But what are the elements of sound research? At a minimum, such research should follow the rules of the *scientific method*. As you probably learned in high school and/or college science classes, these rules—formulating hypotheses, gathering and testing data, drawing conclusions, and so forth—help guarantee that research yields the most accurate and reliable conclusions possible.

An overriding principle of the scientific method is that research should be conducted as *objectively* as possible. Researchers are often passionate about their work, but they must take care not to let the findings they expect and even hope to uncover affect how they do their research. This in turn means that they must not conduct their research in a manner that helps achieve the results they expect to find. Such bias can happen unconsciously, and the scientific method helps reduce the potential for this bias as much as possible.

This potential is arguably greater in the social sciences than in the natural and physical sciences. The political views of chemists and physicists typically do not affect how an experiment is performed and how the outcome of the experiment is interpreted. In contrast, researchers in the social sciences, and perhaps particularly in sociology, often have strong feelings about the topics they are studying. Their social and political beliefs may thus influence how they perform their research on these topics and how they interpret the results of this research. Following the scientific method helps reduce this possible influence.

? Exercise 1.4.7

Which of the following is/are examples of sociological research methods?

a) Survey

b) Experiments

c) Observation

d) Existing Data

e) All of the above

Answer

Correct Answer: e

Key Takeaways

- The major types of research on social problems include surveys, experiments, observational studies, and the use of existing data.
- Surveys are the most common method, and the results of surveys of random samples may be generalized to the populations from which the samples come.
- Observation studies and existing data are also common methods in social problems research. Observation studies enable the gathering of rich, detailed information, but their results cannot necessarily be generalized beyond the people studied.
- Research on social problems should follow the scientific method to yield the most accurate and objective conclusions possible.

For Your Review

1. Have you ever been a respondent or subject in any type of sociological or psychological research project? If so, how did it feel to be studied?
2. Which type of social problems research method sounds most interesting to you? Why?

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1.5: End-of-Chapter Material

Summary

1. Some sociologists favor the social constructionist view that negative social conditions or behaviors are not social problems unless they are generally perceived as a social problem, but other sociologists say that these conditions and behaviors are still social problems even if they are not perceived as such.
2. According to C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination involves the ability to realize that personal troubles are rooted in problems in the larger social structure. The sociological imagination thus supports a blaming-the-system view over a blaming-the-victim view.
3. Social problems have existed for decades or even centuries, but many of these have also lessened in their seriousness over time, and change in the future is indeed possible.
4. Several theoretical perspectives in sociology exist. Functionalism emphasizes the functions that social institutions serve to ensure the ongoing stability of society, while conflict theory focuses on the conflict among different racial, ethnic, social class, and other groups and emphasizes how social institutions help ensure inequality. Symbolic interactionism focuses on how individuals interpret the meanings of the situations in which they find themselves.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Poverty

2.1: The Measurement and Extent of Poverty
2.2: Who the Poor Are- Social Patterns of Poverty
2.3: Explaining Poverty
2.4: The Consequences of Poverty
2.5: Global Poverty
2.6: Reducing Poverty
2.7: End-of-Chapter Material

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2.1: The Measurement and Extent of Poverty

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to do the following:

1. Understand how official poverty in the United States is measured.
2. Describe problems in the measurement of official poverty.
3. Describe the extent of official poverty.

When US officials became concerned about poverty during the 1960s, they quickly realized they needed to find out how much poverty we had. To do so, a measure of official poverty, or a poverty line, was needed. A government economist, Mollie Orshanky, first calculated this line in 1963 by multiplying the cost of a very minimal diet by three, as a 1955 government study had determined that the typical American family spent one-third of its income on food. Thus a family whose cash income is lower than three times the cost of a very minimal diet is considered officially poor.

This way of calculating the official poverty line has not changed since 1963. It is thus out of date for many reasons. For example, many expenses, such as heat and electricity, child care, transportation, and health care, now occupy a greater percentage of the typical family's budget than was true in 1963. In addition, this official measure ignores a family's noncash income from benefits such as food stamps and tax credits. As a national measure, the poverty line also fails to take into account regional differences in the cost of living. All these problems make the official measurement of poverty highly suspect. As one poverty expert observes, "The official measure no longer corresponds to reality. It doesn't get either side of the equation right—how much the poor have or how much they need. No one really trusts the data" (DeParle, et. al., 2011). We'll return to this issue shortly.

2021 Federal Poverty Guidelines

Family Size	Gross Annual Income	Gross Monthly Income	Approximate Hourly Wage
1	$12,880	$1,073	$6
2	$17,420	$1,452	$8
3	$21,960	$1,830	$11
4	$26,500	$2,208	$13
5	$31,040	$2,587	$15
6	$35,580	$2,965	$17
7	$40,120	$3,343	$19
8	$44,660	$3,722	$21
Over 8 add per person:	$4,540	$378	$2

Source: Federal Register vol. 86, No. 19, February 1, 2021, pp. 7732-34. Monthly and hourly income calculated by OCPP and rounded to the nearest dollar and cent, respectively. The hourly rate is based on 40 hours of work per week for a full year (2080 hours). These guidelines are for the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia.

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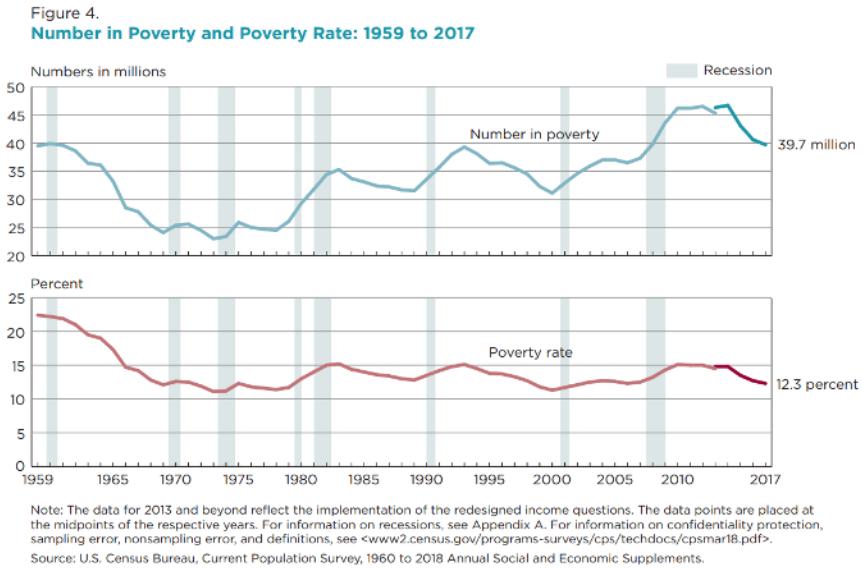
FPL: Federal Poverty Level also know as Official Poverty Line. The measure of official poverty began in 1963 and stipulates that a family whose income is lower than three times the cost of a minimal diet is considered officially poor. This measure has not changed since 1963 even though family expenses have risen greatly in many areas.

The poverty line is adjusted annually for inflation and takes into account the number of people in a family: The larger the family size, the higher the poverty line. In 2010, the poverty line for a nonfarm family of four (two adults, two children) was $22,213. A four-person family earning even one more dollar than $22,213 in 2010 was *not* officially poor, even though its "extra" income hardly lifted it out of dire economic straits. Poverty experts have calculated a no-frills budget that enables a family to meet its basic needs in food, clothing, shelter, and so forth; this budget is about twice the poverty line. Families with incomes between the poverty line and twice the poverty line (or *twice poverty*) are barely making ends meet, but they are not considered officially poor. When we talk here about the poverty level, then, keep in mind that we are talking only about *official* poverty and that there are many families and individuals living in near poverty who have trouble meeting their basic needs, especially when they face unusually high medical expenses, motor vehicle expenses, or the like. For this reason, many analysts think families need incomes twice as high as the federal poverty level just to get by (Wright, et. al., 2011). They thus use *twice-poverty* data (i.e., family incomes below

twice the poverty line) to provide a more accurate understanding of how many Americans face serious financial difficulties, even if they are not living in official poverty.

The Extent of Poverty

With this caveat in mind, how many Americans are poor? The US Census Bureau gives us some answers that use the traditional, official measure of poverty developed in 1963. In 2010, 15.1 percent of the US population, or 46.2 million Americans, lived in official poverty (DeNavas-Walt, et. al., 2011). This percentage represented a decline from the early 1990s but was higher than 2000 and even higher than the rate in the late 1960s (see Figure 2.1 “US Poverty, 1959–2010”). If we were winning the war on poverty in the 1960s (notice the sharp drop in the 1960s in Figure 2.1 “US Poverty, 1959–2010”), since then poverty has fought us to a standstill.



Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2018) Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/content/dam/C...63/figure4.pdf

Another way of understanding the extent of poverty is to consider episodic poverty, defined by the Census Bureau as being poor for at least two consecutive months in some time period. From 2004 to 2007, the last years for which data are available, almost one-third of the US public, equal to about 95 million people, were poor for at least two consecutive months, although only 2.2 percent were poor for all three years (DeNavas-Walt, et al., 2010). As these figures indicate, people go into and out of poverty, but even those who go out of it do not usually move very far from it. And as we have seen, the majority of Americans can expect to experience poverty or near poverty at some point in their lives.

The problems in the official poverty measure that were noted earlier have led the Census Bureau to develop a *Supplemental Poverty Measure*. This measure takes into account the many family expenses in addition to food; it also takes into account geographic differences in the cost of living, taxes paid and tax credits received, and the provision of food stamps, Medicaid, and certain other kinds of government aid. This new measure yields an estimate of poverty that is higher than the rather simplistic official poverty measure that, as noted earlier, is based solely on the size of a family and the cost of food and the amount of a family’s cash income. According to this new measure, the 2010 poverty rate was 16.0 percent, equal to 49.1 million Americans (Short, 2011). Because the official poverty measure identified 46.2 million people as poor, the new, more accurate measure increased the number of poor people in the United States by almost 3 million. Without the help of Social Security, food stamps, and other federal programs, at least 25 million additional people would be classified as poor (Sherman, 2011). These programs thus are essential in keeping many people above the poverty level, even if they still have trouble making ends meet and even though the poverty rate remains unacceptably high.

A final figure is worth noting. Recall that many poverty experts think that twice-poverty data—the percentage and number of people living in families with incomes below twice the official poverty level—are a better gauge than the official poverty level of the actual extent of poverty, broadly defined, in the United States. Using the twice-poverty threshold, about one-third of the US population, or more than 100 million Americans, live in poverty or near poverty (Pereyra, 2011). Those in near poverty are just one crisis—losing a job or sustaining a serious illness or injury—away from poverty. Twice-poverty data paint a very discouraging picture.

Key Takeaways

- The official poverty rate is based on the size of a family and a minimal food budget; this measure underestimates the true extent of poverty.
- The official poverty rate in 2010 was 15.1 percent, equal to more than 46 million Americans.
- About one-third of the US population, or more than 100 million Americans, have incomes no higher than twice the poverty line.

For Your Review

1. Write a short essay that summarizes the problems by which the official poverty rate is determined.
2. Sit down with some classmates and estimate what a family of four (two parents, two young children) in your area would have to pay annually for food, clothing, shelter, energy, and other necessities of life. What figure do you end up with? How does this sum of money compare with the official poverty line of $22,213 in 2010 for a family of four?

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2.2: Who the Poor Are- Social Patterns of Poverty

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe racial/ethnic differences in the poverty rate.
2. Discuss how family structure is related to the poverty rate.
3. Explain what poverty and labor force participation data imply about the belief that many poor people lack the motivation to work.

Who are the poor? Although the official poverty rate in 2010 was 15.1 percent, this rate differs by the important sociodemographic characteristics of race/ethnicity, gender, and age, and it also differs by region of the nation and by family structure. The poverty rate differences based on these variables are critical to understanding the nature and social patterning of poverty in the United States. We look at each of these variables in turn with 2010 census data (DeNavas-Walt, et, al., 2011).

? Exercise 2.2.1

Most poor people in the United States are likely to be:

a) Black/African American

b) Latino

c) Native American

d) Asian

e) White

Answer

The correct answer is e

What did you circle? If you are like the majority of people who answer a similar question in public opinion surveys, you would have circled *a. Black/African American*. When Americans think about poor people, they tend to picture African Americans (White, 2007). This popular image is thought to reduce the public's sympathy for poor people and to lead them to oppose increased government aid for the poor. The public's views on these matters are, in turn, thought to play a key role in government poverty policy. It is thus essential for the public to have an accurate understanding of the racial/ethnic patterning of poverty.

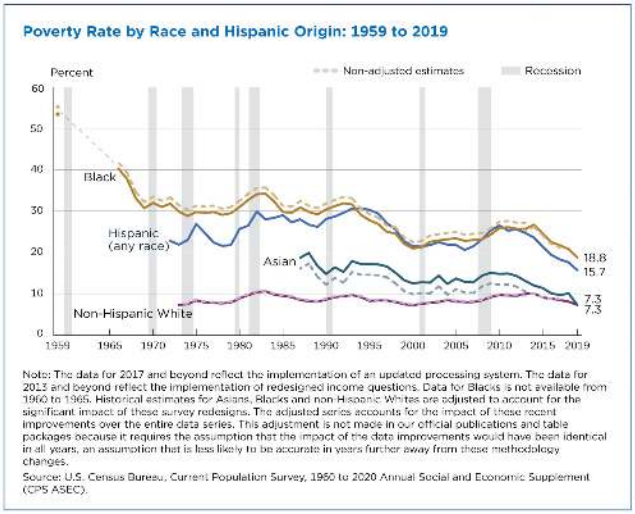


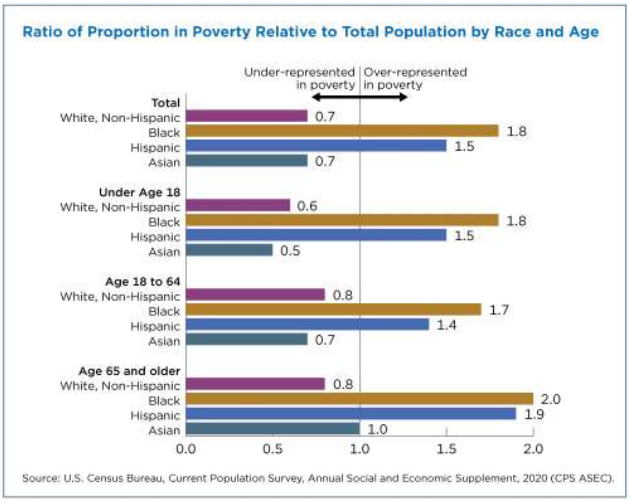
The most typical poor people in the United States are non-Latino whites. These individuals comprise 42.4 percent of all poor Americans. Franco Folini – Homeless guys with dogs – CC BY-SA 2.0.

Unfortunately, the public's racial image of poor people is mistaken, as census data reveal that *the most typical poor person is white (non-Latino)*. To be more precise, 42.4 percent of poor people are white (non-Latino), 28.7 percent are Latino, 23.1 percent are black, and 3.7 percent are Asian (see Figure 2.2 "Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Poor, 2010 (Percentage of Poor Persons

Who Belong to Each Group)"). As these figures show, non-Latino whites certainly comprise the greatest number of the American poor. Turning these percentages into numbers, they account for 19.6 million of the 46.2 million poor Americans.

It is also true, though, that race and ethnicity affect the chances of being poor. While only 9.9 percent of non-Latino whites are poor, 27.4 percent of African Americans, 12.1 percent of Asians, and 26.6 percent of Latinos (who may be of any race) are poor (see Figure 2.3 "Race, Ethnicity, and Poverty, 2010 (Percentage of Each Group That Is Poor)"). Thus African Americans and Latinos are almost three times as likely as non-Latino whites to be poor. (Because there are so many non-Latino whites in the United States, the greatest number of poor people are non-Latino white, even if the percentage of whites who are poor is relatively low.) The higher poverty rates of people of color are so striking and important that they have been termed the "colors of poverty" (Lin & Harris, 2008).



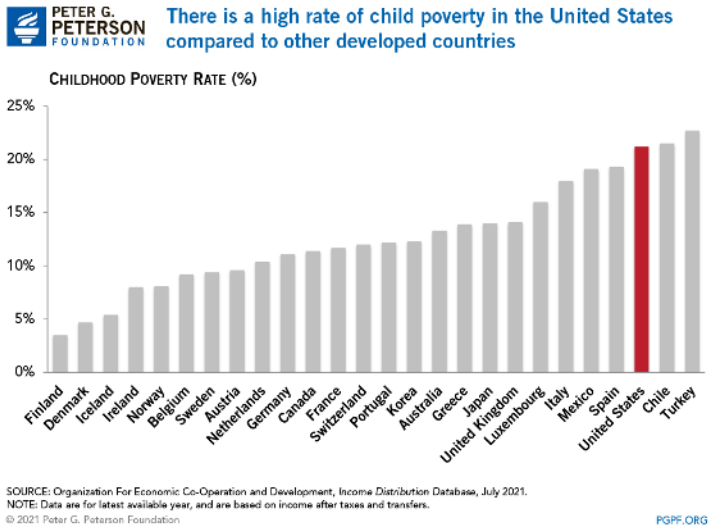


Gender

One thing that many women know all too well is that women are more likely than men to be poor. According to the census, 16.2 percent of all females live in poverty, compared to only 14.0 percent of all males. These figures translate to a large gender gap in the actual number of poor people, as 25.2 million women and girls live in poverty, compared to only 21.0 million men and boys, for a difference of 4.2 million people. The high rate of female poverty is called the *feminization of poverty* (Iceland, 2006). We will see additional evidence of this pattern when we look at the section on family structure that follows.

Age

Turning to age, at any one time 22 percent of children under age 18 are poor (amounting to 16.4 million children), a figure that rises to about 39 percent of African American children and 35 percent of Latino children. About 37 percent of all children live in poverty for at least one year before turning 18 (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010). The poverty rate for US children is the highest of all wealthy democracies and in fact is 1.5 to 9 times greater than the corresponding rates in Canada and Western Europe (Mishel, et. al., 2009). As high as the US childhood poverty rate is, twice-poverty data again paint an even more discouraging picture. Children living in families with incomes below twice the official poverty level are called *low-income children*, and their families are called *low-income families*. Almost 44 percent of American children, or some 32.5 million kids, live in such families (Addy & Wright, 2012). Almost two-thirds of African American children and Latino children live in low-income families.



At the other end of the age distribution, 9 percent of people aged 65 or older are poor (amounting to about 3.5 million seniors). Turning around these age figures, almost 36 percent of all poor people in the United States are children, and almost 8 percent of the poor are 65 or older. Thus more than 43.4 percent of Americans living in poverty are children or the elderly.

Region

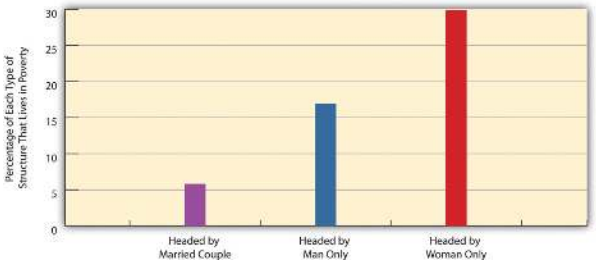
Poverty rates differ around the country. Some states have higher poverty rates than other states, and some counties within a state are poorer than other counties within that state. A basic way of understanding geographical differences in poverty is to examine the poverty rates of the four major regions of the nation. When we do this, the South is the poorest region, with a poverty rate of 16.9 percent. The West is next (15.3 percent), followed by the Midwest (13.9 percent) and then the Northeast (12.8 percent). The South's high poverty rate is thought to be an important reason for the high rate of illnesses and other health problems it experiences compared to the other regions (Ramshaw, 2011).

Family Structure

There are many types of family structures, including a married couple living with their children; an unmarried couple living with one or more children; a household with children headed by only one parent, usually a woman; a household with two adults and no children; and a household with only one adult living alone. Across the nation, poverty rates differ from one type of family structure to another.

Not surprisingly, poverty rates are higher in families with one adult than in those with two adults (because they often are bringing in two incomes), and, in one-adult families, they are higher in families headed by a woman than in those headed by a man (because women generally have lower incomes than men). Of all families headed by just a woman, 31.6 percent live in poverty, compared to only 15.8 percent of families headed by just a man. In contrast, only 6.2 percent of families headed by a married couple live in poverty (see Figure 2.4 "Family Structure and Poverty Rate (Percentage of Each Type of Structure That Lives in Poverty)"). The figure for female-headed families provides additional evidence for the feminization of poverty concept introduced earlier.

Figure 2.4 Family Structure and Poverty Rate (Percentage of Each Type of Structure That Lives in Poverty)



Source: Data from DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., & Smith, J. C. (2011). *Income, poverty, and health insurance coverage in the United States: 2010* (Current Population Report P60-239). Washington, DC: US Census Bureau.

We saw earlier that 22 percent of American children are poor. This figure varies according to the type of family structure in which the children live. Whereas only 11.6 percent of children residing with married parents live in poverty, 46.9 percent of those living with only their mother live in poverty. This latter figure rises to 53.3 percent for African American children and 57.0 percent for Latino children (US Census Bureau, 2012). Yet regardless of their race or ethnicity, children living just with their mothers are at particularly great risk of living in poverty.

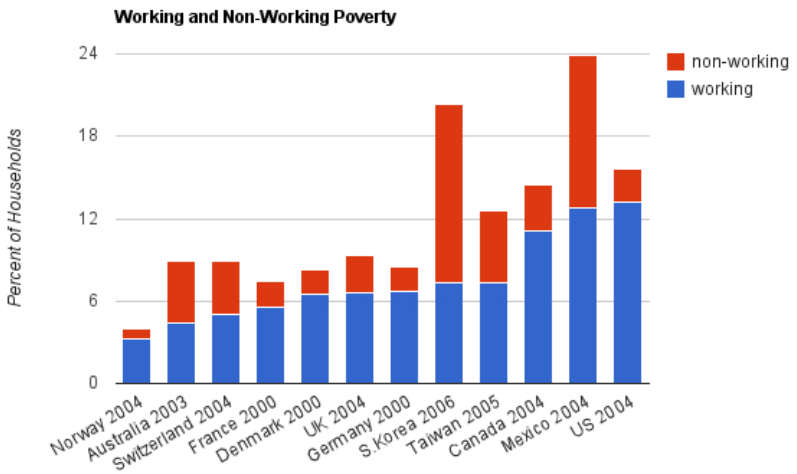
Labor Force Status

As this chapter discusses later, many Americans think the poor are lazy and lack the motivation to work and, as is often said, "really could work if they wanted to." However, government data on the poor show that most poor people are, in fact, either working, unemployed but looking for work, or unable to work because of their age or health. Table 2.1 "Poverty and Labor Force Participation, 2010" shows the relevant data. We discuss these numbers in some detail because of their importance, so please follow along carefully.

Table 2.1 Poverty and Labor Force Participation, 2010

Total number of poor people	46,180,000
Number of poor people under age 18	16,401,000
Number of poor people ages 65 and older	3,521,000
Number of poor people ages 18–64	26,258,000
Number of poor people ages 18–64 who were:	
Working full- or part-time	9,053,000
Unemployed but looking for work	3,616,000
Disabled	4,247,000
In the armed forces	77,000
Able-bodied but not in the labor force	9,254,000

Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2010). Current population survey (CPS) table creator. Retrieved from www.census.gov/cps/data/cpstablecreator.html.



Source: LIS Web Tabulator, www.lisdatacenter.org (October 8, 2011). Luxembourg: LIS.y ; Most recent data available*

Let's examine this table to see the story it tells. Of the roughly 46.2 million poor people, almost 20 million were either under age 18 or at least 65. Because of their ages, we would not expect them to be working. Of the remaining 26.3 million poor adults ages 18–64, almost 17 million, or about two-thirds, fell into one of these categories: (a) they worked full-time or part-time, (b) they were

unemployed but looking for work during a year of very high unemployment due to the nation's faltering economy, (c) they did not work because of a disability, or (d) they were in the armed forces. Subtracting all these adults leaves about 9.3 million able-bodied people ages 18–64.

Doing some arithmetic, we thus see that almost 37 million of the 46.2 million poor people we started with, or 80 percent, with were either working or unemployed but looking for work, too young or too old to work, disabled, or in the armed forces. It would thus be inaccurate to describe the vast majority of the poor as lazy and lacking the motivation to work.

What about the 9.3 million able-bodied poor people who are ages 18–64 but not in the labor force, who compose only 20 percent of the poor to begin with? Most of them were either taking care of small children or elderly parents or other relatives, retired for health reasons, or in school (US Census Bureau, 2012); some also left the labor force out of frustration and did not look for work (and thus were not counted officially as unemployed). Taking all these numbers and categories into account, it turns out that the percentage of poor people who "really could work if they wanted to" is rather miniscule, and the common belief that they "really could work if they wanted to" is nothing more than a myth.

People Making a Difference

Feeding "Motel Kids" Near Disneyland

Just blocks from Disneyland in Anaheim, California, more than 1,000 families live in cheap motels frequently used by drug dealers and prostitutes. Because they cannot afford the deposit for an apartment, the motels are their only alternative to homelessness. As Bruno Serato, a local Italian restaurant owner, observed, "Some people are stuck, they have no money. They need to live in that room. They've lost everything they have. They have no other choice. No choice."

Serato learned about these families back in 2005, when he saw a boy at the local Boys & Girls Club eating a bag of potato chips as his only food for dinner. He was told that the boy lived with his family in a motel and that the Boys & Girls Club had a "motel kids" program that drove children in vans after school to their motels. Although the children got free breakfast and lunch at school, they often went hungry at night. Serato soon began serving pasta dinners to some seventy children at the club every evening, a number that had grown by spring 2011 to almost three hundred children nightly. Serato also pays to have the children transported to the club for their dinners, and he estimates that the food and transportation cost him about $2,000 monthly. His program had served more than 300,000 pasta dinners to motel kids by 2011.

Two of the children who eat Serato's pasta are Carlos and Anthony Gomez, 12, who live in a motel room with the other members of their family. Their father was grateful for the pasta: "I no longer worry as much, about them [coming home] and there being no food. I know that they eat over there at [the] Boys & Girls Club."

Bruno Serato is merely happy to be helping out. "They're customers," he explains. "My favorite customers" (Toner, 2011).

For more information about Bruno Serato's efforts, visit his charity site at www.thecaterinasclub.org.

Key Takeaways

- Although people of color have higher poverty rates than non-Latino whites, the most typical poor person in the United States is non-Latino white.
- The US childhood poverty rate is the highest of all Western democracies.
- Labor force participation data indicate that the belief that poor people lack motivation to work is in fact a myth.

For Your Review

1. Why do you think the majority of Americans assume poor people lack the motivation to work?
2. Explain to a friend how labor force participation data indicate that it is inaccurate to think that poor people lack the motivation to work.

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2.3: Explaining Poverty

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe the assumptions of the functionalist and conflict views of stratification and of poverty.
2. Explain the focus of symbolic interactionist work on poverty.
3. Understand the difference between the individualist and structural explanations of poverty.

Why does poverty exist, and why and how do poor people end up being poor? The sociological perspectives introduced in Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems" provide some possible answers to these questions through their attempt to explain why American society is *stratified*—that is, why it has a range of wealth ranging from the extremely wealthy to the extremely poor. We review what these perspectives say generally about social stratification (rankings of people based on wealth and other resources a society values) before turning to explanations focusing specifically on poverty.

In general, the functionalist perspective and conflict perspective both try to explain why social stratification exists and endures, while the symbolic interactionist perspective discusses the differences that stratification produces for everyday interaction. Table 2.2 "Theory Snapshot" summarizes these three approaches.

Table 2.2 Theory Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Functionalism	Stratification is necessary to induce people with special intelligence, knowledge, and skills to enter the most important occupations. For this reason, stratification is necessary and inevitable.
Conflict theory	Stratification results from lack of opportunity and from discrimination and prejudice against the poor, women, and people of color. It is neither necessary nor inevitable.
Symbolic interactionism	Stratification affects people's beliefs, lifestyles, daily interaction, and conceptions of themselves.

The Functionalist View

As discussed in Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems", functionalist theory assumes that society's structures and processes exist because they serve important functions for society's stability and continuity. In line with this view, functionalist theorists in sociology assume that stratification exists because it also serves important functions for society. This explanation was developed more than sixty years ago by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (Davis & Moore, 1945) in the form of several logical assumptions that imply stratification is both necessary and inevitable. When applied to American society, their assumptions would be as follows:

1. **Some jobs are more important than other jobs.** For example, the job of a brain surgeon is more important than the job of shoe shining.
2. **Some jobs require more skills and knowledge than other jobs.** To stay with our example, it takes more skills and knowledge to perform brain surgery than to shine shoes.
3. **Relatively few people have the ability to acquire the skills and knowledge that are needed to do these important, highly skilled jobs.** Most of us would be able to do a decent job of shining shoes, but very few of us would be able to become brain surgeons.
4. **To encourage the people with the skills and knowledge to do the important, highly skilled jobs, society must promise them higher incomes or other rewards.** If this is true, some people automatically end up higher in society's ranking system than others, and stratification is thus necessary and inevitable.

To illustrate their assumptions, say we have a society where shining shoes and doing brain surgery both give us incomes of $150,000 per year. (This example is *very* hypothetical, but please keep reading.) If you decide to shine shoes, you can begin making this money at age 16, but if you decide to become a brain surgeon, you will not start making this same amount until about age 35, as you must first go to college and medical school and then acquire several more years of medical training. While you have spent

nineteen additional years beyond age 16 getting this education and training and taking out tens of thousands of dollars in student loans, you could have spent those years shining shoes and making $150,000 a year, or $2.85 million overall. Which job would you choose?



Functional theory argues that the promise of very high incomes is necessary to encourage talented people to pursue important careers such as surgery. If physicians and shoe shiners made the same high income, would enough people decide to become physicians? Public Domain Images – CC0 public domain.

As this example suggests, many people might not choose to become brain surgeons unless considerable financial and other rewards awaited them. By extension, we might not have enough people filling society's important jobs unless they know they will be similarly rewarded. If this is true, we must have stratification. And if we must have stratification, then that means some people will have much less money than other people. If stratification is inevitable, then, poverty is also inevitable. The functionalist view further implies that if people are poor, it is because they do not have the ability to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for the important, high-paying jobs.

The functionalist view sounds very logical, but a few years after Davis and Moore published their theory, other sociologists pointed out some serious problems in their argument (Tumin, 1953; Wrong, 1959).

First, it is difficult to compare the importance of many types of jobs. For example, which is more important, doing brain surgery or mining coal? Although you might be tempted to answer with brain surgery, if no coal were mined then much of our society could not function. In another example, which job is more important, attorney or professor? (Be careful how you answer this one!)

Second, the functionalist explanation implies that the most important jobs have the highest incomes and the least important jobs the lowest incomes, but many examples, including the ones just mentioned, counter this view. Coal miners make much less money than physicians, and professors, for better or worse, earn much less on the average than lawyers. A professional athlete making millions of dollars a year earns many times the income of the president of the United States, but who is more important to the nation? Elementary school teachers do a very important job in our society, but their salaries are much lower than those of sports agents, advertising executives, and many other people whose jobs are far less essential.

Third, the functionalist view assumes that people move up the economic ladder based on their abilities, skills, knowledge, and, more generally, their merit. This implies that if they do not move up the ladder, they lack the necessary merit. However, this view ignores the fact that much of our stratification stems from lack of equal opportunity. As later chapters in this book discuss, because of their race, ethnicity, gender, and class standing at birth, some people have less opportunity than others to acquire the skills and training they need to fill the types of jobs addressed by the functionalist approach.

Finally, the functionalist explanation might make sense up to a point, but it does not justify the extremes of wealth and poverty found in the United States and other nations. Even if we do have to promise higher incomes to get enough people to become physicians, does that mean we also need the amount of poverty we have? Do CEOs of corporations really need to make millions of dollars per year to get enough qualified people to become CEOs? Do people take on a position as CEO or other high-paying job at least partly because of the challenge, working conditions, and other positive aspects they offer? The functionalist view does not answer these questions adequately.

One other line of functionalist thinking focuses more directly on poverty than generally on stratification. This particular functionalist view provocatively argues that poverty exists because it serves certain positive functions for our society. These functions include the following: (1) poor people do the work that other people do not want to do; (2) the programs that help poor

people provide a lot of jobs for the people employed by the programs; (3) the poor purchase goods, such as day-old bread and used clothing, that other people do not wish to purchase, and thus extend the economic value of these goods; and (4) the poor provide jobs for doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals who may not be competent enough to be employed in positions catering to wealthier patients, clients, students, and so forth (Gans, 1972). Because poverty serves all these functions and more, according to this argument, the middle and upper classes have a vested interested in neglecting poverty to help ensure its continued existence.

? Exercise 2.3.1

Which of the following is an assumption about social stratification is associated with the functionalist perspective?

a) Social stratification affects people's beliefs, lifestyles, daily interaction, and conceptions of themselves.

b) Social stratification is necessary and inevitable.

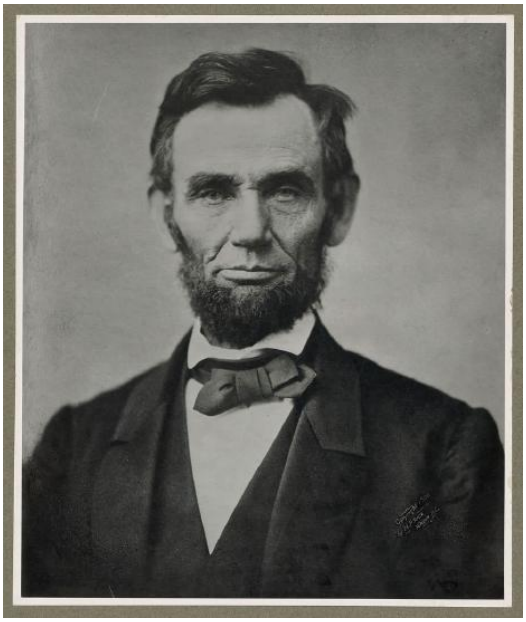
c) Social stratification results from lack of opportunity and from discrimination and prejudice against the poor, women, and people of color.

d) Social stratification is necessary to induce people with special intelligence, knowledge, and skills to enter the most important occupation.

Answer

B & D

The Conflict View



Because he was born in a log cabin and later became president, Abraham Lincoln's life epitomizes the American Dream, which is the belief that people born into poverty can become successful through hard work. The popularity of this belief leads many Americans to blame poor people for their poverty. US Library of Congress – public domain.

Conflict theory's explanation of stratification draws on Karl Marx's view of class societies and incorporates the critique of the functionalist view just discussed. Many different explanations grounded in conflict theory exist, but they all assume that stratification stems from a fundamental conflict between the needs and interests of the powerful, or "haves," in society and those of the weak, or "have-nots" (Kerbo, 2012). The former take advantage of their position at the top of society to stay at the top, even if it means oppressing those at the bottom. At a minimum, they can heavily influence the law, the media, and other institutions in a way that maintains society's class structure.

In general, conflict theory attributes stratification and thus poverty to lack of opportunity from discrimination and prejudice against the poor, women, and people of color. In this regard, it reflects one of the early critiques of the functionalist view that the previous section outlined. To reiterate an earlier point, several of the remaining chapters of this book discuss the various obstacles that make

it difficult for the poor, women, and people of color in the United States to move up the socioeconomic ladder and to otherwise enjoy healthy and productive lives.

? Exercise 2.3.2

Which of the following is an assumption about social stratification is associated with the conflict perspective?

a) Social stratification affects people's beliefs, lifestyles, daily interaction, and conceptions of themselves.

b) Social stratification is necessary and inevitable.

c) Social stratification results from lack of opportunity and from discrimination and prejudice against the poor, women, and people of color.

d) Social stratification is necessary to induce people with special intelligence, knowledge, and skills to enter the most important occupation.

Answer

Correct answer: c

Symbolic Interactionism

Consistent with its micro orientation, symbolic interactionism tries to understand stratification and thus poverty by looking at people's interaction and understandings in their daily lives. Unlike the functionalist and conflict views, it does not try to explain why we have stratification in the first place. Rather, it examines the differences that stratification makes for people's lifestyles and their interaction with other people.

Many detailed, insightful sociological books on the lives of the urban and rural poor reflect the symbolic interactionist perspective (Anderson, 1999; C. M. Duncan, 2000; Liebow, 1993; Rank, 1994). These books focus on different people in different places, but they all make very clear that the poor often lead lives of quiet desperation and must find ways of coping with the fact of being poor. In these books, the consequences of poverty discussed later in this chapter acquire a human face, and readers learn in great detail what it is like to live in poverty on a daily basis.

Some classic journalistic accounts by authors not trained in the social sciences also present eloquent descriptions of poor people's lives (Bagdikian, 1964; Harrington, 1962). Writing in this tradition, a newspaper columnist who grew up in poverty recently recalled, "I know the feel of thick calluses on the bottom of shoeless feet. I know the bite of the cold breeze that slithers through a drafty house. I know the weight of constant worry over not having enough to fill a belly or fight an illness…Poverty is brutal, consuming and unforgiving. It strikes at the soul" (Blow, 2011).

Sociological accounts of the poor provide a vivid portrait of what it is like to live in poverty on a daily basis.

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On a more lighthearted note, examples of the symbolic interactionist framework are also seen in the many literary works and films that portray the difficulties that the rich and poor have in interacting on the relatively few occasions when they do interact. For example, in the film *Pretty Woman*, Richard Gere plays a rich businessman who hires a prostitute, played by Julia Roberts, to accompany him to swank parties and other affairs. Roberts has to buy a new wardrobe and learn how to dine and behave in these social settings, and much of the film's humor and poignancy come from her awkwardness in learning the lifestyle of the rich.

? Exercise 2.3.3

Which of the following is an assumption about social stratification is associated with the interactionist perspective?

a) Social stratification affects people's beliefs, lifestyles, daily interaction, and conceptions of themselves.

b) Social stratification is necessary and inevitable.

c) Social stratification results from lack of opportunity and from discrimination and prejudice against the poor, women, and people of color.

d) Social stratification is necessary to induce people with special intelligence, knowledge, and skills to enter the most important occupation.

Answer

Correct answer: A

Specific Explanations of Poverty

The functionalist and conflict views focus broadly on social stratification but only indirectly on poverty. When poverty finally attracted national attention during the 1960s, scholars began to try specifically to understand why poor people become poor and remain poor. Two competing explanations developed, with the basic debate turning on whether poverty arises from problems either within the poor themselves or in the society in which they live (Rank, 2011). The first type of explanation follows logically from the functional theory of stratification and may be considered an individualistic explanation. The second type of explanation follows from conflict theory and is a structural explanation that focuses on problems in American society that produce poverty. Table 2.3 "Explanations of Poverty" summarizes these explanations.

Table 2.3 Explanations of Poverty

Explanation	Major assumptions
Individualistic	Poverty results from the fact that poor people lack the motivation to work and have certain beliefs and values that contribute to their poverty.
Structural	Poverty results from problems in society that lead to a lack of opportunity and a lack of jobs.

It is critical to determine which explanation makes more sense because, as sociologist Theresa C. Davidson (Davidson, 2009) observes, "beliefs about the causes of poverty shape attitudes toward the poor." To be more precise, the particular explanation that people favor affects their view of government efforts to help the poor. Those who attribute poverty to problems in the larger society are much more likely than those who attribute it to deficiencies among the poor to believe that the government should do more to help the poor (Bradley & Cole, 2002). The explanation for poverty we favor presumably affects the amount of sympathy we have for the poor, and our sympathy, or lack of sympathy, in turn affects our views about the government's role in helping the poor. With this backdrop in mind, what do the individualistic and structural explanations of poverty say?

Individualistic Explanation

According to the individualistic explanation, the poor have personal problems and deficiencies that are responsible for their poverty. In the past, the poor were thought to be biologically inferior, a view that has not entirely faded, but today the much more common belief is that they lack the ambition and motivation to work hard and to achieve success. According to survey evidence, the majority of Americans share this belief (Davidson, 2009). A more sophisticated version of this type of explanation is called the *culture of poverty* theory (Banfield, 1974; Lewis, 1966; Murray, 2012). According to this theory, the poor generally have beliefs and values that differ from those of the nonpoor and that doom them to continued poverty. For example, they are said to be impulsive and to live for the present rather than the future.

Regardless of which version one might hold, the individualistic explanation is a blaming-the-victim approach (see Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems"). Critics say this explanation ignores discrimination and other problems in American society and exaggerates the degree to which the poor and nonpoor do in fact hold different values (Ehrenreich, 2012; Holland, 2011; Schmidt, 2012). Regarding the latter point, they note that poor employed adults work more hours per week than wealthier adults and that poor parents interviewed in surveys value education for their children at least as much as wealthier parents. These and other similarities in values and beliefs lead critics of the individualistic explanation to conclude that poor people's poverty cannot reasonably be said to result from a culture of poverty.

Structural Explanation

According to the second, structural explanation, which is a blaming-the-system approach, US poverty stems from problems in American society that lead to a lack of equal opportunity and a lack of jobs. These problems include (a) racial, ethnic, gender, and

age discrimination; (b) lack of good schooling and adequate health care; and (c) structural changes in the American economic system, such as the departure of manufacturing companies from American cities in the 1980s and 1990s that led to the loss of thousands of jobs. These problems help create a vicious cycle of poverty in which children of the poor are often fated to end up in poverty or near poverty themselves as adults.

As Rank (Rank, 2011) summarizes this view, "American poverty is largely the result of failings at the economic and political levels, rather than at the individual level…In contrast to [the individualistic] perspective, the basic problem lies in a shortage of viable opportunities for all Americans." Rank points out that the US economy during the past few decades has created more low-paying and part-time jobs and jobs without benefits, meaning that Americans increasingly find themselves in jobs that barely lift them out of poverty, if at all. Sociologist Fred Block and colleagues share this critique of the individualistic perspective: "Most of our policies incorrectly assume that people can avoid or overcome poverty through hard work alone. Yet this assumption ignores the realities of our failing urban schools, increasing employment insecurities, and the lack of affordable housing, health care, and child care. It ignores the fact that the American Dream is rapidly becoming unattainable for an increasing number of Americans, whether employed or not" (Block, et. al., 2006).

Most sociologists favor the structural explanation. As later chapters in this book document, racial and ethnic discrimination, lack of adequate schooling and health care, and other problems make it difficult to rise out of poverty. On the other hand, some ethnographic research supports the individualistic explanation by showing that the poor do have certain values and follow certain practices that augment their plight (Small, et. al., 2010). For example, the poor have higher rates of cigarette smoking (34 percent of people with annual incomes between $6,000 and $11,999 smoke, compared to only 13 percent of those with incomes $90,000 or greater [Goszkowski, 2008]), which helps cause them to have more serious health problems.

Adopting an integrated perspective, some researchers say these values and practices are ultimately the result of poverty itself (Small et, al., 2010). These scholars concede a culture of poverty does exist, but they also say it exists because it helps the poor cope daily with the structural effects of being poor. If these effects lead to a culture of poverty, they add, poverty then becomes self-perpetuating. If poverty is both cultural and structural in origin, these scholars say, efforts to improve the lives of people in the "other America" must involve increased structural opportunities for the poor and changes in some of their values and practices.

Key Takeaways

- According to the functionalist view, stratification is a necessary and inevitable consequence of the need to use the promise of financial reward to encourage talented people to pursue important jobs and careers.
- According to conflict theory, stratification results from lack of opportunity and discrimination against the poor and people of color.
- According to symbolic interactionism, social class affects how people interact in everyday life and how *they view certain aspects of the social world*.
- The individualistic view attributes poverty to individual failings of poor people themselves, while the structural view attributes poverty to problems in the larger society.

For Your Review

1. In explaining poverty in the United States, which view, individualist or structural, makes more sense to you? Why?
2. Suppose you could wave a magic wand and invent a society where everyone had about the same income no matter which job he or she performed. Do you think it would be difficult to persuade enough people to become physicians or to pursue other important careers? Explain your answer.

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2.4: The Consequences of Poverty

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to do the following:

1. Describe the family and housing problems associated with poverty.
2. Explain how poverty affects health and educational attainment.

Regardless of its causes, poverty has devastating consequences for the people who live in it. Much research conducted and/or analyzed by scholars, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations has documented the effects of poverty (and near poverty) on the lives of the poor (Lindsey, 2009; Moore, et. al., 2009; Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010; Sanders, 2011). Many of these studies focus on childhood poverty, and these studies make it very clear that childhood poverty has lifelong consequences. In general, poor children are more likely to be poor as adults, more likely to drop out of high school, more likely to become a teenaged parent, and more likely to have employment problems. Although only 1 percent of children who are never poor end up being poor as young adults, 32 percent of poor children become poor as young adults (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010).

? Exercise 2.4.1

True/False: 1 child in 6 lives in poverty compared to 1 in 8 adults. That's 11.9 million impoverished children in the U.S.

Answer

True.



Poor children are more likely to have inadequate nutrition and to experience health, behavioral, and cognitive problems. Kelly Short – Poverty: "Damaged Child," Oklahoma City, OK, USA, 1936. (Colorized). – CC BY-SA 2.0.E

A recent study used government data to follow children born between 1968 and 1975 until they were ages 30 to 37 (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011). The researchers compared individuals who lived in poverty in early childhood to those whose families had incomes at least twice the poverty line in early childhood. Compared to the latter group, adults who were poor in early childhood

- had completed two fewer years of schooling on the average;
- had incomes that were less than half of those earned by adults who had wealthier childhoods;
- received $826 more annually in food stamps on the average;
- were almost three times more likely to report being in poor health;
- were twice as likely to have been arrested (males only); and
- were five times as likely to have borne a child (females only).

We discuss some of the major specific consequences of poverty here and will return to them in later chapters.

Exercise 2.4.2

True/False: Food insecurity has lasting effects like low reading & math scores, & more physical & mental health problems.

Answer

True.

Family Problems

The poor are at greater risk for family problems, including divorce and domestic violence. As Chapter 9 "Sexual Behavior" explains, a major reason for many of the problems families experience is stress. Even in families that are not poor, running a household can cause stress, children can cause stress, and paying the bills can cause stress. Families that are poor have more stress because of their poverty, and the ordinary stresses of family life become even more intense in poor families. The various kinds of family problems thus happen more commonly in poor families than in wealthier families. Compounding this situation, when these problems occur, poor families have fewer resources than wealthier families to deal with these problems.

Children and Our Future

Getting under Children's Skin: The Biological Effects of Childhood Poverty

As the text discusses, childhood poverty often has lifelong consequences. Poor children are more likely to be poor when they become adults, and they are at greater risk for antisocial behavior when young, and for unemployment, criminal behavior, and other problems when they reach adolescence and young adulthood.

According to growing evidence, one reason poverty has these consequences is that it has certain neural effects on poor children that impair their cognitive abilities and thus their behavior and learning potential. As Greg J. Duncan and Katherine Magnuson (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011, p. 23) observe, "Emerging research in neuroscience and developmental psychology suggests that poverty early in a child's life may be particularly harmful because the astonishingly rapid development of young children's brains leaves them sensitive (and vulnerable) to environmental conditions."

In short, poverty can change the way the brain develops in young children. The major reason for this effect is stress. Children growing up in poverty experience multiple stressful events: neighborhood crime and drug use; divorce, parental conflict, and other family problems, including abuse and neglect by their parents; parental financial problems and unemployment; physical and mental health problems of one or more family members; and so forth. Their great levels of stress in turn affect their bodies in certain harmful ways. As two poverty scholars note, "It's not just that poverty-induced stress is mentally taxing. If it's experienced early enough in childhood, it can in fact get 'under the skin' and change the way in which the body copes with the environment and the way in which the brain develops. These deep, enduring, and sometimes irreversible physiological changes are the very human price of running a high-poverty society" (Grusky & Wimer, 2011, p. 2).

One way poverty gets "under children's skin" is as follows (Evans, et. al., 2011). Poor children's high levels of stress produce unusually high levels of stress hormones such as cortisol and higher levels of blood pressure. Because these high levels impair their neural development, their memory and language development skills suffer. This result in turn affects their behavior and learning potential. For other physiological reasons, high levels of stress also affect the immune system, so that poor children are more likely to develop various illnesses during childhood and to have high blood pressure and other health problems when they grow older, and cause other biological changes that make poor children more likely to end up being obese and to have drug and alcohol problems.

The policy implications of the scientific research on childhood poverty are clear. As public health scholar Jack P. Shonkoff (Shonkoff, 2011) explains, "Viewing this scientific evidence within a biodevelopmental framework points to the particular importance of addressing the needs of our most disadvantaged children at the earliest ages." Duncan and Magnuson (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011) agree that "greater policy attention should be given to remediating situations involving deep and persistent poverty occurring early in childhood." To reduce poverty's harmful physiological effects on children, Skonkoff advocates efforts to promote strong, stable relationships among all members of poor families; to improve the quality of the home and neighborhood physical environments in which poor children grow; and to improve the nutrition of poor children. Duncan and Magnuson call for more generous income transfers to poor families with young children and note that many European democracies provide many kinds of support to such families. The recent scientific evidence on early childhood poverty underscores the importance of doing everything possible to reduce the harmful effects of poverty during the first few years of life.

Health, Illness, and Medical Care

The poor are also more likely to have many kinds of health problems, including infant mortality, earlier adulthood mortality, and mental illness, and they are also more likely to receive inadequate medical care. Poor children are more likely to have inadequate nutrition and, partly for this reason, to suffer health, behavioral, and cognitive problems. These problems in turn impair their ability to do well in school and land stable employment as adults, helping to ensure that poverty will persist across generations. Many poor people are uninsured or underinsured, at least until the US health-care reform legislation of 2010 takes full effect a few years from now, and many have to visit health clinics that are overcrowded and understaffed.

As Chapter 10 “Work and the Economy” discusses, it is unclear how much of poor people’s worse health stems from their lack of money and lack of good health care versus their own behavior such as smoking and eating unhealthy diets. Regardless of the exact reasons, however, the fact remains that poor health is a major consequence of poverty. According to recent research, this fact means that poverty is responsible for almost 150,000 deaths annually, a figure about equal to the number of deaths from lung cancer (Bakalar, 2011).

Education

Poor children typically go to rundown schools with inadequate facilities where they receive inadequate schooling. They are much less likely than wealthier children to graduate from high school or to go to college. Their lack of education in turn restricts them and their own children to poverty, once again helping to ensure a vicious cycle of continuing poverty across generations. As Chapter 8 “The Changing Family” explains, scholars debate whether the poor school performance of poor children stems more from the inadequacy of their schools and schooling versus their own poverty. Regardless of exactly why poor children are more likely to do poorly in school and to have low educational attainment, these educational problems are another major consequence of poverty.

Housing and Homelessness

The poor are, not surprisingly, more likely to be homeless than the nonpoor but also more likely to live in dilapidated housing and unable to buy their own homes. Many poor families spend more than half their income on rent, and they tend to live in poor neighborhoods that lack job opportunities, good schools, and other features of modern life that wealthier people take for granted. The lack of adequate housing for the poor remains a major national problem. Even worse is outright homelessness. An estimated 1.6 million people, including more than 300,000 children, are homeless at least part of the year (Lee, et. al., 2010).

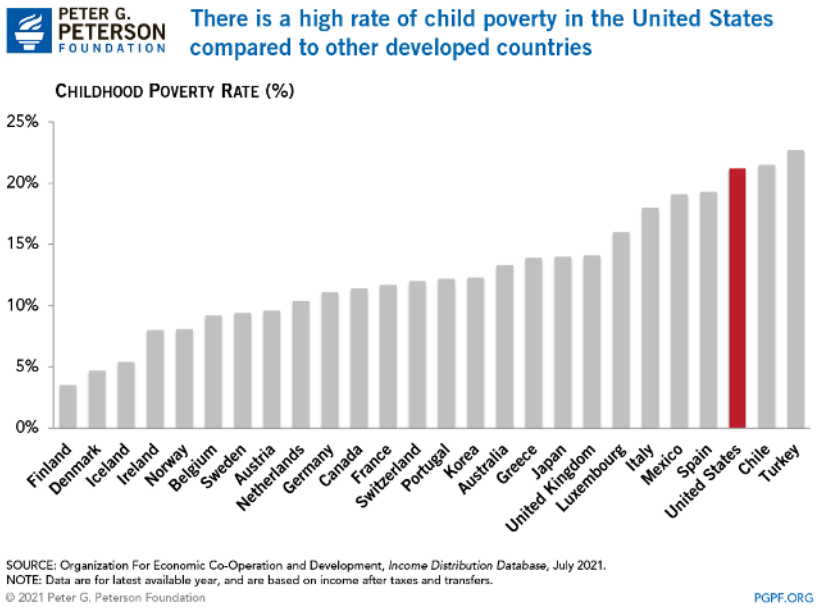
Crime and Victimization

As Chapter 5 “Alcohol and Other Drugs” discusses, poor (and near poor) people account for the bulk of our street crime (homicide, robbery, burglary, etc.), and they also account for the bulk of victims of street crime. That chapter will outline several reasons for this dual connection between poverty and street crime, but they include the deep frustration and stress of living in poverty and the fact that many poor people live in high-crime neighborhoods. In such neighborhoods, children are more likely to grow up under the influence of older peers who are already in gangs or otherwise committing crime, and people of any age are more likely to become crime victims. Moreover, because poor and near-poor people are more likely to commit street crime, they also comprise most of the people arrested for street crimes, convicted of street crime, and imprisoned for street crime. Most of the more than 2 million people now in the nation’s prisons and jails come from poor or near-poor backgrounds. Criminal behavior and criminal victimization, then, are other major consequences of poverty.

Lessons from Other Societies

Poverty and Poverty Policy in Other Western Democracies

To compare international poverty rates, scholars commonly use a measure of the percentage of households in a nation that receive less than half of the nation’s median household income after taxes and cash transfers from the government. In data from the late 2000s, 17.3 percent of US households lived in poverty as defined by this measure. By comparison, other Western democracies had the rates depicted in the figure that follows. The average poverty rate of the nations in the figure excluding the United States is 9.5 percent. The US rate is thus almost twice as high as the average for all the other democracies.



Why is there so much more poverty in the United States than in its Western counterparts? Several differences between the United States and the other nations stand out (Brady, 2009; Russell, 2011). First, other Western nations have higher minimum wages and stronger labor unions than the United States has, and these lead to incomes that help push people above poverty. Second, these other nations spend a much greater proportion of their gross domestic product on social expenditures (income support and social services such as child-care subsidies and housing allowances) than does the United States. As sociologist John Iceland (Iceland, 2006) notes, "Such countries often invest heavily in both universal benefits, such as maternity leave, child care, and medical care, and in promoting work among [poor] families…The United States, in comparison with other advanced nations, lacks national health insurance, provides less publicly supported housing, and spends less on job training and job creation." Block and colleagues agree: "These other countries all take a more comprehensive government approach to combating poverty, and they assume that it is caused by economic and structural factors rather than bad behavior" (Block et, al., 2006).

The experience of the United Kingdom provides a striking contrast between the effectiveness of the expansive approach used in other wealthy democracies and the inadequacy of the American approach. In 1994, about 30 percent of British children lived in poverty; by 2009, that figure had fallen by more than half to 12 percent. Meanwhile, the US 2009 child poverty rate, was almost 21 percent.

Britain used three strategies to reduce its child poverty rate and to help poor children and their families in other ways. First, it induced more poor parents to work through a series of new measures, including a national minimum wage higher than its US counterpart and various tax savings for low-income workers. Because of these measures, the percentage of single parents who worked rose from 45 percent in 1997 to 57 percent in 2008. Second, Britain increased child welfare benefits regardless of whether a parent worked. Third, it increased paid maternity leave from four months to nine months, implemented two weeks of paid paternity leave, established universal preschool (which both helps children's cognitive abilities and makes it easier for parents to afford to work), increased child-care aid, and made it possible for parents of young children to adjust their working hours to their parental responsibilities (Waldfogel, 2010). While the British child poverty rate fell dramatically because of these strategies, the US child poverty rate stagnated.

In short, the United States has so much more poverty than other democracies in part because it spends so much less than they do on helping the poor. The United States certainly has the wealth to follow their example, but it has chosen not to do so, and a high poverty rate is the unfortunate result. As the Nobel laureate economist Paul Krugman (2006, p. A25) summarizes this lesson, "Government truly can be a force for good. Decades of propaganda have conditioned many Americans to assume that government is always incompetent…But the [British experience has] shown that a government that seriously tries to reduce poverty can achieve a lot."

Key Takeaways

- Poor people are more likely to have several kinds of family problems, including divorce and family conflict.
- Poor people are more likely to have several kinds of health problems.

- Children growing up in poverty are less likely to graduate high school or go to college, and they are more likely to commit street crime.

For Your Review

1. Write a brief essay that summarizes the consequences of poverty.
2. Why do you think poor children are more likely to develop health problems?

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2.5: Global Poverty

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

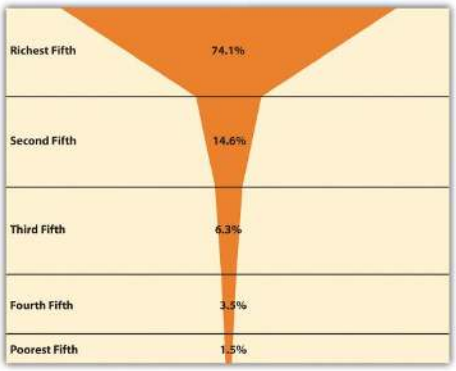
1. Describe where poor nations tend to be located.
2. Explain the difference between the modernization and dependency theories of poverty.
3. List some of the consequences of global poverty.

As serious as poverty is in the United States, poverty in much of the rest of the world is beyond comprehension to the average American. Many of the world's poor live in such desperate circumstances that they would envy the lives of poor Americans. Without at all meaning to minimize the plight of the American poor, this section provides a brief look at the world's poor and at the dimensions of global poverty

Global Inequality

The world has a few very rich nations and many very poor nations, and there is an enormous gulf between these two extremes. If the world were one nation, its median annual income (at which half of the world's population is below this income and half is above it) would be only $1,700 (Dikhanov, 2005). The richest fifth of the world's population would have three-fourths of the world's entire income, while the poorest fifth of the world's population would have only 1.5 percent of the world's income, and the poorest two-fifths would have only 5.0 percent of the world's income (Dikhanov, 2005). Reflecting this latter fact, these poorest two-fifths, or about 2 billion people, live on less than $2 per day (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). As Figure 2.5 "Global Income Distribution (Percentage of World Income Held by Each Fifth of World Population)" illustrates, this distribution of income resembles a champagne glass.

Figure 2.5
Global Income Distribution (Percentage of World Income Held by Each Fifth of World Population)



Source: Data from Dikhanov, Y. (2005). Trends in global income distribution, 1970–2000, and scenarios for 2015. New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme.

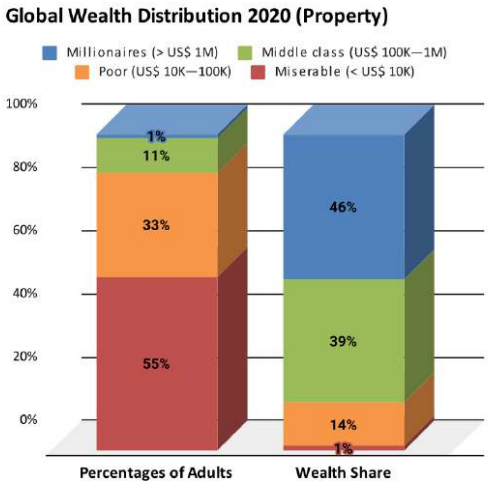
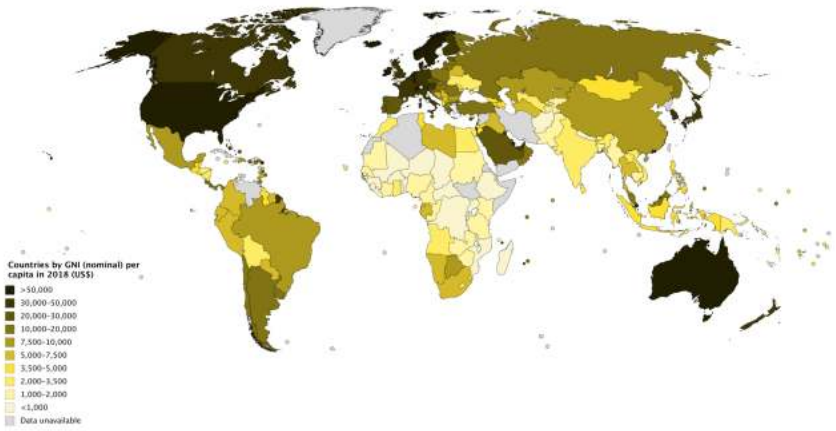


Figure 2.6 Global Wealth Distribution By Leandrosalvador - Own work, CC0, commons.wikimedia.org/w/inde...urid=107566084.

To understand global inequality, it is helpful to classify nations into a small number of categories based on their degree of wealth or poverty, their level of industrialization and economic development, and related factors. Over the decades, scholars and international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank have used various classification systems, or typologies. A popular typology today simply ranks nations into groups called *wealthy* (or high-income) nations, *middle-income* nations, and *poor* (or low-income) nations, based on measures such as gross domestic product (**GDP**) per capita (the total value of a nation's goods and services divided by its population). This typology has the advantage of emphasizing the most important variable in global stratification: how much wealth a nation has. At the risk of being somewhat simplistic, the other important differences among the world's nations all stem from their degree of wealth or poverty. Figure 2.7 "Global Stratification Map" depicts these three categories of nations (with the middle category divided into upper-middle and lower-middle). As should be clear, whether a nation is wealthy, middle income, or poor is heavily related to the continent on which it is found.

Figurem2.7 Countries by Gross National Income Per Capita



By JackintheBox - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, commons.wikimedia.org/w/inde...curid=89002068

Measuring Global Poverty

How do we know which nations are poor? A very common measure of global poverty was developed by the World Bank, an international institution funded by wealthy nations that provides loans, grants, and other aid to help poor and middle-income nations. Each year the World Bank publishes its World Development Report, which provides statistics and other information on the economic and social well-being of the globe's almost two hundred nations. The World Bank puts the official global poverty line (which is considered a measure of extreme poverty) at income under $1.25 per person per day, which amounts to about $456 yearly per person or $1,825 for a family of four. According to this measure, 1.4 billion people, making up more than one-fifth of the world's population and more than one-fourth of the population of developing (poor and middle-income) nations, are poor. This level of poverty rises to 40 percent of South Asia and 51 percent of sub-Saharan Africa (Haughton & Khandker, 2009).

In a new development, the World Bank has begun emphasizing the concept of vulnerability to poverty, which refers to a significant probability that people who are not officially poor will become poor within the next year. Determining vulnerability to poverty is important because it enables antipoverty strategies to be aimed at those most at risk for sliding into poverty, with the hope of preventing them from doing so.

Vulnerability to poverty appears widespread; in several developing nations, about one-fourth of the population is always poor, while almost one-third is vulnerable to poverty or is slipping into and out of poverty. In these nations, more than half the population is always or sometimes poor. (Haughton & Khandker, 2009) summarize this situation: "As typically defined, vulnerability to poverty is more widespread than poverty itself. A wide swathe of society risks poverty at some point of time; put another way, in most societies, only a relatively modest portion of society may be considered as economically secure."

Explaining Global Poverty

Explanations of global poverty parallel those of US poverty in their focus on individualistic versus structural problems. One type of explanation takes an individualistic approach by, in effect, blaming the people in the poorest nations for their own poverty, while a second explanation takes a structural approach in blaming the plight of poor nations on their treatment by the richest ones. Table 2.4 "Theory Snapshot" summarizes the two sets of explanations.

Table 2.4 Theory Snapshot

Theory	Major assumptions
Modernization theory	Wealthy nations became wealthy because early on they were able to develop the necessary beliefs, values, and practices for trade, industrialization, and rapid economic growth to occur. Poor nations remained poor because they failed to develop these beliefs, values, and practices; instead, they continued to follow traditional beliefs and practices that stymied industrial development and modernization.
Dependency theory	The poverty of poor nations stems from their colonization by European nations, which exploited the poor nations' resources and either enslaved their populations or used them as cheap labor. The colonized nations were thus unable to develop a professional and business class that would have enabled them to enter the industrial age and to otherwise develop their economies.

Modernization Theory

The individualistic explanation is called modernization theory (Rostow, 1990). According to this theory, rich nations became wealthy because early on they were able to develop the "correct" beliefs, values, and practices—in short, the correct culture—for trade, industrialization, and rapid economic growth to occur. These cultural traits include a willingness to work hard, to abandon tradition in favor of new ways of thinking and doing things, and to adopt a future orientation rather than one focused on maintaining present conditions. Thus Western European nations began to emerge several centuries ago as economic powers because their populations adopted the kinds of values and practices just listed. In contrast, nations in other parts of the world never became wealthy and remain poor today because they never developed the appropriate values and practices. Instead, they continued to follow traditional beliefs and practices that stymied industrial development and modernization.



According to modernization theory, poor nations are poor because their people never developed values such as an emphasis on hard work. United Nations Photo – OLS Brings Support to Strained Medical Services – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Modernization theory has much in common with the culture of poverty theory discussed earlier. It attributes the poverty of poor nations to their failure to develop the "proper" beliefs, values, and practices necessary for economic success both at the beginning of industrialization during the nineteenth century and in the two centuries that have since transpired. Because modernization theory implies that people in poor nations do not have the talent and ability to improve their lot, it may be considered a functionalist explanation of global inequality.

Dependency Theory

The structural explanation for global stratification is called dependency theory, which may be considered a conflict explanation of global inequality. Not surprisingly, this theory's views sharply challenge modernization theory's assumptions (Packenham, 1992). Whereas modernization theory attributes global stratification to the "wrong" cultural values and practices in poor nations, dependency theory blames global stratification on the exploitation of these nations by wealthy nations. According to this view, poor nations never got the chance to pursue economic growth because early on they were conquered and colonized by European ones. The European nations stole the poor nations' resources and either enslaved their populations or used them as cheap labor. They

installed their own governments and often prevented the local populace from getting a good education. As a result, the colonized nations were unable to develop a professional and business class that would have enabled them to enter the industrial age and to otherwise develop their economies. Along the way, wealthy nations sold their own goods to colonized nations and forced them to run up enormous debt that continues to amount today.

In today's world, huge multinational corporations continue to exploit the labor and resources of the poorest nations, say dependency theorists. These corporations run sweatshops in many nations, in which workers toil in inhumane conditions at extremely low wages (Sluiter, 2009). Often the corporations work hand-in-hand with corrupt officials in the poor nations to strengthen their economic stake in the countries.

Comparing the Theories

Which makes more sense, modernization theory or dependency theory? As with many theories, both make sense to some degree, but both have their faults. Modernization theory places too much blame on poor nations for their own poverty and ignores the long history of exploitation of poor nations by rich nations and multinational corporations alike. For its part, dependency theory cannot explain why some of the poorest countries are poor even though they were never European colonies; neither can it explain why some former colonies such as Hong Kong have been able to attain enough economic growth to leave the rank of the poorest nations. Together, both theories help us understand the reasons for global stratification, but most sociologists would probably favor dependency theory because of its emphasis on structural factors in the world's historic and current economy.

The Lives of the World's Poor

Poor nations are the least industrialized and most agricultural of all the world's countries. They consist primarily of nations in Africa and parts of Asia and constitute roughly half of the world's population. Many of these nations rely heavily on one or two crops, and if weather conditions render a crop unproductive in a particular season, the nations' hungry become even hungrier. By the same token, if economic conditions reduce the price of a crop or other natural resource, the income from exports of these commodities plummets, and these already poor nations become even poorer.



A young resident of Maslakh Camp takes a drink of water. People in poor nations live in the most miserable conditions possible. United Nations Photo – Maslakh Camp for Displaced, Afghanistan – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

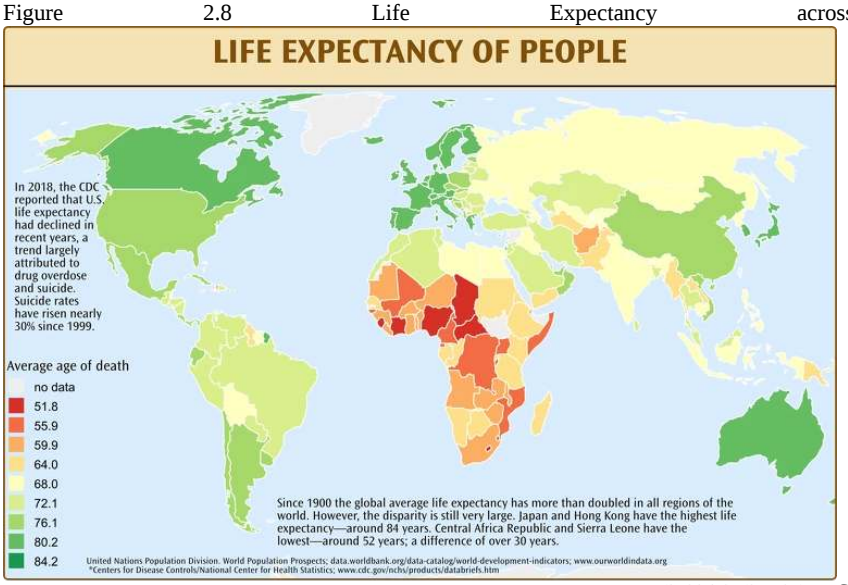
By any standard, the more than 1.4 billion people in poor nations live a desperate existence in the most miserable conditions possible. They suffer from AIDS and other deadly diseases, live on the edge of starvation, and lack indoor plumbing, electricity, and other modern conveniences that most Americans take for granted. Most of us have seen unforgettable photos or video footage of African children with stick-thin limbs and distended stomachs reflecting severe malnutrition.

It would be nice if these images were merely fiction, but unfortunately they are far too real. AIDS, malaria, starvation, and other deadly diseases are common. Many children die before reaching adolescence, and many adults die before reaching what in the richest nations would be considered middle age. Many people in the poorest nations are illiterate, and a college education remains as foreign to them as their way of life would be to us. The images of the world's poor that we see in television news reports or in film documentaries fade quickly from our minds. Meanwhile, millions of people on our planet die every year because they do not have enough to eat, because they lack access to clean water or adequate sanitation, or because they lack access to medicine that is found in every CVS, Rite Aid, and Walgreens in the United States. We now examine some specific dimensions and consequences of global poverty.

Life Expectancy

When we look around the world, we see that global poverty is literally a matter of life and death. The clearest evidence of this fact comes from data on life expectancy, or the average number of years that a nation's citizens can be expected to live. Life expectancy certainly differs within each nation, with some people dying younger and others dying older, but poverty and related conditions affect a nation's overall life expectancy to a startling degree.

Figure 2.8 Life Expectancy across the Globe



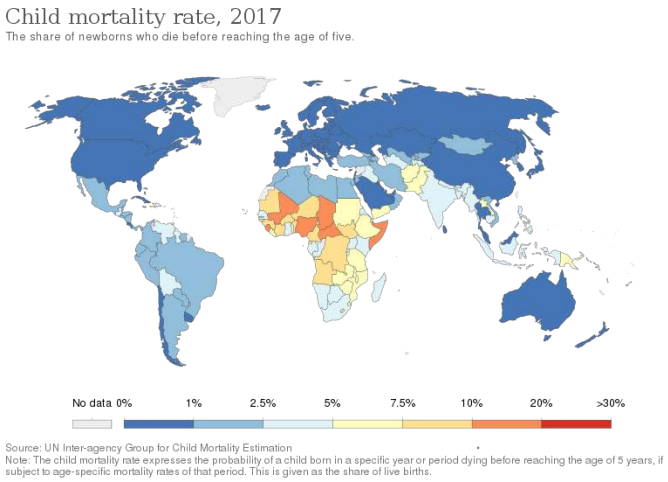
Sources: United Nations Population Division, World Population Prospects; data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators; www.ourworldindata.org. Centers for Disease Controls/National Center for Health Statistics; www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs.htm

A map of global life expectancy appears in Figure 2.7 "Average Life Expectancy across the Globe (Years)". Life expectancy is highest in North America, Western Europe, and certain other regions of the world and lowest in Africa and South Asia, where *life expectancy in many nations is some 30 years shorter than in other regions*. Another way of visualizing the relationship between global poverty and life expectancy appears in Figure 2.8 "Global Poverty and Life Expectancy, 2006", which depicts average life expectancy for wealthy nations, upper-middle-income nations, lower-middle-income nations, and poor nations. Men in wealthy nations can expect to live 76 years on average, compared to only 56 in poor nations; women in wealthy nations can expect to live 82 years, compared to only 58 in poor nations. Life expectancy in poor nations is thus 20 and 24 years lower, respectively, for the two sexes.

Child Mortality

A key contributor to life expectancy and also a significant consequence of global poverty in its own right is child mortality, the number of children who die before age 5 per 1,000 children. As Figure 2.9 "Global Poverty and Child Mortality, 2006" shows, the rate of child mortality in poor nations is 135 per 1,000 children, meaning that 13.5 percent of all children in these nations die before age 5. In a few African nations, child mortality exceeds 200 per 1,000. In contrast, the rate in wealthy nations is only 7 per 1,000. Children in poor nations are thus about 19 times (13.5 ÷ 0.7) more likely to die before age 5 than children in wealthy nations.

Figure 2.10 Child Mortality Rate



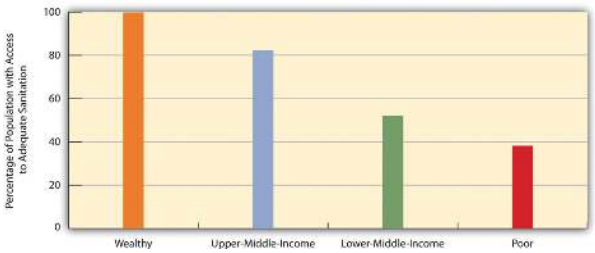
By Our World In Data - ourworldindata.org/grapher/c...mortality-igme, CC BY 3.0, commons.wikimedia.org/w/inde...curid=86920694

Sanitation and Clean Water

Two other important indicators of a nation's health are access to adequate sanitation (disposal of human waste) and access to clean water. When people lack adequate sanitation and clean water, they are at much greater risk for life-threatening diarrhea, serious infectious diseases such as cholera and typhoid, and parasitic diseases such as schistosomiasis (World Health Organization, 2010). About 2.4 billion people around the world, almost all of them in poor and middle-income nations, do not have adequate sanitation, and more than 2 million, most of them children, die annually from diarrhea. More than 40 million people worldwide, almost all of them again in poor and middle-income nations, suffer from a parasitic infection caused by flatworms.

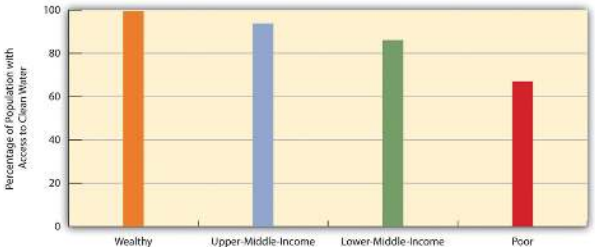
As Figure 2.10 "Global Stratification and Access to Adequate Sanitation, 2006" and Figure 2.11 "Global Stratification and Access to Clean Water, 2006" show, access to adequate sanitation and clean water is strongly related to national wealth. Poor nations are much less likely than wealthier nations to have adequate access to both sanitation and clean water. Adequate sanitation is virtually universal in wealthy nations but is available to only 38 percent of people in poor nations. Clean water is also nearly universal in wealthy nations but is available to only 67 percent of people in poor nations.

Figure 2.11 Global Stratification and Access to Adequate Sanitation, 2006



Source: Data from World Bank. (2010). Health nutrition and population statistics. Retrieved from http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do.

Figure 2.11 Global Stratification and Access to Clean Water, 2006



Source: Data from World Bank. (2010). Health nutrition and population statistics. Retrieved from http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do.

Malnutrition



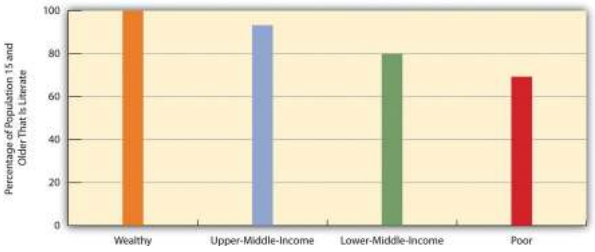
About one-fifth of the population of poor nations, about 800 million individuals, are malnourished. Dr. Lyle Conrad at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention- ID# 6874 – public domain.

Another health indicator is malnutrition. This problem is caused by a lack of good food combined with infections and diseases such as diarrhea that sap the body of essential nutrients. About one-fifth of the population of poor nations, or about 800 million individuals, are malnourished; looking just at children, in developing nations more than one-fourth of children under age 5, or about 150 million altogether, are underweight. Half of all these children live in only three nations: Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan; almost half the children in these and other South Asian nations are underweight. Children who are malnourished are at much greater risk for fat and muscle loss, brain damage, blindness, and death; perhaps you have seen video footage of children in Africa or South Asia who are so starved that they look like skeletons. Not surprisingly, child malnutrition contributes heavily to the extremely high rates of child mortality that we just examined and is estimated to be responsible for more than 5 million deaths of children annually (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2006; World Health Organization, 2010).

Adult Literacy

Moving from the area of health, a final indicator of human development is adult literacy, the percentage of people 15 and older who can read and write a simple sentence. Once again we see that people in poor and middle-income nations are far worse off (see Figure 2.12 "Global Poverty and Adult Literacy, 2008"). In poor nations, only about 69 percent of adults 15 and older can read and write a simple sentence. The high rate of illiteracy in poor nations not only reflects their poverty but also contributes to it, as people who cannot read and write are obviously at a huge disadvantage in the labor market.

Figure 2.12 Global Poverty and Adult Literacy, 2008



Source: Data from World Bank. (2010). Health nutrition and population statistics. Retrieved from http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do.

Applying Social Research

Unintended Consequences of Welfare Reform

Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was a major government program to help the poor from the 1930s to the 1960s. Under this program, states allocated federal money to provide cash payments to poor families with children. Although the program was heavily criticized for allegedly providing an incentive to poor mothers both to have more children and to not join the workforce, research studies found little or no basis for this criticism. Still, many politicians and much of the public accepted the criticism as true, and AFDC became so unpopular that it was replaced in 1997 by a new program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which is still a major program today.

TANF is more restrictive in many respects than AFDC was. In particular, it limits the amount of time a poor family can receive federal funds to five years, and allows states to impose a shorter duration for funding, which many have done. In addition, it requires single parents in families receiving TANF funds to work at least thirty hours a week (or twenty hours a week if they have a child under the age of 6) and two parents to work at least thirty-five hours per week combined. In most states, going to school to obtain a degree does not count as the equivalent of working and thus does not make a parent eligible for TANF payments. Only short-term programs or workshops to develop job skills qualify.

Did welfare reform involving TANF work? Many adults formerly on AFDC found jobs, TANF payments nationwide have been much lower than AFDC payments, and many fewer families receive TANF payments than used to receive AFDC payments. All these facts lead many observers to hail TANF as a successful program. However, sociologists and other scholars who study TANF families say the numbers are misleading because poor families have in effect been excluded from TANF funding because of its strict requirements. The reduced payments and lower number of funded families indicate the failure of TANF, they say, not its success.

Several problems explain why TANF has had these unintended consequences. First, many families are poor for many more than five years, and the five-year time limit under TANF means that they receive financial help for only some of the years they live in poverty. Second, because the federal and state governments provide relatively little financial aid for child care, many parents simply cannot afford to work, and if they don't work, they lose their TANF payments. Third, jobs are certainly difficult to find, especially if, as is typical, a poor parent has relatively little education and few job skills, and if parents cannot find a job, they again lose their TANF payments. Fourth, many parents cannot work because they have physical or mental health problems or because they are taking care of a family member or friend with a health problem; these parents, too, become ineligible for TANF payments.

Sociologist Lorna Rivera put a human face to these problems in a study of fifty poor women in Boston, Massachusetts. She lived among them, interviewed them individually, and conducted focus groups. She found that TANF worsened the situation of these women for the reasons just stated, and concluded that welfare reform left these and other poor women "uneducated, underemployed, underpaid, and unable to effectively move themselves and their families forward."

Ironically, some studies suggest that welfare reform impaired the health of black women for several reasons. Many ended up with jobs with long bus commutes and odd hours, leading to sleep deprivation and less time for medical visits. Many of these new workers also suddenly had to struggle to find affordable day care for their children. These problems are thought to have increased their stress levels and, in turn, harmed their health.

The research by social scientists on the effects of TANF reveals that the United States took a large step backward when it passed welfare reform in the 1990s. Far from reducing poverty, welfare reform only worsened it. This research underscores the need for the United States to develop better strategies for reducing poverty similar to those used by other Western democracies, as discussed in the Note 2.19 "Lessons from Other Societies" box in this chapter.

Sources: (Blitstein, 2009; Mink, 2008; Parrott & Sherman, 2008; Rivera, 2008)

Key Takeaways

- People in poor nations live in the worst conditions possible. Deadly diseases are common, and many children die before reaching adolescence.
- According to the modernization theory, rich nations became rich because their peoples possessed certain values, beliefs, and practices that helped them become wealthy. Conversely, poor nations remained poor because their peoples did not possess these values, beliefs, and practices.
- According to the dependency theory, poor nations have remained poor because they have been exploited by rich nations and by multinational corporations.

For Your Review

1. Considering all the ways in which poor nations fare much worse than wealthy nations, which one seems to you to be the most important problem that poor nations experience? Explain your answer.
2. Which theory of global poverty, modernization or dependency, makes more sense to you? Why?

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2.6: Reducing Poverty

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Explain why the United States neglects its poor.
2. List any three potentially promising strategies to reduce US poverty.
3. Describe how to reduce global poverty from a sociological perspective.

As this chapter noted at the outset, the United States greatly reduced poverty during the 1960s through a series of programs and policies that composed the so-called war on poverty. You saw evidence of the success of the war on poverty in Figure 2.1 “US Poverty, 1959–2010”, which showed that the poverty rate declined from 22.2 percent in 1960 to a low of 11.1 percent in 1973 before fluctuating from year to year and then rising since 2000. The Note 2.19 “Lessons from Other Societies” box showed that other democracies have much lower poverty rates than the United States because, as many scholars believe, they have better funded and more extensive programs to help their poor (Brady, 2009; Russell, 2011).

The lessons from the 1960s’ war on poverty and the experience of other democracies are clear: It is very possible to reduce poverty if, and only if, a nation is willing to fund and implement appropriate programs and policies that address the causes of poverty and that help the poor deal with the immediate and ongoing difficulties they experience.

A major reason that the US poverty rate reached its low in 1973 and never went lower during the past four decades is that the United States retreated from its war on poverty by cutting back on the programs and services it had provided during that good war (Soss, et. al., 2007). Another major reason is that changes in the national economy during the past few decades have meant that well-paying manufacturing jobs have been replaced by low-paying service jobs with fewer benefits (Wilson, 2010). Yet this has also happened in other democracies, and their poverty rates remain lower than the US rate because, unlike the United States, they have continued to try to help their poor rather than neglect them.

Why does the United States neglect its poor? Many scholars attribute this neglect to the fact that many citizens and politicians think the poor are poor because of their own failings. As summarized by sociologist Mark R. Rank (Rank, 2011), these failings include “not working hard enough, failure to acquire sufficient skills, or just making bad decisions.” By thus blaming the poor for their fate, citizens and politicians think the poor do not deserve to have the US government help them, and so the government does not help, or at least not nearly as much as other democracies do. We have seen that the facts do not support the myth that the poor lack motivation to work, but that does not lessen the blame given the poor for being poor.

To renew the US effort to help the poor, it is essential that the actual facts about poverty become better known so that a fundamental shift in thinking about poverty and the poor can occur. Rank (Rank, 2011) says that one aspect of this shift must include the recognition, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, that “poverty affects us all” because it costs so many tax dollars to help the poor and because a majority of the public can expect to be poor or near poor at some point in their lives. A second aspect of this shift in thinking, adds Rank, is the recognition (following a blaming-the-system approach) that poverty stems much more from the lack of opportunity, lack of jobs, declining government help for the poor, and other structural failings of American society than from individual failings of the poor themselves. A third aspect of this shift in thinking, he concludes, is that poverty must become seen as a “moral problem” and as “an injustice of a substantial magnitude” (Rank, 2011). As he forcefully argues, “Something is seriously wrong when we find that, in a country with the most abundant resources in the world, there are children without enough to eat, families who cannot afford health care, and people sleeping on the streets for lack of shelter” (Rank, 2011). This situation, he says, must become seen as a “moral outrage” (Rank, 2011).

Sociologist Joe Soss (Soss, 2011) argues that a change in thinking is not enough for a renewed antipoverty effort to occur. What is needed, he says, is political protest and other political activity by the poor and on behalf of the poor. Soss notes that “political conflict and mass mobilization played key roles” in providing the impetus for social-welfare programs in the 1930s and 1960s in the United States, and he adds that the lower poverty rates of Western European democracies “are products of labor movements, unions, and parties that mobilized workers to demand more adequate social supports.” These twin histories lead Soss to conclude that the United States will not increase its antipoverty efforts unless a new wave of political activity by and on behalf of the poor arises. As he argues, “History suggests that major antipoverty victories can be achieved. But they won’t be achieved by good will and smart ideas alone. They’ll be won politically, when people—in poor communities, in advocacy groups, in government, in the academy, and elsewhere—mobilize to advance antipoverty agendas in ways that make politics as usual untenable.”

Antipoverty Programs and Policies



To help reduce poverty, it is essential to help poor parents pay for child care. Herald Post – Family Child Care – CC BY-NC 2.0.

If a renewed antipoverty effort does occur for whatever reason, what types of programs and policies show promise for effectively reducing poverty? Here a sociological vision is essential. It is easy to understand why the hungry schoolchildren described in the news story that began this chapter might be going without food during a very faltering national economy. Yet a sociological understanding of poverty emphasizes its structural basis in bad times and good times alike. Poverty is rooted in social and economic problems of the larger society rather than in the lack of willpower, laziness, or other moral failings of poor individuals themselves. Individuals born into poverty suffer from a lack of opportunity from their first months up through adulthood, and poverty becomes a self-perpetuating, vicious cycle. To the extent a culture of poverty might exist, it is best seen as a logical and perhaps even inevitable outcome of, and adaptation to, the problem of being poor and not the primary force driving poverty itself.

