SOCIAL PROBLEMS (GRCC EDITION)



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Social Problems (GRCC Edition)

Emily Pain

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About This Book

This customized Open Educational Resource (OER) textbook is an updated and revised hybrid of two existing OER textbooks:

> *Social Problems: Continuity and Change* by Anonymous [name redacted] (2010) offers a realistic but motivating look at the many issues that are facing our society today. As the subtitle implies, social problems are persistent but they have also improved in the past and can be improved in the present and future, provided that our nation has the wisdom and will to address them.
>
> *Inequality and Interdependence: Social Problems and Social Justice* by Kimberly Puttman, Kathryn Burrows, Patricia Halleran, Bethany Grace Howe, Nora Karena, Kelly Szott, and Avery Temple (2025) is a powerful book that explores the social problems that you and other students may face by integrating powerful theories, current data, and compelling stories from people of color, women and nonbinary people, poor people, queer people, people of different abilities, immigrants, and many others who experience injustice.

Dr. Pain sincerely appreciates the authors named above for their hard work in constructing their OER textbooks, for making the current textbook possible, and especially for their dedication to social justice for their students.

The current textbook was remixed and revised by Dr. Pain with additional revisions by Dr. Henderson at Grand Rapids Community College during the Fall 2025 semester. Dr. Pain plans to to continually revise and update the text such that data will remain current, more features will be made available, and the textbook will continue to improve.

Suggestions are welcome from students and educators for in-text content or highlight boxes (e.g., Personal or Community Profile, Applying Social Research, People Making a Difference).

Please reach out to Dr. Pain at emilypain@grcc.edu with suggestions or other comments or questions.

Message to Students

Welcome to Social Problems! We're happy to have you.

Our commitment to social justice inspired us to adapt this textbook for our GRCC students, which may be adopted by other faculty as well as read by other learners. It integrates two existing social problems textbooks and adds and revises the content to match our course schedule, topics, and learning outcomes. Please see the About This Book page for more information.

This textbook also includes student-created ancillaries! The Open Pedagogy Project in Dr. Pain's hybrid and in-person courses involves each team creating ancillary material that is incorporated into this very text, enhancing the textbook and benefiting future students.

This textbook is continually being revised, so please make sure to read chapter pages online or read PDFs of individual pages rather than reading a PDF of entire textbook, which may not be updated.

You may use the Enter Reader Mode function on the top right of each page for screen readers or a cleaner version of each chapter page.

To access a chapter, click the textbook title (Social Problems) on the light blue menu above then click the chapter tile. Once you're in the chapter, start with the Overview page, then click the arrow button or page title on the right side of the screen to jump to the next page, or return to the chapter via the menu at the top of the screen then click the page you'd like to read.

It's good practice to take notes as you read, to help you engage more with the material and to prepare for graded coursework.

We're excited for you to explore social problems from a sociological perspective this semester!

–Dr. Pain and Dr. Henderson, Grand Rapids Community College

The following is the Message to Students page from the Puttman et al. OER textbook:

Thank you for joining us on this adventure into the beautiful and complicated world of social problems. We challenge you to bring an open mind and a curious heart to this exploration.

This book is powerful. We explore the social problems that you and other students may face by integrating powerful theories, current data, and compelling stories from People of Color, women and nonbinary people, poor people, queer folx, people of different abilities, immigrants, and many others who experience injustice.

This book is beautiful. We use photos, art, music, charts, graphs, infographics, and videos in addition to words to tell the truth about inequality, injustice, and interdependent solutions.

This book is transformative. We invite you to explore your own life through the lens of power and privilege to consider how you benefit from or are harmed by oppressive systems, and how you can take action to dismantle them. We celebrate the work of educators, researchers, activists, organizers and others whose work to end racism, heterosexism, ableism, nativism and other intersectional structures of oppression inspires us to take action.

As part of our commitment to justice, this book is openly licensed and free of charge. By providing free, high-quality, equity-minded, antiracist materials, we support making college education both more accessible and transformative.

We designed this book to engage all of you. The chapters average about an hour and a half of required reading and video content. Your actual engagement time may differ depending on how fast you read (and how many jobs you have while you are in school).

You will notice that we have added many links to videos, blogs, papers, and other sources throughout the book. Unless the text says, “Please read” or “Take a moment to watch,” those resources are there for you to learn more if you want to. You may find them helpful as you work on your assignments or if you are just plain curious to learn more.

Now click the button on the right side of this page with the arrow “→” to turn the page!

- **Message to Students** by Kimberly Puttman, Kathryn Burrows, Patricia Halleran, Bethany Grace Howe, Nora Karena, Kelly Szott, and Avery Temple is licensed CC BY 4.0. Original source: https://openoregon.pressbooks.pub/socproblems1e/.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Medicine and Health

Overview of Medicine and Health Problems
Theoretical Perspectives on Medicine and Health Problems
Patterns of Medicine and Health Problems
Strategies to Address Medicine and Health Problems
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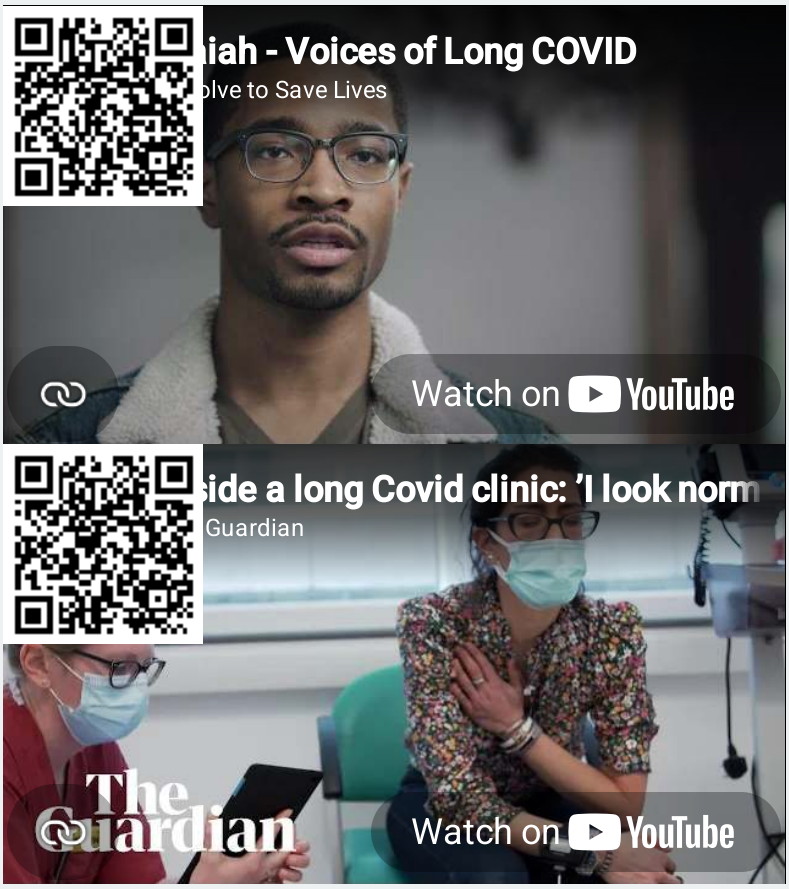
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Overview of Medicine and Health Problems

Learning Objectives

- Compare models of health that sociologists and health researchers use to explain inequality in health outcomes.
- Describe how various social groups and nations of the world differ in important indicators of health and illness.
- Summarize classical and other theoretical perspectives on problems of health and medicine.
- Explain how the social structure, systems of oppression, and patriarchy impact the experience of problems for people in marginalized groups.
- Describe differences in the healthcare model found in the US and in industrial nations.
- Describe health disparities and problems relating to healthcare and the institution of medicine.
- List strategies to reduce problems in medicine and health and provide effective health solutions, including those that expand social justice.

We probably can all tell a story about how COVID-19 impacted our lives. Some of us have had family members or friends pass away. Some of our kids just felt achy or tired for a day and then got better. Some of us wore masks, paused in-person socializing, and were anxious at the grocery store. Some of us are still experiencing lingering symptoms from a COVID-19 infection, called long COVID, as described in the videos below. Pause for a moment to think about your own COVID pandemic health story and consider the many ways that this disease has affected society in the United States and worldwide.



The videos Isaiah – Voices of Long COVID (top) and Inside a long Covid clinic: 'I look normal, but my body is breaking down' (bottom) tell the story of people with long-haul COVID-19. Watch all of

the first video and the first 5 minutes of the second video. As you watch, consider how these experiences are tied to social problems.

"Isaiah – Voices of Long COVID" by Resolve to Save Lives and "Inside a Long Covid clinic: "I look normal, but my body is breaking down" by The Guardian are licensed under the Standard YouTube License

Common sense tells us that since COVID-19 is a disease, it should affect all people equally. You would think that a virus wouldn't discriminate. However, we have learned that some social groups are more likely to be infected, hospitalized, and even die as a result of contracting COVID-19. The table below shows rates of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths due to COVID-19 by race/ethnicity from the first year of the pandemic, in summer 2020. As you can see, Black people died from COVID-19 at a rate twice that of white people during this time. Please take a moment to look at the other differences related to race/ethnicity in this table.

Rate ratios compared to White, Non-Hispanic persons	American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic persons	Asian, Non-Hispanic persons	Black or African American, Non-Hispanic persons	Hispanic or Latino persons
Cases[1]	1.5x	0.8x	1.1x	1.5x
Hospitalization[2]	2.8x	0.8x	2.2x	2.1x
Death[3,4]	2.1x	0.8x	1.7x	1.8x

Race and ethnicity are risk markers for other underlying conditions that affect health, including socioeconomic status, access to health care, and exposure to the virus related to occupation, e.g., frontline, essential, and critical infrastructure workers.

This table displays rates for COVID-19 Infection, Hospitalization, and Death by Race/Ethnicity, as of July 28, 2020. Race and ethnicity are risk markers for other underlying conditions that affect health, including socioeconomic status, access to health care, and exposure to related occupations, e.g. frontline, essential, and critical infrastructure workers.

"Risk for COVID-19 Infection, Hospitalization, and Death By Race/Ethnicity" by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) is in the Public Domain

Perhaps you noticed that the data show a gap between white non-Hispanic Americans and American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black people, and Latinx people. As you can see in the table, cases, hospitalizations, and deaths for all racial/ethnic groups except for Asians are substantially higher than for whites. This experience of inequality demonstrates that health and illness can be social problems.

This chapter will explore the social elements of *health*, and look deeply at why health is a social problem. We will also explore *medicine*, the social institution responsible for addressing health and healthcare. We will examine collective and individual models of the social determinants of health, as well as how sociologists make sense of health, illness, and the institution of medicine. We will look at differences in health systems internationally and decide if these systemic differences support health for everyone. We will also examine creative action from individuals, communities, and governments, responses that demonstrate our interdependence, and the need for the social justice of health.

Medicine and Health

The World Health Organization (1946) defines **health** as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. We usually think of health, illness, and medicine in individual terms. When a person becomes ill, we view the illness as a medical problem with biological causes. Doctors and medical professionals focus most on the health of an individual. However, health and illness in society go beyond individual experience.

Sociologists and public health professionals focus on the health of groups. This specialty is called **epidemiology**, the study of disease and health and their causes and distributions. Epidemiology can focus on the differences between neighborhoods, other communities, states, or countries. Unlike physicians, sociologists and other public health scholars do not try to understand why any one person becomes ill. Instead, we typically examine illness rates to explain why people from certain social backgrounds are likelier than others to become sick. Sociologists know that social location makes a critical difference. Epidemiologists also focus on social causes of differences in health outcomes.

As we look at health in the United States, we see a complex and often contradictory issue. On the one hand, as one of the wealthiest nations, the US fares well in health comparisons with the rest of the world. However, the US also lags behind almost every industrialized country in providing care to all its citizens. This gap between the shared value of health and unequal outcomes makes health and illness a social problem. Even with our brief explanation of COVID-19 above, we see that people experience unequal health outcomes based on their race. This is just one dimension of inequality in health outcomes.

Sociologists also examine **medicine**, the social institution that seeks to prevent, diagnose, and treat illness and to promote health in its various dimensions. In other words, it is the institution responsible for addressing health and healthcare. This institution is vast, to put it mildly, involving more than 11 million people such as physicians, nurses, dentists, therapists, medical records technicians, and many others, as well as everything else related to health and healthcare such as the pharmaceutical industry, hospitals and clinics, industries that profit from medical products such as eye glasses or walkers, insurance policies and companies, and more.

Medical sociology is the systematic study of how societies manage issues of health and illness, such as diseases and disorders, healthcare access, and the larger picture of physical, mental, and social components of health and illness. Major topics for medical sociologists include doctor/patient relationships, the structure and socioeconomics of healthcare, the causes of health disparities across social groups, the practices within the institution of medicine that perpetuate inequality, and even how culture impacts attitudes toward disease and wellness.

Our ideas about what is healthy, what is illness, and what actions we should take to be healthy and treat illness are socially constructed. A sociological approach emphasizes that a society's culture shapes its understanding of health and illness and practices of medicine. In particular, *culture* shapes a society's perceptions of what it means to be healthy or ill, the reasons to which it attributes illness, and the ways in which it tries to keep its members healthy and cure those who are sick (Hahn & Inborn 2009). Knowing about a society's culture helps us to understand how it perceives health and healing. By the same token, knowing about a society's health and medicine helps us to understand important aspects of its culture. We'll look more deeply into cultural constructions of health and illness on Theoretical Perspectives page.

However, *subculture* can impact our understandings of health and medicine, such that we have competing understandings within one culture. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some people strongly believed that we should abide by scientific recommendations such as mask-wearing and social-distancing in order to protect each other and population health (the health of all people in the nation). Others strongly believed that the government regulating our behaviors in order to protect population health was a violation of individual freedom. These differences are illustrated in the images below.



In the first image on the left, protesters hold signs that promote using science to end the COVID-19 pandemic. In the second photo on the right, protesters hold signs that say that lockdown is an issue of tyranny and freedom.

> *"Photo of Yes to Science protesters" by Mitchell Luo is licensed under the Unsplash License; "Photo of an anti-lockdown protest" by Michael Swan is in the Public Domain*

As you think about your experience with COVID-19, have you changed how you think about your own health? Many people who became severely ill or died from COVID-19 had other health issues, such as hypertension and obesity. Do you know people whose attitudes about their general health have changed? Do you know people who are suspicious of the government's intentions or less likely to listen to doctors or scientists? What do you think will be the best way to prevent illness and death should another pandemic strike? Each of these questions highlights a topic related to the social construction of the social problem of health and illness.

Additionally, how we get sick and how we stay healthy reveals both inequality and interdependence. For example, residents of Flint, Michigan experienced higher-than-normal levels of lead toxicity, hair loss, rash, and other health issues when the local municipal government changed the water supply in 2013. Although government officials knew that the Flint River was contaminated with pollution from manufacturing, they decided to use this water for city residents because it was cheaper. Decisions at several interdependent layers of government resulted in this harmful action. Local citizens connected with doctors, health officials, and journalists to tell the story of the contaminated water and support a change.