This sort of understanding suggests that efforts to reduce poverty must address first and foremost the structural basis for poverty while not ignoring certain beliefs and practices of the poor that also make a difference. An extensive literature on poverty policy outlines many types of policies and programs that follow this dual approach (Cancian & Danziger, 2009; Greenberg, et. al., 2007; Iceland, 2006; Lindsey, 2009; Moore et al., 2009; Rank, 2004). If these were fully adopted, funded, and implemented, as they are in many other democracies, they would offer great promise for reducing poverty. As two poverty experts recently wrote, “We are optimistic that poverty can be reduced significantly in the long term if the public and policymakers can muster the political will to pursue a range of promising antipoverty policies” (M. Cancian & S. Danziger, 2009, p. 32).Cancian, M., & Danziger, S. H. (2009). *Changing poverty, changing policies*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. Although a full discussion of these policies is beyond the scope of this chapter, the following measures are commonly cited as holding strong potential for reducing poverty, and they are found in varying degrees in other Western democracies:

1. Adopt a national “full employment” policy for the poor, involving federally funded job training and public works programs, and increase the minimum wage so that individuals working full-time will earn enough to lift their families out of poverty.
2. Increase federal aid for the working poor, including higher earned income credits and child-care subsidies for those with children.
3. Establish well-funded early childhood intervention programs, including home visitations by trained professionals, for poor families.
4. Provide poor families with enough income to enable them to pay for food and housing.
5. Increase the supply of affordable housing.
6. Improve the schools that poor children attend and the schooling they receive and expand early childhood education programs for poor children.
7. Provide better nutrition and health services for poor families with young children.
8. Establish universal health insurance.
9. Increase Pell Grants and other financial aid for higher education.

Global Poverty

Years of international aid to poor nations have helped them somewhat, but, as this chapter has shown, their situation remains dire. International aid experts acknowledge that efforts to achieve economic growth in poor nations have largely failed, but they disagree why this is so and what alternative strategies may prove more successful (Cohen & Easterly, 2009).Cohen, J., & Easterly, W. (Eds.). (2009). *What works in development? Thinking big and thinking small*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. One

very promising trend has been a switch from macro efforts focusing on infrastructure problems and on social institutions, such as the schools, to micro efforts, such as providing cash payments or small loans directly to poor people in poor nations (a practice called *microfinancing*) and giving them bed nets to prevent mosquito bites (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011; Hanlon, Barrientos, & Hulme, 2010; Karlan & Appel, 2011).Banerjee, A. V., & Duflo, E. (2011). *Poor economics: A radical rethinking of the way to fight global poverty*. New York, NY: PublicAffairs; Hanlon, J., Barrientos, A., & Hulme, D. (2010). *Just give money to the poor: The development revolution from the global south*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press; Karlan, D., & Appel, J. (2011). *More than good intentions: How a new economics is helping to solve global poverty*. New York, NY: Dutton. However, the evidence on the success of these efforts is mixed (Bennett, 2009; The Economist, 2010).Bennett, D. (2009, September 20). Small change. *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved from http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/id...fight_poverty/; The Economist. (2010). A better mattress. *The Economist, 394*(8673), 75–76. Much more to help the world's poor certainly needs to be done.

In this regard, sociology's structural approach is in line with dependency theory and suggests that global stratification results from the history of colonialism and from continuing exploitation today of poor nations' resources by wealthy nations and multinational corporations. To the extent such exploitation exists, global poverty will lessen if and only if this exploitation lessens. A sociological approach also emphasizes the role that class, gender, and ethnic inequality play in perpetuating global poverty. For global poverty to be reduced, gender and ethnic inequality must be reduced.

Writers Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (2010)Kristoff, N. D., & WuDunn, S. (2010). *Half the sky: Turning oppression into opportunity for women worldwide*. New York, NY: Vintage Books. emphasize the need to focus efforts to reduce global poverty of women. We have already seen one reason this emphasis makes sense: women are much worse off than men in poor nations in many ways, so helping them is crucial for both economic and humanitarian reasons. An additional reason is especially illuminating: When women in poor nations acquire extra money, they typically spend it on food, clothing, and medicine, essentials for their families. However, when men in poor nations acquire extra money, they often spend it on alcohol, tobacco, and gambling. This gender difference might sound like a stereotype, but it does indicate that aid to women will help in many ways, while aid to men might be less effective and often even wasted.

Key Takeaways

- According to some sociologists, a change in thinking about poverty and the poor and political action by and on behalf of the poor are necessary for a renewed effort to help poor Americans.
- Potentially successful antipoverty programs and policies to help the US poor include expanding their employment opportunities and providing them much greater amounts of financial and other aid.
- To help people in poor nations, gender and ethnic inequality must be addressed.

For Your Review

1. Write a brief essay summarizing the changes in thinking that some sociologists argue must occur before a renewed effort to reduce poverty can take place.
2. Write a brief essay summarizing any four policies or programs that could potentially lower US poverty.

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2.7: End-of-Chapter Material

Summary

1. Poverty statistics are misleading in at least two ways. First, the way that poverty is measured is inadequate for several reasons, and more accurate measures of poverty that have recently been developed suggest that poverty is higher than the official poverty measure indicates. Second, even if people live slightly above the poverty line, they are still living in very difficult circumstances and are having trouble making ends meet.
2. Children, people of color, the South, and single-parent families headed by women have especially high poverty rates. Despite what many Americans think, the most typical poor person is white, and most poor people who are able to work outside the home in fact do work.
3. To explain social stratification and thus poverty, functionalist theory says that stratification is necessary and inevitable because of the need to encourage people with the needed knowledge and skills to decide to pursue the careers that are most important to society. Conflict theory says stratification exists because of discrimination against, and blocked opportunities for, the have-nots of society. Symbolic interactionist theory does not try to explain why stratification and poverty exist, but it does attempt to understand the experience of being poor.
4. The individualistic explanation attributes poverty to individual failings of poor people themselves, while the structuralist explanation attributes poverty to lack of jobs and lack of opportunity in the larger society.
5. Poverty has serious consequences in many respects. Among other problems, poor children are more likely to grow up to be poor, to have health problems, to commit street crime, and to have lower levels of formal education.
6. The nations of the world differ dramatically in wealth and other resources, with the poorest nations being found in Africa and parts of Asia.
7. Global poverty has a devastating impact on the lives of hundreds of millions of people throughout the world. Poor nations have much higher rates of mortality and disease and lower rates of literacy.
8. Modernization theory attributes global poverty to the failure of poor nations to develop the necessary beliefs, values, and practices to achieve economic growth, while dependency theory attributes global poverty to the colonization and exploitation by European nations of nations in other parts of the world.
9. A sociological perspective suggests that poverty reduction in the United States and around the world can occur if the structural causes of poverty are successfully addressed.

Using What You Know

It is December 20, and you have just finished final exams. In two days, you will go home for winter break and are looking forward to a couple weeks of eating, sleeping, and seeing your high school friends. Your smartphone signals that someone has texted you. When you read the message, you see that a friend is asking you to join her in serving a holiday supper on December 23 at a food pantry just a few miles from your campus. If you do that, you will not be able to get home until two days after you had been planning to arrive, and you will miss a big high school “reunion” party set for the night of the twenty-third. What do you decide to do? Why?

What You Can Do

To help fight poverty and the effects of poverty, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Contribute money to a local, state, or national organization that provides various kinds of aid to the poor.
2. Volunteer at a local food pantry or homeless shelter.
3. Start a canned food or used clothing drive on your campus.
4. Write letters or send e-mails to local, state, and federal officials that encourage them to expand antipoverty programs.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Racial and Ethnic Inequality

3.1: Racial and Ethnic Inequality- A Historical Prelude
3.2: The Meaning of Race and Ethnicity
3.3: Prejudice
3.4: Discrimination
3.5: Dimensions of Racial and Ethnic Inequality
3.6: Explaining Racial and Ethnic Inequality
3.7: Reducing Racial and Ethnic Inequality
3.8: End-of-Chapter Material

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3.1: Racial and Ethnic Inequality- A Historical Prelude

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe the targets of nineteenth-century mob violence in US cities.
2. Discuss why the familiar saying "The more things change, the more they stay the same" applies to the history of race and ethnicity in the United States.

Race and ethnicity have torn at the fabric of American society ever since the time of Christopher Columbus, when an estimated 1 million Native Americans populated the eventual United States. By 1900, their numbers had dwindled to about 240,000, as tens of thousands were killed by white settlers and US troops and countless others died from disease contracted from people with European backgrounds. Scholars say this mass killing of Native Americans amounted to genocide (Brown, 2009).

African Americans also have a history of maltreatment that began during the colonial period, when Africans were forcibly transported from their homelands to be sold as slaves in the Americas. Slavery, of course, continued in the United States until the North's victory in the Civil War ended it. African Americans outside the South were not slaves but were still victims of racial prejudice. During the 1830s, white mobs attacked free African Americans in cities throughout the nation, including Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Buffalo, and Pittsburgh. The mob violence stemmed from a "deep-seated racial prejudice…in which whites saw blacks as 'something less than human'" (Brown, 1975) and continued well into the twentieth century, when white mobs attacked African Americans in several cities, with at least seven antiblack riots occurring in 1919 that left dozens dead. Meanwhile, an era of Jim Crow racism in the South led to the lynching of thousands of African Americans, segregation in all facets of life, and other kinds of abuses (Litwack, 2009).



During the era of Jim Crow racism in the South, several thousand African Americans were lynched. US Library of Congress – public domain.

African Americans were not the only targets of native-born white mobs back then (Dinnerstein & Reimers, 2009). As immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Eastern Europe, Mexico, and Asia flooded into the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they, too, were beaten, denied jobs, and otherwise mistreated. During the 1850s, mobs beat and sometimes killed Catholics in cities such as Baltimore and New Orleans. During the 1870s, whites rioted against Chinese immigrants in cities in California and other states. Hundreds of Mexicans were attacked and/or lynched in California and Texas during this period.

Nazi racism in the 1930s and 1940s helped awaken Americans to the evils of prejudice in their own country. Against this backdrop, a monumental two-volume work by Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal (Myrdal, 1944) attracted much attention when it was published. The book, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, documented the various forms of discrimination facing blacks back then. The "dilemma" referred to by the book's title was the conflict between the American democratic ideals of egalitarianism and liberty and justice for all and the harsh reality of prejudice, discrimination, and lack of equal opportunity.

The Kerner Commission's 1968 report reminded the nation that little, if anything, had been done since Myrdal's book to address this conflict. Sociologists and other social scientists have warned since then that the status of people of color has actually been worsening in many ways since this report was issued (Massey, 2007; Wilson, 2009). Evidence of this status appears in the remainder of this chapter.

Key Takeaways

- US history is filled with violence and other maltreatment against Native Americans, blacks, and immigrants.
- Social scientists warn that the status of people of color has been worsening.

For Your Review

1. Describe why Myrdal said US race relations were an “American dilemma.”
2. How much did you learn in high school about the history of race and ethnicity in the United States? Do you think you should have learned more?

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3.2: The Meaning of Race and Ethnicity

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Critique the biological concept of race.
2. Discuss why race is a social construction.
3. Explain why ethnic heritages have both good and bad consequences.

To begin our understanding of racial and ethnic inequality, we first need to understand what *race* and *ethnicity* mean. These terms may seem easy to define but are much more complex than their definitions suggest.

Race

Let's start first with race, which refers to a category of people who share certain inherited physical characteristics, such as skin color, facial features, and stature. A key question about race is whether it is more of a biological category or a social category. Most people think of race in biological terms, and for more than three hundred years, or ever since white Europeans began colonizing nations filled with people of color, people have been identified as belonging to one race or another based on certain biological features.

It is certainly easy to see that people in the United States and around the world differ physically in some obvious ways. The most noticeable difference is skin tone: Some groups of people have very dark skin, while others have very light skin. Other differences also exist. Some people have very curly hair, while others have very straight hair. Some have thin lips, while others have thick lips. Some groups of people tend to be relatively tall, while others tend to be relatively short. Using such physical differences as their criteria, scientists at one point identified as many as nine races: African, American Indian or Native American, Asian, Australian Aborigine, European (more commonly called "white"), Indian, Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian (Smedley, 2007).

Although people certainly do differ in these kinds of physical features, anthropologists, sociologists, and many biologists question the value of these categories and thus the value of the biological concept of race (Smedley, 2007). For one thing, we often see more physical differences *within* a race than *between* races. For example, some people we call "white" (or European), such as those with Scandinavian backgrounds, have very light skins, while others, such as those from some Eastern European backgrounds, have much darker skins. In fact, some "whites" have darker skin than some "blacks," or African Americans. Some whites have very straight hair, while others have very curly hair; some have blonde hair and blue eyes, while others have dark hair and brown eyes. Because of interracial reproduction going back to the days of slavery, African Americans also differ in the darkness of their skin and in other physical characteristics. In fact, it is estimated that at least 30 percent of African Americans have some white (i.e., European) ancestry and that at least 20 percent of whites have African or Native American ancestry. If clear racial differences ever existed hundreds or thousands of years ago (and many scientists doubt such differences ever existed), in today's world these differences have become increasingly blurred.



President Barack Obama had an African father and a white mother. Although his ancestry is equally black and white, Obama considers himself an African American, as do most Americans. In several Latin American nations, however, Obama would be considered white because of his white ancestry. Steve Jurvetson – Barak Obama on the Primary – CC BY 2.0.

Another reason to question the biological concept of race is that an individual or a group of individuals is often assigned to a race arbitrarily. A century ago, for example, Irish, Italians, and Eastern European Jews who left their homelands were not regarded as white once they reached the United States but rather as a different, inferior (if unnamed) race (Painter, 2010). The belief in their inferiority helped justify the harsh treatment they suffered in their new country. Today, of course, we call people from all three backgrounds white or European.

In this context, consider someone in the United States who has a white parent and a black parent. What race is this person? American society usually calls this person black or African American, and the person may adopt this identity (as does President Barack Obama, who had a white mother and African father). But where is the logic for doing so? This person, as well as President Obama, is as much white as black in terms of parental ancestry.

Or consider someone with one white parent and another parent who is the child of one black parent and one white parent. This person thus has three white grandparents and one black grandparent. Even though this person's ancestry is thus 75 percent white and 25 percent black, she or he is likely to be considered black in the United States and may well adopt this racial identity. This practice reflects the traditional *one-drop rule* in the United States that defines someone as black if she or he has at least one drop of *black blood*, and that was used in the antebellum South to keep the slave population as large as possible (Staples, 2005). Yet in many Latin American nations, this person would be considered white (see Note 3.7 "Lessons from Other Societies"). With such arbitrary designations, race is more of a social category than a biological one.

? Exercise 3.2.1

Which of the following is not a racial group?

a) African Americans.

b) White Americans.

c) Hispanics.

d) Asian Americans.

Answer

Correct answer: C

Lessons from Other Societies

The Concept of Race in Brazil

As the text discusses, race was long considered a fixed, biological category, but today it is now regarded as a social construction. The experience of Brazil provides very interesting comparative evidence for this more accurate way of thinking about race.

When slaves were first brought to the Americas almost four hundred years ago, many more were taken to Brazil, where slavery was not abolished until 1888, than to the land that eventually became the United States. Brazil was then a colony of Portugal, and the Portuguese used Africans as slave labor. Just as in the United States, a good deal of interracial reproduction has occurred since those early days, much of it initially the result of rape of women slaves by their owners, and Brazil over the centuries has had many more racial intermarriages than the United States. Also like the United States, then, much of Brazil's population has multiracial ancestry. But in a significant departure from the United States, Brazil uses different criteria to consider the race to which a person belongs.

Brazil uses the term *preto*, or *black*, for people whose ancestry is solely African. It also uses the term *branco*, or *white*, to refer to people whose ancestry is both African and European. In contrast, as the text discusses, the United States commonly uses the term *black* or *African American* to refer to someone with even a small amount of African ancestry and *white* for someone who is thought to have solely European ancestry or at least "looks" white. If the United States were to follow Brazil's practice of reserving the term *black* for someone whose ancestry is solely African and the term *white* for someone whose ancestry is both African and European, many of the Americans commonly called "black" would no longer be considered black and instead would be considered white.

As sociologist Edward E. Telles (2006, p. 79) summarizes these differences, "[Blackness is differently understood in Brazil than in the United States. A person considered black in the United States is often not so in Brazil. Indeed, some U.S. blacks may be

considered white in Brazil. Although the value given to blackness is similarly low [in both nations], who gets classified as black is not uniform." The fact that someone can count on being considered "black" in one society and not "black" in another society underscores the idea that race is best considered a social construction rather than a biological category.

Sources: Barrionuevo & Calmes, 2011; Klein & Luno, 2009; Telles, 2006

A third reason to question the biological concept of race comes from the field of biology itself and more specifically from the studies of genetics and human evolution. Starting with genetics, people from different races are more than 99.9 percent the same in their DNA (Begley, 2008). To turn that around, less than 0.1 percent of all DNA in our bodies accounts for the physical differences among people that we associate with racial differences. In terms of DNA, then, people with different racial backgrounds are much, much more similar than dissimilar.

Even if we acknowledge that people differ in the physical characteristics we associate with race, modern evolutionary evidence reminds us that we are all, really, of one human race. According to evolutionary theory, the human race began thousands and thousands of years ago in sub-Saharan Africa. As people migrated around the world over the millennia, natural selection took over. It favored dark skin for people living in hot, sunny climates (i.e., near the equator), because the heavy amounts of melanin that produce dark skin protect against severe sunburn, cancer, and other problems. By the same token, natural selection favored light skin for people who migrated farther from the equator to cooler, less sunny climates, because dark skins there would have interfered with the production of vitamin D (Stone & Lurquin, 2007). Evolutionary evidence thus reinforces the common humanity of people who differ in the rather superficial ways associated with their appearances: We are one human species composed of people who happen to look different.

Race as a Social Construction

The reasons for doubting the biological basis for racial categories suggest that race is more of a social category than a biological one. Another way to say this is that race is a social construction, a concept that has no objective reality but rather is what people decide it is (Berger & Luckmann, 1963). In this view, race has no real existence other than what and how people think of it.

This understanding of race is reflected in the problems, outlined earlier, in placing people with multiracial backgrounds into any one racial category. We have already mentioned the example of President Obama. As another example, golfer Tiger Woods was typically called an African American by the news media when he burst onto the golfing scene in the late 1990s, but in fact his ancestry is one-half Asian (divided evenly between Chinese and Thai), one-quarter white, one-eighth Native American, and only one-eighth African American (Leland & Beals, 1997).

Historical examples of attempts to place people in racial categories further underscore the social constructionism of race. In the South during the time of slavery, the skin tone of slaves lightened over the years as babies were born from the union, often in the form of rape, of slave owners and other whites with slaves. As it became difficult to tell who was "black" and who was not, many court battles over people's racial identity occurred. People who were accused of having black ancestry would go to court to prove they were white in order to avoid enslavement or other problems (Staples, 1998).

Although race is a social construction, it is also true that race has real consequences because people *do* perceive race as something real. Even though so little of DNA accounts for the physical differences we associate with racial differences, that low amount leads us not only to classify people into different races but also to treat them differently—and, more to the point, unequally—based on their classification. Yet modern evidence shows there is little, if any, scientific basis for the racial classification that is the source of so much inequality.

Ethnicity

Because of the problems in the meaning of *race*, many social scientists prefer the term *ethnicity* in speaking of people of color and others with distinctive cultural heritages. In this context, ethnicity refers to the shared social, cultural, and historical experiences, stemming from common national or regional backgrounds, that make subgroups of a population different from one another. Similarly, an ethnic group is a subgroup of a population with a set of shared social, cultural, and historical experiences; with relatively distinctive beliefs, values, and behaviors; and with some sense of identity of belonging to the subgroup. So conceived, the terms *ethnicity* and *ethnic group* avoid the biological connotations of the terms *race* and *racial group*.

At the same time, the importance we attach to ethnicity illustrates that it, too, is in many ways a social construction, and our ethnic membership thus has important consequences for how we are treated. In particular, history and current practice indicate that it is easy to become prejudiced against people with different ethnicities from our own. Much of the rest of this chapter looks at the

prejudice and discrimination operating today in the United States against people whose ethnicity is not white and European. Around the world today, ethnic conflict continues to rear its ugly head. The 1990s and 2000s were filled with ethnic cleansing and pitched battles among ethnic groups in Eastern Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. Our ethnic heritages shape us in many ways and fill many of us with pride, but they also are the source of much conflict, prejudice, and even hatred, as the hate crime story that began this chapter so sadly reminds us.

? Exercise 3.2.1

Which of the following factors does not determine your ethicity?

a) shared cultural experiences

b) common national or regional backgrounds

c) similar physical features

d) distinctive beliefs, values, and behaviors

Answer

Correct answer: C

Key Takeaways

- Sociologists think race is best considered a social construction rather than a biological category.
- "Ethnicity" and "ethnic" avoid the biological connotations of "race" and "racial."

For Your Review

1. List everyone you might know whose ancestry is biracial or multiracial. What do these individuals consider themselves to be?
2. List two or three examples that indicate race is a social construction rather than a biological category.

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3.3: Prejudice

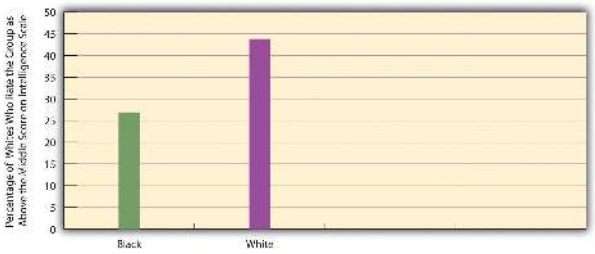
Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Define *prejudice*, *racism*, and *stereotypes*.
2. Discuss the major social-psychological and sociological theories of prejudice.
3. Describe how the nature of prejudice has changed.

Prejudice and *discrimination* (discussed in the next section) are often confused, but the basic difference between them is this: Prejudice is the attitude, while discrimination is the behavior. More specifically, racial and ethnic prejudice refers to a set of negative attitudes, beliefs, and judgments about whole categories of people, and about individual members of those categories, because of their perceived race and/or ethnicity. A closely related concept is racism, or the belief that certain racial or ethnic groups are inferior to one's own. Prejudice and racism are often based on racial and ethnic stereotypes, or simplified, mistaken generalizations about people because of their race and/or ethnicity. While cultural and other differences do exist among the various American racial and ethnic groups, many of the views we have of such groups are unfounded and hence are stereotypes. An example of the stereotypes that white people have of other groups appears in Figure 3.1 "Perceptions by Non-Latino White Respondents of the Intelligence of White and Black Americans", in which white respondents in the General Social Survey (GSS), a recurring survey of a random sample of the US population, are less likely to think blacks are intelligent than they are to think whites are intelligent.

Figure 3.1 Perceptions by Non-Latino White Respondents of the Intelligence of White and Black Americans



Source: Data from General Social Survey. (2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10.

Explaining Prejudice

Where does racial and ethnic prejudice come from? Why are some people more prejudiced than others? Scholars have tried to answer these questions at least since the 1940s, when the horrors of Nazism were still fresh in people's minds. Theories of prejudice fall into two camps, social-psychological and sociological. We will look at social-psychological explanations first and then turn to sociological explanations. We will also discuss distorted mass media treatment of various racial and ethnic groups.

Social-Psychological Explanations

One of the first social-psychological explanations of prejudice centered on the authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). According to this view, authoritarian personalities develop in childhood in response to parents who practice harsh discipline. Individuals with authoritarian personalities emphasize such things as obedience to authority, a rigid adherence to rules, and low acceptance of people (out-groups) not like oneself. Many studies find strong racial and ethnic prejudice among such individuals (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). But whether their prejudice stems from their authoritarian personalities or instead from the fact that their parents were probably prejudiced themselves remains an important question.



Authoritarian personalities are said to develop in childhood from harsh parental discipline and to be linked to racial and ethnic prejudice. Although many people with authoritarian personalities are prejudiced, it remains unclear whether their prejudice stems from their personalities or from their parents' own prejudice. Flickr – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Another early and still popular social-psychological explanation is called frustration theory (or scapegoat theory) (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). In this view individuals with various problems become frustrated and tend to blame their troubles on groups that are often disliked in the real world (e.g., racial, ethnic, and religious minorities). These minorities are thus scapegoats for the real sources of people's misfortunes. Several psychology experiments find that when people are frustrated, they indeed become more prejudiced. In one early experiment, college students who were purposely not given enough time to solve a puzzle were more prejudiced after the experiment than before it (Cowen, Landes, & Schaet, 1959).

Sociological Explanations

One popular sociological explanation emphasizes *conformity* and *socialization* and is called *social learning theory*. In this view, people who are prejudiced are merely conforming to the culture in which they grow up, and prejudice is the result of socialization from parents, peers, the news media, and other various aspects of their culture. Supporting this view, studies have found that people tend to become more prejudiced when they move to areas where people are very prejudiced and less prejudiced when they move to locations where people are less prejudiced (Aronson, 2008). If people in the South today continue to be more prejudiced than those outside the South, as we discuss later, even though legal segregation ended more than four decades ago, the influence of their culture on their socialization may help explain these beliefs.

Children and Our Future

Growing Up as Farmworkers' Kids

In the large agricultural fields of California work thousands of farmworkers and their families. Adults and children alike live in poor, crowded conditions and do backbreaking work in the hot sun, day after day after day.

Because their parents are migrant workers, many children attend a specific school for only a few weeks or months at most before their parents move to another field in another town or even another state. At Sherwood Elementary School in Salinas, California, in the heart of the state's agricultural sector, 97 percent of students live in or near poverty. With their Latino backgrounds, more than three-fourths do not speak English well or at all, and many of their parents cannot read or write their own language, Spanish.

At the Sherwood school, according to a news report, many students "sleep beneath carports and live in such cramped quarters that their parents take them to the local truck stop to wash up before school." A local high school teacher said many of his students see little of their parents, who spend most of their waking hours working in the fields. "They have little brothers and sisters to take care of, maybe cook for. Yet they're supposed to turn in a 10-page paper by tomorrow? I mean, it's unreal."

These conditions have grievous consequences for California's migrant farmworker children, almost half of whom fail to complete high school. The principal of the Sherwood Elementary School said the key strategy for her faculty and school was "understanding where the students come from but also having high expectations."

The plight of farmworkers' children is just one aspect of the difficulties facing Latino children around the country. Thanks to reproduction and immigration, the number of Latino children nationwide has grown significantly during the past few decades: in 2009, 23 percent of US kindergarten children were Latino, compared to only 10 percent in 1989. These growing numbers underscore the need to pay attention to the health and welfare of Latino children.

Against this backdrop, it is distressing to note that their health and welfare is not very good at all. About one-third of Latino children live in poverty. The average Latino child grows up in a poor neighborhood where almost half of the residents do not speak

English fluently, where the schools are substandard, and where the high school dropout and teen unemployment rates are high. A number of factors, including their ethnicity, poverty, language barriers, and the immigrant status of many of their parents, limit Latino children's access to adequate health care and various kinds of social services.

Amid all these problems, however, the situation of California's farmworker children stands out as a national embarrassment for a prosperous country like the United States. As the country struggles to end racial and ethnic inequality, it must not forget the children of Salinas who have to use a truck stop to wash up before school.

Sources: P. L. Brown, 2011; Landale, McHale, & Booth, 2011; Tavernise, 2011

The mass media play a key role in how many people learn to be prejudiced. This type of learning happens because the media often present people of color in a negative light. By doing so, the media unwittingly reinforce the prejudice that individuals already have or even increase their prejudice (Larson, 2005). Examples of distorted media coverage abound. Even though poor people are more likely to be white than any other race or ethnicity (see Chapter 2 "Poverty"), the news media use pictures of African Americans far more often than those of whites in stories about poverty. In one study, national news magazines, such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, and television news shows portrayed African Americans in almost two-thirds of their stories on poverty, even though only about one-fourth of poor people are African Americans. In the magazine stories, only 12 percent of the African Americans had a job, even though in the real world more than 40 percent of poor African Americans were working at the time the stories were written (Gilens, 1996). In a Chicago study, television news shows there depicted whites fourteen times more often in stories of good Samaritans, even though whites and African Americans live in Chicago in roughly equal numbers (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Many other studies find that newspaper and television stories about crime and drugs feature higher proportions of African Americans as offenders than is true in arrest statistics (Surette, 2011). Studies like these show that the news media "convey the message that black people are violent, lazy, and less civic minded" (Jackson, 1997, p. A27).

A second sociological explanation emphasizes *economic and political competition* and is commonly called *group threat theory* (Quillian, 2006). In this view, prejudice arises from competition over jobs and other resources and from disagreement over various political issues. When groups vie with each other over these matters, they often become hostile toward each other. Amid such hostility, it is easy to become prejudiced toward the group that threatens your economic or political standing. A popular version of this basic explanation is Susan Olzak's (1992) *ethnic competition theory*, which holds that ethnic prejudice and conflict increase when two or more ethnic groups find themselves competing for jobs, housing, and other goals.

The competition explanation is the macro equivalent of the frustration/scapegoat theory already discussed. Much of the white mob violence discussed earlier stemmed from whites' concern that the groups they attacked threatened their jobs and other aspects of their lives. Thus lynchings of African Americans in the South increased when the Southern economy worsened and decreased when the economy improved (Tolnay & Beck, 1995). Similarly, white mob violence against Chinese immigrants in the 1870s began after the railroad construction that employed so many Chinese immigrants slowed and the Chinese began looking for work in other industries. Whites feared that the Chinese would take jobs away from white workers and that their large supply of labor would drive down wages. Their assaults on the Chinese killed several people and prompted the passage by Congress of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 that prohibited Chinese immigration (Dinnerstein & Reimers, 2009).



During the 1870s, whites feared that Chinese immigrants would take away their jobs. This fear led to white mob violence against the Chinese and to an act of Congress that prohibited Chinese immigration. Wikimedia Commons – public domain.

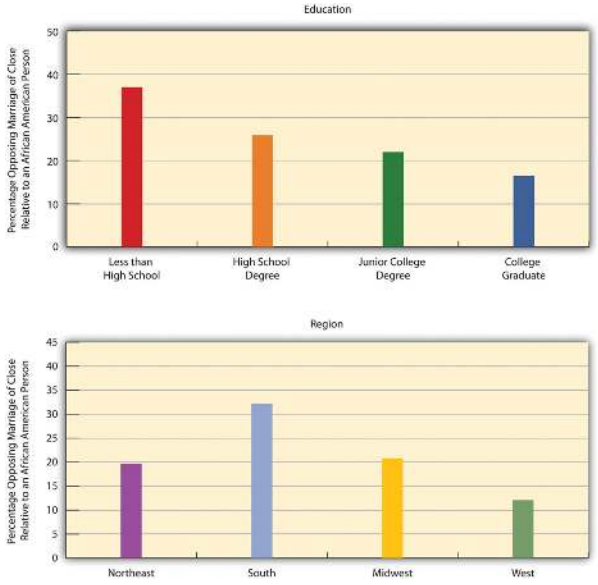
Correlates of Prejudice

Since the 1940s, social scientists have investigated the individual correlates of racial and ethnic prejudice (Stangor, 2009). These correlates help test the theories of prejudice just presented. For example, if authoritarian personalities do produce prejudice, then people with these personalities should be more prejudiced. If frustration also produces prejudice, then people who are frustrated with aspects of their lives should also be more prejudiced. Other correlates that have been studied include age, education, gender, region of country, race, residence in integrated neighborhoods, and religiosity. We can take time here to focus on gender, education, and region of country and discuss the evidence for the racial attitudes of whites, as most studies do in view of the historic dominance of whites in the United States.

The findings on *gender* are rather surprising. Although women are usually thought to be more empathetic than men and thus to be less likely to be racially prejudiced, recent research indicates that the racial views of (white) women and men are in fact very similar and that the two genders are about equally prejudiced (Hughes & Tuch, 2003). This similarity supports group threat theory, outlined earlier, in that it indicates that white women and men are responding more as whites than as women or men, respectively, in formulating their racial views.

Findings on *education* and *region of country* are not surprising. Focusing again just on whites, less educated people are usually more racially prejudiced than better-educated people, and Southerners are usually more prejudiced than non-Southerners (Krysan, 2000). Evidence of these differences appears in Figure 3.2 "Education, Region, and Opposition by Non-Latino Whites to a Close Relative Marrying an African American", which depicts educational and regional differences in a type of racial prejudice that social scientists call *social distance*, or feelings about interacting with members of other races and ethnicities. The General Social Survey asks respondents how they feel about a "close relative" marrying an African American. Figure 3.2 "Education, Region, and Opposition by Non-Latino Whites to a Close Relative Marrying an African American" shows how responses by white (non-Latino) respondents to this question vary by education and by Southern residence. Whites without a high school degree are much more likely than those with more education to oppose these marriages, and whites in the South are also much more likely than their non-Southern counterparts to oppose them. To recall the sociological perspective (see Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems"), our social backgrounds certainly do seem to affect our attitudes.

Figure 3.2 Education, Region, and Opposition by Non-Latino Whites to a Close Relative Marrying an African American



Source: Data from General Social Survey. (2010). Retrieved from sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsd+gss10.

The Changing Nature of Prejudice

Although racial and ethnic prejudice still exists in the United States, its nature has changed during the past half-century. Studies of these changes focus on whites' perceptions of African Americans. Back in the 1940s and before, an era of overt *Jim Crow* racism (also called *traditional* or *old-fashioned* racism) prevailed, not just in the South but in the entire nation. This racism involved blatant bigotry, firm beliefs in the need for segregation, and the view that blacks were biologically inferior to whites. In the early

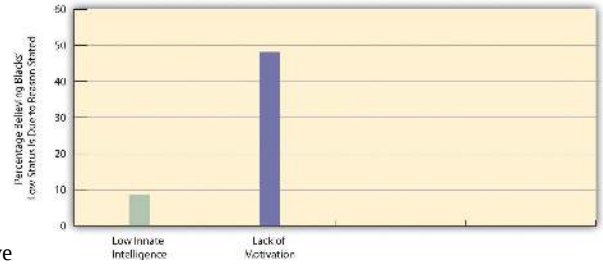
1940s, for example, more than half of all whites thought that blacks were less intelligent than whites, more than half favored segregation in public transportation, more than two-thirds favored segregated schools, and more than half thought whites should receive preference over blacks in employment hiring (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997).

The Nazi experience and then the civil rights movement led whites to reassess their views, and Jim Crow racism gradually waned. Few whites believe today that African Americans are biologically inferior, and few favor segregation. So few whites now support segregation and other Jim Crow views that national surveys no longer include many of the questions that were asked a half-century ago.

But that does not mean that prejudice has disappeared. Many scholars say that Jim Crow racism has been replaced by a more subtle form of racial prejudice, termed *laissez-faire*, *symbolic*, or *modern* racism, that amounts to a "kinder, gentler, antiblack ideology" that avoids notions of biological inferiority (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997, p. 15; Quillian, 2006; Sears, 1988). Instead, it involves stereotypes about African Americans, a belief that their poverty is due to their cultural inferiority, and opposition to government policies to help them. Similar views exist about Latinos. In effect, this new form of prejudice blames African Americans and Latinos themselves for their low socioeconomic standing and involves such beliefs that they simply do not want to work hard.

Evidence for this modern form of prejudice is seen in Figure 3.3 "Attribution by Non-Latino Whites of Blacks' Low Socioeconomic Status to Blacks' Low Innate Intelligence and to Their Lack of Motivation to Improve", which presents whites' responses to two General Social Survey (GSS) questions that asked, respectively, whether African Americans' low socioeconomic status is due to their lower "in-born ability to learn" or to their lack of "motivation and will power to pull themselves up out of poverty." While only 8.5 percent of whites attributed blacks' status to lower innate intelligence (reflecting the decline of Jim Crow racism), about 48 percent attributed it to their lack of motivation and willpower. Although this reason sounds "kinder" and "gentler" than a belief in blacks' biological inferiority, it is still one that blames African Americans for their low socioeconomic status.

Figure 3.3 Attribution by Non-Latino Whites of Blacks' Low Socioeconomic Status to Blacks' Low Innate Intelligence and to Their Lack of Motivation to Improve

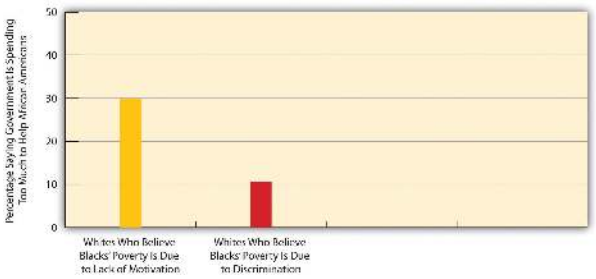


Source: Data from General Social Survey. (2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10.

Prejudice and Public Policy Preferences

If whites do continue to believe in racial stereotypes, say the scholars who study modern prejudice, they are that much more likely to oppose government efforts to help people of color. For example, whites who hold racial stereotypes are more likely to oppose government programs for African Americans (Quillian, 2006). We can see an example of this type of effect in Figure 3.4 "Racial Stereotyping by Non-Latino Whites and Their Opposition to Government Spending to Help African Americans", which compares two groups: whites who attribute blacks' poverty to lack of motivation, and whites who attribute blacks' poverty to discrimination. Those who cite lack of motivation are more likely than those who cite discrimination to believe the government is spending too much to help blacks.

Figure 3.4 Racial Stereotyping by Non-Latino Whites and Their Opposition to Government Spending to Help African Americans



Source: Data from General Social Survey. (2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10.



Whites who are racially prejudiced are more likely to favor harsher treatment of criminals and in particular are more likely to support the death penalty. Wikimedia Commons – CC BY-SA 3.0.

Racial prejudice influences other public policy preferences as well. In the area of criminal justice, whites who hold racial stereotypes or hostile feelings toward African Americans are more likely to be afraid of crime, to think that the courts are not harsh enough, to support the death penalty, to want more money spent to fight crime, and to favor excessive use of force by police (Barkan & Cohn, 2005; Unnever & Cullen, 2010).

If racial prejudice influences views on all these issues, then these results are troubling for a democratic society like the United States. In a democracy, it is appropriate for the public to disagree on all sorts of issues, including criminal justice. For example, citizens hold many reasons for either favoring or opposing the death penalty. But is it appropriate for racial prejudice to be one of these reasons? To the extent that elected officials respond to public opinion, as they should in a democracy, and to the extent that racial prejudice affects public opinion, then racial prejudice may be influencing government policy on criminal justice and on other issues. In a democratic society, it is unacceptable for racial prejudice to have this effect.

Key Takeaways

- Social-psychological explanations of prejudice emphasize authoritarian personalities and frustration, while sociological explanations emphasize social learning and group threat.
- Education and region of residence are related to racial prejudice among whites; prejudice is higher among whites with lower levels of formal education and among whites living in the South.
- Jim Crow racism has been replaced by symbolic or modern racism that emphasizes the cultural inferiority of people of color.
- Racial prejudice among whites is linked to certain views they hold about public policy. Prejudice is associated with lower support among whites for governmental efforts to help people of color and with greater support for a more punitive criminal justice system.

For Your Review

1. Think about the last time you heard someone say a remark that was racially prejudiced. What was said? What was your reaction?
2. The text argues that it is inappropriate in a democratic society for racial prejudice to influence public policy. Do you agree with this argument? Why or why not?

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3.4: Discrimination

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Discuss Merton's views on whether prejudice and discrimination always coincide.
2. Distinguish between individual discrimination and institutional discrimination.
3. Provide two examples of institutional discrimination.

Often racial and ethnic prejudice lead to discrimination against the subordinate racial and ethnic groups in a given society. Discrimination in this context refers to the arbitrary denial of rights, privileges, and opportunities to members of these groups. The use of the word *arbitrary* emphasizes that these groups are being treated unequally not because of their lack of merit but because of their race and ethnicity.

Usually prejudice and discrimination go hand-in-hand, but Robert Merton (1949) stressed this is not always so. Sometimes we can be prejudiced and not discriminate, and sometimes we might not be prejudiced and still discriminate. Table 3.1 "The Relationship between Prejudice and Discrimination" illustrates his perspective. The top-left cell and bottom-right cell consist of people who behave in ways we would normally expect. The top-left one consists of "active bigots," in Merton's terminology, people who are both prejudiced and discriminatory. An example of such a person is the white owner of an apartment building who dislikes people of color and refuses to rent to them. The bottom-right cell consists of "all-weather liberals," as Merton called them, people who are neither prejudiced nor discriminatory. An example would be someone who holds no stereotypes about the various racial and ethnic groups and treats everyone the same regardless of her or his background.

Table 3.1 The Relationship between Prejudice and Discrimination

	Prejudiced?	
	Yes	*No*
Discriminates?		
Yes	Active bigots	Fair-weather liberals
No	Timid bigots	All-weather liberals

Source: Adapted from Merton, R. K. (1949). Discrimination and the American creed. In R. M. MacIver (Ed.), *Discrimination and national welfare* (pp. 99–126). New York, NY: Institute for Religious Studies.

The remaining two cells of Table 3.1 "The Relationship between Prejudice and Discrimination" are the more unexpected ones. On the bottom left, we see people who are prejudiced but who nonetheless do not discriminate; Merton called them "timid bigots." An example would be white restaurant owners who do not like people of color but still serve them anyway because they want their business or are afraid of being sued if they do not serve them. At the top right, we see "fair-weather liberals," or people who are not prejudiced but who still discriminate. An example would be white store owners in the South during the segregation era who thought it was wrong to treat blacks worse than whites but who still refused to sell to them because they were afraid of losing white customers.

Individual Discrimination

The discussion so far has centered on individual discrimination, or discrimination that individuals practice in their daily lives, usually because they are prejudiced but sometimes even if they are not prejudiced. Individual discrimination is common, as Joe Feagin (1991), a former president of the American Sociological Association, found when he interviewed middle-class African Americans about their experiences. Many of the people he interviewed said they had been refused service, or at least received poor service, in stores or restaurants. Others said they had been harassed by the police, and even put in fear of their lives, just for being black. Feagin concluded that these examples are not just isolated incidents but rather reflect the larger racism that characterizes US society.



Sociologist Denise Segura found that more than 40 percent of the Mexican American women she interviewed at a public university had encountered workplace discrimination based on their ethnicity and/or gender. Jodi Womack – DSC05104 – CC BY 2.0.



Sociologist Joe Feagin's study of middle-class African Americans found that many had been harassed by police and had otherwise experienced various kinds of racial slights. USAG- Humphreys – USAG-Humphreys teens participate in a focus group – CC BY 2.0.



In February 2012, neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman fatally shot 17-year-old Trayvon Martin as Martin was walking back from a 7-Eleven carrying some Skittles and iced tea. Critics said Zimmerman was suspicious of Martin only because Martin was black. Michael Fleshman – Trayvon_Martin_Occupy March 21 – CC BY-SA 2.0.

To many observers, the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in February 2012 was a deadly example of individual discrimination. Martin, a 17-year-old African American, was walking in a gated community in Sanford, Florida, as he returned from a 7-Eleven with a bag of Skittles and some iced tea. An armed neighborhood watch volunteer, George Zimmerman, called 911 and said Martin looked suspicious. Although the 911 operator told Zimmerman not to approach Martin, Zimmerman did so anyway; within minutes Zimmerman shot and killed the unarmed Martin and later claimed self-defense. According to many critics of this incident, Martin's only "crime" was "walking while black." As an African American newspaper columnist observed, "For every black man in America, from the millionaire in the corner office to the mechanic in the local garage, the Trayvon Martin tragedy is personal. It could have been me or one of my sons. It could have been any of us" (Robinson, 2012).

Much individual discrimination occurs in the workplace, as sociologist Denise Segura (Segura, 1992) documented when she interviewed 152 Mexican American women working in white-collar jobs at a public university in California. More than 40 percent of the women said they had encountered workplace discrimination based on their ethnicity and/or gender, and they attributed their treatment to stereotypes held by their employers and coworkers. Along with discrimination, they were the targets of condescending comments like “I didn’t know that there were any educated people in Mexico that have a graduate degree.”

Institutional Discrimination

Individual discrimination is important to address, but at least as consequential in today’s world is institutional discrimination, or discrimination that pervades the practices of whole institutions, such as housing, medical care, law enforcement, employment, and education. This type of discrimination does not just affect a few isolated people of color. Instead, it affects large numbers of individuals simply because of their race or ethnicity. Sometimes institutional discrimination is also based on gender, disability, and other characteristics.

In the area of race and ethnicity, institutional discrimination often stems from prejudice, as was certainly true in the South during segregation. However, just as individuals can discriminate without being prejudiced, so can institutions when they engage in practices that seem to be racially neutral but in fact have a discriminatory effect. Individuals in institutions can also discriminate without realizing it. They make decisions that turn out, upon close inspection, to discriminate against people of color even if they did not mean to do so.

The bottom line is this: Institutions can discriminate even if they do not intend to do so. Consider height requirements for police. Before the 1970s, police forces around the United States commonly had height requirements, say five feet ten inches. As women began to want to join police forces in the 1970s, many found they were too short. The same was true for people from some racial/ethnic backgrounds, such as Latinos, whose stature is smaller on the average than that of non-Latino whites. Of course, even many white males were too short to become police officers, but the point is that even more women, and even more men of certain ethnicities, were too short.

This gender and ethnic difference is not, in and of itself, discriminatory as the law defines the term. The law allows for *bona fide* (good faith) physical qualifications for a job. As an example, we would all agree that someone has to be able to see to be a school bus driver; sight therefore is a *bona fide* requirement for this line of work. Thus even though people who are blind cannot become school bus drivers, the law does not consider such a physical requirement to be discriminatory.



Institutional discrimination can occur even if this type of discrimination is not intended. Police forces used to have height requirements, but these were deemed by courts to discriminate against women, Latinos, and other individuals. In response, police forces lowered their height requirements. Thomas Hawk – Oakland Police Memorial – CC BY-NC 2.0.

But were the height restrictions for police work in the early 1970s *bona fide* requirements? Women and members of certain ethnic groups challenged these restrictions in court and won their cases, as it was decided that there was no logical basis for the height restrictions then in effect. In short (pun intended), the courts concluded that a person did not have to be five feet ten inches to be an effective police officer. In response to these court challenges, police forces lowered their height requirements, opening the door for many more women, Latino men, and some other men to join police forces (Appier, 1998). Whether police forces back then intended their height requirements to discriminate, or whether they honestly thought their height requirements made sense, remains in dispute. Regardless of the reason, their requirements did discriminate.

Institutional discrimination affects the life chances of people of color in many aspects of life today. To illustrate this, we turn briefly to some examples of institutional discrimination that have been the subject of government investigation and scholarly research.

Health Care

People of color have higher rates of disease and illness than whites, a fact explored further in Chapter 10 "Work and the Economy"'s treatment of health and medicine. One question that arises is why their health is worse. One possible answer involves institutional discrimination based on race and ethnicity.

Several studies use hospital records to investigate whether people of color receive optimal medical care, including coronary bypass surgery, angioplasty, and catheterization. After taking the patients' medical symptoms and needs into account, these studies find that African Americans are much less likely than whites to receive the procedures just listed. This is true when poor blacks are compared to poor whites and also when middle-class blacks are compared to middle-class whites (Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2003). In a novel way of studying race and cardiac care, one study performed an experiment in which several hundred doctors viewed videos of African American and white patients, all of whom, unknown to the doctors, were actors. In the videos, each "patient" complained of identical chest pain and other symptoms. The doctors were then asked to indicate whether they thought the patient needed cardiac catheterization. The African American patients were less likely than the white patients to be recommended for this procedure (Schulman et al., 1999).

Why does discrimination like this occur? It is possible, of course, that some doctors are racists and decide that the lives of African Americans just are not worth saving, but it is far more likely that they have *unconscious* racial biases that somehow affect their medical judgments. Regardless of the reason, the result is the same: African Americans are less likely to receive potentially life-saving cardiac procedures simply because they are black. Institutional discrimination in health care, then, is literally a matter of life and death.

Mortgages, Redlining, and Residential Segregation

When loan officers review mortgage applications, they consider many factors, including the person's income, employment, and credit history. The law forbids them to consider race and ethnicity. Yet African Americans and Latinos are more likely than whites to have their mortgage applications declined (Blank, Venkatachalam, McNeil, & Green, 2005). Because members of these groups tend to be poorer than whites and to have less desirable employment and credit histories, the higher rate of mortgage rejections may be appropriate, albeit unfortunate.

To control for this possibility, researchers take these factors into account and in effect compare whites, African Americans, and Latinos with similar incomes, employment, and credit histories. Some studies are purely statistical, and some involve white, African American, and Latino individuals who independently visit the same mortgage-lending institutions. Both types of studies find that African Americans and Latinos are still more likely than whites with similar qualifications to have their mortgage applications rejected (Turner et al., 2002). We will probably never know whether loan officers are consciously basing their decisions on racial prejudice, but their practices still amount to racial and ethnic discrimination whether the loan officers are consciously prejudiced or not.

There is also evidence of banks rejecting mortgage applications for people who wish to live in certain urban, supposedly high-risk neighborhoods, and of insurance companies denying homeowner's insurance or else charging higher rates for homes in these same neighborhoods. Practices like these that discriminate against houses in certain neighborhoods are called *redlining*, and they also violate the law (Ezeala-Harrison, Glover, & Shaw-Jackson, 2008). Because the people affected by redlining tend to be people of color, redlining, too, is an example of institutional discrimination.



Banks have rejected mortgage applications from people who wish to live in certain urban, high-risk neighborhoods. This practice, called redlining, violates the law. Because many of the loan applicants who experience redlining are people of color, redlining is an example of institutional discrimination. Taber Andrew Bain – US Bank – CC BY 2.0.

Mortgage rejections and redlining contribute to another major problem facing people of color: residential segregation. Housing segregation is illegal but is nonetheless widespread because of mortgage rejections and other processes that make it very difficult for people of color to move out of segregated neighborhoods and into unsegregated areas. African Americans in particular remain highly segregated by residence in many cities, much more so than is true for other people of color. The residential segregation of African Americans is so extensive that it has been termed *hypersegregation* and more generally called American apartheid (Massey & Denton, 1993).

In addition to mortgage rejections, a pattern of subtle discrimination by realtors and homeowners makes it difficult for African Americans to find out about homes in white neighborhoods and to buy them (Pager, 2008). For example, realtors may tell African American clients that no homes are available in a particular white neighborhood, but then inform white clients of available homes. The now routine posting of housing listings on the Internet might be reducing this form of housing discrimination, but not all homes and apartments are posted, and some are simply sold by word of mouth to avoid certain people learning about them.

The hypersegregation experienced by African Americans cuts them off from the larger society, as many rarely leave their immediate neighborhoods, and results in *concentrated poverty*, where joblessness, crime, and other problems reign. For several reasons, then, residential segregation is thought to play a major role in the seriousness and persistence of African American poverty (Rothstein, 2012; Stoll, 2008).

Employment Discrimination

Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned racial discrimination in employment, including hiring, wages, and firing. However, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans still have much lower earnings than whites. Several factors explain this disparity, including the various structural obstacles discussed in Chapter 2 “Poverty”’s examination of poverty. Despite Title VII, however, an additional reason is that people of color continue to face discrimination in hiring and promotion (Hirsh & Cha, 2008). It is again difficult to determine whether such discrimination stems from conscious prejudice or from unconscious prejudice on the part of potential employers, but it is racial discrimination nonetheless.

A now-classic field experiment documented such discrimination. Sociologist Devah Pager (2003) had young white and African American men apply independently in person for entry-level jobs. They dressed the same and reported similar levels of education and other qualifications. Some applicants also admitted having a criminal record, while other applicants reported no such record. As might be expected, applicants with a criminal record were hired at lower rates than those without a record. However, in striking evidence of racial discrimination in hiring, African American applicants *without* a criminal record were hired at the same low rate as the white applicants *with* a criminal record.

Key Takeaways

- People who practice racial or ethnic discrimination are usually also prejudiced, but not always. Some people practice discrimination without being prejudiced, and some may not practice discrimination even though they are prejudiced.
- Individual discrimination is common and can involve various kinds of racial slights. Much individual discrimination occurs in the workplace.

- Institutional discrimination often stems from prejudice, but institutions can also practice racial and ethnic discrimination when they engage in practices that seem to be racially neutral but in fact have a discriminatory effect.

For Your Review

1. If you have ever experienced individual discrimination, either as the person committing it or as the person affected by it, briefly describe what happened. How do you now feel when you reflect on this incident?
2. Do you think institutional discrimination occurs because people are purposely acting in a racially discriminatory manner? Why or why not?

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3.5: Dimensions of Racial and Ethnic Inequality

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to do:

1. Describe any two manifestations of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States.
2. Explain how and why racial inequality takes a hidden toll on people of color.
3. Provide two examples of white privilege.

Racial and ethnic inequality manifests itself in all walks of life. The individual and institutional discrimination just discussed is one manifestation of this inequality. We can also see stark evidence of racial and ethnic inequality in various government statistics. Sometimes statistics lie, and sometimes they provide all too true a picture; statistics on racial and ethnic inequality fall into the latter category. Table 3.2 “Selected Indicators of Racial and Ethnic Inequality in the United States” presents data on racial and ethnic differences in income, education, and health.

Table 3.2 Selected Indicators of Racial and Ethnic Inequality in the United States

	White	African American	Latino	Asian	Native American
Median family income, 2010 ($)	68,818	39,900	41,102	76,736	39,664
Persons who are college educated, 2010 (%)	30.3	19.8	13.9	52.4	14.9 (2008)
Persons in poverty, 2010 (%)	9.9 (non-Latino)	27.4	26.6	12.1	28.4
Infant mortality (number of infant deaths per 1,000 births), 2006	5.6	12.9	5.4	4.6	8.3

Sources: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from www.census.gov/compendia/statab; US Census Bureau. (2012). American FactFinder. Retrieved from factfinder2.census.gov/faces/...es/index.xhtml; MacDorman, M., & Mathews, T. J. (2011). Infant Deaths—United States, 2000–2007. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, *60*(1), 49–51.



Asian Americans have higher family incomes than whites on the average. Although Asian Americans are often viewed as a “model minority,” some Asians have been less able than others to achieve economic success, and stereotypes of Asians and discrimination against them remain serious problems. LindaDee2006 – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

The picture presented by Table 3.2 “Selected Indicators of Racial and Ethnic Inequality in the United States” is clear: US racial and ethnic groups differ dramatically in their life chances. Compared to whites, for example, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans have much lower family incomes and much higher rates of poverty; they are also much less likely to have college degrees. In addition, African Americans and Native Americans have much higher infant mortality rates than whites: Black infants, for example, are more than twice as likely as white infants to die. Later chapters in this book will continue to highlight various dimensions of racial and ethnic inequality.

Although Table 3.2 “Selected Indicators of Racial and Ethnic Inequality in the United States” shows that African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans fare much worse than whites, it presents a more complex pattern for Asian Americans. Compared to whites, Asian Americans have higher family incomes and are more likely to hold college degrees, but they also have a higher poverty rate. Thus many Asian Americans do relatively well, while others fare relatively worse, as just noted. Although Asian Americans are often viewed as a “model minority,” meaning that they have achieved economic success despite not being white, some Asians have been less able than others to climb the economic ladder. Moreover, stereotypes of Asian Americans and discrimination against them remain serious problems (Chou & Feagin, 2008). Even the overall success rate of Asian Americans obscures the fact that their occupations and incomes are often lower than would be expected from their educational attainment. They thus have to work harder for their success than whites do (Hurh & Kim, 1999).

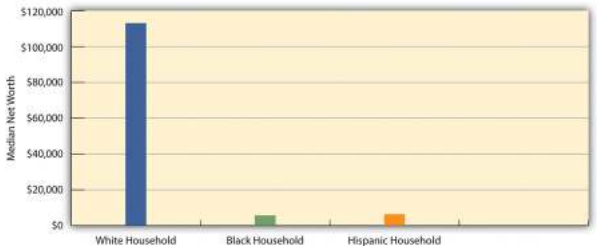
The Increasing Racial/Ethnic Wealth Gap

At the beginning of this chapter, we noted that racial and ethnic inequality has existed since the beginning of the United States. We also noted that social scientists have warned that certain conditions have actually worsened for people of color since the 1960s (Hacker, 2003; Massey & Sampson, 2009).

Recent evidence of this worsening appeared in a report by the Pew Research Center (2011). The report focused on racial disparities in wealth, which includes a family’s total assets (income, savings and investments, home equity, etc.) and debts (mortgage, credit cards, etc.). The report found that the wealth gap between white households on the one hand and African American and Latino households on the other hand was much wider than just a few years earlier, thanks to the faltering US economy since 2008 that affected blacks more severely than whites.

According to the report, whites’ median wealth was ten times greater than blacks’ median wealth in 2007, a discouraging disparity for anyone who believes in racial equality. By 2009, however, whites’ median wealth had jumped to twenty times greater than blacks’ median wealth and eighteen times greater than Latinos’ median wealth. White households had a median net worth of about $113,000, while black and Latino households had a median net worth of only $5,700 and $6,300, respectively (see Figure 3.5 “The Racial/Ethnic Wealth Gap (Median Net Worth of Households in 2009)”). This racial and ethnic difference is the largest since the government began tracking wealth more than a quarter-century ago.

Figure 3.5 The Racial/Ethnic Wealth Gap (Median Net Worth of Households in 2009)



Source: Pew Research Center, 2011.

A large racial/ethnic gap also existed in the percentage of families with negative net worth—that is, those whose debts exceed their assets. One-third of black and Latino households had negative net worth, compared to only 15 percent of white households. Black and Latino households were thus more than twice as likely as white households to be in debt.

The Hidden Toll of Racial and Ethnic Inequality

An increasing amount of evidence suggests that being black in a society filled with racial prejudice, discrimination, and inequality takes what has been called a “hidden toll” on the lives of African Americans (Blitstein, 2009). As we shall see in later chapters, African Americans on the average have worse health than whites and die at younger ages. In fact, every year there are an additional 100,000 African American deaths than would be expected if they lived as long as whites do. Although many reasons probably

explain all these disparities, scholars are increasingly concluding that the stress of being black is a major factor (Geronimus et al., 2010).

In this way of thinking, African Americans are much more likely than whites to be poor, to live in high-crime neighborhoods, and to live in crowded conditions, among many other problems. As this chapter discussed earlier, they are also more likely, whether or not they are poor, to experience racial slights, refusals to be interviewed for jobs, and other forms of discrimination in their everyday lives. All these problems mean that African Americans from their earliest ages grow up with a great deal of stress, far more than what most whites experience. This stress in turn has certain neural and physiological effects, including hypertension (high blood pressure), that impair African Americans' short-term and long-term health and that ultimately shorten their lives. These effects accumulate over time: black and white hypertension rates are equal for people in their twenties, but the black rate becomes much higher by the time people reach their forties and fifties. As a recent news article on evidence of this "hidden toll" summarized this process, "The long-term stress of living in a white-dominated society 'weathers' blacks, making them age faster than their white counterparts" (Blitstein, 2009, p. 48).

Although there is less research on other people of color, many Latinos and Native Americans also experience the various sources of stress that African Americans experience. To the extent this is true, racial and ethnic inequality also takes a hidden toll on members of these two groups. They, too, experience racial slights, live under disadvantaged conditions, and face other problems that result in high levels of stress and shorten their life spans.

White Privilege: The Benefits of Being White



American whites enjoy certain privileges merely because they are white. For example, they usually do not have to fear that a police officer will stop them simply because they are white, and they also generally do not have to worry about being mistaken for a bellhop, parking valet, or maid. Loren Kerns – Day 73 – CC BY 2.0.

Before we leave this section, it is important to discuss the advantages that US whites enjoy in their daily lives simply because they are white. Social scientists term these advantages white privilege and say that whites benefit from being white whether or not they are aware of their advantages (McIntosh, 2007).

This chapter's discussion of the problems facing people of color points to some of these advantages. For example, whites can usually drive a car at night or walk down a street without having to fear that a police officer will stop them simply because they are white. Recalling the Trayvon Martin tragedy, they can also walk down a street without having to fear they will be confronted and possibly killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer. In addition, whites can count on being able to move into any neighborhood they desire to as long as they can afford the rent or mortgage. They generally do not have to fear being passed up for promotion simply because of their race. White students can live in college dorms without having to worry that racial slurs will be directed their way. White people in general do not have to worry about being the victims of hate crimes based on their race. They can be seated in a restaurant without having to worry that they will be served more slowly or not at all because of their skin color. If they are in a hotel, they do not have to think that someone will mistake them for a bellhop, parking valet, or maid. If they are trying to hail a taxi, they do not have to worry about the taxi driver ignoring them because the driver fears he or she will be robbed.

Social scientist Robert W. Terry (1981, p. 120) once summarized white privilege as follows: "*To be white in America is not to have to think about it.* Except for hard-core racial supremacists, the meaning of being white is having the choice of attending to or ignoring one's own whiteness" (emphasis in original). For people of color in the United States, it is not an exaggeration to say that race and ethnicity is a daily fact of their existence. Yet whites do not generally have to think about being white. As all of us go

about our daily lives, this basic difference is one of the most important manifestations of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States.

Perhaps because whites do not have to think about being white, many studies find they tend to underestimate the degree of racial inequality in the United States by assuming that African Americans and Latinos are much better off than they really are. As one report summarized these studies' overall conclusion, "Whites tend to have a relatively rosy impression of what it means to be a black person in America. Whites are more than twice as likely as blacks to believe that the position of African Americans has improved a great deal" (Vedantam, 2008, p. A3). Because whites think African Americans and Latinos fare much better than they really do, that perception probably reduces whites' sympathy for programs designed to reduce racial and ethnic inequality.

Key Takeaways

- Compared to non-Latino whites, people of color have lower incomes, lower educational attainment, higher poverty rates, and worse health.
- Racial and ethnic inequality takes a hidden toll on people of color, as the stress they experience impairs their health and ability to achieve.
- Whites benefit from being white, whether or not they realize it. This benefit is called white privilege.

For Your Review

1. Write a brief essay that describes important dimensions of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States.
2. If you are white, describe a time when you benefited from white privilege, whether or not you realized it at the time. If you are a person of color, describe an experience when you would have benefited if you had been white.

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3.6: Explaining Racial and Ethnic Inequality

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Understand cultural explanations for racial and ethnic inequality.
2. Describe structural explanations for racial and ethnic inequality.

Why do racial and ethnic inequality exist? Why do African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and some Asian Americans fare worse than whites? In answering these questions, many people have some very strong opinions.

Biological Inferiority

One long-standing explanation is that blacks and other people of color are *biologically inferior*: They are naturally less intelligent and have other innate flaws that keep them from getting a good education and otherwise doing what needs to be done to achieve the American Dream. As discussed earlier, this racist view is no longer common today. However, whites historically used this belief to justify slavery, lynchings, the harsh treatment of Native Americans in the 1800s, and lesser forms of discrimination. In 1994, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray revived this view in their controversial book, *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), in which they argued that the low IQ scores of African Americans, and of poor people more generally, reflect their genetic inferiority in the area of intelligence. African Americans' low innate intelligence, they said, accounts for their poverty and other problems. Although the news media gave much attention to their book, few scholars agreed with its views, and many condemned the book's argument as a racist way of "blaming the victim" (Gould, 1994).

Cultural Deficiencies

Another explanation of racial and ethnic inequality focuses on supposed *cultural deficiencies* of African Americans and other people of color (Murray, 1984). These deficiencies include a failure to value hard work and, for African Americans, a lack of strong family ties, and are said to account for the poverty and other problems facing these minorities. This view echoes the culture-of-poverty argument presented in Chapter 2 "Poverty" and is certainly popular today. As we saw earlier, more than half of non-Latino whites think that blacks' poverty is due to their lack of motivation and willpower. Ironically some scholars find support for this cultural deficiency view in the experience of many Asian Americans, whose success is often attributed to their culture's emphasis on hard work, educational attainment, and strong family ties (Min, 2005). If that is true, these scholars say, then the lack of success of other people of color stems from the failure of their own cultures to value these attributes.

How accurate is the cultural deficiency argument? Whether people of color have "deficient" cultures remains hotly debated (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Many social scientists find little or no evidence of cultural problems in minority communities and say the belief in cultural deficiencies is an example of symbolic racism that blames the victim. Citing survey evidence, they say that poor people of color value work and education for themselves and their children at least as much as wealthier white people do (Holland, 2011; Muhammad, 2007). Yet other social scientists, including those sympathetic to the structural problems facing people of color, believe that certain cultural problems do exist, but they are careful to say that these cultural problems arise out of the structural problems. For example, Elijah Anderson (1999) wrote that a "street culture" or "oppositional culture" exists among African Americans in urban areas that contributes to high levels of violent behavior, but he emphasized that this type of culture stems from the segregation, extreme poverty, and other difficulties these citizens face in their daily lives and helps them deal with these difficulties. Thus even if cultural problems do exist, they should not obscure the fact that structural problems are responsible for the cultural ones.

Structural Problems

A third explanation for US racial and ethnic inequality is based in conflict theory and reflects the blaming-the-system approach outlined in Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems". This view attributes racial and ethnic inequality to *structural problems*, including institutional and individual discrimination, a lack of opportunity in education and other spheres of life, and the absence of jobs that pay an adequate wage (Feagin, 2006). Segregated housing, for example, prevents African Americans from escaping the inner city and from moving to areas with greater employment opportunities. Employment discrimination keeps the salaries of people of color much lower than they would be otherwise. The schools that many children of color attend every day are typically overcrowded and underfunded. As these problems continue from one generation to the next, it becomes very difficult for people

already at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder to climb up it because of their race and ethnicity (see Note 3.33 "Applying Social Research").

Applying Social Research

The Poor Neighborhoods of Middle-Class African Americans

In a society that values equal opportunity for all, scholars have discovered a troubling trend: African American children from middle-class families are much more likely than white children from middle-class families to move down the socioeconomic ladder by the time they become adults. In fact, almost half of all African American children born during the 1950s and 1960s to middle-class parents ended up with lower incomes than their parents by adulthood. Because these children had parents who had evidently succeeded despite all the obstacles facing them in a society filled with racial inequality, we have to assume they were raised with the values, skills, and aspirations necessary to stay in the middle class and even to rise beyond it. What, then, explains why some end up doing worse than their parents?

According to a recent study written by sociologist Patrick Sharkey for the Pew Charitable Trusts, one important answer lies in the neighborhoods in which these children are raised. Because of continuing racial segregation, many middle-class African American families find themselves having to live in poor urban neighborhoods. About half of African American children born between 1955 and 1970 to middle-class parents grew up in poor neighborhoods, but hardly any middle-class white children grew up in such neighborhoods. In Sharkey's statistical analysis, neighborhood poverty was a much more important factor than variables such as parents' education and marital status in explaining the huge racial difference in the eventual socioeconomic status of middle-class children. An additional finding of the study underscored the importance of neighborhood poverty for adult socioeconomic status: African American children raised in poor neighborhoods in which the poverty rate declined significantly ended up with higher incomes as adults than those raised in neighborhoods where the poverty rate did not change.

Why do poor neighborhoods have this effect? It is difficult to pinpoint the exact causes, but several probable reasons come to mind. In these neighborhoods, middle-class African American children often receive inadequate schooling at run-down schools, and they come under the influence of youths who care much less about schooling and who get into various kinds of trouble. The various problems associated with living in poor neighborhoods also likely cause a good deal of stress, which, as discussed elsewhere in this chapter, can cause health problems and impair learning ability.

Even if the exact reasons remain unclear, this study showed that poor neighborhoods make a huge difference. As a Pew official summarized the study, "We've known that neighborhood matters…but this does it in a new and powerful way. Neighborhoods become a significant drag not just on the poor, but on those who would otherwise be stable." Sociologist Sharkey added, "What surprises me is how dramatic the racial differences are in terms of the environments in which children are raised. There's this perception that after the civil rights period, families have been more able to seek out any neighborhood they choose, and that…the racial gap in neighborhoods would whittle away over time, and that hasn't happened."

Data from the 2010 Census confirm that the racial gap in neighborhoods persists. A study by sociologist John R. Logan for the Russell Sage Foundation found that African American and Latino families with incomes above $75,000 are more likely to live in poor neighborhoods than non-Latino white families with incomes below $40,000. More generally, Logan concluded, "The average affluent black or Hispanic household lives in a poorer neighborhood than the average lower-income white household."

One implication of this neighborhood research is clear: to help reduce African American poverty, it is important to do everything possible to improve the quality and economy of the poor neighborhoods in which many African American children, middle-class or poor, grow up.

Sources: Logan, 2011; MacGillis, 2009; Sharkey, 2009

As we assess the importance of structure versus culture in explaining why people of color have higher poverty rates, it is interesting to consider the economic experience of African Americans and Latinos since the 1990s. During that decade, the US economy thrived. Along with this thriving economy, unemployment rates for African Americans and Latinos declined and their poverty rates also declined. Since the early 2000s and especially since 2008, the US economy has faltered. Along with this faltering economy, unemployment and poverty rates for African Americans and Latinos increased.

To explain these trends, does it make sense to assume that African Americans and Latinos somehow had fewer cultural deficiencies during the 1990s and more cultural deficiencies since the early 2000s? Or does it make sense to assume that their economic success or lack of it depended on the opportunities afforded them by the US economy? Economic writer Joshua Holland (2011) provides the logical answer by attacking the idea of cultural deficiencies: "That's obviously nonsense. It was exogenous economic factors

and changes in public policies, not manifestations of ‘black culture’ [or ‘Latino culture’], that resulted in those widely varied outcomes…While economic swings this significant can be explained by economic changes and different public policies, it’s simply impossible to fit them into a cultural narrative.”

Key Takeaways

- Although a belief in biological inferiority used to be an explanation for racial and ethnic inequality, this belief is now considered racist.
- Cultural explanations attribute racial and ethnic inequality to certain cultural deficiencies among people of color.
- Structural explanations attribute racial and ethnic inequality to problems in the larger society, including discriminatory practices and lack of opportunity.

For Your Review

1. Which of the three explanations of racial and ethnic inequality makes the most sense to you? Why?
2. Why should a belief in the biological inferiority of people of color be considered racist?

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3.6: Explaining Racial and Ethnic Inequality is shared under a not declared license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

3.7: Reducing Racial and Ethnic Inequality

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Summarize the debate over affirmative action.
2. Describe any three policies or practices that could reduce racial and ethnic inequality in the United States.

Now that we have examined race and ethnicity in the United States, what have we found? Where do we stand in the second decade of the twenty-first century? Did the historic election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 signify a new era of equality between the races, as many observers wrote, or did his election occur despite the continued existence of pervasive racial and ethnic inequality?

On the one hand, there is cause for hope. Legal segregation is gone. The vicious, "old-fashioned" racism that was so rampant in this country into the 1960s has declined dramatically since that tumultuous time. People of color have made important gains in several spheres of life, and African Americans and other people of color occupy some important elected positions in and outside the South, a feat that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. Perhaps most notably, Barack Obama has African ancestry and identifies as an African American, and on his 2008 election night people across the country wept with joy at the symbolism of his victory. Certainly progress has been made in US racial and ethnic relations.

On the other hand, there is also cause for despair. Old-fashioned racism has been replaced by a modern, symbolic racism that still blames people of color for their problems and reduces public support for government policies to deal with their problems. Institutional discrimination remains pervasive, and hate crimes, such as the cross burning that began this chapter, remain all too common. So does suspicion of people based solely on the color of their skin, as the Trayvon Martin tragedy again reminds us.

If adequately funded and implemented, several types of programs and policies show strong promise of reducing racial and ethnic inequality. We turn to these in a moment, but first let's discuss affirmative action, an issue that has aroused controversy since its inception.

People Making a Difference

College Students and the Southern Civil Rights Movement

The first chapter of this book included this famous quotation by anthropologist Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." The beginnings of the Southern civil rights movement provide an inspirational example of Mead's wisdom and remind us that young people can make a difference.

Although there had been several efforts during the 1950s by African Americans to end legal segregation in the South, the start of the civil rights movement is commonly thought to have begun on February 1, 1960. On that historic day, four brave African American students from the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina, dressed in coats and ties, sat down quietly at a segregated lunch counter in a Woolworth's store in the city of Greensboro and asked to be served. When they were refused service, they stayed until the store closed at the end of the day, and then went home. They returned the next day and were joined by some two dozen other students. They were again refused service and sat quietly the rest of the day. The next day some sixty students and other people joined them, followed by some three hundred on the fourth day. Within a week, sit-ins were occurring at lunch counters in several other towns and cities inside and outside of North Carolina. In late July, 1960, the Greensboro Woolworth's finally served African Americans, and the entire Woolworth's chain desegregated its lunch counters a day later. Although no one realized it at the time, the civil rights movement had "officially" begun thanks to the efforts of a small group of college students.

During the remaining years of the heyday of the civil rights movement, college students from the South and North joined thousands of other people in sit-ins, marches, and other activities to end legal segregation. Thousands were arrested, and at least forty-one were murdered. By risking their freedom and even their lives, they made a difference for millions of African Americans. And it all began when a small group of college students sat down at a lunch counter in Greensboro and politely refused to leave until they were served.

Sources: Branch, 1988; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2011

Affirmative Action

Affirmative action refers to special consideration for minorities and women in employment and education to compensate for the discrimination and lack of opportunities they experience in the larger society. Affirmative action programs were begun in the 1960s to provide African Americans and, later, other people of color and women access to jobs and education to make up for past discrimination. President John F. Kennedy was the first known official to use the term, when he signed an executive order in 1961 ordering federal contractors to "take affirmative action" in ensuring that applicants are hired and treated without regard to their race and national origin. Six years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson added sex to race and national origin as demographic categories for which affirmative action should be used.

Although many affirmative action programs remain in effect today, court rulings, state legislation, and other efforts have limited their number and scope. Despite this curtailment, affirmative action continues to spark much controversy, with scholars, members of the public, and elected officials all holding strong views on the issue.

One of the major court rulings just mentioned was the US Supreme Court's decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 US 265 (1978). Allan Bakke was a 35-year-old white man who had twice been rejected for admission into the medical school at the University of California, Davis. At the time he applied, UC–Davis had a policy of reserving sixteen seats in its entering class of one hundred for qualified people of color to make up for their underrepresentation in the medical profession. Bakke's college grades and scores on the Medical College Admission Test were higher than those of the people of color admitted to UC–Davis either time Bakke applied. He sued for admission on the grounds that his rejection amounted to reverse racial discrimination on the basis of his being white (Stefoff, 2005).

The case eventually reached the Supreme Court, which ruled 5–4 that Bakke must be admitted into the UC–Davis medical school because he had been unfairly denied admission on the basis of his race. As part of its historic but complex decision, the Court thus rejected the use of strict racial quotas in admission, as it declared that no applicant could be excluded based solely on the applicant's race. At the same time, however, the Court also declared that race may be used as one of the several criteria that admissions committees consider when making their decisions. For example, if an institution desires racial diversity among its students, it may use race as an admissions criterion along with other factors such as grades and test scores.

Two more recent Supreme Court cases both involved the University of Michigan: *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 US 244 (2003), which involved the university's undergraduate admissions, and *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 US 306 (2003), which involved the university's law school admissions. In *Grutter* the Court reaffirmed the right of institutions of higher education to take race into account in the admissions process. In *Gratz*, however, the Court invalidated the university's policy of awarding additional points to high school students of color as part of its use of a point system to evaluate applicants; the Court said that consideration of applicants needed to be more individualized than a point system allowed.

Drawing on these Supreme Court rulings, then, affirmative action in higher education admissions on the basis of race/ethnicity is permissible as long as it does not involve a rigid quota system and as long as it does involve an individualized way of evaluating candidates. Race may be used as one of several criteria in such an individualized evaluation process, but it must not be used as the only criterion.

The Debate over Affirmative Action

Opponents of affirmative action cite several reasons for opposing it (Connors, 2009). Affirmative action, they say, is reverse discrimination and, as such, is both illegal and immoral. The people benefiting from affirmative action are less qualified than many of the whites with whom they compete for employment and college admissions. In addition, opponents say, affirmative action implies that the people benefiting from it need extra help and thus are indeed less qualified. This implication stigmatizes the groups benefiting from affirmative action.

In response, proponents of affirmative action give several reasons for favoring it (Connors, 2009). Many say it is needed to make up not just for past discrimination and a lack of opportunities for people of color but also for ongoing discrimination and a lack of opportunity. For example, because of their social networks, whites are much better able than people of color to find out about and to get jobs (Reskin, 1998). If this is true, people of color are automatically at a disadvantage in the job market, and some form of affirmative action is needed to give them an equal chance at employment. Proponents also say that affirmative action helps add diversity to the workplace and to the campus. Many colleges, they note, give some preference to high school students who live in a distant state in order to add needed diversity to the student body; to "legacy" students—those with a parent who went to the same institution—to reinforce alumni loyalty and to motivate alumni to donate to the institution; and to athletes, musicians, and other

applicants with certain specialized talents and skills. If all these forms of preferential admission make sense, proponents say, it also makes sense to take students' racial and ethnic backgrounds into account as admissions officers strive to have a diverse student body.

Proponents add that affirmative action has indeed succeeded in expanding employment and educational opportunities for people of color, and that individuals benefiting from affirmative action have generally fared well in the workplace or on the campus. In this regard research finds that African American students graduating from selective US colleges and universities after being admitted under affirmative action guidelines are slightly *more* likely than their white counterparts to obtain professional degrees and to become involved in civic affairs (Bowen & Bok, 1998).

As this brief discussion indicates, several reasons exist for and against affirmative action. A cautious view is that affirmative action may not be perfect but that some form of it is needed to make up for past and ongoing discrimination and lack of opportunity in the workplace and on the campus. Without the extra help that affirmative action programs give disadvantaged people of color, the discrimination and other difficulties they face are certain to continue.

Other Programs and Policies

As indicated near the beginning of this chapter, one message from DNA evidence and studies of evolution is that we are all part of one human race. If we fail to recognize this lesson, we are doomed to repeat the experiences of the past, when racial and ethnic hostility overtook good reason and subjected people who happened to look different from the white majority to legal, social, and violent oppression. In the democracy that is America, we must try to do better so that there will truly be "liberty and justice for all."

As the United States attempts, however haltingly, to reduce racial and ethnic inequality, sociology has much insight to offer in its emphasis on the structural basis for this inequality. This emphasis strongly indicates that racial and ethnic inequality has much less to do with any personal faults of people of color than with the structural obstacles they face, including ongoing discrimination and lack of opportunity. Efforts aimed at such obstacles, then, are in the long run essential to reducing racial and ethnic inequality (Danziger, Reed, & Brown, 2004; Syme, 2008; Walsh, 2011). Some of these efforts resemble those for reducing poverty discussed in Chapter 2 "Poverty", given the greater poverty of many people of color, and include the following:

1. Adopt a national "full employment" policy involving federally funded job training and public works programs.
2. Increase federal aid for the working poor, including earned income credits and child-care subsidies for those with children.
3. Establish and expand well-funded early childhood intervention programs, including home visitation by trained professionals, for poor families, as well as adolescent intervention programs, such as Upward Bound, for low-income teenagers.
4. Improve the schools that poor children attend and the schooling they receive, and expand early childhood education programs for poor children.
5. Provide better nutrition and health services for poor families with young children.
6. Strengthen efforts to reduce teenage pregnancies.
7. Strengthen affirmative action programs within the limits imposed by court rulings.
8. Strengthen legal enforcement of existing laws forbidding racial and ethnic discrimination in hiring and promotion.
9. Strengthen efforts to reduce residential segregation.

Key Takeaways

- There is reason to be both hopeful and less hopeful in regard to the future of racial and ethnic relations and inequality in the United States.
- Affirmative action continues to be a very controversial issue. Proponents think it is necessary to compensate for past and continuing racial and ethnic discrimination and lack of opportunity, while opponents think it discriminates against qualified whites.
- A variety of policies and practices hold strong potential for reducing racial and ethnic inequality, providing they are adequately funded and successfully implemented.

For Your Review

1. How hopeful are you in regard to the future of race and ethnicity in the United States? Explain your answer.
2. Do you favor or oppose affirmative action? Why?

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3.8: End-of-Chapter Material

Summary

1. Racial and ethnic prejudice and discrimination have been an “American dilemma” in the United States ever since the colonial period. Slavery was only the ugliest manifestation of this dilemma. The urban riots of the 1960s led to warnings about the racial hostility and discrimination confronting African Americans and other groups, and these warnings continue down to the present.
2. Social scientists today tend to consider race more of a social category than a biological one for several reasons. Race is thus best considered a social construction and not a fixed biological category.
3. Ethnicity refers to a shared cultural heritage and is a term increasingly favored by social scientists over race. Membership in ethnic groups gives many people an important sense of identity and pride but can also lead to hostility toward people in other ethnic groups.
4. Prejudice, racism, and stereotypes all refer to negative attitudes about people based on their membership in racial or ethnic categories. Social-psychological explanations of prejudice focus on scapegoating and authoritarian personalities, while sociological explanations focus on conformity and socialization or on economic and political competition. Jim Crow racism has given way to modern or symbolic racism that considers people of color to be culturally inferior.
5. Discrimination and prejudice often go hand in hand, but not always. People can discriminate without being prejudiced, and they can be prejudiced without discriminating. Individual and institutional discrimination both continue to exist in the United States.
6. Racial and ethnic inequality in the United States is reflected in income, employment, education, and health statistics. In their daily lives, whites enjoy many privileges denied to their counterparts in other racial and ethnic groups.
7. On many issues Americans remain sharply divided along racial and ethnic lines. One of the most divisive issues is affirmative action. Its opponents view it among other things as reverse discrimination, while its proponents cite many reasons for its importance, including the need to correct past and present discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities.

Using What You Know

After graduating college, you obtain a job in a medium-sized city in the Midwest and rent an apartment in a house in a nearby town. A family with an African American father and white mother has recently moved into a house down the street. You think nothing of it, but you begin to hear some of the neighbors expressing concern that the neighborhood “has begun to change.” Then one night a brick is thrown through the window of the new family’s home, and around the brick is wrapped the message, “Go back to where you came from!” Since you’re new to the neighborhood yourself, you don’t want to make waves, but you are also shocked by this act of racial hatred. You can speak up somehow or you can stay quiet. What do you decide to do? Why?

What You Can Do

To help reduce racial and ethnic inequality, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Contribute money to a local, state, or national organization that tries to help youths of color at their schools, homes, or other venues.
2. Volunteer for an organization that focuses on policy issues related to race and ethnicity.
3. Volunteer for any programs at your campus that aim at enhancing the educational success of new students of color; if no such programs exist, start one.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Gender Inequality

4.1: Understanding Sex and Gender
4.2: Feminism and Sexism
4.3: Dimensions of Gender Inequality
4.4: Violence against Women- Rape and Sexual Assault
4.5: The Benefits and Costs of Being Male
4.6: Reducing Gender Inequality
4.7: End-of-Chapter Material

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4.1: Understanding Sex and Gender

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Define sex, gender, femininity, and masculinity.
2. Critically assess the evidence on biology, culture and socialization, and gender.
3. Discuss agents of gender socialization.

Although the terms *sex* and *gender* are sometimes used interchangeably and do complement each other, they nonetheless refer to different aspects of what it means to be a woman or man in any society.

Sex refers to the anatomical and other biological differences between females and males that are determined at the moment of conception and develop in the womb and throughout childhood and adolescence. Females, of course, have two X chromosomes, while males have one X chromosome and one Y chromosome. From this basic genetic difference spring other biological differences. The first to appear are the genitals that boys and girls develop in the womb and that the doctor (or midwife) and parents look for when a baby is born (assuming the baby's sex is not already known from ultrasound or other techniques) so that the momentous announcement, "It's a boy!" or "It's a girl!" can be made. The genitalia are called primary sex characteristics, while the other differences that develop during puberty are called secondary sex characteristics and stem from hormonal differences between the two sexes. Boys generally acquire deeper voices, more body hair, and more muscles from their flowing testosterone. Girls develop breasts and wider hips and begin menstruating as nature prepares them for possible pregnancy and childbirth. For better or worse, these basic biological differences between the sexes affect many people's perceptions of what it means to be female or male, as we next discuss.



Babies are born with anatomical and other biological differences that are determined at the moment of conception. These biological differences define the baby's sex. Abby Bischoff – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Gender as a Social Construction

If sex is a biological concept, then gender is a social concept. It refers to the social and cultural differences a society assigns to people based on their (biological) sex. A related concept, gender roles, refers to a society's expectations of people's behavior and attitudes based on whether they are females or males. Understood in this way, gender, like race as discussed in Chapter 3 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality", is a *social construction*. How we think and behave as females and males is not etched in stone by our biology but rather is a result of how society expects us to think and behave based on what sex we are. As we grow up, we learn these expectations as we develop our gender identity, or our beliefs about ourselves as females or males.

These expectations are called *femininity* and *masculinity*. Femininity refers to the cultural expectations we have of girls and women, while masculinity refers to the expectations we have of boys and men. A familiar nursery rhyme nicely summarizes these two sets of traits:

What are little boys made of?
Snips and snails,
And puppy dog tails,

That’s what little boys are made of.
What are little girls made of?
Sugar and spice,
And everything nice,
That’s what little girls are made of.

As this rhyme suggests, our traditional notions of femininity and masculinity indicate that we think females and males are fundamentally different from each other. In effect, we think of them as two sides of the same coin of being human. What we traditionally mean by femininity is captured in the adjectives, both positive and negative, we traditionally ascribe to women: gentle, sensitive, nurturing, delicate, graceful, cooperative, decorative, dependent, emotional, passive, and weak. Thus when we say that a girl or woman is very feminine, we have some combination of these traits in mind: she is soft, dainty, pretty, and even a bit flighty. What we traditionally mean by masculinity is captured in the adjectives, again both positive and negative, our society traditionally ascribes to men: strong, assertive, brave, active, independent, intelligent, competitive, insensitive, unemotional, and aggressive. When we say that a boy or man is very masculine, we have some combination of these traits in mind: he is tough, strong, and assertive.

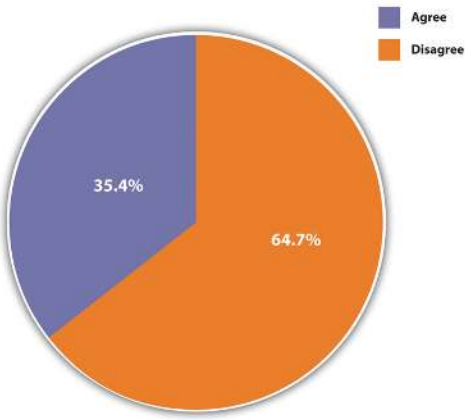
These traits might sound like stereotypes of females and males in today’s society, and to some extent they are, but differences between women and men in attitudes and behavior do in fact exist (Aulette & Wittner, 2011). For example, women cry more often than men do. Men are more physically violent than women. Women take care of children more than men do. Women smile more often than men. Men curse and spit more often than women. When women talk with each other, they are more likely to talk about their personal lives than men are when they talk with each other. The two sexes even differ when they hold a cigarette (not that anyone should smoke!). When a woman holds a cigarette, she usually has the palm of her cigarette-holding hand facing upward; when a man holds a cigarette, he usually has his palm facing downward.

The Development of Gender Differences

What accounts for differences in female and male behavior and attitudes? Do the biological differences between the sexes account for these other differences? Or do these latter differences stem, as most sociologists think, from cultural expectations and from differences in the ways in which the sexes are socialized? These are critical questions, for they ask whether the differences between boys and girls and women and men stem more from biology or from society. If we think behavioral and other differences between the sexes are due primarily to their respective biological makeups, we imply that these differences are inevitable or nearly so and that any attempt to change them goes against biology and will likely fail.

For example, consider the obvious biological fact that women bear and nurse children and men do not. Couple this with the common view that women are also more gentle and nurturing than men, and we end up with a “biological recipe” for women to be the primary caretakers of children. Many people think this means women are therefore much better suited than men to take care of children once they are born, and that the family might be harmed if mothers work outside the home or if fathers are the primary caretakers. Figure 4.1 “Belief That Women Should Stay at Home” shows that more than one-third of the public agrees that “it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.” To the extent this belief exists, women may not want to work outside the home or, if they choose to do so, they then face difficulties from employers, family, and friends. Conversely, men may not even think about wanting to stay at home and may themselves face difficulties from employees, family, and friends if they want to do so. A belief in a strong biological basis for differences between women and men implies, then, that there is little we can or should do to change these differences. It implies that “anatomy is destiny,” and destiny is, of course, by definition inevitable.

Figure 4.1 Belief That Women Should Stay at Home



Agreement or disagreement with the statement that "it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family." Source: Data from General Social Survey. (2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10.

This implication makes it essential to understand the extent to which gender differences do, in fact, stem from biological differences between the sexes or, instead, stem from cultural and social influences. If biology is paramount, then gender differences are perhaps inevitable and the status quo will remain. If culture and social influences matter much more than biology, then gender differences can change and the status quo may give way. With this backdrop in mind, let's turn to the biological evidence for behavioral and other differences between the sexes and then examine the evidence for their social and cultural roots.

Biology and Gender

Several biological explanations for gender roles exist, and we discuss two of the most important ones here. One explanation is from the field of evolutionary psychology (Buss, 2012) and argues an evolutionary basis for traditional gender roles.

Scholars advocating this view reason as follows (Thornhill & Gangestad, 2008). In prehistoric societies, two major social roles existed (1) hunting or gathering food to relieve hunger, and (2) bearing and nursing children. Because only women could perform the latter role, they were also the primary caretakers for children for several years after birth. And because women were frequently pregnant, their roles as mothers confined them to the home. Meanwhile, men were better suited than women for hunting because they were stronger and quicker than women. In prehistoric societies, then, biology was indeed destiny: For biological reasons, men in effect worked outside the home (hunted), while women stayed at home with their children.

Evolutionary reasons also explain why men are more violent than women. In prehistoric times, men who were more willing to commit violence against and even kill other men would "win out" in the competition for female mates. They thus were more likely than less violent men to produce offspring, who would then carry these males' genetic violent tendencies.

If the human race evolved along these lines, evolutionary psychologists continue, natural selection favored those societies where men were stronger, braver, and more aggressive and where women were more fertile and nurturing. Such traits over the millennia became fairly instinctual, meaning that men's and women's biological natures evolved differently. Men became, by nature, more assertive, daring, and violent than women, and women became, by nature, more gentle, nurturing, and maternal than men. To the extent this is true, these scholars add, traditional gender roles for women and men make sense from an evolutionary standpoint, and attempts to change them go against the sexes' biological natures. This in turn implies that existing gender inequality must continue

because it is rooted in biology. The title of a book presenting the evolutionary psychology argument summarizes this implication: “Biology at Work: Rethinking Sexual Equality” (Browne, 2002).



According to some evolutionary psychologists, today’s gender differences in strength and physical aggression are ultimately rooted in certain evolutionary processes that spanned millennia. Vladimir Pustovit – Couple – CC BY 2.0.

Critics challenge the evolutionary explanation on several grounds (Begley, 2009; Fine, 2011). First, much greater gender variation in behavior and attitudes existed in prehistoric times than the evolutionary explanation assumes. Second, even if biological differences did influence gender roles in prehistoric times, these differences are largely irrelevant in modern societies, in which, for example, physical strength is not necessary for survival. Third, human environments throughout the millennia have simply been too diverse to permit the simple, straightforward biological development that the evolutionary explanation assumes. Fourth, evolutionary arguments implicitly justify existing gender inequality by implying the need to confine women and men to their traditional roles.

Recent anthropological evidence also challenges the evolutionary argument that men’s tendency to commit violence was biologically transmitted. This evidence instead finds that violent men have trouble finding female mates who would want them and that the female mates they find and the children they produce are often killed by rivals to the men (Begley, 2009).

A second biological explanation for traditional gender roles attributes males’ higher levels of aggression to their higher levels of testosterone (Mazur, 2009). Several studies find that males with higher levels of testosterone tend to have higher levels of aggression. However, this correlation does not necessarily mean that their testosterone increased their violence; as has been found in various animal species, it is also possible that their violence increased their testosterone. Because studies of human males cannot for ethical and practical reasons manipulate their testosterone levels, the exact meaning of the results from these testosterone-aggression studies must remain unclear, according to a report by the National Academy of Sciences (Miczek, Mirsky, Carey, DeBold, & Raine, 1994).

Another line of research on the biological basis for sex differences in aggression involves children, including some as young as ages 1 or 2, in various situations (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008). They might be playing with each other, interacting with adults, or writing down solutions to hypothetical scenarios given to them by a researcher. In most of these studies, boys are more physically aggressive in thought or deed than girls, even at a very young age. Other studies are more experimental in nature. In one type of study, a toddler will be playing with a toy, only to have it removed by an adult. Boys typically tend to look angry and try to grab the toy back, while girls tend to just sit there and whimper. Because these gender differences in aggression are found at very young ages, researchers often say they must have some biological basis. However, critics of this line of research counter that even young children have already been socialized along gender lines (Begley, 2009; Fine, 2011), a point to which we return later in the chapter. To the extent this is true, gender differences in children’s aggression may reflect socialization rather than biology.

In sum, biological evidence for gender differences certainly exists, but its interpretation remains very controversial. It must be weighed against the evidence, to which we next turn, of cultural variations in the experience of gender and of socialization differences by gender. One thing is clear: To the extent we accept biological explanations for gender, we imply that existing gender differences and gender inequality must continue to exist. As sociologist Linda L. Lindsey (2011, p. 52) notes, “Biological arguments are consistently drawn upon to justify gender inequality and the continued oppression of women.” In contrast, cultural and social explanations of gender differences and gender inequality promise some hope for change. Let’s examine the evidence for these explanations.

Culture and Gender

Some of the most compelling evidence against a strong biological determination of gender roles comes from anthropologists, whose work on preindustrial societies demonstrates some striking gender variation from one culture to another. This variation underscores the impact of culture on how females and males think and behave.

Extensive evidence of this impact comes from anthropologist George Murdock (1937), who created the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample of almost two hundred preindustrial societies studied by anthropologists. Murdock found that some tasks in these societies, such as hunting and trapping, are almost always done by men, while other tasks, such as cooking and fetching water, are almost always done by women. These patterns provide evidence for the evolutionary argument presented earlier, as they probably stem from the biological differences between the sexes. Even so, there were at least some societies in which women hunted and in which men cooked and fetched water.



Anthropological research finds a good deal of variation in gender roles for certain tasks, including planting crops, milking, and generating fires. Other tasks, such as hunting and trapping, are typically done by men while tasks such as cooking and fetching water are typically done by women. World Bank Photo Collection – Somo Samo village well – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

More important, Murdock found much greater gender variation in several of the other tasks he studied, including planting crops, milking, and generating fires. Men primarily performed these tasks in some societies, women primarily performed them in other societies, and in still other societies both sexes performed them equally. Murdock's findings illustrate how gender roles differ from one culture to another and imply they are not biologically determined.

Anthropologists continue to investigate cultural differences in gender. Some of their most interesting findings concern gender and sexuality (Brettell & Sargent, 2009). Although all societies distinguish "femaleness" and "maleness," additional gender categories exist in some societies. The Native Americans known as the Mohave, for example, recognize four genders: a woman, a woman who acts like a man, a man, and a man who acts like a woman. In some societies, a third, intermediary gender category is recognized. Anthropologists call this category the *berdache*, who is usually a man who takes on a woman's role. This intermediary category combines aspects of both femininity and masculinity of the society in which it is found and is thus considered an androgynous gender. Although some people in this category are born as *intersexed* individuals (formerly known as *hermaphrodites*), meaning they have genitalia of both sexes, many are born biologically as one sex or the other but adopt an androgynous identity.

Anthropologists have found another androgynous gender composed of women warriors in thirty-three Native American groups in North America. Walter L. Williams (1997) calls these women "amazons" and notes that they dress like men and sometimes even marry women. In some tribes girls exhibit such "masculine" characteristics from childhood, while in others they may be recruited into "amazonhood." In the Kaska Indians, for example, a married couple with too many daughters would select one to "be like a man." When she was about 5 years of age, her parents would begin to dress her like a boy and have her do male tasks. Eventually she would grow up to become a hunter.

The androgynous genders found by anthropologists remind us that gender is a social construction and not just a biological fact. If culture does affect gender roles, socialization is the process through which culture has this effect. What we experience as girls and boys strongly influences how we develop as women and men in terms of behavior and attitudes. To illustrate this important dimension of gender, let's turn to the evidence on socialization.

Socialization and Gender

Socialization is the process whereby individuals learn the culture of their society. Several agents of socialization exist, including the family, peers, schools, the mass media, and religion, and all these institutions help to socialize people into their gender roles and also help them develop their gender identity (Andersen & Hysock, 2011).

The Family

Socialization into gender roles begins in infancy, as almost from the moment of birth parents begin to socialize their children as boys or girls without even knowing it (Begley, 2009; Eliot, 2011). Parents commonly describe their infant daughters as pretty, soft, and delicate and their infant sons as strong, active, and alert, even though neutral observers find no such gender differences among infants when they do not know the infants' sex. From infancy on, parents play with and otherwise interact with their daughters and sons differently. They play more roughly with their sons—for example, by throwing them up in the air or by gently wrestling with them—and more quietly with their daughters. When their infant or toddler daughters cry, they warmly comfort them, but they tend to let their sons cry longer and to comfort them less. They give their girls dolls to play with and their boys action figures and toy guns. While these gender differences in socialization are probably smaller now than a generation ago, they certainly continue to exist. Go into a large toy store and you will see pink aisles of dolls and cooking sets and blue aisles of action figures, toy guns, and related items.

Peers

Peer influences also encourage gender socialization. As they reach school age, children begin to play different games based on their gender. Boys tend to play sports and other competitive team games governed by inflexible rules and relatively large numbers of roles, while girls tend to play smaller, cooperative games such as hopscotch and jumping rope with fewer and more flexible rules. Although girls are much more involved in sports now than a generation ago, these gender differences in their play persist and continue to reinforce gender roles. For example, boys' games encourage them to be competitive, while girls' games encourage them to become cooperative and trusting. The patterns we see in adult males and females thus have roots in their play as young children (Lindsey, 2011) (see Note 4.13 "Children and Our Future").

Children and Our Future

Girls and Boys at Play

The text discusses how the types of games that girls and boys play influence their gender-role socialization. Let's take a closer look at two early sociological studies that provided important evidence for this process.

Janet Lever (1978) studied fifth-grade children in three different communities in Connecticut. She watched them play and otherwise interact in school and also had the children keep diaries of their play and games outside school. Lever found that boys' games were typically more complex than girls' games: The boys' games had a greater number of rules and more specialized roles, and they also involved more individuals playing. She attributed these differences to socialization by parents, teachers, and other adults and argued that the complexity of boys' play and games helped them to be better able than girls to learn important social skills such as dealing with rules and coordinating actions to achieve goals.

A second sociologist, Barrie Thorne (1993), studied fourth- and fifth-graders in California and Michigan. The boys tended to play team sports and other competitive games, while the girls tended to play cooperative games such as jump rope. These differences led Thorne to conclude that gender-role socialization stems not only from practices by adults but also from the children's own activities without adult involvement. When boys and girls interacted, it was often "girls against the boys" in classroom spelling contests and in games such as tag. Thorne concluded that these "us against them" contests helped the children learn that boys and girls are two different and antagonistic sexes. Boys also tended to disrupt girls' games more than the reverse and in this manner both exerted and learned dominance over females. In all these ways, children were not just the passive recipients of gender-role socialization from adults (their teachers), but they also played an active role in ensuring that such socialization occurred.

These two studies were among the first to emphasize the importance of children's play for the gender-based traits and values that girls and boys learn, which in turn affect the choices they make for careers and other matters later in life. The rise in team sports opportunities for girls in the years since Lever and Thorne did their research is a welcome development, but young children continue to play in the ways that Lever and Thorne found. The body of research on gender differences in children's play points to the need for teachers, parents, and other adults to encourage girls and boys alike to have a mixture of both competitive and

cooperative games so that both sexes may develop a better balance of values that are now commonly considered to be either feminine or masculine.

Schools

School is yet another agent of gender socialization. First of all, school playgrounds provide a location for the gender-linked play activities just described to occur. Second, and perhaps more important, teachers at all levels treat their female and male students differently in subtle ways of which they are probably not aware. They tend to call on boys more often to answer questions in class and to praise them more when they give the right answer. They also give boys more feedback about their assignments and other school work (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). At all grade levels, many textbooks and other books still portray people in gender-stereotyped ways. It is true that the newer books do less of this than older ones, but the newer books still contain some stereotypes, and the older books are still used in many schools, especially those that cannot afford to buy newer volumes.

Mass Media

Gender socialization also occurs through the mass media (Renzetti, Curran, & Maier, 2012). On children's television shows, the major characters are male. On Nickelodeon, for example, the very popular SpongeBob SquarePants is a male, as are his pet snail, Gary; his best friend, Patrick Star; their neighbor, Squidward Tentacles; and SpongeBob's employer, Eugene Crabs. Of the major characters in Bikini Bottom, only Sandy Cheeks is a female. For all its virtues, *Sesame Street* features Bert, Ernie, Cookie Monster, and other male characters. Most of the Muppets are males, and the main female character, Miss Piggy, depicted as vain and jealous, is hardly an admirable female role model. As for adults' prime-time television, more men than women continue to fill more major roles in weekly shows, despite notable women's roles in shows such as *The Good Wife* and *Grey's Anatomy*. Women are also often portrayed as unintelligent or frivolous individuals who are there more for their looks than for anything else. Television commercials reinforce this image. Cosmetics ads abound, suggesting not only that a major task for women is to look good but also that their sense of self-worth stems from looking good. Other commercials show women becoming ecstatic over achieving a clean floor or sparkling laundry. Judging from the world of television commercials, then, women's chief goals in life are to look good and to have a clean house. At the same time, men's chief goals, judging from many commercials, are to drink beer and drive cars.



Women's magazines reinforce the view that women need to be slender and wear many cosmetics in order to be considered beautiful. Photo Editing Services Tucia.com – Glamour /Fashion Retouching by Tucia – CC BY 2.0.

Women's and men's magazines reinforce these gender images (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Milillo, 2008). Most of the magazines intended for teenaged girls and adult women are filled with pictures of thin, beautiful models; advice on dieting; cosmetics ads; and articles on how to win and please your man. Conversely, the magazines intended for teenaged boys and men are filled with ads and articles on cars and sports, advice on how to succeed in careers and other endeavors, and pictures of thin, beautiful (and sometimes nude) women. These magazine images again suggest that women's chief goals are to look good and to please men and that men's chief goals are to succeed, win over women, and live life in the fast lane.

Religion

Another agent of socialization, religion, also contributes to traditional gender stereotypes. Many traditional interpretations of the Bible yield the message that women are subservient to men (Tanenbaum, 2009). This message begins in Genesis, where the first human is Adam, and Eve was made from one of his ribs. The major figures in the rest of the Bible are men, and women are for the most part depicted as wives, mothers, temptresses, and prostitutes; they are praised for their roles as wives and mothers and condemned for their other roles. More generally, women are constantly depicted as the property of men. The Ten Commandments

includes a neighbor's wife with his house, ox, and other objects as things not to be coveted (Exodus 20:17), and many biblical passages say explicitly that women belong to men, such as this one from the New Testament: "Wives be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church. As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands" (Ephesians 5:22–24).

Several passages in the Old Testament justify the rape and murder of women and girls. The Koran, the sacred book of Islam, also contains passages asserting the subordinate role of women (Mayer, 2009).

A Final Word on the Sources of Gender

Scholars in many fields continue to debate the relative importance of biology and of culture and socialization for how we behave and think as girls and boys and as women and men. The biological differences between females and males lead many scholars and no doubt much of the public to assume that masculinity and femininity are to a large degree biologically determined or at least influenced. In contrast, anthropologists, sociologists, and other social scientists tend to view gender as a social construction. Even if biology does matter for gender, they say, the significance of culture and socialization should not be underestimated. To the extent that gender is indeed shaped by society and culture, it is possible to change gender and to help bring about a society where both men and women have more opportunity to achieve their full potential.

Key Takeaways

- Sex is a biological concept, while gender is a social concept and refers to the social and cultural differences a society assigns to people based on their sex.
- Several biological explanations for gender roles exist, but sociologists think culture and socialization are more important sources of gender roles than biology.
- Families, schools, peers, the mass media, and religion are agents of socialization for the development of gender identity and gender roles.

For Your Review

1. Write a short essay about one or two events you recall from your childhood that reflected or reinforced your gender socialization.
2. Do you think gender roles are due more to biology or to culture and socialization? Explain your answer.

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4.2: Feminism and Sexism

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Define feminism, sexism, and patriarchy.
2. Discuss evidence for a decline in sexism.

In the national General Social Survey (GSS), slightly more than one-third of the public agrees with this statement: “It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? If you are like the majority of college students, you disagree.

Today a lot of women, and some men, will say, “I’m not a feminist, but…,” and then go on to add that they hold certain beliefs about women’s equality and traditional gender roles that actually fall into a feminist framework. Their reluctance to self-identify as feminists underscores the negative image that feminists and feminism have but also suggests that the actual meaning of feminism may be unclear.

Feminism and sexism are generally two sides of the same coin. Feminism refers to the belief that women and men should have equal opportunities in economic, political, and social life, while sexism refers to a belief in traditional gender role stereotypes and in the inherent inequality between men and women. Sexism thus parallels the concept of racial and ethnic prejudice discussed in Chapter 3 “Racial and Ethnic Inequality”. Women and people of color are both said, for biological and/or cultural reasons, to lack certain qualities for success in today’s world.



Feminism as a social movement began in the United States during the abolitionist period before the Civil War. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (left) and Lucretia Mott (right) were outspoken abolitionists who made connections between slavery and the oppression of women. The US Library of Congress – public domain; The US Library of Congress – public domain.

Two feminist movements in US history have greatly advanced the cause of women’s equality and changed views about gender. The first began during the abolitionist period, when abolitionists such as Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton began to see similarities between slavery and the oppression of women. This new women’s movement focused on many issues but especially the right to vote, which women won in 1920. The second major feminist movement began in the late 1960s, as women active in the Southern civil rights movement turned their attention to women’s rights, and it is still active today. This movement has profoundly changed public thinking and social and economic institutions, but, as we will soon see, much gender inequality remains.

Several varieties of feminism exist. Although they all share the basic idea that women and men should be equal in their opportunities in all spheres of life, they differ in other ways (Hannam, 2012). *Liberal feminism* believes that the equality of women can be achieved within our existing society by passing laws and reforming social, economic, and political institutions. In contrast, *socialist feminism* blames capitalism for women’s inequality and says that true gender equality can result only if fundamental changes in social institutions, and even a socialist revolution, are achieved. *Radical feminism*, on the other hand, says that patriarchy (male domination) lies at the root of women’s oppression and that women are oppressed even in noncapitalist societies. Patriarchy itself must be abolished, they say, if women are to become equal to men. Finally, *multicultural feminism* emphasizes that women of color are oppressed not only because of their gender but also because of their race and class. They thus face a triple burden that goes beyond their gender. By focusing their attention on women of color in the United States and other nations,

multicultural feminists remind us that the lives of these women differ in many ways from those of the middle-class women who historically have led US feminist movements.

The Growth of Feminism and the Decline of Sexism

What evidence is there for the impact of the contemporary women's movement on public thinking? The GSS, the Gallup poll, and other national surveys show that the public has moved away from traditional views of gender toward more modern ones. Another way of saying this is that the public has moved from sexism toward feminism.

To illustrate this, let's return to the GSS statement that it is much better for the man to achieve outside the home and for the woman to take care of home and family. Figure 4.2 "Change in Acceptance of Traditional Gender Roles in the Family, 1977–2010" shows that agreement with this statement dropped sharply during the 1970s and 1980s before leveling off afterward to slightly more than one-third of the public.

Figure 4.2 Change in Acceptance of Traditional Gender Roles in the Family, 1977–2010



Percentage agreeing that "it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family." Source: Data from General Social Surveys. (1977–2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10.

Another GSS question over the years has asked whether respondents would be willing to vote for a qualified woman for president of the United States. As Figure 4.3 "Change in Willingness to Vote for a Qualified Woman for President" illustrates, this percentage rose from 74 percent in the early 1970s to a high of 96.2 percent in 2010. Although we have not yet had a woman president, despite Hillary Rodham Clinton's historic presidential primary campaign in 2007 and 2008 and Sarah Palin's presence on the Republican ticket in 2008, the survey evidence indicates the public is willing to vote for one. As demonstrated by the responses to the survey questions on women's home roles and on a woman president, traditional gender views have indeed declined.

Figure 4.3 Change in Willingness to Vote for a Qualified Woman for President



Source: Data from General Social Survey. (2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10.

Key Takeaways

- Feminism refers to the belief that women and men should have equal opportunities in economic, political, and social life, while sexism refers to a belief in traditional gender role stereotypes and in the inherent inequality between men and women.
- Sexist beliefs have declined in the United States since the early 1970s.

For Your Review

1. Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?
2. Think about one of your parents or of another adult much older than you. Does this person hold more traditional views about gender than you do? Explain your answer.

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4.3: Dimensions of Gender Inequality

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Summarize the status of women around the world today.
2. Understand the extent of and reasons for gender inequality in income and the workplace in the United States.
3. Understand the extent of and reasons for sexual harassment.

The primary focus of this chapter is gender inequality in the United States, but it is also important to discuss gender inequality worldwide. While American women are unequal to men in many respects, women's situation throughout much of the world is especially dire. Accordingly, we first examine the global inequality of women before turning our attention to the United States.

The Global Inequality of Women

The problem of global poverty first discussed in Chapter 2 "Poverty" is especially severe for women. Although, as Chapter 2 "Poverty" noted, more than 1.4 billion people on earth are desperately poor, their ranks include more than their fair share of women, who are estimated to make up 70 percent of the world's poor. Because women tend to be poorer than men worldwide, they are more likely than men to experience all the problems that poverty causes, including malnutrition and disease. But they also suffer additional problems. Some of these problems derive from women's physiological role of childbearing, and some arise from how they are treated simply because they are women.

Let's first look at childbearing. One of the most depressing examples of how global poverty affects women is maternal mortality, or the number of women who die during childbirth for every 100,000 live births. More than 500,000 women die worldwide annually from complications during pregnancy or childbirth. Maternal mortality usually results from one or more of the following: inadequate prenatal nutrition, disease and illness, and inferior obstetrical care, all of which are much more common in poor nations than in wealthy nations. In wealthy nations, the rate of maternal mortality is 14 per 100,000 births, but in poor nations the rate is a distressingly high 590 per 100,000 births, equivalent to almost 6 deaths for every 1,000 births. Women in poor nations are thus forty-two times more likely than those in wealthy nations to die from complications during pregnancy or childbirth (World Bank, 2012).



In India and Pakistan, thousands of new wives every year are murdered in dowry deaths because they have not provided their husbands a suitable amount of money and goods. Wikimedia Commons – CC BY 2.0.

In addition to these problems, women in poor nations fare worse than men in other ways because of how they are treated as women. One manifestation of this fact is the violence they experience (World Health Organization, 2010).World Health Organization/London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. (2010). *Preventing intimate partner and sexual violence against women: Taking action and generating evidence*. Geneva, Switzerland: Author. About one-third of women worldwide have been raped or beaten, leading Amnesty International (2004) to call violence against women "the greatest human rights scandal of our times." Although violence against women certainly occurs in wealthy nations, it is more common and extreme in poor and middle-income nations, and in nations where women's inequality (as reflected by criteria such as their labor force participation and their educational attainment) is especially high (Kaya & Cook, 2010). More than half of women in Uganda, for example, have been physically or sexually abused (Amnesty International, 2010). Many young women in India who work outside the home have been raped by male high-school dropouts who think these women lack virtue and should be punished with rape (Polgreen, 2011). In

India and Pakistan, thousands of women are killed every year in dowry deaths, in which a new wife is murdered by her husband and/or his relatives if she does not pay the groom money or goods (Kethineni & Srinivasan, 2009). In many countries, young girls routinely have their genitals cut out, often with no anesthesia, in what has been termed *female genital mutilation*, a practice that is thought to affect more than 100 million girls and women across the earth and has been called an act of torture (Kristoff, 2011; Rogo, Subayi, & Toubia, 2007).

Sex trafficking is another major problem in countries like Cambodia, India, Nepal, and Thailand, where young girls are often stolen from their parents and forced to work as prostitutes in what amounts to *sexual slavery*. The number of girls (and sometimes boys) under age 18 who work as sex slaves is thought to reach into the millions and to be larger than the number of African slaves during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Kristoff & WuDunn, 2010).

Beyond violence, women in poor nations are less likely than their male counterparts to get a higher education, and girls are less likely than boys to attend primary school. Women are also less likely than men to work in jobs that pay a decent wage and to hold political office. In many poor nations, girls are less likely than boys to receive adequate medical care when they become ill and are more likely than boys to die before age 5. In all these ways, women and girls in poor nations especially suffer.

In stark contrast, women in wealthy democratic nations fare much better than their counterparts in poor nations. In many wealthy democracies, women's status vis-à-vis men is higher than in the United States. The Note 4.23 "Lessons from Other Societies" box discusses this situation further.

Lessons from Other Societies

Women in the Nordic Nations

The United Nations Development Programme ranks nations on a "gender empowerment measure" of women's involvement in their nation's economy and political life (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). Of the 109 nations included in the measure, Sweden ranks first, followed by Norway, Finland, and Denmark. The remaining Nordic nation, Iceland, ranks eighth. The other nations in the top ten are the Netherlands, Belgium, Australia, Germany, and New Zealand. Canada ranks twelfth, and the United States ranks only eighteenth. In trying to understand why the United States ranks this low and what it might be able to do to increase its empowerment of women, the experience of the Nordic nations provides some important lessons.

The Nordic nations rank at the top of the gender empowerment measure largely because they have made a concerted effort to boost women's involvement in the business and political worlds (Sumer, Smithson, Guerreiro, & Granlund, 2008). They are all social democratic welfare states characterized by extensive government programs and other efforts to promote full economic and gender equality.

For example, Norway's government provides day care for children and adult care for older or disabled individuals, and it also provides forty-four weeks of paid parental leave after the birth of a child. Parents can also work fewer hours without losing income until their child is 2 years of age. All these provisions mean that women are much more likely than their American counterparts to have the freedom and economic means to work outside the home, and they have taken advantage of this opportunity. As a recent analysis concluded, "It has been extremely important for women that social rights have been extended to cover such things as the caring of young children and elderly, sick and disabled members of society. In the Nordic countries, women have been more successful than elsewhere in combining their dual role as mothers and workers, and social policy arrangements are an integral part of the gender equality policy" (Kangas & Palme, 2009, p. 565).

The lesson for the United States is clear: An important reason for the Nordic nations' high gender empowerment ranking is government policy that enables women to work outside the home if they want to do so. The experience of these nations indicates that greater gender equality might be achieved in the United States if it adopted policies similar to those found in these nations that make it easier for women to join and stay in the labor force.

Gender Inequality in the United States

We have said that the women's movement changed American life in many ways but that gender inequality persists in the United States. Let's look at examples of such inequality, much of it taking the form of institutional discrimination, which, as we saw in Chapter 3 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality", can occur even if it is not intended to happen. We start with gender inequality in income and the workplace and then move on to a few other spheres of life.

The Gender Gap in Income

In the last few decades, women have entered the workplace in increasing numbers, partly, and for many women mostly, out of economic necessity, and partly out of desire for the sense of self-worth and other fulfillment that comes with work. In February 2012, 57.9 percent of US women aged 16 or older were in the labor force, compared to only 43.3 percent in 1970; comparable figures for men were 70.3 percent in 2012 and 79.7 percent in 1970 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Thus while women's labor force participation continues to lag behind men's, this gender gap has narrowed. The figures just cited include women of retirement age. When we just look at younger women, labor force participation is even higher. For example, 74.7 percent of women aged 35–44 were in the labor force in 2011, compared to only 46.8 percent in 1970.

Despite the workplace gains women have made, problems persist. Perhaps the major problem is a gender gap in income. Women have earned less money than men ever since records started being kept (Reskin & Padavic, 2002). In the United States in the early 1800s, full-time women workers in agriculture and manufacturing earned less than 38 percent of what men earned. By 1885, they were earning about 50 percent of what men earned in manufacturing jobs. As the 1980s began, full-time women workers' median weekly earnings were about 65 percent of men's. Women have narrowed the gender gap in earnings since then: Their weekly earnings now (2011) are 82.2 percent of men's among full-time workers ages 16 and older (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Still, this means that for every $10,000 men earn, women earn only about $8,220. To turn that around, for every $10,000 women earn, men earn $12,156. This gap amounts to hundreds of thousands of dollars over a lifetime of working.



Women have earned less money than men ever since records started being kept. Women now earn about 81 percent of what men earn. John Jacobi – receptionist answering phone at suburban eye care – CC BY 2.0.

As Table 4.1 "Median Annual Earnings of Full-Time, Year-Round Workers Aged 25–64 by Educational Attainment, 2010*" shows, this gender gap exists for all levels of education and even increases with higher levels of education. On the average, women with a bachelor's degree or higher and working full time earn almost $18,000 less per year than their male counterparts.

Table 4.1 Median Annual Earnings of Full-Time, Year-Round Workers Aged 25–64 by Educational Attainment, 2010*

	High school dropout	High school degree	Some college or associate's degree	Bachelor's degree or higher
Men	25,272	36,920	43,940	69,160
Women	20,176	28,236	33,176	51,272
Difference	5,096	8,684	10,764	17,888
Gender gap (%; women ÷ men)	79.8	76.5	75.5	74.1
* Median weekly earnings × 52 weeks				

Source: US Department of Labor. (2011). *Highlights of women's earnings in 2010*. Washington, DC: Author.

What accounts for the gender gap in earnings? A major reason is sex segregation in the workplace, which accounts for up to 45 percent of the gender gap (Kelley, 2011; Reskin & Padavic, 2002). Although women have increased their labor force participation, the workplace remains segregated by gender. Almost half of all women work in a few low-paying clerical and service (e.g., waitressing) jobs, while men work in a much greater variety of jobs, including high-paying ones. Table 4.2 "Gender Segregation in the Workplace for Selected Occupations, 2010" shows that many jobs are composed primarily of women or of men. Part of the

reason for this segregation is that socialization affects what jobs young men and women choose to pursue, and part of the reason is that women and men do not want to encounter difficulties they may experience if they took a job traditionally assigned to the other sex. A third reason is that sex-segregated jobs discriminate against applicants who are not the “right” sex for that job. Employers may either consciously refuse to hire someone who is the “wrong” sex for the job or have job requirements (e.g., height requirements) and workplace rules (e.g., working at night) that unintentionally make it more difficult for women to qualify for certain jobs. Although such practices and requirements are now illegal, they still continue. The sex segregation they help create contributes to the continuing gender gap between female and male workers. Occupations dominated by women tend to have lower wages and salaries. Because women are concentrated in low-paying jobs, their earnings are much lower than men’s (Reskin & Padavic, 2002).

This fact raises an important question: Why do women’s jobs pay less than men’s jobs? Is it because their jobs are not important and require few skills (recalling the functional theory of stratification discussed in Chapter 2 “Poverty”)? The evidence indicates otherwise: Women’s work is devalued precisely because it is women’s work, and women’s jobs thus pay less than men’s jobs because they are women’s jobs (Magnusson, 2009).

Table 4.2 Gender Segregation in the Workplace for Selected Occupations, 2010

Occupation	Female workers (%)	Male workers (%)
Preschool and kindergarten teachers	97.0	3.0
Speech-language pathologists	96.3	3.7
Secretaries and administrative assistants	96.1	3.9
Dental hygienists	95.1	4.9
Registered nurses	91.1	8.9
Food servers (waiters/waitresses)	71.1	29.9
Pharmacists	53.0	47.0
Physicians	32.3	67.7
Lawyers	31.5	68.5
Dentists	25.5	64.5
Computer software engineers	20.9	79.1
Electricians	1.5	98.5
Carpenters	1.4	98.5

Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

Studies of comparable worth support this argument (Levanon, England, & Allison, 2009). Researchers rate various jobs in terms of their requirements and attributes that logically should affect the salaries they offer: the importance of the job, the degree of skill it requires, the level of responsibility it requires, the degree to which the employee must exercise independent judgment, and so forth. They then use these dimensions to determine what salary a job should offer. Some jobs might be better on some dimensions and worse on others but still end up with the same predicted salary if everything evens out.



Some women's jobs pay less than men's jobs even though their comparable worth is equal to or even higher than the men's jobs. For example, a social worker, depicted here, may earn less money than a probation officer, even though calculations based on comparable worth would predict that a social worker should earn at least as much. Wikimedia Commons – CC BY 2.0.

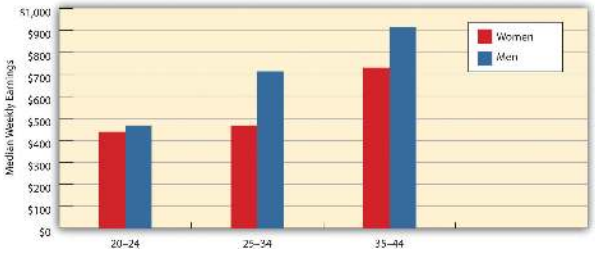
When researchers make their calculations, they find that certain women's jobs pay less than men's even though their comparable worth is equal to or even higher than the men's jobs. For example, a social worker may earn less money than a probation officer, even though calculations based on comparable worth would predict that a social worker should earn at least as much. The comparable worth research demonstrates that women's jobs pay less than men's jobs of comparable worth and that the average working family would earn several thousand dollars more annually if pay scales were reevaluated based on comparable worth and women were paid more for their work.

Even when women and men work in the same jobs, women often earn less than men, and men are more likely than women to hold leadership positions in these occupations. Government data provide ready evidence of the lower incomes women receive even in the same occupations. For example, among full-time employees, female marketing and sales managers earn only 66 percent of what their male counterparts earn; female human resource managers earn only 80 percent of what their male counterparts earn; female claims adjusters earn only 77 percent; female accountants earn only 75 percent; female elementary and middle school teachers earn only 91 percent; and even female secretaries and clerical workers earn only 91 percent (US Department of Labor, 2011).

One reason for these differences, and for women's lower earnings in general, is their caregiving responsibilities (Chang, 2010). Women are more likely than men to have the major, and perhaps the sole, responsibility for taking care of children and aging parents or other adults who need care. This responsibility limits their work hours and often prompts them to drop out of the labor force. If women rejoin the labor force after their children start school, or join for the first time, they are already several years behind men who began working at an earlier age. Economics writer David Leonhardt (2010, p. B1) explains this dynamic: "Many more women take time off from work. Many more women work part time at some point in their careers. Many more women can't get to work early or stay late. And our economy exacts a terribly steep price for any time away from work—in both pay and promotions. People often cannot just pick up where they have left off. Entire career paths are closed off. The hit to earnings is permanent."

We can see evidence of this "hit" when we examine the gender gap in earnings by age. This gap is relatively low for people in their early twenties, when women earn 93.8 percent of what men earn, but rises during the next two decades of age as more and more women bear and raise children (see Figure 4.4 "Gender, Age, and Median Weekly Earnings of Full-Time Employees, 2010").

Figure 4.4 Gender, Age, and Median Weekly Earnings of Full-Time Employees, 2010



Source: U.S. Department of Labor. (2011). *Highlights of Women's Earnings in 2010*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.

Still, when variables like number of years on the job, number of hours worked per week, and size of firm are taken into account, gender differences in earnings diminish but do not disappear altogether, and it is very likely that sex discrimination (conscious or unconscious) by employers accounts for much of the remaining disparity.

Some of the sex discrimination in employment reflects the existence of two related phenomena, the glass ceiling and the glass escalator. Women may be promoted in a job only to find they reach an invisible "glass ceiling" beyond which they cannot get promoted, or they may not get promoted in the first place. In the largest US corporations, women constitute only about 16 percent of the top executives, and women executives are paid much less than their male counterparts (Jenner & Ferguson, 2009). Although these disparities stem partly from the fact that women joined the corporate ranks much more recently than men, they also reflect a glass ceiling in the corporate world that prevents qualified women from rising up above a certain level (Hymowitz, 2009). Men, on the other hand, can often ride a "glass escalator" to the top, even in female occupations. An example is seen in elementary school teaching, where principals typically rise from the ranks of teachers. Although men constitute only about 16 percent of all public elementary school teachers, they account for about 41 percent of all elementary school principals (Aud et al., 2011).



Women constitute only about 16 percent of the top executives in the largest US corporations, and women executives are paid much less than their male counterparts. These disparities reflect a "glass ceiling" that limits women's opportunities for promotion. Baltic Development Forum – Kristovskis meeting – CC BY 2.0.

Whatever the reasons for the gender gap in income, the fact that women make so much less than men means that female-headed families are especially likely to be poor. In 2010, almost 32 percent of these families lived in poverty, compared to only 6 percent of married-couple families (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). As noted in Chapter 2 "Poverty", the term *feminization of poverty* refers to the fact that female-headed households are especially likely to be poor. The gendering of poverty in this manner is one of the most significant manifestations of gender inequality in the United States.

Sexual Harassment

Another workplace problem (including schools) is sexual harassment, which, as defined by federal guidelines and legal rulings and statutes, consists of unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or physical conduct of a sexual nature that is used as a condition of employment or promotion or that interferes with an individual's job performance and creates an intimidating or hostile environment.

Although men can be, and are, sexually harassed, women are more often the targets of sexual harassment. This gender difference exists for at least two reasons, one cultural and one structural. The cultural reason centers on the depiction of women and the socialization of men. As our discussion of the mass media and gender socialization indicated, women are still depicted in our culture as sexual objects that exist for men's pleasure. At the same time, our culture socializes men to be sexually assertive. These two cultural beliefs combine to make men believe that they have the right to make verbal and physical advances to women in the workplace. When these advances fall into the guidelines listed here, they become sexual harassment.



Sexual harassment in the workplace is a common experience. In surveys of women employees, up to two-thirds of respondents report having been sexually harassed. Wikimedia Commons – CC BY-SA 4.0.

The second reason that most targets of sexual harassment are women is more structural. Reflecting the gendered nature of the workplace and of the educational system, typically the men doing the harassment are in a position of power over the women they harass. A male boss harasses a female employee, or a male professor harasses a female student or employee. These men realize that subordinate women may find it difficult to resist their advances for fear of reprisals: A female employee may be fired or not promoted, and a female student may receive a bad grade.

How common is sexual harassment? This is difficult to determine, as the men who do the sexual harassment are not about to shout it from the rooftops, and the women who suffer it often keep quiet because of the repercussions just listed. But anonymous surveys of women employees in corporate and other settings commonly find that 40–65 percent of the respondents report being sexually harassed (Rospenda, Richman, & Shannon, 2009). In a survey of 4,501 women physicians, 36.9 percent reported being sexually harassed either in medical school or in their practice as physicians (Frank, Brogan, & Schiffman, 1998). In studies of college students, almost one-third of women undergraduates and about 40 percent of women graduate students report being sexually harassed by a faculty member (Clodfelter, Turner, Hartman, & Kuhns, 2010).

Studies of people who have been sexually harassed find that they often experience various psychological problems. The Note 4.29 “Applying Social Research” box discusses this body of research further.

Applying Social Research

The Long-Term Mental Health Consequences of Sexual Harassment

Despite the fact that sexual harassment is illegal, most women (and men) who are sexually harassed do not bring court action. Two reasons explain their decision not to sue: they fear being fired and/or they worry they will not be believed. But another reason has to do with the mental and emotional consequences of being sexually harassed. These consequences include relationship problems, a loss of self-esteem, fatigue, depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, and a feeling of powerlessness. These effects are similar to those for posttraumatic stress disorder and are considered symptoms of what has been termed *sexual harassment trauma syndrome*. This syndrome, and perhaps especially the feeling of powerlessness, are thought to help explain why sexual harassment victims hardly ever bring court action and otherwise often keep quiet. According to law professor Theresa Beiner, the legal system should become more aware of these psychological consequences as it deals with the important question in sexual harassment cases of whether harassment actually occurred. If a woman keeps quiet about the harassment, it is too easy for judges and juries to believe, as happens in rape cases, that the woman originally did not mind the behavior that she now says is harassment.

Should the legal system begin to make better use of social science research on sexual harassment trauma syndrome, a recent study by sociologist Jason N. Houle and colleagues provides important new evidence for legal officials to consider. The authors note two faults in prior sexual harassment research. First, most studies have focused on workers in a single occupation, such as lawyers, or in a single organization, such as a university campus, rather than in a diverse set of occupations and organizations. Second, because most studies have examined workers at only one point in time, they have been unable to study the long-term psychological consequences of sexual harassment.

To correct these deficiencies, Houle et al. analyzed data from a study of 1,010 ninth-graders in St. Paul, Minnesota, that followed them from 1988 to 2004, when they were 30 or 31 years old. The study included measures of the respondents’ experience of sexual harassment at several periods over the study’s sixteen-year time span (ages 14–18, 19–26, 29–30, and 30–31), their level of psychological depression, and their sociodemographic background. Focusing on depression at ages 30 or 31, the authors found that sexual harassment at ages 14–18 did not affect the chances of depression at ages 30–31, but that sexual harassment during any of

the other three age periods *did* increase the chances of depression at ages 30–31. These results held true for both women and men who had been harassed. The authors concluded that the "effects of harassment are indeed lasting, as harassment experiences early in the career were associated with heightened depressive symptoms nearly 10 years later."

In finding long-term effects of sexual harassment on women and men in a variety of occupations and organizational settings, Houle et al.'s study made an important contribution to our understanding of the psychological consequences of sexual harassment. Its findings underscore the need for workplaces and campuses to do everything possible to eliminate this illegal and harmful behavior and perhaps will prove useful in sexual harassment lawsuits.

Sources: Beiner, 2005; Houle, Staff, Mortimer, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2011; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007

Women of Color: A Triple Burden

Earlier we mentioned multicultural feminism, which stresses that women of color face difficulties for three reasons: their gender, their race, and, often, their social class, which is frequently near the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. They thus face a *triple burden* that manifests itself in many ways.

For example, women of color experience extra income inequality. Earlier we discussed the gender gap in earnings, with women earning 82.2 percent of what men earn, but women of color face both a gender gap *and* a racial/ethnic gap. Table 4.3 "The Race/Ethnicity and Gender Gap in Annual Earnings for Full-Time, Year-Round Workers, 2010*" depicts this double gap for full-time workers. We see a racial/ethnic gap among both women and men, as African Americans and Latinos of either gender earn less than whites. We also see a gender gap between men and women, as women earn less than men within any race/ethnicity. These two gaps combine to produce an especially high gap between African American and Latina women and white men: African American women earn only about 70 percent of what white men earn, and Latina women earn only about 60 percent of what white men earn.

Table 4.3 The Race/Ethnicity and Gender Gap in Annual Earnings for Full-Time, Year-Round Workers, 2010*

	Annual earnings ($)	Percentage of white male earnings
Men		
White (non-Hispanic)	44,200	—
Black	32,916	74.5
Latino	26,416	59.8
Women		
White (non-Hispanic)	35,568	80.5
Black	30,784	69.7
Latina	26,416	59.8
* Median weekly earnings × 52 weeks		

Source: US Department of Labor. (2011). *Highlights of women's earnings in 2010*. Washington, DC: Author.

These differences in income mean that African American and Latina women are poorer than white women. We noted earlier that almost 32 percent of all female-headed families are poor. This figure masks race/ethnic differences among such families: 24.8 percent of families headed by non-Latina white women are poor, compared to 41.0 percent of families headed by African American women and also 44.5 percent of families headed by Latina women (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2011). While white women are poorer than white men, African American and Latina women are clearly poorer than white women.

Household Inequality

Gender inequality occurs within families and households. We will talk more about this aspect of family life in Chapter 8 "The Changing Family", but briefly discuss here one significant dimension of gender-based household inequality: housework. Someone has to do housework, and that someone is usually a woman. It takes many hours a week to clean the bathrooms, cook, shop in the grocery store, vacuum, and do everything else that needs to be done. The research evidence indicates that women married to or living with men spend two to three times as many hours per week on housework as men spend (Gupta & Ash, 2008). This disparity

holds true even when women work outside the home, leading sociologist Arlie Hochschild (Hochschild, 1989) to observe in a widely cited book that women engage in a "second shift" of unpaid work when they come home from their paying job.

The good news is that gender differences in housework time are smaller than a generation ago. The bad news is that a large gender difference remains. As one study summarized the evidence on this issue, "Women invest significantly more hours in household labor than do men despite the narrowing of gender differences in recent years" (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000, p. 196). In the realm of household work, then, gender inequality persists.

Key Takeaways

- Among full-time workers, women earn about 79.4 percent of men's earnings. This gender gap in earnings stems from several factors, including sex segregation in the workplace and the lower wages and salaries found in occupations that involve mostly women.
- Sexual harassment results partly from women's subordinate status in the workplace and may involve up to two-thirds of women employees.
- Women of color may face a "triple burden" of difficulties based on their gender, their race/ethnicity, and their social class.

For Your Review

1. Do you think it is fair for occupations dominated by women to have lower wages and salaries than those dominated by men? Explain your answer.
2. If you know a woman who works in a male-dominated occupation, interview her about any difficulties she might be experiencing as a result of being in this sort of situation.

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4.4: Violence against Women- Rape and Sexual Assault

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe the extent of rape and sexual assault.
2. Explain why rape and sexual assault occur.

Susan Griffin (1971, p. 26) began a classic essay on rape in 1971 with this startling statement: “I have never been free of the fear of rape. From a very early age I, like most women, have thought of rape as a part of my natural environment—something to be feared and prayed against like fire or lightning. I never asked why men raped; I simply thought it one of the many mysteries of human nature.”

When we consider interpersonal violence of all kinds—homicide, assault, robbery, and rape and sexual assault—men are more likely than women to be victims of violence. While true, this fact obscures another fact: Women are far more likely than men to be raped and sexually assaulted. They are also much more likely to be portrayed as victims of pornographic violence on the Internet and in videos, magazines, and other outlets. Finally, women are more likely than men to be victims of *domestic violence*, or violence between spouses and others with intimate relationships. The gendered nature of these acts against women distinguishes them from the violence men suffer. Violence is directed against men not because they are men per se, but because of anger, jealousy, and the sociological reasons discussed in Chapter 6 “Crime and Criminal Justice”’s treatment of deviance and crime. But rape and sexual assault, domestic violence, and pornographic violence are directed against women precisely because they are women. These acts are thus an extreme manifestation of the gender inequality women face in other areas of life. We discuss rape and sexual assault here but will leave domestic violence for Chapter 8 “The Changing Family” and pornography for Chapter 7 “Sexual Behavior”.

The Extent and Context of Rape and Sexual Assault

Our knowledge about the extent and context of rape and reasons for it comes from three sources: the FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), both discussed in Chapter 6 “Crime and Criminal Justice”, and surveys of and interviews with women and men conducted by academic researchers. From these sources we have a fairly good if not perfect idea of how much rape occurs, the context in which it occurs, and the reasons for it. What do we know?



)3-N-AE328-001: WASHINGTON (March 30, 2012) An informational poster about sexual assault awareness month. Throughout the month of April, commanc raged to organize activities to raise awareness of sexual assault using the theme, “Hurts One, Affects All. Prevention of Sexual Assault is Everyone’s Duty.” Jo rsation on social media and help raise awareness using #SAAM. (U.S. Navy photo illustration by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class N wood/Released). Up to one-third of US women experience a rape or sexual assault, including attempts, at least once in their lives. Wikimedia Commons – p in.

According to the UCR, which are compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) from police reports, 88,767 reported rapes (including attempts, and defined as forced sexual intercourse) occurred in the United States in 2010 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011). Because women often do not tell police they were raped, the NCVS, which involves survey interviews of thousands of people nationwide, probably yields a better estimate of rape; the NCVS also measures sexual assaults in addition to rape, while the UCR measures only rape. According to the NCVS, 188,380 rapes and sexual assaults occurred in 2010 (Truman, 2011). Other research indicates that up to one-third of US women will experience a rape or sexual assault, including attempts, at least once in their lives (Barkan, 2012). A study of a random sample of 420 Toronto women involving intensive interviews yielded an even higher figure: Two-thirds said they had experienced at least one rape or sexual

assault, including attempts. The researchers, Melanie Randall and Lori Haskell (1995, p. 22), concluded that "it is more common than not for a woman to have an experience of sexual assault during their lifetime."

Studies of college students also find a high amount of rape and sexual assault. About 20–30 percent of women students in anonymous surveys report being raped or sexually assaulted (including attempts), usually by a male student they knew beforehand (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006). Thus at a campus of 10,000 students of whom 5,000 are women, about 1,000–1,500 women will be raped or sexually assaulted over a period of four years, or about 10 per week in a four-year academic calendar. The Note 4.33 "People Making a Difference" box describes what one group of college students did to help reduce rape and sexual assault at their campus.

People Making a Difference

College Students Protest against Sexual Violence

Dickinson College is a small liberal-arts campus in the small town of Carlisle, Pennsylvania. But in the fight against sexual violence, it loomed huge in March 2011, when up to 150 students conducted a nonviolent occupation of the college's administrative building for three days to protest rape and sexual assault on their campus. While they read, ate, and slept inside the building, more than 250 other students held rallies outside, with the total number of protesters easily exceeding one-tenth of Dickinson's student enrollment. The protesters held signs that said "Stop the silence, our safety is more important than your reputation" and "I value my body, you should value my rights." One student told a reporter, "This is a pervasive problem. Almost every student will tell you they know somebody who's experienced sexual violence or have experienced it themselves."

Feeling that college officials had not done enough to help protect Dickinson's women students, the students occupying the administrative building called on the college to set up an improved emergency system for reporting sexual assaults, to revamp its judicial system's treatment of sexual assault cases, to create a sexual violence prevention program, and to develop a new sexual misconduct policy.

Rather than having police or security guards take the students from the administrative building and even arrest them, Dickinson officials negotiated with the students and finally agreed to their demands. Upon hearing this good news, the occupying students left the building on a Saturday morning, suffering from a lack of sleep and showers but cheered that they had won their demands. A college public relations official applauded the protesters, saying they "have indelibly left their mark on the college. We're all very proud of them." On this small campus in a small town in Pennsylvania, a few hundred college students had made a difference.

Sources: Jerving, 2011; Pitz, 2011

The public image of rape is of the proverbial stranger attacking a woman in an alleyway. While such rapes do occur, most rapes actually happen between people who know each other. A wide body of research finds that 60–80 percent of all rapes and sexual assaults are committed by someone the woman knows, including husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends, and ex-boyfriends, and only 20–35 percent by strangers (Barkan, 2012). A woman is thus two to four times more likely to be raped by someone she knows than by a stranger.

In 2011, sexual assaults of hotel housekeepers made major headlines after the head of the International Monetary Fund was arrested for allegedly sexually assaulting a hotel housekeeper in New York City; the charges were later dropped because the prosecution worried about the housekeeper's credibility despite forensic evidence supporting her claim. Still, in the wake of the arrest, news stories reported that hotel housekeepers sometimes encounter male guests who commit sexual assault, make explicit comments, or expose themselves. A hotel security expert said in one news story, "These problems happen with some regularity. They're not rare, but they're not common either." A housekeeper recalled in the same story an incident when she was vacuuming when a male guest appeared: "[He] reached to try to kiss me behind my ear. I dropped my vacuum, and then he grabbed my body at the waist, and he was holding me close. It was very scary." She ran out of the room when the guest let her leave but did not call the police. A hotel workers union official said housekeepers often refused to report sexual assault and other incidents to the police because they were afraid they would not be believed or that they would get fired if they did so (Greenhouse, 2011, p. B1).

Explaining Rape and Sexual Assault

Sociological explanations of rape fall into cultural and structural categories similar to those presented earlier for sexual harassment. Various "rape myths" in our culture support the absurd notion that women somehow enjoy being raped, want to be raped, or are "asking for it" (Franiuk, Seefelt, & Vandello, 2008). One of the most famous scenes in movie history occurs in the classic film *Gone with the Wind*, when Rhett Butler carries a struggling Scarlett O'Hara up the stairs. She is struggling because she does not want to have sex with him. The next scene shows Scarlett waking up the next morning with a satisfied, loving look on her face. The not-so-subtle message is that she enjoyed being raped (or, to be more charitable to the film, was just playing hard to get).

A related cultural belief is that women somehow ask or deserve to be raped by the way they dress or behave. If she dresses attractively or walks into a bar by herself, she wants to have sex, and if a rape occurs, well, then, what did she expect? In the award-winning film *The Accused*, based on a true story, actress Jodie Foster plays a woman who was raped by several men on top of a pool table in a bar. The film recounts how members of the public questioned why she was in the bar by herself if she did not want to have sex and blamed her for being raped.

A third cultural belief is that a man who is sexually active with a lot of women is a stud and thus someone admired by his male peers. Although this belief is less common in this day of AIDS and other STDs, it is still with us. A man with multiple sex partners continues to be the source of envy among many of his peers. At a minimum, men are still the ones who have to "make the first move" and then continue making more moves. There is a thin line between being sexually assertive and sexually aggressive (Kassing, Beesley, & Frey, 2005).

These three cultural beliefs—that women enjoy being forced to have sex, that they ask or deserve to be raped, and that men should be sexually assertive or even aggressive—combine to produce a cultural recipe for rape. Although most men do not rape, the cultural beliefs and myths just described help account for the rapes that do occur. Recognizing this, the contemporary women's movement began attacking these myths back in the 1970s, and the public is much more conscious of the true nature of rape than a generation ago. That said, much of the public still accepts these cultural beliefs and myths, and prosecutors continue to find it difficult to win jury convictions in rape trials unless the woman who was raped had suffered visible injuries, had not known the man who raped her, and/or was not dressed attractively (Levine, 2006).

Structural explanations for rape emphasize the power differences between women and men similar to those outlined earlier for sexual harassment. In societies that are male dominated, rape and other violence against women is a likely outcome, as they allow men to demonstrate and maintain their power over women. Supporting this view, studies of preindustrial societies and of the fifty states of the United States find that rape is more common in societies where women have less economic and political power (Baron & Straus, 1989; Sanday, 1981). Poverty is also a predictor of rape; although rape in the United States transcends social class boundaries, it does seem more common among poorer segments of the population than among wealthier segments, as is true for other types of violence (Truman & Rand, 2010). Scholars think the higher rape rates among the poor stem from poor men trying to prove their "masculinity" by taking out their economic frustration on women (Martin, Vieraitis, & Britto, 2006).

Key Takeaways

- Up to one-third of US women experience a rape or sexual assault, including attempts, in their lifetime.
- Rape and sexual assault result from a combination of structural and cultural factors. In states and nations where women are more unequal, rape rates tend to be higher.

For Your Review

1. What evidence and reasoning indicate that rape and sexual assault are not just the result of psychological problems affecting the men who engage in these crimes?
2. Write a brief essay in which you critically evaluate the cultural beliefs that contribute to rape and sexual assault.

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4.5: The Benefits and Costs of Being Male

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. List some of the benefits of being male.
2. List some of the costs of being male.

Most of the discussion so far has been about women, and with good reason: In a sexist society such as our own, women are the subordinate, unequal sex. But *gender* means more than *female*, and a few comments about men are in order.

Benefits

We have already discussed gender differences in occupations and incomes that favor men over women. In a patriarchal society, men have more wealth than women and more influence in the political and economic worlds more generally.

Men profit in other ways as well. In Chapter 3 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality", we talked about white privilege, or the advantages that whites automatically have in a racist society whether or not they realize they have these advantages. Many scholars also talk about male privilege, or the advantages that males automatically have in a patriarchal society whether or not they realize they have these advantages (McIntosh, 2007).

A few examples illustrate male privilege. Men can usually walk anywhere they want or go into any bar they want without having to worry about being raped or sexually harassed. Susan Griffin was able to write "I have never been free of the fear of rape" because she was a woman; it is no exaggeration to say that few men could write the same thing and mean it. Although some men are sexually harassed, most men can work at any job they want without having to worry about sexual harassment. Men can walk down the street without having strangers make crude remarks about their looks, dress, and sexual behavior. Men can ride the subway system in large cities without having strangers grope them, flash them, or rub their bodies against them. Men can apply for most jobs without worrying about being rejected because of their gender, or, if hired, not being promoted because of their gender. We could go on with many other examples, but the fact remains that in a patriarchal society, men automatically have advantages just because they are men, even if race/ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation affect the degree to which they are able to enjoy these advantages.

Costs

Yet it is also true that men pay a price for living in a patriarchy. Without trying to claim that men have it as bad as women, scholars are increasingly pointing to the problems men face in a society that promotes male domination and traditional standards of masculinity such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and toughness (Kimmel & Messner, 2010). Socialization into masculinity is thought to underlie many of the emotional problems men experience, which stem from a combination of their emotional inexpressiveness and reluctance to admit to, and seek help for, various personal problems (Wong & Rochlen, 2005). Sometimes these emotional problems build up and explode, as mass shootings by males at schools and elsewhere indicate, or express themselves in other ways. Compared to girls, for example, boys are much more likely to be diagnosed with emotional disorders, learning disabilities, and attention deficit disorder, and they are also more likely to commit suicide and to drop out of high school.

Men experience other problems that put themselves at a disadvantage compared to women. They commit much more violence than women do and, apart from rape and sexual assault, also suffer a much higher rate of violent victimization. They die earlier than women and are injured more often. Because men are less involved than women in child rearing, they also miss out on the joy of parenting that women are much more likely to experience.

Growing recognition of the problems males experience because of their socialization into masculinity has led to increased concern over what is happening to American boys. Citing the strong linkage between masculinity and violence, some writers urge parents to raise their sons differently in order to help our society reduce its violent behavior (Corbett, 2011). In all these respects, boys and men—and our nation as a whole—are paying a very real price for being male in a patriarchal society.

Key Takeaways

- In a patriarchal society, males automatically have certain advantages, including a general freedom from fear of being raped and sexually assaulted and from experiencing job discrimination on the basis of their gender.

- Men also suffer certain disadvantages from being male, including higher rates of injury, violence, and death and a lower likelihood of experiencing the joy that parenting often brings.

For Your Review

1. What do you think is the most important advantage, privilege, or benefit that men enjoy in the United States? Explain your answer.
2. What do you think is the most significant cost or disadvantage that men experience? Again, explain your answer.

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4.6: Reducing Gender Inequality

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe any three policies or programs that should help reduce gender inequality.
2. Discuss possible ways of reducing rape and sexual assault.

Gender inequality is found in varying degrees in most societies around the world, and the United States is no exception. Just as racial/ethnic stereotyping and prejudice underlie racial/ethnic inequality (see Chapter 3 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality"), so do stereotypes and false beliefs underlie gender inequality. Although these stereotypes and beliefs have weakened considerably since the 1970s thanks in large part to the contemporary women's movement, they obviously persist and hamper efforts to achieve full gender equality.

A sociological perspective reminds us that gender inequality stems from a complex mixture of cultural and structural factors that must be addressed if gender inequality is to be reduced further than it already has been since the 1970s. Despite changes during this period, children are still socialized from birth into traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, and gender-based stereotyping incorporating these notions still continues. Although people should certainly be free to pursue whatever family and career responsibilities they desire, socialization and stereotyping still combine to limit the ability of girls and boys and women and men alike to imagine less traditional possibilities. Meanwhile, structural obstacles in the workplace and elsewhere continue to keep women in a subordinate social and economic status relative to men.

To reduce gender inequality, then, a sociological perspective suggests various policies and measures to address the cultural and structural factors that help produce gender inequality. These steps might include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Reduce socialization by parents and other adults of girls and boys into traditional gender roles.
2. Confront gender stereotyping by the popular and news media.
3. Increase public consciousness of the reasons for, extent of, and consequences of rape and sexual assault, sexual harassment, and pornography.
4. Increase enforcement of existing laws against gender-based employment discrimination and against sexual harassment.
5. Increase funding of rape-crisis centers and other services for girls and women who have been raped and/or sexually assaulted.
6. Increase government funding of high-quality day-care options to enable parents, and especially mothers, to work outside the home if they so desire, and to do so without fear that their finances or their children's well-being will be compromised.
7. Increase mentorship and other efforts to boost the number of women in traditionally male occupations and in positions of political leadership.

As we consider how best to reduce gender inequality, the impact of the contemporary women's movement must be neither forgotten nor underestimated. Since it began in the late 1960s, the women's movement has generated important advances for women in almost every sphere of life. Brave women (and some men) challenged the status quo by calling attention to gender inequality in the workplace, education, and elsewhere, and they brought rape and sexual assault, sexual harassment, and domestic violence into the national consciousness. For gender inequality to continue to be reduced, it is essential that a strong women's movement continue to remind us of the sexism that still persists in American society and the rest of the world.

Reducing Rape and Sexual Assault

As we have seen, gender inequality also manifests itself in the form of violence against women. A sociological perspective tells us that cultural myths and economic and gender inequality help lead to rape, and that the rape problem goes far beyond a few psychopathic men who rape women. A sociological perspective thus tells us that our society cannot just stop at doing something about these men. Instead it must make more far-reaching changes by changing people's beliefs about rape and by making every effort to reduce poverty and to empower women. This last task is especially important, for, as Randall and Haskell (1995, p. 22) observed, a sociological perspective on rape "means calling into question the organization of sexual inequality in our society."

Aside from this fundamental change, other remedies, such as additional and better funded rape-crisis centers, would help women who experience rape and sexual assault. Yet even here women of color face an additional barrier. Because the antirape movement was begun by white, middle-class feminists, the rape-crisis centers they founded tended to be near where they live, such as college campuses, and not in the areas where women of color live, such as inner cities and Native American reservations. This meant that

women of color who experienced sexual violence lacked the kinds of help available to their white, middle-class counterparts (Matthews, 1989), and despite some progress, this is still true today.

Key Takeaways

- Certain government efforts, including increased financial support for child care, should help reduce gender inequality.
- If gender inequality lessens, rape and sexual assault should decrease as well.

For Your Review

1. To reduce gender inequality, do you think efforts should focus more on changing socialization practices or on changing policies in the workplace and schools? Explain your answer.
2. How hopeful are you that rape and sexual assault will decrease significantly in your lifetime?

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4.7: End-of-Chapter Material

Summary

1. *Sex* is a concept that refers to biological differences between females and males, while *gender* is a concept that refers to a society's expectations of how females and males should think and behave.
2. In understanding gender differences, scholars continue to debate the value of biological explanations. Biological explanations are provocative but ultimately imply that gender differences are inevitable and that the status quo must be maintained. In contrast, cultural and socialization explanations imply some hope for changing gender roles and for reducing gender inequality.
3. Many studies emphasize that socialization leads children in the United States to adopt the gender roles associated with femininity and masculinity. Parents view and interact with their daughters and sons differently, and children continue to learn their gender roles from their peers, schools, the mass media, and religion.
4. Feminism refers to the belief that women should be equal to men. With feminism defined in this way, many more people hold feminist beliefs than might be willing to admit to it.
5. Gender inequality in the workplace is manifested through the gender gap in earnings and through sexual harassment. Women earn only about 80 percent of what men earn. Several reasons account for this gap, including sex segregation in the workplace, women's caring roles, the devaluing of women's work, and outright sex discrimination by employers. Sexual harassment against women is quite common and stems from cultural beliefs about women's and men's roles and structural differences in the workplace in power between women and men.
6. Women of color experience a triple burden based on their gender, race/ethnicity, and social class. Even though white women earn less money and are poorer than white men, women of color earn less money and are poorer than white women.
7. Violence against women is another manifestation of gender inequality. Research shows that up to one-third of US women will be raped or sexually assaulted and that about 70–80 percent of their assailants will be men they know.
8. In a patriarchal society men enjoy privileges just for being male, whether or not they recognize these privileges. At the same time, men also experience disadvantages, including violent behavior and victimization and higher rates of certain emotional problems than those experienced by women.

Using What You Know

A friend of yours is working twenty hours per week in a local restaurant during the academic year to earn money for her tuition. She tells you that her manager has pressured her to go out on a date with him and has hinted she could be fired if she refuses. Your friend likes working there otherwise and makes good tips, but she is now dreading having to go to work. With the tight job market, she fears not being able to find other work if she quits, and she's afraid of being fired or not believed if she complains to state authorities. She asks you what she should do. What do you tell her?

What You Can Do

To help reduce gender inequality, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Contribute money to a local, state, or national organization that provides treatment to adolescent girls with drug, alcohol, or other problems.
2. Volunteer at a rape crisis center or for a rape hotline.
3. Start or join a group on your campus that focuses on gender issues.
4. Start or join a group on your campus or in the local community that focuses on getting middle-school girls more interested in math and the sciences.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Alcohol and Other Drugs

5.1: Drug Use in History
5.2: Drugs and Drug Use Today
5.3: Social Patterning of Drug Use
5.4: Explaining Drug Use
5.5: Drug Policy and the War on Illegal Drugs
5.6: Addressing the Drug Problem and Reducing Drug Use
5.7: End-of-Chapter Material

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5.1: Drug Use in History

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Discuss the presence of drugs in ancient times.
2. Summarize the use of drugs in the United States during the nineteenth century.
3. Explain the racial basis for decisions to ban opium, cocaine, and marijuana in the United States.

Shakespeare once wrote that "what's past is prologue." This familiar phrase means that what happened in the past provides a context for, and can help to understand and predict, the future. To the extent that the past is prologue, the history of drug use provides a sobering lesson: Drug use has been common since ancient times and has been common in almost every society. As a recent book on drug policy states, "People have used chemicals to alter their state of mind since before there were written records" (Kleiman, Caulkins, & Hawken, 2011, p. xviii). If past is indeed prologue, then it is no surprise that drug use remains common in contemporary nations despite considerable efforts to reduce it.

One manifestation of the long history of drug use is that humans have used mind-altering plants since prehistoric times. "Early humans discovered that eating some plants gave a feeling of relaxation, happiness, drowsiness, or peace," one scholar writes. "Some gave a feeling of increased energy, alertness, and stamina. And some caused strange sensations, terrifying visions, or a profoundly different awareness" (Gahlinger, 2004, p. 5).



Ancient Greeks drank poppy juice, which contained opium, around 300 BCE. Use of other drugs was also common in ancient times. Tilemahos Efthimiadis – National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece – CC BY 2.0.

Examples of drug use thousands of years ago abound (Escohotado, 2010; Faupel, Horowitz, & Weaver, 2010; Goodman, Sherratt, & Lovejoy, 2007). Mead, an alcoholic drink made from fermented honey, was first used about 8000 BCE, and beer and berry wines were first used about 6000 BCE. The ancient Sumerians used opium starting about 5000 BCE. Ancient Egypt used alcohol in 3500 BCE, while ancient China used cannabis (the source of marijuana) around 3000 BCE. Ancient people in what is now Switzerland ate poppy seeds (the source of opium) in 2500 BCE. Coca leaves (the source of cocaine) have been chewed for thousands of years. Folk medicines made from plants and herbs have also been used since ancient times. People in ancient Palestine drank wine in 350 BCE. Ancient Greeks drank poppy juice in 300 BCE. In about the same period, South American tribes used a hallucinogen called *cohoba*, made from mimosa beans. The Chinese and other Asians were using opium regularly by 1000 CE. Native Americans used tobacco before being discovered by Columbus in 1492. The use of various drugs has also been common in the many societies that anthropologists have studied (Durant & Thakker, 2003; Page & Singer, 2010).

Sociologist Erich Goode (2008, p. 176) summarizes the history of drug use as follows: "Humans have been ingesting drugs for thousands of years. And throughout recorded time, significant numbers of nearly every society on earth have used one or more drugs to achieve certain desired physical or mental states. Drug use comes close to being a universal, both worldwide and throughout history."

Drug Use in US History

This history of drug use includes the United States, where past is again prologue. During the colonial era, tobacco was a major crop in Virginia and other colonies thanks to slave labor. After being processed, it was commonly used by colonists and also exported to Europe in great quantities (Gately, 2001). From the earliest colonial days, alcohol was another drug used in great quantities, as "Americans were drinkers right from the start" (Genzlinger, 2011, p. C1). The Mayflower, the celebrated ship that brought the first Puritans to what eventually became the United States, was filled with barrels of beer. In colonial New England, rum manufacturing

was a major industry, and rum drinking was common. During the early 1770s, New England had more than 140 rum distilleries, and rum consumption in the colonies averaged 7.5 million gallons annually. This massive drinking has led one author to call rum "the real spirit of 1776" (Williams, 2006). Rum was also a major export to Europe and elsewhere. In addition to rum, colonists routinely drank beer and hard cider.

During the nineteenth century, Americans began to use drugs other than alcohol in great quantities. One popular drug was coffee. Before the Civil War, Americans who drank coffee had to buy green (unroasted) coffee beans in bulk and roast their own coffee. Then in 1865, John Arbuckle, a Pittsburgh grocer, began selling roasted coffee inside a new invention—the paper bag. His bagged coffee was an instant hit across the nation, other coffee manufacturers followed suit, and coffee use by Americans greatly increased.

Alcohol also remained a very popular drug, and use of this drug during the 1800s was probably greater than during colonial America. Two reasons help account for this trend (Faupel et al., 2010). One reason was the western frontier. As the nation moved west, many of the explorers and settlers who led the way were men who were unmarried or, if married, men who had left their families behind. To put it mildly, they drank a lot, fought a lot, and gambled a lot. A second reason was that many Irish immigrants came to the United States during a great wave of immigration that began in the mid-nineteenth century. Although it might sound like a stereotype, the Irish drank a lot of alcohol back in their homeland, and they continued to do so once they reached the United States. Regardless of who was drinking, heavy alcohol use contributed greatly to poverty, to physical assaults and homicides, and to domestic violence and other family problems.

Three other popular drugs in this era were opium, cocaine, and marijuana. Use of these drugs was so common that nineteenth-century America has been called a "dope fiend's paradise" (Brecher, 1973). A brief discussion of these drugs' histories will underscore the widespread use of drugs in the American past and also racial issues that arose when laws were passed to ban these drugs (Musto, 1999).

Opium

During the decades before and after the Civil War, the use of opium was extremely common (Goode, 2012). Beyond making people feel good, opium is an effective painkiller and cough suppressant. Accordingly, it was a staple in many patent medicines, elixirs and tonics, sold back then in apothecaries, general stores, and other venues. Large numbers of people from all social backgrounds used these opium-laced medicines for problems such as depression, headaches, menstrual cramps, and toothaches. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that the United States was a nation of opium users during this period; an estimated 500,000 Americans were addicted to opium by the end of the century. As anthropologist Robert B. Edgerton (1976, pp. 57–58) summarizes the situation, "The use of opium was widespread in all segments of American society. Children were calmed with opium derivatives, women used many popular patent medicines which were liberally larded with opiates, and 'opium dens' were probably present in all cities and most towns as well."



Opium was a common ingredient in nineteenth-century tonics and elixirs that were sold widely to the public. camarelius – _DSC_5554 rot cr alt – CC BY-NC 2.0.

Attendance at opium dens (the equivalent of today's bar or tavern, with opium the drug of choice rather than alcohol) was a popular activity for the Chinese immigrants who began coming to the United States during the 1850s to help build the nation's railroads and perform other jobs. White workers feared their growing numbers as a threat to their jobs, and racial prejudice against the Chinese increased. Politicians, labor unions, and other parties began to focus on the Chinese habit of smoking opium at opium dens and

warned that the Chinese were kidnapping little white children, taking them to the opium dens, and turning them into “opium fiends.” This campaign had two effects: it increased prejudice against the Chinese, and it increased public concern about opium. This rising concern led San Francisco in 1875 to become the first locality to ban opium dens. Other California cities did the same, and the state itself banned opium dens in 1881. Three decades later, the federal government banned the manufacture, sale, and use of opium (except for use with a physician’s prescription) when it passed the Harrison Narcotics Act in 1914.

Cocaine

Cocaine was another drug that was very popular in the nineteenth century, beginning in the 1880s, thanks in part to enthusiastic claims by Sigmund Freud and American physicians that cocaine could help relieve asthma, depression, hay fever, sexual impotence, toothache pain, and a host of other problems. Like opium, cocaine was a popular ingredient in the many patent medicines that people bought at various stores, and the US Army Surgeon-General advocated its medical use. It was a major ingredient in a new beverage introduced in 1886, Coca-Cola, which became an instant hit because people naturally felt so good when they drank Coke! During the next two decades, however, concern grew about cocaine’s effects. Some of this concern was fueled by the absurd belief that African Americans who used cocaine became extra strong, dangerous, and even invulnerable to bullets. Cocaine was heavily taxed by the 1914 Harrison Narcotics Act and later banned.

Marijuana

A third legal drug during the late nineteenth century was marijuana. It joined opium and cocaine in being a common ingredient in patent medicines, and it was a popular drug for problems like migraine headaches, menstrual cramps, and toothache pain. After the Mexican Revolution of 1910, Mexicans moved to the United States in increased numbers and brought with them their habit of marijuana use. Whites feared that Mexicans would take their jobs, and, similar to what happened with opium and Chinese immigrants during the 1870s, began to charge that Mexicans who used marijuana would become violent and more likely to rape and murder innocent white victims. This racially prejudiced claim increased concern about marijuana and helped lead to the federal Marijuana Tax Act of 1937 that banned its use.

This brief history shows that drug use has been part of the American culture ever since the nation began. If past is prologue, it should come as no surprise that drugs remain part of the American culture today, and it should also come as no surprise that efforts to reduce or eliminate drug use often meet with much resistance and little success. As the United States continues to try to deal with drug use, these basic facts must not be forgotten.

Key Takeaways

- Drug use has been common since ancient times.
- Alcohol was widely drunk in colonial America. During the latter nineteenth century, opium, marijuana, and cocaine were legal drugs that were also widely used.
- Racial prejudice played an important role in decisions during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to ban opium, marijuana, and cocaine.

For Your Review

1. Were you surprised to read that mind-altering drug use has been common since ancient times? Why or why not?
2. Were you surprised to read that racial prejudice helped lead to bans on opium, marijuana, and cocaine? Why or why not?

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5.2: Drugs and Drug Use Today

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Summarize the different types of drugs.
2. Explain the various harms caused by alcohol and tobacco.
3. Understand the effects of marijuana, cocaine, and other illegal drugs.

A drug may be defined as any substance other than food that, when taken into the body, affects the structure and/or functioning of the body. Defined this way, many common substances contain drugs or are drugs: coffee, No-Doz, and other products to keep us alert; aspirin, acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and other pain relievers; Tums, Rolaids, and other products that reduce heartburn; Metamucil and other products that reduce constipation; Robitussin, Sudafed, and other cold medicines; and so forth. If you have ever used one of these products, you are technically a drug user, however silly that might sound.

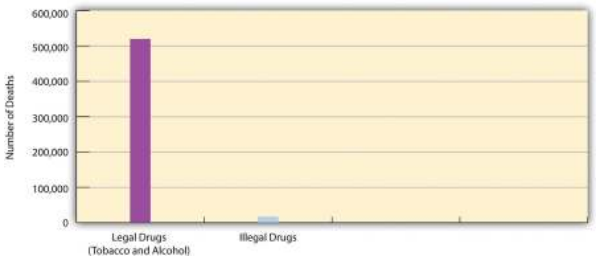
Many prescription drugs also certainly exist: Prozac and other antidepressants; Valium and other tranquilizers; Lipitor and other cholesterol drugs; Yasmin, Yaz and other birth control pills; Viagra and other products that relieve erectile dysfunction; and so forth. Sales of these prescription drugs amount to tens of billions of dollars annually.

The following substances are also drugs: alcohol, ecstasy, cocaine, heroin, marijuana, LSD, methamphetamine, PCP, and tobacco. Much has been written about these drugs, and we will discuss them further later in this section. But note that two of these drugs, alcohol and tobacco, are legal after a certain age, while the remaining drugs are illegal.

One of the problems in deciding how to think about and deal with drugs is that this distinction between legal drugs and illegal drugs has no logical basis. It makes sense to assume that the illegal drugs should be the ones that are the most dangerous and cause the most physical and social harm, but that is not true. Rather, alcohol and tobacco cause the most harm even though they are legal. As Kleiman et al. (2011, p. xviii) note about alcohol, “When we read that one in twelve adults suffers from a substance abuse disorder or that 8 million children are living with an addicted parent, it is important to remember that alcohol abuse drives those numbers to a much greater extent than does dependence on illegal drugs.” Tobacco kills about 435,000 Americans annually by causing premature death, and alcohol kills about 85,000 annually through its effects on the liver and other body organs (Mokdad, Marks, Stroup, & Gerberding, 2004).

Putting these numbers together, some 520,000 Americans die annually from alcohol and tobacco use. Meanwhile, the physiological effects of all illegal drugs combined kill an estimated 17,000 Americans annually (Mokdad et al., 2004), a number that is only just above the number of annual deaths (16,500) from nonsteroidal inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as aspirin and ibuprofen (Frech & Go, 2009). Figure 7.1 “Annual Deaths from Legal and Illegal Drugs” depicts the huge difference between deaths from alcohol and tobacco as legal drugs and from illegal drugs.

Figure 7.1 Annual Deaths from Legal and Illegal Drugs



Source: Mokdad, A. H., Marks, J. S., Stroup, D. F., & Gerberding, J. L. (2004). Actual causes of death in the United States, 2000. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 291*(10), 1238–1245.

We return to the issue of the relative harm of legal and illegal drugs toward the end of the chapter when we discuss drug policy. In the meantime, keep in mind two related facts: (1) all drugs can be dangerous, and (2) some drugs are much more dangerous than others. Two aspirins are safe to take, but a bottle of aspirin can kill someone. Two cups of coffee a day are fine, but drinking many cups a day can cause anxiety, insomnia, and headaches. One drink of alcohol is safe to take, but several drinks in a short time amount to binge drinking, and long-term use of alcohol can kill someone. One snort of cocaine is usually safe, but even one snort can result in a sudden fatal heart attack, and long-term use often has serious health consequences.

Types of Drugs

Drugs are commonly classified into certain categories according to their physiological effects. All drugs may make us feel good, but they do so in different ways. Because some drugs are much more potent than other drugs, there is much variation within each category. Partly because many drugs have multiple effects, many different classifications of drugs exist. A common classification includes the following categories: depressants, hallucinogens, marijuana, narcotics, and stimulants.

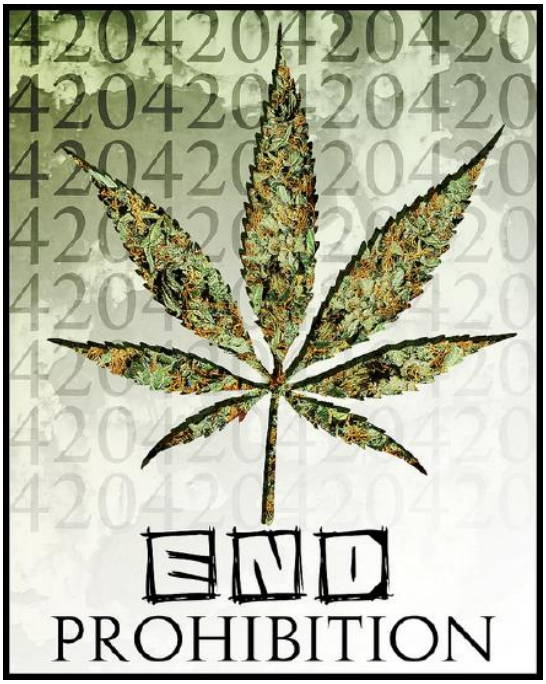
Depressants

Depressants slow down the activity of the central nervous system. Depending on the specific drug, they help induce drowsiness and relaxation, and they can reduce anxiety and pain. Several types of depressants exist. *Analgesics* reduce pain and include over-the-counter products such as aspirin, acetaminophen (the major ingredient in Tylenol), and ibuprofen (the major ingredient in Advil and Motrin), and many prescription medicines that contain acetaminophen. *Sedatives* help people relax and include alcohol, barbiturates, and sleep medicines such as Sominex and Tylenol PM (both over-the-counter) and Ambien and Valium (both prescription). Large doses of depressants may lead to physical dependence and sometimes death.

Hallucinogens

Hallucinogens are mind-altering drugs that cause delusions or hallucinations. Their ranks include ecstasy, LSD, mescaline, and PCP. Many people who use a hallucinogen report that the mind-altering effects of the drug provide them a truly wonderful experience, but many also find the effects to be troubling at best and horrible and terrifying at worst. Long-term effects include hallucinations that occur without any drug use preceding them.

Marijuana



Marijuana is by far the most popular illegal drug in the United States. Modern Scribe Photography – Maryjane 4-20-2010 (420) – CC BY-ND 2.0.

Because marijuana's effects do not fit neatly into any other category of drug, marijuana (along with its close cousin, hashish) is often considered to be its own category. As we will see later, it is by far the most popular illegal drug in the United States. Its effects include distortion of time and space, euphoria, hunger, increased sensory perception, and relaxation.

Narcotics

Narcotics are sometimes classified under depressants because they slow down the central nervous system, but they are often still considered as their own category. They are highly effective at relieving pain and are a common substance in prescription medicines for severe pain. By definition, all narcotics are derived from opium, either in its natural form or in a synthesized form. Examples of narcotics include codeine, heroin, methadone, and morphine. In addition to relieving pain, narcotics may induce drowsiness,

euphoria, and relaxation. Although narcotics do not damage bodily organs, they are very physically addictive, and high doses can be fatal.

Stimulants

Stimulants have the opposite effect of depressants by speeding up the central nervous system. They increase alertness and energy and can produce euphoria or anxiety. Some are legal and some are illegal, and many very different drugs are all considered stimulants: caffeine, cocaine, methamphetamine and other amphetamines, nicotine (tobacco), and Ritalin. Stimulants can be very physically addictive, and nicotine is thought to be more addictive than heroin. While caffeine is very safe as long as someone does not have too many cups of coffee daily, many other stimulants may have dangerous short-term or long-term side effects on the cardiovascular system.

Not all drugs can be discussed in one chapter. In choosing which drugs to discuss in a book on social problems, it makes sense to discuss the drugs that probably concern Americans the most. We thus focus in the remainder of this section mostly on alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, cocaine, and heroin.

? Exercise 5.2.1

Drugs are commonly classified into different categories based on their physiological effects. A common classification includes the following categories:

a) alcohol, marijuana, legal drugs, illegal drugs, and narcotics.

b) depressants, hallucinogens, marijuana, narcotics, and stimulants.

c) tobacco, alcohol, sedatives, hallucinogens, and heroin.

Answer

Correct answer: B

Legal Drugs

As noted earlier, alcohol and tobacco (nicotine) are two legal drugs that are very common and that together kill hundreds of thousands of Americans annually. According to national survey evidence collected by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the federal government, most people 12 and older (as well as many younger than 18) have tried alcohol, and over half the public drinks currently (defined as having had at least one drink in the past month). While many people have tried tobacco, only slightly more than one-fourth of the public uses it currently (at least once during the past month). Table 7.1 “Prevalence of Alcohol and Tobacco Use, Ages 12 and Older, 2010*” summarizes the prevalence of alcohol and nicotine use. Translating some of these percentages into actual numbers, almost 70 million Americans are current tobacco users (mostly by smoking cigarettes), and 131 million are current alcohol users.

Table 7.1 Prevalence of Alcohol and Tobacco Use, Ages 12 and Older, 2010*

	Lifetime	Past year	Past month
Alcohol	82.5	66.4	51.8
Tobacco	68.7	32.8	27.4

* Percentage using in designated time period

Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). *Results from the 2010 national survey on drug use and health: Summary of national findings*. Rockville, MD: Author.

With this backdrop, we now discuss these two legal but very harmful drugs in greater detail.

Alcohol

Moderate alcohol use (more than one drink per day for an adult female and two drinks per day for an adult male) is relatively safe for most people and may even have health benefits (Harvard School of Public Health, 2012). The problem is that many people

drink much more than moderately. As the Harvard School of Public Health (2012) explains, “If all drinkers limited themselves to a single drink a day, we probably wouldn’t need as many cardiologists, liver specialists, mental health professionals, and substance abuse counselors. But not everyone who likes to drink alcohol stops at just one. While most people drink in moderation, some don’t.”

SAMHSA survey data show the extent of such problem drinking, as its survey measures both binge drinking (five or more drinks on the same occasion—within two hours of each other—on at least one day in the past month) and heavy drinking (binge drinking on at least five days in the past month). Table 7.2 “Prevalence of Binge and Heavy Alcohol Use, 2010*” presents the relevant data for people 12 and older and also for those aged 18–20, the customary age for people in their first two years of college.

Table 7.2 Prevalence of Binge and Heavy Alcohol Use, 2010*

	Ages 12 and older	Ages 18–20
Binge use	23.1	33.3
Heavy use	6.7	11.3
* Percentage engaging in alcohol use		

Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). *Results from the 2010 national survey on drug use and health: Summary of national findings*. Rockville, MD: Author.

As Table 7.2 “Prevalence of Binge and Heavy Alcohol Use, 2010*” indicates, almost one-fourth of all people 12 and older and one-third of those aged 18–20 engage in binge drinking, while almost 7 percent and about 11 percent, respectively, engage in heavy drinking. The figures for those 12 and older translate to almost 59 million binge drinkers and 17 million heavy drinkers. These numbers show that tens of millions of people abuse alcohol annually and underscore the problem of dealing with problem drinking.

The amount of alcohol consumed annually by occasional, moderate, and heavy drinkers is staggering. The relevant data appear in Table 7.3 “Alcohol Consumption in the United States, 2010”. Americans drink 7.6 billion gallons of alcohol annually, equivalent to 126 billion standard drinks. This number of drinks works out to 496 drinks per person annually for the 12 and older population and 748 drinks per person for the 12 and older population that drinks at all. Keep in mind that this is just an average. The heavy drinkers identified in Table 7.2 “Prevalence of Binge and Heavy Alcohol Use, 2010*” have many more than 748 drinks every year, while light drinkers have only a relative handful of drinks.

Table 7.3 Alcohol Consumption in the United States, 2010

	Number of gallons	Equivalent number of standard drinks*
Beer	6.4 billion	68.2 billion
Wine	713.2 million	18.3 billion
Spirits	463.1 million	39.5 billion
Total	7.6 billion	126.0 billion
* one drink = 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of spirits		

Source: Beer Institute. (2011). *Brewers almanac, 2011*. Washington, DC: Author.

The Drinking Culture and the Alcohol Industry

As noted earlier, alcohol has a long history in the United States and an even longer history in much of the rest of the world. When we think about the tens of millions of Americans who drink at least occasionally, the ads for beer and wine and hard liquor that appear regularly in the popular media, and the thousands of bars and related venues across the country, it is certainly no exaggeration to say that we have a drinking culture.

Once upon a time, the federal and state governments tried to eliminate this culture. We are speaking, of course, about Prohibition. The passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the US Constitution in January 1919 banned the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcohol; the ban took effect a year later. For reasons we will discuss later, the ban was eventually deemed a failure, and the

passage of the Twenty-First Amendment in 1933 repealed the Eighteenth Amendment. The manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcohol became legal once again.