More than 60% of the residents of Flint are Black. Over 40% of Flint's residents live below the poverty line. This combination of race and class influenced the original decision making and community response. Eventually, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission cited systemic racism as the fundamental cause for the questionable decisions. Recovery required both individual agency and collective action. If you'd like to learn more, Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know provides more details.

Mental Health

In addition to physical health, we discuss mental health in this chapter. **Mental health** is a state of mind characterized by emotional well-being, good behavioral adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, and a capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life (American Psychological Association 2023). It includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.

Mental health includes subjective well-being, autonomy, and competence. It is the ability to fulfill your intellectual and emotional potential. Mental health is how you enjoy life and create a balance between activities. Cultural differences, your own evaluation of yourself, and competing professional theories all affect how one defines mental health. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.

Throughout your life, if you experience mental health problems, your thinking, mood, and behavior could be affected. Some early signs related to mental health problems are sleep difficulties, lack of energy, and thinking of harming yourself or others. All of us will experience mental health challenges throughout our lives – times when we're not sleeping, eating, or socializing as well as we know we could be. We may have times when we feel mildly depressed for a matter of days or just don't feel like doing much. These experiences are common and do not mean you have a mental illness.

Mental illness, also called *mental health disorders*, refers to a wide range of mental health conditions and disorders that affect your mood, thinking, and behavior. Examples of mental illness include depression and other mood disorders like bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and addictive behaviors (Mayo Clinic Staff 2022). When *substance use disorders* co-occur with other mental health disorders, it is known as *dual diagnosis*. Having a dual diagnosis increases symptoms and decreases responsiveness to treatment. Drug use can precipitate overdoses on drugs such as methamphetamines, cocaine, and cannabis and can also worsen diagnoses such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. We will discuss social problems of drugs including substance use disorder further in the following chapter.

Unlike mental health, mental illness has a very specific definition. Psychiatrists, psychologists, and even your primary care doctor use a manual called the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which lists every recognized mental illness. The DSM-5 (the latest one published as of this writing) lays out 297 conditions that professionals recognize as a mental illness (American Psychiatric Association 2013).

Each mental illness listed in the DSM has a list of diagnostic criteria that a person must meet to be considered to have that particular mental illness. For example, to get an official diagnosis of major depressive disorder, a person must meet five out of eight

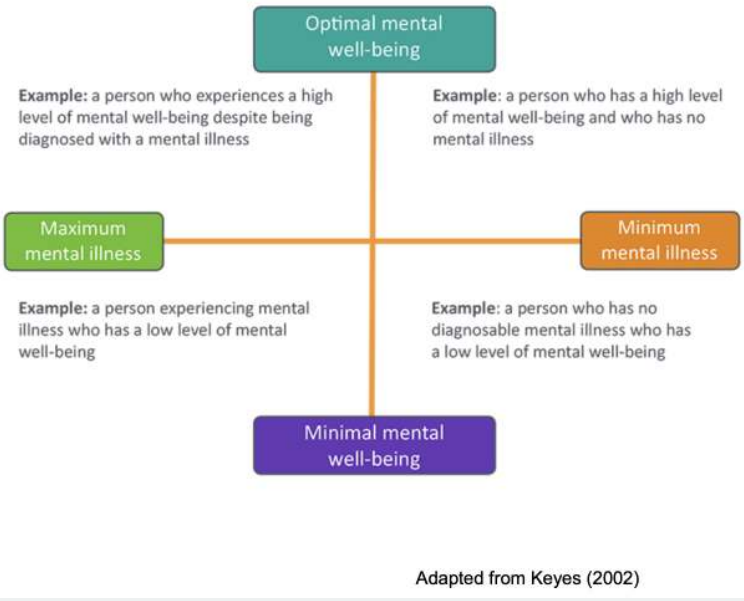
symptoms, such as severe fatigue, feeling hopeless or worthless, or much less interest in activities they used to enjoy, for at least two weeks to be considered clinically depressed.

Mental illnesses are common in the US. Nearly one in five US adults (57.8 million) lived with a mental illness in 2021 (National Institute of Mental Health 2023). Mental illnesses include many different conditions that vary in degree of severity, ranging from mild to moderate to severe.

In addition to the definitions of mental health and mental illness that we commonly use to discuss diagnosis or lack thereof, some people are starting to use the description of mental well-being. **Mental wellness** is an internal resource that helps us think, feel, connect, and function. It is an active process that helps us to build resilience, grow, and flourish (McGroarty 2021). While people can support their own mental well-being with self-care activities and connecting with family and friends, the core concept is more profound. It comprises the activities and attitudes that all of us can cultivate to ensure our own resilience, whether we have a mental health diagnosis or not.

The community activists and researchers who created the phrase mental well-being use it for two reasons. First, by separating a mental health diagnosis from the quality of mental well-being, we have a model that helps us understand that mental illness can be similar to a chronic disease. You can see this model for yourself in the figure below.

Figure 1. The mental health and wellbeing continua



Adapted from Keyes (2002)

This displays the Mental Health and Wellbeing Continua (plural for continuum). Have you ever considered that mental illness and mental well-being might differ?

"The Mental Health and Well-being Continua" from "Enhancing Public Mental Health and Wellbeing Through Creative Arts Participation" by Tony Gillam is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

Some days, weeks, or even years, the illness is very well managed, and the person leads a productive, happy, and fulfilling life. On other days, the illness is not well managed, and the person needs more support. On the other axis, some people may experience a life event that makes them deeply sad or feel powerless. They don't have a mental health diagnosis but may need mental health treatment or support anyway. Watch Mental Health Continuum to see how the model works in real time.

Second, some people and communities stigmatize people who have mental illnesses or need mental health treatment. In those cases, using the language of mental wellbeing avoids stigma. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) hosts these sites, which you can explore if it interests you: Sharing Hope: Mental Wellness in the Black Community and Compartiendo Esperanza: Mental Wellness in the Latinx Community. Both sites have excellent videos exploring issues relating to mental wellness and resilience, mental health, and mental illness in these specific communities.

In this chapter, we aim not only to understand the role of sociology in the study of mental health but to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of social life on our mental well-being. This discussion is *interdisciplinary* – it includes material from many fields. But there is a coherent organizing theme: The need to understand mental illness in a broad social context. Too often, scientists and psychologists study people who have diseases of the mind without regard to their social origins and to the workings of institutionalized *social control* involved in mental illness.

We will define more sociological concepts – *stigma* and *total institutions* – to understand why mental health is a sociological issue. This chapter critically examines how history, institutions, and culture shape our conceptions of mental illness and people with mental health challenges. We will consider the social factors contributing to the rates and the experiences of mental illness, including social location.

When sociologists study mental health, they look at trends across groups. They look at how mental health varies by race, class, gender, sexuality, and more. They also explore the factors that maintain or distract from mental health, such as stress, resilience, and coping factors, the social roles we hold, and the strength of our social networks as a source of support.

In addition to physical and mental health, sociologists are interested in health care programs and insurance, which vary dramatically around the world. The following brief section describes some of that variation.

Healthcare in Industrial Nations

Industrial nations throughout the world, with the notable exception of the US, provide their citizens with some form of national health care and *national health insurance* (Russell 2011). Although their healthcare 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 healthcare spending is much higher per capita in the US than in these other nations. In all these respects, these national health insurance systems offer several advantages over the US healthcare model (Reid 2010). We will discuss this issue further in subsequent pages.

✔ 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 US spends more per capita than these nations on health care, it generally ranks much lower than they do on important health indicators. In the first decade of the twentieth century, 24 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 US had the lowest life expectancy, the highest infant mortality, and the highest rates of obesity, adult diabetes, and HIV and AIDS. It ranked 21st in mortality from heart disease and only tenth in breast cancer mortality rate. The US also ranked 22nd 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 US 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 US and the disadvantages of the US system. In surveys 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% in the United States compared to 0-2% elsewhere; though that figure was nearly cut in half with the Affordable Care Act), 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 healthcare to their citizens and the US does not. As such, the US has much to learn from their example. Because the healthcare reform achieved in the US in 2009-2010 did not include a national healthcare model, the US will likely continue to lag behind other democracies in the quality of health and healthcare. At the same time, the cost of health care will certainly continue to be much higher in the US than in other Western nations, in part because the US 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 Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2011; Schoen et al. 2007

In this chapter we will cover social problems related to physical and mental health, including *health disparities* between various social groups, as well as other problems within the institution of medicine such as *medicalization* and the cost and quality of healthcare. First, we summarize how sociological and other perspectives frame medicine and health problems.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Medicine and Health Problems

We now turn to sociological explanations of medicine and health. As usual, the major sociological perspectives that we have discussed throughout this textbook offer different types of explanations, but together they provide us with a more comprehensive understanding than any one approach can offer by itself. The Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot table below summarizes what they say.

Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Structural functionalism	Good health and effective medical care are essential for the smooth functioning of society. Dysfunctions in social institutions and systems lead to poorer population health and disrupt societal harmony. Patients must perform the 'sick role' in order to be perceived as legitimately ill and to be exempt from their normal obligations. The biopsychosocial model of mental illness incorporates biological, psychological, and social features.
Conflict theory	Social inequality characterizes the quality of health and the quality of healthcare. People from disadvantaged social backgrounds are more likely to become ill and to receive inadequate healthcare. 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. Labeling and stigma impact individuals who have been labeled as having a mental illness.

Structural Functionalism

As conceived by American sociologist Talcott Parsons, 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. If health is vital to the stability of the society, *illness* is often seen as a form of deviance.

Parsons examined the functions of sickness and health in his book *The Social System* (1951), exploring the roles of the sick person and the doctor. The **sick role** is defined as patterns of expectations that define appropriate behavior for the sick and those who take care of them.

For a person to be considered legitimately sick, said Parsons, several expectations must be met. 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.



Functionalist 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

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. 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. A long-term illness can make our world seem smaller, more defined by the illness than anything else. An illness can be a chance for discovery, for re-imaging a new self (Conrad and Barker 2007).

Second, Parsons's discussion ignores the fact that our social backgrounds affect the likelihood of becoming ill and the quality of medical care we receive. Third, Parsons wrote approvingly of the power 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.

Regarding mental health, functionalist sociologists begin to layer social approaches to medical and psychological models. Functionalists look at the function that mental illness and mental health play in society. They look at how mental health functions in a person's life. To this end, they developed psychosocial and biopsychosocial models of mental illness.

One functionalist model of mental illness is called the **psychosocial model of mental illness**. This approach focuses on how individuals interact with and adapt to their environment. Specific factors of interest might include a person's relationships, past trauma, economic situation, outlook on life, and religious beliefs. For example, stress – both good and bad – can affect your mental health. Social scientists pay attention to where these stressful areas are. In fact, starting a new job is in the top three stressful things – but most people are happy to start new jobs. Happiness aside, the new expectations, roles, and attitudes you find at your new workplace cause stress. Of course, negative things can also cause stress, and psychologists help people develop resilience against this sort of stress so they can successfully navigate the stressful situation.

Another thing psychologists take into account are your social roles. Having conflicting social roles, such as being a parent during COVID-19 and having a full-time job, is a role conflict that can cause stress. There are several kinds of **role strain**, situations caused by higher-than-expected demands placed on an individual performing a specific role that leads to difficulty or stress. For example, being a student can take up too much time according to your boss at work.



This image represents a 'stressed-out' person. Functionalists say that role strain can cause mental stress. What in your life stresses you?

"Photo of stressed person" by Luis Villasmil is licensed under the Unsplash License

As the name implies, the psychosocial model focuses on the importance of psychological and social factors in informing a person's mental health. Rather than looking to a person's brain for clues, a proponent of the psychosocial model of mental illness might look to a patient's personal history, attitude, beliefs, and life circumstances to better understand their mental illness. But the psychosocial model is also limited because it doesn't take biological or genetic factors into account.

To address this, sociologists, psychologists, and psychiatrists have developed the **biopsychosocial model of mental illness**, which addresses the idea that mental health problems are caused by a combination of biological, psychological, and social features.

For example, it can be true that a patient has a biological disposition to mental illness and has experienced trauma that is causing or exacerbating their symptoms. Similarly, many patients have discovered that a combination of psychotropic medication and talk therapy helps address their mental health issues. In fact, many mental health care providers integrate both approaches into a more holistic framework called the biopsychosocial model.

Conflict Theory

According to conflict theory, the dominant group in society – those people with power, money, and other resources – make decisions about how the healthcare system runs. Therefore, they ensure that they have access to quality healthcare. To ensure that subordinate groups stay subordinate, they restrict access to care. This creates significant healthcare and health disparities between the dominant and subordinate groups. Early conflict theorists emphasized that social class difference is the main cause of unequal outcomes, and today that may include health outcomes. However, single-determinant models are insufficient to explain our complex social problems, as power differentials and inequalities are *intersectional*.

The conflict approach emphasizes inequality in the quality of health and of health care (Weitz 2013). They highlight how society's inequities along the areas of social class, race, gender, sexuality, and age are reproduced in health care and the institution of medicine more broadly. Health care institutions include thousands of doctors, staff, patients, and administrators, and are highly bureaucratic. They do not serve everyone equally, often because of structural *systems of oppression* (e.g., racism, sexism,

cissexism, heterosexism). When health is a commodity, marginalized people are more likely to experience illness and live and work in unhealthy environments.

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**, transformed from a behavior or condition into a medical problem, their possible social roots and thus potential solutions are neglected.

Obstetrical care provides a strong example. In most of human history, midwives were the people who helped deliver babies. In the nineteenth century, with the professionalization of medicine, physicians medicalized childbearing, claiming that they were better trained than midwives and winning legislation in the US giving them authority to deliver babies. Some may have honestly felt that midwives were inadequately trained, but they also fully recognized that obstetrical care would be quite lucrative (Ehrenreich & English 2005), and they strongly stigmatized midwives to make them seem inadequate.

The medicalization of childbirth in the US is so pervasive that most expectant parents in the US give birth in hospitals, with fetal monitors, medications, and other medical interventions that are unnecessary for most healthy pregnancies. In fact, severe complications among childbearers in the US have more than doubled in the last 20 years, rather than the reverse. In contrast, other Western nations continue to rely on midwifery. In Great Britain, midwives deliver half of all babies, including Kate Middleton's first two children, Prince George and Princess Charlotte. In Sweden, Norway, and France, midwives oversee most expectant and new births, enabling obstetricians to concentrate on high-risk births. In Canada and New Zealand, midwives are so highly valued that they're brought in to manage complex cases that need special attention.

Midwives are far less prevalent in the US than in other affluent Western countries, attending around 10% of births, despite that birthing care shortages have reached critical levels, with nearly half of all US counties without a practicing obstetrician-gynecologist (OBGYN). In rural areas, hospitals offering obstetric services have fallen more than 16% since 2004. The extent to which they can legally participate in patient care varies widely from one state to the next. At times, the cultural stigmas regarding medical practices can cause people to seek medical services that don't meet their needs.

In another 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 active children. 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 lucrative for physicians and for the company that developed Ritalin, and it also obscured the possible roots of their behavior in parenting, schools, or even *gender socialization* (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 social inequality in health and medicine and of the negative aspects of the medical establishment's motivation for extending its reach remains compelling.

When we look at inequality in mental health, the approach is typically grounded in conflict theory. We will provide an example of this approach to mental health our discussion of social class. You may notice that it takes a conflict approach because it ties wealth and poverty to rates of mental illness. In essence, The Chicago Schizophrenia Study found that people from poorer neighborhoods were more likely to develop schizophrenia than were people from middle-class neighborhoods. While Faris and Dunham had differing approaches to explain why this might be the case, the fact that poverty – a *classist* experience – is linked to health outcomes is a classic conflict theory approach to mental illness.

Symbolic Interactionism

Like all social problems, the concepts of health and illness are *socially constructed*. The **social construction of illness** is based on the idea that there is no objective reality, only our own perceptions of reality. In other words, 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 theories surrounding the social construction of health emphasize the social and cultural aspects of the discipline's approach to physical, objectively definable phenomena. This section examines a comprehensive framework that focuses on the cultural meaning of illness, the social construction of the illness experience, and the social construction of medical knowledge (Conrad and Barker 2010).

Most medical sociologists contend that illnesses have both a biological and an experiential component and that these components exist independently of each other. Dominant white culture influences the way we experience illness, dictating which illnesses are stigmatized, which are considered disabilities or impairments, and which are contestable illnesses (Conrad & Barker 2010).

Contested illnesses are those that are questioned or questionable by some medical professionals. Disorders like fibromyalgia or chronic fatigue syndrome are real physical experiences, but some medical professionals contest whether these ailments are definable in medical terms. This causes a problem for a patient with symptoms that might be explained by a contested illness – how to get the treatment and diagnosis they need in the face of a medical establishment that does not believe their symptoms are real.

Scholars disagree over the social construction of mental illness. The predominant view in psychiatry, of course, is that people have actual mental and emotional functioning problems. These problems are best characterized as mental illnesses or mental disorders and should be treated by medical professionals (Kring and Sloan 2009). But other scholars, adopting a *labeling theory* approach, say that mental illness is a social construction (Szasz 2008) because few are labeled as 'mentally ill' despite that all kinds of people sometimes act oddly or in diverse ways. If someone says they hear the voice of an angel, we often attribute their perceptions to their religious views and consider them religious, not mentally ill. Instead, if someone insists that aliens from Mars have been in touch, we are more apt to think that there is something mentally wrong with that person. We socially construct our concepts of mental illness, labeling some people but not others.

This intellectual debate notwithstanding, many people suffer serious mental and emotional problems, such as severe mood swings and depression, that interfere with their everyday functioning and social interaction. Other symptoms of mental illnesses include psychosis, which is the loss of contact with reality; hallucinations, which is seeing or hearing things that others cannot; and delusions, which is believing things that are not actually true. Sociologists and other researchers have investigated the social epidemiology of these problems. As usual, they find social inequality (Cockerham 2011).

We also see the social construction of health and illness when we try to measure and treat pain. Individual and cultural perceptions of pain can make it difficult for healthcare workers to treat illnesses since they cannot be measured using a device. A person's experience of pain is subjective, and a physician's response to treating pain is highly variable. In addition to individual and cultural differences in the response to pain, the medical system's response to pain varies by race. Women of color are less likely to receive adequate pain medication during childbirth (Lange, Rao, and Toledo 2017) and the postpartum period (Badreldin, Grobman, and Yee 2019). If you would like to learn more, the website How We Fail Black Patients in Pain explores some reasons why physicians may give less pain medication to Black and Brown people than to white people.

In addition to pain, it can be challenging to come to a shared understanding of physical activity. Assessment tools like the Rating of Perceived Exertion (RPE) Scale attempt to measure exertion at the individual level using accessible language and visual cues. This RPE chart includes the Wong-Baker FACES pain assessment tool, which is used often in healthcare settings because it works for a variety of ages, ability levels, and can be understood by those whose primary language is not English. The Rating of Perceived Exertion (RPE) chart (below) gives a more complete view of an individual's actual exertion level, since heart rate or pulse measurements may be affected by medication or other issues (Centers for Disease Control 2022).

Rating of Perceived Exertion

	0 - Very light activity	Minimal exertion, but more than sleeping or stationary activity.	Heart rate, breathing, and physical comfort level are baseline.
	2 - Light activity	Feels like you can maintain the activity for several hours.	Breathing is normal. Heart rate higher than baseline.

	4 - Moderate activity	Feel comfortable, but cannot maintain the activity for more than two hours.	Can speak a few minutes before getting winded. Heart rate is elevated.
	6 - Vigorous activity	Feel uncomfortable with multiple physical signs that your body is working hard.	Can speak a sentence before becoming winded. Heart rate is elevated.
	8 - Very hard activity	Difficult to maintain activity intensity for more than a few minutes.	Can speak a few words before becoming winded. Heart rate is high.
	10 - Maximum effort activity	Feels impossible to maintain activity intensity for more than a few minutes.	Completely out of breath, unable to talk. Heart rate is very high.

This chart displays the Rating of Perceived Exertion (RPE) Scale combined with the Wong-Baker FACES pain assessment tool. How is this chart an example of the social construction of health?

"Rating of Perceived Exertion" by Kaitlin Hakanson is licensed under CC BY 4.0. Based on the Wong-Baker FACES Pain Rating Scale, Twitter post by Haydn Drake @paramedickiwi, and Borg Rating of Perceived Exertion Scale from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

In another example, in the late 1800s opium use was quite common in the US, 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).

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.

Critics fault the symbolic interactionist approach for implying that no illnesses have an 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 reality and that reality itself is constructed through social interaction.

In regard to mental health, symbolic interactionism focuses on meanings, experiences, and consequences of mental illness. Michaels MacDonald, historian of psychiatry, observed that mental illness "is the most solitary of afflictions to the people who experience it; but it is the most social of maladies to those who observe its effects" (1981: 1). Psychiatry generally focuses on the suffering individual while sociologists study the social aspects and implications of an individual's mental disturbance on friends, family, community, and society. Sociologists ask questions like:

- How can we define and draw boundaries around mental illness and distinguish it from eccentricity or mere idiosyncrasy?
- Who determines what is “normal” difference and what is pathological?
- Who has the privilege to make such decisions? Why? Do such things vary across time and cross-culturally?
- How have societies responded to the presence of those who do not seem to share our commonsense notions of reality?

As part of the answer to these questions, the *social construction theory* of mental illness states that mental illnesses, mental health, normality, and abnormality are all social constructions and are not based in biological reality. One socially constructed concept is the idea of what is 'normal.' People in power say that normal is being happy and productive. If you are not these things, you are deemed 'abnormal' or 'sick.' The National Alliance for Mental Illness, or NAMI, challenges this idea and argues that people with mental illnesses are indeed 'normal,' although they may be different than others. Differences are to be celebrated, not labeled as dangerous or damaged.

At the same time, mental illness has profoundly disruptive effects on individual lives and on the social order we all take for granted. Erving Goffman (pictured below), whose mid-twentieth century writings still constitute some of the most provocative and profound sociological meditations on the subject, is perhaps best known for his searing critique of mental hospitals as **total institutions**: Residential institutions that cut off individuals from wider communities or society. Total institutions often have the goal of *resocialization*: The learning of new cultural norms, values, and expectations. However, total institutions often attempt to break down the very personality and sense of self of an individual, forcing a revised, more obedient personality and selfhood.



Erving Goffman, a Canadian-born, Jewish sociologist researched mental health and mental illness. His book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* is essential in understanding the social construction of difference.

“Erving Goffman” from the American Sociological Association is included under fair use

From the late nineteen-sixties through the nineteen-eighties, the intellectual distance and even hostility between sociologists and psychiatrists often seemed to be growing. Within five years of the appearance of Goffman’s groundbreaking book *Asylums*, the California sociologist Thomas Scheff had authored a more radical assault on psychiatry. Scheff dismissed the *medical model* of mental illness altogether and attempted to replace it with a *societal reaction model*, where mental patients were portrayed as victims – victims of psychiatrists (Scheff 1966).

Scheff noted that despite centuries of effort, "there is no rigorous knowledge of the cause, cure, or even the symptoms of functional mental disorders," and we would be better off adopting "a [sociological] theory of mental disorder in which psychiatric symptoms are considered to be labeled violations of social norms, and stable ‘mental illness’ to be a social role." And, "societal reaction [not internal pathology] is usually the most important determinant of entry into that role" (1966: 25).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the societal reaction theory of deviance enjoyed broad popularity and acceptance among many sociologists. Scheff’s was one of the principal works in that tradition. In the face of an avalanche of well-founded objections, Scheff was eventually forced to back away from many of his more extreme positions. By the time the third edition of his book appeared (Scheff 1999), most of its bolder ideas had been quietly abandoned.

Labeling and *stigmatization* of the mentally ill have remained important subjects for sybmolic interactionists. This **stigmatization of illness** is when shame or disgrace is aimed at a person with a physical or mental illness or condition. Stigma can exacerbate the experience of having a mental illness. The idea of stigmatization is powerful, even if culturally the stigma associated with mental illness has been weakening.

Other Theoretical Perspectives

In addition to the three classical theoretical perspectives, other theories have framed and explained problems of health and medicine. We will discuss two examples below, including important points regarding the intersection of race and social class.

The Hispanic Paradox

Healthcare researchers who explore health outcomes for Latinx or Hispanic people describe these outcomes as the *Hispanic paradox*. Hispanics make up the largest and fastest-growing racial minority group in the US (Funk and Lopez 2022). For decades, health services researchers have puzzled over a paradox among them. Hispanics live longer and have lower death rates from heart disease, cancer, and many other leading causes of death than non-Hispanic white people despite having social disadvantages, including lower incomes and worse access to health coverage, and experiencing racism and sometimes nativism or xenophobia.



Social connections may be one of the reasons why Latinx families tend to be healthier than other families in similar economic circumstances. How do you see social connection as helpful in your own life?

"Close-up of smiling family posing" by Freepik is used under the Freepik license

There are many theories about why this might happen. The possibilities include stronger social networks, healthier eating habits, and lower smoking rates among some Hispanic groups, particularly newer arrivals. However, focusing on national data can mask important differences. It also matters if people have health insurance, speak primarily Spanish or English, or grew up in the US or another country. The very heterogeneity of the Hispanic population makes it hard to pinpoint problems, including high rates of diabetes, liver disease, and certain cancers and poor birth outcomes among some Hispanic groups. Some were born here and others come from more than 20 countries, with widely differing experiences and social circumstances, including immigration status. The same diversity challenges the validity of the Hispanic paradox (Hostetter and Klein 2018).

Racism and Weathering

When we consider the causes of poor health outcomes, a common theory about why people of color have poor health outcomes is because they are disproportionately poor. They don't have the money or health insurance that they need to get the needed level of medical care. This theory is partially true, and thus highlights the need for attention to the intersection of race and social class.

However, researcher Arline Geroniumus (pictured below) argues that racism itself can impact health outcomes. She coined the term weathering to describe the impact that social location can have on health. More specifically, **weathering** is the concept describing how chronic exposure to social and economic disadvantage leads to an accelerated decline in physical health outcomes (Geronimus 2023).



Arline Geronimus is a public health researcher who argues that the harm of racism itself is a cause of health inequality for people of color.

"Photo of Arline Geronimus" © University of Michigan is included under fair use

As a student at Princeton, Geronimus worked with pregnant teenagers in Trenton, New Jersey. She noticed that many of these young moms had serious chronic conditions, even though they were still young, and she wondered why. This curiosity led her to do extensive research (Demby 2018). She discovered that the physical body breaks down faster when you are exposed to chronic racism. The stress of wondering whether the police will stop you in traffic, or whether your children will come home safely, causes a stress overload in the body, when in turn causes physical deterioration (Geronimus 2021).

While she originally did her research with Black people and focused on *racial weathering*, she has expanded her concept. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she found that marginalization of oppressed populations related to race, class, gender, and other areas of social location was likely to lead to poorer health outcomes related to COVID-19 (Geronimus 2021). Weathering partially explains racial and other disparities in a wide array of health conditions (Forde et al. 2019).

For example, structural racism leads to disproportionate houselessness for Black people in particular. Safe housing is one of the social determinants of health. Partially because Black people have less access to safe housing, they experience poorer health outcomes. This again highlights the intersection of racism and classism. This NPR episode explains the weathering concept if you would like more details.

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Patterns of Medicine and Health Problems

When we examine health and healthcare in the United States, there is both good 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 incredibly rare today, thanks to vaccines, 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.

More specifically, the US average life expectancy climbed from about 47 years in 1900 to about 78 years in 2023. Similarly, infant mortality dropped dramatically in the last half-century from 29.2 infant deaths per 1,000 live births in 1950 to only 5.55 in the last quarter of 2024 (Driscoll and Ely 2025). Cigarette smoking declined from 51% for men and 34% for women in 1965 to 23% and 18% in 2009, respectively (National Center for Health Statistics 2011). Moreover, as of 2021, only about 11.6% of adults smoke (American Lung Association 2024). In another example, various policies during the past three decades have dramatically reduced levels of lead in young children's blood: 88% of children had unsafe levels in the mid-1970s, compared to less than 2% three decades later (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007). Between 2017 and March 2020, the percentage of children with elevated levels of lead in their blood was only 0.4% (Child Stats 2023).

Unfortunately, the bad news is also considerable. Despite all these and other gains, the US lags behind most other wealthy democracies in several health indicators, as we have seen, even though it is the wealthiest nation in the world. More than 8% of all infants are born at low birth weight, measured as 5.5 pounds or lower, putting them at risk for long-term health problems (CDC 2025). 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).

There is also wide variation in health outcomes across different social groups including by social class, race, gender, sexuality, and age, which we discuss next. In addition to these health disparities, there are problems within the institution of medicine such as with access to health insurance and bias or discrimination in healthcare. We also describe some of these problems below.

Health Disparities

We will provide several examples of health disparities next, followed by a discussion of what factors contribute to those disparities. **Health disparities** refer to preventable differences in health outcomes or access to healthcare across different social groups. The National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (2025) defines health disparities as:

> "largely preventable health differences that adversely affect populations who experience greater challenges to optimal health and are closely linked with intergenerational social, economic, and/or environmental factors," which "may be observed in the risks, prevalence, or problems resulting from specific behaviors, as well as the incidence, prevalence, and mortality from conditions, diseases, and/or disorders. Health disparities also can be observed in health care access, quality, and utilization, and within the delivery of clinical care."

Health disparities can be found across all social groups, such as regarding social class, race, gender/sex, sexuality, and age. We will explore some of these disparities now.