Alcohol manufacturing and sales are a major industry worldwide today. Several alcohol companies rank among the largest corporations in the world as well as in the United States (Jernigan, 2009). US alcohol sales amount to about $160 billion annually, and they rose by 20 percent in the 2010–2011 period during the faltering economy (Smith, 2011). The amount of money the public spends on alcohol equals 12.5 percent of what it spends on food (US Department of Agriculture, 2011). The alcohol industry provides about 2 million jobs annually, more than $40 billion in wages, and more than $50 billion in taxes, and it contributes more than $160 billion to the annual national economy (Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, 2011). All these figures show that the alcohol industry plays a significant role in the US economy.

Despite this role, if the United States does indeed have a drinking culture, the alcohol industry bears a major share of the responsibility. As the American Medical Association (2004) has stated,

Like the tobacco industry, the alcohol industry produces a legal, widely consumed drug; is dominated by relatively few producers; and utilizes a powerful combination of advertising dollars, savvy marketing, political campaign contributions, and sophisticated lobbying tactics to create and maintain an environment favorable to its economic and political interests. It requires the recruitment of new, youthful drinkers to maintain and build its customer base…As a chemical that affects our bodies, alcohol is a powerful drug resulting in more premature deaths and illnesses than all illicit drugs combined. Yet the industry has shaped public opinion and forced government to treat it not as a drug but as a cultural artifact, a valued legal commodity, almost a food, even a necessity of life.

As just one example of how the alcohol industry promotes its “powerful drug,” the headline of a recent news article declared that the “alcohol companies go online to lure young drinkers” (Gardner, 2010). According to the report, alcohol companies are increasingly using Facebook and other social media to persuade young people to buy and drink their products. Not surprisingly, many of these young targets turn out to be under the legal drinking age of 21 because they are easily able to gain access to alcohol sites. This problem led a public health professor to observe, “Close to 5,000 people under the age of 21 die of alcohol overuse each year. Virtual worlds show all of the appeal and none of the consequences of alcohol use and undercut efforts to reduce the incidence of underage drinking. At this point, alcohol companies appear limited only by their imaginations and pocketbooks” (Gardner, 2010).



The alcohol industry is a major part of the US and worldwide economies and provides about 2 million jobs annually in the United States. amateur photography by michel – Aardwolf Brewing Company – CC BY 2.0.

Consequences of Alcohol Abuse

Despite alcohol’s immense popularity, the fact remains that more than 18 million Americans abuse it (Harvard School of Public Health, 2012). This heavy rate of abuse means that alcohol has serious personal and social consequences. One set of consequences involves personal health. We noted earlier that alcohol abuse is responsible for about 85,000 deaths annually through the physiological damage it does. Heavy alcohol use can destroy the liver, increase blood pressure, weaken the heart and immune system, and cause sexual dysfunction. It can lead to neurological problems and also raises the risk of incurring several kinds of cancer. Binge drinking can cause serious immediate health problems because it may lead to someone overdosing on alcohol. About 800,000 adults are hospitalized every year for alcohol overdoses, and tens of thousands more are hospitalized because they have

consumed alcohol along with prescription narcotic pain medications, a combination that can be deadly (National Institutes of Health, 2011).

In addition to these health problems, alcohol use is responsible for more than 16,000 traffic fatalities annually, and it plays an important role in violent crime (Felson, Teasdale, & Burchfield, 2008). As almost anyone with an alcoholic family member can attest, alcohol abuse can also cause many problems for families, including domestic violence and divorce and the stress that results from having to deal with someone's alcoholism on a daily basis. (The Note 7.13 "Children and Our Future" box discusses the impact of parental alcoholism on children.) Alcohol abuse costs the United States more than $185 billion each year in medical expenses, lost earnings because of alcohol-related illness or premature death, lost earnings by victims of violent crime, and alcohol-caused traffic accidents (Harvard School of Public Health, 2012).

Children and Our Future

Children of Alcoholics

As with so many social problems, one of the saddest consequences of alcohol abuse involves children. About one-fifth of children have lived with an alcoholic parent or other adult. Whether because alcoholism is partly inherited or because children tend to use their parents as role models, children of alcoholics are four times more likely than children of nonalcoholics to become alcoholics themselves by the time they reach adulthood.

Because living with an alcoholic parent is often both chaotic and unpredictable, it is no surprise that children of alcoholics often experience a great deal of stress and other difficulties that may also account for their greater tendency to become alcoholics. Compared to other children, they are more likely to be neglected and/or abused by their parents, and they are also more likely to miss school, have lower grades, and engage in disruptive behavior. In addition, they are at great risk for eating disorders and substance abuse other than alcohol abuse. The stress they experience can also harm their neurological development and immune system and put them at greater risk for different kinds of illness and disease. Children of alcoholics are also at greater risk for several kinds of psychological and emotional problems. These include (1) *guilt*, because they may blame themselves for their parent's drinking; (2) *anxiety*, because they worry about their parent's health and may see their parents arguing and fighting; (3) *embarrassment* that leads them not to invite friends over to visit nor to ask another adult for help; (4) *lack of trust* in other people, because they have learned not to trust their alcoholic parent; and (5) *anger*, *confusion*, and *depression*.

One special problem that children of alcoholics face is that they are "forced into adulthood." They often find themselves having to care for younger siblings and even for their alcoholic parent. By taking on such a heavy responsibility, they in effect become adults at too tender an age. This responsibility weighs on them and helps account for the psychological and emotional difficulties they often experience.

Mental health professionals strongly advise that children of alcoholics receive counseling and other kinds of support to help them deal with their family experiences. Group support programs for teenaged children may be very helpful. Perhaps the best known such program is Alateen, which also services teenagers who want help dealing with an alcoholic friend. Teenagers at Alateen meetings share their experiences, learn how to deal with the special difficulties that stem from having a relative or friend with an alcohol problem, and provide emotional support for each other. One important message they learn from Alateen is that they are in no way responsible for the alcoholism of their parent, other relative, or friend.

Alateen has helped many young people, as this testimonial from "Lizzy" attests: "Alateen has helped me a lot over the years… From the day I went to my first meeting, the door to my happiness was flung open. With the help of the Alateen Group Sponsors and my fellow teens, my life has become what I always wanted it to be. My goal for success in the program was fulfilled. I have been given a second chance at life and I have Alateen to thank for that."

Young children and teenagers are resilient, but children of alcoholics have to be especially resilient. Programs like Alateen help give them a second chance.

Sources: Alateen, 2011; American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2006; James, 2008

College Students

Alcohol abuse is also a problem on college and university campuses across the United States. Based on the SAMHSA survey evidence discussed earlier, full-time college students ages 18–22 drink more often and more heavily than their peers who are not in college (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2008). Among full-time college students ages 18–20, who are all too young to drink legally, about 40 percent have engaged in binge drinking in the past month, and 17 percent have engaged

in heavy drinking as defined earlier. Binge drinking on and off campus is so common that binge drinkers consume 91 percent of all the alcohol that college students drink.

Binge drinking by college students has many serious consequences (Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2008; National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 2007). The following are consequences with approximate figures:

- Binge drinkers are much more likely than other students to miss class, get poor grades, be injured, have unprotected sex, and to drive after drinking.
- Six hundred thousand college students suffer alcohol-related injuries (from motor vehicle crashes and other accidents) each year, and 1,700 die from these injuries.
- Thirty thousand college students need medical attention annually to treat alcohol overdosing.
- Seven hundred thousand students are assaulted annually by a student who has been drinking, and three hundred students die from these assaults.
- Students who attend colleges with high rates of binge drinking are more likely to experience sleep disruption, property damage, and physical and sexual assaults than those who attend colleges with low rates of binge drinking.

Tobacco and Nicotine

Nicotine, the major drug in tobacco, is another legal but very dangerous drug. As we saw earlier, its use kills four times as many people every year as those killed by alcohol use. Tobacco is a slow poison. If it were not already a legal drug used by millions, and a company had just manufactured cigarettes for the first time, the Food and Drug Administration would never approve this product. Fortunately for tobacco companies, nicotine does not distort perception the way that alcohol and many other psychoactive drugs do. Someone smoking or otherwise using tobacco can safely drive a car, operate machinery, and so forth, and someone “under the influence” of tobacco does not become violent.



Tobacco is a slow poison. If it were a new drug, it would not be approved for public consumption. Raul Lieberwirth – cigarette – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

If you have ever watched any number of pre-1970s movies or television shows like “Mad Men” that portray life back then, you know that the United States used to have a tobacco culture the way it now has an alcohol culture. Many, many people smoked cigarettes, and a large number smoked cigars or pipes. This particular drug culture began to abate in the 1970s after much evidence mounted about the deaths and other serious health effects of tobacco use and especially about the dangers of second-hand smoke. Whereas college students a generation ago often sat in smoke-filled classrooms and Americans generally sat in smoke-filled restaurants and other venues, today most Americans can count on being in enclosed public spaces in which smoking is banned.

Even so, we have already seen that more than one-fourth of Americans 12 and older, or some 70 million people, are still current users (past month) of tobacco. Almost one-fifth of American adults (18 and older), or 45.3 million adults, smoke cigarettes daily or occasionally (King, Dube, Kaufmann, Shaw, & Pechacek, 2011). Thanks to the greater knowledge about tobacco’s health effects, public education campaigns about these effects, heavy taxes on cigarettes, and changing attitudes about tobacco, these numbers represent a significant decline from a generation ago.

Tobacco use causes more preventable death and illness in the United States than any other cause of death; if no one used tobacco, the more than 400,000 tobacco-related deaths each year would not occur. As we think about tobacco, this startling statistic needs to be kept in mind: *About half of all cigarette smokers will one day die from a premature death caused by a smoking-related illness* (King et al., 2011). To repeat what was said just earlier, nicotine is a slow poison.

Tobacco kills in several ways. Smoking causes 80–90 percent of all lung cancers, and it greatly increases the risk of emphysema and other lung disease, coronary heart disease, and stroke. In addition to lung cancer, tobacco use also causes several other cancers, including bladder cancer, cervical cancer, esophageal cancer, stomach cancer, and throat cancer. Women who smoke are at greater risk for lower bone density and hip fracture when they get older.

The economics of tobacco use are also worth knowing. Americans spend about $90 billion annually on tobacco products, with most of this amount spent on cigarettes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). They purchase more than 300 billion cigarettes annually, with most of the cigarettes sold by three companies. Cigarette smoking is estimated to cost almost $200 billion annually in medical expenses and lost economic productivity. This works out to a national economic loss of about $10.50 for every pack of cigarettes that is sold.

One interesting and very important fact about the economics of cigarette smoking is what happens when the cost of cigarettes is increased. Most smokers begin their deadly habit during adolescence or young adulthood. Because this is a period of their lives when they do not have much money, increases in the cost of cigarettes are particularly useful in persuading some of these young people not to buy cigarettes. Government data indicate that every 10 percent increase in the price of cigarettes reduces cigarette consumption among young people by 4 percent (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). A similar but smaller effect occurs among older smokers.

Earlier we said that the alcohol industry plays a major role in the amount of drinking that occurs in the United States. The same is true of the tobacco industry and smoking. This industry spends about $15 billion annually—or an average of $41 million daily—in advertising, sponsorship of public events, and other activities to promote its deadly product, and for many years hid or distorted data about the deadly effects of cigarette smoking (Brandt, 2009). Because of funding cutbacks during the recent faltering economy, the states have reduced their media campaigns and other efforts aimed at reducing smoking. This reduction, combined with the tobacco industry's huge promotional spending, leads one public health professor to lament, "The tobacco companies are winning the battle" (Martin, 2011).

Illegal Drugs

The SAMHSA survey also gathers data from its thousands of respondents about illegal drug use. Table 7.4 "Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 12 and Older, 2010*" presents these data for several illegal drugs and shows that use of these drugs is far from rare.

Table 7.4 Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 12 and Older, 2010*

	Lifetime	Past year	Past month
Any illegal drug	47.1	15.3	8.9
Illegal drug other than marijuana	30.0	8.1	3.6
Marijuana/hashish	41.9	11.5	6.9
Cocaine/crack	14.7	1.8	0.6
Hallucinogens	14.8	1.8	0.5
Heroin	1.6	0.2	0.1
Stimulants	8.5	1.1	0.4
Nonmedical use of prescription-type drugs†	20.4	6.3	2.7
* Percentage using in designated time period			
† Includes stimulants			

Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). *Results from the 2010 national survey on drug use and health: Summary of national findings*. Rockville, MD: Author.

The following figure from Table 7.5 “Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 18–20, 2010*” is striking: 47.1 percent of all Americans ages 12 and older have used an illegal drug at least once in their lifetimes. This percentage translates to almost 120 million people. In terms of lifetime use, the single most popular illegal drug is easily marijuana, but 30 percent of Americans, or 76 million people, have used an illegal drug other than marijuana. Almost 15 percent, or more than 37 million people, have used cocaine/crack or hallucinogens, and more than 20 percent, or almost 52 million people, have used prescription drugs illegally. These percentages and the numbers of people associated with them all indicate that lifetime illegal drug use in the United States is widespread.

Despite this fact, most public health experts are primarily concerned with current (past month) illegal drug use. The percentages for past-month (and also past-year) use in Table 7.5 “Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 18–20, 2010*” are noticeably smaller than those for lifetime use. They indicate that most people who have used illegal drugs in their lifetimes are no longer using them, or at least have not used them in the past year or past month. Most of these lifetime users tried their illegal drug once, twice, or a few times and then stopped using it, and some may have used it more often but then stopped. In any event, it is the current, past-month users who raise the most concern for our society in general and for the public health and legal communities and other sectors of our society that deal with illegal drug use and its effects.

In looking at current illegal drug use, we see that 8.9 percent of the public falls into this category. This percentage translates to almost 23 million Americans, no small number by any means. Their favorite illegal drug is marijuana (and hashish), but 3.6 percent, or 9 million people, have used an illegal drug other than marijuana in the past month. These users favor prescription drugs used for nonmedical reasons. Despite the publicity that cocaine/crack still receives, less than 1 percent of the public has used it in the past month, and less than 2 percent has used it in the past year. These small percentages, though, still translate to 1.5 million people and 5.5 million people, respectively.

The percentages in Table 7.4 “Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 12 and Older, 2010*” underestimate the problem of illegal drug use in at least two respects. First, the SAMHSA survey does not include people whose illegal drug use is especially high: the homeless, runaway teenagers, jail and prison inmates, and youths in detention centers. Second, and conversely, the SAMHSA survey includes people whose illegal drug use is relatively low—namely, young adolescents and people in their middle age and older years. For this reason, it is instructive to examine the prevalence of illegal drug use among the people who are in their “prime” ages for it: those who are 18–20 years old. Accordingly, Table 7.5 “Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 18–20, 2010*” presents the appropriate figures for Americans in this age group.

Table 7.5 Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 18–20, 2010*

	Lifetime	Past year	Past month
Any illegal drug	52.8	37.7	23.1
Illegal drug other than marijuana	31.2	19.1	8.0
Marijuana/hashish	46.4	32.7	20.3
Cocaine/crack	8.5	4.1	1.2
Hallucinogens	14.1	7.9	2.3
Heroin	1.6	0.5	0.2
Stimulants	7.8	3.9	1.3
Nonmedical use of prescription-type drugs†	24.5	14.5	5.9
* Percentage using in designated time period			
† Includes stimulants			

Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). *Results from the 2010 national survey on drug use and health: Summary of national findings*. Rockville, MD: Author.

Take a moment to compare the percentages in Table 7.5 "Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 18–20, 2010*" for ages 18–20 to the percentages in Table 7.4 "Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 12 and Older, 2010*" for ages 12 and older. When you do this, you will see that past-year and past-month illegal drug use is generally much higher for people ages 18–20 than for everyone 12 and older. More than one-third of the 18–20 age group have used an illegal drug in the past year, and almost one-fourth are current users, having used an illegal drug in the past month. As with the 12 and older population, their drug of choice is clearly marijuana, with nonmedical use of prescription-type drugs a distant second.

This last statement is important to keep in mind. In terms of percentages, the major illegal drug is marijuana. Very low percentages of Americans use other illegal drugs when we consider current use and past-year use, although a greater number have experimented with other illegal drugs in their lifetimes. As we have seen, however, the low percentages for the other illegal drugs still translate into millions of Americans who are current users of illegal drugs other than marijuana. It is also true that drugs like heroin and cocaine/crack are used more heavily in large cities than in smaller cities and towns and rural areas. Although these drugs are only rarely used nationwide, they are a particular problem in large urban areas.

With this backdrop in mind, we now discuss a few illegal drugs in further detail.

Marijuana

As we have seen, marijuana is easily the most widely used illegal drug in the United States. The percentages for marijuana use in Table 7.4 "Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 12 and Older, 2010*" translate to 106 million people who have ever used marijuana, 29 million people who used it in the past year, and 17 million people who used it in the past month (current users). As Table 7.5 "Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 18–20, 2010*" showed, marijuana use is especially high among young people: One-third of people ages 18–20 have used marijuana in the past year, and one-fifth are current users.

Marijuana use can cause several problems (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2010). Marijuana distorts perception, impairs coordination, and can cause short-term memory loss, and people who are high from marijuana may be unable to safely drive a motor vehicle or operate machinery. In addition, regular pot smokers are at risk for respiratory problems, though not lung cancer. Chronic marijuana use is also associated with absence from school and the workplace and with social relationship problems, although it is difficult to determine whether marijuana is causing these effects or whether the association exists because someone with personal problems begins using marijuana regularly.

Despite these problems, marijuana is almost certainly the most benign illegal drug in terms of health and social consequences, and it is also much more benign than either alcohol or tobacco (Drug Policy Alliance, 2011; Faupel et al., 2010). As noted earlier, these latter two drugs kill about 520,000 Americans annually. In contrast, marijuana has probably never killed anyone, and its use has not been associated with any cancers. Alcohol use is a risk factor for violent behavior, but marijuana use is a risk factor for mellow behavior; if everyone who now uses alcohol instead smoked marijuana, our violent crime rate would probably drop significantly! Despite some popular beliefs, marijuana is generally not physiologically addictive, it does not reduce ambition and motivation, and it does not act as a "gateway drug" that leads to the use of more dangerous drugs (Hanson, Venturelli, & Fleckenstein, 2012). A review of the evidence on marijuana summarized research findings as follows: "Studies of long-term marijuana smokers do not produce gross or major clinical, psychiatric, psychological, or social difference between users and nonusers, or between heavier and lighter users" (Goode, 2008, p. 247).

While not entirely safe, then, marijuana is much safer, both on an individual basis and on a societal basis, than either alcohol or tobacco. Even so, it remains an illegal drug. This fact underscores our earlier observation that the legality or illegality of drugs has no logical basis. If the personal and social harm caused by a drug determined whether it is legal or not, then it would be logical for marijuana to be legal and for alcohol or tobacco to be illegal.

For better or worse, though, the millions of marijuana users have broken the law. In most states, marijuana possession is a crime punishable by a jail or prison term that depends on the amount of marijuana involved. Fourteen states (Alaska, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon) have decriminalized simple possession of small amounts of marijuana: They treat possession as a minor offense similar to a traffic violation and punish it with only a small fine. Most of these states decriminalized the drug in the 1970s after a national commission with members appointed by the US Congress and by President Richard Nixon recommended taking this action. There is no evidence that marijuana use in these states increased compared to use in the states that have not decriminalized marijuana

(Beckett & Herbert, 2008). In fact, marijuana use in the nation declined sharply in the 1980s, the first decade after decriminalization began, both in the states that decriminalized pot possession and in the states that did not decriminalize it.

Cocaine

Cocaine produces a high that is considered more pleasurable than that for any other drug. According to sociologist Erich Goode (2008, p. 288), "Cocaine's principal effects are exhilaration, elation, and euphoria—voluptuous, joyous feelings accompanied by a sense of grandiosity." As a stimulant, cocaine also increases energy, alertness, and a sense of self-confidence. It is not physiologically addictive, but it is considered psychologically addictive: The high it produces is so pleasurable that some users find they need to keep using it.



Cocaine is a particularly addictive drug because of the high degree of pleasurable feelings it causes. Nightlife of Revelry – Cocaine – CC BY 2.0.

Cocaine is made from coca plants grown in South America. It most often appears in a powdered form that is sniffed (or, to use the more common term for this method, snorted). The high it produces takes some time to occur but may last up to thirty minutes once it does arrive. A more potent form, crack cocaine (or, more commonly, crack), is made by heating a mixture of powdered cocaine, baking soda, and water. A user then heats the mixture that remains and breathes in the vapors that result. Crack produces an immediate, intense high and is a relatively inexpensive drug. These features made crack a very popular drug when it was first introduced into US cities in the 1980s (Faupel et al. 2010). Street gangs fought each other to control its distribution and sale, much as organized crime gangs fought each other over alcohol distribution and sale during Prohibition.

Cocaine and crack use has declined since the 1970s and 1980s, but, as Table 7.5 "Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 18–20, 2010*" showed, almost 15 percent of the public has used cocaine at least once; this number translates to some 37 million Americans. Still, past-year use is only 1.8 percent, and past-month (current) use is only 0.6 percent. Cocaine use thus must be considered rare in percentage terms. At the same time, these percentages translate to 4.5 million and 1.5 million Americans, respectively. These are not small numbers. Moreover, past-year and past-month cocaine use is higher among young people, as Table 7.5 "Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 18–20, 2010*" showed. Further, crack use remains a problem in the nation's urban areas.

In terms of health risks, cocaine is a much more dangerous drug than marijuana. As a stimulant, cocaine speeds up the central nervous system. Because it does so much more intensely than most other stimulants, its use poses special dangers for the cardiovascular system (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2011). In particular, it can disrupt the heart's normal rhythm and cause ventricular fibrillations, and it can speed up the heart and raise blood pressure. An overdose of cocaine can thus be deadly, and long-term use produces an increased risk of stroke, seizure, and heart disease. Because cocaine also constricts blood vessels in the brain, long-term use raises the risk of attention deficit, memory loss, and other cognitive problems. Long-term abuse has also caused panic attacks, paranoia, and even psychosis.

Heroin

Heroin is derived from opium (and more immediately from morphine, an opium derivative) and is almost certainly the most notorious opiate. It was one of the popular opiate drugs that, as discussed earlier, were used so widely during the late nineteenth century. Heroin was first marketed as a painkiller and cough suppressant by the company that makes Bayer aspirin. As the United

States became more concerned about opium use, Bayer Laboratories discontinued heroin marketing in 1910, and heroin, like other opiates, was banned under the 1914 Harrison Narcotic Act.

Although Table 7.4 “Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 12 and Older, 2010*” shows that its use is minuscule in percentage terms, these percentages translate to 600,000 people who have used heroin in the past year, and 240,000 who have used in the past month. Because these users are concentrated in the nation’s large cities, heroin, like crack, is a special problem for these areas.

Like other narcotics, heroin use produces a feeling of euphoria. After it is injected, “the user feels a flash, a rush, which has been described as an intense, voluptuous, orgasmlike sensation. Following this is the feeling of well-being, tranquility, ease, and calm, the sensation that everything in the user’s life is just fine. Tensions, worries, problems, the rough edges of life—all seem simply to melt away” (Goode, 2008, pp. 308–309).

Although heroin use is uncommon, it continues to capture the public’s concern more than perhaps any other illegal drug. As sociologist Goode (2008, pp. 307–308) has observed,

For decades, it was the most feared, the most dreaded, the “hardest” drug; heroin has virtually defined the drug problem. In spite of being somewhat overshadowed since the mid-1980s by cocaine, and specifically crack, heroin probably remains the single substance the American public is most likely to point to as an example of a dangerous drug. Until recently, disapproval of any level of heroin use was greater than for any other drug. And, until recently, heroin addicts were the most stigmatized of all drug users. Heroin is the epitome of the illicit street drug. Its association in the public mind with street crime, even today, is probably stronger than for any other drug. The stereotype of the junkie is that he or she is by nature a lowlife, an outcast, a “deviant,” a dweller in the underworld, an unsavory, untrustworthy character to be avoided at any cost.

Users typically take heroin into their body by injecting it into a vein. This mode of administration is undoubtedly a major reason for the public’s very negative image of heroin users. Indeed, the image of a heroin addict “shooting up” is one that has appeared in many movies and television shows past and present. Many heroin addicts share their needles, a practice that increases their risk of contracting HIV and hepatitis.

The public’s image and concern about heroin is partly deserved in some ways and partly undeserved in other ways. Like other opiates, heroin is extremely physiologically addictive, although not as addictive as nicotine. But also like other opiates, heroin does not damage body organs. The emaciated look we often associate with heroin users stems not from the drug itself but from the low-caliber lifestyles that heroin addicts tend to live and their decisions to spend the little money they have on heroin rather than on food and a healthier lifestyle. An overdose of heroin can certainly kill, just as overdoses of other drugs can kill. One reason heroin overdoses occur is that heroin users cannot know for sure the purity of the heroin they buy illegally and thus may inject an unsafe dose to get high.

Prescription Drug Abuse

Table 7.4 “Prevalence of Illegal Drug Use, Ages 12 and Older, 2010*” showed that about one-fifth of Americans have used prescription drugs for nonmedical purposes. This type of use is illegal. It constitutes the most widespread illegal drug use other than marijuana use and has grown in recent years, especially among adolescents. The prescription drugs that are most often abused are those containing narcotics, tranquilizers, and stimulants; two of the most common brands that are abused are OxyContin and Vicodin. Because prescription drugs are beneficial for so many people even if they are abused, our nation faces a special difficulty in dealing with the abuse of these drugs. As the head of the National Institute on Drug Abuse explains, “The challenges we face are much more complex because we need to address the needs of patients in pain, while protecting those at risk for substance use disorders” (Zuger, 2011, p. D1). Thus according to a news report, “These drugs must be somehow legal and illegal, encouraged yet discouraged, tightly regulated yet easily available” (Zuger, 2011, p. D1).



Many prescription drug abusers use drugs obtained from their own prescriptions or from prescriptions of friends or relatives. sharyn morrow – the husband's vicodin – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Most prescription drug abusers have their own prescriptions or obtain their drugs from friends, acquaintances, or relatives who have their own prescriptions. Whatever the source, some of these prescriptions are obtained legitimately—for actual medical conditions—and then abused, and some are obtained after feigning a medical condition. Many experts fault physicians for overprescribing painkillers and other prescription drugs.

Prescription drug abuse is thought to be growing for two reasons (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2005). First, physicians' prescriptions for painkillers and other drugs continue to rise, creating a greater supply of prescription drugs that can be abused. Second, online pharmacies and pain clinics have made it easier to obtain prescription drugs, with or without an actual prescription.

The Note 7.14 "Applying Social Research" box discusses the roots of adolescent prescription drug abuse in family and school factors. The importance of these factors reinforces the sociological view that the origins of drug use often lie beyond the individual and in the social environment.

Applying Social Research

Prescription Drug Abuse by Adolescents

Despite the importance of prescription drug abuse, social science research on its causes is relatively sparse. In one of the first studies to examine the social origins of adolescent prescription drug abuse, sociologist Jason A. Ford analyzed data on adolescents in the national survey conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration that is discussed elsewhere in this chapter. Drawing on the large body of work that attributes drug use in part to weak social bonds, Ford reasoned that prescription drug abuse should be higher among adolescents who have weaker bonds to their parents and also weaker bonds to their schools.

For his measure of parental bonds, Ford used several questions that asked adolescents about their relationship with their parents, including whether parents feel proud of them and praise them for doing a good job, and whether their parents help them with their homework and limit their time out with friends on a school night. For his measure of school bonds, he used several questions that asked adolescents such things as whether they liked going to school and whether they found their schooling meaningful and important. His measure of prescription drug abuse relied on the adolescents' self-reports of whether they had used any prescription drug for nonmedical purposes in the past year.

Controlling for gender, race, and other factors, Ford found support for his hypotheses: prescription drug abuse was higher among adolescents with weaker bonds to their parents and also weaker bonds to their schools.

These results have important implications for efforts to reduce prescription drug abuse by adolescents. They suggest that efforts by our society to strengthen families and to improve our schools may well have a significant, beneficial side-effect: lower prescription drug abuse by adolescents.

Source: Ford, 2009

Key Takeaways

- The distinction between legal drugs and illegal drugs has no logical basis; legal drugs cause much more harm than illegal drugs.
- Alcohol and tobacco kill more than 500,000 Americans annually. Binge drinking on campuses results in accidents and assaults involving several hundred thousand college students annually.

- Marijuana is by far the most commonly used illegal drug. The low prevalence of other illegal drugs still amounts to millions of people using these drugs annually.

For Your Review

1. Do you agree or disagree that the distinction between legal drugs and illegal drugs is not logical? Explain your answer.
2. Do you agree that binge drinking is a problem that campuses should address, or do you think that it's a relatively harmless activity that lets students have some fun? Explain your answer.

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5.3: Social Patterning of Drug Use

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

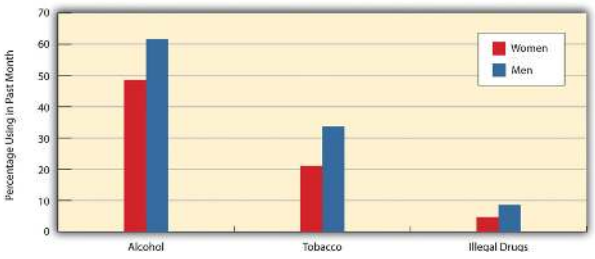
1. Outline the nature of gender differences in drug use.
2. Understand whether racial and ethnic differences in drug use exist.
3. Explain whether education and religiosity are related to drug use.

It is a sociological truism that our sociodemographic backgrounds—gender, race and ethnicity, social class, and so forth—influence many of our behaviors and attitudes. Drug use is no different. By examining the social patterning of drug use, we can see which kinds of people, in terms of their sociodemographic backgrounds, are more or less at risk for using drugs. And by understanding these sociodemographic differences, we begin to understand why some people are more likely than others to use drugs. Our examination of these differences will rely heavily on data from the SAMHSA survey discussed earlier and focus on past-month differences in alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drug use (all illegal drugs combined).

Gender

In the study of crime and deviance, gender is an important predictor: Males are more likely than females to commit the more serious forms of crime and deviance, such as homicide, robbery, and burglary. This pattern generally holds true for drug use of various types. Figure 7.2 “Gender and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Past Month)” shows that men are more likely than women to use alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs. In related data, men are also more than twice as likely as women to engage in binge drinking (30.7 percent compared to 13.8 percent) and heavy drinking (9.7 percent compared to 2.8 percent) as defined earlier.

Figure 7.2 Gender and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Past Month)



Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). *Results from the 2010 national survey on drug use and health: Summary of national findings*. Rockville, MD: Author.

Why do these gender differences exist? A common thread underlines gender differences in criminal behavior and in drug use of various kinds, and that is *masculinity* (Lindsey, 2011). Compared to girls, boys are raised to be more active, assertive, and daring, and to be less concerned about the effects of their behavior on others. As they grow older, these traits make them more likely to use drugs and also to commit various types of crimes. Ironically, the way that most parents raise their sons helps make their sons more likely than their daughters to drink, smoke, and use illegal drugs once they reach adolescence and in the many decades of their adulthood.



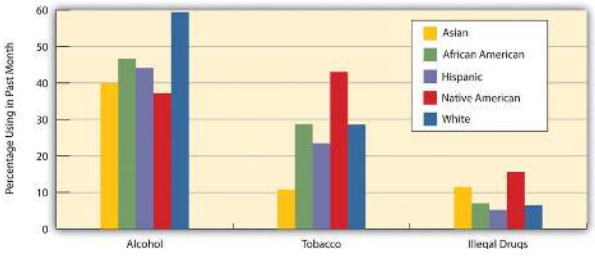
On the average, males drink alcohol more often and more heavily than females, and they are also more likely to use other types of drugs. David, Bergin, Emmett, and Elliott – IMG_3110 – CC BY 2.0.

In an important exception to the general gender difference just discussed, females are more likely than males to use prescription drugs for nonmedical reasons (Ford, 2009). The reasons for this counterintuitive finding are unclear, but scholars speculate that because girls and women obtain more prescription drugs than do boys and men, their greater nonmedical use of prescription drugs reflects the fact that they have more access to these drugs in the first place.

Race and Ethnicity

Racial and ethnic differences in drug use of various types exist to some extent but are less clear-cut than the gender differences we just examined (see Figure 7.3 "Race/Ethnicity and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Past Month)"). For alcohol use, whites have the highest rate of drinking, and Native Americans, despite the popular image that they have alcohol problems, have the lowest rate. For tobacco use, Native Americans have the highest rate of use, and Asians have the lowest rate. For illegal drugs, Native Americans again have the highest rate of use, and Hispanics have the lowest rate. Note that African Americans have roughly the same illegal drug use rate as whites, and have lower rates of alcohol and tobacco use than whites do. Although many people believe that African Americans are more likely than whites to use drugs, research data show that this belief is a myth.

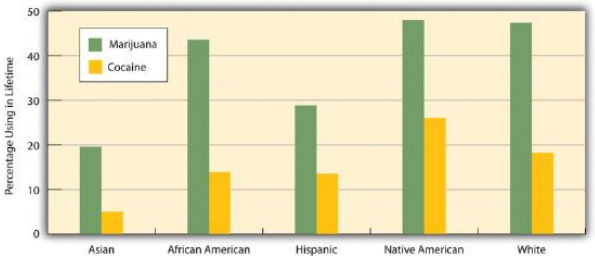
Figure 7.3 Race/Ethnicity and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Past Month)



Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). *Results from the 2010 national survey on drug use and health: Summary of national findings*. Rockville, MD: Author.

The illegal drugs category includes many types of drugs. We do not have space to illustrate racial/ethnic differences in the use of each of these drugs, but we will examine differences in marijuana and cocaine (including crack) use. Figure 7.4 "Race/Ethnicity and Prevalence of Marijuana and Cocaine Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Lifetime)" shows these differences for lifetime use. Despite some minor differences, African Americans, Native Americans, and whites have the highest lifetime use of marijuana, while Asians and Hispanics have the lowest use. Turning to cocaine, Native Americans have the highest lifetime use, and Asians have the lowest use. Note again that African Americans have a lower rate of lifetime use than whites; this racial difference will be relevant for our discussion toward the end of the chapter of the racial impact of the legal war on drugs since the 1970s.

Figure 7.4 Race/Ethnicity and Prevalence of Marijuana and Cocaine Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Lifetime)

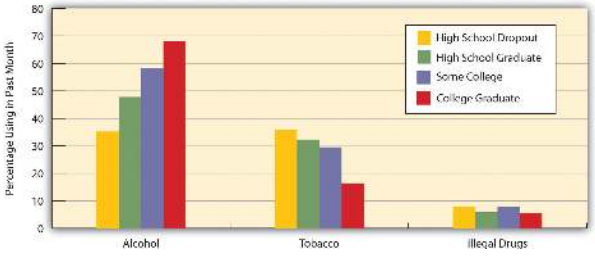


Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). *Results from the 2010 national survey on drug use and health: Summary of national findings*. Rockville, MD: Author.

Education

Education differences in drug use depend on the type of drug (see Figure 7.5 “Education and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Past Month)”). For alcohol, higher levels of education are associated with a higher likelihood of drinking. One possible reason for this association is that people with lower levels of education are more likely to be religious, and people who are religious are less likely to drink. For tobacco, higher levels of education are associated with lower levels of tobacco use. In particular, college graduates are much less likely to use tobacco than people without a college degree. For illegal drugs, there is no clear association between education and use of these drugs, although college graduates report the lowest past-month use.

Figure 7.5 Education and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Past Month)

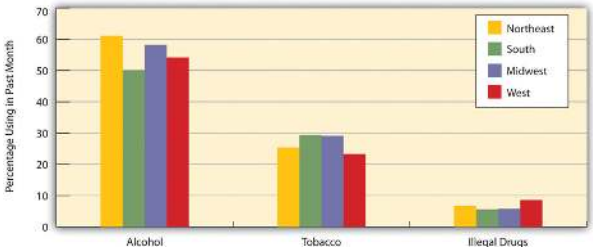


Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). *Results from the 2010 national survey on drug use and health: Summary of national findings*. Rockville, MD: Author.

Region of Country

The regions of the United States differ in many attitudes and behaviors, and one of these behaviors is drug use (see Figure 7.6 “Region of Country and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Past Month)”). The regional differences are not large, but the South has lowest rate of alcohol use, in part reflecting the fact that it is the most religious region in the nation. The South and Midwest have the highest rates of tobacco use, while the West has the lowest rate, befitting its image as a “healthy” region. However, the West also has the highest rate of illegal drug use, although its use is only slightly higher than the other regions’ use.

Figure 7.6 Region of Country and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Past Month)

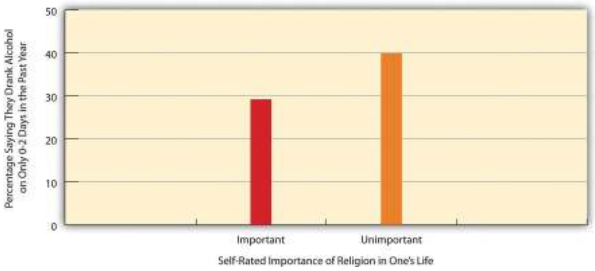


Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2011). *Results from the 2010 national survey on drug use and health: Summary of national findings*. Rockville, MD: Author.

Religiosity

A growing number of studies finds that religiosity—how religious someone is—affects how often people use various drugs: The more religious people are, the lower their drug use; conversely, the less religious they are, the higher their drug use (Desmond, Soper, & Purpura, 2009). We can see evidence of this relationship in Figure 7.7 “Religiosity and Drinking among Youths Ages 17–18 (Percentage Saying They Drank Alcohol on Only 0–2 Days in the Past Year)”, which presents data for a nationwide sample of youths ages 17–18. Those who say religion is important in their lives report less drinking (i.e., on only 0–2 days in the past year) than those who say religion is unimportant in their lives.

Figure 7.7 Religiosity and Drinking among Youths Ages 17–18 (Percentage Saying They Drank Alcohol on Only 0–2 Days in the Past Year)



Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Wave I. (2012). Retrieved from http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/cgi-bin/S...sdr+21600-0001.

Key Takeaways

- Drug use is socially patterned: Aspects of our sociodemographic backgrounds affect our likelihood of using various drugs.
- Perhaps the clearest social pattern involves gender, with males more likely than females to use and abuse alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs.
- Despite common beliefs, the rate of illegal drug use is lower for African Americans than for whites.

For Your Review

1. The text discusses five social patterns of drug use: gender, race/ethnicity, education, region of country, and religiosity. Taking into account these five sets of patterns, write a short essay in which you use this information to understand your own level of use (or nonuse) of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs.
2. Did it surprise you to read that illegal drug use is lower among African Americans than among whites? Why or why not?

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5.4: Explaining Drug Use

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Understand the possible biological origins of drug addiction.
2. Explain why longitudinal research on personality traits and drug use is important.
3. Outline the aspects of the social environment that may influence drug use.

To know how to reduce drug use, we must first know what explains it. The major explanations for drug use come from the fields of biology, psychology, and sociology.

Biological Explanations

In looking at drug use, the field of biology focuses on two related major questions. First, how and why do drugs affect a person's behavior, mood, perception, and other qualities? Second, what biological factors explain why some people are more likely than others to use drugs?

Regarding the first question, the field of biology has an excellent understanding of how drugs work. The details of this understanding are beyond the scope of this chapter, but they involve how drugs affect areas in the brain and the neurotransmitters that cause a particular drug's effects. For example, cocaine produces euphoria and other positive emotions in part because it first produces an accumulation of dopamine, a neurotransmitter linked to feelings of pleasure and enjoyment.



Research on identical twins suggests that alcoholism has a genetic basis. Michael Dorausch – Identical Twins Jedward – CC BY-SA 2.0.

Regarding the second question, biological research is more speculative, but it assumes that some people are particularly vulnerable to the effects of drugs. These people are more likely to experience very intense effects and to become physiologically and/or psychologically addicted to a particular drug. To the extent this process occurs, the people in question are assumed to have a biological predisposition for drug addiction that is thought to be a genetic predisposition.

Most research on genetic predisposition has focused on alcohol and alcoholism (Hanson et al., 2012). Studies of twins find that identical twins are more likely than fraternal twins (who are not genetically identical) to both have alcohol problems or not to have them. In addition, studies of children of alcoholic parents who are adopted by nonalcoholic parents find that these children are more likely than those born to nonalcoholic parents to develop alcohol problems themselves. Although a genetic predisposition for alcoholism might exist for reasons not yet well understood, there is not enough similar research on other types of drug addiction to assume that a genetic predisposition exists for these types. Many nonbiological factors also explain the use of, and addiction to, alcohol and other drugs. We now turn to these factors.

Psychological Explanations

Psychological explanations join biological explanations in focusing on why certain individuals are more likely than others to use drugs and to be addicted to drugs (Hanson et al., 2012). Some popular psychological explanations center on personality differences between drug users and nonusers. These explanations assume that users have personality traits that predispose them to drug use. These traits include low self-esteem and low self-confidence, low trust in others, and a need for thrills and stimulation. In effect, drug users have inadequate personalities, or personality defects, that make them prone to drug use, and once they start using drugs, their personality problems multiply.

One problem with research on personality explanations is methodological: If we find personality differences between drug users and nonusers, should we conclude that personality problems cause drug use, or is it possible that drug use causes personality problems? Most of the research on personality and drug use cannot answer this question adequately, since it studies drug users and nonusers at one point in time (*cross-sectional research*). To answer this question adequately, *longitudinal research*, which examines the same people over time, is necessary. Among initial drug abstainers at Time 1, if those with the personality traits mentioned earlier turn out to be more likely than those without the traits to be using drugs at Time 2, then we can infer that personality problems affect drug use rather than the reverse. Longitudinal research on personality and drug use that studies adolescents and college students does indeed find this causal sequence (Sher, Bartholow, & Wood, 2000). However, some scholars still question the importance of personality factors for drug use and addiction (Goode, 2012). They say these factors have only a small effect, if that, and they cite research questioning whether personality differences between users and nonusers in fact exist (Feldman, Boyer, Kumar, & Prout, 2011).

Other psychological explanations are based on the classic concept from behavioral psychology of *operant conditioning*—the idea that people and animals are more likely to engage in a behavior when they are rewarded, or reinforced, for it. These explanations assume that people use drugs because drugs are positive reinforcers in two respects. First, drugs provide pleasurable effects themselves and thus provide *direct reinforcement*. Second, drug use often is communal: People frequently use drugs (alcohol is certainly a prime example, but so are many other drugs) with other people, and they enjoy this type of social activity. In this manner, drug use provides *indirect reinforcement*.

Sociological Explanations

Sociological explanations emphasize the importance of certain aspects of the social environment—social structure, social bonds to family and school, social interaction, and culture—or drug use, depending on the type of drug. For drugs like heroin and crack that tend to be used mostly in large urban areas, the social structure, or, to be more precise, social inequality, certainly seems to matter. As sociologist Elliott Currie (1994, p. 3) has observed, the use of these drugs by urban residents, most of them poor and of color, reflects the impact of poverty and racial inequality: “Serious drug use is not evenly distributed: it runs ‘along the fault lines of our society.’ It is concentrated among some groups and not others, and has been for at least half a century.” This fact helps explain why heroin use grew in the inner cities during the 1960s, as these areas remained poor even as the US economy was growing. Inner-city youths were attracted to heroin because its physiological effects helped them forget about their situation and also because the heroin subculture—using an illegal drug with friends, buying the drug from dealers, and so forth—was an exciting alternative to the bleakness of their daily lives. Crack became popular in inner cities during the 1980s for the same reasons.

Social bonds to families and schools also make a difference. Adolescents with weak bonds to their families and schools, as measured by such factors as the closeness they feel to their parents and teachers, are more likely to use drugs of various types than adolescents with stronger bonds to their families and schools. Their weaker bonds prompt them to be less likely to accept conventional norms and more likely to use drugs and engage in other delinquent behavior.

Regarding social interaction, sociologists emphasize that *peer influences* greatly influence one’s likelihood of using alcohol, tobacco, and a host of other drugs (Hanson et al., 2012). Much and probably most drug use begins during adolescence, when peer influences are especially important. When our friends during this stage of life are drinking, smoking, or using other drugs, many of us want to fit in with the crowd and thus use one of these drugs ourselves. In a related explanation, sociologists also emphasize that society’s “drug culture” matters for drug use. For example, because we have a culture that so favors alcohol, many people drink alcohol. And because we have a drug culture in general, it is no surprise, sociologically speaking, that drug use of many types is so common.

To the extent that social inequality, social interaction, and a drug culture matter for drug use, sociologists say, it is a mistake to view most drug use as stemming from an individual’s biological or psychological problems. Although these problems do play a role for

some individuals' use of some drugs, drug use as a whole stems to a large degree from the social environment and must be understood as a social problem, and not just as an individual problem.

Beyond these general explanations of why people use drugs, sociological discussions of drug use reflect the three sociological perspectives introduced in Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems"—functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism—as we shall now discuss. Table 7.6 "Theory Snapshot" summarizes this discussion.

Table 7.6 Theory Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Contributions to understanding of drug use
Functionalism	Drug use is functional for several parties in society. It provides drug users the various positive physiological effects that drugs have; it provides the sellers of legal or illegal drugs a source of income; and it provides jobs for the criminal justice system and the various other parties that deal with drug use. At the same time, both legal drugs and illegal drugs contribute to dysfunctions in society.
Conflict theory	Much drug use in poor urban areas results from the poverty, racial inequality, and other conditions affecting people in these locations. Racial and ethnic prejudice and inequality help determine why some drugs are illegal as well as the legal penalties for these drugs. The large multinational corporations that market and sell alcohol, tobacco, and other legal drugs play a powerful role in the popularity of these drugs and lobby Congress to minimize regulation of these drugs.
Symbolic interactionism	Drug use arises from an individual's interaction with people who engage in drug use. From this type of social interaction, an individual learns how to use a drug and also learns various attitudes that justify drug use and define the effects of a drug as effects that are enjoyable.

Functionalism

Recall that functionalist theory emphasizes the need for social stability, the functions that different aspects of society serve for society's well-being, and the threats (or dysfunctions) to society's well-being posed by certain aspects of society. In line with this theory, sociologists emphasize that drug use may actually be functional for several members of society. For the people who use legal or illegal drugs, drug use is functional because it provides them the various positive physiological effects that drugs have. For the people who sell legal or illegal drugs, drug use is functional because it provides them a major source of income. Illegal drug use is even functional for the criminal justice system, as it helps provide jobs for the police, court officials, and prison workers who deal with illegal drugs. Legal and illegal drugs also provide jobs for the social service agencies and other organizations and individuals whose work focuses on helping people addicted to a drug. At the same time, drugs, whether legal or illegal, have the many dysfunctions for society that this chapter discussed earlier, and this fact must not be forgotten as we acknowledge the functions of drugs.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory stresses the negative effects of social inequality and the efforts of the elites at the top of society's hierarchy to maintain their position. This theory helps us understand drugs and drug use in at least three respects. First, and as noted just earlier, much drug use in poor urban areas results from the poverty, racial inequality, and other conditions affecting people in these locations. They turn to illegal drugs partly to feel better about their situation, and partly because the illegal drug market is a potentially great source of income that does not require even a high school degree.

Second, conflict theory emphasizes that racial and ethnic prejudice and inequality help determine why some drugs are illegal as well as the criminal penalties for these drugs. For example, the penalties for crack are much harsher, gram for gram, than those for powder cocaine, even though the two drugs are pharmacologically identical. Crack users are primarily poor African Americans in

urban areas, while powder cocaine users are primarily whites, many of them at least fairly wealthy. These facts prompt many observers to say that the harsher penalties for crack are racially biased (Tonry, 2011). Other evidence for this argument of conflict theory is seen in the history of the illegality of opium, cocaine, and marijuana. As we discussed earlier, racial and ethnic prejudice played an important role in why these common drugs in the nineteenth century became illegal: prejudice against Chinese immigrants for opium, prejudice against African Americans for cocaine, and prejudice against Mexican Americans for marijuana.

Third, conflict theory emphasizes the huge influence that multinational corporations have in the marketing and sale of the legal drugs—alcohol, tobacco, and many prescription drugs—that often have harmful individual and societal consequences. To maximize their profits, these companies do their best, as noted earlier, to convince Americans and people in other nations to use their products. They also spend billions of dollars to lobby Congress. As also mentioned earlier, the tobacco industry hid for years evidence of the deadly effects of its products. All these efforts illustrate conflict theory's critical view of the role that corporations play in today's society.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the interaction of individuals and on how they interpret their interaction. Given this focus, symbolic interactionism views social problems as arising from the interaction of individuals. As such, it understands drug use as a behavior arising from an individual's interaction with people who engage in drug use. From this type of social interaction, an individual learns how to use a drug and also learns various attitudes that justify drug use and define the effects of a drug as effects that are enjoyable.

A study of drug use that reflects this approach is Howard S. Becker's (1953) classic article, "Becoming a Marihuana User." Becker wrote that someone usually begins smoking marijuana in the presence of friends who are experienced marijuana users. This social interaction, he argued, is critical for new users to wish to continue using marijuana. To want to do so, they must learn three behaviors or perceptions from the experienced users who are "turning them on" to marijuana use. First, new users must learn how to smoke a joint (marijuana cigarette) by deeply inhaling marijuana smoke and holding in the smoke before exhaling. Second, they must perceive that the effects they feel after smoking enough marijuana (spatial distortion, hunger pangs, short-term memory loss) signify that they are *stoned* (under the influence of marijuana); their friends typically tell them that if they are feeling these effects, they are indeed stoned. Third, they must learn to define these effects as pleasurable; if people suddenly experience spatial distortion, intense hunger, and memory loss, they might very well worry they are having huge problems! To prevent this from happening, their friends say things to them such as, "Doesn't that feel great!" This and similar comments help reassure the new users that the potentially worrisome effects they are experiencing are not only bad ones but in fact very enjoyable ones.

? Exercise 5.4.1

Which sociological perspective is likely to argue that drug use in poor urban areas results from the poverty, racial inequality, and other conditions affecting people in these locations.

a) conflict

b) functionalism

c) interactionism

Answer

Correct Answer: A

? Exercise 5.4.2

Which sociological perspective is likely to argue that drug use is functional for several parties in society.

a) conflict

b) functionalism

c) interactionism

Answer

Correct Answer: B

Key Takeaways

- Biological theories assume that some people are especially vulnerable to drug addiction for genetic reasons.
- A popular set of psychological theories assumes that drug addiction results from certain personality traits and problems.
- Sociological theories attribute drug use to various aspects of the social environment, including peer influences, weak social bonds, and the larger drug culture.

For Your Review

1. When you think about the reasons for drug use and addiction, do you think biological factors, psychological factors, or the social environment play the most important role? Explain you answer.
2. Write a brief essay in which you discuss a time when your friends influenced you, or someone else you know, to use a legal or illegal drug.

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5.5: Drug Policy and the War on Illegal Drugs

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Explain whether the DARE program is effective.
2. Outline the goals and examples of a harm reduction approach to drug use.
3. List the problems arising from the current legal war on illegal drugs.

For many decades, the United States has used several strategies to try to deal with drugs. These strategies generally fall into four categories: treatment, prevention, harm reduction, and, for certain drugs, criminalization and the use of the criminal justice system, or, as we will call it, the war on illegal drugs. We now turn to these strategies.

Treatment

Treatment programs are intended for people who already are using drugs, perceive they have a drug problem, and want to reduce or eliminate their drug use. This strategy is probably familiar to most readers, even if they have not used drugs themselves or at least have not had the benefit of a treatment program. Treatment programs often involve a group setting, but many drug users also receive individual treatment from a psychiatrist, psychologist, or drug counselor. Perhaps the most famous treatment program is Alcoholics Anonymous, a program that involves alcoholics meeting in a group setting, acknowledging their drinking problem and its effects on family members and other loved ones, and listening to each other talk about their situations. Other group settings are residential settings, sometimes called *detox units*. In these settings, people check themselves into an institution and stay there for several weeks until they and the professionals who treat them are satisfied. Perhaps the most famous residential treatment program is the Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage, California; this center was established by and named after an acknowledged alcoholic who was the wife of President Gerald Ford.



The Betty Ford Center is a residential detox unit for people with alcohol and other drug problems. Image courtesy of Betty Ford Center, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BETTYFORD.jpg.

In addition to or in conjunction with group treatment programs, individual treatment for drug addiction may involve the use of "good" drugs designed to help wean addicts off the drug to which they are addicted. For example, nicotine gum, patches, and other products are designed to help cigarette smokers stop smoking.

The various forms of treatment can be very effective for some addicts and less effective or not effective at all for other addicts; most treatment programs have a high failure rate (Goode, 2012). A sociological perspective suggests that however effective treatment might be for some people, the origins of drug use ultimately lie in the larger society—its social structure, social interaction, and the drug culture—and that these roots must be addressed for serious reductions in drug use to occur.

Prevention

Because it is always best to try to prevent a problem before it begins, an important strategy to deal with drug use involves prevention. The major prevention strategies involve drug education or drug testing (Faupel et al., 2010). Many education-based prevention programs focus on children and adolescents. This focus reflects the fact that use of most drugs begins during adolescence, and that if adolescents do not begin using drugs during this period of their lives, they are much less likely to do so

when they become adults. Some education strategies follow what is called an *informational model*: they involve public-service advertising, the distribution of drug pamphlets in medical offices, and other such efforts. Several studies question the effectiveness of strategies based on this model (Faupel et al., 2010).

Other education programs take place in the secondary school system and on college campuses. The most famous such program is almost certainly DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), which involves police officers speaking to middle-school children. DARE programs have been carried out in more than 7,000 schools across the nation. However, several studies find that DARE programs do not generally reduce subsequent drug use among the children who attend them compared to children who do not attend them (Faupel et al., 2010).

Drug testing is very common in today's society, and you may well have been required to have a drug test as part of an application for a job, involvement in a school sport, or other activity. At least half of US workplaces now perform required drug tests. Drug testing is expensive, and many critics say it is not cost-effective in view of the low prevalence of illegal drug use in the United States (Faupel et al., 2010).

Harm Reduction

A third strategy involves harm reduction. As this term implies, this strategy attempts to minimize the harm caused by drugs. It recognizes that many people will use drugs despite efforts to prevent or persuade them from doing so and despite any punishment they might receive for using illegal drugs. Our nation is currently using a harm reduction approach with regard to alcohol and tobacco. It recognizes that tens of millions of people use these products, and designated-driving programs and other efforts try to minimize the considerable harm these two drugs cause.

A specific harm reduction strategy with regard to illegal drugs is the provision of clean, sterile needles for people who inject themselves with heroin, cocaine/crack, or other drugs. Many of these users share needles, and this sharing spreads HIV, hepatitis, and other diseases. If they have a supply to sterile needles, the reasoning goes, the transmission of these diseases will be reduced even if use of the drugs with the aid of the needles does not reduce. Critics say the provision of sterile needles in effect says that drug use is OK and may even encourage drug use. Proponents reply that needle-based drug use will occur whether or not sterile needles are provided, and that the provision of sterile needles does more good than harm. Other nations have adopted this type of harm reduction much more extensively than the United States.

Another harm reduction strategy involves the use of drug courts, which began in the 1990s and now number more than 2,500 across the United States. In these courts, drug offenders who have been arrested and found guilty are sentenced to drug treatment and counseling rather than to jail or prison. Evaluation studies show that the courts save much money compared to imprisoning drug offenders and that they are more effective than imprisonment in reducing the offenders' drug habit (Stinchcomb, 2010).

People Making a Difference

Law Enforcement against Prohibition

Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (LEAP) is an organization of current and former police and other criminal justice professionals, including prosecutors, judges, and FBI agents, who advocate for the legalization of illegal drugs. Because many of these professionals were on the front lines in the war against drugs and often put their lives in danger, their views about drug policy cannot be dismissed lightly.

One of their members is MacKenzie Allen, a 65-year-old deputy sheriff who worked in Los Angeles and Seattle, including time as an undercover agent who bought illegal drugs and made countless arrests for drug offenses. Although Allen strongly disapproves of drug use, his many years in law enforcement led him to realize that the drug problem is best understood as a public health problem, not a legal problem. He notes that the United States has lowered cigarette use through public education and without outlawing cigarettes. "Can you imagine the mayhem had we outlawed cigarettes?" he writes. "Can you envision the 'cigarette cartels' and the bloodbath that would follow? Yet, thanks to a public awareness campaign we've made a huge dent in tobacco use without arresting a single cigarette smoker."

Allen adds that most of the problems associated with illegal drug use are actually the result of the laws against drugs. These laws create a huge illegal market, much of it involving violent cartels, he says, that promises strong profits for the manufacturers and sellers of illegal drugs. He is also critical of other aspects of the war on drugs:

If the colloquial definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting a different result, what does that say about our "War on Drugs"? We've been pursuing this strategy for forty years. It has cost a trillion taxpayer dollars, thousands of lives

(both law enforcement and civilians) and destroyed hundreds of thousands more by incarceration. Moreover, it undermines the safety of our communities by overcrowding our jails and prisons, forcing them to give early release to truly violent offenders.

Another LEAP member is Joseph D. McNamara, the former police chief of San Jose, California. McNamara also criticizes the violence resulting from the laws against drugs. "Like an increasing number of law enforcers," he writes specifically about marijuana, "I have learned that most bad things about marijuana—especially the violence made inevitable by an obscenely profitable black market—are caused by the prohibition, not by the plant." He continues, "Al Capone and his rivals made machine-gun battles a staple of 1920s city street life when they fought to control the illegal alcohol market. No one today shoots up the local neighborhood to compete in the beer market…How much did the [Mexican] cartels make last year dealing in Budweiser, Corona or Dos Equis? Legalization would seriously cripple their operations."

As these statements indicate, the legal war on drugs has had many costs. It is difficult to know what to do about illegal drugs, but in bringing these costs to the attention of elected officials and the American public, Law Enforcement Against Prohibition is making a difference. For further information about LEAP, visit copssaylegalizedrugs.com.

Sources: Allen, 2001; Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, 2011; McNamara, 2010

The War on Illegal Drugs

The most controversial drug strategy involves the criminalization of many drugs and the use of the police and the rest of the criminal justice system to apprehend and punish the users, manufacturers, and sellers of illegal drugs. As the brief history of drug use at the beginning of this chapter indicated, the United States has banned certain drugs since the late nineteenth century, and it accelerated this effort during the 1970s and 1980s as concern grew about heroin, crack, and other drugs.

In judging the war on illegal drugs, two considerations should be kept in mind (Meier & Geis, 2007). One consideration is the *philosophical* question of the extent to which the government in a free society should outlaw behaviors that may be harmful even if people (let's assume we are talking about legal adults) want to engage in them. Americans do all kinds of things that may harm themselves and that may directly or indirectly harm other people. For example, many Americans eat high amounts of candy, ice cream, potato chips, hamburgers, and other "fat food" that causes obesity, great harm to individual health, premature death and bereavement, and tens of billions of dollars in health costs and lost productivity annually. Although obesity almost certainly causes more harm overall than illegal drugs, no one is about to say that the use of "fat food" should be banned or restricted, although some schools and workplaces have removed candy and soda machines. Americans also engage in many other activities that can be very harmful, including downhill skiing, contact sports, skydiving, and any number of other activities, but no one is about to say that we should be prohibited from engaging in these efforts. Where is the logic, then, in allowing all these behaviors and in not allowing the use of certain drugs? A philosophical argument can be made that all drug use should, in fact, be allowed in a free society (Husak, 2002), and perhaps this is an issue that you and your classmates will want to discuss.

The second consideration is the *social science* question of whether laws against drugs do more good than harm, or more harm than good. In a rational society, if a law or policy does more good than harm, then we should have the law or policy. However, if it does more harm than good, however much good it might do, then we should not have it, because the harm outweighs the good.

In considering this issue, critics of drug laws say they do much more harm than good, and they often cite Prohibition as an example of this dynamic. Prohibition was repealed because our society decided it was doing much more harm than good and was thus a "triumphant failure," as one author has called this period of our history (Okrent, 2011, p. 67). Prohibition caused several harms: (1) the rise of organized crime to earn illegal profits from the manufacture, distribution, and sale of alcohol; (2) the violence and murder among organized crime gangs that fought each other over drug "turf"; (3) the wounding and death of innocent bystanders from gunfights between organized crime gangs; (4) the wounding and murder of police officers who enforced Prohibition; (5) rampant corruption among police officers and political officials who took money from organized crime to ignore violations of Prohibition; and (6) the expenditure of much time, money, and energy by the criminal justice system to enforce Prohibition.

Prohibition did reduce drinking and the violence associated with drinking. But some scholars say that the organized crime violence caused by Prohibition was so common and deadly that the homicide rate grew during Prohibition rather than lessening (Jensen, 2000), though other scholars dispute this finding (Owens, 2011). In yet another problem, many people during Prohibition became sick and/or died from drinking tainted liquor. Because alcohol was no longer regulated, illegal alcohol often contained, by accident or design, dangerous substances. As an example, 15,000 people in the Midwest became sick with a severe neurological problem after drinking an illegal alcohol laced with a paint thinner chemical (Genzlinger, 2011).

Critics of today's war on illegal drugs say that it has reproduced the same problems that Prohibition produced. Among these problems are the following:

- Drug gangs and individual drug sellers engage in deadly fights with each other and also kill or wound police officers and other law enforcement personnel who fight the war on drugs.
- Many innocent bystanders, including children, are wounded or killed by stray bullets.
- Many police officers take bribes to ignore drug law violations and/or sell drugs confiscated from dealers.
- The criminal justice system and other agencies spend much time, money, and energy in the war against illegal drugs, just as they did during Prohibition. Enforcing drug laws costs about $50 billion annually (McVay, n.d.). Police and other law enforcement personnel make more than 1.6 million arrests for drug offenses annually, including about 850,000 arrests for marijuana possession (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011). Some 500,000 people are in prison or jail for drug offenses.
- The drug war has focused disproportionately on African Americans and Latinos and greatly increased their numbers who have gone to jail or prison. Even though illegal drug use is more common among whites than among blacks, the arrest rate for drug offenses is ten times higher for African Americans than the rate for whites (Blow, 2011). Partly because of the drug war, about one-third of young African American men have prison records.
- Most of the 17,000 annual deaths from illegal drug use stem from the fact that the drugs are illegal. Because they are illegal, they may contain dangerous substances that can be fatal, just as in Prohibition. In addition, some illegal drug users overdose because they underestimate the purity of a drug.



One of the harms associated with the war on drugs is that police officers die in the line of duty when they are killed by drug sellers or users. Greg Matthews – Riverside Police Officer Memorial Service – CC BY-ND 2.0.

Because of all these problems, drug law critics say, the United States should legalize marijuana, the most benign illegal drug, and seriously consider legalizing some or all other illegal drugs.

Proponents of the drug war reply that if drugs were legalized or decriminalized (still against the law, but violations would be treated like traffic offenses), many more people would use the newly legal drugs, and the problems these drugs cause would increase. Responding to this argument, drug law critics say it is not at all certain that drug use would increase if drugs were legalized. To support their view, they cite two pieces of evidence.

First, illegal drugs are relatively easy to obtain and use without fear of arrest. If people have decided not to use illegal drugs now, it is unlikely they will use them if the drugs were legalized. Support for this argument comes from national data on high school seniors (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2011). In 2010, 82 percent of seniors said they could easily obtain marijuana, and 35.5 percent said they could easily obtain cocaine. Despite these numbers, only 35 percent had used marijuana in the past year, and only 3 percent had used cocaine in the past year.

Second, marijuana use in the United States decreased in the 1970s and 1980s after several states decriminalized it. As we noted earlier, marijuana use also declined in the Netherlands after they decriminalized the drug in the 1970s. Moreover, even though use of marijuana is legal in the Netherlands, its rate of marijuana use is no higher than the rate of marijuana use in the United States (Drug Policy Alliance, 2012). In another international comparison, Portugal decriminalized possession of all drugs in 2001; after it did so, teenage drug use declined (see Note 7.28 "Lessons from Other Societies").

At this point, it is impossible to know how much, if at all, the use of illegal drugs would rise if they were legalized. Critics of the drug war say that even if the use of drugs did rise, the benefits of legalizing or decriminalizing them would still outweigh the disadvantages (Feiling, 2010).

Lessons from Other Societies

What Happened after the Netherlands and Portugal Decriminalized Drugs?

As the United States ponders its drug policy, the experience of the Netherlands and Portugal provides some provocative lessons.

The Netherlands decriminalized drugs in 1976. Under the Netherlands' policy, although criminal penalties remain for possessing hard drugs (cocaine, heroin, etc.) and large quantities of marijuana, drug users are not normally arrested for possessing drugs, but they must receive drug treatment if they are arrested for another reason. Drug sellers are not normally arrested for selling small amounts of drugs, but they may be arrested for selling them in large. Marijuana use in the Netherlands dropped in the immediate years after it was decriminalized. Although it increased somewhat since then, as in some other nations, it remains much lower than the US rate. According to the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 23 percent of Dutch residents ages 15–64 have used cannabis at least once in their lives, compared to 40 percent of Americans ages 12 and older (2005 figures). Dutch use of cocaine and heroin also remains much lower than American use. Reflecting the Netherlands' experience, most of the nations in Western Europe have also decriminalized marijuana possession and use, and their rates of marijuana use also remain lower than the US rate.

In 2001, Portugal became the first European nation to remove all criminal penalties for drug possession. Portugal took this step because it reasoned that fear of arrest keeps drug addicts from seeking help and because it recognized that drug treatment costs far less than imprisonment. Anyone convicted of drug possession is sent for drug treatment, but the person may refuse treatment without any penalty.

In the first five years after Portugal decriminalized all drug possession, teenaged illegal drug use declined, new HIV infections from sharing needles declined, and the prison population also declined. Meanwhile, the number of drug addicts receiving treatment increased by 41 percent. A researcher who reported these trends commented, "Judging by every metric, decriminalization in Portugal has been a resounding success. It has enabled the Portuguese government to manage and control the drug problem far better than virtually every other Western country does." A Portuguese drug official agreed, "The impact [of drugs] in the life of families and our society is much lower than it was before decriminalization," and noted that police are now freer to spend more time and energy on high-level dealers. Adult drug use in Portugal has risen slightly since 2001, but so has adult drug use in other European nations that did not decriminalize drugs. Portugal's increase has not been higher than these other nations' increase.

Although the Netherlands, Portugal, and other Western European nations certainly differ from the United States in many ways, their experience strongly suggests that decriminalization of drugs may cause much more good than harm. If so, the United States has important lessons to learn from their experiences.

Sources: Hughes & Stevens, 2010; Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008; Reinarman & Hendrien, 2004; Szaalavitz, 2009; Tracey & Jahromi, 2010

Key Takeaways

- To deal with drugs, the United States has used several strategies, including treatment, prevention, harm reduction, and the legal war on illegal drugs.
- According to its critics, the war on illegal drugs has done much more harm than good and in this respect is repeating the example of Prohibition.

For Your Review

1. Do you think the United States should make sterile needles and syringes freely available to people who are addicted to drugs that are injected? Why or why not?
2. Do you agree or disagree that the war on illegal drugs is doing more harm than good? Explain your answer.

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5.6: Addressing the Drug Problem and Reducing Drug Use

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Explain the problems associated with arresting hundreds of thousands of people for drug possession.
2. List any three specific measures that may help deal with the drug problem.

As you may have already noticed and will notice again, the other chapters in this book usually present a fairly optimistic assessment when they discuss prospects for addressing the social problem discussed in each chapter. They point to the experience of other nations that do a good job of addressing the social problem, they cite social science evidence that points to solutions for addressing the problem, and they generally say that the United States could address the problem if it had the wisdom to approach it appropriately and to spend sufficient sums of money.

This chapter will not end with an optimistic assessment for addressing the drug problem. The reason for this lack of optimism is that what's past is prologue: People have enthusiastically used drugs since prehistoric times and show no signs of reducing their drug use. Many and perhaps most scholars think the legal war on drugs has had little, if any, impact on drug use (Walker, 2011), and many scholars recognize that this war brought with it the many disadvantages cited in the previous section. As Kleiman et al. (2011, p. xvi) observe, "Our current drug policies allow avoidable harm by their ineffectiveness and create needless suffering by their excesses."

A growing number of people in the political world agree. In 2011, the Global Commission on Drug Policy issued a major report on the world's antidrug efforts. The commission comprised nineteen members, including a former United Nations secretary general, a former US secretary of state, a former chair of the US Federal Reserve, and former presidents or prime ministers of Brazil, Colombia, Greece, Mexico, and Switzerland. The commission's report called for a drastic rethinking of current drug policy: "The global war on drugs has failed, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world…Fundamental reforms in national and global drug control policies are urgently needed" (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2011, p. 3). Decriminalization and even legalization of illegal drugs should be seriously considered, the report concluded.

Given this backdrop, many drug experts question whether our current drug policies make sense. They add that the best approach our society could take would be to expand the prevention, treatment, and harm reduction approaches discussed earlier; because drugs will always be with us, our society should do what it can to minimize the many harms that drugs cause. Thus drug education prevention and drug treatment programs should be expanded, sterile needles should be made available for drug addicts who inject their drugs, and drug courts should be used for a greater number of drug offenders.

Beyond these approaches, some experts say marijuana use should be decriminalized and that decriminalization of other drugs should be seriously considered. If marijuana were not only decriminalized but also legalized and taxed, it is estimated that this new tax revenue would amount to $8.7 billion annually and that about $8.7 billion annually would also be saved in reduced law enforcement costs, for a total of more than $17 billion in new funds that could be used for drug prevention, drug treatment, and other needs (Kristof, 2010). Many Americans agree with these experts: In a 2011 Gallup poll, 50 percent of the public favored legalizing marijuana, while 46 percent opposed legalizing it (Graves, 2011).

More generally, these experts say, it makes little sense to arrest more than 1.3 million people each year for drug possession and to put many of them in jail or prison. We do not arrest and imprison alcoholics and cigarette smokers; instead we try to offer them various kinds of help, and we should do the same for people who are addicted to other kinds of drugs. If arrest and imprisonment must continue, these measures should be reserved for sellers of large quantities of illegal drugs, not for the people who use the drugs or for those who sell only small quantities. When low-level drug dealers are imprisoned, they are simply replaced on the street by new dealers. Providing low-level dealers with alternative sentencing would reduce the number of imprisoned dealers over time by several hundred thousand annually without making illegal drugs more available.

In addition to all these measures, several other steps might well reduce certain kinds of drug use or at least reduce the harm that both drugs and our current drug policies cause (Kleiman et al., 2011). These steps include the following:

1. **Providing legally prescribed heroin and/or substitute opiates, including methadone, for heroin addicts.** This provision has proven effective in several other nations.
2. **Encouraging primary care physicians and other health-care providers to screen more carefully for substance abuse.**

3. **Basing drug sentencing less on the quantity of illegal drugs sold and more on the level of violence in which some drug sellers engage.**
4. **Abandoning DARE.** According to Kleiman et al. (2011, p. 201), "the continued dominance in school-based drug education of DARE—a program that has never been shown to actually reduce drug use—is a scandal." They instead recommend school-based programs that help children develop self-control and prosocial behavior, as these programs have also been shown to reduce children's subsequent drug use.
5. **Following the psychological principle of operant conditioning by providing drug addicts small cash payments for clean drug tests, as these rewards have been shown to be effective.**
6. **Fully reintegrating former drug dealers and recovering drug addicts into society.** They should have full access to public housing, educational loans, and other benefits, and they should be allowed to vote in states that now do not let them vote.
7. **Raising alcohol taxes.** According to Kleiman et al. (2011), tripling the alcohol tax would especially reduce drinking by heavy drinkers and by minors, and it would reduce the number of homicides by 1,000 annually and the number of motor vehicle accidents by 2,000 annually. The new tax money could also help fund alcohol treatment and prevention programs. "In the entire field of drug-abuse control," Kleiman et al. (2011, p. 204) write, "there is no bargain as attractive as a higher alcohol tax."
8. **Prohibiting alcohol sales to anyone who has engaged in drunk driving or who has committed violence under the influence of alcohol.** For this ban to work, everyone who wants to buy alcohol would have to show an ID, and those prohibited from buying alcohol would have that indicated on their ID. This ban would certainly be unpopular among the many drinkers who drink responsibly, but it would reduce the great harm that alcohol causes.
9. **Allowing marijuana users to grow their own cannabis or to buy it from small growers.** This would reduce the sales of cannabis, and thus its profits, from the organized crime groups and the Mexican cartels that now provide much of the marijuana used in the United States.
10. **Raising the cigarette tax.** Some states already have high cigarette taxes, but several states have low cigarette taxes. Raising the taxes in the low-tax states would reduce cigarette smoking in these states. The new tax revenue could be used to fund treatment programs that help reduce smoking.

Key Takeaways

- Critics of the war on drugs say that people who use illegal drugs should be treated, not arrested, just as people who use alcohol and tobacco are treated, if they seek treatment, rather than arrested.
- Specific measures that could help address the drug problem include providing legally prescribed heroin or substitute opiates for heroin addicts and raising the alcohol tax.

For Your Review

1. Do you think that alcohol taxes should be raised? Why or why not?
2. Do you favor decriminalization of marijuana? Explain your answer.

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5.7: End-of-Chapter Material

Summary

1. Humans have used drugs of various types since prehistoric times. Alcohol has been a common drug in the United States since the colonial period, and opium, marijuana, and heroin were common legal drugs in the late nineteenth century.
2. The distinction between legal and illegal drugs lacks a logical basis. Alcohol and tobacco kill many more people than all illegal drugs combined.
3. The use of several drugs is socially patterned. Males are more likely than females to use drugs, and religious people are less likely to use them than those who are less religious. The differences that race/ethnicity, education, and region of country make for drug use depends on the type of drug.
4. Biological theories assume that drug addiction results from a genetic predisposition, while psychological theories attribute drug use to certain personality traits and to positive reinforcement.
5. Sociological theories attribute drug use to peer and cultural influences. A sociological perspective suggests that the ultimate roots of drug use lie in the social environment rather than inside the individual.
6. Major approaches to dealing with drugs include treatment, prevention, harm reduction, and the use of the criminal justice system for illegal drugs. Critics of the war on drugs say that it does more harm than good, and they urge that serious consideration be given to decriminalizing marijuana and perhaps other drugs.

Using What You Know

A college friend of yours seems to drink a lot most nights and even goes to class some mornings hung over. You've become so concerned that you've suggested to your friend when you've been out for the evening to just have a couple drinks. Your friend has just laughed you off. What, if anything, do you do?

What You Can Do

To help deal with the societal and individual problems caused by alcohol and other drugs, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Volunteer for a local agency that helps teenagers or adults who have a problem with alcohol or other drugs.
2. Start or join in efforts on your campus to encourage responsible drinking.
3. Start a group to encourage your state to raise taxes on alcohol and cigarettes.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Alcohol and Other Drugs

6.1: The Problem of Crime
6.2: Types of Crime
6.3: Who Commits Crime?
6.4: Explaining Crime
6.5: The Criminal Justice System
6.6: Reducing Crime
6.7: End-of-Chapter Material

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6.1: The Problem of Crime

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Understand the extent of public concern about crime.
2. Explain how the news media contribute to myths about crime.
3. Describe how crime in the United States is measured.

Put most simply, crime is behavior that is prohibited by the criminal law because it is considered especially harmful or offensive. This simple definition, however, raises many questions:

- Who decides what is offensive or harmful?
- Are some harmful behaviors not considered crimes, and are some crimes not that harmful?
- Are some people more likely than others to be considered criminals because of their gender, race and ethnicity, social class, age, or other aspect of their social backgrounds?

These questions lie at the heart of the sociological study of deviance, of which crime is a special type. Deviance is behavior that violates social norms and arouses strong social disapproval. This definition reflects the common sociological view that deviance is not a quality of a behavior itself but rather the result of what other people think about the behavior. This view is reflected in an often-cited quote from sociologist Howard S. Becker (1963, p. 9), who wrote several decades ago that "deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules or sanctions to an 'offender.' The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label."

This definition reminds us that some harmful behaviors, such as white-collar crime, may not be considered deviant and fail to result in severe legal punishment, perhaps because wealthy individuals perform them. It also reminds us that some less harmful behaviors, such as prostitution, may be considered very deviant because the public deems the behavior immoral and because poor people engage in them. As these possibilities suggest, the application of a criminal label to an offender is *problematic*: People arrested and/or convicted of a crime may not have engaged in a very harmful behavior or even in the behavior of which they are suspected, and people with no criminal record have in fact engaged in harmful and even criminal behavior.

Public Concern about Crime

The American public is clearly concerned about crime. Two-thirds of the public said in a 2011 Gallup poll that crime had risen from the previous year. More than a third, 38 percent, said they would be "afraid to walk alone at night" within one mile of their residence; this figure translates to more than 86 million adults. In the same poll, 47 percent (or about 114 million adults) said they worry about their homes being burglarized, and 44 percent said they worry about thefts of or from their motor vehicles. Corresponding figures for other crimes were: experiencing identity theft, 67 percent; getting mugged, 34 percent; getting attacked while driving your car, 19 percent; being sexually assaulted, 22 percent (including 37 percent of women); and getting murdered, 20 percent (among the lowest figures in this list, but one that still amounts to 42 million adults worrying about being murdered).

Although the public is concerned about crime, at least some of this concern might exceed what the facts about crime would justify. For example, although most of the public, as we just noted, thinks the crime rate has been rising, this rate has actually been declining since the early 1990s. And although one-fifth of the public worries about getting murdered, homicides comprise less than one-tenth of 1 percent of all violent and property crime (*street crime*); only about 7 of every 100,000 Americans, or 0.007 percent, are murdered every year; homicide does not rank among the top ten causes of death (which include heart disease and cancer); and the number of homicides is much lower than the number of deaths from harmful behavior by corporations (such as pollution or unsafe products and workplaces). Crime is indeed a real problem, but public concern about crime may be higher than the facts warrant.

Media Myths

To the extent this is true, news media coverage of crime may be partly responsible (Robinson, 2011). For example, if the television news and newspapers suddenly have several stories about a few sensational crimes, public concern about crime may jump, even though crime in general has not risen at all. Similarly, the news media have increased their crime coverage even when crime is falling, as happened during the early 1990s when the major US television networks more than doubled their nightly news stories about crime even though crime had been declining (Freeman, 1994).

The news media, in fact, distort the amount and nature of crime in several ways (Surette, 2011). First, they overdramatize crime by reporting it in many news stories. Crime dominates news coverage in many newspapers and television newscasts, and, as just noted, the media may devote much coverage to a few sensational crimes and create the false impression that a "crime wave" is occurring when the crime rate may even be declining.

Second, the media devote particularly heavy coverage to violent crime, reflecting the common saying that "if it bleeds, it leads." For example, more than 25 percent of the crime stories on evening newscasts and in newspapers concern homicide, even though homicide comprises less than 1 percent of all crime (Feld, 2003). Similarly, the vast majority of crime stories feature violent crime, even though violent crime comprises only about 12–14 percent of all street crimes combined. Media attention to violent crime thus gives the public the false impression that most crime is violent when in fact most crime involves a theft of some sort (*property crime*).



The news media feature violent crime, even though violent crime comprises only a small portion of all crime. Darla Hueske – did not cross – CC BY-ND 2.0.

Third, the media tend to highlight crimes committed by African Americans or other people of color and crimes with white victims. A greater percentage of crime stories involve people of color as offenders than is true in arrest statistics. A greater percentage of crime stories also involve whites as victims than is actually true, and newspaper stories of white-victim crimes are longer than those of black-victim crimes. Crimes in which African Americans are the offenders and whites are the victims also receive disproportionate media coverage even though most crimes involve offenders and victims of the same race. In all these ways, the news media exaggerate the extent to which people of color commit crimes and the extent to which whites are victims of crimes.

Fourth, the media also tend to highlight crimes committed by youths. In one study of thousands of local newscast stories, about two-thirds of the stories about violence depicted youthful offenders, even though teenagers commit only about 14–16 percent of violent crime (Jackson, 1997). In a related problem, media stories involving teenagers are much more likely to show them committing crime or other antisocial acts than committing good deeds or other positive behavior. In these ways, the news media convey a false impression that leads the public to believe both that youths commit much of our violent crime and that youth violence has been rising even though it has actually declined since the early 1990s.

Measuring Crime

It is surprisingly difficult to know how much crime occurs. Crime is not like the weather, when we all can see whether it is raining, snowing, or sunny. Usually when crime occurs, only the criminal and the victim, and sometimes an occasional witness, know about it. We thus have an incomplete picture of the crime problem, but because of various data sources we still have a pretty good understanding of how much crime exists and of who is most likely to commit it and be victimized by it.

The government's primary source of crime data is the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), published annually by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The FBI gathers its data from police departments around the country who tell the FBI about crimes that have come to their attention. The police also tell the FBI whether someone is arrested for the crime and, if so, the person's age, gender, and race. The FBI gathers all these UCR data and reports them in an annual volume called *Crime in the United States* (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011).

Most UCR data concern the so-called Part I Crimes, eight felonies that the FBI considers the most serious. Four of these are violent crimes—homicide, rape, aggravated assault, and robbery—and four are property crimes—burglary, larceny (e.g., shoplifting, pick-pocketing, purse-snatching), motor vehicle theft, and arson.

According to the FBI, 1,246,248 violent crimes and 9,082,887 property crimes occurred in 2010, for a total of about 10.3 million. This is the nation's official crime count, and by any standard it is a lot of crime. However, this number is much lower than it should

be because *more than half of all crime victims do not report their crimes to the police*, and the police thus do not know about them. These unreported crimes represent "hidden" crimes or, as they are often called, the dark figure of crime. Thus the true crime problem is much greater than suggested by the UCR.

This underreporting of crime represents a major problem for the UCR's validity. Several other problems exist. First, the UCR excludes white-collar crimes and thus diverts attention away from their harm. Second, police practices affect the number of crimes listed in the UCR. For example, the police do not record every report they hear from a citizen as a crime. Sometimes they do not have the time to do so, and sometimes they do not believe the citizen. If they do not record the report, the FBI does not count it as a crime. If the police start recording more reports or fail to record even more reports, the official crime rate will rise or fall, respectively, even though the actual number of crimes has not changed. This fact has led to crime-reporting scandals during the past two decades, as police departments in several major cities failed to record many crimes or downgraded others (e.g., calling a rape a simple assault) in an apparent effort to make it appear as if the crime rate were falling (Hart, 2004). In a third problem, if crime victims become more or less likely to report their crimes to the police (e.g., the advent of the 911 emergency number may have increased calls to the police), the official crime rate will again change, even if the actual number of crimes has not.

To get a more accurate picture of crime, the federal government began in the early 1970s to administer a survey, now called the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), to tens of thousands of randomly selected US households. People in the households are asked whether they or their residence has been the victim of several different types of crimes in the past half year. Their responses are then extrapolated to the entire US population to yield fairly accurate estimates of the actual number of crimes occurring in the nation. These estimates are thought to be more accurate than the UCR's figures, even if it is true that victims sometimes might not want to tell NCVS interviewers what happened to them (Catalano, 2006).

Table 8.1 "Number of Crimes: Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), 2010" lists the number of street crimes as reported by the UCR and estimated by NCVS. Note that these two crime sources do not measure exactly the crimes. For example, the NCVS excludes commercial crimes such as shoplifting, while the UCR includes them. The NCVS also includes simple assaults (where someone receives only a minor injury), while the UCR excludes them. These differences notwithstanding, we can still see that the NCVS estimates about 1.8 times as many crimes as the UCR reports to us. The *dark figure* of crime is large indeed.

Table 8.1 Number of Crimes: Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), 2010

	UCR	NCVS
Violent crime	1,246,248	3,817,380
Property crime	9,082,887	14,908,330
Total	10,329,135	18,725,710

Source: Maguire, K. (Ed.). (2011). *Sourcebook of criminal justice statistics*. Retrieved from www.albany.edu/sourcebook/toc_3.html.

A third source of crime information is the self-report survey. Here subjects, usually adolescents, indicate on an anonymous questionnaire whether and how often they committed various offenses in, say, the past year. Typically, they also answer questions about their family relationships, school performance, and other aspects of their backgrounds. Self-report studies have yielded valuable information about delinquency and explanations of crime. Like the NCVS, they underscore how much crime is committed that does not come to the attention of the police.

Key Takeaways

- Much of the American public is concerned about crime, and many people worry about becoming a victim of various types of crime.
- The news media overdramatize the nature and amount of crime, and they give more attention to crimes involving African Americans and Latinos as offenders and whites as victims.
- The nation's major source of crime data is the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). However, many people do not report their crimes to the police, and police practices affect the number of "official" crimes reported by the UCR.

For Your Review

1. Why do you think so many Americans are afraid of crime even though the crime rate has greatly declined since the early 1990s?
2. Why is it difficult to measure crime accurately? Why is the measurement of crime by the FBI inaccurate?

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6.2: Types of Crime

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

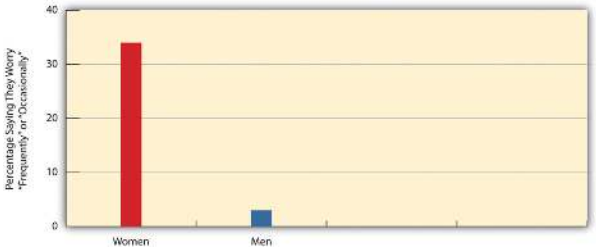
1. Describe the major aspects of homicide.
2. Discuss evidence indicating that white-collar crime is more serious than street crime.
3. Explain the major issues raised by the concept of consensual crime.

Many types of crime exist. Criminologists commonly group crimes into several major categories: (1) violent crime; (2) property crime; (3) white-collar crime; (4) organized crime; and (5) consensual or victimless crime. Within each category, many more specific crimes exist. For example, violent crime includes homicide, aggravated and simple assault, rape and sexual assault, and robbery, while property crime includes burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson. Because a full discussion of the many types of crime would take several chapters or even an entire book or more, we highlight here the most important dimensions of the major categories of crime and the issues they raise for public safety and crime control.

Violent Crime

Even if, as our earlier discussion indicated, the news media exaggerate the problem of violent crime, it remains true that violent crime plagues many communities around the country and is the type of crime that most concerns Americans. The news story that began this chapter reminds us that violent crime is all too real for too many people; it traps some people inside their homes and makes others afraid to let their children play outside or even to walk to school. Rape and sexual assault are a common concern for many women and leads them to be more fearful of being victimized than men: In the 2011 Gallup poll mentioned earlier, 37 percent of women said they worried about being sexually assaulted, compared to only 6 percent of men (see Figure 8.1 “Gender and Worry about Being Sexually Assaulted (Percentage Saying They Worry “Frequently” or “Occasionally”).

Figure 8.1 Gender and Worry about Being Sexually Assaulted (Percentage Saying They Worry “Frequently” or “Occasionally”)



Source: Data from Maguire, K. (Ed.). (2011). *Sourcebook of criminal justice statistics*. Retrieved from www.albany.edu/sourcebook.

Research on violent crime tends to focus on homicide and on rape and sexual assault. Homicide, of course, is considered the most serious crime because it involves the taking of a human life. As well, homicide data are considered more accurate than those for other crimes because most homicides come to the attention of the police and are more likely than other crimes to lead to an arrest. For its part, the focus on rape and sexual assault reflects the contemporary women’s movement’s interest in these related crimes beginning in the 1970s and the corresponding interest of criminologists, both female and male, in the criminal victimization of women.