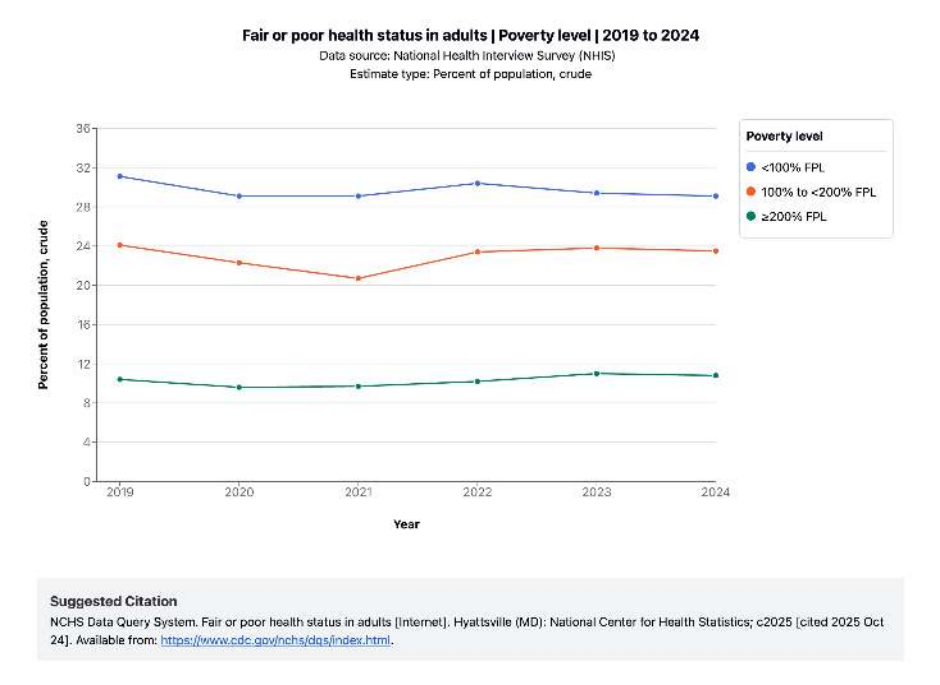
Social Class

There has been growing recognition in the government and in medical and academic communities that social class influences health outcomes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2011; Patel 2020).

Marilyn Winkleby and her research associates (1992) state that "one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of a person's morbidity [incidence of disease] and mortality [death] experience is that person's socioeconomic status (SES). This finding persists across all diseases with few exceptions, continues throughout the entire lifespan, and extends across numerous risk factors for disease." In other words, being in a lower social class makes you more likely to get sick or die of disease than people in a higher social class.

Many types of health indicators illustrate the social class–health link in the US. In an annual survey conducted by the government, people are asked to indicate the quality of their health. In 2024, nearly 15% of the adult population reported being in poor or fair health, but over 29% of those at <100% of the federal poverty level (FPL) reported being in poor or fair health, compared with less

than 11% of those at 200% of the FPL or higher (NCHS 2025). 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 (NCHS 2011).



This chart shows how rates of poor or fair perceived health are far higher among adults at less than 100% of the federal poverty level (FPL) than those who have higher socioeconomic standing (at 200% or higher of the FPL).

Source: NCHS 2025

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. Because people with a lower socioeconomic status experience financial insecurity, they can be more stressed. For instance, stress 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 weakens immune systems, making it difficult to fight viruses and to heal.

Second, social class also influences how likely you are to have health insurance and get good 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). Particularly in the US, where healthcare is not universal, the poorer you are, the less likely you are to have quality health insurance.

Suppose you have a full-time, beneficial managerial job in a large multinational corporation. In that case, you will likely receive paid time off, excellent health insurance, long-term care insurance, and contributions to your retirement. This package of benefits

helps you to prevent disease and stay healthy. Conversely, suppose you have a low-wage seasonal job, particularly in a state that doesn't fully participate in the Affordable Care Act (ACA). In that case, neither your employer nor the government provides health care insurance for you. You pay for your healthcare out of your own pocket. Given the high cost of care, you will likely delay getting treatment, not have access to preventative care, or not be able to pay for complex treatment. In the US, economics, insurance, and health outcomes are linked in enormously inequitable ways.



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.

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Third, education influences health outcomes. Ae lack of education 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). General level of education matters here. In one study of whether smokers quit smoking after a heart attack, only 10% of heart attack patients without a high school degree quit smoking, compared to almost 90% of those with a college degree (Wray, Herzog, Willis, & Wallace 1998). Education about medicine and health is important as well. For instance, Phelan and Link (2003) note that many behavior-influenced diseases like lung cancer, coronary artery disease, and HIV/AIDS initially were widespread across social class groups. However, once information linking habits to disease was shared, these diseases decreased in higher social class groups and increased in lower social class groups. This illustrates the important role of education initiatives regarding a given disease and possible inequalities in how those initiatives effectively reach different groups.

A fourth reason for social class health disparities 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 US over the last several decades, they continue for many of the poor. Crowding was one cause of the higher rates of COVID-19 illness and death among lower-income people.

A final reason for the poor health of poor people is unhealthy lifestyles. Poor people are more likely to smoke, to eat high-fat food, to avoid exercise, and to be overweight (Pampel et al. 2010). However, we must keep in mind that health habits are constrained by structural factors such as living in *food deserts*, lacking access to quality healthcare, and having less education on health habits.

Covid-19 death tolls in the US demonstrate the relationship between health and poverty. For instance, Finch and Finch (2020) found that residents of poorer counties were more likely to die from Covid-related deaths than those who resided in middle- and high-income counties.

✔ 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% of the poverty line.
- Based on their parents' reports, poor children are almost five times more likely (33% compared to 7%) 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. 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 US 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 US 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

Sociologists also see unequal outcomes when they examine prevalence and outcomes of mental illness. One of the most consistent findings across studies is that lower social class groups have greater amounts of mental illness. For instance, poor people have higher rates of severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, serious depression, and other problems (Mossakowski 2008; Ridley et. al 2020). Why is this the case?

One of the earliest studies of the sociology of mental health came from the University of Chicago in the 1930s. Sociologists explored whether mental illness caused poverty or whether poverty caused mental illness. The two researchers who led this

project, Faris and Dunham (1939), looked at psychiatric admissions to Chicago hospitals by neighborhood. What they found was rather shocking: There was a nine times increased rate of schizophrenia from people who came from poorer neighborhoods than from middle-class neighborhoods. The researchers tried to figure out why.

One idea was *social selection*, the idea that lower class position is a consequence of mental illness. Mentally ill people would drift downward into lower income groups or poorer neighborhoods because they couldn't keep jobs. In addition to considering social selection, they considered *social causation*. In this model, which Faris and Dunham later refuted, lower class position was a cause of mental illness.

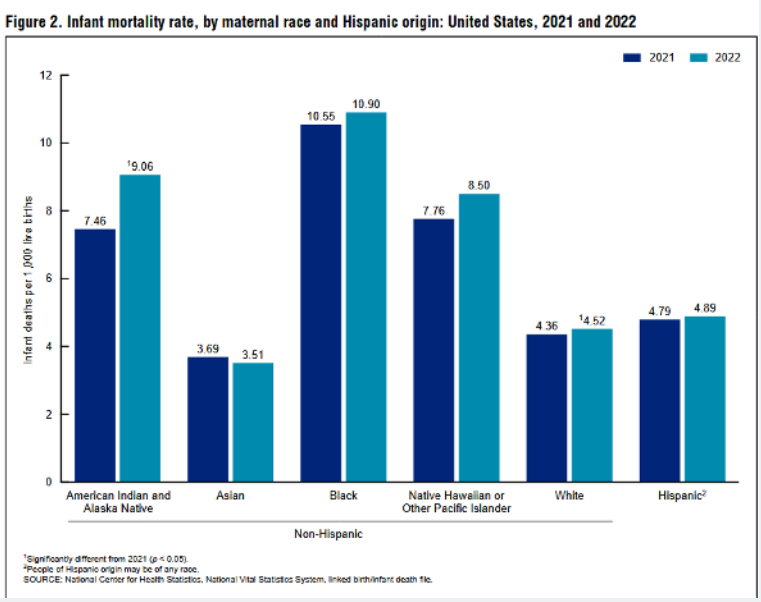
Results of this early study came back mixed. At first, Faris and Dunham said that the isolation and poverty of living in the central city created schizophrenia – a cause. But then, they changed their minds and said people with schizophrenia have downward drift and moved to the central, poorer part of town after developing schizophrenia – an effect. Later studies have found that Faris and Dunham's study was actually trying to tell us that it's both – cause and effect. Social selection theories and social causation theories can be used to account for the relationship between schizophrenia and poverty.

Thus, as with physical health, poverty itself can be a risk factor for poor mental health. Although there is evidence of both causal paths, most scholars believe that poverty contributes to mental illness more than the reverse (Warren 2009). This article from the Guardian, Mental Illness and Poverty: You Can't Tackle One Without The Other, might help you to make more sense of this complex relationship.

Further, people with mental health issues can struggle with educational and economic stability because sufficient social supports are not in place to support them, resulting in stagnant or downward *social mobility*.

Race

When looking at the social epidemiology of the US, it is easy to see health disparities between people with different races/ethnicities. These disparities can be a matter of life and death. The discrepancy between Black and white Americans shows the gap clearly. In 2018, the average life expectancy for Black males was 74.7 years. The average life expectancy for white males was 78.5 years. This is a gap of almost 5 years (Wamsley 2021). We see similar disparities when we look at how many babies die or infant mortality (how many people die at a particular time or place). The 2022 infant mortality rates were highest for Black infants and lowest for Asian infants, as displayed in the chart below. Black infants are more than twice as likely as white infants to die before their first birthday. In a related indicator, parental mortality (from complications of pregnancy or childbirth) stands at 8.1 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births for white childbearers, 7.2 for Latinx childbearers, and a troubling 23.8 for Black childbearers. Maternal mortality for Black women is thus about three times greater than that for the other two groups (Ely & Driscoll 2024).



https://socialsci.libretexts.org/@go/page/255495

Infant mortality rate, by maternal race and Hispanic origin: United States, 2021 and 2022. Infant mortality varies significantly by race/ethnicity. What factors do you think contribute to this disparity?

Source: Ely & Driscoll, National Vital Statistics Reports 2024

In other indicators, Black people are more likely than white people to die from heart disease, although the white rate of such deaths is higher than the rates of Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans. Black individuals 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. Black women are three times more likely to dies as a result of pregnancy related complications compared to white women (CDC 2024).

Commenting on all these disparities in health, a former head of the US Department of Health and Human Services said, "We have been—and remain—two nations: one majority, one minority—separated by the quality of our health" (Penn et al. 2000: 102). The examples just discussed certainly indicate that her statement is still true today.

Why do such large racial/ethnic disparities in health exist? To a large degree, they reflect the high poverty rates for Black, Latinx, 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 healthcare professionals that affects the quality of care that people of color receive.

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 Black Americans are much less likely than white Americans to receive the procedures just listed. This is true when poor Black people are compared to poor white people and also when the middle-class is compared (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 Black 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 Black patients were less likely than the white patients to be recommended for this procedure (Schulman et al. 1999). It is possible, of course, that some doctors are overt racists and decide that the lives of Black people are less worth saving, but it is far more likely that they have unconscious or *implicit racial biases* that affect their medical judgments. Regardless of the reason, the result is the same: Black Americans are less likely to receive potentially life-saving cardiac procedures simply because they are Black. *Institutional discrimination* in medicine, then, is literally a matter of life and death.

Scholars are increasingly concluding that the stress of being Black in the US – facing *anti-Black racism* – is a major factor in health disparities (Geronimus et al. 2010; Williams 2018). 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 Black Americans (Blitstein 2009). In this way of thinking, Black 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. 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 Black individuals from their earliest ages grow up with a great deal of stress, far more than what most white individuals experience. This stress in turn has certain neural and physiological effects, including hypertension (high blood pressure), that impair Black 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 news article on evidence of this "hidden toll" summarized, "The long-term stress of living in a white-dominated society 'weathers' blacks, making them age faster than their white counterparts" (Blitstein 2009: 48).

An additional reason for racial disparities in health is diet. Many of the foods that have long been part of Black American *culture* are high in fat. Partly as a result, Black people are more likely than white people to have heart disease and high blood pressure and to die from these conditions (Parra-Medina et al. 2010). In contrast, first-generation Latinx people 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, Black Americans tend to have worse health than white Americans even among those with the same incomes. Several reasons explain this racial gap. One is the extra stress that Black Americans of all incomes face because they live

in a society that is still racially prejudiced and discriminatory (Bratter & Gorman 2011), as discussed above. In this regard, studies find that Black and Latinx people who have experienced the most racial discrimination in their daily lives tend to have worse physical health (Lee & Ferraro 2009). Some middle-class Black people 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).



Black 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 Black Americans experience and the stress that accompanies this experience.

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Another 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), and will be discussed further in a future chapter. 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 Black Americans: 80% of these residents live within three miles of a polluting industrial facility (Cernansky 2011).

The evidence on the connection between race and mental health 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 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 Black and Latinx individuals are more likely than white individuals to exhibit signs of mental distress (Jang, Chiriboga, Kim, & Phillips 2008; Mossakowski 2008).

The video below, "The Intersection of Race and Mental Health," presents some of the newest research on race and mental health. It specifically calls out racial trauma as a cause of mental health issues.



Watch the first 8 minutes of the video #TerpsTalk: Intersection of Race and Mental Health, which discusses both the need for mental health services and the barriers to services for people of color. How does this illustrate the connections between social location and health?

"#TERPSTALK: Intersection of Race and Mental Health" by Maryland Athletics is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

Racial trauma is used to describe the physical and psychological symptoms that people of color often experience after being exposed to stressful experiences of racism (Jernigan et al. N.d.). For instance, people of color experience discrimination in the form of *microaggressions*, *redlining*, *criminalization*, and disproportionate incarceration. These experiences, and many others, contribute to racial trauma.

Further, nearly 36% of people who experience any mental illness and report as two or more races (SAMHSA 2021), meaning that they are mixed race or multiracial. We'll look at two factors that might influence the mental health of multiracial people: Legal history and double-discrimination, although there are many more contributing factors.

People from different races have always had relationships with each other. Sometimes, in the cases of slavery, these relationships were non-consensual sexual violence. The laws against *miscegenation*, or the mixing of two races, were only overturned at the federal level in the US only in 1967 (Greig 2013). In fact, "the 2000 Census was the first time that citizens of the United States could select multiple racial categories for self-identification apart from Hispanic ethnicity in a census" (Whaley and Francis 2006). The lack of legal, governmental, and systems recognition of multiracial identity is an additional stress for multiracial people. If you would like to learn more, check out this blog, Laws that Banned Mixed Marriages.

A second contributing factor to mental health risks for multiracial people is **double-discrimination**, a concept which describes the experience of discrimination from both of one's communities. This popular media article about Kamala Harris quotes Diana Sanchez, a professor who studies multiracial identity:

> "Sanchez says that multiracial people can face what she refers to as double discrimination, where they experience discrimination from both communities they are members of. In Harris's case, that leads to South Asians saying she's not South Asian enough and Black people saying she might not be Black enough. 'So there's all these different sources of discrimination that are affecting the development of your multiracial identity and your experience with it, and that can make it hard to navigate,' Sanchez said" (Chittal 2021).

If you want to learn more about the experience of mixed-race people, check out Do All Multiracial People Think the Same?. Then answer the question: Why might mixed-race people have a unique experience of social problems, including mental health and mental illness?

Gender/Sex

In this subsection, we use the language of both gender and sex. Sociologists typically speak of *gender*, because it is the socially constructed gender roles and expectations that create differences between women and men (in a binary construction of gender which research often uses). However, regarding health, there are some *biological sex* differences between females and males (once

again, this is binary because that is how health research has categorized bodies despite that intersex people have always existed). Interestingly though, some of those 'sex differences' are a product of the *social construction of gender*.

The evidence on gender/sex and health is both complex and fascinating. Women outlive men by more than five years, and the 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 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?

Several reasons explain the gender gap in longevity. One might be biological, as the estrogen levels of people assigned female 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 other health problems (Kuller 2010). However, as with other differences in health outcomes, much of the difference may be due to social factors.

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 risk 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 annually – most of them men.

A final reason is men's reluctance to discuss and seek help for their medical problems (see Baker et al. 2014), 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: 10).

Studies also 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 they 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 differences that constitute the gender morbidity paradox. The other difference concerns why women have more nonfatal health problems than men. Several reasons explain this difference (Read & Gorman 2010). 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.



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.

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However, women still tend to have worse health than men even when age is taken into account. Medical sociologists attribute this difference to *gender inequality* in the larger society (Read & Gorman 2010). For example, women are poorer overall than men and more likely to be in poverty. As already noted, poverty is a risk factor for health problems. Women's worse health, then, is partly due to their greater likelihood of living in 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 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 may cause.

Another reason is because women experience *sexism* – systemic, institutionalized discrimination – in their everyday lives, and (as is also true for people of color and racism) this discrimination is thought to produce stress and thus poorer physical health (Landry & Mercurio 2009). Women are affected adversely both by institutionalized sexism within and unequal access to the healthcare industry, which reflects gender inequality more broadly. According to a report from KFF, women experienced a decline in their ability to see needed specialists between 2001 and 2008. In 2008, one-quarter of women questioned the quality of their healthcare (Ranji & Salganico 2011). Quality is partially indicated by access and cost. In 2018, roughly one in four women (26%) compared to one in five men (19%) reported delaying healthcare or letting conditions go untreated due to cost. Because of costs, approximately one in five women postponed preventive care, skipped a recommended test or treatment, or reduced their use of medication due to cost (Ranji, Rosenzweig, and Salganicoff 2018).

In addition, many critics also point to the medicalization of women's issues as an example of institutionalized sexism. **Medicalization** refers to the process by which previously normal aspects of life are redefined as pathological and needing medical attention. Many aspects of women's lives have been medicalized, including premenstrual syndrome, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause. The medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth has been particularly contentious in recent decades, with many women opting against the medical process and choosing natural childbirth as part of their reproductive health plan.

Reproductive health is not limited to pregnancy and childbirth. It also includes the ability to choose when or whether to be pregnant. For centuries, women have controlled conception and pregnancy using plants and devices. As women's bodies became more medicalized, contraception and termination of pregnancy became managed by doctors. In some cases, this was useful. Doctors developed 'the pill' in the 1950s, and it was widely available by the 1970s (Liao and Dolin 2012). By reliably preventing conception, women had more choices in when to get pregnant, at least once they didn't need permission from their husbands to take the pill. Often, this gave them more freedom to work, make money, and gain economic power.

The technology to provide safe, effective terminations of pregnancy also evolved. *Abortion* is the spontaneous or voluntary termination of pregnancy. As women fought to control their own reproduction, the right to choose abortion became a hotly contested debate. In early 1973, the Supreme Court affirmed the right to a woman's privacy in matters surrounding her pregnancy in a 7-2 decision, commonly known as *Roe v. Wade*. The decision reads in part:

> "The Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment protects against state action the right to privacy, and a woman's right to choose to have an abortion falls within that right to privacy. A state law that broadly prohibits abortion without respect to the stage of pregnancy or other interests violates that right. Although the state has legitimate interests in protecting the health of pregnant women and the 'potentiality of human life,' the relative weight of each of these interests varies over the course of pregnancy, and the law must account for this variability" (Oyez N.d.).

For five decades after the Roe decision, women had access to abortion services in all US states. With access to safe and effective abortion, women's health outcomes improved. Maternal mortality decreased, and there was less infant mortality (World Health Organization 2021).





These images portray reproductive health activists supporting the right to abortion, then and now. How does the reproductive rights movement highlight the connection between social control and gender inequality?

"Sen. Judiciary subcomm. Hearing on abortion amendment 1974" (left) by Warren K. Leffler has no known copyright restrictions, courtesy of the Library of Congress; "Roe v. Wade" (right) by Susan Ruggles is licensed under CC BY 2.0

However, some people did not agree with this legal decision. The conflict in values is based on politics, religion, and power. If you look at the conflict based on political party, you see that the Republican party argues that the unborn child has a right to life that cannot be violated. The Democratic party argues that people have the right to bodily autonomy, and to choose whether to get pregnant or to terminate pregnancy and to have access to safe, legal, affordable contraception and abortion.

However, not all Republicans and Democrats support their own party's platform. Republicans who do support the platform are likely to be Protestant. Forty percent of them are white Evangelical Christians. Republicans who don't support the right to life are much less likely to be religious. Eighty percent of Democrats support the right to choose. The 20% who don't are commonly white Evangelical, Hispanic Catholic, or Black Protestant. The combination of race and religion appears to have a unique influence on beliefs about reproductive rights (Lipka 2022).

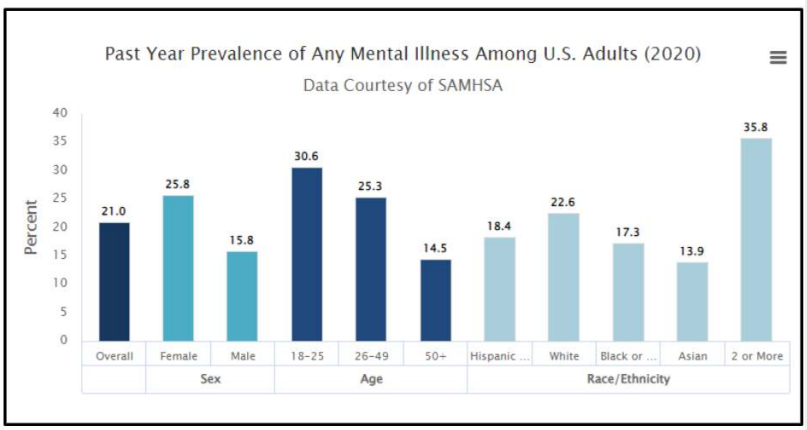
But differences in politics and religion mask a deeper divide: The debate over who controls women's bodies. This is an example of *gendered social control*, the social control of women or people assigned female. Generally, men make the laws that control women and pregnant people's bodies. We see the power of *patriarchal* systems in the challenges to Roe v. Wade. In the summer of 2022, access to abortion was removed as a federally protected right, as our *right to privacy* was dismantled (for all of us, not just women or pregnant people). Each state could now decide whether abortions were legal or illegal, and many states limited access to abortion.

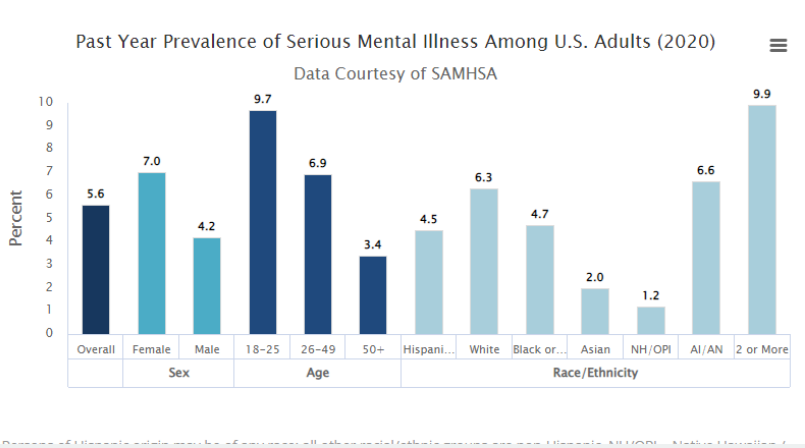
The Supreme Court's decision to have states decide abortion rights has worsened health outcomes for women, particularly if they are poor or women of color. Women and pregnant people may be arrested in some states if they have abortions. Doctors may face legal charges if they take action to terminate pregnancies, even when it is to save the life of the pregnant person. In October 2022, a doctor was concerned about legal action in one case where the fetus would not survive at birth. The woman endured "a roughly six-hour ambulance ride to end her pregnancy in North Carolina, where she arrived with dangerously high blood pressure and signs of kidney failure" (Kusisto 2022). Because poor women and women of color (who are disproportionately poor) can't afford to travel to states which protect abortion rights, they are even more at risk.

The medicalization of health, particularly regarding reproductive health, encourages some women and pregnant people to work for **reproductive justice**, a framework that centers the human right to have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and healthy environments (Beaumonis and Bond-Theriault 2017). This framework, developed by Black feminists, centers people with marginalized identities who are most at risk, and emphasizes how reproductive health is tied to intersecting oppressions. If you want to learn more about reproductive justice, watch the video What is Reproductive Justice?.

Gender is also related to mental illness in complex ways. Worldwide, women are more likely than men to experience mental health issues (Andermann 2010). The charts below shows the prevalence of Any Mental Illness (AMI) and Serious Mental Illness (SMI) among adults in 2020, two broad categories to describe mental illness conditions. AMI encompasses all recognized mental

illnesses, whereas SMI is a smaller and more severe subset of AMI. There are some group-level differences in this data that are important to notice. One is that the prevalence of AMI and SMI among women is much higher than that of men – why might this be?





These charts displays the prevalence of Any Mental Illness (top) and Serious Mental Illness (bottom) among adults in the US. What differences between social groups do you see?

"Prevalence of Any Mental Illness" and "Prevalence of Serious Mental Illness" by the National Institute of Mental Health are in the Public Domain

Social scientists consider social and structural factors. In the optional article, Culture and the social construction of gender: Mapping the intersection with mental health, psychiatrist Lisa Andermann calls us to look beyond individual explanations of women's mental health and explore structural factors:

> "Identifying the psychosocial factors in women's lives linked to mental distress, and even starting to take steps to correct them, may not be enough to reduce rates of mental illness or improve well-being of women around the world. More studies which take into account the interaction between biological and psychosocial factors are needed to explore the perpetuating factors in women's mental health, and explain why these problems continue to persist over time and suggest strategies for change. And for these changes to occur, health system inadequacies related to gender must be addressed" (Andermann 2010).

The nature of the relationship between gender/sex and mental health also depends on the type of mental illness. Women have higher rates of eating disorders and PTSD than men and are more likely to be seriously depressed, but men have higher rates of antisocial personality disorders (a lack of empathy, or psychopathy) and substance use disorders that lead them to be a threat to others (Christiansen, McCarthy, and Seeman 2022; Kort-Butler 2009).

Sociologists again attribute these differences to *gender socialization* that lead women to keep problems such as anger inside themselves while encouraging men to express anger outwardly, often through violence (Kessler and Wang 2008). To the extent that women have higher levels of depression and other mental health illnesses, the structural and cultural 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).

We also return to *patriarchy* as an underlying contributor to health problems among women, nonbinary, and queer people below.

Sexuality and Gender

Gender and sexual identities may also impact how a person experiences health and illness. However, understanding these unequal experiences based on sociological data is challenging. Because being queer (including transgender) was stigmatized and under strict *social control* until recently in the US, many people did not and still may not disclose their identities as queer. The agencies that collect data about gender and sexual identity have only recently begun to re-tool their data collection methods so that people can report their identities accurately. Despite these limitations, though, we see inequality.

Queer adults have higher rates than heterosexual cisgender adults of physical health problems and also of mental health problems (Frost, Lehavot, & Meyer 2011; Institute of Medicine 2011). These problems are thought to stem from the stress that queer people experience from living in a society in which they frequently encounter verbal and physical harassment, job discrimination, a need for some to conceal their identity, and lack of equal legal treatment. Queer secondary school students experience various kinds of educational and mental health issues because of the mistreatment they encounter in the institution of education, and by the time that queer individuals reach their adult years, the various stressors they have experienced at least since adolescence have begun to take a toll on their physical and mental health.

Because stress compromises immune systems, queer individuals on average may have lower immune functioning and lower perceived physical health than heterosexual cisgender individuals. Because stress impairs mental health, they are also more likely to have higher rates of depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and other psychiatric and psychological problems, including suicidality (Sears & Mallory 2011). Among all queer individuals, those who have experienced greater levels of stress related to their sexuality have higher levels of physical and mental health problems than those who have experienced lower levels of stress.

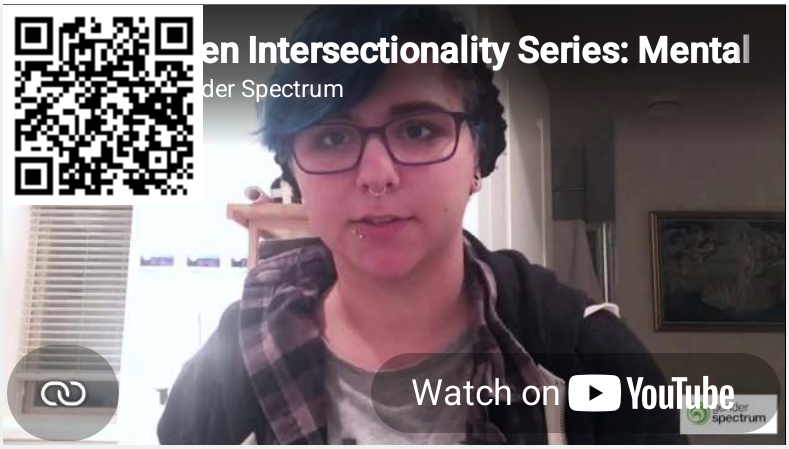
It is important to keep in mind that these various physical and mental health problems do not stem from a queer identity itself, but rather from the experience of living as a queer individual in a *heterosexist* and *cissexist* society. The American College of Physicians highlights the connections between laws, discrimination, and rejection that result in poorer health outcomes for queer people:

> "These laws and policies, along with others that reinforce marginalization, discrimination, social stigma, or rejection of LGBT persons by their families or communities or that simply keep LGBT persons from accessing health care, have been associated with increased rates of anxiety, suicide, and substance or alcohol abuse" (Daniel & Butkus 2015).

Transgender people have unique health concerns that are rarely addressed well by current practices. Although transgender people differ in their desires regarding medical support for their physical transitions, many of the procedures are not covered by insurance. When examining health outcomes for transgender people, the report states:

> "Transgender persons are also at a higher lifetime risk for suicide attempt and show higher incidence of social stressors, such as violence, discrimination, or childhood abuse, than nontransgender persons. A 2011 survey of transgender or gender-nonconforming persons found that 41 [percent] reported having attempted suicide, with the highest rates among those who faced job loss, harassment, poverty, and physical or sexual assault" (Daniel & Butkus 2015).