Certain aspects of homicide are worth noting. First, although some homicides are premeditated, most in fact are relatively spontaneous and the result of intense emotions like anger, hatred, or jealousy (Fox, Levin, & Quinet, 2012). Two people may begin arguing for any number of reasons, and things escalate. A fight may then ensue that results in a fatal injury, but one of the antagonists may also pick up a weapon and use it. About 25–50 percent of all homicides are victim-precipitated, meaning that the eventual victim is the one who starts the argument or the first one to escalate it once it has begun.

Second, and related to the first aspect, most homicide offenders and victims knew each other before the homicide occurred. Indeed, about three-fourths of all homicides involve nonstrangers, and only one-fourth involve strangers. Intimate partners (spouses, ex-spouses, and current and former partners) and other relatives commit almost 30 percent of all homicides (Messner, Deane, & Beaulieu, 2002). Thus although fear of a deadly attack by a stranger dominates the American consciousness, we in fact are much more likely on average to be killed by someone we know than by someone we do not know.



About two-thirds of homicides involve firearms, and half involve a handgun. Geoffery Fairchild – The Robbery – CC BY 2.0.

Third, about two-thirds of homicides involve firearms. To be a bit more precise, just over half involve a handgun, and the remaining firearm-related homicides involve a shotgun, rifle, or another undetermined firearm. Combining these first three aspects, then, the most typical homicide involves nonstrangers who have an argument that escalates and then results in the use of deadly force when one of the antagonists uses a handgun.

Fourth, most homicides (as most violent crime in general) are intraracial, meaning that they occur within the same race; the offender *and* victim are of the same race. For single offender/single victim homicides where the race of both parties is known, about 90 percent of African American victims are killed by African American offenders, and about 83 percent of white victims are killed by white offenders (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011). Although whites fear victimization by African Americans more than by whites, whites in fact are much more likely to be killed by other whites than by African Americans. While African Americans do commit about half of all homicides, most of their victims are also African American.

Fifth, males commit about 90 percent of all homicides and females commit only 10 percent. As we discuss in Section 3.1 “Racial and Ethnic Inequality: A Historical Prelude”, males are much more likely than women to commit most forms of crime, and this is especially true for homicide and other violent crime.

Sixth, the homicide rate is much higher in large cities than in small towns. In 2010, the homicide rate (number of homicides per 100,000 population) in cities with a population at or over 250,000 was 10.0 percent, compared to only 2.5 percent in towns with a population between 10,000 and 24,999 (see Figure 8.2 “Population Size and Homicide Rate, 2010”). Thus the risk for homicide is four times greater in large cities than in small towns. While most people in large cities certainly do *not* die from homicide, where we live still makes a difference in our chances of being victimized by homicide and other crime.

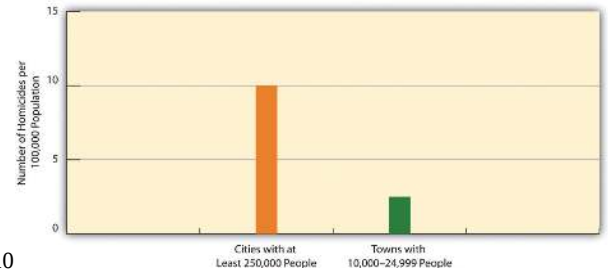


Figure 8.2 Population Size and Homicide Rate, 2010 Source: Data from Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2011). *Crime in the United States, 2010*. Washington, DC: Author.

Finally, the homicide rate rose in the late 1980s and peaked during the early 1990s before declining sharply until the early 2000s and then leveling off and declining a bit further since then. Although debate continues over why the homicide rate declined during the 1990s, many criminologists attribute the decline to a strong economy, an ebbing of gang wars over drug trafficking, and a decline of people in the 15–25 age group that commits a disproportionate amount of crime (Blumstein & Wallman, 2006). Some observers believe rising imprisonment rates also made a difference, and we return to this issue later in this chapter.

Rape and sexual assault were included in Chapter 4 “Gender Inequality”’s discussion of violence against women as a serious manifestation of gender inequality. As that chapter noted, it is estimated that one-third of women on the planet have been raped or sexually assaulted, beaten, or physically abused in some other way (Heise, Ellseberg, & Gottemoeller, 1999). While it is tempting to conclude that such violence is much more common in poor nations than in a wealthy nation like the United States, we saw in

Chapter 4 “Gender Inequality” that violence against women is common in this nation as well. Like homicide, about three-fourths of all rapes and sexual assaults involve individuals who know each other, not strangers.

Property Crime

As noted earlier, the major property crimes are burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson. These crimes are quite common in the United States and other nations and, as Table 8.1 “Number of Crimes: Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), 2010” indicated, millions occur annually in this country. Many Americans have installed burglar alarms and other security measures in their homes and similar devices in their cars and SUVs. While property crime by definition does not involve physical harm, it still makes us concerned, in part because it touches so many of us. Although property crime has in fact declined along with violent crime since the early 1990s, it still is considered a major component of the crime problem, because it is so common and produces losses of billions of dollars annually.

Much property crime can be understood in terms of the roles and social networks of property criminals. In this regard, many scholars distinguish between *amateur theft* and *professional theft*. Most property offenders are amateur offenders: They are young and unskilled in the ways of crime, and the amount they gain from any single theft is relatively small. They also do not plan their crimes and instead commit them when they see an opportunity for quick illegal gain. In contrast, professional property offenders tend to be older and quite skilled in the ways of crime, and the amount they gain from any single theft is relatively large. Not surprisingly, they often plan their crimes well in advance. The so-called *cat burglar*, someone who scales tall buildings to steal jewels, expensive artwork, or large sums of money, is perhaps the prototypical example of the professional property criminals. Many professional thieves learn how to do their crimes from other professional thieves, and in this sense they are mentored by the latter just as students are mentored by professors, and young workers by older workers.

White-Collar Crime

If you were asked to picture a criminal in your mind, what image would you be likely to think of first: a scruffy young male with a scowl or sneer on his face, or a handsome, middle-aged man dressed in a three-piece business suit? No doubt the former image would come to mind first, if only because violent crime and property crime dominate newspaper headlines and television newscasts and because many of us have been victims of violent or property crime. Yet white-collar crime is arguably much more harmful than street crime, both in terms of economic loss and of physical injury, illness, and even death.

What exactly is white-collar crime? The most famous definition comes from Edwin Sutherland (1949, p. 9), a sociologist who coined the term in the 1940s and defined it as “a crime committed by a person of respectability and high social status in the course of his occupation.” Sutherland examined the behavior of the seventy largest US corporations and found that they had violated the law hundreds of times among them. Several had engaged in crimes during either World War I or II; they provided defective weapons and spoiled food to US troops and even sold weapons to Germany and other nations the United States was fighting.

Although white-collar crime as studied today includes auto shop repair fraud and employee theft by cashiers, bookkeepers, and other employees of relatively low status, most research follows Sutherland’s definition in focusing on crime committed by people of “respectability and high social status.” Thus much of the study of white-collar crime today focuses on fraud by physicians, attorneys, and other professionals and on illegal behavior by executives of corporations designed to protect or improve corporate profits (*corporate crime*).

In the study of professional fraud, health-care fraud stands out for its extent and cost (Rosoff, Pontell, & Tillman, 2010). Health-care fraud is thought to amount to more than $100 billion per year, compared to less than $20 billion for all property crime combined. For example, some physicians bill Medicare and private insurance for services that patients do not really need and may never receive. Medical supply companies sometimes furnish substandard equipment. To compensate for the economic loss it incurs, health-care fraud drives up medical expenses and insurance costs. In this sense, it steals from the public even though no one ever breaks into your house or robs you at gunpoint.

Although health-care and other professional fraud are serious, corporate crime dwarfs all other forms of white-collar crime in the economic loss it incurs and in the death, injury, and illness it causes. Corporate financial crime involves such activities as fraud, price fixing, and false advertising. The Enron scandal in 2001 involved an energy corporation whose chief executives exaggerated profits. After their fraud and Enron’s more dire financial state were finally revealed, the company’s stock plummeted and it finally went bankrupt. Its thousands of workers lost their jobs and pensions, and investors in its stock lost billions of dollars. Several other major corporations engaged in (or strongly suspected of doing so) accounting fraud during the late 1990s and early 2000s, but Enron was merely the most notorious example of widespread scandal that marked this period.

While corporate financial crime and corruption have cost the nation untold billions of dollars in this and earlier decades, corporate violence—actions by corporations that kill or maim people or leave them ill—is even more scandalous. The victims of corporate violence include corporate employees, consumers of corporate goods, and the public as a whole. Annual deaths from corporate violence exceed the number of deaths from homicide, and illness and injury from corporate violence affect an untold number of people every year.



The asbestos industry learned in the 1930s that asbestos was a major health hazard, but it kept this discovery a secret for more than three decades. Aaron Suggs – Asbestos – CC BY 2.0.

Employees of corporations suffer from unsafe workplaces in which workers are exposed to hazardous conditions and chemicals because their companies fail to take adequate measures to reduce or eliminate this exposure. Such exposure may result in illness, and exposure over many years can result in death. According to a recent estimate, more than 50,000 people die each year from workplace exposure (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations [AFL-CIO], 2010), a figure about three times greater than the number of annual homicides. About 1,500 coal miners die each year from black lung disease, which results from the breathing of coal dust; many and perhaps most of these deaths would be preventable if coal mining companies took adequate safety measures (G. Harris, 1998). In another example, the asbestos industry learned during the 1930s that exposure to asbestos could cause fatal lung disease and cancer. Despite this knowledge, asbestos companies hid evidence of this hazard for more than three decades: They allowed their workers to continue to work with asbestos and marketed asbestos as a fire retardant that was widely installed in schools and other buildings. More than 200,000 asbestos workers and members of the public either have already died or are expected to die from asbestos exposure; most or all of these deaths could have been prevented if the asbestos industry had acted responsibly when it first discovered it was manufacturing a dangerous product (Lilienfeld, 1991).

Unsafe products also kill or maim consumers. One of the most notorious examples of deaths from an unsafe product involved the Ford Pinto, a car first sold in the early 1970s that was vulnerable to fire and explosion when hit from behind in a minor rear-end collision (Cullen, Maakestad, & Cavender, 2006). Ford knew before the Pinto went on the market that its gas tank was unusually vulnerable in a rear-end collision and determined it would take about $11 per car to fix the problem. It then did a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether it would cost more to fix the problem or instead to settle lawsuits after Pinto drivers and passengers died or were burned and injured in rear-end collisions. This analysis indicated that Ford would save about $87 million if it did *not* fix the problem and instead paid out compensation after Pinto drivers and passengers died or got burned. Because Ford made this decision, about five hundred people eventually died in Pinto rear-end collisions and many others were burned.

The toll of white-collar crime, both financial and violent, is difficult to estimate, but by all accounts it exceeds the economic loss and death and injury from all street crime combined. White-collar crime is thought to involve an annual economic loss of more than $700 billion annually from corporate fraud, professional fraud, employee theft, and tax evasion and an annual toll of at least 100,000 deaths from workplace-related illness or injury, unsafe products, and preventable environmental pollution. These figures compare to an economic loss of less than $20 billion from property crime and a death toll of about 17,000 from homicide (Barkan, 2012). By any measure, the toll of white-collar crime dwarfs the toll of street crime, even though the latter worries us much more than white-collar crime. Despite the harm that white-collar crime causes, the typical corporate criminal receives much more lenient punishment, if any, than the typical street criminal (Rosoff et al., 2010).

Organized Crime

Organized crime refers to criminal activity by groups or organizations whose major purpose for existing is to commit such crime. When we hear the term “organized crime,” we almost automatically think of the so-called Mafia, vividly portrayed in the

Godfather movies and other films, that comprises several highly organized and hierarchical Italian American "families." Although Italian Americans have certainly been involved in organized crime in the United States, so have Irish Americans, Jews, African Americans, and other ethnicities over the years. The emphasis on Italian domination of organized crime overlooks these other involvements and diverts attention from the actual roots of organized crime.

What are these roots? Simply put, organized crime exists and even thrives because it provides goods and/or services that the public demands. Organized crime flourished during the 1920s because it was all too ready and willing to provide an illegal product, alcohol, that the pubic continued to demand even after Prohibition began. Today, organized crime earns its considerable money from products and services such as illegal drugs, prostitution, pornography, loan sharking, and gambling. It also began long ago to branch out into legal activities such as trash hauling and the vending industry.

Government efforts against organized crime since the 1920s have focused on arrest, prosecution, and other law-enforcement strategies. Organized crime has certainly continued despite these efforts. This fact leads some scholars to emphasize the need to reduce public demand for the goods and services that organized crime provides. However, other scholars say that reducing this demand is probably a futile or mostly futile task, and they instead urge consideration of legalizing at least some of the illegal products and services (e.g., drugs and prostitution) that organized crime provides. Doing so, they argue, would weaken the influence of organized crime.

Consensual Crime

Consensual crime (also called *victimless crime*) refers to behaviors in which people engage voluntarily and willingly even though these behaviors violate the law. Illegal drug use, discussed in Chapter 7 "Alcohol and Other Drugs", is a major form of consensual crime; other forms include prostitution, gambling, and pornography. People who use illegal drugs, who hire themselves out as prostitutes or employ the services of a prostitute, who gamble illegally, and who use pornography are all doing so because they want to. These behaviors are not entirely victimless, as illegal drug users, for example, may harm themselves and others, and that is why the term *consensual crime* is often preferred over *victimless crime*. As just discussed, organized crime provides some of the illegal products and services that compose consensual crime, but these products and services certainly come from sources other than organized crime.

This issue aside, the existence of consensual crime raises two related questions that we first encountered in Chapter 7 "Alcohol and Other Drugs". First, to what degree should the government ban behaviors that people willingly commit and that generally do not have unwilling victims? Second, do government attempts to ban such behaviors do more good than harm or more harm than good? Chapter 5 "Alcohol and Other Drugs"'s discussion of these questions focused on illegal drugs, and in particular on the problems caused by laws against certain drugs, but similar problems arise from laws against other types of consensual crime. For example, laws against prostitution enable pimps to control prostitutes and help ensure the transmission of sexual diseases because condoms are not regularly used.

Critics of consensual crime laws say we are now in a new prohibition and that our laws against illegal drugs, prostitution, and certain forms of gambling are causing the same problems now that the ban on alcohol did during the 1920s and, more generally, cause more harm than good. Proponents of these laws respond that the laws are still necessary as an expression of society's moral values and as a means, however imperfect, of reducing involvement in harmful behaviors.

Key Takeaways

- Most homicides are committed for relatively emotional, spontaneous reasons and between people who knew each other beforehand.
- White-collar crime involves more death, injury, and economic loss than street crime, but the punishment of white-collar crime is relatively weak.
- Consensual crime raises two related issues: (a) To what extent should the government prohibit people from engaging in behavior in which there are no unwilling victims, and (b) do laws against consensual crime do more good than harm or more harm than good?

For Your Review

1. If homicide is a relatively emotional, spontaneous crime, what does that imply for efforts to use harsh legal punishment, including the death penalty, to deter people from committing homicide?
2. Do you think consensual crimes should be made legal? Why or why not?

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6.3: Who Commits Crime?

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

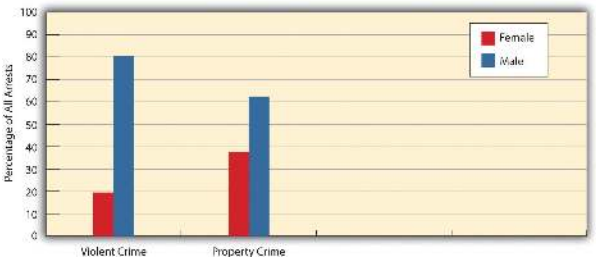
1. Explain why males commit more crime than females.
2. Discuss whether social class differences exist in crime rates.
3. Discuss whether racial/ethnic differences exist in crime rates.

While people from all walks of life commit street crime, some people are still more likely than others to break the law because of their social backgrounds. These social backgrounds include their gender, age, social class, urban/rural residence, and race and ethnicity. Despite their inaccuracies, the three data sources discussed in the first section of this chapter all provide a similar picture of what kinds of people, in terms of their social backgrounds, are more or less likely to commit street crime. We briefly discuss each background in turn.

Gender

Simply put, males commit much more crime than females. In UCR data, men comprise about 81 percent of all arrests for violent crime and about 63 percent of all arrests for property crime. (See Figure 8.3 “Gender and Arrest (Percentage of All Arrests)”.) In the NCVS, victims report that males commit most of the violent crimes they experienced, and self-report studies find that males far outpace females in the commission of serious street offenses. When it comes to breaking the law, crime is a man’s world.

Figure 8.3 Gender and Arrest (Percentage of All Arrests)



Source: Data from Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2011). *Crime in the United States, 2010*. Washington, DC: Author.

The key question is why such a large gender difference exists. Some scholars attribute this difference to biological differences between the sexes, but most criminologists attribute it to sociological factors. One of these is gender role socialization: Despite greater recognition of gender roles, we continue to raise our boys to be assertive and aggressive, while we raise our girls to be gentle and nurturing (Lindsey, 2011). Such gender socialization has many effects, and one of these is a large gender difference in criminal behavior. A second factor is opportunity. Studies find that parents watch their daughters more closely than they watch their sons, who are allowed to stay out later at night and thus have more opportunity to break the law.



Males have higher crime rates than females. An important reason for this gender difference is that boys are socialized to be assertive and aggressive, while girls are socialized to be gentle and nurturing. Philippe Put – Fight – CC BY 2.0.

Age

Age also makes a difference in criminal behavior: Offending rates are highest in the late teens and early twenties and decline thereafter. Accordingly, people in the 15–24 age range account for about 40 percent of all arrests even though they comprise only about 14 percent of the population.

Several factors again seem to account for this pattern (Shoemaker, 2010). First, peer relationships matter more during this time of one's life than later, and peers are also more likely during this period than later to be offenders themselves. For both reasons, our peer relationships during our teens and early twenties are more likely than those in our later years to draw us into crime. Second, adolescents and young adults are more likely than older adults to lack full-time jobs; for this reason, they are more likely to need money and thus to commit offenses to obtain money and other possessions. Third, as we age out of our early twenties, our ties to conventional society increase: Many people marry, have children, and begin full-time employment, though not necessarily in that order. These events and bonds increase our stakes in conformity, to use some social science jargon, and thus reduce our desire to break the law (Laub, Sampson, & Sweeten, 2006).

Social Class

Findings on social class differences in crime are less clear than they are for gender or age differences. Arrests statistics and much research indicate that poor people are much more likely than wealthier people to commit street crime. However, some scholars attribute the greater arrests of poor people to social class bias against them. Despite this possibility, most criminologists would probably agree that social class differences in criminal offending are "unmistakable" (Harris & Shaw, 2000, p. 138). Reflecting this conclusion, one sociologist has even noted, with tongue only partly in cheek, that social scientists know they should not "stroll the streets at night in certain parts of town or even to park there" and that areas of cities that frighten them are "not upper-income neighborhoods" (Stark, 1987, p. 894). Thus social class does seem to be associated with street crime, with poor individuals doing more than their fair share.

Explanations of this relationship center on the effects of poverty, which, as the next section will discuss further, is said to produce anger, frustration, and economic need and to be associated with a need for respect and with poor parenting skills and other problems that make children more likely to commit antisocial behavior when they reach adolescence and beyond. These effects combine to lead poor people to be more likely than wealthier people to commit street crime, even if it is true that most poor people do not commit street crime at all.

Although the poor are more likely than the wealthy to commit street crime, it is also true that the wealthy are much more likely than the poor to commit white-collar crime, which, as argued earlier, can be much more harmful than street crime. If we consider both street crime and white-collar crime, then there does not appear to be a social class-crime relationship, since the poor have higher rates of the former and the wealthy have higher rates of the latter.

Urban versus Rural Residence

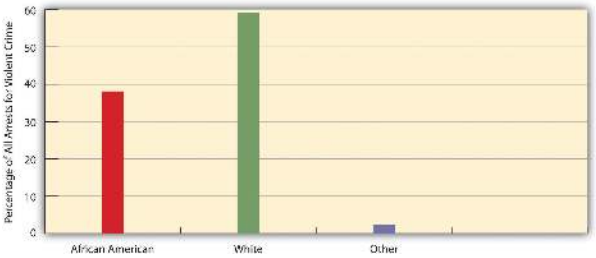
Where we live also makes a difference for our likelihood of committing crime. We saw earlier that big cities have a much higher homicide rate than small towns. This trend exists for violent crime and property crime more generally. Urban areas have high crime rates in part because they are poor, but poverty by itself does not completely explain the urban-rural difference in crime, since many rural areas are poor as well. A key factor that explains the higher crime rates of urban areas is their greater population density (Stark 1987). When many people live close together, they come into contact with one another more often. This fact means that teenagers and young adults have more peers to influence them to commit crime, and it also means that potential criminals have more targets (people and homes) for their criminal activity. Urban areas also have many bars, convenience stores, and other businesses that can become targets for potential criminals, and bars, taverns, and other settings for drinking can obviously become settings where tempers flare and violence ensues.

Race and Ethnicity

In discussing who commits crime, any discussion of race and ethnicity is bound to arouse controversy because of the possibility of racial and ethnic stereotyping. But if we can say that men and younger people have relatively high crime rates without necessarily sounding biased against individuals who are male or younger, then it should be possible to acknowledge that certain racial and ethnic groups have higher crime rates without sounding biased against them.

Keeping this in mind, race and ethnicity do seem to be related to criminal offending. In particular, much research finds that African Americans and Latinos have higher rates of street crime than non-Latino whites. For example, although African Americans comprise about 13 percent of the US population, they account for about 39 percent of all arrests for violent crime (see Figure 8.4 “Race and Arrest for Violent Crime (Percentage of All Violent Crime Arrests)”).

Figure 8.4 Race and Arrest for Violent Crime (Percentage of All Violent Crime Arrests)



Source: Data from Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2011). *Crime in the United States, 2010*. Washington, DC: Author.

Latinos also have higher crime rates than non-Latino whites, but lower rates than those for African Americans. Although racial and ethnic bias by the criminal justice system may account for some of these racial/ethnic differences in offending, most criminologists agree that such differences do in fact exist for serious street crimes (Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2012).

Why do these differences exist? A racist explanation would attribute them to biological inferiority of the groups, African Americans and Latinos, with the relatively high rates of offending. Such explanations were popular several generations ago but fortunately lost favor as time passed and attitudes changed. Today, scholars attribute racial/ethnic differences in offending to several sociological factors (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). First, African Americans and Latinos are much poorer than whites on the average, and poverty contributes to higher crime rates. Second, they are also more likely to live in urban areas, which, as we have seen, also contribute to higher crime rates. Third, the racial and ethnic discrimination they experience leads to anger and frustration that in turn can promote criminal behavior. Although there is less research on Native Americans’ criminality, they, too, appear to have higher crime rates than whites because of their much greater poverty and experience of racial discrimination (McCarthy & Hagan, 2003).

In appreciating racial/ethnic differences in street crime rates, it is important to keep in mind that whites commit most white-collar crime, and especially corporate crime, as it is white people who lead and manage our many corporations. Just as social class affects the type of crime that people do, so do race and ethnicity. Wealthy, white people commit much crime, but it is white-collar crime they tend to commit, not street crime.

Key Takeaways

- Males commit more street crime than females, in part because of gender role socialization that helps make males more assertive and aggressive.

- Young people commit a disproportionate amount of street crime, in part because of the influence of their peers and their lack of stakes in conformity.
- The disproportionate involvement of African Americans and Latinos in street crime arises largely from their poverty and urban residence.

For Your Review

1. If we say that males commit more crime than females, does that imply that we are prejudiced against males? Why or why not?
2. Write a brief essay that outlines social class and racial/ethnic differences in street crime and explains the reasons for these differences.

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6.4: Explaining Crime

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Understand social structure theories of crime.
2. Explain the social bonding theory of crime.
3. Describe the general assumptions of conflict theories of crime.

If we want to be able to reduce crime, we must first understand why it occurs. Sociologists generally discount explanations rooted in the individual biology or psychology of criminal offenders. While a few offenders may suffer from biological defects or psychological problems that lead them to commit crime, most do not. Further, biological and psychological explanations cannot adequately explain the social patterning of crime discussed earlier: why higher crime rates are associated with certain locations and social backgrounds. For example, if California has a higher crime rate than Maine, and the United States has a higher crime rate than Canada, it would sound silly to say that Californians and Americans have more biological and psychological problems than Mainers and Canadians, respectively. Biological and psychological explanations also cannot easily explain why crime rates rise and fall, nor do they lend themselves to practical solutions for reducing crime.



California has a higher crime rate than many other states, but it is difficult to argue that Californians have more biological or psychological problems than the residents of other states. Ken Lund – Welcome to California, Nevada-California Border, U.S. 95 – CC BY-SA 2.0.

In contrast, sociological explanations do help understand the social patterning of crime and changes in crime rates, and they also lend themselves to possible solutions for reducing crime. A brief discussion of these explanations follows, and a summary appears in Table 8.2 “Sociological Explanations of Crime”.

Table 8.2 Sociological Explanations of Crime

Major perspective	Related explanation	Summary of explanation
Functional (social structure theories)	Social disorganization	Certain social characteristics of urban neighborhoods contribute to high crime rates. These characteristics include poverty, dilapidation, population density, and population turnover.
	Anomie	According to Robert Merton, crime by the poor results from a gap between the cultural emphasis on economic success and the inability to achieve such success through the legitimate means of working.

Major perspective	Related explanation	Summary of explanation
Interactionist (social process theories)	Differential association	Edwin H. Sutherland argued that criminal behavior is learned by interacting with close friends who teach us how to commit various crimes and also the values, motives, and rationalizations we need to adopt in order to justify breaking the law.
	Social bonding	Travis Hirschi wrote that delinquency results from weak bonds to conventional social institutions, such as families and schools.
	Labeling	Deviance and crime result from being officially labeled; arrest and imprisonment increase the likelihood of reoffending.
Conflict (conflict theories)	Group conflict	Criminal law is shaped by the conflict among the various social groups in society that exist because of differences in race and ethnicity, social class, religion, and other factors.
	Radical	The wealthy try to use the law and criminal justice system to reinforce their power and to keep the poor and people of color at the bottom of society.
	Feminist	Gender plays an important role in the following areas: (1) the reasons girls and women commit crime; (2) the reasons female crime is lower than male crime; (3) the victimization of girls and women by rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence; and (4) the experience of women professionals and offenders in the criminal justice system.

The Functional Perspective: Social Structure Theories

Social structure theories all stress that crime results from the breakdown of society's norms and social organization and in this sense fall under the functional perspective outlined in Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems". They trace the roots of crime to problems in the society itself rather than to biological or psychological problems inside individuals. By doing so, they suggest the need to address society's social structure in order to reduce crime. Several social structure theories exist.

Social Disorganization Theory

A popular explanation is social disorganization theory. This approach originated primarily in the work of Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay (1942), two social scientists at the University of Chicago who studied that city's delinquency rates during the first three decades of the twentieth century. During this time, the ethnic composition of Chicago changed considerably, as the city's inner zones were first occupied by English, German, and Irish immigrants, and then by Eastern European immigrants, and then by African Americans who moved there from southern states. Shaw and McKay found that the inner zones of Chicago consistently had the highest delinquency rates regardless of which ethnic group lived there, and they also found that the ethnic groups' delinquency rates declined as they moved to outer areas of Chicago. To explain these related patterns, Shaw and McKay reasoned that the inner zones of Chicago suffered from *social disorganization*: A weakening of social institutions such as the family, school, and religion that in turn weakens the strength of social bonds and norms and the effectiveness of socialization. Research today

confirms that crime rates are highest in neighborhoods with several kinds of structural problems, including high rates of residential mobility, population density, poverty, and single-parent families (Mazerolle, Wickes, & McBroom, 2010).

Anomie Theory

Another popular explanation is anomie theory, first formulated by Robert K. Merton (1938) in a classic article. Writing just after the Great Depression, Merton focused on the effects of poverty in a nation like the United States that places so much emphasis on economic success. With this strong cultural value, wrote Merton, the poor who do not achieve the American dream feel especially frustrated. They have several ways or adaptations of responding to their situation (see Table 8.3 “Anomie Theory”).

Table 8.3 Anomie Theory

	Goal of economic success	
	Accept	*Reject*
Value of working		
Accept	Conformity	Ritualism
Reject	Innovation	Retreatism

First, said Merton, they may continue to accept the goal of economic success and also the value of working at a job to achieve such success; Merton labeled this adaptation *conformity*. Second, they may continue to favor economic success but reject the value of working and instead use new, illegitimate means, for example theft, of gaining money and possessions; Merton labeled this adaptation *innovation*. Third, they may abandon hope of economic success but continue to work anyway because work has become a habit. Merton labeled this adaptation *ritualism*. Finally, they may reject both the goal of economic success and the means of working to achieve such success and withdraw from society either by turning to drugs or by becoming hobos; Merton labeled this adaptation *retreatism*. He also listed a fifth adaptation, which he called *rebellion*, to characterize a response in which people reject economic success and working and work to bring about a new society with new values and a new economic system.

Merton’s theory was very influential for many years but eventually lost popularity, partly because many crimes, such as assault and rape, are not committed for the economic motive that his theory assumed, and partly because many people use drugs and alcohol without dropping out of society, as his retreatism category assumed. In recent years, however, scholars have rediscovered and adapted his theory, and it has regained favor as new attention is being paid to the frustration resulting from poverty and other strains in one’s life that in turn may produce criminal behavior (Miller, Schreck, & Tewksbury, 2011).

? Exercise 6.4.1

According to Merton, when we accept the value of working but, reject the goal of economic success it is called:

Answer

Ritualilsm

The Interactionist Perspective: Social Process Theories

Social process theories all stress that crime results from the social interaction of individuals with other people, particularly their friends and family, and thus fall under the interactionist perspective outlined in Chapter 1 “Understanding Social Problems”. They trace the roots of crime to the influence that our friends and family have on us and to the meanings and perceptions we derive from their views and expectations. By doing so, they indicate the need to address the peer and family context as a promising way to reduce crime.



Social process theories stress that crime results from social interaction. In particular, our friends influence our likelihood of committing crime or not committing crime. Sam.Weiss. – what happens in the guys bathroom, stays in the guys bathroom – CC BY-ND 2.0.

Differential Association Theory

One of the most famous criminological theories is differential association theory, first formulated at about the same time as Merton's anomie theory by Edwin H. Sutherland and published in its final form in an edition of a criminology text he wrote (Sutherland, 1947). Sutherland rejected the idea, fashionable at the time, that crime had strong biological roots and instead said it grew out of interaction with others. Specifically, he wrote that adolescents and other individuals learn that it is acceptable to commit crime and also how to commit crime from their interaction with their close friends. Adolescents become delinquent if they acquire more and stronger attitudes in favor of breaking the law than attitudes opposed to breaking the law. As Sutherland put it, "A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to the violation of law over definitions unfavorable to the violation of law." Crime and delinquency, then, result from a very normal social process, social interaction. Adolescents are more or less at risk for delinquency partly depending on who their friends are and what their friends do or don't do.

Many scholars today consider peer influences to be among the most important contributors to delinquency and other misbehavior (Akers & Sellers, 2009). One problem with differential association theory is that it does not explain behavior, like rape, that is usually committed by a lone offender and that is generally the result of attitudes learned from one's close friends.

Social Bonding Theory

In a 1969 book, *Causes of Delinquency*, Travis Hirschi (1969) asked not what prompts people to commit crime, but rather what *keeps them from* committing crime. This question was prompted by his view that human nature is basically selfish and that it is society's task to tame this selfishness. He wrote that an adolescent's bonds to society, and specifically the bonds to family and school, help keep the adolescent from breaking the law.

Hirschi identified several types of social bonds, but generally thought that the closer adolescents feel to their family and teachers, the more they value their parents' beliefs and school values, and the more time they spend with their families and on school activities, the less likely they are to be delinquent. Turning that around, they are more likely to be delinquent if they feel more distant from their parents and teachers, if they place less value on their family's and school's values, and if they spend less time with these two very important social institutions in their lives.

Hirschi's social bonding theory attracted immediate attention and is one of the most popular and influential theories in criminology today. It highlighted the importance of families and schools for delinquency and stimulated much research on their influence. Much of this research has focused on the relationship between parents and children. When this relationship is warm and harmonious and when children respect their parents' values and parents treat their children firmly but fairly, children are less likely to commit antisocial behavior during childhood and delinquency during adolescence. Schools also matter: Students who do well in school and are very involved in extracurricular activities are less likely than other students to engage in delinquency (Bohm & Vogel, 2011).

Children and Our Future

Saving Children from a Life of Crime

Millions of children around the nation live in circumstances that put them at risk for a childhood, adolescence, and adulthood filled with antisocial behavior, delinquency, and crime, respectively. Although most of these children in fact will not suffer this fate, many of their peers will experience these outcomes. These circumstances thus must be addressed to save these children from a life

of crime. As social scientists Brandon C. Welsh and David P. Farrington observe, “Convincing research evidence exists to support a policy of saving children from a life of crime by intervening early in childhood to tackle key risk factors.”

What are these risk factors? They include being born to a teenaged, single mother; living in poverty or near poverty; attending poor, dilapidated schools; and living in high-crime urban areas. As should be evident, these risk factors are all related, as most children born to teenaged, single mothers live in poverty or near poverty, and many such children live in high-crime urban areas.

What can be done to help save such children from a life of crime? Ideally, our nation would lift them and their families entirely out of poverty with employment and social payment policies. Although this sort of national policy will not occur in the foreseeable future, a growing amount of rigorous social science evaluation evidence points to several effective programs and policies that can still help at-risk children. These include (1) at the individual level, certain types of preschool programs and social skills training programs; (2) at the family level, home visiting by trained professionals and parenting training programs; and (3) at the school and community levels, certain types of after-school and community-mentoring programs in which local adults spend time with children at risk for delinquency and other problems.

As Welsh and Farrington note, “Early prevention is by no means a panacea. But it does represent an integral part of any plan to reduce the nation’s crime rate.” They add that several other Western democracies have national agencies devoted to improving behavioral and other outcomes among those nations’ children, and they call for the United States to establish a similar national agency, the National Council on Early Prevention, as part of a nationwide strategy to prevent delinquency and other antisocial behaviors among American youth.

Sources: Piquero, Farrington, Welsh, Tremblay, & Jennings, 2009; Welsh & Farrington, 2007

Another social institution, religion, has also been the subject of research. An increasing number of studies are finding that religious involvement seemingly helps keep adolescents from using alcohol and other drugs (see Chapter 5 “Alcohol and Other Drugs”), from engaging in frequent sexual activity, and from engaging in delinquency generally (Desmond, Soper, & Purpura, 2009). Fewer studies of religiosity and criminality during adulthood exist, but one investigation found an association between greater religiosity and fewer sexual partners among never-married adults (Barkan, 2006).

Labeling Theory

Our criminal justice system is based on the idea that the prospect of quick arrest and harsh punishment should deter criminal behavior. Labeling theory has the opposite idea, as it assumes that labeling someone as a criminal or deviant, which arrest and imprisonment certainly do, makes the person more likely to continue to offend. This result occurs, argues the theory, because the labeling process gives someone a negative self-image, reduces the potential for employment, and makes it difficult to have friendships with law-abiding individuals.



When this man is released from prison, he will probably face difficulties in finding a job and starting friendships with law-abiding people. These difficulties will make him more likely to commit new crimes. Derek Key – Jailbirds – CC BY 2.0.

Suppose, for example, that you were just released from prison after serving a five-year term for armed robbery. When you apply for a job and list your prison term on the application, how likely are you to get hired? If you are at a bar and meet someone who interests you and then tell the person where you were for the previous five years, what are the chances that the conversation will continue? Faced with bleak job prospects and a dearth of people who want to spend time with you, what are your alternatives? Might you not succumb to the temptation to hang out with other offenders and even to commit new crime yourself?

Although research findings are not unanimous, several studies do find that arrest and imprisonment increase future offending, as labeling theory assumes (Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson, 2009). To the extent this undesired consequence occurs, efforts to stem juvenile and adult crime through harsher punishment may sometimes have the opposite result from their intention.

? Exercise 6.4.2

According to the _____, delinquency results from weak bonds to conventional social institutions, such as families and schools.

Answer

Social bonding theory

The Conflict Perspective

Several related theories fall under the conflict perspective outlined in Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems". Although they all have something to say about why people commit crime, their major focus is on the use and misuse of the criminal law and criminal justice system to deal with crime. Three branches of the conflict perspective exist in the study of crime and criminal justice.

The first branch is called group conflict theory, which assumes that criminal law is shaped by the conflict among the various social groups in society that exist because of differences in race and ethnicity, social class, religion, and other factors. Given that these groups compete for power and influence, the groups with more power and influence try to pass laws that ban behaviors in which subordinate groups tend to engage, and they try to use the criminal justice system to suppress subordinate group members. A widely cited historical example of this view is Prohibition, which was the result of years of effort by temperance advocates, most of them from white, Anglo-Saxon, rural, and Protestant backgrounds, to ban the manufacture, sale, and use of alcohol. Although these advocates thought alcohol use was a sin and incurred great social costs, their hostility toward alcohol was also motivated by their hostility toward the types of people back then who tended to use alcohol: poor, urban, Catholic immigrants. Temperance advocates' use of legal means to ban alcohol was, in effect, a "symbolic crusade" against people toward whom these advocates held prejudicial attitudes (Gusfield, 1963).

The second branch of the conflict perspective is called radical theory. Radical theory makes the same general assumptions as group conflict theory about the use of criminal law and criminal justice, but with one key difference: It highlights the importance of (economic) social class more than the importance of religion, ethnicity, and other social group characteristics. In this way, radical theory evokes the basic views of Karl Marx on the exploitation and oppression of the poor and working class by the ruling class (Lynch & Michalowski, 2006).

An early but still influential radical explanation of crime was presented by Dutch criminologist Willem Bonger (1916). Bonger blamed the high US crime rate on its economic system, capitalism. As an economic system, he said, capitalism emphasizes the pursuit of profit. Yet, if someone gains profit, someone else is losing it. This emphasis on self-gain, he said, creates an egoistic culture in which people look out for themselves and are ready and even willing to act in a way that disadvantages other people. Amid such a culture, he said, crime is an inevitable outcome. Bonger thought crime would be lower in socialist societies because they place more emphasis on the welfare of one's group than on individual success.

Feminist approaches comprise the third branch of the conflict perspective on the study of crime and criminal justice. Several such approaches exist, but they generally focus on at least one of four areas: (1) the reasons girls and women commit crime; (2) the reasons female crime is lower than male crime; (3) the victimization of girls and women by rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence; and (4) the experience of women professionals and offenders in the criminal justice system.

Regarding the first area, the research generally finds that girls and women commit crime for the same reasons that boys and men commit crime: poverty, parental upbringing, and so forth. But it also finds that both women and men "do gender" when they commit crime. That is, they commit crime according to gender roles, at least to some extent. Thus one study found that women robbers tend to rob other women and not to use a gun when they do so (J. Miller & Brunson, 2000).

In addressing the second area, on why female crime is less common than male crime, scholars often cite two reasons discussed earlier: gender role socialization and gender-based differences in parental supervision. One additional reason derives from social bonding theory: Girls feel closer to their parents than boys do, and thus are less delinquent (Lanctôt & Blanc, 2002).



One important area of feminist-inspired work on crime and criminal justice involves studies of women police officers. Joery Bruijntjes – Polizia Locale – CC BY-NC 2.0.

We have already commented on the victimization of women from rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence, but the study of this topic began with work by feminist criminologists during the 1970s. Since that time, innumerable works have addressed this type of victimization, which is also thought to contribute to girls' delinquency and, more generally, female drug and alcohol abuse (Chesney-Lind & Jones, 2010).

The final area for feminist work addresses women professionals and offenders in the criminal justice system. This body of research certainly goes beyond the scope of this book, but it documents the many blatant and subtle forms of discrimination that women face as police, attorneys, judges, prison guards, and other professionals (Muraskin, 2012). A primary task of research on women offenders is to determine how they fare in the criminal justice system compared to male offenders. Studies tend to find that females receive somewhat more lenient treatment than males for serious offenses and somewhat harsher treatment for minor offenses, although some studies conclude that gender does not make too much of a difference one way or the other (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004).

Key Takeaways

- Social structure theories stress that crime results from economic and other problems in how society is structured and from poverty and other problems in neighborhoods.
- Interactionist theories stress that crime results from our interaction with family members, peers, and other people, and from labeling by the criminal justice system.
- Conflict theories stress that social groups with power and influence try to use the law and criminal justice system to maintain their power and to keep other groups at the bottom of society.

For Your Review

1. What are any two criminogenic (crime-causing) social or physical characteristics of urban neighborhoods?
2. According to labeling theory, why are arrest and imprisonment sometimes counterproductive?

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6.5: The Criminal Justice System

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe what is meant by the "working personality" of the police.
2. Discuss the quality of legal representation of criminal defendants.
3. Explain whether incarceration reduces crime in an effective and cost-efficient manner.

The criminal justice system in a democracy like the United States faces two major tasks: (1) keeping the public safe by apprehending criminals and, ideally, reducing crime; and (2) doing so while protecting individual freedom from the abuse of power by law enforcement agents and other government officials. Having a criminal justice system that protects individual rights and liberties is a key feature that distinguishes a democracy from a dictatorship.

How well does the US criminal justice system work in both respects? How well does it control and reduce crime, and how well does it observe individual rights and not treat people differently based on their social class, race and ethnicity, gender, and other social characteristics? What are other problems in our criminal justice system? Once again, whole books have been written about these topics, and we have space here to discuss only some of this rich literature.

Police

The police are our first line of defense against crime and criminals and for that reason are often called "the thin blue line." Police officers realize that their lives may be in danger at any time, and they also often interact with suspects and other citizens whose hostility toward the police is quite evident. For these reasons, officers typically develop a *working personality* that, in response to the danger and hostility police face, tends to be authoritarian and suspicious (Skolnick, 1994). Indeed, it is not too far-fetched to say that police-citizen relations are characterized by mutual hostility and suspicion (Dempsey & Forst, 2012).

Two aspects of police behavior are especially relevant for a textbook on social problems. The first is police *corruption*. No one knows for sure how much police corruption occurs, but low-level corruption (e.g., accepting small bribes and stealing things from stores while on patrol) is thought to be fairly common, while high-level corruption (e.g., accepting large bribes and confiscating and then selling illegal drugs) is thought to be far from rare. In one study involving trained researchers who rode around in police cars, more than one-fifth of the officers being observed committed some corruption (Reiss, 1980). Several notorious police scandals have called attention to rampant corruption amid some police forces. One scandal more than three decades ago involved New York City officer Frank Serpico, whose story was later documented in a best-selling book (Maas, 1973) and in a tension-filled film starring Al Pacino. After Serpico reported high-level corruption to his superiors, other officers plotted to have him murdered and almost succeeded. A more recent scandal involved the so-called Rampart Division in Los Angeles and involved dozens of officers who beat and shot suspects, stole drugs and money, and lied at the trials of the people they arrested (Glover & Lait, 2000).

The other relevant behavior is *police brutality* or, to use a less provocative term, the *use of undue* (also called *unjustified* or *excessive*) force by police. Police, of course, are permitted and even expected to use physical force when necessary to subdue suspects. Given the context of police work noted earlier (feelings of danger and suspicion) and the strong emotions at work in any encounter between police and suspects, it is inevitable that some police will go beyond the bounds of appropriate force and commit brutality. An important question is how much police brutality occurs. In a recent national survey, about 1 percent of US residents who had had an encounter with the police in 2008 believed that excessive force was used against them (Eith & Durose, 2011). This is a low figure in percentage terms, but still translates to 417,000 people who may have been victims of police brutality in one year.

How well do the police prevent crime? To answer this question, let us be clear what it is asking. The relevant question is not whether having the police we do have keeps us safer than having no police at all. Rather, the relevant question is whether hiring more police or making some specific change in police practice would lower the crime rate. The evidence on this issue is complex, but certain conclusions are in order.



In terms of crime reduction, the ways in which police are deployed matter more than the actual number of police. Joery Bruijntjes – Polizia Locale – CC BY-NC 2.0.

First, simply adding more officers to a city's existing police force will probably not reduce crime, or will reduce it only to a very small degree and at great expense (Walker, 2011). Several reasons may explain why additional police produce small or no reductions in crime. Much violence takes place indoors or in other locations far from police purview, and practical increases in police numbers still would not yield numbers high enough to guarantee a police presence in every public location where crime might happen. Because criminals typically think they can commit a crime with impunity if no police are around, the hiring of additional police is not likely to deter them.

Additional police may not matter, but how police are deployed *does* matter. In this regard, a second conclusion from the policing and crime literature is that *directed patrol* involving the consistent deployment of large numbers of police in high-crime areas ("hot spots") can reduce crime significantly (Mastrofski, Weisburd, & Braga, 2010). *Crackdowns*—in which the police flood a high crime and drug neighborhood, make a lot of arrests, and then leave—have at most a short-term effect, with crime and drug use eventually returning to their previous levels or simply becoming displaced to other neighborhoods.

Criminal Courts

In the US legal system, suspects and defendants enjoy certain rights and protections guaranteed by the Constitution and Bill of Rights and provided in various Supreme Court rulings since these documents were written some 220 years ago. Although these rights and protections do exist and again help distinguish our democratic government from authoritarian regimes, in reality the criminal courts often fail to achieve the high standards by which they should be judged. *Justice Denied* (Downie, 1972) and *Injustice for All* (Strick, 1978) were the titles of two popular critiques of the courts written about four decades ago, and these titles continue to apply to the criminal courts today.

A basic problem is the lack of adequate counsel for the poor. Wealthy defendants can afford the best attorneys and get what they pay for: excellent legal defense. An oft-cited example here is O. J. Simpson, the former football star and television and film celebrity who was arrested and tried during the mid-1990s for allegedly killing his ex-wife and one of her friends (Barkan, 1996). Simpson hired a "dream team" of nationally famous attorneys and other experts, including private investigators, to defend him at an eventual cost of some $10 million. A jury acquitted him, but a poor defendant in similar circumstances almost undoubtedly would have been found guilty and perhaps received a death sentence.

Almost all criminal defendants are poor or near poor. Although they enjoy the right to free legal counsel, in practice they receive ineffective counsel or virtually no counsel at all. The poor are defended by public defenders or by court-appointed private counsel, and either type of attorney simply has far too many cases in any time period to handle adequately. Many poor defendants see their attorneys for the first time just moments before a hearing before the judge. Because of their heavy caseloads, the defense attorneys do not have the time to consider the complexities of any one case, and most defendants end up pleading guilty.

A 2006 report by a New York state judicial commission reflected these problems (Hakim, 2006, p. B1). The report concluded that "local governments were falling well short of constitutional requirements in providing legal representation to the poor," according to a news story. Some New York attorneys, the report found, had an average yearly caseload of 1,000 misdemeanors and 175 felonies. The report also found that many poor defendants in 1,300 towns and villages throughout the state received no legal representation at all. The judge who headed the commission called the situation "a serious crisis."

Another problem is plea bargaining, in which a defendant agrees to plead guilty, usually in return for a reduced sentence. Under our system of justice, criminal defendants are entitled to a trial by jury if they want one. In reality, however, most defendants plead guilty, and criminal trials are very rare: Fewer than 3 percent of felony cases go to trial. Prosecutors favor plea bargains because

they help ensure convictions while saving the time and expense of jury trials, while defendants favor plea bargains because they help ensure a lower sentence than they might receive if they exercised their right to have a jury trial and then were found guilty. However, this practice in effect means that defendants are punished if they do exercise their right to have a trial. Critics of this aspect say that defendants are being coerced into pleading guilty even when they have a good chance of winning a not guilty verdict if their case went to trial (Oppel, 2011).

The Problem of Prisons

The United States now houses more than 1.5 million people in state and federal prisons and more than 750,000 in local jails. This total of about 2.3 million people behind bars is about double the 1990 number and yields an incarceration rate that is by far the highest rate of any Western democracy. This high rate is troubling, and so is the racial composition of American prisoners. More than 60 percent of all state and federal prisoners are African American or Latino, even though these two groups comprise only about 30 percent of the national population. As Chapter 5 "Alcohol and Other Drugs" noted, African Americans and Latinos have been arrested and imprisoned for drug offenses far out of proportion to their actual use of illegal drugs. This racial/ethnic disparity has contributed to what law professor Michelle Alexander (2010) terms the "new Jim Crow" of mass incarceration. Reflecting her concern, about one of every three young African American males are under correctional supervision (in jail or prison or on probation or parole).

The corrections system costs the nation more than $75 billion annually. What does the expenditure of this huge sum accomplish? It would be reassuring to know that the high US incarceration rate keeps the nation safe and even helps reduce the crime rate, and it is certainly true that the crime rate would be much higher if we had no prisons at all. However, many criminologists think the surge in imprisonment during the last few decades has not helped reduce the crime rate at all or at least in a cost-efficient manner (Durlauf & Nagin, 2011). Greater crime declines would be produced, many criminologists say, if equivalent funds were instead spent on crime prevention programs instead of on incarceration (Welsh & Farrington, 2007), a point returned to in Section 8.6 "Reducing Crime".

Criminologists also worry that prison may be a breeding ground for crime because rehabilitation programs such as vocational training and drug and alcohol counseling are lacking and because prison conditions are substandard. They note that more than 700,000 inmates are released from prison every year and come back into their communities ill equipped to resume a normal life. There they face a lack of job opportunities (how many employers want to hire an ex-con?) and a lack of friendships with law-abiding individuals, as our earlier discussion of labeling theory indicated. Partly for these reasons, imprisonment ironically may increase the likelihood of future offending (Durlauf & Nagin, 2011).

Living conditions behind bars merit further discussion. A common belief of Americans is that many prisons and jails are like country clubs, with exercise rooms and expensive video and audio equipment abounding. However, this belief is a myth. Although some minimum-security federal prisons may have clean, adequate facilities, state prisons and local jails are typically squalid places. As one critique summarized the situation, "Behind the walls, prisoners are likely to find cramped living conditions, poor ventilation, poor plumbing, substandard heating and cooling, unsanitary conditions, limited private possessions, restricted visitation rights, constant noise, and a complete lack of privacy" (Kappeler & Potter, 2005, p. 293).

Some Americans probably feel that criminals deserve to live amid overcrowding and squalid living conditions, while many Americans are probably at least not very bothered by this situation. But this situation increases the odds that inmates will leave prison and jail as *more* of a threat to public safety than when they were first incarcerated. Treating inmates humanely would be an important step toward successful reentry into mainstream society.

People Making a Difference

Making a Difference in the Lives of Ex-Cons

The text notes that more than 600,000 inmates are released from prison every year. Many of them are burdened with drug, alcohol, and other problems and face bleak prospects for employment, friendships, and stable lives, in general. Since 1967, The Fortune Society has been making a difference in the lives of ex-convicts in and near New York City.

The Fortune Society's website (http://www.fortunesociety.org) describes the group's mission: "The Fortune Society is a nonprofit social service and advocacy, founded in 1967, whose mission is to support successful reentry from prison and promote alternatives to incarceration, thus strengthening the fabric of our communities." About 70 percent of its more than 190 employees are ex-prisoners and/or have histories of substance abuse or homelessness. It is fair to say that The Fortune Society was working on prisoner reentry long before scholars discovered the problem in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The group's president, JoAnne Page, described its halfway house where inmates stay for up to two months after their release from prisons: "This is what we do. We bring people home safely. There's a point when the crime happened. The sentence was served, and the rehabilitation must begin. We look at a human being as much more than the worst they ever did." Recalling that many of her relatives died in the Holocaust, Page added, "What my family experience did was to make me want to be somebody who fights institutions that damage people and who makes the world a little safer. Prisons are savage institutions."

In addition to its halfway house, the Fortune Society provides many other services for inmates, ex-inmates, and offenders who are put on probation in lieu of incarceration. It regularly offers drug and alcohol counseling, family services, adult education and career development programs, and classes in anger management, parenting skills, and health care. One of its most novel programs is Miss Betty's Practical Cooking and Nutrition Class, an eight-week course for ex-inmates who are young fathers. While a first reaction might be to scoff at such a class, a Fortune counselor pointed to its benefits after conceding her own immediate reaction. "When I found out about the cooking classes, I thought, 'So they're going to learn to cook, so what?' What's that going to do? But it's building self-esteem. For most of these guys, they're in a city, they've grown up on Kool-Aid and a bag of chips. This is building structure. They're at the point where they have really accomplished something…They're learning manners. You really can change patterns."

One ex-convict that Fortune helped was 22-year-old Candice Ellison, who spent more than two years in prison for assault. After not finding a job despite applying to several dozen jobs over a six-month span, she turned in desperation to The Fortune Society for help. Fortune bought her interview clothes and advised her on how to talk about her prison record with potential employers. Commending the help she received, she noted, "Some of my high school friends say it's not that hard to get a job, but for people like me with a criminal background, it's like 20 times harder."

The Fortune Society has received national recognition for its efforts. Two federal agencies, the Department of Justice and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, have featured The Fortune Society as a model program for helping ex-inmates. The Urban Institute featured this model in a video it developed about prisoner reentry programs. And in 2005, the American Society of Criminology presented the Society its President's Award for "Distinguished Contributions to the Cause of Justice." These and other examples of the national recognition won by The Fortune Society indicate that for more than four decades it has indeed been making a difference.

Sources: Bellafante, 2005; Greenhouse, 2011; Richardson, 2004

Focus on the Death Penalty

The death penalty is perhaps the most controversial issue in the criminal justice system today. The United States is the only Western democracy that sentences common criminals to death, as other democracies decided decades ago that civilized nations should not execute anyone, even if the person took a human life. About two-thirds of Americans in national surveys favor the death penalty, with their reasons including the need for retribution ("an eye for an eye"), deterrence of potential murderers, and lower expenditure of public funds compared to a lifetime sentence. Social science evidence is irrelevant to the retribution argument, which is a matter for philosophy and theology, but it is relevant to many other aspects of the death debate. Taken together, the evidence on all these aspects yields a powerful case *against* the death penalty (Death Penalty Information Center, 2011).

First, capital punishment does not deter homicide: Almost all studies on this issue fail to find a deterrent effect. An important reason for this stems from the nature of homicide. As discussed earlier, it is a relatively spontaneous, emotional crime. Most people who murder do not sit down beforehand to calculate their chances of being arrested, convicted, and executed. Instead they lash out. Premeditated murders do exist, but the people who commit them do not think they will get caught and so, once again, are not deterred by the potential for execution.

Second, the death penalty is racially discriminatory. While some studies find that African Americans are more likely than whites who commit similar homicides to receive the death penalty, the clearest evidence for racial discrimination involves the race of the victim: Homicides with white victims are more likely than those with African American victims to result in a death sentence (Paternoster & Brame, 2008). Although this difference is not intended, it suggests that the criminal justice system values white lives more than African American lives.



The death penalty is racially discriminatory and does not deter homicide. Thomas Hawk – Miami Police – CC BY-NC 2.0.

Third, many people have been mistakenly convicted of capital offenses, raising the possibility of *wrongful executions*. Sometimes defendants are convicted out of honest errors, and sometimes they are convicted because the police and/or prosecution fabricated evidence or engaged in other legal misconduct. Whatever their source, wrongful convictions of capital offenses raise the ugly possibility that a defendant will be executed even though he was actually innocent of any capital crime. During the past four decades, more than 130 people have been released from death row after DNA or other evidence cast serious doubt on their guilt. In March 2011, Illinois abolished capital punishment, partly because of concern over the possibility of wrongful executions. As the Illinois governor summarized his reasons for signing the legislative bill to abolish the death penalty, "Since our experience has shown that there is no way to design a perfect death penalty system, free from the numerous flaws that can lead to wrongful convictions or discriminatory treatment, I have concluded that the proper course of action is to abolish it" (Schwartz & Fitzsimmons, 2011:A18).

Fourth, executions are expensive. Keeping a murderer in prison for life costs about $1 million in current dollars (say 40 years at $25,000 per year), while the average death sentence costs the state about $2 million to $3 million in legal expenses.

This diverse body of evidence leads most criminologists to oppose the death penalty. In 1989, the American Society of Criminology adopted this official policy position on capital punishment: "Be it resolved that because social science research has demonstrated the death penalty to be racist in application and social science research has found no consistent evidence of crime deterrence through execution, The American Society of Criminology publicly condemns this form of punishment, and urges its members to use their professional skills in legislatures and courts to seek a speedy abolition of this form of punishment."

Key Takeaways

- Partly because the police often fear for their lives, they tend to have a "working personality" that is authoritarian and suspicious. Police corruption and use of undue force remain significant problems in many police departments.
- Although criminal defendants have the right to counsel, the legal representation of such defendants, most of whom are poor or near poor, is very inadequate.
- Prisons are squalid places, and incarceration has not been shown to reduce crime in an effective or cost-efficient manner.
- Most criminologists agree that capital punishment does not deter homicide, and they worry about racial discrimination in the use of the death penalty and about the possibility of wrongful executions.

For Your Review

1. Have you ever had an encounter with a police officer? If so, how would you describe the officer's personality? Was it similar to what is described in the text?
2. The text argues that improvement in prison conditions would help reduce the probability of reoffending after inmates leave prison. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your answer.

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6.6: Reducing Crime

Learning Objective

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe five strategies that criminologists have proposed to reduce crime.

During the last few decades, the United States has used a get-tough approach to fight crime. This approach has involved longer prison terms and the building of many more prisons and jails. As noted earlier, scholars doubt that this surge in imprisonment has achieved significant crime reduction at an affordable cost, and they worry that it may be leading to greater problems in the future as hundreds of thousands of prison inmates are released back into their communities every year.

Many of these scholars favor an approach to crime borrowed from the field of public health. In the areas of health and medicine, a public health approach tries to treat people who are already ill, but it especially focuses on preventing disease and illness before they begin. While physicians try to help people who already have cancer, medical researchers constantly search for the causes of cancer so that they can try to prevent it before it affects anyone. This model is increasingly being applied to criminal behavior, and criminologists have advanced several ideas that, if implemented with sufficient funds and serious purpose, hold great potential for achieving significant, cost-effective reductions in crime (Barlow & Decker, 2010; Frost, Freilich, & Clear, 2010; Lab, 2010). Many of their strategies rest on the huge body of theory and research on the factors underlying crime in the United States, which we had space only to touch on earlier, while other proposals call for criminal justice reforms. We highlight some of these many strategies here.

Applying Social Research

"Three Strikes" Laws Strike Out

The *get-tough* approach highlighted in the text has involved, among other things, mandatory minimum sentencing, in which judges are required to give convicted offenders a minimum prison term, often several years long, rather than a shorter sentence or probation.

Beginning in the 1990s, one of the most publicized types of mandatory sentencing has been the "three strikes and you're out" policy that mandates an extremely long sentence—at least twenty-five years—and sometimes life imprisonment for offenders convicted of a third (or, in some states, a second) felony. The intent of these laws, enacted by about half the states and the federal government, is to reduce crime by keeping dangerous offenders behind bars for many years and by deterring potential offenders from committing crime (*general deterrence*). Sufficient time since the first three strikes laws were passed has elapsed to enable criminologists to assess whether they have, in fact, reduced crime.

Studies of this issue find that three strikes laws do not reduce serious crime and, in fact, may even *increase* the number of homicides. Several studies have focused on California, where tens of thousands of offenders have been sentenced under the state's three strikes law passed in 1994. Almost all these studies conclude that California's law did not reduce subsequent crime or did so by only a negligible amount. A few studies also have examined nationwide samples of city and state crime rates in the states that adopted three strikes laws and in the states that did not do so. These studies also fail to find that three strikes laws have reduced crime. As one of these studies, by three criminologists from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, concludes, "Consistent with other studies, ours finds no credible statistical evidence that passage of three strikes laws reduces crime by deterring potential criminals or incapacitating repeat offenders." The national studies even find that three strikes laws have *increased* the number of homicides. This latter finding is certainly an unintended consequence of these laws and may stem from decisions by felons facing a third strike to kill witnesses so as to avoid life imprisonment.

In retrospect, it is not very surprising that three strikes laws do not work as intended. Many criminals simply do not think they will get caught and thus are not likely to be deterred by increased penalties. Many are also under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol at the time of their offense, making it even less likely they will worry about being caught. In addition, many three strikes offenders tend to be older (because they are being sentenced for their third felony, not just their first) and thus are already "aging out" beyond the high-crime age group, 15–25. Thus three strikes laws target offenders whose criminality is already declining because they are getting older.

In addition to the increase in homicides, research has identified other problems produced by three strikes laws. Because three strikes defendants do not want a life term, some choose a jury trial instead of pleading guilty. Jury trials are expensive and slow compared to guilty pleas and thus cost the prosecution both money and time. In another problem, the additional years that three

strikes offenders spend in prison are costing the states millions of dollars in yearly imprisonment costs and in health-care costs as these offenders reach their elderly years.

As should be clear, the body of three strikes research has important policy implications, as noted by the University of Alabama at Birmingham scholars: "(P)olicy makers should reconsider the costs and benefits associated with three strikes laws" (p. 235). Three strikes laws do not lower crime and in fact increase homicides, and they have forced the states to spend large sums of money on courts and prisons. The three strikes research strongly suggests that three strikes laws should be eliminated.

Sources: Kovandzic, Sloan, & Vieraitis, 2004; Walker, 2011

A first strategy involves serious national efforts to reduce poverty and to improve neighborhood living conditions. It is true that most poor people do not commit crime, but it is also true that most street crime is committed by the poor or near poor for reasons discussed earlier. Efforts that create decent-paying jobs for the poor, enhance their vocational and educational opportunities, and improve their neighborhood living conditions should all help reduce poverty and its attendant problems and thus to reduce crime (Currie, 2011).

A second strategy involves changes in how American parents raise their boys. To the extent that the large gender difference in serious crime stems from male socialization patterns, changes in male socialization should help reduce crime (Collier, 2004). This will certainly not happen any time soon, but if American parents can begin to raise their boys to be less aggressive and less dominating, they will help reduce the nation's crime rate. As two feminist criminologists have noted, "A large price is paid for structures of male domination and for the very qualities that drive men to be successful, to control others, and to wield uncompromising power.…Gender differences in crime suggest that crime may not be so normal after all. Such differences challenge us to see that in the lives of women, men have a great deal more to learn" (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988, p. 527).

Lessons from Other Societies

Preventing Crime and Treating Prisoners in Western Europe

The text suggests the get-tough approach that the United States has been using to reduce crime has not worked in a cost-effective manner and has led to other problems, including a flood of inmates returning to their communities every year. In fighting crime, the United States has much to learn from Western Europe. In contrast to the US get-tough approach, Western European nations tend to use a public health model that comprises two components. The first is a focus on crime prevention that uses early childhood intervention programs and other preventive measures to address the roots of crime and other childhood and family problems. The second is a criminal justice policy that involves sentencing defendants and treating prisoners in a manner more likely to rehabilitate offenders and reduce their repeat offending than the more punitive approach in the United States.

The overall Western European approach to offenders is guided by the belief that imprisonment should be reserved for the most dangerous violent offenders, and that probation, community service, and other forms of community corrections should be used for other offenders. Because violent offenders comprise only a small proportion of all offenders, the Western European approach saves a great deal of money while still protecting public safety.

The experience of Denmark and the Netherlands is illustrative. Like the United States, Denmark had to deal with rapidly growing crime rates during the 1960s. Whereas the United States responded with the get-tough approach involving longer and more certain prison terms and the construction of more and more prisons, Denmark took the opposite approach: It adopted shorter prison terms for violent offenders and used the funds saved from the reduced prison costs to expand community corrections for property offenders. Finland and the Netherlands have also adopted a similar approach that favors community corrections and relatively short prison terms for violent offenders over the get-tough approach the United States adopted.

All these nations save great sums of money in prison costs and other criminal justice expenses because they chose not to adopt the US get-tough approach, yet their rates of serious violent crime lag behind the US rates. Although these nations obviously differ from the United States, the advantages of their approach should be kept in mind as the United States evaluates its get-tough policies. There may be much to learn from their less punitive approach to crime: While the United States got tough, perhaps they got sensible.

Sources: Dammer & Albanese, 2011; Waller & Welsh, 2007

A third and very important strategy involves expansion of early childhood intervention (ECI) programs and nutrition services for poor mothers and their children, as the Note 8.28 "Children and Our Future" box discussed earlier. ECI programs generally involve visits by social workers, nurses, or other professionals to young, poor mothers shortly after they give birth, as these mother's children are often at high risk for later behavioral problems (Welsh & Farrington, 2007). These visits may be daily or weekly and

last for several months, and they involve parenting instruction and training in other life skills. These programs have been shown to be very successful in reducing childhood and adolescent misbehavior in a cost-effective manner (Greenwood, 2006). In the same vein, nutrition services would also reduce the risk of neurological impairment among newborns and young children and thus their likelihood of developing later behavioral problems.

A fourth strategy calls for a national effort to improve the nation's schools and schooling. This effort would involve replacing large, older, and dilapidated schoolhouses with smaller, nicer, and better equipped ones. For many reasons, this effort should help improve student academic achievement and school commitment and thus lower delinquent and later criminal behavior.

A final set of strategies involves changes in the criminal justice system that should help reduce repeat offending and save much money that could be used to fund the ECI programs and other efforts just outlined. Placing nonviolent property and drug offenders in community corrections (e.g., probation, daytime supervision) would reduce the number of prison and jail inmates by hundreds of thousands annually without endangering Americans' safety and save billions of dollars in prison costs (Jacobson, 2006). These funds could also be used to improve prison and jail vocational and educational programming and drug and alcohol services, all of which are seriously underfunded. If properly funded, such programs and services hold great promise for rehabilitating many inmates (Cullen, 2007). Elimination of the death penalty would also save much money while also eliminating the possibility of wrongful executions.

This is not a complete list of strategies, but it does suggest the kinds of efforts that would help address the roots of crime and, in the long run, help to reduce it. Although the United States may not be interested in pursuing this crime-prevention approach, strategies like the ones just mentioned would in the long run be more likely than our current get-tough approach to create a safer society and at the same time save us billions of dollars annually.

Note that none of these proposals addresses white-collar crime, which should not be neglected in a discussion of reducing the nation's crime problem. One reason white-collar crime is so common is that the laws against it are weakly enforced; more consistent enforcement of these laws should help reduce white-collar crime, as would the greater use of imprisonment for convicted white-collar criminals (Rosoff et al., 2010).

Key Takeaways

- The get-tough approach has not been shown to reduce crime in an effective and cost-efficient manner. A sociological explanation of crime thus suggests the need to focus more resources on the social roots of crime in order to prevent crime from happening in the first place.
- Strategies suggested by criminologists to reduce crime include (a) reducing poverty and improving neighborhood living conditions, (b) changing male socialization patterns, (c) expanding early childhood intervention programs, (d) improving schools and schooling, and (e) reducing the use of incarceration for drug and property offenders.

For Your Review

1. The text notes that social science research has not shown the get-tough approach to be effective or cost-efficient. If this is true, why do you think this approach has been so popular in the United States since the 1970s?
2. Of the five strategies outlined in the text to reduce crime, which one strategy do you think would be most effective if it were implemented with adequate funding? Explain your answer.

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6.7: End-of-Chapter Material

Summary

1. Crime is a major concern for many Americans. More than one-third fear walking alone at night in their neighborhoods, and even larger percentages worry about specific types of crimes. News media coverage of crime contributes to these fears. The media overdramatize crime by covering so much of it and by giving especially heavy attention to violent crime even though most crime is not violent. In other problems, the news media disproportionately depict young people and people of color as offenders and whites as victims.
2. The nation's major source of crime statistics is the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). Because many people do not tell the police about crimes they have experienced, the UCR underestimates the actual level of crime in the United States. It is also subject to changes in police reporting practices and in particular to deliberate efforts by police to downplay the amount of crime. To help correct these problems, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) measures crime every year in a national survey that asks residents to report their criminal victimization. The NCVS is thought to yield a more accurate estimate of crime than the UCR, and it also provides much information on the circumstances under which victimization occurs. Self-report surveys, typically given to adolescents, are a final form of crime measurement and provide much information on the adolescents' social backgrounds and thus on the context of their offending.
3. The major categories of crime are violent crime, property crime, white-collar crime, and consensual crime. Much violent crime is relatively spontaneous and emotional, and a surprising amount involves victims and offenders who knew each other before the violent act occurred. Despite popular perceptions, most violent crime is also intraracial. A major distinction in the understanding of property crime is that between professional thieves, who are very skilled and steal valuable possessions or large sums of money, and amateur thieves, who are unskilled and whose theft is petty by comparison. Corporate crime and other kinds of white-collar crime arguably cost the nation more than street crime in economic loss, health problems, and death; corporate violence involves unsafe working conditions, unsafe products, and environmental pollution. Consensual crime, such as illegal drug use and prostitution, raises two important questions: (1) Which consensual but potentially harmful behaviors should the state ban and which should it not ban, and (2) does banning such behaviors do more harm than good or more good than harm?
4. Crime is socially patterned. Males commit more serious crimes than females. African Americans and Latinos have higher crime rates than whites, poor people have higher crime rates than the wealthy, and youths in their teens and early twenties have higher crime rates than older people. In addition, crime is higher in urban areas than in rural areas.
5. Many sociological theories of criminal behavior exist. Social structure theories highlight poverty and weakened social institutions as important factors underlying crime. Social process theories stress the importance of peer relationships, social bonding, and social reaction. Conflict theories call attention to the possible use of the legal system to punish behavior by subordinate groups, while feminist theories examine gender differences in criminality, the victimization of women by rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence, and the experiences of women professionals and offenders in the criminal justice system.
6. The criminal justice system costs tens of billions of dollars annually, yet scholars question the potential of this system to reduce crime. How police are deployed seems a more important factor regarding their potential for crime reduction than the actual numbers of police. The surge in imprisonment of the last few decades may have accounted for a relatively small drop in crime, but whatever reduction it has achieved has not been cost-effective, and hundreds of thousands of prison inmates are now returning every year to their communities. Several problems also exist in the criminal justice system itself. Police corruption and brutality remain serious concerns, while indigent defendants receive inadequate legal representation or none at all. Despite public perceptions, prisons and jails are squalid places, and rape and other violence are daily concerns.
7. The United States is the only Western democracy to use the death penalty for common criminals. Social science evidence finds that the death penalty does not deter homicide, is racially discriminatory, may involve wrongful convictions, and costs considerably more than life imprisonment.
8. Many proposals for reducing crime derive from sociological evidence. These proposals aim to reduce poverty and improve neighborhood living conditions; to change male socialization patterns; to expand early childhood intervention programs and nutrition services; to improve the nation's schools and schooling; and to reduce the number of prison inmates by placing nonviolent property and drug offenders in community corrections. The funds saved by this last proposal could be used to improve prison and jail rehabilitation programming.

Using What You Know

Suppose you are the Democratic Party Governor of a midsized state and that you are up for reelection in two years. You were a political science major in college but had a sociology minor with a focus in criminal justice. The crime rate in your state has risen slightly since you took office, and there is growing sentiment in the state's major newspapers and from the Republican Party opposition in the state legislature to lengthen prison terms for serious crime and to build two more prisons for the greater number of prisoners that will be expected. Because of your studies in college, you are skeptical that this approach will reduce crime, and you recognize it will cost millions of dollars. But you also realize that your opponents and some members of the news media are beginning to say that you are soft on crime. What do you do?

What You Can Do

To help deal with the problem of crime, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Volunteer at an agency that helps troubled teenagers.
2. Volunteer with an organization that helps ex-offenders.
3. Work for an organization that provides early childhood intervention services for at-risk children.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: The Changing Family

7.1: Overview of the Family
7.2: Sociological Perspectives on the Family
7.3: Changes and Problems in American Families
7.4: Families in the Future
7.5: End-of-Chapter Material

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7.1: Overview of the Family

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe why many children throughout history have not lived in a nuclear family.
2. Understand the status of the nuclear family in the United States since the colonial period.
3. Describe the major marriage and family arrangements in the United States today.

A family is a group of two or more people who are related by blood, marriage, adoption, or a mutual commitment and who care for one another. Defined in this way, the family is universal or nearly universal: Some form of the family has existed in every society, or nearly every society, that we know about (Starbuck, 2010). Yet it is also true that many types of families have existed, and the cross-cultural and historical record indicates that these different forms of the family can all "work": They provide practical and emotional support for their members and they socialize their children.

It is important to keep this last statement in mind, because Americans until the last few decades thought of only one type of family, and that is the nuclear family: A married heterosexual couple and their young children living by themselves under one roof. The nuclear family has existed in most societies with which scholars are familiar. An extended family, which consists of parents, their children, and other relatives, has a nuclear family at its core and was quite common in prehistoric societies. Many *one-parent* families begin as (two-parent) nuclear families that dissolve upon divorce or separation or, more rarely, the death of one of the parents. In recent decades, one-parent families have become more common in the United States because of divorce and births out of wedlock, but they were actually very common throughout most of human history because many spouses died early in life and because many babies were born out of wedlock.



Although the nuclear family is a common family arrangement today, historically many children lived with only one parent because spouses died early and many babies were born out of wedlock. Wikimedia Commons – CC BY 2.0.

Although many prehistoric societies featured nuclear families, a few societies studied by anthropologists have not had them. In these societies, a father does not live with a woman after she has his child and sees them either irregularly or not at all. Despite the absence of a father and the lack of a nuclear family, this type of family arrangement seems to have worked well in these societies. In particular, children are cared for and grow up to be productive members of their societies (Smith, 1996).

These examples do not invalidate the fact that nuclear families are almost universal. But they do indicate that the functions of the nuclear family can be achieved through other family arrangements. If that is true, perhaps the oft-cited concern over the "breakdown" of the 1950s-style nuclear family in modern America is at least somewhat undeserved. As indicated by the examples just given, children can and do thrive without two parents. To say this is meant neither to extol divorce, births out of wedlock, and fatherless families nor to minimize the problems they may involve. Rather, it is meant simply to indicate that the nuclear family is not the only viable form of family organization (Seccombe, 2012).

In fact, although nuclear families remain the norm in most societies, in practice they are something of a historical rarity: Until about a century ago, many spouses died by their mid-forties, and many babies were born out of wedlock. In medieval Europe, for example, people died early from disease, malnutrition, and other problems. One consequence of early mortality was that many

children could expect to outlive at least one of their parents and thus essentially were raised in one-parent families or in stepfamilies (Gottlieb, 1993).

During the American colonial period, different family types abounded, and the nuclear family was by no means the only type (Coontz, 1995). Nomadic Native American groups had relatively small nuclear families, while nonnomadic groups had larger extended families. Because nuclear families among African Americans slaves were difficult to achieve, slaves adapted by developing extended families, adopting orphans, and taking in other people not related by blood or marriage. Many European parents of colonial children died because average life expectancy was only 45 years. The one-third to one-half of children who outlived at least one of their parents lived in stepfamilies or with just their surviving parent. Mothers were so busy working the land and doing other tasks that they devoted relatively little time to child care, which instead was entrusted to older children or servants.

Moving much forward in US history, an important change in American families occurred during the 1940s after World War II ended. As men came home after serving in the military in Europe and Japan, books, magazines, and newspapers exhorted women to have babies, and babies they did have: People got married at younger ages and the birth rate soared, resulting in the now famous *baby boom generation*. Meanwhile, divorce rates dropped. The national economy thrived as auto and other factory jobs multiplied, and many families for the first time could dream of owning their own homes. Suburbs sprang up, and many families moved to them. Many families during the 1950s did indeed fit the *Leave It to Beaver* model of the breadwinner-homemaker suburban nuclear family. Following the Depression of the 1930s and the war of the 1940s, the 1950s seemed an almost idyllic decade.

Even so, less than 60 percent of American children during the 1950s lived in breadwinner-homemaker nuclear families. Moreover, many lived in poverty, as the poverty rate then was almost twice as high as it is today. Teenage pregnancy rates were about twice as high as today. Although not publicized back then, alcoholism and violence in families were common. Historians have found that many women in this era were unhappy with their homemaker roles, Mrs. Cleaver (Beaver's mother) to the contrary, suffering from what Betty Friedan (1963) famously called the "feminine mystique."

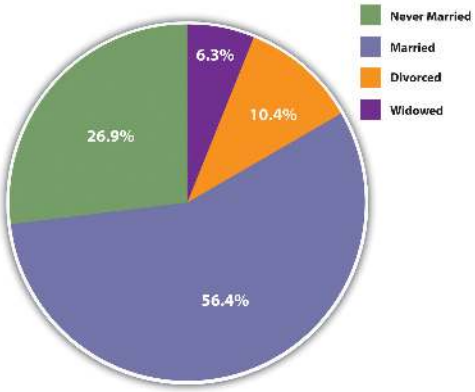
During the 1960s and 1970s, women began to enter the labor force. They did so to increase their families' incomes and to achieve greater self-fulfillment. More than 60 percent of married women with children under 6 years of age are now in the labor force, compared to less than 19 percent in 1960. At about the same time, divorce rates increased for several reasons that we examine later in this chapter. Changes in the American family had begun, and along with them various controversies and problems.

Marriage and the Family in the United States Today

In the United States today, marriage remains an important institution. Only about 27 percent of all adults (18 or older) have never been married, 56 percent are currently married, 10 percent are divorced, and 6 percent are widowed (see Figure 10.1 "Marital Status of the US Population 18 Years of Age or Older, 2010"). Thus 72 percent of American adults have been married, whether or not they are currently married. Because more than half of the never-married people are under 30, it is fair to say that many of them will be getting married sometime in the future. When we look just at people aged 45–54, about 87 percent are currently married or had been married at some point in their lives. In a 2010 poll, only 5 percent of Americans under age 30 said they did not want to get married (Luscombe, 2010). These figures all indicate that marriage continues to be an important ideal in American life, even if not all marriages succeed. As one sociologist has said, "Getting married is a way to show family and friends that you have a successful personal life. It's like the ultimate merit badge" (Luscombe, 2010).

Although marriage remains an important institution, two recent trends do suggest that its importance is declining for some segments of the population (Cohn, Passel, Wang, & Livingston, 2011). First, although 71 percent of adults have been married, this figure represents a drop from 85 percent in 1960. Second, education greatly affects whether we marry and stay married, and marriage is less common among people without a college degree.

Figure 10.1 Marital Status of the US Population 18 Years of Age or Older, 2010



Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

Recent figures provide striking evidence of this relationship. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of college graduates are currently married, compared to less than half (47 percent) of high school graduates and high school dropouts combined. People with no more than a high school degree are less likely than college graduates to marry at all, and they are more likely to get divorced, as we shall discuss again later, if they do marry.

This difference in marriage rates worsens the financial situation that people with lower education already face. As one observer noted, “As marriage increasingly becomes a phenomenon of the better-off and better-educated, the incomes of two-earner married couples diverge more from those of struggling single adults” (Marcus, 2011). One of the many consequences of this education gap in marriage is that the children of one-parent households are less likely than those of two-parent households to graduate high school and to attend college. In this manner, a parent’s low education helps to perpetuate low education among the parent’s children.

The United States Compared to Other Democracies

In several ways, the United States differs from other Western democracies in its view of marriage and in its behavior involving marriage and other intimate relationships (Cherlin, 2010; Hull, Meier, & Ortyl, 2012). First, Americans place more emphasis than their Western counterparts on the ideal of romantic love as a basis for marriage and other intimate relationships and on the cultural importance of marriage. Second, the United States has higher rates of marriage than other Western nations. Third, the United States also has higher rates of divorce than other Western nations; for example, 42 percent of American marriages end in divorce after fifteen years, compared to only 8 percent in Italy and Spain. Fourth, Americans are much more likely than other Western citizens to remarry once they are divorced, to cohabit in short-term relationships, and, in general, to move from one intimate relationship to another, a practice called *serial monogamy*. This practice leads to instability that can have negative impacts on any children that may be involved and also on the adults involved.



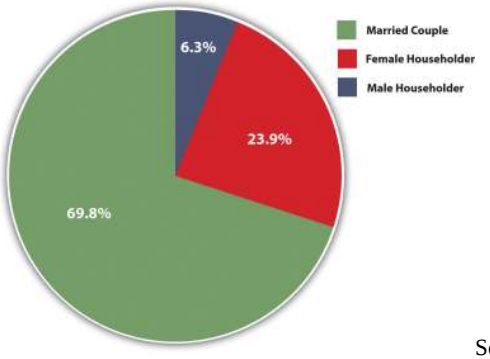
Americans place more emphasis than Europeans on the ideal of romantic love as the basis for marriage. This emphasis helps account for why the United States has a higher divorce rate than many European nations. Ken Witherow – Digimem Studio Photo Shoot – CC BY 2.0.

The US emphasis on romantic love helps account for its high rates of marriage, divorce, and serial monogamy. It leads people to want to be in an intimate relationship, marital or cohabiting. Then when couples get married because they are in love, many quickly find that passionate romantic love can quickly fade; because their expectations of romantic love were so high, they become more disenchanted once this happens and unhappy in their marriage. As sociologist Andrew J. Cherlin (2010, p. 4) observes, "Americans are conflicted about lifelong marriage: they value the stability and security of marriage, but they tend to believe that individuals who are unhappy with their marriages should be allowed to end them." Still, the ideal of romantic love persists even after divorce, leading to remarriage and/or other intimate relationships.

Children and Families

The United States has about 36 million families with children under 18. About 70 percent of these are married-couple families, while 30 percent (up from about 14 percent in the 1950s) are one-parent families. Most of these latter families are headed by the mother (see Figure 10.2 "Family Households with Children under 18 Years of Age, 2010").

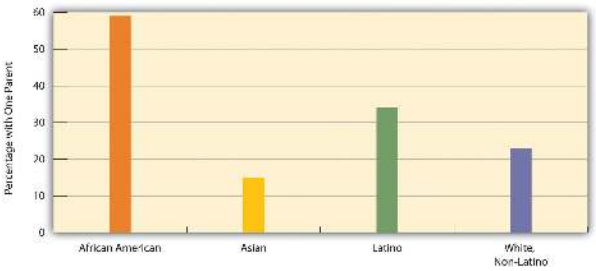
Figure 10.2 Family Households with Children under 18 Years of Age, 2010



Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

The proportion of families with children under 18 that have only one parent varies significantly by race and ethnicity: Latino and African American families are more likely than white and Asian American households to have only one parent (see Figure 10.3 "Race, Ethnicity, and Percentage of Family Groups with Only One Parent, 2010"). Similarly, whereas 30 percent of all children do not live with both their biological parents, this figure, too, varies by race and ethnicity: about 61 percent of African American children, 15 percent of Asian children, 33 percent of Latino children, and 23 percent of non-Latino white children.

Figure 10.3 Race, Ethnicity, and Percentage of Family Groups with Only One Parent, 2010



Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

We will discuss several other issues affecting children later in this chapter. But before we move on, it is worth noting that children, despite all the joy and fulfillment they so often bring to parents, also tend to reduce parents' emotional well-being. As a recent review summarized the evidence, "Parents in the United States experience depression and emotional distress more often than their childless adult counterparts. Parents of young children report far more depression, emotional distress and other negative emotions than non-parents, and parents of grown children have no better well-being than adults who never had children" (Simon, 2008, p. 41).

Children have these effects because raising them can be both stressful and expensive. Depending on household income, the average child costs parents between $134,000 and $270,000 from birth until age 18. College education obviously can cost tens of thousands of dollars beyond that. Robin W. Simon (2008) argues that American parents' stress would be reduced if the government provided better and more affordable day care and after-school options, flexible work schedules, and tax credits for various parenting costs. She also thinks that the expectations Americans have of the joy of parenthood are unrealistically positive and that parental stress would be reduced if expectations became more realistic.

Key Takeaways

- Although the nuclear family has been very common, many children throughout history have not lived in a nuclear family, in part because a parent would die at an early age.
- Most Americans eventually marry. This fact means that marriage remains an important ideal in American life, even if not all marriages succeed.
- About 30 percent of children live with only one parent, almost always their mother.

For Your Review

1. Write a brief essay in which you describe the advantages and disadvantages of the 1950s-type nuclear family in which the father works outside the home and the mother stays at home.
2. The text notes that most people eventually marry. In view of the fact that so many marriages end in divorce, why do you think that so many people continue to marry?
3. Some of the children who live only with their mothers were born out of wedlock. Do you think the parents should have married for the sake of their child? Why or why not?

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7.2: Sociological Perspectives on the Family

Learning Objective

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Summarize understandings of the family as presented by functional, conflict, and social interactionist theories.

Sociological views on today's families and their problems generally fall into the functional, conflict, and social interactionist approaches introduced in Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems". Let's review these views, which are summarized in Table 10.1 "Theory Snapshot".

Table 10.1 Theory Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Functionalism	The family performs several essential functions for society. It socializes children, it provides emotional and practical support for its members, it helps regulate sexual activity and sexual reproduction, and it provides its members with a social identity. Family problems stem from sudden or far-reaching changes in the family's structure or processes; these problems threaten the family's stability and weaken society.
Conflict theory	The family contributes to social inequality by reinforcing economic inequality and by reinforcing patriarchy. Family problems stem from economic inequality and from patriarchal ideology. The family can also be a source of conflict, including physical violence and emotional cruelty, for its own members.
Symbolic interactionism	The interaction of family members and intimate couples involves shared understandings of their situations. Wives and husbands have different styles of communication, and social class affects the expectations that spouses have of their marriages and of each other. Family problems stem from different understandings and expectations that spouses have of their marriage.

Social Functions of the Family

Recall that the functional perspective emphasizes that social institutions perform several important functions to help preserve social stability and otherwise keep a society working. A functional understanding of the family thus stresses the ways in which the family as a social institution helps make society possible. As such, the family performs several important functions.

First, the family is the primary unit for *socializing children*. No society is possible without adequate socialization of its young. In most societies, the family is the major unit in which socialization happens. Parents, siblings, and, if the family is extended rather than nuclear, other relatives all help socialize children from the time they are born.



One of the most important functions of the family is the socialization of children. In most societies the family is the major unit through which socialization occurs. Colleen Kelly – Kids Playing Monopoly Chicago – CC BY 2.0.

Second, the family is ideally a major source of *practical and emotional support* for its members. It provides them food, clothing, shelter, and other essentials, and it also provides them love, comfort, and help in times of emotional distress, and other types of support.

Third, the family helps *regulate sexual activity and sexual reproduction*. All societies have norms governing with whom and how often a person should have sex. The family is the major unit for teaching these norms and the major unit through which sexual reproduction occurs. One reason for this is to ensure that infants have adequate emotional and practical care when they are born.

Fourth, the family provides its members with a *social identity*. Children are born into their parents' social class, race and ethnicity, religion, and so forth. Some children have advantages throughout life because of the social identity they acquire from their parents, while others face many obstacles because the social class or race/ethnicity into which they are born is at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Beyond discussing the family's functions, the functional perspective on the family maintains that sudden or far-reaching changes in conventional family structure and processes threaten the family's stability and thus that of society. For example, most sociology and marriage-and-family textbooks during the 1950s maintained that the male breadwinner–female homemaker nuclear family was the best arrangement for children, as it provided for a family's economic and child-rearing needs. Any shift in this arrangement, they warned, would harm children and, by extension, the family as a social institution and even society itself. Textbooks no longer contain this warning, but many conservative observers continue to worry about the impact on children of working mothers and one-parent families. We return to their concerns shortly.