Newer research is focusing on the interactions of nonbinary and genderfluid individuals and their mental health. The video below discusses the intersection of gender identity and mental illness.



As you watch the video Teen Intersectionality Series: Mental Health & Gender, consider the power of community described in the video, regarding both gender identity and mental health.

"Teen Intersectionality Series: Mental Health & Gender" by Gender Spectrum is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

In this episode of All Things Considered: Health Care System Fails Many Transgender Americans, the journalist notes that simple things, like having forms that indicate only 'male' and 'female' (which assumes that everyone is cisgender and fails to represent both intersex and transgender people), become barriers to accessing health care services. Transgender people are more likely to experience preventable health conditions because it is difficult to find medical providers who will treat them with respect. The videos that are linked to this episode explore issues related to transgender health in more detail.

Personal Profile

In the piloting of the Puttman et al. textbook that was incorporated into the textbook you're now reading, one student who participated in the *open pedagogy* project expanded our collective understandings of gender and sexual identity. They shared their own experiences of gender identity and created art to convey the prejudice that they experience from the medical community.

The image below conveys the understanding of the physician that gender can only be experienced as a binary and the limited belief that transitioning means to fulfill one of those two gender identities. When you examine the picture from the perspective of the trans person, you see both a key and a chain. The chain represents how a trans person is often chained to the binary during medical transition. The key represents how a trans nonbinary person would want to break away from the binary the medical system puts on them in order to meet the transition goals they actually have.

The student writes:

> Being able to be a part of progress for the future and being able to influence the learning of people like me who take Sociology was an unexpectedly heart-warming experience. During the class itself, it didn't feel that impactful. However, as the class was coming to a close, I got the sense that my, and the rest of my class, were going to change the class just as much as the class changed us.
>
> I also got the opportunity. After noticing a gap in knowledge in the textbook about medical discrimination for trans people, I wrote an essay detailing the issues that trans people like myself

deal with while trying to transition. While it was relevant then, it seems even more relevant now. When asked to elaborate artistically, as a nonbinary person myself, I was able to delve more into the feelings associated with such discrimination – frustration, helplessness, anger and shame. After sharing this essay and the art pieces illustrating my points, I felt that my efforts were actually going to do something beyond fulfilling the necessities of the assignment.

This experience in open pedagogy supported the student in telling their truth. Their classmates were able to learn from this example. One student even changed the topic of her paper from 'women's reproductive rights' to 'people's reproductive rights,' to honor the fact that not all people with uteruses are women. And, because this art and essay can be incorporated into the course and textbook, future students are able to benefit.

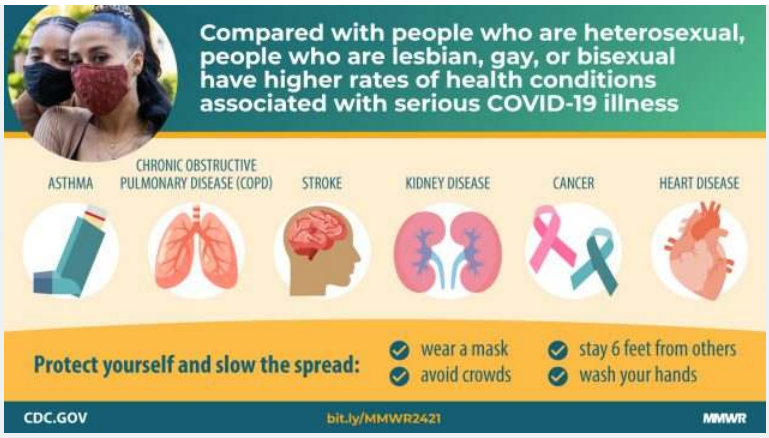


"So, you want to transition?" is student-created artwork. They illustrate that the doctor holds a binary understanding of gender identity. The person looking to transition, meanwhile, is trapped by those options because they are nonbinary.

"So, you want to transition?" © EME, Soc 205 and 206 Student, is all rights reserved and included with permission

Despite the health problems that queer people experience, medical students do not learn very much about these problems. One survey of medical school Deans found that one-third of medical schools provide no clinical training about these health issues, and that students in the medical schools that do provide training still receive only an average of five hours of training (Obedin-Maliver et al. 2011). The senior author of the study commented on its findings, "It's great that a lot of schools are starting to teach these topics. But the conversation needs to go deeper. We heard from the deans that a lot of these important LGBT health topics are completely off the radar screens of many medical schools" (White 2011).

When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) examined risk factors for COVID-19 illness or death, they found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people had challenging underlying health conditions more often than straight people (see the figure below). The report points primarily to economic causes as a core cause of the difference, indicating that LGB people, particularly if they are Black or Brown, experience more economic instability (Heslin & Hall 2021).



This is a CDC infographic on COVID-19 and LGB health (Heslin & Hall 2021). Because queer people tend to be poorer than heterosexual cisgender people, they often have more underlying health conditions. These underlying conditions may put them at higher risk for poor COVID-19 outcomes.

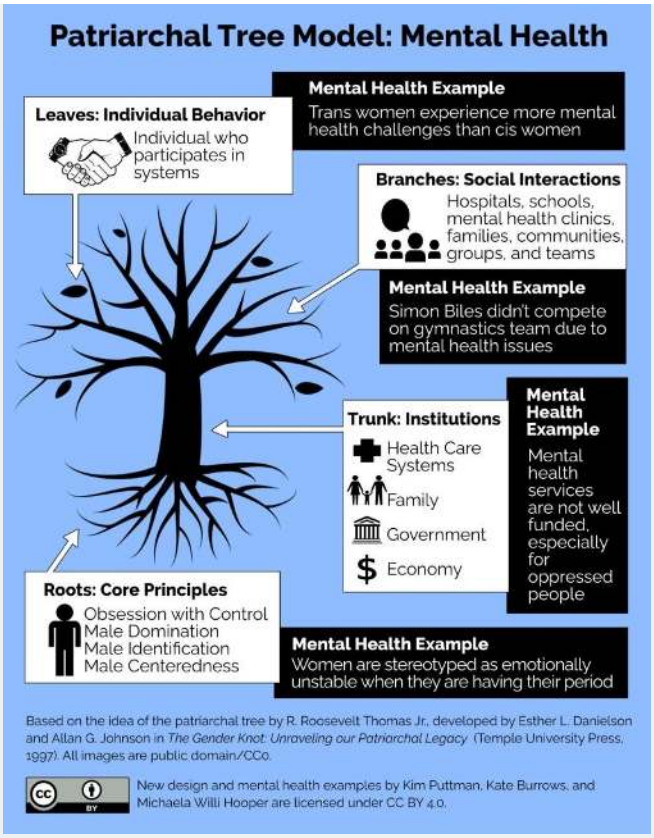
"Infographic on Sexual Orientation and COVID-19" from "Sexual Orientation Disparities in Risk Factors for Adverse COVID-19–Related Outcomes, by Race/Ethnicity — Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, United States, 2017–2019" by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) is in the Public Domain

In addition to concerns such as economic instability, stress, and stigma, we must consider cultural factors in explaining the poorer health of queer individuals and women.

Like our concept of *structural racism*, our society is structured on **patriarchy**: A structural system that positions (white) men and masculinity above all others. Alda Facio, a Costa Rican jurist, writer, teacher, and activist, offers the following definition of patriarchy:

> "Patriarchy is a form of mental, social, spiritual, economic and political organization/structuring of society produced by the gradual institutionalization of sex-based political relations created, maintained and reinforced by different institutions linked closely together to achieve consensus on the lesser value of women and their roles" (Facio 2013).

Patriarchy is the social structure and related behaviors that give men power and that oppress women and nonbinary people, as well as queer people more broadly because it normalizes heterosexuality. As social problems scholars, we want to understand how patriarchy works in a much deeper way. Examine the image below:



Patriarchy is like a tree. It has the roots of core principles, the trunk of institutions, the branches of social interactions, and the leaves of individual behavior.

See photo credit above

In the drawing of this tree, we notice:

Roots: The roots of the patriarchal tree are the core beliefs and practices that provide an often unconscious base of patriarchy. These underlying principles are *obsession with control* – controlling women's bodies, money, and choices. This principle also supports the idea that men should stay in control, of their emotions, lives, and other people's lives. The second principle, *male domination*, locates men in positions of authority. Leadership is a male role and a source of male power. The third principle, *male identification*, locates men at the center of what is right and good. We see this principle in action when we use words like all mankind when we actually mean all people. The fourth and final principle is *male centeredness*, which focuses on and value the activities of men and boys, rather than women, girls, and nonbinary people. Combining many of these principles in action, the US Soccer Federation agreed that women and men soccer players should earn equal pay, as of 2022. For more on this landmark victory, feel free to read The US National Women's Soccer Team wins $24 million in equal pay settlement.

Trunk: The trunk of this structural inequality are our institutions, our governments, and our economy. Throughout this book, we have seen examples of gender inequality, often supported by our schools, businesses, and governments. We've also seen how these organizations sometimes change to become less patriarchal.

Branches: The branches of our tree are the smaller containers of social interaction, such as families, churches, clubs, work teams, or your favorite gamer's discord group. At this level, group norms influence the behavior of individuals. In these smaller communities, we explore what it means to 'do' the gender of nonbinary, woman, or man. For example, in many heterosexual dual-parent families, members take on traditional *gender roles*.The father mostly does outside chores like mowing the lawn or taking out the trash, and the mother does more of the ongoing daily tasks of cleaning up, laundry, and family planning.

Leaves: Each of us is a leaf on the patriarchal tree. In our own actions, we can reinforce gender norms, or we can consciously choose to uproot these deep roots. Our choices matter deeply. However, by placing each of us in a system of power, we move away

from shame, blame, and a bad person model. Instead, we can examine how social structures of gendered oppression may be reproduced in our own daily interactions. This knowledge empowers us to choose differently.

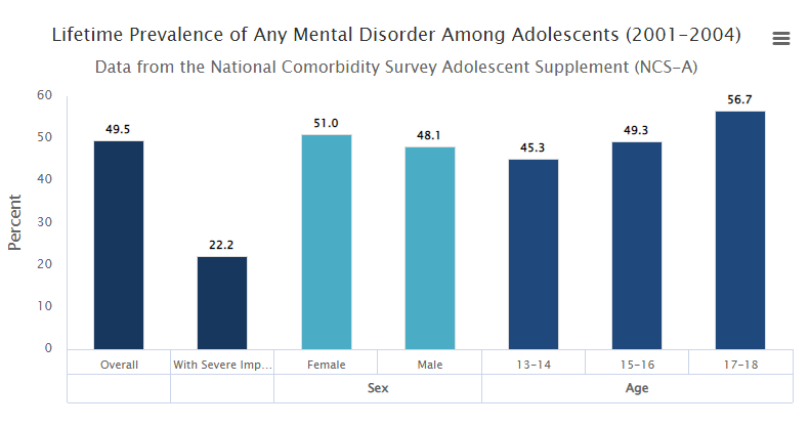
Because this structure is both deeply rooted and interconnected, it is resistant to change. Also, patriarchy itself becomes a reason for inequality in all of our social problems.

Again, it is not gender or sexual identity that causes poorer health outcomes. Instead, it is the social structure embedded with stigma, discrimination, and violence that makes life riskier and shorter for queer people.

Age

Health is quite obviously related to age, in that physical and cognitive health declines as we get older. Rather than focusing on that connection, we will explore the relationship between young age and mental health.

While 21% of all adults have a mental illness, almost half of all teenagers have mental disorders, as demonstrated in the figure below.



This chart shows the prevalence of Any Mental Disorder among adolescents. Almost half of all teenagers report a mental disorder. What do you think might cause such a high rate?

"Prevalence of Any Mental Disorders Among Adolescents" by the National Institute of Mental Health is in the Public Domain

Why is there such a wide difference between teenagers and adults? It's hard to say for sure, but research offers three options:

First is biology: Scientists are mapping changes in the brain in much more detailed ways. During adolescence, the brain adds new connections, particularly connections related to executive planning and regulation. Half of adults with mental disorders experience onset of the disorder by age 14, and 75% of adults experience onset by age 24 (Kessler 2007). Remembering that the human brain is in formation until age 25, these data suggest that experiences during adolescence shape mental health outcomes. Let's look deeper.

Scientists are mapping brain development in new ways that reveal the importance of the neural networks that are being created in adolescence. An adolescent brain is creating new connections, particularly connections related to planning and regulation. These connections help to stabilize a person's mental health. Further, if a person's experience or biology does not map new connections in essential pathways, a person's mental health may be less stable. Because adolescent brains not only respond to the same experiences as adult brains, but develop faster and more extensively, experiences in adolescence may shape the brain's functioning more powerfully than those some experiences in adulthood. Experiences that negatively impact brain development include child and adolescent illness, hormonal shifts, exposures to toxins such as drugs and alcohol, food insecurity, trauma history, emotional and physical abuse. As discussed below adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) predict health outcomes. Impact on brain development is one of the ways in which childhood trauma impacts adult health outcomes. Specifically, trauma and stress factors negatively impact normal brain development and increase vulnerability to mental or emotional illness.

Second is exclusion in data: Other researchers suggest that part of the difference between the two age groups has to do with being able to contact people. Many youth are still connected with school and family, even if they are experiencing mental health issues. Most mental health surveys don't contact people in residential living, including assisted living, group homes, prisons, or jails. Also, they do not contact people who are houseless. Because of this, mental health issues in adult and senior populations may be significantly under-reported (Kessler & Wang 2008).

Third is the question of more stress or less stigma: Researchers are exploring whether the increase in reporting of mental health issues for teens and young adults is due to experiencing more stressors or experiencing less stigma around reporting mental health concerns. This article, Why Gen Z is More Open in Talking about Their Mental Health explores this conundrum; feel free to read it if you like.

Global Perspective

The nations of the world differ dramatically in the quality of their health and healthcare. People in poorer nations suffer from low 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.

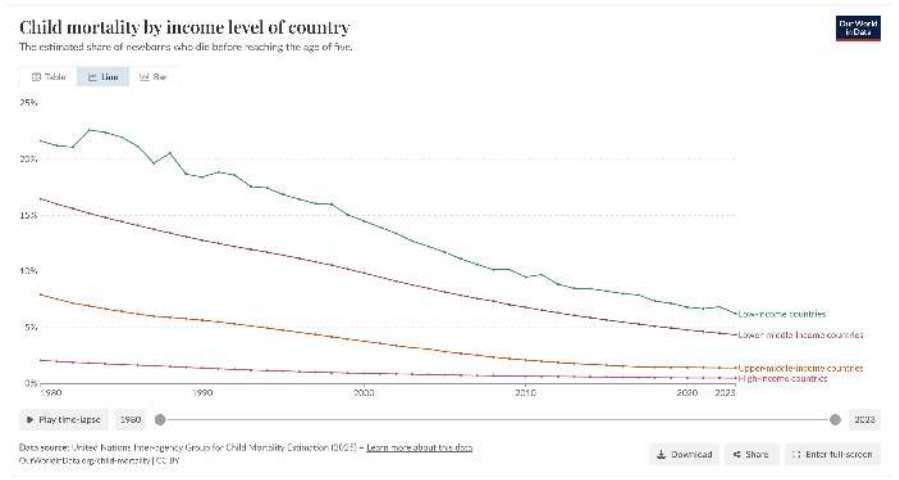


Two-thirds of the 33 million people worldwide who have HIV/AIDS live in sub-Saharan Africa. This terrible fact illustrates just one of the many health problems that people in poor nations suffer.

khym – AIDS Orphans and their Guardians in Sophia Village near Nairobi, Kenya – CC BY 2.0

A few health indicators should indicate the depth of the problem. Life expectancy is one important measure of a nation's health and is relevant for understanding worldwide disparities in health and health care. North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand have much longer life expectancies (75 years or more) than Africa and Asia, where some nations have expectancies closer to 60 or fewer years. The society we live in can affect our life span by more than a quarter of a century. In 2023, country life expectancy at birth ranged from a low of 54 years in Nigeria to a high of 86 years in Monaco and San Marino (World Bank Group n.d.).

The figure below compares another important indicator, infant mortality for nations grouped into four income categories. Though the gap has been closing and lower-income nations are faring far better than decades ago, striking differences persist. The rate of low-income nations is 12 times higher than that of high-income nations, at 6.1% versus 0.5%, respectively (United Nations 2025).



This chart illustrates how the child mortality gap by nation income level has been getting smaller; however, it has not yet closed and there remains a wide gap between low-income and high-income countries.

Source: Our World in Data 2025; United Nations 2025

Not surprisingly, these global differences are similar to those for adequate sanitation. Whereas the percentage of access to adequate sanitation facilities (i.e., the removal of human waste from the physical environment, as by toilets) is at least 98% in the wealthy nations of North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, it is less than 33% in many poor nations in Africa and Asia.

Social Determinants of Health

As we have seen, social contexts including social inequalities account for much of the disparities we see in health by social class, race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Sociologists and others who study human health have a detailed model that helps them make sense of health in these and other social groups. This model is called the social determinants of health. More specifically, the **social determinants of health** are the circumstances in which people are born, grow up, live, work, and age and the systems put in place to deal with illness (World Health Organization 2013). These circumstances are shaped by a wider set of forces: economics, social policies, and politics.

Social scientists and health professionals use this model of social determinants of health to describe the social factors that influence the health or lack of health of different social groups. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) created the model image below. We see that access to quality health care influences how healthy you might be. Whether your neighborhood is located next to an oil refinery changes your health outcomes. You might be surprised that education access and quality also impact your health. Wealthy people can pay more money for healthcare. Additionally, they get better educations, which sometimes leads to better health choices.



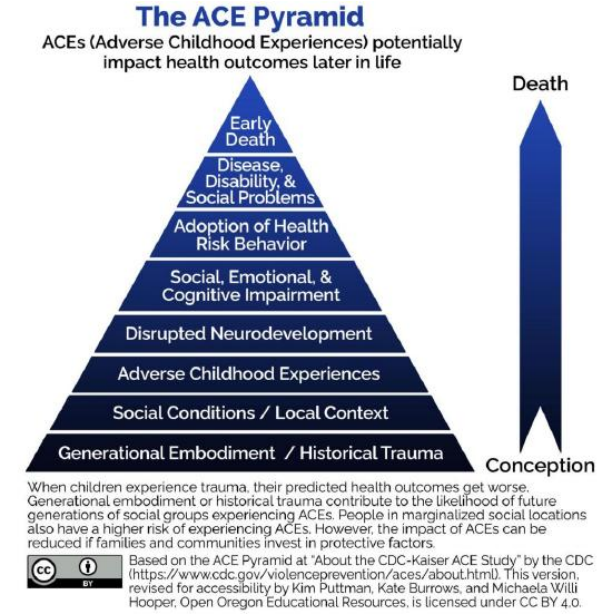
This is a model of the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH), provided by the CDC. How do these factors impact your own health or the health of your family? How might these factors impact the health of families who are different from you?

"Social Determinants of Health Model" by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) is in the Public Domain

The way organizations and institutions create models for the social determinants of health can change what we see. If you'd like to explore this question more deeply, here is a model from the World Health Organization and a SDOH model from the Canadian First Nations Peoples. Why might these models be different from each other?

In a slightly different social model of health, researchers look at how trauma over time affects health outcomes. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years). The ACEs model measures the amount of trauma a child experiences and describes the impact of trauma on health outcomes. *Trauma* is a person's (or group) response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms one's ability to cope.

The figure below shows the ACE Pyramid model distributed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. ACEs potentially impact health outcomes later in life.



This images portrays the ACE pyramid. Many of us experience some adverse childhood events. When communities and families invest in protective factors, the impact of ACEs on our future health outcomes decreases.

See photo credit above

In the model image, an arrow on the side shows the progression from conception (at the bottom) to death (at the top). The levels, from conception to death, are:

- Generational Embodiment/Historical Trauma
- Social Conditions/Local Context
- Adverse Childhood Experiences
- Disrupted Neurodevelopment
- Social, Emotional, & Cognitive Impairment
- Adoption of Health Risk Behavior
- Disease, Disability, & Social Problems
- Early Death

When children experience trauma, their predicted health outcomes get worse. These adverse or traumatic experiences may include growing up in a family with mental health or substance abuse issues, child abuse, or other experiences of violence. Because a person who experiences these events is more likely to experience some physical and mental health challenges in childhood, they are more likely to adopt risky behaviors as an adult. Additionally, the more ACEs an adult has, the more it can predict that person's risk of developing health problems such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. If left untreated, the related diseases and disabilities can lead to early death.

However, when children get help from caring adults, are connected with others, or receive competent professional support, they can recover from this early trauma. These interventions and others are known as protective factors. If families and communities support children with protective factors, the negative health impacts of trauma decrease. Many people experience at least one Adverse Childhood Experience in their lifetime. However, people in marginalized social locations have more risk of ACEs.

Beyond the experience of an individual, generational embodiment or historical trauma contributes to the likelihood of future generations of social groups experiencing ACEs. *Historical trauma* is multigenerational trauma experienced by a specific cultural, racial or ethnic group (Administration for Children and Families N.d.). It is related to major events that oppressed a particular group of people because of their status as oppressed, such as slavery, the Holocaust, forced migration, and the violent colonization of Indigenous people in North America. The generational embodiment of this trauma means that trauma responses of a previous generation are passed down to future generations unless they are healed.

For a deeper look at how ACEs work, you may watch the TED Talk, How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across a Lifetime.

Healthcare

In the section above, we mentioned how less access to quality healthcare impacts the experience of people in marginalized groups within the institution of medicine. In this section we expand upon that discussion, focusing more specifically on problems of healthcare quality, costs, and insurance.

Healthcare Quality

As the social determinants of health model notes, health disparities are influenced by the level of healthcare that social groups have access to. The level of healthcare is measured by specific quality measures, standards that measure the performance of healthcare providers for patients and populations. For example, quality measures include how many people get a flu shot, how long someone has to wait to see a doctor, or how often medication given for low blood pressure actually results in lower blood pressure. Quality measures can identify important aspects of care like safety, effectiveness, timeliness, and fairness.

The National Healthcare Disparities Report used quality measures and social location to examine health care inequality. Even after adjusting for insurance differences, they found that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color receive poorer quality of care and less access to care than White dominant groups. The report identified these racial inequalities in care:

- Black people, Native Americans, and Alaska Natives receive worse care than whites for about 40 percent of quality measures, which are standards for measuring the performance of healthcare providers to care for patients and populations
- Hispanics, Native Hawai`ians, and Pacific Islanders receive worse care than white people for more than 30 percent of quality measures
- Asian people received worse care than white people for nearly 30 percent of quality measures but better care for nearly 30 percent of quality measures (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality 2020).

Although there are multiple, complex reasons for discrepancies in care, a simple illustration may help make the point. Medical professionals and public health workers are asking why Black and Brown people are more likely to die of COVID-19. One medical study examined the pulse oximetry measurements of Black and white people in the hospital. If you've been to the hospital, you likely have had to put your finger into a little device that tells the medical professionals how much oxygen is in your blood. That's oximetry. The study's authors examined how often these measurements were accurate for white and Black patients.

They found that Black patients were three times more likely than white patients to have shortages of oxygen in the blood that the monitor didn't pick up. Because COVID-19 mainly attacks the lungs and reduces oxygen, the discrepancies in the measurements of this device may lead to more medical complications in Black patients (Sjoding et al. 2021; Wallis 2021). In addition, blood oxygenation levels are part of complex automated medical alerts. If the measurements are wrong, they do not trigger the alerts which notify medical professionals to respond. Therefore, the related levels of care are lower and less effective for Black patients. To learn more, you may watch the video Investigating Claims That Oximeters Give Inaccurate Readings To Patients With Darker Skin.

Researchers have documented both racial and gender *bias in healthcare*. Racial bias seems fairly common. Black patients are less likely than white patients 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).

Additionally, one major conflict in values we see in the social problem of mental illness is the value of community care versus the efficacy of psychiatric care. Historically, many people with mental illnesses were *institutionalized*, meaning that they were placed in hospitals. Many state-run hospitals provided essential care. People were isolated from their families and communities and significantly stigmatized. Also, because these facilities were often locked, outside oversight was often limited. In 1955, over half a million people were hospitalized (Talbott 2004).

Since this high, the institutionalized population has decreased by almost 60% (Yohanna 2013). Some of that decrease is due to a change in values. Talbott (2004) writes, "The impact of the community mental health philosophy that it is better to treat the mentally ill nearer to their families, jobs, and communities." This perspective humanizes people with this condition.

Unfortunately, *deinstitutionalization* had several unintended consequences, including a rise in houselessness (Mechanic & Rochfort 1990; Pierson 2019). Another unintended consequence is that the prison system became a de facto asylum system. Approximately half of current prison and jail inmates experience a mental illness. However, treatment there is irregular and insufficient (Bronson and Berzofsky 2017). If you want to know more, watch the video The New Asylums, about the rise of the prison system as the new asylum.

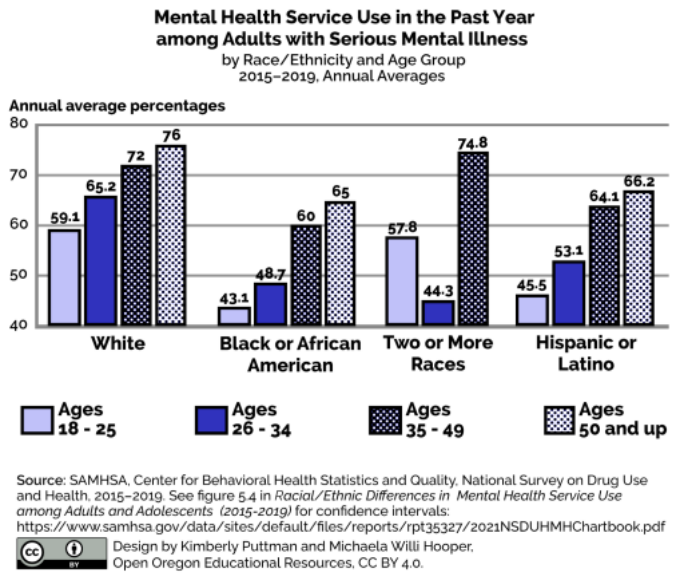
Further, government funding for community mental health services and other social supports is insufficient to meet the need, which requires wrap-around support. Please watch the video below to learn about one individual's experience with mental illness and health care, and significance of wrap-around support.



Watch the video Rosalind's Story: Living with Serious Mental Illness and Alcoholism. As you watch, please consider how mental illness might complicate other social problems.

"Rosalind's Story: Living with Serious Mental Illness and Alcoholism " by California Health Care Foundation is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

We can further examine the amount of unmet needs for mental health services according to race/ethnicity. Black, Brown, and Indigenous people have less access to mental health services than white people. In the chart below, we notice that white people use mental health services more than any other group.



> This chart displays the use of Mental Health Services among adults with a Serious Mental Illness, by race and age. What do you notice?
>
> *"Mental Health Service Use in the Past Year among Adults with Serious Mental Illness by Race/Ethnicity and Age Group" by Kimberly Puttman and Michaela Willi Hooper is licensed under CC BY 4.0; data source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2015–2019, SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality*

Black and Brown people have a harder time accessing quality mental health services. When they do receive services, they are more likely to have a negative experience. Some cultures have more stigma around mental health issues than white Americans generally have. This can be a barrier for some immigrants and first- and second-generation Americans to seek services. For immigrants, mental health providers often lack language and cultural competency skills, which makes the treatment much less effective.

Other problems in the quality of medical care also put patients unnecessarily at risk. We examine three of these here:

1. **Shortage of physicians and nurses.** One 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. 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.
2. **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 24 hours have their performance impaired as much as a drunk driver. Surgeons who stayed awake all night made 20% more errors in simulated surgery than those who slept normally and took 14 percent longer to complete the surgery (Wen 1998).
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 two million every decade (Crowley & Nalder 2009). Despite this serious problem, a government report found that hospital employees fail to report more than 80% of hospital mistakes, and that most hospitals in which mistakes were reported nonetheless failed to change their policies or practices (Salahi 2012).
4. **Unhygienic practices**. Another 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 five percent of all hospital patients, or two 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).

In addition to low-quality healthcare, the costs for healthcare can be incredibly high, resulting in patients delaying or forgoing necessary appointments, treatments, prescriptions, and surgeries.

Healthcare Costs

The US 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. This figure was about 50% higher than that for the next two highest-spending countries, Norway and Switzerland; 80% 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 US might be justified if the quality of health and of healthcare in this nation outranked that in its peer nations. As we have seen, however, the US lags behind many of its peer nations in several indicators of health and health care quality. If the US spends far more than its peer nations on health care yet still lags behind them in many indicators, an inescapable conclusion is that the US 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 US 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). Billing and other administrative tasks cost about $360 billion annually, or 14% 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 US 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 US and its peer nations helps explain why the cost of health care services in the US 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 US compared to other nations. To keep things simple, we will compare the US with only Canada. The average US appendectomy in 2010 cost $13,123, compared to $3,810 in Canada; the average US hip replacement cost $34,354, compared to $10,753 in Canada; the average US childbirth cost $8,435, compared to $2,667 in Canada; and the average US bypass surgery cost $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 cost an average of $464 in the US, compared to only $65 in Canada, and an MRI scan cost an average of $1,009 in the US, compared to only $304 in Canada (International Federation of Health Plans 2010).

On top of the high cost of healthcare is the cost, complexity, and other problems of health insurance.