The Family and Conflict

Conflict theorists agree that the family serves the important functions just listed, but they also point to problems within the family that the functional perspective minimizes or overlooks altogether.

First, the family as a social institution contributes to social inequality. Because families pass along their wealth to their children, and because families differ greatly in the amount of wealth they have, the family helps reinforce existing inequality. As it developed through the centuries, and especially during industrialization, the family also became more and more of a patriarchal unit (since men made money working in factories while women stayed home), helping to reinforce men's status at the top of the social hierarchy.

Second, the family can also be a source of conflict for its own members. Although the functional perspective assumes the family provides its members emotional comfort and support, many families do just the opposite and are far from the harmonious, happy groups depicted in the 1950s television shows. Instead, they argue, shout, and use emotional cruelty and physical violence. We return to family violence later in this chapter.

The conflict perspective emphasizes that many of the problems we see in today's families stem from economic inequality and from patriarchy. The problems that many families experience reflect the fact that they live in poverty or near poverty. Money does not always bring happiness, but a dire lack of money produces stress and other difficulties that impair a family's functioning and relationships. The Note 10.9 "Applying Social Research" box discusses other ways in which social class influences the family.

Conflict within a family also stems from patriarchy. Husbands usually earn more money than wives, and many men continue to feel that they are the head of their families. When women resist this old-fashioned notion, spousal conflict occurs.

Applying Social Research

Social Class and the Family

A growing amount of social science research documents social class differences in how well a family functions: the quality of its relationships and the cognitive, psychological, and social development of its children. This focus reflects the fact that what happens during the first months and years of life may have profound effects on how well a newborn prospers during childhood, adolescence, and beyond. To the extent this is true, the social class differences that have been found have troublesome implications.

According to sociologist Frank E. Furstenberg Jr., "steep differences exist across social classes" in mothers' prenatal experiences, such as the quality of their diet and health care, as well as in the health care that their infants receive. As a result, he says, "children enter the world endowed unequally." This inequality worsens after they are born for several reasons.

First, low-income families are much more likely to experience *negative events*, such as death, poor health, unemployment, divorce, and criminal victimization. When these negative events do occur, says Furstenberg, "social class affects a family's ability to

cushion their blow…Life is simply harder and more brutish at the bottom." These negative events produce great amounts of stress; as Chapter 2 "Poverty" discussed, this stress in turn causes children to experience various developmental problems.

Second, low-income parents are much less likely to read and speak regularly to their infants and young children, who thus are slower to develop cognitive and reading skills; this problem in turn impairs their school performance when they enter elementary school.

Third, low-income parents are also less able to expose their children to cultural experiences (e.g., museum visits) outside the home, to develop their talents in the arts and other areas, and to otherwise be involved in the many nonschool activities that are important for a child's development. In contrast, wealthier parents keep their children very busy in these activities in a pattern that sociologist Annette Lareau calls *concerted cultivation*. These children's involvement in these activities provides them various life skills that help enhance their performance in school and later in the workplace.

Fourth, low-income children grow up in low-income neighborhoods, which often have inadequate schools and many other problems, including toxins such as lead paint, that impair a child's development. In contrast, says Furstenberg, children from wealthier families "are very likely to attend better schools and live in better neighborhoods. It is as if the playing field for families is tilted in ways that are barely visible to the naked eye."

Fifth, low-income families are less able to afford to send a child to college, and they are more likely to lack the social contacts that wealthier parents can use to help their child get a good job after college.

For all these reasons, social class profoundly shapes how children fare from conception through early adulthood and beyond. Because this body of research documents many negative consequences of living in a low-income family, it reinforces the need for wide-ranging efforts to help such families.

Sources: Bandy, Andrews, & Moore, 2012; Furstenberg, 2010; Lareau, 2010

Families and Social Interaction

Social interactionist perspectives on the family examine how family members and intimate couples interact on a daily basis and arrive at shared understandings of their situations. Studies grounded in social interactionism give us a keen understanding of how and why families operate the way they do.

Some studies, for example, focus on how husbands and wives communicate and the degree to which they communicate successfully (Tannen, 2001). A classic study by Mirra Komarovsky (1964) found that wives in blue-collar marriages liked to talk with their husbands about problems they were having, while husbands tended to be quiet when problems occurred. Such gender differences are less common in middle-class families, where men are better educated and more emotionally expressive than their working-class counterparts, but gender differences in communication still exist in these families. Another classic study by Lillian Rubin (1976) found that wives in middle-class families say that ideal husbands are ones who communicate well and share their feelings, while wives in working-class families are more apt to say that ideal husbands are ones who do not drink too much and who go to work every day.

According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, family problems often stem from the different understandings, perceptions, and expectations that spouses have of their marriage and of their family. When these differences become too extreme and the spouses cannot reconcile their disagreements, spousal conflict and possibly divorce may occur (Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2006).

Key Takeaways

- The family ideally serves several functions for society. It socializes children, provides practical and emotional support for its members, regulates sexual reproduction, and provides its members with a social identity.
- Reflecting conflict theory's emphases, the family may also produce several problems. In particular, it may contribute for several reasons to social inequality, and it may subject its members to violence, arguments, and other forms of conflict.
- Social interactionist understandings of the family emphasize how family members interact on a daily basis. In this regard, several studies find that husbands and wives communicate differently in certain ways that sometimes impede effective communication.

For Your Review

1. As you think how best to understand the family, do you favor the views and assumptions of functional theory, conflict theory, or social interactionist theory? Explain your answer.

2. Do you think the family continues to serve the function of regulating sexual behavior and sexual reproduction? Why or why not?

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7.3: Changes and Problems in American Families

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Discuss why the US divorce rate rose during the 1960s and 1970s and summarize the major individual-level factors accounting for divorce today.
2. Describe the effects of divorce for spouses and children.
3. Summarize the evidence on how children fare when their mothers work outside the home.
4. Describe the extent of family violence and explain why it occurs.



According to the census, roughly 6 million opposite-sex couples are currently cohabiting in the United States. The average cohabitation lasts less than two years. Amit Gupta – CC BY-NC 2.0.

American families have undergone many changes since the 1950s. Scholars, politicians, and the public have strong and often conflicting views on the reasons for these changes and on their consequences. We now look at some of the most important issues affecting US families through the lens of the latest social scientific evidence. Because Chapter 5 "Sexual Orientation and Inequality" on sexual orientation and inequality discussed same-sex marriage and families, please refer back to that chapter for material on this very important topic.

Cohabitation

Some people who are not currently married nonetheless cohabit, or live together, with someone of the opposite sex in a romantic relationship. The census reports that about 6 million opposite-sex couples are currently cohabiting; these couples constitute about 10 percent of all opposite-sex couples (married plus unmarried) who live together. The average cohabitation lasts less than two years and ends when the couple either splits up or gets married; about half of cohabiting couples do marry, and half split up. More than half of people in their twenties and thirties have cohabited, and roughly one-fourth of this age group is currently cohabiting (Brown, 2005). Roughly 55 percent of cohabiting couples have no biological children, about 45 percent live with a biological child of one of the partners, and 21 percent live with their own biological child. (These figures add to more than 100 percent because many couples live with their own child and a child of a partner.) About 5 percent of children live with biological parents who are cohabiting.

Interestingly, many studies find that married couples who have cohabited with each other before getting married are *more* likely to divorce than married couples who did not cohabit (Jose, O'Leary, & Moyer, 2010). As sociologist Susan L Brown (2005, p. 34) notes, this apparent consequence is ironic: "The primary reason people cohabit is to test their relationship's viability for marriage. Sorting out bad relationships through cohabitation is how many people think they can avoid divorce. Yet living together before marriage actually increases a couple's risk of divorce." Two reasons may account for this result. First, cohabitation may change the relationship between a couple and increase the chance they will divorce if they get married anyway. Second, individuals who are willing to live together without being married may not be very committed to the idea of marriage and thus may be more willing to divorce if they are unhappy in their eventual marriage.

Recent research compares the psychological well-being of cohabiting and married adults and also the behavior of children whose biological parent or parents are cohabiting rather than married (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Brown, 2005). On average, married adults are happier and otherwise have greater psychological well-being than cohabiting adults, while the latter, in turn, fare better

psychologically than adults not living with anyone. Research has not yet clarified the reasons for these differences, but it seems that people with the greatest psychological and economic well-being are most likely to marry. If this is true, it is not the state of being married per se that accounts for the difference in well-being between married and cohabiting couples, but rather the extent of well-being that affects decisions to marry or not marry. Another difference between cohabitation and marriage concerns relationship violence. Among young adults (aged 18–28), this type of violence is more common among cohabiting couples than among married or dating couples. The reasons for this difference remain unknown but may again reflect differences in the types of people who choose to cohabit (Brown & Bulanda, 2008).

The children of cohabiting parents tend to exhibit lower well-being of various types than those of married parents: They are more likely to engage in delinquency and other antisocial behavior, and they have lower academic performance and worse emotional adjustment. The reasons for these differences remain to be clarified but may again stem from the types of people who choose to cohabit rather than marry.

Divorce and Single-Parent Households

The US divorce rate has risen since the early 1900s, with several peaks and valleys, and is now the highest in the industrial world. It rose sharply during the Great Depression and World War II, probably because of the economic distress of the former and the family disruption caused by the latter, and fell sharply after the war as the economy thrived and as marriage and family were proclaimed as patriotic ideals. It dropped a bit more during the 1950s before rising sharply through the 1960s and 1970s (Cherlin, 2009). The divorce rate has since declined somewhat (see Figure 10.4 “Number of Divorces per 1,000 Married Women Aged 15 or Older, 1960–2009”) and today is only slightly higher than its peak at the end of World War II. Still, the best estimates say that 40–50 percent of all new marriages will one day end in divorce (Teachman, 2008). The surprising announcement in June 2010 of the separation of former vice president Al Gore and his wife, Tipper, was a poignant reminder that divorce is a common outcome of many marriages.

Figure 10.4 Number of Divorces per 1,000 Married Women Aged 15 or Older, 1960–2009



Source: Data from Wilcox, W. B. (Ed.). (2010). *The state of our unions, 2010: Marriage in America*. Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project.

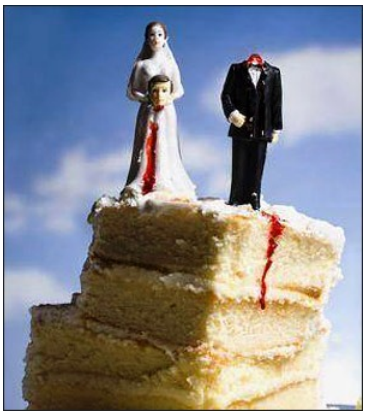
Reasons for Divorce

We cannot be certain about why the divorce rate rose so much during the 1960s and 1970s, but we can rule out two oft-cited causes. First, there is little reason to believe that marriages became any less happy during this period. We do not have good data to compare marriages then and now, but the best guess is that marital satisfaction did not decline after the 1950s ended. What did change was that people after the 1950s became more willing to seek divorces in marriages that were already unhappy.

Second, although the contemporary women’s movement is sometimes blamed for the divorce rate by making women think marriage is an oppressive institution, the trends in Figure 10.4 “Number of Divorces per 1,000 Married Women Aged 15 or Older, 1960–2009” suggest this blame is misplaced. The women’s movement emerged in the late 1960s and was capturing headlines by the early 1970s. Although the divorce rate obviously rose after that time, it also started rising several years *before* the women’s movement emerged and captured headlines. If the divorce rate began rising before the women’s movement started, it is illogical to blame the women’s movement. Instead, other structural and cultural forces must have been at work, just as they were at other times in the last century, as just noted, when the divorce rate rose and fell.

Why, then, did divorce increase during the 1960s and 1970s? One reason is the increasing economic independence of women. As women entered the labor force in the 1960s and 1970s, they became more economically independent of their husbands, even if their jobs typically paid less than their husbands’ jobs. When women in unhappy marriages do become more economically independent, they are more able to afford to get divorced than when they have to rely entirely on their husbands’ earnings (Hiedemann, Suhomlinova, & O’Rand, 1998). When both spouses work outside the home, moreover, it is more difficult to juggle the many demands of family life, and family life can be more stressful. Such stress can reduce marital happiness and make divorce more

likely. Spouses may also have less time for each other when both are working outside the home, making it more difficult to deal with problems they may be having.



Disapproval of divorce has declined since the 1950s, and divorce is now considered a normal if unfortunate part of life. John C Bullas BSc MSc PhD MCIHT MIAT – Divorce Cakes a_005 – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

It is also true that disapproval of divorce has declined since the 1950s, even if negative views of it still remain (Cherlin, 2009). Not too long ago, divorce was considered a terrible thing; now it is considered a normal if unfortunate part of life. We no longer say a bad marriage should continue for the sake of the children. When New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller ran for president in the early 1960s, the fact that he had been divorced hurt his popularity, but when California Governor Ronald Reagan ran for president less than two decades later, the fact that he had been divorced was hardly noted. Many presidential candidates and other politicians today have been divorced. But is the growing acceptability of divorce a cause of the rising divorce rate, or is it the result of the rising divorce rate? Or is it both a cause and a result? This important causal order question is difficult to resolve.

Another reason divorce rose during the 1960s and 1970s may be that divorces became easier to obtain legally. In the past, most states required couples to prove that one or both had committed actions such as mental cruelty, adultery, or other such behaviors in order to get divorced. Today almost all states have no-fault divorce laws that allow a couple to divorce if they say their marriage has failed from irreconcilable differences. Because divorce has become easier and less expensive to obtain, more divorces occur. But are no-fault divorce laws a cause or result of the post-1950s rise in the divorce rate? The divorce rate increase preceded the establishment of most states' no-fault laws, but it is probably also true that the laws helped make additional divorces more possible. Thus no-fault divorce laws are probably one reason for the rising divorce rate after the 1950s, but only one reason (Kneip & Bauer, 2009).

We have just looked at possible reasons for divorce rate trends, but we can also examine the reasons why certain marriages are more or less likely to end in divorce within a given time period. Although, as noted earlier, 40–50 percent of all new marriages will probably end in divorce, it is also true that some marriages are more likely to end than others. Family scholars identify several correlates of divorce (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Wilcox, 2010). An important one is age at marriage: Teenagers who get married are much more likely to get divorced than people who marry well into their twenties or beyond, partly because they have financial difficulties and are not yet emotionally mature. A second correlate of divorce is social class: People who are poor and have less formal education at the time of their marriage are much more likely to get divorced than people who begin their marriages in economic comfort and with higher levels of education.

Effects of Divorce and Single-Parent Households

Much research exists on the effects of divorce on spouses and their children, and scholars often disagree on what these effects are. One thing is clear: Divorce plunges many women into poverty or near-poverty (Gadalla, 2008; Wilcox, 2010). Many have been working only part time or not at all outside the home, and divorce takes away their husband's economic support. Even women working full time often have trouble making ends meet, because many are in low-paying jobs. One-parent families headed by a woman for any reason are much poorer ($32,031 in 2010 median annual income) than those headed by a man ($49,718). Meanwhile, the median income of married-couple families is much higher ($72,751). Almost 32 percent of all single-parent families headed by women are officially poor, compared to only about 16 percent of single-parent families headed by men and 6 percent of married-couple families (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011).

Although the economic consequences of divorce seem clear, what are the psychological consequences for husbands, wives, and their children? Are they better off if a divorce occurs, worse off, or about the same?

Effects on Spouses

The research evidence for spouses is very conflicting. Many studies find that divorced spouses are, on average, less happy and have poorer mental health after their divorce, but some studies find that happiness and mental health often improve after divorce (Cherlin, 2009; Waite, Luo, & Lewin, 2009). The postdivorce time period that is studied may affect what results are found: For some people psychological well-being may decline in the immediate aftermath of a divorce, given how difficult the divorce process often is, but rise over the next few years. The contentiousness of the marriage also matters. Some marriages ending in divorce have been filled with hostility, conflict, and sometimes violence, while other marriages ending in divorce have not been very contentious at all, even if they have failed. Individuals seem to fare better psychologically after ending a very contentious marriage but fare worse after ending a less contentious marriage (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007).

Effects on Children

What about the children? Parents used to stay together "for the sake of the children," thinking that divorce would cause their children more harm than good. Studies of this issue generally find that children in divorced families are indeed more likely, on average, to do worse in school, to use drugs and alcohol and suffer other behavioral problems, and to experience emotional distress and other psychological problems (Wilcox, 2010). The trauma of the divorce and the difficulties that single parents encounter in caring for and disciplining children are thought to account for these effects.

However, two considerations suggest that children of divorce may fare worse for reasons other than divorce trauma and the resulting single-parent situation. First, most children whose parents divorce end up living with their mothers. As we just noted, many divorced women and their children live in poverty or near poverty. To the extent that these children fare worse in many ways, their mothers' low incomes may be a contributing factor. Studies of this issue find that divorced mothers' low incomes do, in fact, help explain some of the difficulties that their children experience (Demo & Fine, 2010). Divorce trauma and single-parenthood still matter for children's well-being in many of these studies, but the worsened financial situation of divorced women and their children also makes a difference.

Second, it is possible that children do worse after a divorce because of the parental conflict that led to the divorce, not because of the divorce itself. It is well known that the quality of the relationship between a child's parents affects the child's behavior and emotional well-being (Moore, Kinghorn, & Bandy, 2011). This fact raises the possibility that children may fare better if their parents end a troubled marriage than if their parents stay married. Recent studies have investigated this issue, and their findings generally mirror the evidence for spouses just cited: Children generally fare better if their parents end a highly contentious marriage, but they fare worse if their parents end a marriage that has not been highly contentious (Hull et al., 2012). As one researcher summarizes this new body of research, "All these new studies have discovered the same thing: The average impact of divorce in society at large is to neither increase nor decrease the behavior problems of children. They suggest that divorce, in and of itself, is not the cause of the elevated behavior problems we see in children of divorce" (Li, 2010, p. 174). Commenting on divorces from highly contentious marriages, sociologist Virginia E. Rutter (2010, p. 169) bluntly concludes, "There are times and situations when divorce is beneficial to the people who divorce and to their children."

Fathers and Children

Recall that most children whose parents are not married, either because they divorced or because they never were married, live with their mothers. Another factor that affects how children in these situations fare is the closeness of the child-father relationship. Whether or not children live with their fathers, they fare better in many respects when they have an emotionally close relationship with their fathers. This type of relationship is certainly more possible when they live with their fathers, and this is a reason that children who live with both their parents fare better on average than children who live only with their mother. However, some children who do live with their fathers are less close to them than some children who live apart from their fathers.

Recent research by sociologist Alan Booth and colleagues (Booth, Scott, & King, 2010) found that the former children fare worse than the latter children. As Booth et al. (2010, p. 600) summarize this result, "We find that adolescents who are close to their nonresident fathers report higher self-esteem, less delinquency, and fewer depressive symptoms than adolescents who live with a father with whom they are not close. It appears that adolescents benefit more from a close bond to a nonresident father than a weak bond to a resident father." To the extent this is true, they add, "youth are not always better off in two-parent families." In fact, children who are not close to a father with whom they live have lower self-esteem than children who are not close to a father with

whom they do not live. Overall, though, children fare best when they live with fathers with whom they have a close relationship: "It does not appear that strong affection alone can overcome the problems associated with father absence from the child's residence."

Marriage and Well-Being

Is marriage good for people? This is the flip side of the question we have just addressed on whether divorce is bad for people. Are people better off if they get married? Or are they better off if they stay single?

In 1972, sociologist Jessie Bernard (1972) famously said that every marriage includes a "her marriage" and a "his marriage." By this she meant that husbands and wives view and define their marriages differently. When spouses from the same marriage are interviewed, they disagree on such things as how often they should have sex, how often they actually do have sex, and who does various household tasks. Women do most of the housework and child care, while men are freer to work and do other things outside the home. Citing various studies, she said that marriage is better for men than for women. Married women, she said, have poorer mental health than unmarried women, while married men have better mental health than unmarried men. In short, she said that marriage was good for men but bad for women.



Married people are generally happier than unmarried people and score higher on other measures of psychological well-being. Silvia Sala – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Critics later said that Bernard misinterpreted her data on women and that married women are also better off than unmarried women (Glenn, 1997). Recent research generally finds that marriage does benefit both sexes: Married people, women and men alike, are generally happier than unmarried people (whether never married, divorced, or widowed), score better on other measures of psychological well-being, are physically healthier, have better sex lives, and have lower death rates (Waite et al., 2009; Wilcox, 2010). There is even evidence that marriage helps keep men from committing crime (Theobald & Farrington, 2011)! Marriage has these benefits for several reasons, including the emotional and practical support spouses give each other, their greater financial resources compared to those of unmarried people, and the sense of obligation they have toward each other.

Three issues qualify the general conclusion that marriage is beneficial (Frech & Williams, 2007). First, it would be more accurate to say that good marriages are beneficial, because bad marriages certainly are not, and stressful marriages can impair physical and mental health (Parker-Pope, 2010). Second, although marriage is generally beneficial, its benefits seem greater for older adults than for younger adults, for whites than for African Americans, and for individuals who were psychologically depressed before marriage than for those who were not depressed. Third, psychologically happy and healthy people may be the ones who get married in the first place and are less apt to get divorced once they do marry. If so, marriage does not promote psychological well-being; rather, psychological well-being promotes marriage. Research testing this *selectivity hypothesis* finds that both processes occur: Psychologically healthy people are more apt to get and stay married, but marriage also promotes psychological well-being.

Working Mothers and Day Care

As noted earlier, women are now much more likely to be working outside the home than a few decades ago. This is true for both married and unmarried women and also for women with and without children. As women have entered the labor force, the question of who takes care of the children has prompted much debate and controversy. Many observers say young children suffer if they do not have a parent, implicitly their mother, taking care of them full-time until they start school and being there every day when they get home from school. The public is divided on the issue of more mothers working outside the home: 21 percent say this trend is "a good thing for society"; 37 percent say it is "a bad thing for society"; and 46 percent say it "doesn't make much difference" (Morin,

2010). What does research say about how young children fare if their mothers work? (Notice that no one seems to worry that fathers work!)

Early studies compared the degree of attachment shown to their mothers by children in day care and that shown by children who stay at home with their mothers. In one type of study, children were put in a laboratory room with their mothers and observed as the mothers left and returned. The day-care kids usually treated their mothers' departure and returning casually and acted as if they did not care that their mothers were leaving or returning. In contrast the stay-at-home kids acted very upset when their mothers left and seemed much happier and even relieved when they returned. Several researchers concluded that these findings indicated that day-care children lacked sufficient emotional attachment to their mothers (Schwartz, 1983). However, other researchers reached a very different conclusion: The day-care children's apparent nonchalance when their mothers left and returned simply reflected the fact that they always saw her leave and return every day when they went to day care. The lack of concern over her behavior showed only that they were more independent and self-confident than the stay-at-home children, who were fearful when their mothers left, and not that they were less attached to their mothers (Coontz, 1997).

More recent research has compared stay-at-home children and day-care children starting with infancy, with some of the most notable studies using data from a large study funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, a branch of the National Institutes of Health (Rabin, 2008). This research finds that day-care children exhibit better cognitive skills (reading and arithmetic) than stay-at-home children but are also slightly more likely to engage in aggressive behavior that is well within the normal range of children's behavior. This research has also yielded two other conclusions. First, the quality of parenting and other factors such as parent's education and income matter much more for children's cognitive and social development than whether or not they are in day care. Second, to the extent that day care is beneficial for children, it is high-quality day care that is beneficial, as low-quality day care can be harmful.



Children in day care exhibit better cognitive skills than stay-at-home children but are also slightly more likely to engage in aggressive behavior that is within the normal range of children's behavior. njxw – Daycare – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

This latter conclusion is an important finding, because many day-care settings in the United States are not high quality. Unfortunately, many parents who use day care cannot afford high-quality care, which can cost hundreds of dollars monthly. This problem reflects the fact that the United States lags far behind other Western democracies in providing subsidies for day care (see Note 10.21 "Lessons from Other Societies" later in this chapter). Because working women are certainly here to stay and because high-quality day care seems at least as good for children as full-time care by a parent, it is essential that the United States make good day care available and affordable.

Affordable child care is especially essential for low-income parents. After the United States plunged into economic recession in 2008, many states reduced their subsidies for child care. As a result, many low-income parents who wanted to continue working or to start a job could not afford to do so because child care can be very expensive: For a family living below the poverty line, child care comprises one-third of the family budget on the average. As the head of a California organization that advocates for working parents explained, "You can't expect a family with young children to get on their feet and get jobs without child care" (Goodman, 2010, p. A1).

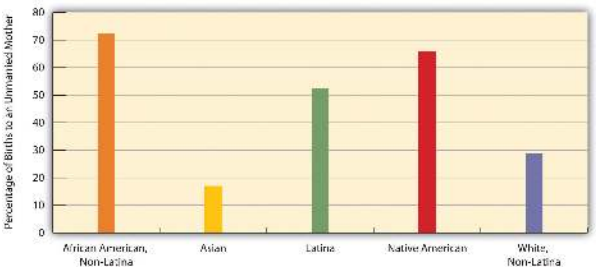
Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Marriages and Families

Marriages and families in the United States exhibit a fair amount of racial and ethnic diversity, as we saw earlier in this chapter. Children are more likely to live with only one parent among Latino and especially African American families than among white and Asian American families. Moreover, African American, Latino, and Native American children and their families are especially likely to live in poverty. As a result, they are at much greater risk for the many problems that children in poverty experience (see Chapter 2 “Poverty”).

Beyond these cold facts lie other racial and ethnic differences in family life (Wright, Mindel, Tran, & Habenstein, 2012). Studies of Latino and Asian American families find they have especially strong family bonds and loyalty. Extended families in both groups and among Native Americans are common, and these extended families have proven a valuable shield against the problems all three groups face because of their race/ethnicity and poverty.

The status of the African American family has been the source of much controversy for several decades. Perhaps the major reason for this controversy is the large number of African American children living in single-parent households: Whereas 41 percent of all births are to unmarried women (up from 28 percent in 1990), such births account for 72 percent of all births to African American women (see Figure 10.5 “Percentage of Births to Unmarried Mothers, by Race/Ethnicity 2010”).

Figure 10.5 Percentage of Births to Unmarried Mothers, by Race/Ethnicity 2010



Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

Many scholars attribute the high number of fatherless families among African Americans to the forcible separation of families during slavery and to the fact that so many young black males today are unemployed, in prison or jail, or facing other problems (Patterson, 1998). Some observers say this high number of fatherless families in turn contributes to African Americans’ poverty, crime, and other problems (Haskins, 2009). But other observers argue that this blame is misplaced to at least some extent. Extended families and strong female-headed households in the African American community, they say, have compensated for the absence of fathers (Willie & Reddick, 2010). The problems African Americans face, they add, stem to a large degree from their experience of racism, segregated neighborhoods, lack of job opportunities, and other structural difficulties (Sampson, 2009). Even if fatherless families contribute to these problems, these scholars say, these other factors play a larger role.

Family Violence

Although family violence has received much attention since the 1970s, families were violent long before scholars began studying family violence and the public began hearing about it. We can divide family violence into two types: violence against intimates (spouses, live-in partners, boyfriends, or girlfriends) and violence against children. (Violence against elders also occurs and was discussed in the Chapter on “Aging and Ageism”.)

Violence against Intimates

Intimates commit violence against each other in many ways: they can hit with their fists, slap with an open hand, throw an object, push or shove, or use or threaten to use a weapon. When all these acts and others are combined, we find that much intimate violence occurs. While we can never be certain of the exact number of intimates who are attacked, the US Department of Justice estimates from its National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) that about 509,000 acts of violence (2010 data) are committed annually by one intimate against another intimate; 80 percent of these acts are committed by men against women (Truman, 2011). Another national survey about a decade ago found that 22 percent of US women had been physically assaulted by a spouse or partner at some point in their lives (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). This figure, if still true, translates to more than 20 million women today. A national survey of Canadian women found that 29 percent had been attacked by a spouse or partner (Randall & Haskell,

1995). Taken together, these different figures all indicate that intimate partner violence is very common and affects millions of people.



According to some estimates, about one-fifth of US women have been assaulted by a spouse or partner at least once in their lives. Neil Moralee – Not Defeated. – CC BY 2.0.

Some observers claim that husbands are just as likely as wives to be beaten by a spouse, and there is evidence that husbands experience an act of violence from their wives about as often as wives do from their husbands. Yet this "gender equivalence" argument has been roundly criticized. Although women do commit violence against husbands and boyfriends, their violence is less serious (e.g., a slap compared to using a fist) and usually in self-defense to their husbands' violence. And although some studies find an equal number of violent acts committed by husbands and wives, other studies find much more violence committed by husbands (Johnson, 2006).

Why do men hit their wives, partners, and girlfriends? As with rape (see Chapter 4 "Gender Inequality"), sociologists answer this question by citing both structural and cultural factors. Structurally, women are the subordinate gender in a patriarchal society and, as such, are more likely to be victims of violence, whether it is rape or intimate violence. Intimate violence is more common in poor families, and economic inequality thus may lead men to take out their frustration over their poverty on their wives and girlfriends (Martin, Vieraitis, & Britto, 2006).

Cultural myths also help explain why men hit their wives and girlfriends (Gosselin, 2010). Many men continue to believe that their wives should not only love and honor them but also obey them, as the traditional marriage vow says. If they view their wives in this way, it becomes that much easier to hit them. In another myth, many people ask why women do not leave home if the hitting they suffer is really that bad; the implication is that the hitting cannot be that bad because they do not leave home. This reasoning ignores the fact that many women *do* try to leave home, which often angers their husbands and ironically puts the women more at risk for being hit, or they do not leave home because they have nowhere to go (Kim & Gray, 2008). As the news story that began this chapter discussed, battered women's shelters are still few in number and can accommodate a woman and her children for only two or three weeks. Many battered women also have little money of their own and simply cannot afford to leave home. The belief that battering cannot be that bad if women hit by their husbands do not leave home ignores all these factors and is thus a myth that reinforces spousal violence against women. (See Note 10.15 "People Making a Difference" for a profile of the woman who started the first women's shelter.)

People Making a Difference

The Founder of the First Battered Women's Shelter

Sandra Ramos deserves our thanks because she founded the first known shelter for battered women in North America back in the late 1970s.

Her life changed one night in 1970 when she was only 28 years old and working as a waitress at a jazz club. One night a woman from her church in New Jersey came to her home seeking refuge from a man who was abusing her. Ramos took in the woman and her children and soon did the same with other abused women and their children. Within a few months, twenty-two women and children were living inside her house. "It was kind of chaotic," recalls Maria, 47, the oldest of Ramos's three children. "It was a small house; we didn't have a lot of room. But she reaches out to people she sees suffering. She does everything in her power to help them."

When authorities threatened to arrest Ramos if she did not remove all these people from her home, she conducted sit-ins and engaged in other actions to call attention to the women's plight. She eventually won county funding to start the first women's shelter.

Today Ramos leads a New Jersey nonprofit organization, Strengthen Our Sisters, that operates several shelters and halfway houses for battered women. Her first shelter and these later ones have housed thousands of women and children since the late 1970s, and at any one time today they house about 180 women and their children.

One woman whom Ramos helped was Geraldine Wright, who was born in the Dominican Republic. Wright says she owes Ramos a great debt. "Sandy makes you feel like, OK, you're going through this, but it's going to get better," she says. "One of the best things I did for myself and my children was come to the shelter. She helped me feel strong, which I usually wasn't. She helped me get a job here at the shelter so that I could find a place and pay the rent."

Since that first woman knocked on her door in 1970, Sandra Ramos has worked unceasingly for the rights and welfare of abused women. She has fittingly been called "one of the nation's most well-known and tireless advocates on behalf of battered women." For more than forty years, Sandra Ramos has made a considerable difference.

Source: Llorente, 2009

Child Abuse

Child abuse takes many forms. Children can be physically or sexually assaulted, and they may also suffer from emotional abuse and practical neglect. Whatever form it takes, child abuse is a serious national problem.

It is especially difficult to know how much child abuse occurs. Infants obviously cannot talk, and toddlers and older children who are abused usually do not tell anyone about the abuse. They might not define it as abuse, they might be scared to tell on their parents, they might blame themselves for being abused, or they might not know whom they could talk to about their abuse. Whatever the reason, they usually remain silent, thus making it very difficult to know how much abuse takes place.



Government data estimate that about 800,000 children are abused or neglected each year. Because most children do not report their abuse or neglect, the actual number is probably much higher. Jane Fox – Child Abuse mental – CC BY-ND 2.0.

Using information from child protective agencies throughout the country, the US Department of Health and Human Services estimates that almost 800,000 children (2008 data) are victims of child abuse and neglect annually (Administration on Children Youth and Families, 2010). This figure includes some 122,000 cases of physical abuse; 69,000 cases of sexual abuse; 539,000 cases of neglect; 55,000 cases of psychological maltreatment; and 17,000 cases of medical neglect. The total figure represents about 1 percent of all children under the age of 18. Obviously this is just the tip of the iceberg, as many cases of child abuse never become known. A 1994 Gallup poll asked adult respondents about physical abuse they suffered as children. Twelve percent said they had been abused (punched, kicked, or choked), yielding an estimate of 23 million adults in the United States who were physically abused as children (D. W. Moore, 1994). Some studies estimate that about 25 percent of girls and 10 percent of boys are sexually abused at least once before turning 18 (Garbarino, 1989). In a study of a random sample of women in Toronto, Canada, 42 percent said they had been sexually abused before turning 16 (Randall & Haskell, 1995). Whatever the true figure is, most child abuse is committed by parents, stepparents, and other people the children know, not by strangers.

Children and Our Future

Is Spanking a Good Idea?

As the text discusses, spanking underlies many episodes of child abuse. Nonetheless, many Americans approve of spanking. In the 2010 General Social Survey, 69 percent of respondents agreed that "it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard, spanking." Reflecting this "spare the rod and spoil the child" belief, most parents have spanked their children. National survey evidence finds that two-thirds of parents of toddlers ages 19–35 months have spanked their child at least once, and one-fourth spank their child sometimes or often.

The reason that many people approve of spanking and that many parents spank is clear: They believe that spanking will teach a child a lesson and improve a child's behavior and/or attitude. However, most child and parenting experts believe the opposite is true. When children are spanked, they say, and especially when they are spanked regularly, they are more likely to misbehave as a result. If so, spanking ironically produces the opposite result from what a parent intends.

Spanking has this effect for several reasons. First, it teaches children that they should behave to avoid being punished. This lesson makes children more likely to misbehave if they think they will not get caught, as they'd not learn to behave for its own sake. Second, spanking also teaches children that it is OK to hit someone to solve an interpersonal dispute and even to hit someone if you love her or him, because that is what spanking is all about. Third, children who are spanked may come to resent their parents and thus be more likely to misbehave because their bond with their parents weakens.

This harmful effect of spanking is especially likely when spanking is frequent. As Alan Kazin, a former president of the American Psychological Association (APA) explains, "Corporal punishment has really serious side effects. Children who are hit become more aggressive." When spanking is rare, this effect may or may not occur, according to research on this issue, but this research also finds that other forms of discipline are as effective as a rare spanking in teaching a child to behave. This fact leads Kazin to say that even rare spanking should be avoided. "It suppresses [misbehavior] momentarily. But you haven't really changed its probability of occurring. Physical punishment is not needed to change behavior. It's just not needed."

Sources: Berlin et al., 2009; Harder, 2007; Park, 2010; Regalado, Sareen, Inkelas, Wissow, & Halfon, 2004

Why does child abuse occur? Structurally speaking, children are another powerless group and, as such, are easy targets of violence. Moreover, the best evidence indicates that child abuse is more common in poorer families. The stress these families suffer from their poverty is thought to be a major reason for the child abuse occurring within them (Gosselin, 2010). As with spousal violence, then, economic inequality is partly to blame for child abuse. Cultural values and practices also matter. In a nation where spanking is common, it is inevitable that physical child abuse will occur, because there is a very thin line between a hard spanking and physical abuse: Not everyone defines a good, hard spanking in the same way. As two family violence scholars once noted, "Although most physical punishment [of children] does not turn into physical abuse, most physical abuse begins as ordinary physical punishment" (Wauchope & Straus, 1990, p. 147). (See Note 10.17 "Children and Our Future" for a further discussion of spanking.)

Abused children are much more likely than children who are not abused to end up with various developmental, psychological, and behavioral problems throughout their life course. In particular, they are more likely to be aggressive, to use alcohol and other drugs, to be anxious and depressed, and to get divorced if they marry (Trickett, Noll, & Putnam, 2011).

Key Takeaways

- The divorce rate rose for several reasons during the 1960s and 1970s but has generally leveled off since then.
- Divorce often lowers the psychological well-being of spouses and their children, but the consequences of divorce also depend on the level of contention in the marriage that has ended.
- Despite continuing controversy over the welfare of children whose mothers work outside the home, research indicates that children in high-quality day care fare better in cognitive development than those who stay at home.
- Violence between intimates is fairly common and stems from gender inequality, income inequality, and several cultural myths that minimize the harm that intimate violence causes.
- At least 800,000 children are abused or neglected each year in the United States. Because most abused children do not report the abuse, the number of cases of abuse and neglect is undoubtedly much higher.

For Your Review

1. Think of someone you know (either yourself, a relative, or a friend) whose parents are divorced. Write a brief essay in which you discuss how the divorce affected this person.
2. Do you think it is ever acceptable for a spouse to slap or hit another spouse? Why or why not?

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7.4: Families in the Future

Learning Objective

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Understand the implications of social science theory and research for how to address family problems.

As perhaps our most important social institution, the family seems to arouse strong passions from almost everyone. Sociological theory and research, along with research from the other social sciences, have important implications for how our society should address the various family issues discussed in this chapter.

One set of implications concerns the many children and families living in poverty. The households in which they live are mostly headed by women, and the majority of these households are the result of divorce. The programs and policies outlined in Chapter 2 "Poverty" are certainly relevant for any efforts to help these families. These efforts include, but are not limited to, increased government financial support, subsidies for child care, vocational training and financial aid for schooling for women who wish to return to the labor force or to increase their wages, early childhood visitation and intervention programs, and increases in programs providing nutrition and medical care to poor women and their children (Cherlin, 2009). In all these efforts, the United States has much to learn from the nations of Western Europe (see Note 10.21 "Lessons from Other Societies").

Lessons from Other Societies

Putting Families First: Helping Families in Western Europe

The nations of Western Europe make a much greater effort than the United States to help families with young children. According to sociologist James W. Russell, these nations believe that taking care of their children is a communal responsibility because "society as a whole benefits from having children adequately reared. Children grow up to take over the responsibilities of maintaining the survival of the society. They will also be available to provide needed services to both their own parents and aging adults who did not raise their own children. An aging adult who did not have children may need the services of a younger doctor who was raised by someone else." In contrast, says Russell, the United States tends to believe that families need to be self-reliant and should not expect very much help from the government. This difference in philosophy leads Western European nations to provide much more support than the United States for families with young children.

This support takes several forms whose nature and extent vary among the Western European nations. Most of the nations, for example, provide at least four months of *paid* maternity leave after the birth of a child; in contrast, the United States guarantees only three months of *unpaid* leave, and only for employees who work for companies that employ at least fifty people. Many European nations also provide paid parental leave after the maternity leave benefits expire; the Untied States does not provide this benefit. In Sweden, parents share 450 days of paid leave to care for a new child.

In another striking difference from the United States, all European nations have a family allowance program, which provides cash payments to parents for every child they have after their first child. The intent here is to not only help these families, but also to encourage them to have children to help counter declining birth rates in Europe.

A third very important difference is that European nations provide free or heavily subsidized child care of generally high quality to enable parents to work outside the home. For example, France provides free child care for children ages 2–6 and pays 75 percent of the cost of child care for children under 2.

In these and other ways, the nations of Western Europe help their families with young children and thus their societies as a whole. The United States has much to learn from their example.

Sources: Russell, 2011; Shahmehri, 2007

Another issue and set of implications from social science research concern family violence. To the extent that much violence against intimates and children is rooted in the frustration and stress accompanying poverty, efforts that reduce poverty will also reduce family violence. And to the extent that gender inequality helps explain violence against women, continuing and strengthening efforts to reduce gender inequality should also reduce violence against intimates, as most of this violence is directed by men against women. Further, if, as many scholars believe, the violent nature of masculinity helps account for violence men commit against their wives and girlfriends, then efforts to change male gender-role socialization should also help.

Turning to child abuse, because so much child abuse remains unknown to child protective authorities, it is difficult to reduce its seriousness and extent. However, certain steps might still help. Because child abuse seems more common among poorer families,

then efforts that reduce poverty should also reduce child abuse. The home visitation programs that help poor children also help reduce child abuse. Although, as noted earlier, approval of spanking is deeply rooted in our culture, a national educational campaign to warn about the dangers of spanking, including its promotion of children's misbehavior, may eventually reduce the use of spanking and thus the incidence of child physical abuse.

Divorce is a final issue for which research by sociologists and other scholars is relevant. Much evidence suggests that divorce from low-conflict marriages has negative consequences for spouses and children, and some evidence suggests that these consequences arise not from the divorce itself but rather from the conflict preceding the divorce and the poverty into which many newly single-parent households are plunged. There is also evidence that spouses and children fare better after a divorce from a highly contentious marriage. Efforts to help preserve marriages should certainly continue, but these efforts should proceed cautiously or not proceed at all for the marriages that are highly contentious. To the extent that marital conflict partly arises from financial difficulties, once again government efforts that help reduce poverty should also help preserve marriages.

Key Takeaways

- Efforts to help children and families living in poverty or near poverty should be expanded.
- Efforts to help preserve marriages should proceed cautiously or not at all for highly contentious marriages.

For Your Review

1. Why do you think the United States lags behind other democracies in efforts to help families?
2. What do you think is the single most important policy or action that our government should take to help America's families?

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7.5: End-of-Chapter Material

Summary

1. As a social institution, the family is a universal or near-universal phenomenon. Yet historical and cross-cultural records indicate that many types of families and family arrangements exist now and have existed in the past. Although the nuclear family has been the norm in many societies, in practice its use has been less common than many people think. Many societies have favored extended families, and in early times children could expect, because of the death of a parent or births out of wedlock, to live at least some part of their childhood with only one parent.
2. Almost one-third of American children live in one-parent families; this percentage varies by race and ethnicity. Some research finds that parents experience more stress and lower psychological well-being than nonparents.
3. Sociological perspectives on the family fall into the more general functional, conflict, and social interactionist approaches guiding sociological thought. Functional theory emphasizes the several functions that families serve for society, including the socialization of children and the economic and practical support of family members. Conflict theory emphasizes the ways in which nuclear families contribute to ongoing gender, class, and race inequality, while social interactionist approaches examine family communication and interaction to make sense of family life.
4. Scholars continue to debate the consequences of divorce and single-parent households for women, men, and their children. Several studies find that divorce and single parenting in and of themselves do not have the dire consequences for children that many observers assume. The low income of single-parent households, and not the absence of a second parent, seems to account for many of the problems that children in such households do experience. Women and children seem to fare better when a highly contentious marriage ends.
5. Despite ongoing concern over the effect on children of day care instead of full-time care by one parent, recent research finds that children in high-quality day care are not worse off than their stay-at-home counterparts. Some studies find that day-care children are more independent and self-confident than children who stay at home and that they perform better on various tests of cognitive ability.
6. Racial and ethnic diversity marks American family life. Controversy also continues to exist over the high number of fatherless families in the African American community. Many observers blame many of the problems African Americans face on their comparative lack of two-parent households, but other observers say this blame is misplaced.
7. Family violence affects millions of spouses and children yearly. Structural and cultural factors help account for the high amount of intimate violence and child abuse. Despite claims to the contrary, the best evidence indicates that women are much more at risk than men for violence by spouses and partners.

Using What You Know

You're working for a medium-sized corporation and have become friendly with one of your coworkers, Susan. One day she shows up at work with some bruises on the right side of her face. She looks upset, and when you ask her what happened, Susan replies that she slipped on the stairs at home and took a nasty fall. You suspect that her husband hit her and that she's not telling the truth about how she got hurt. What, if anything, do you say or do?

What You Can Do

To help deal with the family problems discussed in this chapter, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Volunteer at a day-care center.
2. Volunteer at a battered women's shelter.
3. Start or join a group on your campus that addresses dating violence.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

8: Schools and Education

8.1: An Overview of Education in the United States
8.2: Sociological Perspectives on Education
8.3: Issues and Problems in Elementary and Secondary Education
8.4: Issues and Problems in Higher Education
8.5: Improving Schools and Education
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8.1: An Overview of Education in the United States

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Explain why compulsory education arose during the nineteenth century.
2. Summarize social class, gender, and racial and ethnic differences in educational attainment.
3. Describe the impact that education has on income.
4. Explain how the US education system ranks internationally.

Education is the social institution through which a society teaches its members the skills, knowledge, norms, and values they need to learn to become good, productive members of their society. As this definition makes clear, education is an important part of socialization. Education is both *formal* and *informal*. Formal education is often referred to as *schooling*, and as this term implies, it occurs in schools under teachers, principals, and other specially trained professionals. Informal education may occur almost anywhere, but for young children it has traditionally occurred primarily in the home, with their parents as their instructors. Day care has become an increasingly popular venue in industrial societies for young children's instruction, and education from the early years of life is thus more formal than it used to be.

Education in early America was only rarely formal. During the colonial period, the Puritans in what is now Massachusetts required parents to teach their children to read and also required larger towns to have an elementary school, where children learned reading, writing, and religion. In general, though, schooling was not required in the colonies, and only about 10 percent of colonial children, usually just the wealthiest, went to school, although others became apprentices (Urban & Wagoner, 2008).

To help unify the nation after the Revolutionary War, textbooks were written to standardize spelling and pronunciation and to instill patriotism and religious beliefs in students. At the same time, these textbooks included negative stereotypes of Native Americans and certain immigrant groups. The children going to school continued primarily to be those from wealthy families. By the mid-1800s, a call for free, compulsory education had begun, and compulsory education became widespread by the end of the century. This was an important development, as children from all social classes could now receive a free, formal education. Compulsory education was intended to further national unity and to teach immigrants "American" values. It also arose because of industrialization, as an industrial economy demanded reading, writing, and math skills much more than an agricultural economy had.

Free, compulsory education, of course, applied only to primary and secondary schools. Until the mid-1900s, very few people went to college, and those who did typically came from fairly wealthy families. After World War II, however, college enrollments soared, and today more people are attending college than ever before, even though college attendance is still related to social class, as we shall discuss shortly.

An important theme emerges from this brief history: Until very recently in the record of history, formal schooling was restricted to wealthy males. This means that boys who were not white and rich were excluded from formal schooling, as were virtually all girls, whose education was supposed to take place informally at home. Today, as we will see, race, ethnicity, social class, and, to some extent, gender continue to affect both educational achievement and the amount of learning occurring in schools.



In colonial America, only about 10 percent of children went to school, and these children tended to come from wealthy families. After the Revolutionary War, new textbooks helped standardize spelling and pronunciation and promote patriotism and religious beliefs, but these textbooks also included negative stereotypes of Native Americans. Wikimedia Commons – public domain.

Education in the United States Today

Education in the United States is a massive social institution involving millions of people and billions of dollars. More than 75 million people, almost one-fourth of the US population, attend school at all levels. This number includes 40 million in grades pre-K through eighth grade, 16 million in high school, and 20 million in college (including graduate and professional school). They attend some 132,000 elementary and secondary schools and about 4,200 two-year and four-year colleges and universities and are taught by about 4.8 million teachers and professors (US Census Bureau, 2012).

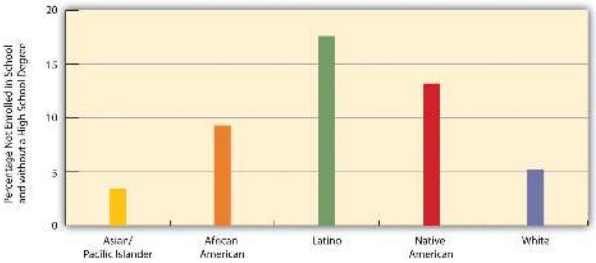
Correlates of Educational Attainment

About 65 percent of US high school graduates enroll in college the following fall. This is a very high figure by international standards, as college in many other industrial nations is reserved for the very small percentage of the population who pass rigorous entrance exams. They are the best of the brightest in their nations, whereas higher education in the United States is open to all who graduate high school. Even though that is true, our chances of achieving a college degree are greatly determined at birth, as social class and race and ethnicity substantially affect who goes to college. They affect whether students drop out of high school, in which case they do not go on to college; they affect the chances of getting good grades in school and good scores on college entrance exams; they affect whether a family can afford to send its children to college; and they affect the chances of staying in college and obtaining a degree versus dropping out. For all these reasons, educational attainment—how far one gets in school—depends heavily on family income and race/ethnicity (Tavernise, 2012). Family income, in fact, makes a much larger difference in educational attainment than it did during the 1960s.

Family Income and Race/Ethnicity

Government data readily show the effects of family income and race/ethnicity on educational attainment. Let's first look at how race and ethnicity affect the likelihood of dropping out of high school. Figure 11.1 "Race, Ethnicity, and High School Dropout Rate, Persons Ages 16–24, 2009 (Percentage Not Enrolled in School and without a High School Degree)" shows the percentage of people ages 16–24 who are not enrolled in school and who have not received a high school degree. The dropout rate is highest for Latinos and Native Americans and lowest for Asians and whites.

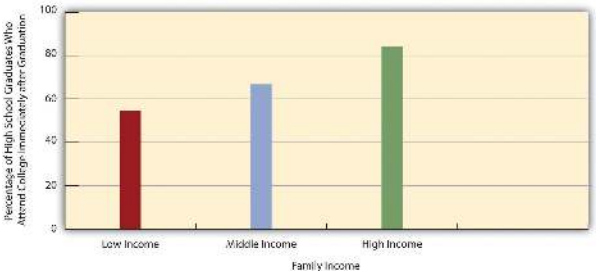
Figure 11.1 Race, Ethnicity, and High School Dropout Rate, Persons Ages 16–24, 2009 (Percentage Not Enrolled in School and without a High School Degree)



Source: Aud, S., Hussar, W., Kena, G., Bianco, K., Frohlich, L., Kemp, J., et al. (2011). *The condition of education 2011*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Now let's look at how family income affects the likelihood of attending college, a second benchmark of educational attainment. Figure 11.2 "Family Income and Percentage of High School Graduates Who Attend College Immediately after Graduation, 2009" shows the relationship between family income and the percentage of high school graduates who enroll in college immediately following graduation: Students from families in the highest income bracket are more likely than those in the lowest bracket to attend college. This "income gap" in college entry has become larger in recent decades (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).

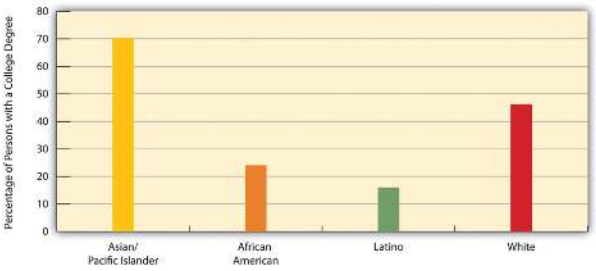
Figure 11.2 Family Income and Percentage of High School Graduates Who Attend College Immediately after Graduation, 2009



Source: Aud, S., Hussar, W., Kena, G., Bianco, K., Frohlich, L., Kemp, J., et al. (2011). *The condition of education 2011*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Finally, let's examine how race and ethnicity affect the likelihood of obtaining a college degree, a third benchmark of educational attainment. Figure 11.3 "Race, Ethnicity, and Percentage of Persons Ages 25 or Older with a Four-Year College Degree, 2010" shows the relationship between race/ethnicity and the percentage of persons 25 or older who have a bachelor's or master's degree. This relationship is quite strong, with African Americans and Latinos least likely to have a degree, and whites and especially Asians/Pacific Islanders most likely to have a degree.

Figure 11.3 Race, Ethnicity, and Percentage of Persons Ages 25 or Older with a Four-Year College Degree, 2010



Source: Aud, S., Hussar, W., Kena, G., Bianco, K., Frohlich, L., Kemp, J., et al. (2011). *The condition of education 2011*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Explaining the Racial/Ethnic Gap in Educational Attainment

Why do African Americans and Latinos have lower educational attainment? Four factors are commonly cited: (a) the underfunded and otherwise inadequate schools that children in both groups often attend; (b) the higher poverty of their families and lower education of their parents that often leave children ill prepared for school even before they enter kindergarten; (c) racial discrimination; and (d) the fact that African American and Latino families are especially likely to live in very poor neighborhoods (Ballantine & Hammack, 2012; Yeung & Pfeiffer, 2009).

The last two factors, racial discrimination and residence in high-poverty neighborhoods, need additional explanation. At least three forms of racial discrimination impair educational attainment (Mickelson, 2003). The first form involves tracking. As we discuss later, students tracked into vocational or general curricula tend to learn less and have lower educational attainment than those tracked into a faster-learning, academic curriculum. Because students of color are more likely to be tracked "down" rather than "up," their school performance and educational attainment suffer.

The second form of racial discrimination involves school discipline. As we also discuss later, students of color are more likely than white students to be suspended, expelled, or otherwise disciplined for similar types of misbehavior. Because such discipline again reduces school performance and educational attainment, this form of discrimination helps explain the lower attainment of African American and Latino students.

The third form involves teachers' expectations of students. As our later discussion of the symbolic interactionist perspective on education examines further, teachers' expectations of students affect how much students learn. Research finds that teachers have lower expectations for their African American and Latino students, and that these expectations help to lower how much these students learn.

Turning to residence in high-poverty neighborhoods, it may be apparent that poor neighborhoods have lower educational attainment because they have inadequate schools, but poor neighborhoods matter for reasons beyond their schools' quality (Kirk & Sampson, 2011; Wodtke, Harding, & Elwert, 2011). First, because many adults in these neighborhoods are high school dropouts and/or unemployed, children in these neighborhoods lack adult role models for educational attainment. Second, poor neighborhoods tend to be racially and ethnically segregated. Latino children in these neighborhoods are less likely to speak English well because they lack native English-speaking friends, and African American children are more likely to speak "black English" than conventional English; both language problems impede school success.

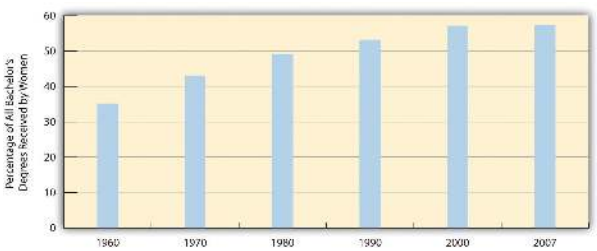
Third, poor neighborhoods have higher rates of violence and other deviant behaviors than wealthier neighborhoods. Children in these neighborhoods thus are more likely to experience high levels of stress, to engage in these behaviors themselves (which reduces their attention and commitment to their schooling), and to be victims of violence (which increases their stress and can impair their neurological development). Crime in these neighborhoods also tends to reduce teacher commitment and parental involvement in their children's schooling. Finally, poor neighborhoods are more likely to have environmental problems such as air pollution and toxic levels of lead paint; these problems lead to asthma and other health problems among children (as well as adults), which impairs the children's ability to learn and do well in school.

For all these reasons, then, children in poor neighborhoods are at much greater risk for lower educational attainment. As a recent study of this risk concluded, "Sustained exposure to disadvantaged neighborhoods…throughout the entire childhood life course has a devastating impact on the chances of graduating from high school" (Wodtke et al., 2011, p. 731). If these neighborhoods are not improved, the study continued, "concentrated neighborhood poverty will likely continue to hamper the development of future generations of children" (Wodtke et al., 2011, p. 733).

Gender

Gender also affects educational attainment. If we do not take age into account, slightly more men than women have a college degree: 30.3 percent of men and 29.6 percent of women. This difference reflects the fact that women were less likely than men in earlier generations to go to college. But today there is a gender difference in the other direction: Women now earn more than 57 percent of all bachelor's degrees, up from just 35 percent in 1960 (see Figure 11.4 "Percentage of All Bachelor's Degrees Received by Women, 1960–2009"). This difference reflects the fact that females are more likely than males to graduate high school, to attend college after high school graduation, and to obtain a degree after starting college (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).

Figure 11.4 Percentage of All Bachelor's Degrees Received by Women, 1960–2009



Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

Impact of Education on Income

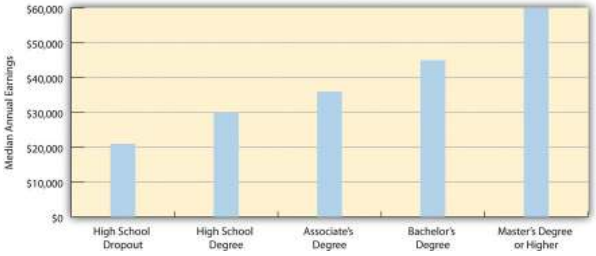


On the average, college graduates have much higher annual earnings than high school graduates. How much does this consequence affect why you decided to go to college? Merrimack College – Commencement 2012 – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Have you ever applied for a job that required a high school degree? Are you going to college in part because you realize you will need a college degree for a higher-paying job? As these questions imply, the United States is a credential society (Collins, 1979). This means at least two things. First, a high school or college degree (or beyond) indicates that a person has acquired the needed knowledge and skills for various jobs. Second, a degree at some level is a requirement for most jobs. As you know full well, a college degree today is a virtual requirement for a decent-paying job. The ante has been upped considerably over the years: In earlier generations, a high school degree, if even that, was all that was needed, if only because so few people graduated from high school to begin with. With so many people graduating from high school today, a high school degree is not worth as much. Then too, today's society increasingly requires skills and knowledge that only a college education brings.

A credential society also means that people with more formal education achieve higher incomes. Annual earnings are indeed much higher for people with more education (see Figure 11.5 "Educational Attainment and Median Annual Earnings, Ages 25–34, 2009"). As earlier chapters indicated, gender and race/ethnicity affect the payoff we get from our education, but education itself still makes a huge difference for our incomes.

Figure 11.5 Educational Attainment and Median Annual Earnings, Ages 25–34, 2009



Source: Aud, S., Hussar, W., Kena, G., Bianco, K., Frohlich, L., Kemp, J., et al. (2011). *The condition of education 2011*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Impact of Education on Mortality

Beyond income, education also affects at what age people tend to die. Simply put, people with higher levels of education tend to die later in life, and those with lower levels tend to die earlier (Miech, Pampel, Kim, & Rogers, 2011). The reasons for this disparity are complex, but two reasons stand out. First, more highly educated people are less likely to smoke and engage in other unhealthy activities, and they are more likely to exercise and to engage in other healthy activities and also to eat healthy diets. Second, they have better access to high-quality health care.

How the US Education System Compares Internationally

The United States has many of the top colleges and universities and secondary schools in the world, and many of the top professors and teachers. In these respects, the US education system is "the best of systems." But in other respects, it is "the worst of systems."

When we compare educational attainment in the United States to that in the world's other democracies, the United States lags behind its international peers.

Differences in the educational systems of the world's democracies make exact comparisons difficult, but one basic measure of educational attainment is the percentage of a nation's population that has graduated high school. A widely cited comparison involves the industrial nations that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Of the twenty-eight nations for which OECD has high school graduation data, the United States ranks only twenty-first, with a graduation rate of 76 percent (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). In contrast, several nations, including Finland, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom have graduation rates of at least 90 percent. If we limit the comparison to the OECD nations that compose the world's wealthy democracies (see Chapter 2 "Poverty") to which the United States is most appropriately compared, the United States ranks only thirteenth out of sixteen such nations.

OECD also collects and publishes data on proficiency in mathematics, reading, and science among 15-year-olds in its member nations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). In reading and science, the United States ranks only at the average for all OECD nations, while the US score for mathematics ranks below the OECD average. Compared to their counterparts in other industrial nations, then, American 15-year-olds are only average or below average for these three important areas of study. Taking into account high school graduation rates and these proficiency rankings, the United States is far from the world leader in the quality of education. The Note 11.8 "Lessons from Other Societies" box examines what the United States might learn from the sterling example of Finland's education system.

Lessons from Other Societies

Successful Schooling in Finland

Finland is widely regarded as having perhaps the top elementary and secondary education system in the world. Its model of education offers several important lessons for US education. As a recent analysis of Finland's schools put it, "The country's achievements in education have other nations doing their homework."

To understand the lessons to be learned from Finland, we should go back several decades to the 1970s, when Finland's education system was below par, with its students scoring below the international average in mathematics and science. Moreover, urban schools in Finland outranked rural schools, and wealthy students performed much better than low-income students. Today, Finnish students rank at the top in international testing, and low-income students do almost as well as wealthy students.

Finland's education system ranks so highly today because it took several measures to improve its education system. First, and perhaps most important, Finland raised teachers' salaries, required all teachers to have a three-year master's degree, and paid all costs, including a living stipend, for the graduate education needed to achieve this degree. These changes helped to greatly increase the number of teachers, especially the number of highly qualified teachers, and Finland now has more teachers for every 1,000 residents than does the United States. Unlike the United States, teaching is considered a highly prestigious profession in Finland, and the application process to become a teacher is very competitive. The college graduates who apply for one of Finland's eight graduate programs in teaching typically rank in the top 10 percent of their class, and only 5–15 percent of their applications are accepted. A leading Finnish educator observed, "It's more difficult getting into teacher education than law or medicine." In contrast, US students who become teachers tend to have lower SAT scores than those who enter other professions, they only need a four-year degree, and their average salaries are lower than other professionals with a similar level of education.

Second, Finland revamped its curriculum to emphasize critical thinking skills, reduced the importance of scores on standardized tests and then eliminated standardized testing altogether, and eliminated academic tracking before tenth grade. Unlike the United States, Finland no longer ranks students, teachers, or schools according to scores on standardized tests because these tests are no longer given.

Third, Finland built many more schools to enable the average school to have fewer students. Today the typical school has fewer than three hundred students, and class sizes are smaller than those found in the United States.

Fourth, Finland increased funding of its schools so that its schools are now well maintained and well equipped. Whereas many US schools are decrepit, Finnish schools are decidedly in good repair.

Finally, Finland provided free medical and dental care for children and their families and expanded other types of social services, including three years of paid maternity leave and subsidized day care, as the country realized that children's health and home environment play critical roles in their educational achievement.

These and other changes helped propel Finland's education system to a leading position among the world's industrial nations. As the United States ponders how best to improve its own education system, it may have much to learn from Finland's approach to how children should learn.

Sources: Abrams, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Eggers & Calegari, 2011; Hancock, 2011; Ravitch, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011

Key Takeaways

- Until very recently in the record of history, formal schooling was restricted to wealthy males.
- Students from low-income backgrounds tend to have lower educational attainment than students from wealthier backgrounds.
- African Americans and Latinos tend to have lower educational attainment than non-Latino whites and Asians.
- Gender influences educational attainment in a complex fashion; older women have lower educational attainment than older men, but younger women have greater educational attainment than younger men.
- The United States ranks behind many other industrial nations in the quality of the education its citizens receive.

For Your Review

1. Do you think the government should take steps to try to reduce racial and ethnic differences in education, or do you think it should take a hands-off approach? Explain your answer.
2. Should the government require that children receive a formal education, as it now does, or should it be up to parents to decide whether their children should receive a formal education? Explain your answer.

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8.2: Sociological Perspectives on Education

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. List the major functions of education.
2. Explain the problems that conflict theory sees in education.
3. Describe how symbolic interactionism understands education.

The major sociological perspectives on education fall nicely into the functional, conflict, and symbolic interactionist approaches (Ballantine & Hammack, 2012). Table 11.1 “Theory Snapshot” summarizes what these approaches say.

Table 11.1 Theory Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Functionalism	Education serves several functions for society. These include (a) socialization, (b) social integration, (c) social placement, and (d) social and cultural innovation. Latent functions include child care, the establishment of peer relationships, and lowering unemployment by keeping high school students out of the full-time labor force. Problems in the educational institution harm society because all these functions cannot be completely fulfilled.
Conflict theory	Education promotes social inequality through the use of tracking and standardized testing and the impact of its “hidden curriculum.” Schools differ widely in their funding and learning conditions, and this type of inequality leads to learning disparities that reinforce social inequality.
Symbolic interactionism	This perspective focuses on social interaction in the classroom, on the playground, and in other school venues. Specific research finds that social interaction in schools affects the development of gender roles and that teachers’ expectations of pupils’ intellectual abilities affect how much pupils learn. Certain educational problems have their basis in social interaction and expectations.

The Functions of Education

Functional theory stresses the functions that education serves in fulfilling a society’s various needs. Perhaps the most important function of education is *socialization*. If children are to learn the norms, values, and skills they need to function in society, then education is a primary vehicle for such learning. Schools teach the three Rs (reading, ’riting, ’rithmetic), as we all know, but they also teach many of the society’s norms and values. In the United States, these norms and values include respect for authority, patriotism (remember the Pledge of Allegiance?), punctuality, and competition (for grades and sports victories).

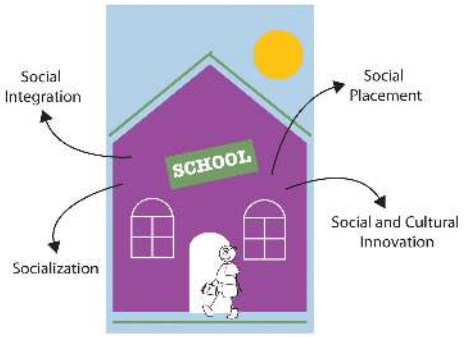
A second function of education is *social integration*. For a society to work, functionalists say, people must subscribe to a common set of beliefs and values. As we saw, the development of such common views was a goal of the system of free, compulsory education that developed in the nineteenth century. Thousands of immigrant children in the United States today are learning English, US history, and other subjects that help prepare them for the workforce and integrate them into American life.

A third function of education is *social placement*. Beginning in grade school, students are identified by teachers and other school officials either as bright and motivated or as less bright and even educationally challenged. Depending on how they are identified, children are taught at the level that is thought to suit them best. In this way, they are presumably prepared for their later station in life. Whether this process works as well as it should is an important issue, and we explore it further when we discuss school tracking later in this chapter.

Social and cultural innovation is a fourth function of education. Our scientists cannot make important scientific discoveries and our artists and thinkers cannot come up with great works of art, poetry, and prose unless they have first been educated in the many

subjects they need to know for their chosen path.

Figure 11.6 The Functions of Education



Schools ideally perform many important functions in modern society. These include socialization, social integration, social placement, and social and cultural innovation.

Education also involves several *latent* functions, functions that are by-products of going to school and receiving an education rather than a direct effect of the education itself. One of these is *child care*: Once a child starts kindergarten and then first grade, for several hours a day the child is taken care of for free. The *establishment of peer relationships* is another latent function of schooling. Most of us met many of our friends while we were in school at whatever grade level, and some of those friendships endure the rest of our lives. A final latent function of education is that it *keeps millions of high school students out of the full-time labor force*. This fact keeps the unemployment rate lower than it would be if they were in the labor force.

Because education serves so many manifest and latent functions for society, problems in schooling ultimately harm society. For education to serve its many functions, various kinds of reforms are needed to make our schools and the process of education as effective as possible.

? Exercise 8.2.1

Which of the following is not a function of education as described above?

a) social placement

b) social and cultural innovation

c) social development

d) socialization

Answer

Correct Answer: C

Education and Inequality

Conflict theory does not dispute the functions just described. However, it does give some of them a different slant by emphasizing how education also perpetuates social inequality (Ballantine & Hammack, 2012). One example of this process involves the function of social placement. When most schools begin tracking their students in grade school, the students thought by their teachers to be bright are placed in the faster tracks (especially in reading and arithmetic), while the slower students are placed in the slower tracks; in high school, three common tracks are the college track, vocational track, and general track.

Such *tracking* does have its advantages; it helps ensure that bright students learn as much as their abilities allow them, and it helps ensure that slower students are not taught over their heads. But conflict theorists say that tracking also helps perpetuate social inequality by *locking* students into faster and lower tracks. Worse yet, several studies show that students' social class and race and ethnicity affect the track into which they are placed, even though their intellectual abilities and potential should be the only things that matter: White, middle-class students are more likely to be tracked "up," while poorer students and students of color are more likely to be tracked "down." Once they are tracked, students learn more if they are tracked up and less if they are tracked down. The latter tend to lose self-esteem and begin to think they have little academic ability and thus do worse in school because they

were tracked down. In this way, tracking is thought to be good for those tracked up and bad for those tracked down. Conflict theorists thus say that tracking perpetuates social inequality based on social class and race and ethnicity (Ansalone, 2010).

Conflict theorists add that standardized tests are culturally biased and thus also help perpetuate social inequality (Grodsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008). According to this criticism, these tests favor white, middle-class students whose socioeconomic status and other aspects of their backgrounds have afforded them various experiences that help them answer questions on the tests.

A third critique of conflict theory involves the quality of schools. As we will see later in this chapter, US schools differ mightily in their resources, learning conditions, and other aspects, all of which affect how much students can learn in them. Simply put, schools are unequal, and their very inequality helps perpetuate inequality in the larger society. Children going to the worst schools in urban areas face many more obstacles to their learning than those going to well-funded schools in suburban areas. Their lack of learning helps ensure they remain trapped in poverty and its related problems.

In a fourth critique, conflict theorists say that schooling teaches a hidden curriculum, by which they mean a set of values and beliefs that support the status quo, including the existing social hierarchy (Booher-Jennings, 2008). Although no one plots this behind closed doors, our schoolchildren learn patriotic values and respect for authority from the books they read and from various classroom activities.

A final critique is historical and concerns the rise of free, compulsory education during the nineteenth century (Cole, 2008). Because compulsory schooling began in part to prevent immigrants' values from corrupting "American" values, conflict theorists see its origins as smacking of *ethnocentrism* (the belief that one's own group is superior to another group). They also criticize its intention to teach workers the skills they needed for the new industrial economy. Because most workers were very poor in this economy, these critics say, compulsory education served the interests of the upper/capitalist class much more than it served the interests of workers.

Symbolic Interactionism and School Behavior

Symbolic interactionist studies of education examine social interaction in the classroom, on the playground, and in other school venues. These studies help us understand what happens in the schools themselves, but they also help us understand how what occurs in school is relevant for the larger society. Some studies, for example, show how children's playground activities reinforce gender-role socialization. Girls tend to play more cooperative games, while boys play more competitive sports (Thorne, 1993) (see Chapter 4 "Gender Inequality").

Applying Social Research

Assessing the Impact of Small Class Size

Do elementary school students fare better if their classes have fewer students rather than more students? It is not easy to answer this important question, because any differences found between students in small classes and those in larger classes might not necessarily reflect class size. Rather, they may reflect other factors. For example, perhaps the most motivated, educated parents ask that their child be placed in a smaller class and that their school goes along with this request. Perhaps teachers with more experience favor smaller classes and are able to have their principals assign them to these classes, while new teachers are assigned larger classes. These and other possibilities mean that any differences found between the two class sizes might reflect the qualities and skills of students and/or teachers in these classes, and not class size itself.

For this reason, the ideal study of class size would involve *random assignment* of both students and teachers to classes of different size. (Recall that Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems" discusses the benefits of random assignment.) Fortunately, a notable study of this type exists.

The study, named Project STAR (Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio), began in Tennessee in 1985 and involved 79 public schools and 11,600 students and 1,330 teachers who were all randomly assigned to either a smaller class (13–17 students) or a larger class (22–25 students). The random assignment began when the students entered kindergarten and lasted through third grade; in fourth grade, the experiment ended, and all the students were placed into the larger class size. The students are now in their early thirties, and many aspects of their educational and personal lives have been followed since the study began.

Some of the more notable findings of this multiyear study include the following:

- While in grades K–3, students in the smaller classes had higher average scores on standardized tests.
- Students who had been in the smaller classes continued to have higher average test scores in grades 4–7.
- Students who had been in the smaller classes were more likely to complete high school and also to attend college.

- Students who had been in the smaller classes were less likely to be arrested during adolescence.
- Students who had been in the smaller classes were more likely in their twenties to be married and to live in wealthier neighborhoods.
- White girls who had been in the smaller classes were less likely to have a teenage birth than white girls who had been in the larger classes.

Why did small class size have these benefits? Two reasons seem likely. First, in a smaller class, there are fewer students to disrupt the class by talking, fighting, or otherwise taking up the teacher's time. More learning can thus occur in smaller classes. Second, kindergarten teachers are better able to teach noncognitive skills (cooperating, listening, sitting still) in smaller classes, and these skills can have an impact many years later.

Regardless of the reasons, it was the experimental design of Project STAR that enabled its findings to be attributed to class size rather than to other factors. Because small class size does seem to help in many ways, the United States should try to reduce class size in order to improve student performance and later life outcomes.

Sources: Chetty et al., 2011; Schanzenbach, 2006



Research guided by the symbolic interactionist perspective suggests that teachers' expectations may influence how much their students learn. When teachers expect little of their students, their students tend to learn less. ijiwaru jimbo – Pre-school colour pack – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Another body of research shows that teachers' views about students can affect how much the students learn. When teachers think students are smart, they tend to spend more time with these students, to call on them, and to praise them when they give the right answer. Not surprisingly, these students learn more because of their teachers' behavior. But when teachers think students are less bright, they tend to spend less time with these students and to act in a way that leads them to learn less. Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson (1968) conducted a classic study of this phenomenon. They tested a group of students at the beginning of the school year and told their teachers which students were bright and which were not. They then tested the students again at the end of the school year. Not surprisingly, the bright students had learned more during the year than the less bright ones. But it turned out that the researchers had randomly decided which students would be designated bright and less bright. Because the "bright" students learned more during the school year without actually being brighter at the beginning, their teachers' behavior must have been the reason. In fact, their teachers did spend more time with them and praised them more often than was true for the "less bright" students. This process helps us understand why tracking is bad for the students tracked down.

Other research in the symbolic interactionist tradition focuses on how teachers treat girls and boys. Many studies find that teachers call on and praise boys more often (Jones & Dindia, 2004). Teachers do not do this consciously, but their behavior nonetheless sends an implicit message to girls that math and science are not for them and that they are not suited to do well in these subjects. This body of research has stimulated efforts to educate teachers about the ways in which they may unwittingly send these messages and about strategies they could use to promote greater interest and achievement by girls in math and science (Battey, Kafai, Nixon, & Kao, 2007).

Key Takeaways

- According to the functional perspective, education helps socialize children and prepare them for their eventual entrance into the larger society as adults.
- The conflict perspective emphasizes that education reinforces inequality in the larger society.

- The symbolic interactionist perspective focuses on social interaction in the classroom, on school playgrounds, and at other school-related venues. Social interaction contributes to gender-role socialization, and teachers' expectations may affect their students' performance.

For Your Review

1. Review how the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist perspectives understand and explain education. Which of these three approaches do you most prefer? Why?

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8.3: Issues and Problems in Elementary and Secondary Education

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe how schooling in the United States helps perpetuate social inequality.
2. Explain the difference between de jure segregation and de facto segregation.
3. Summarize the evidence on the effectiveness of single-sex education.
4. Describe the extent of school violence and the controversy over zero-tolerance policies.
5. Discuss how and why social inequality in the larger society manifests itself in higher education.

The *elementary* (K–8) and *secondary* (9–12) education system today faces many issues and problems of interest not just to educators and families but also to sociologists and other social scientists. We cannot discuss all these issues here, but we will highlight some of the most interesting and important.

Schools and Inequality

Earlier we mentioned that schools differ greatly in their funding, their conditions, and other aspects. Noted author and education critic Jonathan Kozol refers to these differences as "savage inequalities," to quote the title of one of his books (Kozol, 1991). Kozol's concern over inequality in the schools stemmed from his experience as a young teacher in a public elementary school in a Boston inner-city neighborhood in the 1960s. Kozol was shocked to see that his school was literally falling apart. The building itself was decrepit, with plaster falling off the walls and bathrooms and other facilities substandard. Classes were large, and the school was so overcrowded that Kozol's fourth-grade class had to meet in an auditorium, which it shared with another class, the school choir, and, for a time, a group of students practicing for the Christmas play. Kozol's observations led to the writing of his first award-winning book, *Death at an Early Age* (Kozol, 1967).

Kozol (1991) later traveled around the United States and systematically compared public schools in several cities' inner-city neighborhoods to those in the cities' suburbs. Everywhere he went, he found great discrepancies in school spending and in the quality of instruction. In schools in Camden, New Jersey, for example, spending per pupil was less than half the amount spent in the nearby, much wealthier town of Princeton. Chicago and New York City schools spent only about half the amount that some of the schools in nearby suburbs spent.

These numbers were reflected in other differences Kozol found when he visited city and suburban schools. In East St. Louis, Illinois, where most of the residents are poor and almost all are African American, schools had to shut down once because of sewage backups. The high school's science labs were thirty to fifty years out of date when Kozol visited them; the biology lab had no dissecting kits. A history teacher had 110 students but only twenty-six textbooks, some of which were missing their first one hundred pages. At one of the city's junior high schools, many window frames lacked any glass, and the hallways were dark because light bulbs were missing or not working. Visitors could smell urinals one hundred feet from the bathroom.

Contrast these conditions with those Kozol observed in suburban schools. A high school in a Chicago suburb had seven gyms and an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Students there could take classes in seven foreign languages. A suburban New Jersey high school offered fourteen AP courses, fencing, golf, ice hockey, and lacrosse, and the school district there had ten music teachers and an extensive music program.

From his observations, Kozol concluded that the United States is shortchanging its children in poor rural and urban areas. As we saw in Chapter 2 "Poverty", poor children start out in life with many strikes against them. The schools they attend compound their problems and help ensure that the American ideal of equal opportunity for all remains just that—an ideal—rather than a reality. As Kozol (1991, p. 233) observed, "All our children ought to be allowed a stake in the enormous richness of America. Whether they were born to poor white Appalachians or to wealthy Texans, to poor black people in the Bronx or to rich people in Manhasset or Winnetka, they are all quite wonderful and innocent when they are small. We soil them needlessly."

Although the book in which Kozol reported these conditions was published more than twenty years ago, ample evidence (including the news story about Baltimore's schools that began this chapter) shows these conditions persist today. A recent news report discussed public schools in Washington, DC. More than 75 percent of the schools in the city had a leaking roof at the time the report was published, and 87 percent had electrical problems, some of which involved shocks or sparks. Most of the schools' cafeterias—85 percent—had health violations, including peeling paint near food and rodent and roach infestation. Thousands of requests for building repairs, including 1,100 labeled "urgent" or "dangerous," had been waiting more than a year to be addressed.

More than one-third of the schools had a mouse infestation, and in one elementary school, there were so many mice that the students gave them names and drew their pictures. An official with the city's school system said, "I don't know if anybody knows the magnitude of problems at D.C. public schools. It's mind-boggling" (Keating & Haynes, 2007).

Large funding differences in the nation's schools also endure. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for example, annual per-pupil expenditure was $10,878 in 2010; in nearby suburban Lower Merion Township, it was $21,110, or 95 percent higher than Philadelphia's expenditure (Federal Education Budget Project, 2012).

Teacher salaries are related to these funding differences. Salaries in urban schools in low-income neighborhoods are markedly lower than those in schools in wealthier neighborhoods (Dillon, 2011). As a result, teachers at the low-income schools tend to be inexperienced teachers just out of college. All things equal, they are less likely than their counterparts at wealthier schools to be effective teachers.



Jonathan Kozol has written movingly of "savage inequalities" in American schools arising from large differences in their funding and in the condition of their physical facilities. Thomas Hawk – El Paso High School – CC BY-NC 2.0; Nitram242 – Detroit School – CC BY 2.0.

People Making a Difference

Teaching Young Students about Science and Conservation

Since 1999, the Ocean Discovery Institute (ODI) has taught more than 40,000 public school students in a low-income San Diego neighborhood about the ocean and the environment. Most of the students are Latino, and a growing number are recent immigrants from Southeast Asia and East Africa. By learning about ocean science, the students also learn something about geology, physics, and other sciences. ODI's program has grown over the years, and it now services more than 5,000 students annually in ten schools. To accomplish its mission, ODI engages in several kinds of activities.

First, ODI instructors teach hands-on marine science activities to students in grades 3–6. They also consult closely with the schools' teachers about the science curriculum taught in the schools.

Second, ODI runs an after-school program in which they provide marine science–based lessons as well as academic, social, and college-entry support to approximately sixty students in grades 6–12.

Third, ODI takes about twenty high school students every summer to the Sea of Cortez in Baja California, Mexico, for an intensive five-week research experience at a field research station. Before they do so, they are trained for several weeks in laboratory and field research procedures, and they also learn how to swim and snorkel. After they arrive at the field research station, they divide into three research teams; each team works on a different project under the guidance of ODI instructors and university and government scientists. A recent project, which won an award from the World Wildlife Fund, has focused on reducing the number of sea turtles that are accidentally caught in fishing nets.

The instruction provided by ODI has changed the lives of many students. Perhaps most notably, about 80 percent of the students who have participated in the after-school or summer program have attended a four-year college or university (with almost all declaring a major in one of the sciences), compared to less than one-third of students in their schools who have not participated in these programs. One summer program student, whose parents were deported by the government, recalls the experience fondly: "I have learned to become independent, and I pushed myself to try new things. Now I know I can overcome barriers and take chances…I am prepared to overcome challenges and follow my dreams."

In 2011, ODI was one of three organizations that received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Mentoring. Several ODI officials and students traveled to the White House to take part in various events and accept the award from President Obama. As this award attests, the Ocean Discovery Institute is making a striking difference in the lives of

low-income San Diego students. For further information, visit http://www.oceandiscoveryinstitute.org. (Full disclosure: The author's son works for ODI.)

Source: Ocean Discovery Institute, 2011

School Segregation

A related issue to school inequality is school racial segregation. Before 1954, schools in the South were racially segregated by law (de jure segregation). Communities and states had laws that dictated which schools white children attended and which schools African American children attended. Schools were either all white or all African American, and, inevitably, white schools were much better funded than African American schools. Then in 1954, the US Supreme Court outlawed *de jure* school segregation in its famous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Southern school districts fought this decision with legal machinations, and *de jure* school segregation did not really end in the South until the civil rights movement won its major victories a decade later.

Meanwhile, northern schools were also segregated; decades after the *Brown* decision, they have become even more segregated. School segregation in the North stemmed, both then and now, not from the law but from neighborhood residential patterns. Because children usually go to schools near their homes, if adjacent neighborhoods are all white or all African American, then the schools for these neighborhoods will also be all white or all African American, or mostly so. This type of segregation is called de facto segregation.



Many children today attend schools that are racially segregated because of neighborhood residential patterns. halfrain – Swings – CC BY-SA 2.0.

Today many children continue to go to schools that are segregated because of neighborhood residential patterns, a situation that Kozol (2005) calls "apartheid schooling." About 40 percent of African American and Latino children attend schools that are very segregated (at least 90 percent of their students are of color); this level of segregation is higher than it was four decades ago. Although such segregation is legal, it still results in schools that are all African American and/or all Latino and that suffer severely from lack of funding, poor physical facilities, and poorly paid teachers (Orfield, Siegel-Hawley, & Kucsera, 2011).

During the 1960s and 1970s, states, municipalities, and federal courts tried to reduce de facto segregation by busing urban African American children to suburban white schools and, less often, by busing white suburban children to African American urban schools. Busing inflamed passions as perhaps few other issues did during those decades (Lukas, 1985). White parents opposed it because they did not want their children bused to urban schools, where, they feared, the children would be unsafe and receive an inferior education. The racial prejudice that many white parents shared heightened their concerns over these issues. African American parents were more likely to see the need for busing, but they, too, wondered about its merits, especially because it was their children who were bused most often and faced racial hostility when they entered formerly all-white schools.

As one possible solution to reduce school segregation, some cities have established *magnet schools*, schools for high-achieving students of all races to which the students and their families apply for admission (Vopat, 2011). Although these schools do help some students whose families are poor and of color, their impact on school segregation has been minimal because the number of magnet schools is low and because they are open only to the very best students who, by definition, are also few in number. Some critics also say that magnet schools siphon needed resources from public school systems and that their reliance on standardized tests makes it difficult for African American and Latino students to gain admission.

School Choice: Education Vouchers and Charter Schools

Children who attend a public school ordinarily attend the school that is designated for the neighborhood in which they live, and they and their parents normally have little choice in the matter. One of the most popular but also controversial components of the school reform movement today is school choice, in which parents and their children, primarily from low-income families in urban areas, receive public funds to attend a school different from their neighborhood's school. School choice has two components. The first component involves *education vouchers*, which parents can use as tuition at private or parochial (religious) schools. The second component involves charter schools, which are public schools (because public funds pay for students' tuition) built and operated by for-profit companies. Students normally apply for admission to these schools; sometimes they are accepted based on their merit and potential, and sometimes they are accepted by lottery. Both components have strong advocates and fierce critics. We examine each component in turn.

Education Vouchers

Advocates of school choice programs involving education vouchers say they give low-income families an option for high-quality education they otherwise would be unable to afford. These programs, the advocates add, also help improve the public schools by forcing them to compete for students with their private and parochial counterparts. In order to keep a large number of parents from using vouchers to send their children to the latter schools, public schools have to upgrade their facilities, improve their instruction, and undertake other steps to make their brand of education an attractive alternative. In this way, school choice advocates argue, vouchers have a "competitive impact" that forces public schools to make themselves more attractive to prospective students (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011).

Critics of school choice programs say they harm the public schools by decreasing their enrollments and therefore their funding. Public schools do not have the money now to compete with private and parochial ones, nor will they have the money to compete with them if vouchers become more widespread. Critics also worry that voucher programs will lead to a "brain drain" of the most academically motivated children and families from low-income schools (Crone, 2011).

Because school choice programs and school voucher systems are still relatively new, scholars have not yet had time to assess whether they improve their students' academic achievement. Some studies do find small improvements, but methodological problems make it difficult to reach any firm conclusions at this point (DeLuca & Dayton, 2009). Although there is also little research on the impact of school choice programs on funding and other aspects of public school systems, some evidence does indicate a negative impact. In Milwaukee, for example, enrollment decline from the use of vouchers cost the school system $26 million in state aid during the 1990s, forcing a rise in property taxes to replace the lost funds. Because the students who left the Milwaukee school system came from most of its 157 public schools, only a few left any one school, diluting the voucher system's competitive impact. Thus although school choice programs may give some families alternatives to public schools, they might not have the competitive impact on public schools that their advocates claim, and they may cost public school systems state aid (Cooper, 1999).

Charter Schools

About 5,000 charter schools operate across the nation, with about 3 percent of American children attending them. Charter schools and their proponents claim that students fare better in these schools than in conventional public schools because of the charter schools' rigorous teaching methods, strong expectations for good behavior, small classrooms, and other advantages (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2012).

Critics say charter schools incur the same problems that education vouchers incur: They take some of the brightest students from a city's conventional public schools and lead to lower funding for these schools (Ravitch, 2010; Rosenfeld, 2012). Critics also cite research findings that charter schools do not in fact deliver the strong academic performance claimed by their advocates. For example, a study that compared test scores at charter schools in sixteen states with those at public schools found that the charter schools did worse overall: 17 percent of charter schools had better scores than public schools, 46 percent had scores similar to those of public schools, and 37 percent had lower scores (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009).

Even when charter school test scores are higher, there is the methodological problem that students are not randomly assigned to attend a charter school (Basile, 2010). It is thus possible that the students and parents who apply to charter schools are more highly motivated than those who do not. If so, the higher test scores found in some charter schools may reflect the motivation of the students attending these schools, and not necessarily the schools' teaching methods. It is also true that charter schools do not usually enroll students who know little English (because their parents are immigrants) and students with disabilities or other

problems. All such students often face difficulties in doing well in school. This is yet another possible reason that a small number of charter schools outperform public schools. Despite the popularity of charter schools, then, the academic case for them remains to be proven.

Single-Sex Schools and Classes

Before the late 1960s and early 1970s, many colleges and universities, including several highly selective campuses, were single-sex institutions. Since that time, almost all the male colleges and many of the female colleges have gone coed. A few women's colleges still remain, as their administrators and alumnae say that women can achieve much more in a women's college than in a coed institution. The issue of single-sex institutions has been more muted at the secondary school level, as most public schools have been coeducational since the advent of free, compulsory education during the nineteenth century. However, several private schools were single-sex ones from their outset, and many of these remain today. Still, the trend throughout the educational world was toward coeducation.



Single-sex schools and classes have become more popular for several reasons. The research so far indicates that single-sex education may be beneficial in certain respects for the students experiencing it. Wikimedia Commons – CC BY 3.0.

Since the 1990s, however, some education specialists have argued that single-sex secondary schools, or at least single-sex classes, might make sense for girls or for boys. In response, single-sex classes and single-sex schools have arisen in at least seventeen US cities. The argument for single-sex learning for girls rests on the same reasons advanced by advocates for women's colleges: Girls can do better academically, and perhaps especially in math and science classes, when they are by themselves. The argument for boys rests on a different set of reasons (National Association for Single Sex Public Education, 2011). Boys in classes with girls are more likely to act "macho" and thus to engage in disruptive behavior; in single-sex classes, boys thus behave better and are more committed to their studies. They also feel freer to exhibit an interest in music, the arts, and other subjects not usually thought of as "macho" topics. Furthermore, because the best students in coed schools are often girls, many boys tend to devalue academic success in coed settings and are more likely to value it in single-sex settings. Finally, in a boys-only setting, teachers can use examples and certain teaching techniques that boys may find especially interesting, such as the use of snakes to teach biology. To the extent that single-sex education may benefit boys for any of these reasons, these benefits are often thought to be highest for boys from families living in poverty or near poverty.

What does the research evidence say about single-sex schooling's benefits? A review of several dozen studies concluded that the results of single-sex schooling are mixed overall but that there are slightly more favorable outcomes for single-sex schools compared to coeducational schools (US Department of Education, 2005). However, the review noted that methodological problems limited the value of the studies it examined. For example, none of the studies involved random assignment of students to single-sex or coeducational schooling. Further, all the studies involved high school students and a majority involved students in Catholic schools. This limited scope prompted the call for additional studies of younger students and those in public schools.

Another review of the research evidence was more critical of single-sex schooling (Halpern et al., 2011). This review concluded that such schooling does not benefit girls or boys and in fact does them harm by reinforcing gender-role stereotypes. Boys in all-boy classes become more aggressive, the review said, and girls in all-girl classes become more feminine. The review also argued that single-sex schooling is based on a faulty, outdated understanding of how girls and boys learn and function. Drawing on this review and other evidence, two critics of single-sex education recently concluded, "So there is a veritable mountain of evidence, growing every day, that the single-sex classroom is not a magic bullet to save American education. And scant evidence that it heightens the academic achievement of girls and boys" (Barnett & Rivers, 2012).

Children and Our Future

The Importance of Preschool and Summer Learning Programs for Low-Income Children

The first few years of life are absolutely critical for a child's neurological and cognitive development. What happens, or doesn't happen, before ages 5 and 6 can have lifelong consequences for a child's educational attainment, adolescent behavior, and adult employment and family life. However, as this chapter and previous chapters emphasize, low-income children face many kinds of obstacles during this critical phase of their lives. Among other problems, their families are often filled with stressful life events that impair their physical and mental health and neurological development, and their parents read and talk to them much less on the average than wealthier parents do. These difficulties in turn lower their school performance and educational attainment, with negative repercussions continuing into adulthood.

To counteract these problems and enhance low-income children's ability to do well in school, two types of programs have been repeatedly shown to be very helpful and even essential. The first is *preschool*, a general term for semiformal early learning programs that take place roughly between ages 3 and 5. As the name of the famous Head Start program implies, preschool is meant to help prepare low-income children for kindergarten and beyond. Depending on the program, preschool involves group instruction and play for children, developmental and health screening, and other components. Many European nations have high-quality preschool programs that are free or heavily subsidized, but these programs are, by comparison, much less prevalent in the United States and often more costly for parents.

Preschool in the United States has been shown to have positive benefits that extend well into adulthood. For example, children who participate in Head Start and certain other programs are more likely years later to graduate high school and attend college. They also tend to have higher salaries in their twenties, and they are less likely to engage in delinquency and crime.

The second program involves summer learning. Educators have discovered that summer is an important time for children's learning. During the summer, children from middle-class and wealthier families tend to read books, attend summer camp and/or engage in other group activities, and travel with their parents. When they return to school in September, their reading and math skills are higher than when the summer began. In contrast, low-income children are much less likely to have these types of summer experiences, and those who benefitted from school lunch programs during the academic year often go hungry. As a result, their reading and math skills are *lower* when they return to school than when the summer began.

In response to this discovery, many summer learning programs have been established. They generally last from four to eight weeks and are held at schools, campgrounds, community centers, or other locations. Although these programs are still relatively new and not yet thoroughly studied, a recent review concluded that they "can be effective and are likely to have positive impacts when they engage students in learning activities that are hands-on, enjoyable, and have real-world applications."

Preschool programs help children in the short and long term, and summer programs appear to have the same potential. Their expansion in the United States would benefit many aspects of American society. Because their economic benefits outweigh their economic costs, they are a "no-brainer" for comprehensive social reform efforts.

Sources: Child Trends, 2011; Downey & Gibbs, 2012; Garces, Thomas, & Currie, 2003; Reynolds, Temple, Ou, Arteaga, & White, 2011; Terzian & Moore, 2009

School Violence

The issue of school violence won major headlines during the 1990s, when many children, teachers, and other individuals died in the nation's schools. From 1992 until 1999, 248 students, teachers, and other people died from violent acts (including suicide) on school property, during travel to and from school, or at a school-related event, for an average of about thirty-five violent deaths per year (Zuckoff, 1999).

Several of these deaths occurred in mass shootings. In just a few examples, in December 1997, a student in a Kentucky high school shot and killed three students in a before-school prayer group. In March 1998, two middle school students in Arkansas pulled a fire alarm to evacuate their school and then shot and killed four students and one teacher as they emerged. Two months later, an Oregon high school student killed his parents and then went to his school cafeteria, where he killed two students and wounded twenty-two others. Against this backdrop, the infamous April 1999 school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, where two students murdered twelve other students and one teacher before killing themselves, seemed like the last straw. Within days, school after school across the nation installed metal detectors, located police at building entrances and in hallways, and began questioning or suspending students joking about committing violence. People everywhere wondered why the schools were

becoming so violent and what could be done about it. A newspaper headline summarized their concern: “fear is spread around nation” (Zuckoff, 1999).

Fortunately, school violence has declined since the 1990s, with fewer students and other people dying in the nation’s schools or being physically attacked. As this trend indicates, the risk of school violence should not be exaggerated: Statistically speaking, schools are very safe, especially in regard to fatal violence. Two kinds of statistics illustrate this point. First, less than 1 percent of all homicides involving school-aged children take place in or near school; virtually all children’s homicides occur in or near a child’s home. Second, an average of seventeen students are killed at school yearly; because about 56 million students attend US elementary and secondary schools, the chances are less than one in 3 million that a student will be killed at school. The annual rate of other serious school violence (rape and sexual assault, aggravated assault, and robbery) is only three crimes per one hundred students; although this is still three too many, it does indicate that 97 percent of students do not suffer these crimes (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2010).

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed thirteen people at Columbine High School in 1999 before killing themselves. Their massacre led people across the nation to question why violence was occurring in the schools and to wonder what could be done to reduce it.

Read more about it at; en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Er...an_klebold.jpg.

Bullying

Bullying is another problem in the nation’s elementary and secondary schools and is often considered a specific type of school violence. However, bullying can take many forms, such as taunting, that do not involve the use or threat of physical violence. As such, we consider bullying here as a separate problem while acknowledging its close relation to school violence.

First it will be helpful to define bullying. A common definition in the research literature is that bullying involves “physical and verbal attacks and harassment directed at a victim(s) by one student or a group of students over an extensive period of time” (Moon, Hwang, & McCluskey, 2011). Another definition is also helpful: “The use of one’s strength or popularity to injure, threaten or embarrass another person on purpose” (St. George, 2011). As these definitions suggest, bullying can be *physical* in nature (violence such as shoving and punching), *verbal* (teasing, taunting, and name calling), and *social* (spreading rumors, breaking up friendships, deliberately excluding someone from an activity). An additional form of bullying that has emerged in the last decade or so is cyberbullying. As its name implies, cyberbullying involves the use of the Internet, cell phones and smartphones, and other digital technologies to bully others (e.g., rumors can be spread via Facebook) (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

Bullying is a serious problem for at least two reasons. First, bullying is a common occurrence. About one-third of students report being victimized by some form of bullying during the school year; this rate of victimization is much higher than the 3 percent rate of victimization for school violence mentioned in the previous section (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2010).

Second, bullying can have serious consequences (Adams & Lawrence, 2011). Students who are bullied often experience psychological problems that can last into adulthood; these problems include anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleeplessness, and suicidal thoughts. Their physical health may also suffer. Their school performance (grades, attendance, and participation in school activities) may also decline. In addition, bullying victims sometimes respond by lashing out in violence; many of the mass school shootings of the 1990s were committed by male students who had been bullied.

A tragic example of bullying’s effects occurred in September 2011, when a 14-year-old boy in western New York, Jamey Rodemeyer, killed himself after being bullied by classmates because he was gay. Much of the bullying involved homophobic taunts on a social media site Jamey used, including comments such as “JAMIE IS STUPID, GAY, FAT ANND UGLY. HE MUST DIE!” and “I wouldn’t care if you died. No one would. So just do it: It would make everyone WAY more happier!” A week before he died, Jamey wrote on his site, “I always say how bullied I am, but no one listens. What do I have to do so people will listen to me?” (Tan, 2011).

School Discipline and Racial Discrimination

To reduce school violence and bullying, many school districts have adopted strict policies that specify harsh punishments. A common policy involves *zero-tolerance* for weapons; this type of policy calls for automatic suspension or expulsion of a student who has anything resembling a weapon for any reason. However, this policy is often applied too rigidly. In one example, a 6–year-old boy in Delaware excitedly took his new camping utensil—a combination of knife, fork, and spoon—from Cub Scouts to school to use at lunch. He was suspended for having a knife and ordered to spend forty-five days in reform school. His mother said her son

certainly posed no threat to anyone at school, but school officials replied that their policy had to be strictly enforced because it is difficult to determine who actually poses a threat from who does not (Urbina, 2009). In another case, a ninth grader took a knife and cigarette lighter away from a student who had used them to threaten a fellow classmate. The ninth grader was suspended for the rest of the school year for possessing a weapon, even though he had them only because he was protecting his classmate. According to a news story about this case, the school's reaction was "vigilance to a fault" (Walker, 2010, p. A12).

Zero-tolerance or other very strict policies are also in place in many schools for offenses such as drug use and possession, fighting, and classroom disruption. However well intended these policies may be, the research evidence suggests that they are ineffective in deterring the behavior they are meant to prevent, and may even be counterproductive. As one review of this evidence puts it, "It is not clear that zero tolerance policies are succeeding in improving school safety. In fact, some evidence…suggests that these policies actually may have an adverse effect on student academic and behavioral outcomes" (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011, p. 1). When students are suspended, their grades may suffer, and their commitment to schooling may lower; these problems in turn increase their likelihood of engaging in delinquency. The expelled students find it difficult to get back into a school and eventually achieve a high school degree. Their behavior, too, may become more unlawful as a result, and they also are more likely to face unemployment and low-paying jobs. Zero-tolerance school discipline thus seems to do much more harm than good.

In addition to deterrence, another reason for the adoption of strict discipline policies has been to avoid the racial discrimination that occurs when school officials have discretion in deciding which students should be suspended or expelled (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). In school districts with such discretion, African American students with weapons or "near weapons" (such as a small penknife) are more likely than white students with the same objects to be punished in this manner. However, a growing body of research finds that African American and Latino students are still more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled for similar misbehaviors (having a weapon, fighting, cursing a teacher, etc.) even in school districts with very strict discipline (Welch & Payne, 2010; Lewin, 2012). School discipline, then, is often racially discriminatory.

Key Takeaways

- Schools in America are unequal: They differ greatly in the extent of their funding, in the quality of their physical facilities, and in other respects. Jonathan Kozol calls these differences "savage inequalities."
- Single-sex education at the secondary level has become more popular. Preliminary evidence indicates that this form of education may be beneficial for several reasons, but more evidence on this issue is needed.
- Although school violence has declined since the 1990s, it continues to concern many Americans. Bullying at school is a common problem and can lead to more serious violence by the children who are bullied.
- School choice programs are popular but also controversial. Charter schools on the average do no better than public schools, and sometimes worse.

For Your Review

1. If you were the principal of a middle school, would you favor or oppose single-sex classes? Explain your answer.
2. Do you favor or oppose school vouchers? Why?

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8.4: Issues and Problems in Higher Education

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Explain why certain college students flounder.
2. Describe what is meant by legacy admissions and summarize the criticism of this policy.
3. List any two factors that affect college and university graduation rates.
4. Describe the extent of physical and sexual violence on the nation's campuses.

The issues and problems discussed so far in this chapter concern elementary and secondary schools in view of their critical importance for tens of millions of children and for the nation's social and economic well-being. However, higher education has its own issues and problems. Once again, we do not have space to discuss all these matters, but we will examine some of the most interesting and important. (Recall that Chapter 5 "Alcohol and Other Drugs" discussed alcohol abuse on campus, a very significant higher education problem.)

Cost



Higher education can cost students and their parents tens of thousands of dollars per year. This expense prevents many students from going to college and puts many students and parents into considerable debt. GotCredit – Student Loans – CC BY 2.0.

Perhaps the most important issue is that higher education, at least at four-year institutions, is quite expensive and can cost tens of thousands of dollars per year. This figure varies by the type of college or university, as private institutions cost much more than public institutions (for in-state students). According to the College Board (2012), only 44 percent of all students attend a four-year institution whose annual tuition and fees amount to less than $9,000. That means that more than half of students attend an institution whose annual tuition and fees are $9,000 or more; this cost averages more than $28,500 at private colleges and universities and exceeds $36,000 at many of these institutions. Tuition and fees average $8,244 at public four-year institutions. Room and board expenses for on-campus students at four-year institutions range from about $8,000 to $14,000, and books and supplies average at least an additional $1,168 for students who do not have the opportunity to read free or low-cost textbooks such as this one.

Combining these figures, students at the least expensive four-year institutions might have bills that total $17,000 to $20,000 annually, and those at the most expensive private institutions have bills that exceed $50,000. Scholarships and other financial aid reduce these costs for many students. Private institutions actually collect only about 67 percent of their published tuition and fees because of the aid they hand out, and public institutions collect only about 82 percent (Stripling, 2010). However, many students who receive aid may still have bills totaling thousands of dollars annually and graduate with huge loans to repay. At two-year public institutions, annual tuition and fees average almost $3,000; these colleges are more affordable but nonetheless can be very costly for their students and their families.

In view of all these figures, it should come as no surprise that many students graduate in debt. Of all the college students who graduated in 2010, roughly two-thirds had to take out loans to pay for their various expenses. These students graduated with an average debt of $25,250 (Pope, 2011), which can certainly take many years to pay off.

Floundering Students

Although college is often said to be the best time of one's life, many students have difficulties during their college years. These students are called *floundering students*. Homesickness during the first semester on campus is common, but a number of students have difficulties beyond homesickness. According to psychiatry professor David Leibow, who has studied troubled students, many floundering students mistakenly believe that they are the only ones who are floundering, and many fail to tell their parents or friends about their problems (Golden, 2010). The major cause of floundering, says Leibow, is academic difficulties; other causes include homesickness, relationship problems, family problems including family conflict and the serious illness or death of a family member, personal illness, and financial difficulties.

An estimated 10 percent of students annually seek psychological counseling on their college campus, primarily for depression, anxiety, and relationship problems (Epstein, 2010). About one-third of college students overall have sought counseling by the time they graduate or leave school for other reasons, and 7 percent say they have considered suicide before or after entering college (Sieben, 2011). Many students who seek counseling are given medications to treat their symptoms. Leibow says these medications are often helpful but worries that they are overprescribed. Three reasons underlie his concern. First, although the students given these medications may have problems, often the problems are a normal part of growing into adulthood and not serious enough to justify medication. Second, some of these medications can have serious side effects. Third, students who take medications may be less motivated to address the underlying reasons for their problems.

Social Class and Race in Admissions

We saw earlier in this chapter that African American, Latino, and low-income students are less likely to attend college. And when low-income students do attend college, they are much more likely to attend lower-ranking institutions than very selective campuses. At the very top colleges and universities, 74 percent of new students come from the wealthiest one-fourth of US households, and only 3 percent come from the poorest one-fourth of households (Krugman, 2012).

These facts raise important questions about the lack of diversity in college admissions and campus life. Chapter 3 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality" discussed the debate over racially based affirmative action in higher education. Reflecting this debate, some states have passed laws prohibiting the use of race and ethnicity in admissions to public colleges and universities. One such state was California, where voters approved this type of prohibition in 1996. During the first year after this ban took effect, the number of African American and Latino students admitted to the University of California system dropped by about 25 percent and by 50 percent at the system's two most selective campuses in Berkeley and Los Angeles (UCLA). According to the head of the University of California system, "If we had affirmative action as one of our tools, we'd do somewhat better for Hispanics, and we'd probably do significantly better for African-Americans" (Pérez-Peña, 2012).



Although colleges and universities are making a greater effort to attract and retain low-income students and students of color, these students remain greatly underrepresented at institutions of higher education. Bart Everson – Students – CC BY 2.0.

In three states with bans on affirmative action, California, Florida, and Texas, public universities automatically admit the top students in every high school. Because many of their high schools are predominantly African American or Latino, this strategy has helped counter their bans on affirmative action. However, because many more high schools in these states are mostly Latino rather than African American, the strategy has proven more beneficial for Latino admissions than for African American admissions (Pérez-Peña, 2012).

Partly because affirmative action is so controversial, attention has begun to focus on the low numbers of low-income students at many colleges and universities, and especially at the more selective institutions as ranked by *US News & World Report* and other sources. Many education scholars and policymakers feel that increasing the number of low-income students would not only help

these students but also increase campus diversity along the lines of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity (since students of color are more likely to be from low-income backgrounds). Efforts to increase the number of low-income students, these experts add, would avoid the controversy that has surrounded affirmative action.

In response to this new attention to social class, colleges and universities have begun to increase their efforts to attract and retain low-income students, which a recent news report called "one of the most underrepresented minority groups at many four-year colleges" (Schmidt, 2010). The dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard University summarized these efforts as follows: "I honestly cannot think of any admissions person I know who is not looking—as sort of a major criteria [*sic*] of how well their year went—at how well they did in attracting people of different economic backgrounds" (Schmidt, 2010).

As part of their strategy to attract and retain low-income students, Harvard and other selective institutions are now providing financial aid to cover all or most of the students' expenses. Despite these efforts, however, the US higher education system has become more stratified by social class in recent decades: The richest students now occupy a greater percentage of the enrollment at the most selective institutions than in the past, while the poorest students occupy a greater percentage of the enrollment at the least selective four-year institutions and at community colleges (Schmidt, 2010).

Legacy Admissions

At highly selective colleges and universities, the policy of legacy admissions makes it easier for certain wealthy students to gain admission. Under this policy, students who are daughters or sons (or other relatives) of graduates of the institution are given preference in admissions. Because their parents are very likely to be wealthy, a legacy admissions policy in effect amounts to what critics call "affirmative action for the rich" (Kahlenberg, 2010). According to recent research, being a child of an alumna or alumnus of one of these institutions increases one's chances of admission by forty-five percentage points (Kahlenberg, 2011). Thus if a nonlegacy applicant with certain qualifications would ordinarily have a 40 percent chance of being admitted, a legacy applicant with the same qualifications would have an 85 percent chance of being admitted. Critics say legacy admissions give an unfair advantage to wealthy students and use up valuable spots that should go to more qualified students from more varied socioeconomic backgrounds. As one critic puts it, "It's fundamentally unfair because it's a preference that advantages the already advantaged. It has nothing to do with the individual merit of the applicant" (Lewin, 2010, p. A12).

Graduation Rates

For the sake of students and of their colleges and universities, it is important that as many students as possible go on to earn their diplomas. However, only 57 percent of students at four-year institutions graduate within six years. This figure varies by type of institution. At the highly selective private institutions, 80–90 percent or more of students typically graduate within six years, while at many public institutions, the graduate rate is about 50 percent. Academic and financial difficulties and other problems explain why so many students fail to graduate (Gonzalez, 2010).

The 57 percent overall rate masks a racial/ethnic difference in graduation rates: While 60 percent of white students graduate within six years, only 49 percent of Latino students and 40 percent of African American students graduate. At some institutions, the graduation rates of Latino and African American students match those of whites, thanks in large part to exceptional efforts by these institutions to help students of color. As one expert on this issue explains, "What colleges do for students of color powerfully impacts the futures of these young people and that of our nation" (Gonzalez, 2010). Another expert placed this issue into a larger context: "For both moral and economic reasons, colleges need to ensure that their institutions work better for all the students they serve" (Stephens, 2010).

In this regard, it is important to note that the graduation rate of low-income students from four-year institutions is much lower than the graduation rate of wealthier students (Luhby, 2011). In fact, students with high test scores and low-income parents are less likely to graduate than students with low test scores and high-income parents (Krugman, 2012).

Low-income students drop out at higher rates because of academic and financial difficulties and family problems. Their academic and financial difficulties are intertwined. Low-income students often have to work many hours per week during the academic year to be able to pay their bills. Because their work schedules reduce the time they have for studying, their grades may suffer. This general problem has been made worse by cutbacks in federal grants to low-income students that began during the 1980s. These cutbacks forced low-income students to rely increasingly on loans, which have to be repaid. This fact leads some to work more hours during the academic year to limit the loans they must take out, and their increased work schedule again may affect their grades.

Low-income students face additional difficulties beyond the financial (Berg, 2010). Their writing and comprehension skills upon entering college are often weaker than those of wealthier students. If they are first-generation college students (meaning that neither parent went to college), they often have problems adjusting to campus life and living amid students from much more advantaged backgrounds.

Campus Violence

Earlier we discussed violence in the elementary and secondary schools. Violence can also happen on college and university campuses, although shootings are very rare. However, three recent examples illustrate that students and faculty are not immune from gun violence. In April 2012, a former student lined up and then shot and killed seven people and wounded three others at Oikos University in Oakland, California. In February 2010, Amy Bishop, a biology professor at the University of Alabama in Huntsville who had recently been denied tenure, allegedly shot and killed three faculty at a department meeting and wounded three others. Almost three years earlier, a student at Virginia Tech went on a shooting rampage and killed thirty-two students and faculty before killing himself.

Other types of violence are more common on the nation's campuses. Chapter 4 "Gender Inequality" noted that an estimated 20–30 percent of women students have been raped or sexually assaulted (including attempts), usually by a male student who was an acquaintance, friend, or intimate partner. Beyond rape and sexual assault, students are also sometimes assaulted or robbed. Federal victimization data show that about 6 percent of college students are victims of at least one act of all these types of violence annually (Baum & Klaus, 2005). Because there are about 20 million students in college, this 6 percent figure translates to about 1.2 million annual violent victimizations at US colleges and universities. It is important to note that the 6 percent rate masks a significant gender difference: 8 percent of male students experience at least one act of violence annually, compared to about 4 percent of female students. Male students are thus twice as likely as female students to be victimized by violence. For just rape and sexual assault, though, female students are much more likely than male students to be victimized.

Many colleges and universities have been accused of not taking rape and sexual assault seriously in what one news report called a "struggle for justice" for campus rape victims (Lipka, 2011; Shapiro, 2010). This criticism takes two forms. First, campuses ignore many reports of rape and sexual assault altogether. Second, they hand out weak or no discipline in cases when they do heed reports. One student's account of her university's lack of follow-up to her alleged rape illustrates this criticism. "It was as if they were going above and beyond to ensure nothing would be done in my case," the woman later recalled. "I felt extremely disappointed to know that the institution in charge of ensuring my safety did not recognize the massive distress the sexual assault caused me. Furthermore, I was disappointed that when I sought justice through their system, I was treated with hostility and disrespect. I was clearly not believed, and was often blamed for what had happened" (Webley, 2011).

Key Takeaways

- The cost of higher education and other problems make it difficult for low-income students and students of color to enter college and to stay in college once admitted.
- Many college students have academic and personal problems that lead them to flounder and to seek psychological counseling.
- Many campuses continue to lack racial and social class diversity, and affirmative action remains very controversial.
- Physical and sexual violence is a general problem on the nation's campuses. At least one-fifth of college women are raped or sexually assaulted.

For Your Review

1. If you were the director of admissions at a university, what steps would you take to increase the number of applications from low-income students?
2. Do you think alcohol use is to blame for most campus violence, or are there other important factors at work? Explain your answer.

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8.5: Improving Schools and Education

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Understand how helpful good schooling can be to improve the lives of low-income children.
2. Discuss the importance of good teachers.
3. List any three strategies that will improve the education of low-income students.

This concluding section focuses mostly on elementary and secondary education, given its critical importance for young people's development. As we consider how to improve the nation's schools, and especially how to improve outcomes for low-income students and students of color, we need to keep in mind an important consideration: Good schooling can make an important difference for these students, and good teachers can greatly help low-income students (Chetty et al., 2011). However, a large body of research demonstrates that students' family and neighborhood backgrounds actually matter much more than the quality of schooling for their school performance (Downey & Gibbs, 2012; Ladd & Fiske, 2011). Good schooling, then, can only go so far in overcoming the many strikes that low-income students and those of color have against them even before they enter kindergarten and the problems they continue to experience thereafter. As one education writer observes,

Let's be realistic: Teachers aren't miracle workers. There's only so much they can do to address problems that troubled students bring to class every day, including neglect, abuse, and unaddressed medical and mental health issues. The obvious and subtle ways that poverty inhibits a child's ability to learn—from hearing, visual and dental problems to higher asthma rates to diminished verbal interaction in the home—have been well-documented.
So let's seek to improve the state of families. Attacking schools and teachers makes everyone feel like a reformer, but the problems begin long before a child steps through the schoolhouse door. (Farhi, 2011)

Teachers and School Reform

This understanding of low-income students' school performance has important implications for school-reform efforts. For example, if good schooling cannot ordinarily be expected to have a large impact on poor students' lives, this fact calls into question certain aspects of the "No Child Left Behind" movement of the last decade. This movement, begun by the federal government, uses students' scores on standardized tests to assess the quality of their schools. Perhaps inevitably, the subsequent growth in standardized testing has meant that teachers' performance ratings have become increasingly tied to their students' standardized test scores. However, because students' test scores reflect their socioeconomic backgrounds and other nonschool factors much more than the quality of their schooling, these scores are not a good measure of teachers' performance. As one education specialist summarizes this situation, "Of all the goals of the education reform movement, none is more elusive than developing an objective model to assess teachers. Studies have shown that over time, test scores do not provide a consistent means of separating good from bad instructors. Test scores are an inadequate proxy for quality because too many factors outside the teachers' control can influence student performance from year to year—or even from classroom to classroom during the same year" (Russell, 2011, p. WK12).

The Need for More General Social Reform

The importance of students' family and neighborhood backgrounds has a significant implication beyond the issue of teacher assessment: To improve low-income students' school performance, our society must address the problems of poverty and racial/ethnic inequality. As two sociologists argue this point, "If we are serious about improving American children's school performance, we will need to take a broader view of education policy. In addition to school reform, we must also aim to improve children's lives where they spend the vast majority of their time—with their families and in their neighborhoods" (Downey and Gibbs, 2012, p. 85). Chapter 2 "Poverty" and Chapter 3 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality" discussed strategies to reduce poverty and racial/ethnic inequality; these strategies would also help improve the school performance of low-income students and those of color.

A School Reform Agenda

Despite the need to address poverty and racial inequality, it remains true that schools with decaying buildings, uncommitted teachers, and other problems cannot be expected to produce students with even adequate levels of academic achievement. It is thus critical, says poverty expert Mark Robert Rank (2004, p. 208), to do everything possible to provide a quality education to the

nation's poor children: "To deny children the fundamental right to a decent education is both morally wrong and bad social policy. It flies in the face of the American concept of equality of opportunity…Countless studies have documented the immediate and lingering effects of disparate educational outcomes on later life. Improving public education for low-income children is absolutely essential."

In short, good schools and good teachers do matter. In particular, good elementary- and middle-school teachers have been shown to have a lifelong impact on their students: students with good teachers are more likely years later to have lower teenage pregnancy rates and higher college attendance rates, and they are also more likely to have higher salaries in adulthood (Lowrey, 2012).

Education experts urge several measures to improve the nation's schools and the education of American children (Madland & Bunker, 2011; Rokosa, 2011; Rothstein, 2010; Smerdon & Borman, 2009). These measures include the following:

- Have smaller schools and smaller classrooms.
- Provide more funding for schools, especially those in low-income neighborhoods.
- Repair decaying school buildings.
- Increase teachers' pay to attract more highly qualified applicants.
- Hold teachers more accountable for their students' learning, while recognizing the obstacles that teachers of low-income students must overcome.
- Expand early childhood (preschool) education.

On the national level, these steps will cost billions of dollars, but this expenditure promises to have a significant payoff by saving money in the long run and reducing crime, health problems, and other social ills.

As the United States tries to improve its schools, it is also important to attend to the emotional and physical health needs of low-income children (Lowe, 2011). Because of the many problems these children experience in their families and neighborhoods, including alcohol and drug abuse, hunger, illness, marital conflict, and violence, their emotional and physical health may often suffer. They cannot be expected to do well in school unless they are in good health in both respects. For this reason, many schools are now partnering with community health organizations and other agencies to address the emotional and physical health needs of schoolchildren, often by establishing well-staffed and well-equipped health centers inside the schools. Another effort involves recess (yes, recess!), as evidence indicates that children are healthier and better behaved if they go out for recess for a sufficient amount of time.

In a related issue, it is also important for the nation to try to improve parenting skills if it hopes to improve the educational performance and attainment of low-income students (Roksa & Potter, 2011). As Chapter 8 "The Changing Family" discussed, low-income parents are less likely to read and talk with their young children, and this problem impairs their children's cognitive and neurological development. Home visits and other efforts by professionals to encourage parents of infants and toddlers to engage in these activities regularly hold potential for improving their children's ability to learn and do well in school.

School violence and bullying are two other problems that must also be addressed. Several of the steps just outlined should reduce school violence, but other measures should also help. One example involves antibullying programs, which include regular parent meetings, strengthened playground supervision, and appropriate discipline when warranted. Research indicates that these programs reduce bullying by 20–23 percent on the average (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). Any reduction in bullying should in turn help reduce the likelihood of school massacres like Columbine, because, as noted earlier, many of the students committing these massacres had been humiliated and bullied by other students. More generally, because the roots of school violence are also similar to the roots of youth violence outside the schools, measures that reduce youth violence should also reduce school violence. As discussed in previous chapters, such measures include early childhood prevention programs for youths at risk for developmental and behavioral problems, parenting training programs, and policies that provide income and jobs for families living in poverty.

At the level of higher education, our discussion highlighted the fact that social inequality in the larger society also plays out in colleges and universities. The higher dropout rates for low-income students and for students of color in turn contribute to more social inequality. Colleges and universities need to do everything possible to admit these students and then to help them once they are admitted, as they face many obstacles and difficulties that white students from more advantaged backgrounds are much less likely to encounter.

Key Takeaways

- Good schooling can be very helpful for low-income students, but these students' socioeconomic backgrounds have more impact than schooling on their futures.
- For this reason, more general social reform must accompany effective school reform.

- Several strategies, including smaller classes and better-paid teachers, will help improve the learning of low-income students.

For Your Review

1. Write a short essay in which you outline what a school's superintendent might do to improve the learning of the school district's elementary school students.
2. Why do you think the United States has not more vigorously pursued the school reform agenda outlined in this section?

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8.6: End-of-Chapter Material

Summary

1. Education is both formal and informal. Formal education occurs in schools under specially trained teachers, while informal education takes place primarily in the home, with parents as instructors.
2. In the early nineteenth century in the United States, a movement for free, compulsory education began. Reasons for interest in such education included the perceived needs to unify the country, to “Americanize” immigrants, and to give members of the working class the skills, knowledge, and discipline they needed to be productive workers.
3. In the United States, social class, race and ethnicity, and gender all affect educational attainment. Poor people end up with less schooling than middle- and upper-class people, and African Americans and Latinos have lower educational attainment than whites and Asian Americans. Although women had less schooling than men in the past, today they are more likely to graduate from high school and to attend college.
4. Education in the United States has a significant impact on two areas. One is income: the higher the education, the higher the income. The second is attitudes: the higher the education, the greater the tolerance for nontraditional behaviors and viewpoints.
5. Sociological perspectives on education fall into the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist approaches discussed in earlier chapters. Functional theory stresses the functions education serves for society, including socialization, social placement, social integration, and social and cultural innovation. Conflict theory stresses that education perpetuates and reinforces existing social inequality for several reasons, including the use of tracking and inequality in schooling between rich and poor communities. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the social interaction that’s part of schooling and calls attention to the ways in which the treatment of students as smart or dull can affect how much they end up learning.
6. Several issues and problems affect education in the United States today. Many schools are decrepit and lack sufficient books and equipment, and many are also segregated by race and ethnicity. Increasing interest in school choice has led to controversy over whether the government should provide aid to parents to send their children to private and parochial schools. Additional controversy surrounds the issue of single-sex schools for girls. Finally, school violence is an issue of continuing concern; however, the vast majority of schools are very safe for their students, teachers, and other personnel. Bullying is more common, with about one-third of students bullied every year.
7. At the level of higher education, students of color and those from low-income backgrounds are less likely to attend college at all, and if they do attend, they are less likely to graduate.

Using What You Know

You are the principal of a middle school in a poor urban neighborhood. Your classrooms lack basic supplies, your roof often leaks, and an ominous odor often arises from your school’s water system. You have appealed many times to the school district for additional funds to deal with all these problems, but these funds have not been provided. What, if anything, do you do next?

What You Can Do

To help deal with the education problems discussed in this chapter, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Volunteer to tutor students at a local school or after-school program.
2. If your college or university has low numbers of low-income students, establish a student group to encourage your school to admit more such students.
3. Start or join a group on your campus to call attention to the need for responsible alcohol use, as drinking is associated with much campus violence.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

9: Work and the Economy

9.1: Overview of the Economy
9.2: Sociological Perspectives on Work and the Economy
9.3: Problems in Work and the Economy
9.4: Improving Work and the Economy
9.5: End-of-Chapter Material

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9.1: Overview of the Economy

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe the three sectors of the economy.
2. Distinguish the two major economic systems in the world today.
3. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of capitalism and socialism.

When we hear the term *economy*, it is usually in the context of how the economy "is doing": Is inflation soaring or under control? Is the economy growing or shrinking? Is unemployment rising, declining, or remaining stable? Are new college graduates finding jobs easily or not? All these questions concern the economy, but sociologists define economy more broadly as the social institution that organizes the production, distribution, and consumption of a society's goods and services. Defined in this way, the economy touches us all. Keep in mind that the economy is not the same as *government*, which is the social institution through which power is distributed and exercised. Economy and government are social institutions that are certainly intertwined, but conceptually they are distinct.

The economy is composed of three sectors. The primary sector is the part of the economy that takes and uses raw materials directly from the natural environment. Its activities include agriculture, fishing, forestry, and mining. The secondary sector of the economy transforms raw materials into finished products and is essentially the manufacturing industry. Finally, the tertiary sector is the part of the economy that provides services rather than products; its activities include clerical work, health care, teaching, and information technology services.



Clerical work and other occupations that provide services rather than products constitute the tertiary sector in the economy. Wikimedia Commons – CC BY 2.0.

Societies differ in many ways, but they all have to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. How this happens depends on which sectors of the economy are most important. This latter variable in turn depends heavily on the level of a society's development. Generally speaking, the less developed a society's economy, the more important its primary sector; the more developed a society's economy, the more important its tertiary sector. As societies developed economically over the centuries, the primary sector became less important and the tertiary sector became more important. The primary sector was certainly the only sector in the hunting-and-gathering societies that existed thousands of years ago, while the tertiary sector dominates much of the economy in today's wealthiest democracies.

Types of Economic Systems

The two major economic systems in modern societies are capitalism and socialism. In practice, no one society is purely capitalist or socialist, so it is helpful to think of capitalism and socialism as lying on opposite ends of a continuum. Societies' economies mix elements of both capitalism and socialism but do so in varying degrees, so that some societies lean toward the capitalist end of the continuum, while other societies lean toward the socialist end. For example, the United States is a capitalist nation, but the government still regulates many industries to varying degrees. The industries usually would prefer less regulation, while their critics usually prefer more regulation. The degree of such regulation was the point of controversy after the failure of banks and other financial institutions in 2008 and 2009. Let's see how capitalism and socialism differ.

Capitalism

Capitalism is an economic system in which the means of production are privately owned. By *means of production*, we mean everything—land, tools, technology, and so forth—that is needed to produce goods and services. As outlined by famed Scottish philosopher Adam Smith (1723–1790), widely considered the founder of modern economics, the most important goal of capitalism is the pursuit of personal profit (Smith, 1776/1910). As individuals seek to maximize their own wealth, society as a whole is said to benefit. Goods get produced, services are rendered, people pay for the goods and services they need and desire, and the economy and society as a whole prosper.



One important hallmark of capitalism is competition for profit. This competition is thought to help ensure the best products at the lowest prices, as companies will ordinarily try to keep their prices as low as possible to attract buyers and maximize their sales. Consumerist Dot Com – sale window – CC BY 2.0.

As people pursue personal profit under capitalism, they compete with each other for the greatest profits. Businesses try to attract more demand for their products in many ways, including lowering prices, creating better products, and advertising how wonderful their products are. In capitalist theory, such competition helps ensure the best products at the lowest prices, again benefiting society as a whole. Such competition also helps ensure that no single party controls an entire market. According to Smith, the competition that characterizes capitalism should be left to operate on its own, free of government intervention or control. For this reason, capitalism is often referred to as *laissez-faire* (French for “leave alone”) capitalism, and terms to describe capitalism include the *free-enterprise system* and the *free market*.

The hallmarks of capitalism, then, are private ownership of the means of production, the pursuit of profit, competition for profit, and the lack of government intervention in this competition.

Socialism

The features of socialism are the opposite of those just listed for capitalism and were spelled out most famously by Karl Marx. Socialism is an economic system in which the means of production are collectively owned, usually by the government. Whereas the United States has several airlines that are owned by airline corporations, a socialist society might have one government-owned airline.

The most important goal of socialism is not the pursuit of personal profit but rather work for the collective good: The needs of society are considered more important than the needs of the individual. Because of this view, individuals do not compete with each other for profit; instead they work together for the good of everyone. If under capitalism the government is supposed to let the economy alone, under socialism the government controls the economy.

The ideal outcome of socialism, said Marx, would be a truly classless or *communist* society. In such a society all members are equal, and stratification does not exist. Obviously Marx’s vision of a communist society was never fulfilled, and nations that called themselves communist departed drastically from his vision of communism.

Recall that societies can be ranked on a continuum ranging from mostly capitalist to mostly socialist. At one end of the continuum, we have societies characterized by a relatively free market, and at the other end we have those characterized by strict government regulation of the economy. Figure 12.1 “Capitalism and Socialism across the Globe” depicts the nations of the world along this continuum. Capitalist nations are found primarily in North America and Western Europe but also exist in other parts of the world.

Figure 12.1 Capitalism and Socialism across the Globe



Source: Adapted from The Heritage Foundation. (2010). Distribution of economic freedom. Retrieved from http://www.heritage.org/index/pdf/20...ex2010_map.pdf.

Comparing Capitalism and Socialism

People have debated the relative merits of capitalism and socialism at least since the time of Marx (Bowles, 2012; Cohen, 2009). Compared to socialism, capitalism has several advantages. It produces greater economic growth and productivity, at least in part because it provides more incentives (i.e., profit) for economic innovation. It also is often characterized by greater political freedom in the form of civil rights and liberties. As an economic system, capitalism seems to lend itself to personal freedom: Because its hallmarks include the private ownership of the means of production and the individual pursuit of profit, there is much more emphasis in capitalist societies on the needs and desires of the individual and less emphasis on the need for government intervention in economic and social affairs.

Yet capitalism also has its drawbacks. There is much more economic inequality in capitalism than in socialism. Although capitalism produces economic growth, not all segments of capitalism share this growth equally, and there is a much greater difference between the rich and poor than under socialism. People can become very rich in capitalist nations, but they can also remain quite poor.

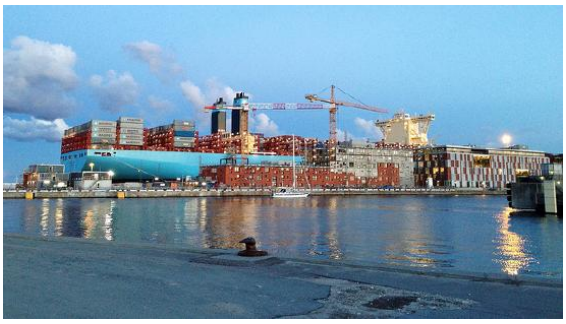
Another possible drawback depends on whether you prefer competition or cooperation. It is often said that important values in the United States include competition and individualism, both of which arguably reflect this nation's capitalist system. Children in the United States are raised with more of an individual orientation than children in socialist societies, who learn that the needs of their society are more important than the needs of the individual. Whereas US children learn to compete with each other for good grades, success in sports, and other goals, children in socialist societies learn to cooperate to achieve tasks.

More generally, capitalism is said by its critics to encourage selfish and even greedy behavior: If individuals try to maximize their profit, they do so at the expense of others. In competition, someone has to lose. A company's ultimate aim, and one that is generally lauded, is to maximize its profits by driving another company out of the market altogether. If so, that company succeeds even if some other party is hurting. The small mom-and-pop grocery stores, drugstores, and hardware stores are almost a thing of the past, as big-box stores open their doors and drive their competition out of business. To its critics, then, capitalism encourages harmful behavior, and there are many losers in capitalism. Yet it is precisely this type of behavior that is taught in business schools.

As a business columnist recently summarized these problems of capitalism,

Why does one have to be a Democrat or a liberal to complain bout the way business gets done? Like most Americans, I am OK with the notion that free-market capitalism produces winners and losers. What I don't like is that it also produces liars, cheaters, swindlers, self-dealing narcissists, overleveraged idiots and reckless egomaniacs out to abuse their economic power and take unfair advantage of hard-working people.
I don't complain about fraud, abuse and folly because I am antibusiness or anticapitalist…What free-market capitalism hasn't yet figured out is what to do with all its losers. At this point in the economic cycle, they are piling up like used tires: debt-sacked college kids who can't get jobs, foreclosed homeowners, failed small-business owners, pink-slipped employees, [and] millions suddenly ejected from the middle class. (Lewis, 2012, p. C3)

Democratic Socialism



The economies of Denmark, pictured here, and several other Western European nations feature a combination of capitalism and socialism that is called democratic socialism. In these economies, the government owns important industries, but private property and political freedom remain widespread. bobthemagicdragon – Majestic – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Some nations combine elements of both capitalism and socialism and are called *social democracies*, while their combination of capitalism and socialism is called democratic socialism. In these nations, which include Denmark, Sweden, and several other Western European nations, the government owns several important industries, but much property remains in private hands, and political freedom is widespread. The governments in these nations have extensive programs to help the poor and other people in need. Although these nations have high tax rates to help finance their social programs, their experience indicates it is very possible to combine the best features of capitalism and socialism while avoiding their faults (Russell, 2011) (see Note 12.10 "Lessons from Other Societies").

? Exercise 9.1.1

Which economic system do we have in the United States?

a) Socialism

b) Capitalism

c) Democratic socialism

Answer

Correct Answer: B

Lessons from Other Societies

Democratic Socialism in Scandinavia

The five Scandinavian nations, also called the Nordic nations, are Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. These nations differ in many ways, but they also share many similarities. In particular, they are all social democracies, as their governments own important industries while their citizens enjoy much political freedom. Each nation has the three branches of government with which most people are familiar—executive, judicial, and legislative—and each nation has a national parliament to which people are elected by proportional representation.

Social democracies like the Scandinavian nations are often called controlled capitalist market economies. The word *controlled* here conveys the idea that their governments either own industries or heavily regulate industries they do not own. A key feature of these social democracies' economies is that inequality in wealth and income is not generally tolerated. Employers, employees, and political officials are accustomed to working closely to ensure that poverty and its related problems are addressed as much as possible and in as cooperative a manner as possible.

Underlying this so-called *social welfare model* is a commitment to *universalism*. All citizens, regardless of their socioeconomic status or family situation, receive various services, such as child care and universal health care, that are free or heavily subsidized. To support this massive provision of benefits, the Scandinavian nations have very high taxes that their citizens generally accept as normal and necessary.

The Scandinavian nations rank at or near the top in international comparisons of health, education, economic well-being, and other measures of quality of life. The Scandinavian experience of social democracy teaches us that it is very possible to have a political

and economic model that combines the best features of capitalism and socialism while retaining the political freedom that citizens expect in a democracy.

Sources: Russell, 2011; Sejersted, 2011

The US Labor Force

We now turn from a general discussion of economic systems to some basic facts on the labor force in the world's leading capitalist nation, the United States. The civilian labor force in the United States consists of all noninstitutionalized civilians 16 years of age or older who work for pay or are looking for work. The civilian labor force (hereafter *labor force*) consists of about 154 million people, or almost two-thirds of the population, including about 71 percent of men and 58 percent of women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

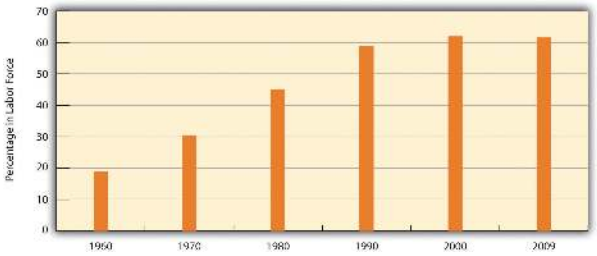
Of those who are currently employed, approximately 2.4 million people work in the agricultural sector, and a much larger number, 138 million, work in nonagricultural industries. Of the latter number, 109 million work in private industry, 21 million work in government, and almost 9 million are self-employed. Most of the currently employed work full-time, but more than 26 million work only part-time. Of this number, 69 percent work part-time for noneconomic reasons; for example, they have childcare or other family obligations, or they are in school. Another 31 percent work part-time for economic reasons: They are unable to find a full-time job, or they may have lost a full-time job because of the faltering economy.

Approximately 87 million Americans ages 16 and older are not in the labor force. Of this number, 93 percent do not desire a job. Most of these individuals are retired, disabled, or taking care of children and/or other family members. Of the 7 percent who would like a job but are still not in the labor force, most have dropped out of the labor force (stopped looking for a job) because they have become discouraged after previously looking for work but not finding a job.

Some 5 percent of currently employed people have two or more jobs at any one time. This percentage translates to about 7 million individuals. It varies slightly by gender: 5.3 percent of employed women have at least two jobs, compared to 4.7 percent of employed men.

Chapter 4 "Gender Inequality" noted that women's labor force participation soared during the last few decades. This general increase is even steeper for married women with children under 6 years of age: In 2009, almost 62 percent of such women were in the labor force, compared to less than 19 percent in 1960 (US Census Bureau, 2012), a threefold difference (see Figure 12.2 "Labor Force Participation Rate of Married Women with Children Younger than 6 Years of Age, 1960–2007").

Figure 12.2 Labor Force Participation Rate of Married Women with Children Younger than 6 Years of Age, 1960–2007



Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

Key Takeaways

- The economy is the social institution that organizes the production, distribution, and consumption of a society's goods and services. It consists of three sectors: the primary sector, the secondary sector, and the tertiary sector.
- The two major economic systems in modern societies are capitalism and socialism. In practice, most societies have economies that mix elements of both systems but that lean toward one end of the capitalism–socialism continuum.
- Social democracies combine elements of both capitalism and socialism. They have achieved high economic growth while maintaining political freedom and personal liberty.

For Your Review

1. In what ways might capitalism be a better economic system than socialism? In what ways might socialism be a better economic system than capitalism?

2. Write a brief essay in which you discuss the values capitalism and socialism seem to develop among the people who live under either type of economic system.

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9.2: Sociological Perspectives on Work and the Economy

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. List any two functions of work and the economy as emphasized by functionalism.
2. Summarize conflict theory's critique of work and the economy.
3. Explain the overall approach of symbolic interactionism to understanding work and the economy.

The three sociological perspectives examined in earlier chapters continue to offer insights that help us understand the economy, including the nature of work on which any economy rests. Table 12.1 "Theory Snapshot" summarizes these insights.

Table 12.1 Theory Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Functionalism	Work and the economy serve several functions for society. The economy makes society possible by providing the goods and services it needs. Work gives people an income and also provides them some self-fulfillment and part of their identity.
Conflict theory	Control of the economy enables the economic elite to maintain their position at the top of society and to keep those at the bottom in their place. Work is often alienating, and the workplace is often a site for sexual harassment and other problems.
Symbolic interactionism	This perspective focuses on social interaction in the workplace, on how employees respond to problems in their workplaces, and on how they perceive the work they do.

Functionalism

Recall that the functionalist perspective highlights the many functions that social institutions serve for society. Accordingly, this perspective paints a positive picture of work and the economy by pointing to their many benefits.

The economy's major function is also an absolutely essential function: the provision of goods and services. Because the economy provides the goods and services that any society needs, the economy makes a society possible. As we saw earlier, capitalist and socialist societies provide goods and services in different ways, and each type of economy has its advantages and disadvantages. Regardless of the relative merits of capitalism and socialism, however, both a capitalist economy and socialist economy make possible the societies in which they are found.

Many high school students have summer jobs or after-school jobs. Whether or not they go to college, most people work for pay once they reach adulthood. Some work full-time until they retire, some alternate full-time work and part-time work, and some may start out with a job but drop out of the labor force to raise their children. Regardless of these various work patterns, the most important function that most people derive from working is their paycheck. Simply put, work provides the income that most people need for food, clothing, shelter, and other essential needs in today's society.

But work has important, nonmaterial functions beyond helping us pay the bills. Many people consider their job part of their overall identity, just as the college students reading this book consider being a student as part of their current identity. As we enter adulthood, we are not just a spouse, partner, parent, or child of our parents; we are also an accountant, banker, claims adjuster, day care worker, elementary school teacher, financial consultant, garage door installer, and so forth. The job we have helps provide us with a sense of who we are, or, to put it another way, a sense of our identity.

Especially if we enjoy our jobs, work can also give us a sense of self-fulfillment, self-confidence, and self-esteem. These psychological effects combine to form yet another important function of work.



An important function of work is that it provides a context for coworker friendships. Many people have friends whom they met in their workplaces or through their work. Wonderlane – Co-workers laughing at Fat Smitty's – CC BY 2.0.

A third function is friendships. Many people have friends and acquaintances whom they met at their workplaces or at least through their work (McGuire, 2007). Coworkers discuss all kinds of topics with each other, including personal matters, sports, and political affairs, and they often will invite other coworkers over to their homes or go out with them to a movie or a restaurant. These friendships are yet another benefit that work often provides.

The nonmaterial benefits that work provides for many people are important and should not be discounted. Although this is speculative, many wealthy people no longer need to work but continue to work because of these nonmaterial benefits. National survey data support the importance of work's nonmaterial benefits in this regard. In the 2010 General Social Survey (GSS), respondents in the labor force were asked, "If you were to get enough money to live as comfortably as you would like for the rest of your life, would you continue to work or would you stop working?" More than two-thirds (68.7 percent) of these respondents replied that they would indeed continue working.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory's views of work and the economy largely derive from the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels during the nineteenth century. As Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems" discussed, Marx and Engels sharply criticized capitalism as an economic system that inherently oppresses workers. In their view, the *bourgeoisie*, or ruling class, owns the means of production, while the *proletariat*, or working class, does not own the means of production. The bourgeoisie uses its wealth, power, and influence to oppress and exploit the proletariat.

Although today's conflict theorists are not necessarily Marxists, they nonetheless criticize many aspects of capitalism, and the earlier discussion of the disadvantages of capitalism reflects their views. They also criticize how large companies treat their workers. As just one example, they call attention to the fact that many companies maintain dangerous workplaces that result in injury, illness, and/or death for tens of thousands of workers annually. We return to this particular problem later in this chapter.

Conflict theorists also point out that the workplace is a setting for sexual harassment, which was discussed in Chapter 4 "Gender Inequality". Although work can and does bring the many benefits assumed by functionalist theory, work can also be a source of great distress for the hundreds of thousands of women and men who are sexually harassed every year.

Marx also wrote that work in a capitalist society is inherently alienating. This is so, he said, because workers do not design the products they build, because factory work (which was the dominant mode of production in Marx's time) involves boring and repetitive tasks, and because workers are treated by their employers as mere commodities to be hired and fired at will. Reflecting Marx's views, conflict theory today also points to the alienating nature of work.

Following up on this concern, social scientists have tried to determine the extent of worker alienation and job satisfaction, as well as the correlates of these two attitudes (Mauno, Kinnunen, & Feldt, 2012). They generally find that American workers like their jobs much more than Marx anticipated but also that the extent to which they like their jobs depends on the income their jobs bring, the degree of autonomy they enjoy in their jobs, and other factors. In the 2010 GSS, 88 percent of respondents said they are "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with the work they do, and only 12 percent said they were dissatisfied. This latter figure is probably much lower than Marx would have predicted for a capitalist society like the United States. One possible reason for this low amount of job dissatisfaction, and one that Marx did not foresee, is the number of workplace friendships as described earlier. Such friendships can lead workers to like their jobs more than they otherwise would and help overcome the alienation they might feel without the friendships.

Symbolic Interactionism

Recall that symbolic interactionism focuses on the interaction of individuals and on how they interpret their interaction. In line with this "micro" focus, many scholars have generated rich descriptions of how certain workplaces' behaviors and understandings are "negotiated" and of how certain kinds of workers view aspects of their work and interpret the meaning of their work. Numerous studies of this type exist of police officers, prostitutes, attorneys, nurses and physicians, teachers, and a variety of other occupations. Most of these studies are based on intensive interviews of people in these occupations. Taken together, they provide a sensitive portrait of why people enter these various jobs and careers, what they like and dislike about their jobs, how they interact with other people in their workplaces, and a host of other issues.



Studies of police officers' behavior and perceptions provide an excellent example of the symbolic interactionist understanding of work. According to Jonathan Rubinstein, an important goal of officers is to maintain the respect of other officers. West Midlands Police – Day 4 – PCSOs on Patrol in Birmingham – CC BY-SA 2.0.

A classic study of the workplace grounded in the symbolic interactionist tradition was sociologist Joan Emerson's (1970) study of gynecological exams. At the time Emerson wrote her study, most gynecologists were men. Because they are necessarily viewing and touching their women patients' genitals, they have to ensure their patients do not think their doctor is behaving in a sexual manner. For this to happen, Emerson wrote, (male) gynecologists take pains to appear as medical professionals rather than as men interested in having sex or aroused by what they were seeing and feeling. In this way, they "define the situation" as a professional encounter rather than as a sexual encounter.

Male gynecologists use several strategies to appear as professionals, according to Emerson. For example, they have a (female) nurse present during the exam to help the patient feel comfortable. They also certainly avoid saying anything that might suggest they are sexually aroused. More generally, gynecologists and nurses always act in a nonchalant, matter-of-fact manner, which sends the patient an implicit message: "In the medical world the pelvic area is like any other part of the body; its private and sexual connotations are left behind when you enter the hospital" (Emerson, 1970, p. 78). In all these ways, gynecological exams are defined only as medical encounters, and patients are helped to feel as comfortable as possible under rather uncomfortable circumstances.

In another classic study grounded in the symbolic interactionist tradition, Jonathan Rubinstein (1993) spent a year riding around and otherwise interacting with police officers in Philadelphia. He later wrote compellingly about police officers' constant fear for their safety, about how they try to control suspects and other threatening people without drawing their guns, about how they interact with each other and with their superiors, and many other matters. In one passage, he wrote about how officers (he interviewed police*men*) try to win and keep the respect of other officers: "A patrolman must learn to avoid any appearance or incompetency if he hopes to maintain the respect of his colleagues. Every man must go to considerable lengths to cover up any weakness or error that might reflect poorly on his competence" (Rubinstein, 1993, p. 105). Thus officers learn to record dispatchers' information promptly and accurately, and they avoid remarks that question the competence of other officers.

? Exercise 9.2.1

Which sociological perspective is likely to argue that work is often alienating, and the workplace is often a site for sexual harassment and other problems?

Answer

Conflict perspective

Key Takeaways

- Functionalism emphasizes the importance of the economy for any society, and the income and self-fulfillment that work often provides.
- Conflict theory highlights the control of the economy by the economic elite, the alienation of work, and various problems in the workplace.
- Symbolic interactionism focuses on interaction in the workplace and how workers perceive many aspects of their work and workplace interaction.

For Your Review

1. Which of the three major sociological approaches to understanding work and the economy do you most prefer? Why?
2. Write a brief essay in which you use a symbolic interactionist approach to understand some aspect of a job you have held or hold now.

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9.3: Problems in Work and the Economy

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Outline recent trends in jobs and wages.
2. Discuss the effects of unemployment.
3. Summarize the problems associated with increasing economic inequality.

The economy and the quality and quantity of work certainly affect the lives of all Americans. At the same time, work and the economy give rise to many kinds of problems that also affect millions of Americans. This section examines several of these problems.

The Loss of Jobs and Wages

Because the American economy greatly weakened as the nation went into a deep recession in late 2007, it should come as no surprise that millions of jobs have been lost during the past half-decade and that wages have declined for many Americans. Yet long before the recession began, certain ominous trends in the American economy were evident. These trends involved a general loss of jobs in many sectors of the American economy and stagnating wages.

These trends partly reflected the fact that the United States has joined other industrial nations in moving into a *postindustrial* economy. In a postindustrial economy, information technology and service jobs replace the machines and manufacturing jobs that are hallmarks of an industrial economy. If physical prowess and skill with one's hands were prerequisites for many industrial jobs, mental prowess and communication skills are prerequisites for postindustrial jobs.

This move to a postindustrial economy has been a mixed blessing for many Americans. The information age has obvious benefits too numerous to mention, but there has also been a cost to the many workers whom postindustrialization and the globalization of the economy have left behind. Since the 1980s, many manufacturing companies moved their plants from US cities to sites in the developing world in Asia and elsewhere, a problem called capital flight. Along with the faltering economy, these trends have helped fuel a loss of 5.5 million manufacturing jobs from the American economy since 2000 (Hall, 2011).

A related problem is outsourcing, in which US companies hire workers overseas for customer care, billing services, and other jobs that Americans used to do. China, India, and the Philippines, which have skilled workforces relatively fluent in English, are the primary nations to which US companies outsource their work. According to projections, some 3.4 million jobs will have been lost by 2015 because of outsourcing (Levine, 2012). Many call centers employ workers in India, and when you call up a computer company or some other business for technical help, you might very well talk with an Indian. Because these call centers have cost Americans jobs and also because Americans and Indians often have trouble understanding each other's accents, outsourcing has been very controversial since it became popular in the early 2000s.



Many American jobs have been lost because of outsourcing to other countries. Paul Keller – wanted – CC BY 2.0.

All these problems reflect a more general shift in the United States from goods-producing jobs to service jobs. Although some of these service jobs, such as many in the financial and computer industries, are high paying, many are in low-wage occupations, such as restaurant and clerical work, that pay less than the goods-producing jobs they replaced. Partly as a result, the average hourly wage (in 2009 dollars) in the United States for workers (excluding managers and supervisors) rose by only one dollar from $17.46

in 1979 to $18.63 in 2009. This change represented an increase of just 0.2 percent per year during that three-decade span, as workers' wages have essentially stagnated during the last three decades (Economic Policy Institute, 2012).

Wage changes in recent years also depend on what social class someone is in. While the average compensation of chief executive officers (CEOs) of large corporations grew by 167 percent from 1989 to 2007, the average compensation of the typical worker grew by only 10 percent (Mishel, Bernstein, & Shierholz, 2009). Another way of understanding this disparity is perhaps more striking. In 1965, the average compensation of CEOs was twenty-four times greater than that of the typical worker; in 2009, their compensation was 185 times greater than that of the typical worker (Economic Policy Institute, 2012). These figures reflect growing economic inequality in the United States, a problem we further examine later in this chapter.

The Decline of Labor Unions

One of the most important developments accompanying industrialization in the nineteenth century was the rise of labor unions and their conflict with management over wages and working conditions (Dubofsky & Dulles, 2010). The pay that workers received was quite low, and the conditions in which they worked were often miserable. The typical employee worked at least ten hours a day for six or seven days a week, with almost no overtime pay and no paid vacations or holidays. To improve wages and working conditions, many labor unions were founded after the Civil War, only to meet determined opposition from companies, the government, and the courts. Companies told each other which workers were suspected of being union members, and these workers were then prevented from getting jobs. Strikers were often arrested for violating laws prohibiting strikes. When juries began finding them not guilty, employers turned to asking judges for injunctions that prohibited strikes. Workers who then went on strike were held in contempt of court by the judge as juries were kept out of the process.



From the 1870s through the 1930s, labor unions fought companies over issues such as low wages and substandard working conditions. onkeyHotey – Together We Bargain – CC BY 2.0.

Labor strife also marked the Great Depression, when masses of people blamed business leaders for their economic plight. Huge sit-ins and other labor protests occurred at auto plants in Detroit. In response, the Congress passed several laws that gave workers a minimum wage, the right to join unions, a maximum-hour workweek, and other rights that Americans now take for granted.

Today labor unions have lost some of their influence, especially as postindustrialization has supplanted the industrial economy and as the United States has lost much of its manufacturing base. Four decades ago, about one-fourth of all private-sector nonagricultural workers belonged to labor unions. By 1985 this figure had dropped to 14.6 percent, and today it stands at only 7.2 percent (Hirsch & Macpherson, 2011). In response, labor unions have intensified their efforts to increase their membership, only to find that US labor laws are filled with loopholes that allow companies to prevent their workers from forming a union. For example, after a company's workers vote to join a union, companies can appeal the vote, and it can take several years for courts to order the company to recognize the union. In the meantime, the low wages, substandard working conditions, and other factors that motivated workers to want to join a union are allowed to continue.

Just as the growth of unions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped to raise workers' wages, the decline of unions has lowered wages. Two reasons explain this decline (Mishel et al., 2009). First, union workers earn about 14 percent more than nonunion workers (controlling for experience, education, occupation, and other factors), a phenomenon known as the *union wage premium*. Because fewer workers are now in unions than four decades ago, they are less likely to benefit from this premium. Second, as unions have declined, there has been less pressure on nonunion employers to raise their wages to match union wages.

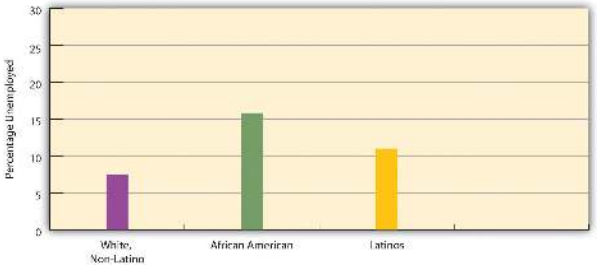
Because the union wage premium is greater for African Americans and Latinos than for whites, the wage decline caused by the decline of unions has probably been steeper for those two groups than for whites. It is also true that union workers are more likely than nonunion workers to be covered by employer-paid health insurance and also to have lower health premiums and deductibles. The decline of unions has thus meant that the average worker today is less likely to have employer-paid health insurance and, if they do, more likely to have higher premiums and deductibles.

Unemployment

Unemployment is a fact of life. There will always be people laid off or fired, who voluntarily quit their jobs, or who just graduated school and are still looking for work. But most unemployed people are involuntarily unemployed, and for them the financial and psychological consequences can be devastating, as we saw in the news story that began this chapter.

Unemployment rates rise and fall with the economy, and the national unemployment rate was as high as 10.2 percent in October 2009 amid the Great Recession that began almost two years earlier. It was still 8.3 percent in February 2012, amounting to almost 13 million people. But whether unemployment is high or low, it always varies by race and ethnicity, with African American and Latino unemployment rates much higher than the white rate (see Figure 12.3 "Race, Ethnicity, and Unemployment Rate, February 2012"). Unemployment is also higher for younger people than for older people. In February 2012, 23.8 percent of all teenagers in the labor force (aged 16–19) were unemployed, a figure three times higher than that for adults. The unemployment rate for African Americans in this age group was a very high 34.7 percent, twice as high as the 21.3 percent figure for whites in this age group (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

Figure 12.3 Race, Ethnicity, and Unemployment Rate, February 2012



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012). Employment & earnings online. Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/opub/ee/home.htm.

Unemployment figures are misleading in an important respect, as they do not include people who are *underemployed*. Underemployment includes the unemployed and also two other types of people: (a) those who are working part-time but who want to work full-time—the so-called *marginally attached*, and (b) those who have stopped looking for work because they have not been able to find a job. Many economists think that underemployment provides a more accurate measure than unemployment of the number of people with employment problems.

For example, in December 2011, when the unemployment rate was 8.5 percent and 13 million people were officially unemployed, the underemployment rate was 15.2 percent, equal to 23.8 million people (Shierholz, 2012). These figures are almost twice as high as the official unemployment figures. Reflecting the racial/ethnic disparity in unemployment, 24.4 percent of African American workers and 22.3 percent of Latino workers were underemployed, compared to only 12.5 percent of white workers. Reflecting on the great amount of underemployment during the Great Recession, one economist commented, "When you combine the long-term unemployed with those who are dropping out and those who are working part time because they can't find anything else, it is just far beyond anything we've seen in the job market since the 1930s" (Herbert, 2010, p. A25).

We have just seen that unemployment rises when the economy falters and that race and ethnicity affect the probability of being unemployed. These two facts provide evidence supporting the *sociological imagination* (see Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems"). As C. Wright Mills (1959) emphasized in his original discussion of this concept, unemployment is best viewed more as a public issue than as a personal trouble. When so many people are unemployed during an economic recession and when there is

such striking evidence of higher unemployment rates among the persons of color who have the least opportunity for the education and training needed to obtain and keep a job, it is evident that high unemployment rates reflect a public issue rather than just a collection of public troubles.

Several kinds of problems make it difficult for people of color to be hired into jobs and thus contribute to the racial/ethnic disparity in unemployment. The Para 12.142 box discusses these problems.

Applying Social Research

Race, Ethnicity, and Employment

As the text discusses, people of color are more likely than whites to be unemployed or underemployed. While a relative lack of education helps explain these higher rates for people of color, other kinds of problems are also apparent.

One problem is racial discrimination on the part of employers, regardless of how conscious employers are of their discriminatory behavior. Chapter 4 "Gender Inequality" recounted a study by sociologist Devah Pager (2003), who had young white and African American men apply independently in person for various jobs in Milwaukee. These men wore the same type of clothing and reported similar levels of education and other qualifications. Some said they had a criminal record, while others said they had not committed any crimes. In striking evidence of racial discrimination in hiring, African American applicants *without* a criminal record were hired at the same low rate as white applicants *with* a criminal record.

Pager and sociologists Bruce Western and Bart Bonikowski also investigated racial discrimination in another field experiment in New York City (Pager, Bonikowski, & Western, 2009). They had white, African American, and Latino "testers," all of them "well-spoken, clean-cut young men" (p. 781), apply in person to low-level service jobs (e.g., retail sales and delivery drivers) requiring no more than a high school education; all the testers had similar (hypothetical) qualifications. Almost one-third (31 percent) of white testers received a call back or job offer, compared to only 25.2 percent of Latino testers and 15.2 percent of African American testers. The researchers concluded that their findings "add to a large research program demonstrating the continuing contribution of discrimination to racial inequality in the post-civil rights era" (p. 794).

Other kinds of evidence also reveal racial discrimination in hiring. Two scholars sent job applications in response to help-wanted ads in Boston and Chicago (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003). They randomly assigned the applications to feature either a "white-sounding" name (e.g., Emily or Greg) or an "African American–sounding" name (e.g., Jamal and Lakisha). White names received 50 percent more callbacks than African American names for job interviews.

Racial differences in access to the informal networks that are often so important in finding a job also contribute to the racial/ethnic disparity in employment. In a study using data from a nationwide survey of a random sample of Americans, sociologist Steve McDonald and colleagues found that people of color and women are less likely than white males to receive informal word of vacant, high-level supervisory positions (McDonald, Nan, & Ao, 2009).

As these studies indicate, research by sociologists and other social scientists reveals that race and ethnicity continue to make a difference in employment prospects for Americans. This body of research reveals clear evidence of discrimination, conscious or unconscious, in hiring and also of racial/ethnic differences in access to the informal networks that are often so important for hiring. By uncovering this evidence, these studies underscore the need to address discrimination, access to informal networks, and other factors that contribute to racial and ethnic disparities in employment.

The Impact of Unemployment

Although the news article that began this chapter gave us a moving account of unemployed people at food banks, survey data also provide harsh evidence of the social and psychological effects of being unemployed. In July 2010, the Pew Research Center issued a report based on a survey of 810 adults who were currently unemployed or had been unemployed since the Great Recession began in December 2007 and 1,093 people who had never been unemployed during the recession (Morin & Kochhar, 2010). The report's title, *Lost Income, Lost Friends—and Loss of Self-Respect*, summarized its major findings.

Of those who had been unemployed for at least six months (*long-term unemployment*), 44 percent said that the recession had caused "major changes" in their lives, versus only 20 percent of those who had never been unemployed. More than half of the long-term unemployed said their family income had declined, and more than 40 percent said that their family relations had been strained and that they had lost contact with close friends. In another finding, 38 percent said they had "lost some self-respect" from being unemployed. One-third said they were finding it difficult to pay their rent or mortgage, compared to only 16 percent of those who had never been unemployed during the recession. Half had borrowed money from family or friends to pay bills, versus only 18

percent of the never unemployed. Of all the people who had been unemployed, almost half had experienced sleep difficulties, and 5 percent had experienced drug or alcohol problems. All these numbers paint a distressing picture of the social and psychological impact of unemployment during the Great Recession that began in late 2007.



Unemployment lines were all too common in recent years. Long-term unemployment often causes various social and psychological difficulties. Rawle C. Jackman – The line of hope… – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Unemployment also has a significant impact on children whose parent or parents are unemployed. The Note 12.21 "Children and Our Future" box discusses this impact.

Children and Our Future

The Hidden Casualties of Unemployment

As unemployment soared in the wake of the Great Recession that began in 2007, many more children lived in a household where a parent had become unemployed. By early 2010, 11 percent of American children, or 8.1 million children overall, had an unemployed parent. Just slightly more than two years earlier, this number had been much smaller, 4.8 million. In just over two years, then, the number of children with an unemployed parent grew by two-thirds.

After their parents became unemployed, these children began to suffer various psychological effects. One news report summarized this psychological impact as follows: "For many families across the country, the greatest damage inflicted by this recession has not necessarily been financial, but emotional and psychological. Children, especially, have become hidden casualties, often absorbing more than their parents are fully aware of. Several academic studies have linked parental job loss—especially that of fathers—to adverse impacts in areas like school performance and self-esteem."

The emotional and psychological effects for children occur for at least two reasons. First, unemployed parents tend to experience extra stress and to become withdrawn. Second, married parents and unmarried partners often experience interpersonal conflict when one of them becomes unemployed. Both of these consequences of unemployment in turn affect children in a household where at least one parent is unemployed.

Children have suffered in other ways from the rise in unemployment. More children have become homeless as their households fell into poverty. In addition, children of an unemployed parent are more likely to repeat a grade or, if they are adolescents, to drop out of school. Child abuse has probably also increased in families where a parent became unemployed.

In view of all these consequences for the children of the unemployed, the United States should do everything possible to put parents and other adults back to work and to help the children of unemployed parents deal with the devastating effects of the Great Recession.

Sources: Lovell & Isaacs, 2010; Luo, 2009

Corporations

One of the most important but controversial features of modern capitalism is the corporation, a formal organization that has a legal existence, including the right to sign contracts, that is separate from that of its members.



Corporations such as Exxon dominate the US economy. They employ thousands of workers, and their assets total many trillions of dollars. Wikimedia Commons – CC BY-SA 2.5.

Adam Smith, the founder of capitalism, envisioned that individuals would own the means of production and compete for profit, and this is the model the United States followed in its early stage of industrialization. After the Civil War, however, corporations quickly replaced individuals and their families as the owners of the means of production and as the competitors for profit. As corporations grew following the Civil War, they quickly tried to control their markets by, for example, buying up competitors and driving others out of business. To do so, they engaged in bribery, kickbacks, and complex financial schemes of dubious ethics. They also established factories and other workplaces with squalid conditions. Their shady financial practices won their chief executives the name "robber barons" and led the federal government to pass the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 designed to prohibit restraint of trade that raised prices (Hillstrom & Hillstrom, 2005).

More than a century later, corporations have increased in both number and size. Although several million US corporations exist, most are fairly small. Each of the largest five hundred, however, has an annual revenue exceeding $4.3 billion (2011 data) and employs thousands of workers. Their total assets run into the trillions of dollars (Fortune, 2011). It is no exaggeration to say they control the nation's economy, as together they produce most of the US private sector output, employ millions of people, and have revenues equal to most of the US gross domestic product. In many ways, the size and influence of corporations stifle the competition that is one of the hallmarks of capitalism. For example, several markets, including that for breakfast cereals, are controlled by four or fewer corporations. This control reduces competition because it reduces the number of products and competitors, and it thus raises prices to the public (Parenti, 2011).

The last few decades have seen the proliferation and rise of the multinational corporation, a corporation with headquarters in one nation but with factories and other operations in many other nations (Wettstein, 2009). Multinational corporations centered in the United States and their foreign affiliates have more than $17 trillion in assets and employ more than 31 million people (US Census Bureau, 2012). The assets of the largest multinational corporations exceed those of many of the world's nations. Often their foreign operations are in poor nations, whose low wages make them attractive sites for multinational corporation expansion. Many multinational employees in these nations work in sweatshops at very low pay and amid substandard living conditions. Critics of this practice say multinationals not only mistreat workers in poor nations but also exploit these nations' natural resources. In contrast, defenders of the practice say multinationals are bringing jobs to poor nations and helping them achieve economic growth. As this debate illustrates, the dominance of multinational corporations will certainly continue to spark controversy.

As we first discussed in Chapter 8 "Crime and Criminal Justice", another controversial aspect of corporations is the white-collar crime in which they engage (Rosoff, Pontell, & Tillman, 2010). Price fixing by corporations costs the US public some $60 billion annually (Simon, 2008). Workplace-related illnesses and injuries that could have been prevented if companies had safe workplaces

kill about 50,000 workers each year (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, 2011). An estimated 10,000 US residents die annually from unsafe products, including contaminated food (Consumer Product Safety Commission, 2010; Young, 2010). All in all, corporate lawbreaking and neglect probably result in almost 100,000 deaths annually and cost the public more than $400 billion (Barkan, 2012).

In sum, corporations are the dominant actors in today's economy. They provide most of our products and many of our services and employ millions of people. It is impossible to imagine a modern industrial system without corporations. Yet they often stifle competition, break the law, and, according to their critics, exploit people and natural resources in developing nations.

Economic Inequality

In 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement gave national attention to economic inequality by emphasizing the differences between the "1%" and the "99%." Proclaiming "We are the 99%," they decried the concentration of wealth in the richest of the rich and the growing inequality of the last few decades. (See Note 12.24 "People Making a Difference".) The issue of economic inequality merits further attention here.

People Making a Difference

Occupy Wall Street

Before 2011, economic inequality in the United States certainly existed and in fact had increased greatly since the 1970s. However, although economic inequality was a topic of concern to social scientists, it was not a topic of concern to the general news media. Because the news media generally ignored economic inequality, it was also not a topic of concern to the general public.

That all changed beginning on September 17, 2011, when hundreds of people calling themselves "Occupy Wall Street" marched through the financial district in New York City before dozens encamped overnight and for weeks to come. Occupy Wall Street took these actions to protest the role of major banks and corporations in the economic collapse of 2007 and 2008 and to call attention to their dominance over the political process. Within weeks, similar Occupy encampments had spread to more than one hundred cities in the United States and hundreds more across the globe. "We are the 99%," they said again and again, as "occupy" became a verb heard repeatedly throughout the United States.

By winter, almost all Occupy encampments had ended either because of legal crackdowns or because of the weather conditions. By that time, however, the Occupy protesters had won news media attention everywhere. In a December 2011 poll by the Pew Research Center, 44 percent of Americans supported the Occupy Wall Street movement, while 35 percent opposed it. Almost half (48 percent) said they agreed with the concerns raised by the movement, compared to 30 percent who said they disagreed with these concerns. In the same poll, 61 percent said the US economic system "unfairly favors the wealthy," while 36 percent said it was fair to all Americans. In a related area, 77 percent said "there is too much power in the hands of a few rich people and corporations." In all these items, there was a notable difference by political party preference. For example, 91 percent of Democrats agreed that a few rich people and corporations have too much power, compared to 80 percent of Independents and only 53 percent of Republicans.

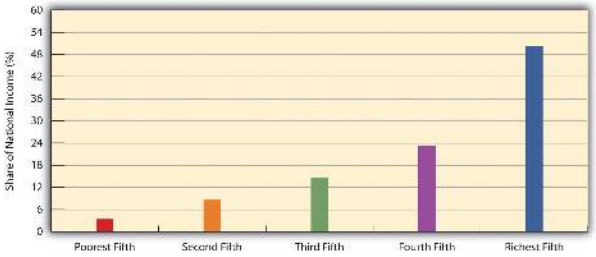
Regardless of these political differences, Occupy Wall Street succeeded in bringing economic inequality and related issues into the national limelight. In just a few short months in 2011, it made a momentous difference.

Sources: Pew Research Center, 2011; vanden Heuvel, 2012

Let's start by defining economic inequality, which refers to the extent of the economic difference between the rich and the poor. Because most societies are stratified, there will always be some people who are richer or poorer than others, but the key question is *how much* richer or poorer they are. When the gap between them is large, we say that much economic inequality exists; when the gap between them is small, we say that relatively little economic inequality exists.

Considered in this light, the United States has a very large degree of economic inequality. A common way to examine inequality is to rank the nation's families by income from lowest to highest and then to divide this distribution into *fifths*. Thus we have the poorest fifth of the nation's families (or the 20 percent of families with the lowest family incomes), a second fifth with somewhat higher incomes, and so on until we reach the richest fifth of families, or the 20 percent with the highest incomes. We then can see what percentage each fifth has of the nation's *entire* income. Figure 12.4 "Share of National Income Going to Income Fifths, 2010" shows such a calculation for the United States. The poorest fifth enjoys only 3.3 percent of the nation's income, while the richest fifth enjoys 50.2 percent. Another way of saying this is that the richest 20 percent of the population have as much income as the remaining 80 percent of the population.

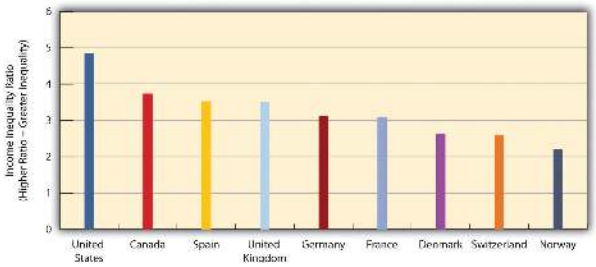
Figure 12.4 Share of National Income Going to Income Fifths, 2010



Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

This degree of inequality is the largest in the industrialized world. Figure 12.5 “Income Inequality around the World” compares the inequality among several industrialized nations by dividing the median income of households in the ninetieth percentile (meaning they have more income than 90 percent of all households) by the median income of households in the tenth percentile (meaning they have more income than only 10 percent of all households); the higher this resulting ninetieth percentile/tenth percentile ratio, the greater a nation’s inequality. The ratio for the United States far exceeds that for any other nation.

Figure 12.5 Income Inequality around the World



Ratio of median income of richest 10 percent in each nation to that of poorest 10 percent.

Source: Data from Mishel, L., Bernstein, J., & Shierholz, H. (2009). *The state of working America 2008/2009*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.

The Role of Tax Policy

Economic inequality in the United States has increased during the last three decades. The loss of manufacturing jobs and unions accounts for some of this increase. However, a primary reason for the rising inequality has been tax policy. More specifically, the federal government has implemented steep cuts in the highest tax rates for income from salaries and wages and especially in tax rates for income from dividends and capital gains (Hacker & Pierson, 2011). This latter cut is especially important because dividends and capital gains account for a much larger share of the income of wealthy families than the income of ordinary families. To be more specific, dividends and capital gains account for only 0.7 percent of the income of the bottom four-fifths of the nation’s families, but for 18.8 percent of the income of the top fifth, 38.2 percent of the top 1 percent, and a striking 51.9 percent of the top 0.1 percent (Hungerford, 2011). In a related statistic, three-fourths of all capital gains are received by the top 1 percent (Krugman, 2012). Relative to its national wealth, the United States is the lowest-taxed industrial democracy in the world (Leonhardt, 2012).

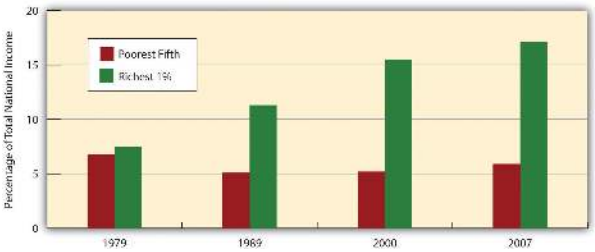


Tax rates for the very wealthy have declined dramatically since the 1970s. This decline has helped fuel a rise in economic inequality. Martin Haesemeyer – The Internal Revenue Service – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Keep this context in mind as we note that tax cuts in 2003 lowered the tax rate for dividends and capital gains from 28 percent to 15 percent. Meanwhile, the top tax rate for income from salaries and wages is 35 percent. Thus many very wealthy families and individuals pay a lower percentage of their income in taxes than many middle- and upper-middle-class families do because so much of the wealthy families' income is from dividends and capital gains. In fact, the four hundred wealthiest families and individuals in the country pay only about 18 percent of their income in federal tax (Krugman, 2012). As the director of Citizens for Tax Justice explained, "The low taxes on capital gains and dividends are why people who make a ton of money, which is largely from investment income, do awfully well. The Warren Buffetts, the hedge fund managers—they pay really low tax rates" (Confessore, Kocieniewski, & Parker, 2011, p. A1). This fact prompts a critical question from Paul Krugman, winner of the Nobel Prize in economics: "Is there a good reason why the rich should bear a startlingly light tax burden?" His answer: "Such low taxes on the very rich are indefensible" (Krugman, 2012, p. A27).

The lowering of tax rates has helped make the nation's wealthiest families even wealthier. After adjusting for inflation, their after-tax income grew by a much greater amount than that for the poorest families from 1979 to 2007. Income grew by only 18 percent for the poorest fifth but by 65 percent for the wealthiest fifth (excluding the top 1 percent), and it also grew by a whopping 275 percent for families in the top 1 percent (Congressional Budget Office, 2011). As a result, economic inequality increased. Figure 12.6 "Growth of Economic Inequality in the United States (Percentage Share of Total National Income)" shows that wealthiest 1 percent now have a much larger share of the nation's total posttax income than they did in 1979, while the poorest fifth have a lower share. As the saying goes, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.

Figure 12.6 Growth of Economic Inequality in the United States (Percentage Share of Total National Income)



Source: Economic Policy Institute. (2011). Share of total income by income fifths and a breakdown of the top 20%. *The State of working America*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved from http://stateofworkingamerica.org/charts/household-income-shares-1979-2007.

The Impact of Economic Inequality

Why should we care if economic inequality has increased and if the United States has the highest degree of inequality of all industrial democracies? One answer is that it is a matter of fairness. The United States is not only the wealthiest nation in the world; it is also a nation that historically has stressed that everyone is created equal and that everyone has an equal opportunity to pursue the "American dream" by becoming economically successful. Against this backdrop, a high degree of economic inequality is simply "un-American" and unfair.

Beyond this rather philosophical critique are more practical considerations. First, a high degree of economic inequality is strongly associated with a high degree of poverty and near poverty: If the rich are getting richer, there is normally less wealth to "go around," and the poor get poorer. For the same reason, high economic inequality is also associated with a shrinking of the middle class. In the United States, as both poverty (and near poverty) and wealth have increased, the size of the middle class has reduced, as the chair of the Council of Economic Advisers has emphasized (Krueger, 2012).

Second, a high degree of economic inequality is also associated with low *economic mobility* (the movement of people up or down the socioeconomic ladder) (Krueger, 2012). As noted earlier, the United States is the most economically unequal of all industrial democracies. It also has lower economic mobility: Americans born into poverty or near poverty are less likely than their counterparts in other democracies to be able to move up the socioeconomic ladder (DeParle, 2012).

Next, high economic inequality may slow economic growth. This possible effect occurs for at least three reasons (Krueger, 2012). First, the wealthy tend to save their money rather than spend it. Second, a shrinking middle class means there is less spending by the middle class to stimulate the economy. Third, workers' morale is likely to be lower in a society with higher economic inequality, and their lower morale decreases their productivity. As the chair of the Council of Economic Advisers has stated, "The evidence suggests that a growing middle class is good for the economy, and that a more fair distribution of income would hasten economic growth. Businesses would benefit from restoring more fairness to the economy by having more middle class customers, more stable markets, and improved employee morale and productivity" (Krueger, 2012).

Finally, many social scientists consider nations with high degrees of economic inequality to be "unhealthy societies," to quote the title of a book on this issue (Wilkinson, 1996). Economic inequality is thought to undermine social cohesion and increase polarization, and also to cause other problems (Barash, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011). Among the world's industrial nations, higher degrees of economic inequality are associated with worse physical and mental health, lower life expectancy, and higher rates of violent crime. High economic inequality, then, is a matter not only of fairness but also of life and death.

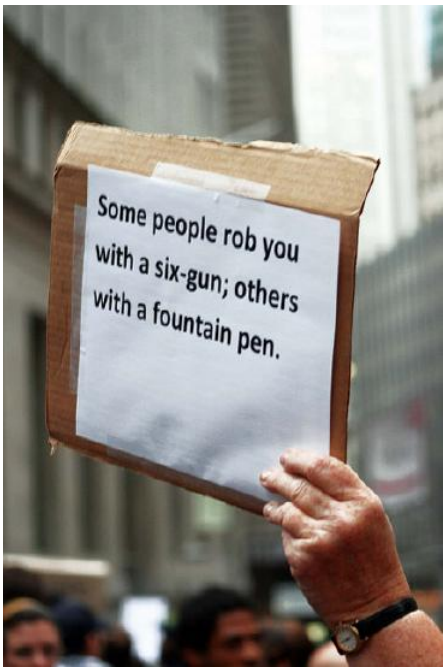
Tax Evasion

Another significant problem in the American economy is *tax evasion*. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) periodically estimates the amount of tax evasion and derives a figure it calls the tax gap: the difference between what Americans owe in federal taxes and what they actually pay. Much of the annual tax gap results from the failure of professionals such as physicians and attorneys to report self-employment income and from the claiming of false deductions by wealthy individuals and families (Braithwaite, 2009).

In January 2012, the IRS released its estimate of the tax gap for 2006. The initial tax gap was $450 billion. After payment of late taxes and certain enforcement efforts, this gap was reduced to $385 billion, still an astronomical figure; tax evasion by corporations amounted for about $70 billion of this amount. The total tax gap is about twenty times greater than the annual economic loss from property crimes such as burglary and motor vehicle theft. In 2006, the federal budget deficit was $248 billion. If everyone had paid the taxes they owed, there would have been no deficit at all, and the federal government in fact would have had a surplus of $137 billion (Pizzigati, 2012).

Despite the huge problem of tax evasion, budget cuts in 2011 weakened the ability of the IRS to enforce the tax code. In 2012, the IRS had 3,000 fewer employees working in enforcement than it had in 2010 (Pizzigati, 2012).

Crime in the Workplace



Employee theft costs about $19.5 billion annually. Workers' dissatisfaction with various aspects of their jobs is a major reason for this form of theft. A. Golden – the US$ 3 TRILLION HEIST – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

An unfortunate fact about work in the United States is crime in the workplace, which is the last problem in work and the economy that we will examine. Two major types of such crime exist: employee theft and workplace violence.

Employee Theft

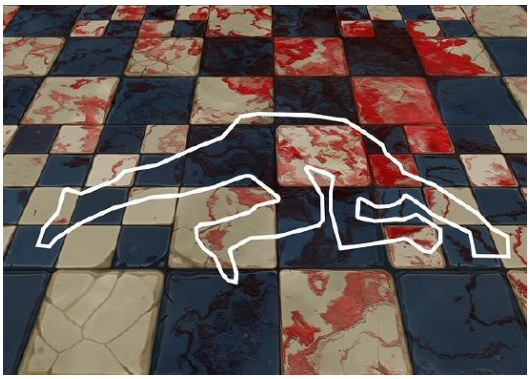
Employee theft takes two forms: pilferage and embezzlement. Pilferage involves the stealing of goods, while embezzlement involves the stealing of money in its various dimensions (cash, electronic transactions, etc.). Whichever form it takes, employee theft is so common that is has been called a "widespread, pervasive, and costly form of crime" (Langton, Piquero, & Hollinger, 2006, p. 539). It is estimated that about 75 percent of employees steal at least once from their employers and that the annual amount of employee theft is $19.5 billion (National Retail Federation, 2007).

Employee theft occurs for many reasons, but a common reason is worker dissatisfaction with various aspects of their job. They may think their wages or salaries are too low, they may feel they have been treated unfairly by their employer, and so forth. As the estimates of the amount of employee theft suggest, this form of theft is not condemned by many people, and, indeed, many workplaces have informal norms that approve of certain forms of theft—for example, it is OK to steal inexpensive objects such as (depending on the workplace) utensils, food, pencils and pens, or toilet paper. Not surprisingly, embezzlement is often more costly to an employer than pilferage; although it can involve just a few dollars from a cash register, it can also involve hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars acquired through more sophisticated means.

When we think of employee theft, we probably usually think of theft by blue-collar or lower white-collar employees. However, physicians, attorneys, and other professionals also steal from their patients/clients or from the government, even if their form of theft is often much more complex and sophisticated than what the term "employee theft" may usually imply. Attorneys may bill their clients for work that was never done, and physicians may bill Medicare or private insurance for patients they never saw or for procedures that were never performed. We call this form of "employee" theft professional fraud. Fraud by physicians and other health-care professionals (including nursing homes and medical testing laboratories) is thought to amount to $100 billion every year (Rosoff et al., 2010), a figure that far exceeds the $19.5 billion in "conventional" employee theft and the similar figure lost to property crime (robbery, burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft).

Workplace Violence

In January 2012, a lumber company employee in North Carolina entered the company's warehouse armed with a twelve-gauge shotgun. He shot and killed three coworkers and critically wounded another coworker. He then returned home, shot himself in the head, and later died at a hospital. A news report described the gunman as a "disgruntled" employee (Muskal, 2012).



About five hundred homicides occur at workplaces every year. The majority of these homicides result from robberies, not from the actions of disgruntled workers. Pixabay – CC0 Public Domain.

Many people die or are injured by acts of violence at their workplaces every year in the United States. In 2008, 517 people were slain at their workplaces, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. As disturbing as this number was, it represented a sharp drop from the numbers that prevailed a decade earlier, when 1,080 workplace homicides occurred in 1994. From 2003 through 2008, an average of 497 workplace homicides occurred every year (Needleman, 2010).

In terms of who is involved and the reasons for their involvement, three kinds of workplace homicides are the most common. The first and by far the most common type is homicide as the result of robbery. This category includes the many store clerks, gas station attendants, taxi drivers, and other employees who are slain during a robbery, as well as police who are killed as they try to stop a robbery or apprehend the offender. The second category is homicide committed as an act of domestic violence; in this type, the offender, almost always a man, seeks out his wife or girlfriend (or ex-wife or ex-girlfriend) at her workplace and kills her. The third category involves disgruntled workers, such as the North Carolina lumber employee just discussed, who kill one or more people at their workplace whom they blame for problems the killers have been having. Although this type of homicide is the type that the phrase “workplace violence” or “workplace killings” usually brings to mind, it is actually the least common of the three types listed here (Fox, 2010).

Key Takeaways

- The move to a postindustrial economy has resulted in a loss of jobs and wages in the United States, thanks in part to capital flight and outsourcing.
- Unemployment soared after the Great Recession that began in late 2007. Joblessness has significant consequences for the financial and psychological well-being of the millions of people who are unemployed.
- Economic inequality has greatly increased since the 1970s, thanks in large part to changes in the tax code that favored the wealthy.
- Corporations often engage in white-collar crime that costs hundreds of billions of dollars annually and results in tens of thousands of deaths.

For Your Review

1. Write a brief essay in which you discuss the benefits and disadvantages of corporations in modern society.
2. Write a brief essay in which you summarize the problems associated with increasing economic inequality.
3. Fewer workers belong to labor unions now than just a few decades ago. Do you think this is a good development or a bad development? Explain your answer.
4. Think of a job you now have or your most recent job if you are currently not employed. On a scale of 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied), how satisfied are you (were you) with your job? Explain why you have (had) this level of satisfaction.

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9.3: Problems in Work and the Economy is shared under a not declared license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

9.4: Improving Work and the Economy

Learning Objective

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Understand several types of social reform for improving work and the economy.

This chapter has discussed problems related to work and the economy. Critics of capitalism say many of these and other problems arise from the nature of capitalism. According to this way of thinking, capitalism as an economic system emphasizes competition and thus a "winner takes all" mentality. In this kind of system, there are many losers, and there is also unbridled greed for ever greater wealth. Further, because there is relatively little government regulation in the free-market system that is a hallmark of capitalism, large corporations are left relatively free to engage in behavior that advances their profits but that also stifles competition, harms the environment, and causes other social ills. Regardless of the merits of this general critique, capitalism is not about to disappear. Any improvement in work and the economy, then, must stem from social reforms based on sound social research. This chapter's discussion points to several important problems that must be addressed.

One problem is racial and ethnic discrimination in hiring and employment. Several kinds of studies, but especially field experiments involving job applicants who are similar except for their race and ethnicity, provide powerful evidence of continuing discrimination despite federal and state laws banning it. This evidence certainly suggests the need for stronger enforcement of existing laws against racial and ethnic bias in employment and for public education campaigns to alert workers to signs of this type of discrimination.

A second problem concerns worker morale. Economic inequality and a faltering economy continue to threaten to undermine worker morale and hence worker productivity. Individual employers can do little about these two fundamental problems in the larger economy, but they can do something about worker morale. In this regard, this chapter discussed the importance of coworker friendships for workers' satisfaction with their jobs and for their more general individual well-being. In view of this importance, employers and employees alike should make special efforts to promote coworker friendships. Because work is such an important part of most people's lives, these efforts should prove beneficial for many reasons. Employers should also take other measures to improve worker morale, including improvements in wages and working conditions.

A third problem is unemployment. Sociologists, psychologists, and other scholars have documented the social and emotional consequences of unemployment. The effects of unemployment go far beyond the loss of money. Revealed by much research, these consequences sometimes seem forgotten in national debates over whether to extend unemployment insurance benefits. But unemployment does have a human face, and it is essential to provide monetary benefits and other kinds of help for the unemployed.

A fourth problem is corporate misbehavior. As this chapter discussed, corporations are essential to the US economy but also cause great harm. It is not an exaggeration to say that corporate crime is rampant and that it goes largely unpunished. Stricter federal and state oversight of and sanctions against corporate misbehavior are needed.

A fifth problem is economic inequality. The degree of inequality has grown during the past few decades, thanks in large part to changes in the tax codes that greatly favored the wealthy. Restoring tax rates to their standards before the 1980s would help to lessen economic inequality and thus help lessen the problems arising from this type of inequality. In a related area, although the official federal tax rate for corporate profits is 35 percent, many corporations pay a much lower percentage than this because of various loopholes and shelters in the federal tax code. From 2009 to 2011, 280 corporations paid an average of only 18.5 percent of their profits in federal taxes, and 30 of these corporations paid no federal tax during this period (Kocieniewski, 2011). The corporations' effective tax rate was lower than that of corporations in many other democracies. For the ten-year period beginning 2002, General Electric paid only 2.3 percent of its profits in federal taxes (Eichler, 2012). Ending the loopholes and shelters that corporations enjoy will help greatly to increase federal revenue. As the advocacy group Citizens for Tax Justice observes, "Closing the loopholes will have real benefits, including a fairer tax system, reduced federal budget deficits and more resources to improve our roads, bridges and schools—things that are really important for economic development here in the United States" (Kocieniewski, 2011, p. B1).

More generally, it is worth noting a recommendation of many observers concerning the federal government's role in the economy. These observers say the government must take a more active role in improving the national infrastructure, job training, and research and development, and in more generally providing incentives for large corporations to invest their resources in job creation. In this regard, they cite the recent experience of Germany, which has recovered faster than the United States from the worldwide recession (Jacobs, 2012).



To improve the economy and create many jobs, many observers say the federal government needs to follow the example of Western Europe by expanding its role in the economy. Diego Cambiaso – White House – CC BY-SA 2.0.

Germany had this success, these observers say, because it undertook several labor market policies. In particular, Germany provided more generous unemployment benefits than found in the United States (including unemployment compensation in return for working shorter hours, which avoided layoffs), and it provided businesses incentives for employment training and subsidies and incentives to hire the unemployed. Other nations have also eased the effects of the recession because their governments have played this type of active role, one that is much more active than found in the United States. The experience of Germany and of several other nations strongly suggests that "government policy and investment can play a vital role in providing incentives for the private sector," as one journalist put it (Zakaria, 2012). If so, the US federal government would do well to follow the example of Germany and other nations.

In this regard, a comprehensive approach involving job-creation funding is essential (Fieldhouse and Thiess, 2011). This approach would involve federal funding and/or budgetary policy reform in the following areas: (1) funding for the renovation of schools, improvement in transportation, and improvements in other components of the national infrastructure; (2) funding for the hiring of thousands of teachers, child care workers, and community service workers; and (3) expansion of unemployment insurance benefits, both to help the families of the unemployed and to give them money that they will spend to help stimulate the economy.

Taken together, these measures promise to create millions of jobs. Because these jobs would stimulate the economy and increase tax revenue, these measures would help to pay for themselves. Additional funding for these measures would come from raising tax rates on the very wealthy, as discussed earlier, and from other types of tax reform, including ending tax loopholes for the oil and gas industry and implementing a "financial speculation tax" (Fieldhouse & Thiess, 2011). This last type of tax reform would involve a small tax on all stock transactions, with a 0.5 percent tax raising about $80 billion annually (Bivens, 2011).

More generally, recall that the social democracies of Scandinavia have combined democratic freedom and economic prosperity. Although there are certainly no signs that the United States is about to follow their example, our nation also has much to learn from these societies as it considers how best to rebuild its economy and to help the millions of people who are unemployed or underemployed.

Key Takeaways

- Certain social reforms are necessary to improve aspects of work and the economy.
- Returning tax codes to their rates before the 1980s will help lessen economic inequality.
- Stricter federal and state oversight of corporate behavior is needed to help address corporate crime.
- A greater investment of federal funding in job creation and the raising of taxes for the very wealthy is necessary to create jobs while stimulating the economy.

For Your Review

1. Write a brief essay that summarizes any three strategies for improving work and the economy.
2. To what extent, if any, do you think capitalism is to blame for the problems in work and the economy discussed in this chapter? Explain your answer.

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9.5: End-of-Chapter Material

Summary

1. Capitalism and socialism are the two primary types of economic systems in the world today. Capitalism involves private ownership, the pursuit of profit, and competition for profit, while socialism involves the collective ownership of goods and resources and efforts for the common good. Several nations practice democratic socialism, which is meant to combine the best of capitalism and socialism.
2. According to functionalism, the economy makes society possible by providing essential goods and services, while work gives people income and self-fulfillment. According to conflict theory, work is alienating, and the economic elite uses its control of the economy to maintain their elite position. Symbolic interactionism focuses on social interaction in the workplace and on how they perceive the work they do.
3. Problems in work and the economy include the following: (a) the loss of jobs and wages; (b) the decline of labor unions; (c) unemployment; (d) corporate misbehavior; (e) rising economic inequality; (f) tax evasion; and (g) workplace crime.
4. Social reforms based on sound social science research are needed to improve work and the economy. Two important reforms would involve stricter enforcement of laws against racial discrimination in hiring and employment and of penalties for corporate crime.

Using What You Know

You graduated from college a year ago and have begun working in sales for an electronics company. You've become good friends with a coworker, with whom you often "hang out" at bars and the occasional party. However, one day you notice this coworker pocketing a smartphone, and you realize that a theft is occurring. What, if anything, do you do? Explain your answer.

What You Can Do

To help deal with the work and economy problems discussed in this chapter, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Start or join a group that tries to educate the public about economic inequality.
2. Assist a local labor union in its efforts to have safer workplaces.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

10: Health and Health Care

10.1: Sociological Perspectives on Health and Health Care
10.2: Global Aspects of Health and Health Care
10.3: Problems of Health in the United States
10.4: Problems of Health Care in the United States
10.5: Improving Health and Health Care
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10.1: Sociological Perspectives on Health and Health Care

Learning Objective

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. List the assumptions of the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist perspectives on health and medicine.

Before discussing these perspectives, we must first define three key concepts—health, medicine, and health care—that lie at the heart of their explanations and of this chapter's discussion. Health refers to the extent of a person's physical, mental, and social well-being. As this definition suggests, health is a multidimensional concept. Although the three dimensions of health just listed often affect each other, it is possible for someone to be in good physical health and poor mental health, or vice versa. Medicine refers to the social institution that seeks to prevent, diagnose, and treat illness and to promote health in its various dimensions. This social institution in the United States is vast, to put it mildly, and involves more than 11 million people (physicians, nurses, dentists, therapists, medical records technicians, and many other occupations). Finally, health care refers to the provision of medical services to prevent, diagnose, and treat health problems.

With these definitions in mind, we now turn to sociological explanations of health and health care. As usual, the major sociological perspectives that we have discussed throughout this book offer different types of explanations, but together they provide us with a more comprehensive understanding than any one approach can do by itself. Table 13.1 "Theory Snapshot" summarizes what they say.

Table 13.1 Theory Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Functionalism	Good health and effective medical care are essential for the smooth functioning of society. Patients must perform the "sick role" in order to be perceived as legitimately ill and to be exempt from their normal obligations. The physician-patient relationship is hierarchical: The physician provides instructions, and the patient needs to follow them.
Conflict theory	Social inequality characterizes the quality of health and the quality of health care. People from disadvantaged social backgrounds are more likely to become ill and to receive inadequate health care. Partly to increase their incomes, physicians have tried to control the practice of medicine and to define social problems as medical problems.
Symbolic interactionism	Health and illness are *social constructions*: Physical and mental conditions have little or no objective reality but instead are considered healthy or ill conditions only if they are defined as such by a society. Physicians "manage the situation" to display their authority and medical knowledge.

The Functionalist Approach

As conceived by Talcott Parsons (1951), the functionalist perspective emphasizes that good health and effective medical care are essential for a society's ability to function. Ill health impairs our ability to perform our roles in society, and if too many people are unhealthy, society's functioning and stability suffer. This was especially true for premature death, said Parsons, because it prevents individuals from fully carrying out all their social roles and thus represents a "poor return" to society for the various costs of pregnancy, birth, child care, and socialization of the individual who ends up dying early. Poor medical care is likewise dysfunctional for society, as people who are ill face greater difficulty in becoming healthy and people who are healthy are more likely to become ill.

For a person to be considered *legitimately* sick, said Parsons, several expectations must be met. He referred to these expectations as the sick role. First, sick people should not be perceived as having caused their own health problem. If we eat high-fat food, become

obese, and have a heart attack, we evoke less sympathy than if we had practiced good nutrition and maintained a proper weight. If someone is driving drunk and smashes into a tree, there is much less sympathy than if the driver had been sober and skidded off the road in icy weather.

Second, sick people must want to get well. If they do not want to get well or, worse yet, are perceived as faking their illness or malingering after becoming healthier, they are no longer considered legitimately ill by the people who know them or, more generally, by society itself.

Third, sick people are expected to have their illness confirmed by a physician or other health-care professional and to follow the professional's instructions in order to become well. If a sick person fails to do so, she or he again loses the right to perform the sick role.



Talcott Parsons wrote that for a person to be perceived as legitimately ill, several expectations, called the sick role, must be met. These expectations include the perception that the person did not cause her or his own health problem. Nathalie Babineau-Griffith – grand-maman's blanket – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

If all these expectations are met, said Parsons, sick people are treated as sick by their family, their friends, and other people they know, and they become exempt from their normal obligations to all these people. Sometimes they are even told to stay in bed when they want to remain active.

Physicians also have a role to perform, said Parsons. First and foremost, they have to diagnose the person's illness, decide how to treat it, and help the person become well. To do so, they need the cooperation of the patient, who must answer the physician's questions accurately and follow the physician's instructions. Parsons thus viewed the physician-patient relationship as hierarchical: the physician gives the orders (or, more accurately, provides advice and instructions), and the patient follows them.

Parsons was certainly right in emphasizing the importance of individuals' good health for society's health, but his perspective has been criticized for several reasons. First, his idea of the sick role applies more to acute (short-term) illness than to chronic (long-term) illness. Although much of his discussion implies a person temporarily enters a sick role and leaves it soon after following adequate medical care, people with chronic illnesses can be locked into a sick role for a very long time or even permanently. Second, Parsons's discussion ignores the fact, mentioned earlier, that our social backgrounds affect the likelihood of becoming ill and the quality of medical care we receive. Third, Parsons wrote approvingly of the hierarchy implicit in the physician-patient relationship. Many experts say today that patients need to reduce this hierarchy by asking more questions of their physicians and by taking a more active role in maintaining their health. To the extent that physicians do not always provide the best medical care, the hierarchy that Parsons favored is at least partly to blame.

The Conflict Approach

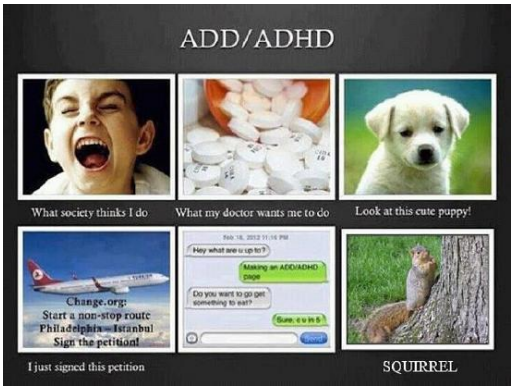
The conflict approach emphasizes inequality in the quality of health and of health-care delivery (Weitz, 2013). As noted earlier, the quality of health and health care differs greatly around the world and within the United States. Society's inequities along social class, race and ethnicity, and gender lines are reproduced in our health and health care. People from disadvantaged social backgrounds are more likely to become ill, and once they do become ill, inadequate health care makes it more difficult for them to become well. As we will see, the evidence of disparities in health and health care is vast and dramatic.

The conflict approach also critiques efforts by physicians over the decades to control the practice of medicine and to define various social problems as medical ones. Physicians' motivation for doing so has been both good and bad. On the good side, they have believed they are the most qualified professionals to diagnose problems and to treat people who have these problems. On the negative side, they have also recognized that their financial status will improve if they succeed in characterizing social problems as

medical problems and in monopolizing the treatment of these problems. Once these problems become “medicalized,” their possible social roots and thus potential solutions are neglected.

Several examples illustrate conflict theory’s criticism. Alternative medicine is becoming increasingly popular, but so has criticism of it by the medical establishment. Physicians may honestly feel that medical alternatives are inadequate, ineffective, or even dangerous, but they also recognize that the use of these alternatives is financially harmful to their own practices. Eating disorders also illustrate conflict theory’s criticism. Many of the women and girls who have eating disorders receive help from a physician, a psychiatrist, a psychologist, or another health-care professional. Although this care is often very helpful, the definition of eating disorders as a medical problem nonetheless provides a good source of income for the professionals who treat it and obscures its cultural roots in society’s standard of beauty for women (Whitehead & Kurz, 2008).

Obstetrical care provides another example. In most of human history, midwives or their equivalent were the people who helped pregnant women deliver their babies. In the nineteenth century, physicians claimed they were better trained than midwives and won legislation giving them authority to deliver babies. They may have honestly felt that midwives were inadequately trained, but they also fully recognized that obstetrical care would be quite lucrative (Ehrenreich & English, 2005).



According to conflict theory, physicians have often sought to define various social problems as medical problems. An example is the development of the diagnosis of ADHD, or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. birgerking – What I Really Do… ADD/ADHD – CC BY 2.0.

In a final example, many hyperactive children are now diagnosed with ADHD, or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. A generation or more ago, they would have been considered merely as overly active. After Ritalin, a drug that reduces hyperactivity, was developed, their behavior came to be considered a medical problem and the ADHD diagnosis was increasingly applied, and tens of thousands of children went to physicians’ offices and were given Ritalin or similar drugs. The definition of their behavior as a medical problem was very lucrative for physicians and for the company that developed Ritalin, and it also obscured the possible roots of their behavior in inadequate parenting, stultifying schools, or even gender socialization, as most hyperactive kids are boys (Conrad, 2008; Rao & Seaton, 2010).

Critics say the conflict approach’s assessment of health and medicine is overly harsh and its criticism of physicians’ motivation far too cynical. Scientific medicine has greatly improved the health of people around the world. Although physicians are certainly motivated, as many people are, by economic considerations, their efforts to extend their scope into previously nonmedical areas also stem from honest beliefs that people’s health and lives will improve if these efforts succeed. Certainly there is some truth in this criticism of the conflict approach, but the evidence of inequality in health and medicine and of the negative aspects of the medical establishment’s motivation for extending its reach remains compelling.

The Symbolic Interactionist Approach

The symbolic interactionist approach emphasizes that health and illness are *social constructions*. This means that various physical and mental conditions have little or no objective reality but instead are considered healthy or ill conditions only if they are defined as such by a society and its members (Buckser, 2009; Lorber & Moore, 2002). The ADHD example just discussed also illustrates symbolic interactionist theory’s concerns, as a behavior that was not previously considered an illness came to be defined as one after the development of Ritalin. In another example first discussed in Chapter 7 “Alcohol and Other Drugs”, in the late 1800s opium use was quite common in the United States, as opium derivatives were included in all sorts of over-the-counter products. Opium use was considered neither a major health nor legal problem. That changed by the end of the century, as prejudice against Chinese Americans led to the banning of the opium dens (similar to today’s bars) they frequented, and calls for the banning of

opium led to federal legislation early in the twentieth century that banned most opium products except by prescription (Musto, 2002).

In a more current example, an attempt to redefine obesity is now under way in the United States. Obesity is a known health risk, but a "fat pride" or "fat acceptance" movement composed mainly of heavy individuals is arguing that obesity's health risks are exaggerated and calling attention to society's discrimination against overweight people. Although such discrimination is certainly unfortunate, critics say the movement is going too far in trying to minimize obesity's risks (Diamond, 2011).

The symbolic interactionist approach has also provided important studies of the interaction between patients and health-care professionals. Consciously or not, physicians "manage the situation" to display their authority and medical knowledge. Patients usually have to wait a long time for the physician to show up, and the physician is often in a white lab coat; the physician is also often addressed as "Doctor," while patients are often called by their first name. Physicians typically use complex medical terms to describe a patient's illness instead of the more simple terms used by laypeople and the patients themselves.

Management of the situation is perhaps especially important during a gynecological exam, as first discussed in Chapter 9 "Work and the Economy". When the physician is a man, this situation is fraught with potential embarrassment and uneasiness because a man is examining and touching a woman's genital area. Under these circumstances, the physician must act in a purely professional manner. He must indicate no personal interest in the woman's body and must instead treat the exam no differently from any other type of exam. To further "desex" the situation and reduce any potential uneasiness, a female nurse is often present during the exam.

Critics fault the symbolic interactionist approach for implying that no illnesses have objective reality. Many serious health conditions do exist and put people at risk for their health regardless of what they or their society thinks. Critics also say the approach neglects the effects of social inequality for health and illness. Despite these possible faults, the symbolic interactionist approach reminds us that health and illness do have a subjective as well as an objective reality.

Key Takeaways

- A sociological understanding emphasizes the influence of people's social backgrounds on the quality of their health and health care. A society's culture and social structure also affect health and health care.
- The functionalist approach emphasizes that good health and effective health care are essential for a society's ability to function, and it views the physician-patient relationship as hierarchical.
- The conflict approach emphasizes inequality in the quality of health and in the quality of health care.
- The interactionist approach emphasizes that health and illness are social constructions; physical and mental conditions have little or no objective reality but instead are considered healthy or ill conditions only if they are defined as such by a society and its members.

For Your Review

1. Which approach—functionalist, conflict, or symbolic interactionist—do you most favor regarding how you understand health and health care? Explain your answer.
2. Think of the last time you visited a physician or another health-care professional. In what ways did this person come across as an authority figure possessing medical knowledge? In formulating your answer, think about the person's clothing, body position and body language, and other aspects of nonverbal communication.

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10.2: Global Aspects of Health and Health Care

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe how the nations of the world differ in important indicators of health and illness.
2. Explain the health-care model found in industrial nations other than the United States.

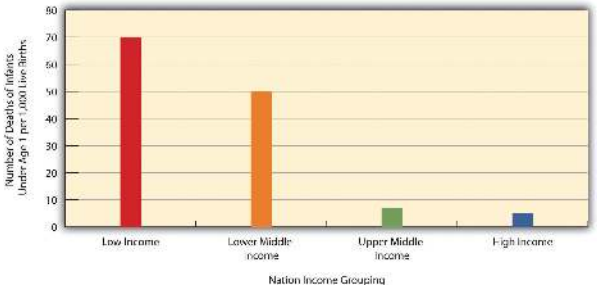
As we have seen in previous chapters, understanding what happens in other societies helps us to understand what happens in our own society. This section's discussion of health and health care across the globe, then, helps shed some light on what is good and bad about US health and medicine.

International Disparities in Health and Illness

The nations of the world differ dramatically in the quality of their health and health care. The poorest nations suffer terribly. Their people suffer from poor nutrition, unsafe water, inadequate sanitation, rampant disease, and inadequate health care. One disease they suffer from is AIDS. Some 34 million people worldwide have HIV/AIDS, and two-thirds of these live in sub-Saharan Africa. Almost two million people, most of them from this region, died in 2010 from HIV/AIDS (World Health Organization, 2011). All these health problems produce high rates of infant mortality and maternal mortality and high death rates. For all these reasons, people in the poorest nations have shorter life spans than those in the richest nations.

A few health indicators should indicate the depth of the problem. Figure 13.1 "Infant Mortality for Low-Income, Lower-Middle-Income, Higher-Middle-Income, and High-Income Nations, 2010" compares an important indicator, infant mortality (number of deaths before age 1 per 1,000 live births) for nations grouped into four income categories. The striking contrast between the two groups provides dramatic evidence of the health problems poor nations face. When, as Figure 13.1 "Infant Mortality for Low-Income, Lower-Middle-Income, Higher-Middle-Income, and High-Income Nations, 2010" indicates, 70 children in the poorest nations die before their first birthday for every 1,000 live births (equivalent to 7 out of 100), the poor nations have serious problems indeed.

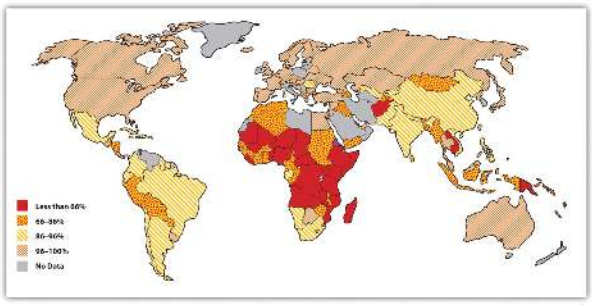
Figure 13.1 Infant Mortality for Low-Income, Lower-Middle-Income, Higher-Middle-Income, and High-Income Nations, 2010



Source: Data from World Bank. (2012). World databank. Retrieved from http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do?Step=1&id=4.

Figure 13.2 "Percentage of Population with Access to Adequate Sanitation Facilities, 2008" shows how the world differs in access to adequate sanitation facilities (i.e., the removal of human waste from the physical environment, as by toilets). Whereas this percentage is at least 98 percent in the wealthy nations of North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, it is less than 33 percent in many poor nations in Africa and Asia.

Figure 13.2 Percentage of Population with Access to Adequate Sanitation Facilities, 2008



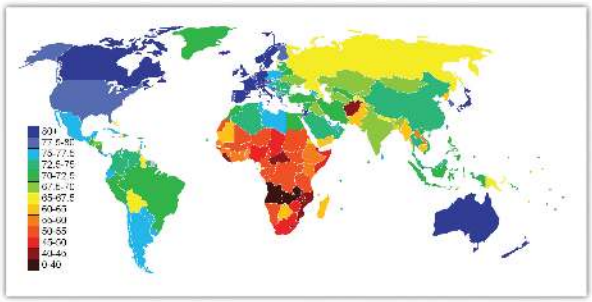
Source: Adapted from World Bank. (2010). Improved sanitation facilities (% of population with access). Retrieved from http://www.worldbank.org.



Two-thirds of the 33 million people worldwide who have HIV/AIDS live in sub-Saharan Africa. This terrible fact illustrates just one of the many health problems that people in poor nations suffer. khym – AIDS Orphans and their Guardians in Sophia Village near Nairobi, Kenya – CC BY 2.0.

Life expectancy is another important measure of a nation's health and is very relevant for understanding worldwide disparities in health and health care. Figure 13.3 "Average Life Expectancy across the Globe (Years)" illustrates these disparities. Not surprisingly, the global differences in this map are similar to those for adequate sanitation in the map depicted in Figure 13.2 "Percentage of Population with Access to Adequate Sanitation Facilities, 2008". North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand have much longer life expectancies (75 years and higher) than Africa and Asia, where some nations have expectancies below 50 years. The society we live in can affect our life span by more than a quarter of a century.

Figure 13.3 Average Life Expectancy across the Globe (Years)



Source: Adapted from http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Life_Expectancy_2011_Estimates_CIA_World_Factbook.png.

Health Care in Industrial Nations

Industrial nations throughout the world, with the notable exception of the United States, provide their citizens with some form of national health care and national health insurance (Russell, 2011). Although their health-care systems differ in several respects, their governments pay all or most of the costs for health care, drugs, and other health needs. In Denmark, for example, the government provides free medical care and hospitalization for the entire population and pays for some medications and some dental care. In France, the government pays for some of the medical, hospitalization, and medication costs for most people and all these expenses for the poor, unemployed, and children under the age of 10. In Great Britain, the National Health Service pays most medical costs for the population, including medical care, hospitalization, prescriptions, dental care, and eyeglasses. In Canada, the National Health Insurance system also pays for most medical costs. Patients do not even receive bills from their physicians, who instead are paid by the government.

Although these national health insurance programs are not perfect—for example, people sometimes must wait for elective surgery and some other procedures—they are commonly credited with reducing infant mortality, extending life expectancy, and, more generally, for enabling their citizenries to have relatively good health. Their populations are generally healthier than Americans, even though health-care spending is much higher per capita in the United States than in these other nations. In all these respects, these national health insurance systems offer several advantages over the health-care model found in the United States (Reid, 2010) (see Note 13.11 "Lessons from Other Societies").

Lessons from Other Societies

National Health Care in Wealthy Democracies

As the text discusses, industrial nations other than the United States provide free or low-cost health care to their citizens in what is known as national (or universal) health insurance and national health care. Although the United States spends more per capita than these nations on health care, it generally ranks much lower than they do on important health indicators. Of twenty-four wealthy democracies from North America, Western Europe, and certain other parts of the world (Australia, Japan, New Zealand; the exact number of nations varies slightly by indicator), the United States has the lowest life expectancy, the highest infant mortality, and the highest rates of obesity, adult diabetes, and HIV and AIDS. It ranks only twenty-first in mortality from heart disease and only tenth in breast cancer mortality rate. The United States also ranks twenty-second for annual doctor consultations per capita and among the highest for hospital admissions for various conditions, such as respiratory disease, that are avoidable with adequate primary and outpatient care. According to policy analyst Lawrence Mishel and colleagues, the conclusion from these international comparisons is inescapable: "Although the United States spends more on health care than other countries with similar per capita income and populations, it has worse health outcomes, on average…Compared to the United States, other countries are more committed to the health and well-being of their citizens through more-universal coverage and more-comprehensive health care systems."

Because of Canada's proximity, many studies compare health and health-care indicators between the United States and Canada. A recent review summarized the evidence: "Although studies' findings go in both directions, the bulk of the research finds higher quality of care in Canada."

Surveys of random samples of citizens in several nations provide additional evidence of the advantages of the type of health care found outside the United States and the disadvantages of the US system. In surveys in 2007 of US residents and those of six other nations (Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom), Americans ranked highest in the percentage uninsured (16 percent in the United States compared to 0–2 percent elsewhere), highest in the percentage that did not receive needed medical care during the last year because of costs, and highest by far in the percentage that had "serious problems" in paying medical bills in the past year.

A fair conclusion from all the evidence is that US health lags behind that found in other wealthy nations because the latter provide free or low-cost national health care to their citizens and the United States does not. If so, the United States has much to learn from their example. Because the health-care reform achieved in the United States in 2009 and 2010 did not include a national health-care model, the United States will likely continue to lag behind other democracies in the quality of health and health care. At the same time, the cost of health care will certainly continue to be much higher in the United States than in other Western nations, in part because the United States uses a *fee-for-service* model in which many physicians are paid for every procedure they do rather than the set salary that some other nations feature.

Sources: Docteur & Berenson, 2009; Mishel, Bernstein, & Shierholz, 2009; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011; Schoen et al., 2007

Key Takeaways

- The world's nations differ dramatically in the quality of their health and health care. People in poor nations suffer from many health problems, and poor nations have very high rates of infant mortality and maternal mortality.
- Except for the United States, industrial nations have national health-care systems and national health insurance. Their health-care models help their citizens to have relatively good health at affordable levels.

For Your Review

1. What do you think should be done to help improve the health of poor nations? What role should the United States play in any efforts in this regard?
2. Do you think the United States should move toward the national health insurance model found in other Western nations? Why or why not?

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10.3: Problems of Health in the United States

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe how and why social class, race and ethnicity, and gender affect physical health and health care in the United States.
2. Summarize the differences that social class, race and ethnicity, and gender make for mental health.

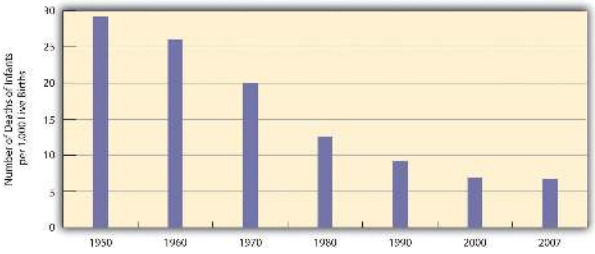
When we examine health and health care in the United States, there is both good news and bad news. The good news is considerable. Health has improved steadily over the last century, thanks in large part to better public sanitation and the discovery of antibiotics. Illnesses and diseases such as pneumonia and polio that used to kill or debilitate people are either unknown today or treatable by modern drugs. Other medical discoveries and advances have also reduced the extent and seriousness of major illnesses, including many types of cancer, and have prolonged our lives.



Cigarette smoking in the United States has declined considerably since the 1960s. Xava du – smoke souls – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Because of these and other factors, the US average life expectancy climbed from about 47 years in 1900 to about 78 years in 2010. Similarly, infant mortality dropped dramatically in the last half-century from 29.2 infant deaths per 1,000 live births in 1950 to only 6.75 in 2007 (see Figure 13.4 “Infant Deaths per 1,000 Live Births, United States, 1950–2007”). Cigarette smoking declined from 51 percent for males and 34 percent for females in 1965 to 23 percent and 18 percent, respectively, in 2009 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2011). In another area, various policies during the past three decades have dramatically reduced levels of lead in young children’s blood: 88 percent of children had unsafe levels in the mid-1970s, compared to less than 2 percent three decades later (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007).

Figure 13.4 Infant Deaths per 1,000 Live Births, United States, 1950–2007



Source: Data from National Center for Health Statistics. (2011). *Health, United States, 2010*. Hyattsville, MD: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Poor Status of American Health

Unfortunately, the bad news is also considerable. Despite all the gains just mentioned, the United States lags behind most other wealthy democracies in several health indicators, as we have seen, even though it is the wealthiest nation in the world. Moreover, 14.5 percent of US households and almost 49 million Americans are “food insecure” (lacking sufficient money for adequate food and nutrition) at least part of the year; more than one-fifth of all children live in such households (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2011). More than 8 percent of all infants are born at low birth weight (under 5.5 pounds), putting them at risk for long-term health problems; this figure has risen steadily since the late 1980s and is higher than the 1970 rate (National Center for Health Statistics, 2011). In other areas, childhood rates of obesity, asthma, and some other chronic conditions are on the rise, with about one-third of children considered obese or overweight (Van Cleave, Gortmaker, & Perrin, 2010). Clearly the United States still has a long way to go in improving the nation’s health.

There is also bad news in the *social distribution* of health. Health problems in the United States are more often found among the poor, among people from certain racial and ethnic backgrounds, and, depending on the problem, among women or men. Social epidemiology refers to the study of how health and illness vary by sociodemographic characteristics, with such variations called health disparities. When we examine social epidemiology in the United States, we see that many health disparities exist. In this way, health and illness both reflect and reinforce society's social inequalities. We now turn to the most important health disparities, starting with physical health and then mental health.

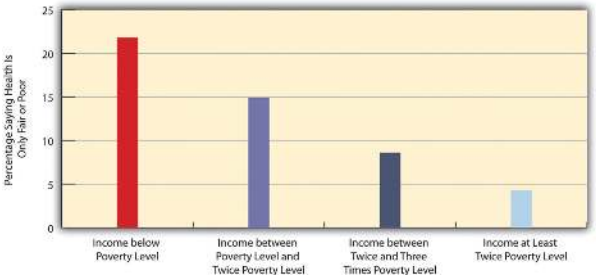
Health Disparities: Physical Health

Social Class

Not only do the poor have less money, but they also have much worse health, as the news story that began this chapter illustrated. There is growing recognition in the government and in medical and academic communities that social class makes a huge difference when it comes to health and illness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

Many types of health indicators illustrate the social class–health link in the United States. In an annual survey conducted by the government, people are asked to indicate the quality of their health. As Figure 13.5 "Family Income and Self-Reported Health (Percentage of People 18 or Over Saying Health Is Only Fair or Poor), 2009" shows, poor people are much more likely than those with higher incomes to say their health is only fair or poor. These self-reports of health are subjective indicators, and it is possible that not everyone interprets "fair" or "poor" health in the same way. But objective indicators of actual health also indicate a strong social class–health link (National Center for Health Statistics, 2011).

Figure 13.5 Family Income and Self-Reported Health (Percentage of People 18 or Over Saying Health Is Only Fair or Poor), 2009



Source: Data from National Center for Health Statistics. (2011). *Health, United States, 2010*. Hyattsville, MD: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Children and Our Future

The Poor Health of Poor Children

When we consider health disparities, some of the most unsettling evidence involves children. As a recent report by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation concluded, "The data illustrate a consistent and striking pattern of incremental improvements in health with increasing levels of family income and educational attainment: As family income and levels of education rise, health improves. In almost every state, shortfalls in health are greatest among children in the poorest or least educated households, but even middle-class children are less healthy than children with greater advantages."

Some government data illustrate the difference that poverty makes for the nation's children:

- Children of poor mothers are more than twice as likely as children born to wealthier mothers to be born with low birth weight.
- By the age of 9 months, poor children are already more likely to exhibit poor health and lower cognitive and socioemotional development.
- By age 3, poor children are two-thirds more likely to have asthma than children whose families' incomes are more than 150 percent of the poverty line.
- Based on their parents' reports, poor children are almost five times more likely (33 percent compared to 7 percent) to be in less than very good health (i.e., their parents rated their children's health as poor, fair, or good rather than as very good or excellent).

In these and other ways, children in low-income families are more likely than children in wealthier families to have more health problems, many of which last into adolescence and adulthood. Poor children's poor health thus makes a critical difference throughout their lives. As sociologist Steven A. Haas and colleagues observe, "A growing body of work demonstrates that those who experience poor health early in life go on to complete less schooling, hold less prestigious jobs, and earn less than their healthier childhood peers."

One reason for the poor health of poor children is that their families are more likely to experience many kinds of stress (see Chapter 2 “Poverty”). Another reason is that their families are more likely to experience food insecurity and, if they are urban, to live in neighborhoods with higher levels of lead and pollution. Low-income children also tend to watch television more often than wealthier children and for this and other reasons to be less physically active; their relative lack of physical activity is yet another reason for their worse health. Finally, their parents are much more likely than wealthier parents to smoke cigarettes; the secondhand smoke they inhale impairs their health.

The clear evidence of poverty’s effects on the health of poor children underscores the need of the United States to do everything possible to minimize these effects. Any money spent to reduce these effects will pay for itself many times over throughout these children’s lifetimes: They will have fewer health problems as they grow up, costing the United States much less in health care, and be better able to do well in school and to have higher incomes as adults. In both the short run and long run, then, improving the health of poor children will also improve the economic and social health of the whole nation.

Sources: Haas, Glymour, & Berkman, 2011; Kaplan, 2009; Murphey, Mackintosh, & McCoy-Roth, 2011; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008

For example, poor adults are also at much greater risk for many health problems, including heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, and some types of cancer. Rates of high blood pressure, serious heart conditions, and diabetes are at least twice as high for middle-aged adults with family incomes below the poverty level than for those with incomes at least twice the poverty level. All these social class differences in health contribute to a striking difference in life expectancy, with Americans whose family incomes are more than four times the federal poverty level expected to live 6.5 years longer than those living in poverty (Kaplan, 2009).

Several reasons account for the social class–health link (Pampel, Krueger, & Denney, 2010). One reason is stress, which, as Chapter 2 “Poverty” explained, is higher for people with low incomes because of unemployment, problems in paying for the necessities of life, and a sense of little control over what happens to them. Stress in turn damages health because it impairs the immune system and other bodily processes.

A second reason is that poor people live in conditions, including crowded, dilapidated housing with poor sanitation, that are bad for their health and especially that of their children. Although these conditions have improved markedly in the United States over the last few decades, they continue for many of the poor.

Another reason for the poor’s worse health is their lack of access to adequate health care. As is well known, many poor people lack medical insurance and in other respects have inadequate health care. These problems make it more likely they will become ill in the first place and more difficult for them to become well because they cannot afford to visit a physician or to receive other health care. Still, social class disparities in health exist even in countries that provide free national health care, a fact that underscores the importance of the other reasons discussed here for the social class–health link (Elo, 2009).



Many people who are poor or near poor lack medical insurance and in other ways have inadequate health care. These problems make it more likely they will become ill and, once ill, less likely they will become well. Truthout.org – Money Behind Health Care – CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

A fourth reason is a lack of education, which, in ways not yet well understood, leads poor people to be unaware or unconcerned about risk factors for health and to have a fatalistic attitude that promotes unhealthy behaviors and reluctance to heed medical advice (Elo, 2009). In one study of whether smokers quit smoking after a heart attack, only 10 percent of heart attack patients without a high school degree quit smoking, compared to almost 90 percent of those with a college degree (Wray, Herzog, Willis, & Wallace, 1998).

A final reason for the poor health of poor people is unhealthy lifestyles, as just implied. Although it might sound like a stereotype, poor people are more likely to smoke, to eat high-fat food, to avoid exercise, to be overweight, and, more generally, not to do what they need to do (or to do what they should not be doing) to be healthy (Pampel et al., 2010). Scholars continue to debate whether unhealthy lifestyles are more important in explaining poor people's poor health than the other factors just discussed. Regardless of the proper mix of reasons, the fact remains that the poor have worse health.

Race and Ethnicity

Health differences also exist when we examine the effects of race and ethnicity, and they are literally a matter of life and death. We can see this when we compare life expectancies for whites and African Americans born in 2006 (Table 13.2 "US Life Expectancy at Birth for People Born in 2007"). When we do not take gender into account, African Americans can expect to live about five fewer years than whites. Among men, they can expect to live almost six fewer years, and among women, four fewer years.

Table 13.2 US Life Expectancy at Birth for People Born in 2007

African American	**Both sexes**	**73.6**
	Men	70.0
	Women	76.8
White	**Both sexes**	**78.4**
	Men	75.9
	Women	80.8

Source: Data from National Center for Health Statistics. (2011). *Health, United States, 2010*. Hyattsville, MD: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

At the beginning of the life course, infant mortality also varies by race and ethnicity (Table 13.3 “Mother’s Race/Ethnicity and US Infant Mortality, 2006 (Number of Infant Deaths per 1,000 Live Births)”), with African American infants more than twice as likely as white infants to die before their first birthday. Infant mortality among Native Americans is almost 1.5 times the white rate, while that for Latinos is about the same (although the Puerto Rican rate is also higher, at 8.0), and Asians a bit lower. In a related indicator, maternal mortality (from complications of pregnancy or childbirth) stands at 8.1 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births for non-Latina white women, 7.2 for Latina women, and a troubling 23.8 for African American women. Maternal mortality for African American women is thus about three times greater than that for the other two groups.

Table 13.3 Mother’s Race/Ethnicity and US Infant Mortality, 2006 (Number of Infant Deaths per 1,000 Live Births)

African American	12.9
Asian or Pacific Islander	4.5
Latina	5.4
Central and South American	4.5
Cuban	5.1
Mexican	5.3
Puerto Rican	8.0
Native American	8.3
White	5.6

Source: Data from National Center for Health Statistics. (2011). *Health, United States, 2010*. Hyattsville, MD: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In other indicators, African Americans are more likely than whites to die from heart disease, although the white rate of such deaths is higher than the rates of Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans. African Americans are also more likely than whites to be overweight and to suffer from asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure, and several types of cancer. Latinos and Native Americans have higher rates than whites of several illnesses and conditions, including diabetes.

Commenting on all these disparities in health, a former head of the US Department of Health and Human Services said a decade ago, “We have been—and remain—two nations: one majority, one minority—separated by the quality of our health” (Penn et al., 2000, p. 102). The examples just discussed certainly indicate that her statement is still true today.

Why do such large racial and ethnic disparities in health exist? To a large degree, they reflect the high poverty rates for African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans compared to those for whites. In addition, inadequate medical care is perhaps a special problem for people of color, thanks to unconscious racial bias among health-care professionals that affects the quality of care that people of color receive (see discussion later in this chapter).

An additional reason for racial disparities in health is diet. Many of the foods that have long been part of African American culture are high in fat. Partly as a result, African Americans are much more likely than whites to have heart disease and high blood pressure and to die from these conditions (Parra-Medina et al., 2010). In contrast, first-generation Latinos tend to have diets consisting of beans, grains, and other low-fat foods, preventing health problems stemming from their poverty from being even worse. But as the years go by and they adopt the typical American’s eating habits, their diets tend to worsen, and their health worsens as well (Pérez-Escamilla, 2009).

In a significant finding, African Americans tend to have worse health than whites even among those with the same incomes. Several reasons explain this racial gap. One is the extra stress that African Americans of all incomes face because they live in a society that is still racially prejudiced and discriminatory (Bratter & Gorman, 2011). In this regard, studies find that African Americans and Latinos who have experienced the most racial discrimination in their daily lives tend to have worse physical health (Lee & Ferraro, 2009). Some middle-class African Americans may also have grown up in poor families and incurred health problems in childhood that continue to affect them. As a former US surgeon general once explained, “You’re never dealing with a person just today. You’re dealing with everything they’ve been exposed to throughout their lives. Does it ever end? Our hypothesis is that it never ends” (Meckler, 1998, p. 4A).



African Americans have worse health than whites, even when people with the same incomes are compared. One reason for this racial gap is the continuing racial discrimination that African Americans experience and the stress that accompanies this experience. Pixabay – CC0 Public Domain.

To some degree, racial differences in health may also have a biological basis. For example, African American men appear to have higher levels of a certain growth protein that may promote prostate cancer; African American smokers may absorb more nicotine than white smokers; and differences in the ways African Americans' blood vessels react may render them more susceptible to hypertension and heart disease (Meckler, 1998; Ricker & Bird, 2005). Because alleged biological differences have been used as the basis for racism, and because race is best thought of as a social construction rather than a biological concept (see Chapter 3 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality"), we must be very careful in acknowledging such differences (Frank, 2007). However, if they do indeed exist, they may help explain at least some of the racial gap in health.

A final factor contributing to racial differences in health is physical location: poor people of color are more likely to live in urban areas and in other locations that are unhealthy places because of air and water pollution, hazardous waste, and other environmental problems (Walker, 2011). This problem is termed *environmental racism* (Michney, 2011). One example of this problem is found in the so-called Cancer Alley on a long stretch of the Mississippi River in Louisiana populated mostly by African Americans; 80 percent of these residents live within three miles of a polluting industrial facility (Cernansky, 2011).

Gender

The evidence on gender and health is both complex and fascinating. Women outlive men by more than six years, and, as Table 13.2 "US Life Expectancy at Birth for People Born in 2007" showed, the gender difference in longevity persists across racial categories. At the same time, women have worse health than men in many areas. For example, they are more likely to suffer from migraine headaches, osteoporosis, and immune diseases such as lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. Women thus have more health problems than men do even though they outlive men—a situation commonly known as the *morbidity paradox* (Gorman & Read, 2006). Why, then, do women outlive men? Conversely, why do men die earlier than women? The obvious answer is that men have more life-threatening diseases, such as heart disease and emphysema, than women, but that raises the question of why this is so.

Several reasons explain the gender gap in longevity. One might be biological, as women's estrogen and other sex-linked biological differences may make them less susceptible to heart disease and other life-threatening illnesses, even as they render them more vulnerable to some of the health problems already listed (Kuller, 2010). A second reason is that men lead more unhealthy lifestyles than women because of differences in gender socialization. For example, men are more likely than women to smoke, to drink heavily, and to drive recklessly. All such behaviors make men more vulnerable than women to life-threatening illnesses and injuries. Men are also more likely than women to hold jobs in workplaces filled with environmental and safety hazards that kill thousands of people—most of them men—annually.

A final reason is men's reluctance to discuss and seek help for their medical problems, owing to their masculine socialization into being "strong, silent types." Just as men do not like to ask for directions, as the common wisdom goes, so do they not like to ask for medical help. As one physician put it, "I've often said men don't come in for checkups because they have a big *S* tattooed on their chests; they think they're Superman" (Guttman, 1999, p. 10).

Studies find that men are less likely than women to tell anyone when they have a health problem and to seek help from a health-care professional (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2009). When both sexes do visit a physician, men ask fewer questions than women do. In one study, the average man asked no more than two questions, while the average woman asked at least six. Because patients who ask more questions get more information and recover their health more quickly, men's silence in the exam room may contribute to their shorter longevity (Foreman, 1999). Interestingly, the development of erectile dysfunction drugs like Viagra may have helped

improve men's health, as men have had to see a physician to obtain prescriptions for these drugs when otherwise they would not have seen a physician (Guttman, 1999).

We have just discussed why men die sooner than women, which is one of the two gender differences that constitute the morbidity paradox. The other gender difference concerns why women have more nonfatal health problems than men. Several reasons explain this difference (Read & Gorman, 2010).



Women more than men tend to have more health problems that are not life threatening. Two reasons for this gender difference are gender inequality in the larger society and the stress accompanying women's traditional caregiving role in the family. Francisco Osorio – CL Society 287: Waiting for a doctor – CC BY 2.0.

One reason arises from the fact that women outlive men. Because women are thus more likely than men to be in their senior years, they are also more likely to develop the many health problems associated with old age. This suggests that studies that control for age (by comparing older women with older men, middle-aged women with middle-aged men, and so forth) should report fewer gender differences in health than those that do not control for age, and this is indeed true.

However, women still tend to have worse health than men even when age is taken into account. Medical sociologists attribute this gender difference to the gender inequality in the larger society (Read & Gorman, 2010). For example, women are poorer overall than men, as they are more likely to work only part-time and in low-paying jobs even if they work full time. As discussed earlier in this chapter, poverty is a risk factor for health problems. Women's worse health, then, is partly due to their greater likelihood of living in poverty or near poverty. Because of their gender, women also are more likely than men to experience stressful events in their everyday lives, such as caring for a child or an aging parent. Their increased stress impairs the immune systems and thus worsens their health. It also is an important cause of their greater likelihood of depression and the various physical health problems (weakened immune systems, higher blood pressure, lack of exercise) that depression often causes. Finally, women experience discrimination in their everyday lives because of our society's sexism, and (as is also true for people of color) this discrimination is thought to produce stress and thus poorer physical health (Landry & Mercurio, 2009).

Health Disparities: Mental Health

Health consists of mental well-being as well as physical well-being, and people can suffer mental health problems in addition to physical health problems. Scholars disagree over whether mental illness is real or, instead, a social construction. The predominant view in psychiatry, of course, is that people do have actual problems in their mental and emotional functioning and that these problems are best characterized as mental illnesses or mental disorders and should be treated by medical professionals (McNally, 2011). But other scholars say mental illness is a social construction or a "myth" (Szasz, 2010). In their view, all kinds of people sometimes act oddly, but only a few are labeled as mentally ill. If someone says she or he hears the voice of an angel, we ordinarily attribute their perceptions to their religious views and consider them religious, not mentally ill. But if someone instead insists that men from Mars have been in touch, we are more apt to think there is something mentally wrong with that person. Mental illness thus is not real but rather is the reaction of others to problems they perceive in someone's behavior.

This intellectual debate notwithstanding, many people do suffer serious mental and emotional problems, such as severe mood swings and depression, that interfere with their everyday functioning and social interaction. Sociologists and other researchers have investigated the social epidemiology of these problems. Several generalizations seem warranted from their research regarding disparities in mental health (Cockerham, 2011).

Social Class

First, social class affects the incidence of mental illness. To be more specific, poor people exhibit more mental health problems than richer people: They are more likely to suffer from schizophrenia, serious depression, and other problems. A major reason for this link is the stress of living in poverty and the many living conditions associated with it. One interesting causal question here is whether poverty leads to mental illness or mental illness leads to poverty. Although there is evidence of both causal paths, most scholars believe that poverty contributes to mental illness more than the reverse (Warren, 2009).



Women are more likely than men to be seriously depressed. Sociologists attribute this gender difference partly to gender socialization that leads women to keep problems inside themselves while encouraging men to express their problems outwardly. Jessica B – Week Five – Face of depression… – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Race and Ethnicity

Second, there is no clear connection between race/ethnicity and mental illness, as evidence on this issue is mixed: Although many studies find higher rates of mental disorder among people of color, some studies find similar rates to whites' rates (Mossakowski, 2008). These mixed results are somewhat surprising because several racial/ethnic groups are poorer than whites and more likely to experience everyday discrimination, and for these reasons should exhibit more frequent symptoms of mental and emotional problems. Despite the mixed results, a fair conclusion from the most recent research is that African Americans and Latinos are more likely than whites to exhibit signs of mental distress (Jang, Chiriboga, Kim, & Phillips, 2008; Mossakowski, 2008).

Gender

Third, gender is related to mental illness but in complex ways, as the nature of this relationship depends on the type of mental disorder. Women have higher rates of manic-depressive disorders than men and are more likely to be seriously depressed, but men have higher rates of antisocial personality disorders that lead them to be a threat to others (Kort-Butler, 2009). Although some medical researchers trace these differences to sex-linked biological differences, sociologists attribute them to differences in gender socialization that lead women to keep problems inside themselves while encouraging men to express their problems outwardly, as through violence. To the extent that women have higher levels of depression and other mental health problems, the factors that account for their poorer physical health, including their higher rates of poverty and stress and rates of everyday discrimination, are thought to also account for their poorer mental health (Read & Gorman, 2010).

Key Takeaways

- Social class, race and ethnicity, and gender all influence the quality of health in the United States. Health problems are more common among people from low-income backgrounds and among people of color. Women are more likely than men to have health problems that are not life threatening.
- Although debate continues over whether mental illness is a social construction, many people do suffer mental health problems. The social epidemiology for mental health and illness resembles that for physical health and illness, with social class, race/ethnicity, and gender disparities existing.
- The private insurance model in the United States incurs huge administrative costs and results in more than 50 million people lacking health insurance.

For Your Review

1. In thinking about the health problems of individuals from low-income backgrounds, some people blame lack of access to adequate health care for these problems, while other people blame unhealthy lifestyles practiced by low-income individuals. Where do you stand on this debate? Explain your answer.
2. Write a brief essay in which you present a sociological explanation of the higher rate of depression found among women than among men.

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10.4: Problems of Health Care in the United States

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

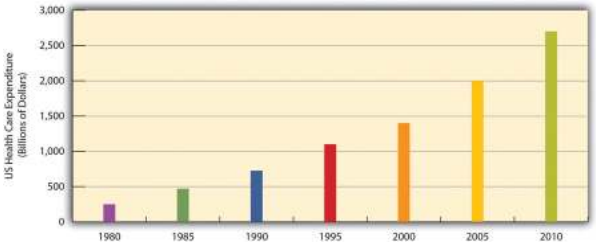
1. Summarize the problems associated with the model of private insurance that characterizes the US health system.
2. Explain how and why mistakes and infections occur in hospitals.
3. Describe any two other problems in US health care other than the lack of health insurance.

As the continuing debate over health care in the United States reminds us, the practice of medicine raises many important issues about its cost and quality. We now turn to some of these issues.

Private Health Insurance and the Lack of Insurance

Medicine in the United States is big business. Expenditures for health care, health research, and other health items and services have risen sharply in recent decades, having increased tenfold since 1980, and now costs the nation more than $2.6 trillion annually (see Figure 13.6 “US Health-Care Expenditure, 1980–2010 (in Billions of Dollars)”). This translates to the largest figure per capita in the industrial world. Despite this expenditure, the United States lags behind many other industrial nations in several important health indicators, as we have already seen. Why is this so?

Figure 13.6 US Health-Care Expenditure, 1980–2010 (in Billions of Dollars)



Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2010). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2010*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

An important reason is the US system of *private health insurance*. As discussed earlier, other Western nations have national systems of health care and health insurance. In stark contrast to these nations, the United States relies largely on a direct-fee system, in which patients under 65 (those 65 and older are covered by Medicare) are expected to pay for medical costs themselves, aided by private health insurance, usually through one’s employer. Table 13.4 “Health Insurance Coverage in the United States, 2010” shows the percentages of Americans who have health insurance from different sources or who are not insured at all. (All figures are from the period before the implementation of the major health-care reform package was passed by the federal government in early 2010.) Adding together the top two figures in the table, 54 percent of Americans have private insurance, either through their employers or from their own resources. About 29 percent have some form of public insurance (Medicaid, Medicare, other public), and 16 percent are uninsured. This final percentage amounts to almost 50 million Americans, including 8 million children, who lack health insurance.

Table 13.4 Health Insurance Coverage in the United States, 2010

Source of coverage	Percentage of people with this coverage
Employer	49%
Individual	5%
Medicaid	16%
Medicare	12%
Other public	1%
Uninsured	16%

Source: Data from Kaiser Family Foundation. (2012). Kaiser state health facts. Retrieved from http://www.statehealthfacts.org.

Their lack of health insurance has deadly consequences because they are less likely to receive preventive health care and care for various conditions and illnesses. For example, because uninsured Americans are less likely than those with private insurance to receive cancer screenings, they are more likely to be diagnosed with more advanced cancer rather than an earlier stage of cancer (Halpern et al., 2008). It is estimated that 45,000 people die each year because they do not have health insurance (Wilper et al., 2009). The Note 13.22 "Applying Social Research" box discusses a very informative real-life experiment on the difference that health insurance makes for people's health.

Applying Social Research

Experimental Evidence on the Importance of Health Insurance

As the text discusses, studies show that Americans without health insurance are at greater risk for a variety of illnesses and life-threatening conditions. Although this research evidence is compelling, uninsured Americans may differ from insured Americans in other ways that also put their health at risk. For example, perhaps people who do not buy health insurance may be less concerned about their health and thus less likely to take good care of themselves. Because many studies have not controlled for all such differences, experimental evidence would be more conclusive (see Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems").

For this reason, the results of a fascinating real-life experiment in Oregon were very significant. In 2008, Oregon decided to expand its Medicaid coverage. Because it could not accommodate all the poor Oregonians who were otherwise uninsured, it had them apply for Medicaid by lottery. Researchers then compared the subsequent health of the Oregonians who ended up on Medicaid with that of Oregonians who remained uninsured. Because the two groups resulted from random assignment (the lottery), it is reasonable to conclude that any later differences between them must have stemmed from the presence or absence of Medicaid coverage.

Although this study is ongoing, initial results obtained a year after it began showed that Medicaid coverage had already made quite a difference. Compared to the uninsured "control" group, the newly insured Oregonians rated themselves happier and in better health and reported fewer sick days from work. They were also 50 percent more likely to have seen a primary care doctor in the year since they received coverage, and women were 60 percent more likely to have had a mammogram. In another effect, they were much less likely to report having had to borrow money or not pay other bills because of medical expenses.

A news report summarized these benefits of the new Medicaid coverage: "[The researchers] found that Medicaid's impact on health, happiness, and general well-being is enormous, and delivered at relatively low cost: Low-income Oregonians whose names were selected by lottery to apply for Medicaid availed themselves of more treatment and preventive care than those who remained excluded from government health insurance. After a year with insurance, the Medicaid lottery winners were happier, healthier, and under less financial strain."

Because of this study's experimental design, it "represents the best evidence we've got," according to the news report, of the benefits of health insurance coverage. As researchers continue to study the two groups in the years ahead and begin to collect data on blood pressure, cardiovascular health, and other objective indicators of health, they will add to our knowledge of the effects of health insurance coverage.

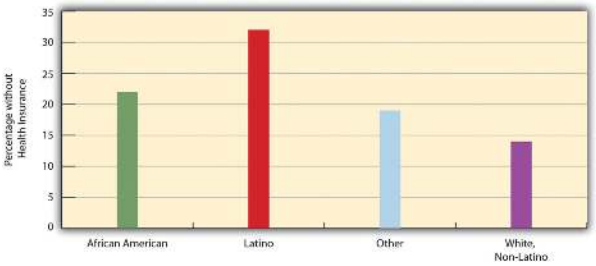
Sources: Baicker & Finkelstein, 2011; Fisman, 2011

Although 29 percent of Americans do have public insurance, this percentage and the coverage provided by this insurance do not begin to match the coverage enjoyed by the rest of the industrial world. Although Medicare pays some medical costs for the elderly, we saw in the Chapter "Aging and Ageism" that its coverage is hardly adequate, as many people must pay hundreds or even thousands of dollars in premiums, deductibles, coinsurance, and copayments. The other government program, Medicaid, pays some health-care costs for the poor, but many low-income families are not poor enough to receive Medicaid. Eligibility standards for Medicaid vary from one state to another, and a family poor enough in one state to receive Medicaid might not be considered poor enough in another state. The State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), begun in 1997 for children from low-income families, has helped somewhat, but it, too, fails to cover many low-income children. Largely for these reasons, about two-thirds of uninsured Americans come from low-income families.

Not surprisingly, the 16 percent uninsured rate varies by race and ethnicity (see Figure 13.7 "Race, Ethnicity, and Lack of Health Insurance, 2008 (Percentage of People under Age 65 with No Insurance)"). Among people under 65 and thus not eligible for Medicare, the uninsured rate rises to almost 22 percent of the African American population and 32 percent of the Latino population. Moreover, 45 percent of adults under 65 who live in official poverty lack health insurance, compared to only 6 percent of higher-income adults (those with incomes higher than four times the poverty level). Almost one-fifth of poor children have no

health insurance, compared to only 3 percent of children in higher-income families (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2012). As discussed earlier, the lack of health insurance among the poor and people of color is a significant reason for their poorer health.

Figure 13.7 Race, Ethnicity, and Lack of Health Insurance, 2008 (Percentage of People under Age 65 with No Insurance)



Source: Data from Kaiser Family Foundation. (2012). Kaiser state health facts. Retrieved from http://www.statehealthfacts.org.

The High Cost of Health Care

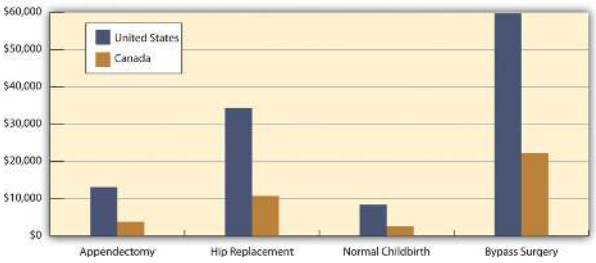
As noted earlier, the United States spends much more money per capita on health care than any other industrial nation. The US per capita health expenditure was $7,960 in 2009, the latest year for which data were available at the time of this writing. This figure was about 50 percent higher than that for the next two highest-spending countries, Norway and Switzerland; 80 percent higher than Canada's expenditure; twice as high as Frances's expenditure; and 2.3 times higher than the United Kingdom's expenditure (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). The huge expenditure by the United States might be justified if the quality of health and of health care in this nation outranked that in its peer nations. As we have seen, however, the United States lags behind many of its peer nations in several indicators of health and health care quality. If the United States spends far more than its peer nations on health care yet still lags behind them in many indicators, an inescapable conclusion is that the United States is spending much more than it should be spending.

Why is US spending on health care so high? Although this is a complex issue, two reasons stand out (Boffey, 2012). First, administrative costs for health care in the United States are the highest in the industrial world. Because so much of US health insurance is private, billing and record-keeping tasks are immense, and "hordes of clerks and accountants [are] needed to deal with insurance paperwork," according to one observer (Boffey, 2012, p. SR12). Billing and other administrative tasks cost about $360 billion annually, or 14 percent of all US health-care costs (Emanuel, 2011). These tasks are unnecessarily cumbersome and fail to take advantage of electronic technologies that would make them much more efficient.

Second, the United States relies on a *fee for service* model for private insurance. Under this model, physicians, hospitals, and health care professionals and business are relatively free to charge whatever they want for their services. In the other industrial nations, government regulations keep prices lower. This basic difference between the United States and its peer nations helps explain why the cost of health care services in the United States is so much higher than in its peer nations. Simply put, US physicians and hospitals charge much more for their services than do their counterparts in other industrial nations (Klein, 2012). And because physicians are paid for every service they perform, they have an incentive to perform more diagnostic tests and other procedures than necessary. As one economic writer recently said, "The more they do, the more they earn" (Samuelson, 2011).

A few examples illustrate the higher cost of medical procedures in the United States compared to other nations. To keep things simple, we will compare the United States with just Canada (see Figure 13.8 "Average Cost of Selected Medical Procedures and Services"). The average US appendectomy costs $13,123, compared to $3,810 in Canada; the average US hip replacement costs $34,354, compared to $10,753 in Canada; the average US normal childbirth costs $8,435, compared to $2,667 in Canada; and the average US bypass surgery costs $59,770, compared to $22,212 in Canada. The costs of diagnostic tests also differ dramatically between the two nations. For example, a head CT scan costs an average of $464 in the United States, compared to only $65 in Canada, and an MRI scan costs and average of $1,009 in the United States, compared to only $304 in Canada (International Federation of Health Plans, 2010).

Figure 13.8 Average Cost of Selected Medical Procedures and Services

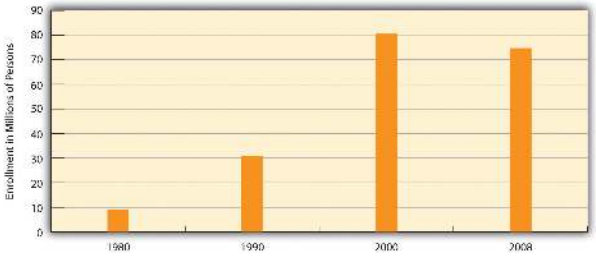


Source: Boffey, P. M. (2012, January 22). The money traps in US health care. *New York Times*, p. SR12.

Managed Care and HMOs

To many critics, a disturbing development in the US health-care system has been the establishment of health maintenance organizations, or HMOs, which typically enroll their subscribers through their workplaces. HMOs are prepaid health plans with designated providers, meaning that patients must visit a physician employed by the HMO or included on the HMO's approved list of physicians. If their physician is not approved by the HMO, they have to either see an approved physician or see their own without insurance coverage. Popular with employers because they are less expensive than traditional private insurance, HMOs have grown rapidly in the last three decades and now enroll more than 70 million Americans (see Figure 13.9 "Growth of Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs), 1980–2007 (Millions of Enrollees)").

Figure 13.9 Growth of Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs), 1980–2007 (Millions of Enrollees)



Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

Although HMOs have become popular, their *managed care* is also very controversial for at least two reasons (Kronick, 2009). The first is the HMOs' restrictions just noted on the choice of physicians and other health-care providers. Families who have long seen a family physician but whose employer now enrolls them in an HMO sometimes find they have to see another physician or risk going without coverage. In some HMOs, patients have no guarantee that they can see the same physician at every visit. Instead, they see whichever physician is assigned to them at each visit. Critics of HMOs argue that this practice prevents physicians and patients from getting to know each other, reduces patients' trust in their physician, and may for these reasons impair patient health.



The managed care that HMOs provide is controversial for several reasons. These reasons include restrictions on the choice of physicians and especially on the types of medical exams and procedures that patients may undergo. Pixabay – CC0 Public Domain.

The second reason for the managed-care controversy is perhaps more important. HMOs often restrict the types of medical exams and procedures patients may undergo, a problem called *denial of care*, and limit their choice of prescription drugs to those

approved by the HMO, even if their physicians think that another, typically more expensive drug would be more effective. HMOs claim that these restrictions are necessary to keep medical costs down and do not harm patients.

Racial and Gender Bias in Health Care

Another problem in the US medical practice is apparent racial and gender bias in health care. Racial bias seems fairly common; as Chapter 3 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality" discussed, African Americans are less likely than whites with the same health problems to receive various medical procedures (Samal, Lipsitz, & Hicks, 2012). Gender bias also appears to affect the quality of health care (Read & Gorman, 2010). Research that examines either actual cases or hypothetical cases posed to physicians finds that women are less likely than men with similar health problems to be recommended for various procedures, medications, and diagnostic tests, including cardiac catheterization, lipid-lowering medication, kidney dialysis or transplant, and knee replacement for osteoarthritis (Borkhoff et al., 2008).

Other Problems in the Quality of Care

Other problems in the quality of medical care also put patients unnecessarily at risk. We examine three of these here:

1. **Sleep deprivation among health-care professionals.** As you might know, many physicians get very little sleep. Studies have found that the performance of surgeons and medical residents who go without sleep is seriously impaired (Institute of Medicine, 2008). One study found that surgeons who go without sleep for twenty-four hours have their performance impaired as much as a drunk driver. Surgeons who stayed awake all night made 20 percent more errors in simulated surgery than those who slept normally and took 14 percent longer to complete the surgery (Wen, 1998).
2. **Shortage of physicians and nurses.** Another problem is a shortage of physicians and nurses (Mangan, 2011). This is a general problem around the country, but even more of a problem in two different settings. The first such setting is hospital emergency rooms. Because emergency room work is difficult and relatively low paying, many specialist physicians do not volunteer for it. Many emergency rooms thus lack an adequate number of specialists, resulting in potentially inadequate emergency care for many patients.

   Rural areas are the second setting in which a shortage of physicians and nurses is a severe problem. As discussed further in the Chapter on "Urban and Rural Problems", many rural residents lack convenient access to hospitals, health care professionals, and ambulances and other emergency care. This lack of access contributes to various health problems in rural areas.
3. **Mistakes by hospitals.** Partly because of sleep deprivation and the shortage of health-care professionals, hundreds of thousands of hospital patients each year suffer from mistakes made by hospital personnel. They receive the wrong diagnosis, are given the wrong drug, have a procedure done on them that was really intended for someone else, or incur a bacterial infection.

   An estimated one-third of all hospital patients experience one or more of these mistakes (Moisse, 2011). These and other mistakes are thought to kill almost 200,000 patients per year, or almost 2 million every decade (Crowley & Nalder, 2009). Despite this serious problem, a government report found that hospital employees fail to report more than 80 percent of hospital mistakes, and that most hospitals in which mistakes were reported nonetheless failed to change their policies or practices (Salahi, 2012).

   A related problem is the lack of hand washing in hospitals. The failure of physicians, nurses, and other hospital employees to wash their hands regularly is *the* major source of hospital-based infections. About 5 percent of all hospital patients, or 2 million patients annually, acquire an infection. These infections kill 100,000 people every year and raise the annual cost of health care by $30 billion to $40 billion (Rosenberg, 2011).

Medical Ethics and Medical Fraud

A final set of problems concerns questions of medical ethics and outright medical fraud. Many types of health-care providers, including physicians, dentists, medical equipment companies, and nursing homes, engage in many types of health-care fraud. In a common type of fraud, they sometimes bill Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurance companies for exams or tests that were never done and even make up "ghost patients" who never existed or bill for patients who were dead by the time they were allegedly treated. In just one example, a group of New York physicians billed their state's Medicaid program for over $1.3 million for 50,000 psychotherapy sessions that never occurred. All types of health-care fraud combined are estimated to cost about $100 billion per year (Kavilanz, 2010).

Other practices are legal but ethically questionable. Sometimes physicians refer their patients for tests to a laboratory that they own or in which they have invested. They are more likely to refer patients for tests when they have a financial interest in the lab to

which the patients are sent. This practice, called *self-referral*, is legal but does raise questions of whether the tests are in the patient's best interests or instead in the physician's best interests (Shreibati & Baker, 2011).

In another practice, physicians have asked hundreds of thousands of their patients to take part in drug trials. The physicians may receive more than $1,000 for each patient they sign up, but the patients are not told about these payments. Characterizing these trials, two reporters said that "patients have become commodities, bought and traded by testing companies and physicians" and said that it "injects the interests of a giant industry into the delicate physician-patient relationship, usually without the patient realizing it" (Eichenwald & Kolata, 1999; Galewitz, 2009). These trials raise obvious conflicts of interest for the physicians, who may recommend their patients do something that might not be good for them but would be good for the physicians' finances.

Key Takeaways

- The US health-care model relies on a direct-fee system and private health insurance. This model has been criticized for contributing to high health-care costs, high rates of uninsured individuals, and high rates of health problems in comparison to the situation in other Western nations.
- Other problems in US health care include the restrictive practices associated with managed care, racial/ethnic and gender bias in health-care delivery, hospital errors, and medical fraud.

For Your Review

1. Do you know anyone, including yourself or anyone in your family, who lacks health insurance? If so, do you think the lack of health insurance has contributed to any health problems? Write a brief essay in which you discuss the evidence for your conclusion.
2. Critics of managed care say that it overly restricts important tests and procedures that patients need to have, while proponents of managed care say that these restrictions are necessary to keep health-care costs in check. What is your view of managed care?

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10.5: Improving Health and Health Care

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Explain how the United States could improve the quality of health and health care.
2. List strategies that will improve global health.

The US health-care system, despite the recent health-care reform legislation and medical advances that used to be only a dream, still has a long way to go before affordable and high-quality health care is available to all. With the health of so many people at stake, the United States needs to make every effort to achieve this essential goal. How might we achieve this goal?

We have seen throughout this chapter that social class, race and ethnicity, and gender all play a profound role in the quality of health and health care. People from low-income backgrounds have higher rates of physical and mental illness because of the stress and other factors associated with living with little money and also because of their lack of access to adequate health care. Partly because they tend to be poorer and partly because of the discrimination they experience in their daily lives and in the health-care system, people of color also have higher rates of physical and mental illness. Findings on gender are more complex, but women have higher rates than men of nonfatal physical illness and of depression and other mental illness, and they experience lower quality of health care for certain conditions.

To improve health and health care in the United States, then, the importance of social class, race and ethnicity, and gender must be addressed. Efforts, as outlined in earlier chapters, that reduce poverty and racial/ethnic and gender inequality should also improve the physical and mental health of those currently at risk because of their low incomes, race or ethnicity, and/or gender, as public health experts recognize (Bradley & Taylor, 2011). At the same time, special efforts must be made to ensure that these millions of individuals receive the best health care possible within the existing system of social inequality.



Canada and other wealthy nations have national health-care systems that provide models for the United States to follow. Samuel Auguste – Au Canada – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

In this regard, the national health-care and health insurance systems of Canada, the United Kingdom, and many other Western nations provide models for the United States. As discussed in this chapter, these nations provide better health care to their citizens in many ways and at a lower cost than that incurred under the US model of private insurance. Their models are not perfect, but a government-funded and government-run single-payer system—or "Medicare for all," as it has been called—shows great promise for improving the health and health care of all Americans. We in effect have single-payer—that is, government-funded—systems for police, firefighters, education, public libraries, and even the postal service, proponents of national health insurance say, and they add that Medicare, a government-funded program, is largely successful (Kristof, 2009). The US government also runs a preventive care and hospital system for military veterans through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA); this system has been called "one of the best-performing and most cost-effective elements in the American medical establishment" (Kristof, 2009, p. A31). According to a study by the Rand Corporation, "If other health care providers followed the V.A.'s lead, it would be a major step toward improving the quality of care across the U.S. health care system" (Kristof, 2009, p. A31).

These models all indicate that national health insurance and the single-payer system for health care found in many other democracies could also succeed in the United States. As one single-payer proponent observed, "A public role in health care shouldn't be any scarier or more repugnant than a public fire department" (Kristof, 2009, p. A31). (The Note 13.28 "People Making a Difference" box highlights a national physicians group that advocates for a single-payer system.)

People Making a Difference

Physicians in Favor of National Health Insurance

Physicians for a National Health Program (PNHP) is a national organization of some 18,000 physicians who support a single-payer system of national health insurance in the United States. They advocate for this goal through the PNHP's website and through a variety of advocacy efforts. These efforts include writing articles for medical and public health journal; writing op-ed columns for newspapers; and making educational materials available to members of the public who wish to contact their members of Congress. PNHP members also appear on local and national television news shows and coordinate and speak at public health forums. PNHP has local chapters and allied groups in more than forty states and the District of Columbia.

According to PNHP, a single-payer system would greatly reduce the billing, paperwork, and other administrative costs of the private insurance model that now dominates the US health care system. These costs, PNHP says, account for one-third of US health expenditures; if the United States were to adopt a national single-payer system, administrative costs would be reduced by $400 billion. PNHP also emphasizes that more than 50 million Americans are now uninsured and many others are underinsured. A national single-payer system would cover virtually the entire population.

An important reason for the high administrative costs of US health care, PNHP explains, is the fact that private insurance companies are for-profit companies. Because their goal is to make a profit, they advertise and engage in various marketing activities, and their CEOs and other executives receive extremely high salaries and other compensation. A single-payer system would eliminate all these problems.

By calling attention to the many problems in the current US health model and by advocating for a national single-payer system, Physicians for a National Health Program is helping to make a difference. For more information, visit http://www.pnhp.org.

Short of adopting national health insurance, other efforts to improve health and health care are certainly essential. One such effort would include an expansion of measures that fall broadly into what the field of public health calls *preventive care*. This approach recognizes that the best approach to health and health care is to prevent illness and disease before they begin. One facet of this approach focuses on the unhealthy behaviors and lifestyles, including lack of exercise, obesity, and smoking, characteristic of millions of Americans. Although the United States has public education campaigns and other initiatives on these risk factors, more could still be done. Another facet of this approach focuses on early childhood in general but especially on early childhood among low-income families. As this chapter has emphasized beginning with the Note 13.1 "Social Problems in the News" story, many health problems begin very early in childhood and even in the womb. Home visitation and nutrition assistance programs must be expanded across the country to address these problems.

Another effort must focus on the high cost of health care. We saw earlier that the US fee-for-service model, in which hospitals and physicians largely set the prices for their services, contributes greatly to the high cost of health care in the United States. Related to this model, physicians are paid for each patient they see, rather than receiving a set salary, as teachers, firefighters, police officers, and most other occupations that service large numbers of people receive. Yet there are some outstanding hospitals, such as the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota and the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio, where physicians do work on salary rather than charging for each patient or for each surgery; costs per patient at these hospitals tend to be lower (Gawande, Berwick, Fisher, & McClellan, 2009). Moving toward this model would help lower health-care costs. The greater use of electronic systems for patient records and billing and for communication among physicians would also reduce costs. So would the elimination of many diagnostic tests and medical procedures and surgeries that research has shown to be unnecessary and that may cost at least $200 billion annually (Weinberger, 2011).

Another strategy that would reduce health care costs would be the adoption of "integrated care," also called "high touch medicine" (Emanuel, 2011). In this model, teams of health care professionals (nurses, pharmacists, physicians) coordinate care for the chronically ill patients (10 percent of the population) who account for two-thirds of all health care costs. This integrated care involves extensive communication among the members of a patient's team with the patient and any caregivers, home visits by nurses to check on the patient, and other components. The goal is to help the patients take better care of themselves so that they do not become sicker and need (additional) hospital or emergency room care. Because hospital and emergency room care is so expensive, the prevention of hospital and emergency room visits through integrated care yields a significant savings in health care costs. If integrated care became the norm around the country, it is estimated that its adoption would save more than $80 billion annually.

It is also essential to reduce medical errors in hospitals and to raise the rate of hand washing. Many hospitals have adopted strict protocols, such as frequent washing of hands and the use of checklists before surgeries, to reduce infection and errors, but many

hospitals have also failed to adopt these protocols. Their failure to do so is a hidden national scandal that kills thousands of people annually.

What can be done to improve world health? Because the poorest nations have the poorest health, it is essential that the wealthy nations provide them the money, equipment, and other resources they need to improve their health and health care. The residents of these nations also need to be given the resources they need to undertake proper sanitation and other good health practices. In this regard, organizations like the World Health Organization have been instrumental in documenting the dire status of health in the poor nations and in promoting efforts to help them, and groups like Doctors Without Borders have been instrumental in bringing health-care professionals and medical care to poor nations. Ultimately, however, these nations' poor health is just one of the consequences of the global inequality examined in Chapter 2 "Poverty". Until these nations' economic circumstances and high rates of illiteracy improve dramatically, their health status will remain a serious problem.

Key Takeaways

- Effective health care reform must address social class, racial and ethnic, and gender inequalities in health and health care.
- National health insurance involving a single-payer system would improve many aspects of health and health care in the United States.
- In the absence of national health insurance, several types of changes could still help to reduce health care costs.

For Your Review

1. Do you favor or oppose national health insurance for the United States? Explain your answer.
2. Why do you think the United States remains the only industrial nation without national health insurance?

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10.6: End-of-Chapter Material

Summary

1. A sociological approach emphasizes the relationship between health, medicine, and society. In particular, our social backgrounds influence our health and access to health care.
2. Sociological perspectives on health and illness fall into the functional, conflict, and interactionist approaches encountered in previous chapters. The functional view emphasizes the importance of health for a society's stability and the roles that people play when they are sick. The conflict view stresses inequality in the quality of health and health-care delivery and efforts by physicians to monopolize the practice of medicine to increase their profits. According to the interactionist view, health and illness are social constructions subject to people's and society's interpretations. The interactionist view also studies how medical professionals and patients interact and the way professionals manage understandings of such interaction.
3. Health and the quality of health care differ widely around the world and reflect global inequality. The earth's poorest nations have extremely high rates of infant mortality and life-threatening diseases such as AIDS and very low life expectancy.
4. The United States lags behind most other industrial nations in important health indicators such as infant mortality and life expectancy. Moreover, serious disparities exist within the United States in the social distribution of health, as evidenced by the study of social epidemiology.
5. Social class, race and ethnicity, and gender all affect the quality of health. The health of poor people is worse than that of the nonpoor. African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans all fare worse than whites on many health indicators, in large part because of their poverty and history of discrimination. Women fare worse than men on several heath indicators, but men have lower life expectancies because of their higher rates of certain life-threatening illnesses.
6. Health care in the United States today faces several problems. The United States is alone among the world's industrial nations in not offering universal national health insurance; its absence is thought to help account for the country's low ranking in the industrial world on major health indicators. Managed care has also come under criticism for restricting coverage of important medical procedures and prescription medicines. Racial and gender bias in health care is another problem that has adverse effects on the nation's health. Other quality-of-care problems include tired physicians, a lack of emergency room physicians, and numerous mistakes made in hospitals.

Using What You Know

You have been working for two months as a volunteer in a hospital in or near your hometown. Your duties include bringing food to patients, talking with them, and otherwise helping them to feel comfortable. However, you have noticed that many of the physicians and nurses you have seen coming into patients' rooms do not wash their hands, and you doubt that they washed their hands immediately before entering the rooms. What, if anything, do you do? Explain your answer.

What You Can Do

To help deal with the health and health-care problems discussed in this chapter, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Volunteer at a local hospital or health clinic.
2. Start a group on your campus to advocate for national health insurance, or join an existing group in the nearby community.
3. Volunteer for a local agency that tries to address the health-care needs of low-income children and their families.

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