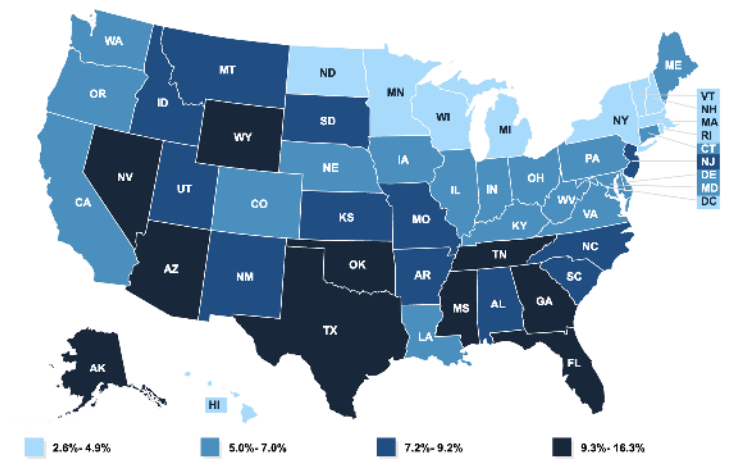
Health Insurance

Medicine in the US is big business. Expenditures for healthcare, health research, and other health items and services have risen sharply in recent decades, having increased tenfold from 1980 to the 2010s, and has been estimated to cost the nation more than $2.6 trillion annually. This translates to the largest figure per capita in the industrial world. Despite this expenditure, the US lags behind many other industrial nations in several important health indicators, as we have already seen. Why is this so?

An important reason is the US system of *private health insurance*. As discussed earlier, other Western nations have national systems of healthcare and health insurance. In stark contrast to these nations, the US 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.

In 2023, nearly half (48.6%) of all health insurance coverage was through employers. The next largest category was Medicaid at 21.2%, followed by Medicare at 14.7%. Nearly 8% were uninsured. The proprtion of people uninsured varies across the nation, however. States in the south and the southwest have the highest uninsured rates, as seen in the map below (KFF n.d.).

Health Insurance Coverage of the Total Population, Uninsured Rate, 2023



https://socialsci.libretexts.org/@go/page/255495

This map illustrates how there are higher rates of uninsured people in the south and the southwest than in the northeast, the midwest, and the west coast.

Source: KFF n.d. (American Community Survey 2023)

The lack of health insurance has deadly consequences because those uninsured are less likely to receive preventive healthcare 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 Applying Social Research box below discusses an 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.

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% more likely to have seen a primary care doctor in the year since they received coverage, and women were 60% 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

Health insurance rates in the US are far from the coverage enjoyed by the rest of the industrial world. Although Medicare pays some medical costs for the elderly, 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, a large proportion of uninsured Americans come from low-income families. The uninsured rate also varies by race, with Black and Latinx people having less coverage than other groups.

Thus, health disparities persist when we shift focus from physical and mental health outcomes to healthcare. People in marginalized groups often have less access to quality healthcare and to adequate or any heath insurance.

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Strategies to Address Medicine and Health Problems

The US healthcare system, despite recent healthcare reform legislation and medical advances, still has a long way to go before affordable and high-quality health care is available to all. This inequity makes healthcare a social justice issue. How might we achieve this goal?

We have seen throughout this chapter that social class, race, gender, sexuality, and other areas of social location all play a profound role in the quality of health and healthcare. For instance, 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.

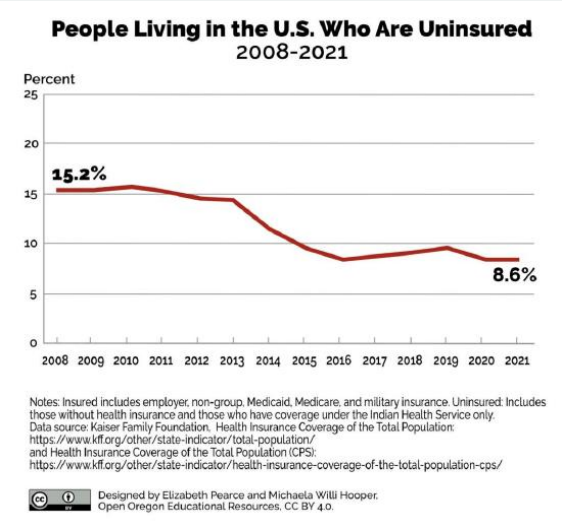
To improve health and health care in the US then, the importance of social location must be addressed. Efforts that reduce poverty and social inequality outlined in earlier chapters should also improve the physical and mental health of those currently at risk because of their marginalized identities, 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.

A National Health Care System

US healthcare coverage can broadly be divided into two main categories: Public healthcare, which is funded by the government, and private healthcare, which a person buys from a private insurance company or is offered such through their employer. The two main publicly funded healthcare programs are *Medicare*, which provides health services to people over 65 years old and people who meet other standards for disability, and *Medicaid*, which provides services to people with low incomes who meet other eligibility requirements. Other government-funded programs include The Indian Health Service, which serves Native Americans; the Veterans Health Administration, which serves veterans; and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which serves children.

Private insurance is typically categorized as either employment-based insurance or direct-purchase insurance. Employment-based insurance is health plan coverage provided in whole or in part by an employer or union. It covers only the employee or the employee and their family. Direct purchase insurance is coverage that an individual buys directly from a private company.

The number of *uninsured* people – those who lack health care coverage – is far lower now than in previous decades, but that doesn't mean everyone has the healthcare they need. In 2013, and in many years preceding it, the number of uninsured people was in the 40 million range, or roughly 18% of the population. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA, aka 'Obamacare') allowed more people to obtain affordable insurance (Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act Glossary N.d.), reducing the number of uninsured individuals and families, though many remain uninsured today.



With the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the percent of uninsured people dropped by nearly half. What else might protect Americans in regards to accessing health care?

See photo credit above

The ACA was a landmark change in US healthcare. Passed in 2010 and fully implemented in 2014, it increased eligibility to programs like Medicaid, helped guarantee insurance coverage for people with pre-existing conditions, and established regulations to ensure insurance premiums collected by insurers and care providers went directly to medical care (as opposed to administrative costs). It also included an individual mandate, which required anyone filing for a tax return to either acquire insurance coverage by 2014 or pay a penalty of several hundred dollars. Other provisions, including government subsidies, are intended to make insurance coverage more affordable, reducing the number of underinsured or uninsured people.

The uninsured number reached its lowest point in 2016, before beginning to climb again (Garfield, Orgera, and Damico 2019). People having some insurance may mask the fact that they could be *underinsured* – that is, people who pay at least 10% of their income on healthcare costs not covered by insurance or, for low-income adults, those whose medical expenses or deductibles are at least 5% of their income (Schoen et al. 2011).

Even with all these options, a sizable portion of the US population remains uninsured. In 2020, about 31 million people had no health insurance (Keith 2020). People don't have health insurance for many reasons. Many small businesses can't afford to provide insurance to their employees. Many employees are part time, so they don't qualify for insurance benefits from their employers. Some people only have health insurance for part of a year (Keisler-Starkey and Bunch 2020). In addition, all states except for California and recently Oregon make it illegal for undocumented immigrants to receive Medicaid services through the ACA. Other states, such as Texas, are pushing to stop the spread of Medicaid to low-income citizens. So, what else can be done?



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

The national health-care and health insurance systems of Canada, the United Kingdom, and many other Western nations provide other successful models for the US. 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 **single-payer system** shows great promise for improving the health and health care of all Americans. This option has been called "Medicare for all," as it would cover all citizens.

We in effect have single-payer government-funded systems for police, firefighters, education, public libraries, and even the postal service, proponents of national health insurance say, and they add that the government program Medicare is largely successful (Kristof 2009). As mentioned above, the US government also runs a preventive care and hospital system for military veterans through the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), which has been called "one of the best-performing and most cost-effective elements in the American medical establishment." 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).

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 US. 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).

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.

In this discussion, it is important to distinguish between socialized medicine and universal healthcare. Under a **socialized medicine** system, the government owns and runs the healthcare system. All medical facilities and expenses are covered through a public insurance plan that is administered by the federal government. It employs doctors, nurses, and other staff and owns and runs the hospitals (Klein 2009). The best example of socialized medicine is in Great Britain, where the National Health System (NHS) covers the cost of healthcare for all residents. Despite some U.S. citizens' reaction to policy changes that hint at socialism, the Veterans Health Administration (VA) is administered in a similar way to socialized medicine in other countries.

Germany, Singapore, and Canada all have **universal healthcare**, which is simply a system that guarantees healthcare coverage for everyone. People often look to Canada's universal healthcare system, Medicare, as a model for the system. In Canada, healthcare is publicly funded and administered by separate provincial and territorial governments. However, the care itself comes from private providers. This is the main difference between universal healthcare and socialized medicine. The Canada Health Act of 1970 required that all health insurance plans must be "available to all eligible Canadian residents, comprehensive in coverage, accessible, portable among provinces, and publicly administered" (Kaiser Family Foundation 2010).

A Focus on Care

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 and smoking, characteristic of millions of Americans. Although the US has public education campaigns and other initiatives on these risk factors, more could still be done.

An additional facet of this approach focuses on early childhood in general but especially on early childhood among low-income families. As this chapter has emphasized, 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 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% 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.

✔ Lessons from Other Societies

Aging Policy and Programs in the Netherlands and Sweden

A few years ago, AARP assessed quality-of-life issues for older people and the larger society in sixteen wealthy democracies (the nations of North America and Western Europe, along with Australia and Japan). Each nation was rated (on a scale of 1–5, with 5 being the highest score) on seventeen criteria, including life expectancy, health care for the elderly, pension coverage, and age-discrimination laws. Of the sixteen nations, the Netherlands ranked first, with a total score of 64, while Italy ranked last, with a score of 48; the United States was thirteenth, with a score of 50. Despite its immense wealth, then, the United States lagged behind most other democracies. Because a "perfect" score would have been 85 (17×5), even the Netherlands fell short of an ideal quality of life as measured by the AARP indicators.

Why did the United States not rank higher? The experience of the Netherlands and Sweden, both of which have longer life expectancies than the United States, points to some possible answers. In the Netherlands, everyone at age 65 receives a full pension that does not depend on how much money they earned while they were working, and everyone thus gets the same amount. This amount is larger than the average American gets, because Social Security does depend on earnings and many people earned fairly low amounts during their working years. As a result, Dutch elderly are much less likely than their American counterparts to be poor. The Dutch elderly (and also the nonelderly) have generous government insurance for medical problems and for nursing home care; this financial help is much higher than older Americans obtain through Medicare.

As one example, the AARP article mentioned an elderly Dutch woman who had cancer surgery and thirty-two chemotherapy treatments, for which she paid nothing. In the United States, the chemotherapy treatments would have cost at least $30,000. Medicare would have covered only 80 percent of this amount, leaving a patient to pay $6,000.

The Netherlands also helps its elderly in other ways. One example is that about one-fourth of that nation's elderly receive regular government-subsidized home visits by health-care professionals and/or housekeepers; this practice enables the elderly to remain independent and avoid having to enter a nursing home. In another example, the elderly also receive seven days of free riding on the nation's rail system.

Sweden has a home-care visitation program that is similar to the Netherlands' program. Many elderly are visited twice a day by a care assistant who helps them bathe and dress in the morning and go to bed at night. The care assistant also regularly cleans their residence and takes them out for exercise. The Swedish government pays about 80 percent of the costs of this assistance and subsidizes the remaining cost for elderly who cannot afford it. Like the Netherlands' program, Sweden's program helps the elderly to remain independent and live at home rather than enter a nursing institution.

Compared to the US, then, other democracies generally provide their elderly less expensive or free health care, greater financial support during their retirement, and home visits by health-care professionals and other assistants. In these and other ways, these other governments encourage "active aging." Adoption of similar policies in the US would improve the lives of older Americans and perhaps prolong their life spans.

Sources: Edwards 2004; Hartlapp & Schmid 2008; Ney 2005

Programs can also be developed to provide care to those with specific health needs, such as mental illness. For instance, the Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS) program in Eugene, Oregon, addresses mental health and drug-related issues. It is integrated into 911 emergency services systems, and is operated jointly by the White Bird Clinic and the Eugene police.

CAHOOTS began as an offshoot of the counterculture movement in Eugene. The organization provided volunteer-operated mental health services to the community. It also presented periodic role-playing seminars to the Eugene police related to managing and defusing mental health-related situations in policing. In the 1980s, the police department began taking advantage of this community initiative, informally referring mental health cases to the CAHOOTS organization to reduce the direct involvement of police in non-crime scenarios. CAHOOTS volunteers still offer crisis response services and access to other community services to persons experiencing mental health or drug-related issues.



The people in this picture are working together in the CAHOOTS program to create solutions for mental health problems.

"White Bird/CAHOOTS Photo" from "Best Programs for the Homeless" © Todd Cooper, Eugene Weekly is all rights reserved and included with permission

In response to a lawsuit against the city for excessive use of force and racial discrimination in a fatal shooting of a veteran with PTSD by the Eugene police, the Eugene city council committed $225,000 of the city police budget to fund 24/7 availability of the CAHOOTS services and access to the 911 dispatch system. As the CAHOOTS organization began to respond to calls, delays in response time decreased significantly. CAHOOTS estimates that in 2021, roughly 17% of the calls to 911 in Eugene resulted in a dispatch of a CAHOOTS team, reducing the involvement of the official police significantly. Chris Skinner, the Eugene chief of police, commented before the pandemic hit that increasing the number of CAHOOTS teams is a benefit of probability: "The less time I put police officers in conflict with people, the less time those conflicts go bad."

If you would like to learn more, listen to 'CAHOOTS': How Social Workers And Police Share Responsibilities In Eugene, Oregon.

✔ Organization Profile

The Loveland Foundation was established in 2018 by Rache Cargle, a writer, entrepreneur, and philanthropist, in response to a fundraiser for therapy support for Black women and girls. The Loveland Foundation now assists with mental health resources in communities of color in a number of locations nationwide, including Texas, Georgia, California, Ohio, and New York.

The organization partners with organizations providing culturally-competent therapy resources for Black women and nonbinary people in the areas where they operate. Through their Therapy Fund, the organization funds all or part of the costs of access to therapy. They also provide residency programs, fellowships, educational spaces, a resource directory, listening tours, and more. For instance, the organization operates workshops for therapy providers to educate about eating disorders among Black women and girls, in partnership with the Renfrew Center for Eating Disorders. The workshops are a six-part series focusing on providing the historical context, etiology, intergenerational trauma, and its impact on body image, assessment, and treatment.

One unusual feature is their approach to building future therapy support resources for people of color. According to the American Psychological Association, only 17% of therapists in the US identify as people of color, and only 3% identify as Black or African American. The Loveland Foundation is investing significant scholarship funding in enabling undergraduate and graduate education for BIPOC people (Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color) intending to offer therapy to the BIPOC community, including addressing the use of unpaid internships and the lack of dependable mentors to provide support resources to students wishing to address this need.

The foundation explains, "Black women and nonbinary folks deserve access to healing, and that healing will impact generations. ... We believe if we reimagine a mental health care system accessible to Black women, we can create a system that benefits everyone."

If you would like to learn more about the services of the Loveland Foundation, check out their site The Loveland Foundation.

Other Policies and Practices

Examples of other policies and practices include addressing the high cose of healthcare in the US and increasing global aid to help reduce poor health in other nations, which are social justice concerns as low-income people often cannot afford care or do not have access to it.

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 US. 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 healthcare costs. 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 woudl also help reduce costs (Weinberger 2011).

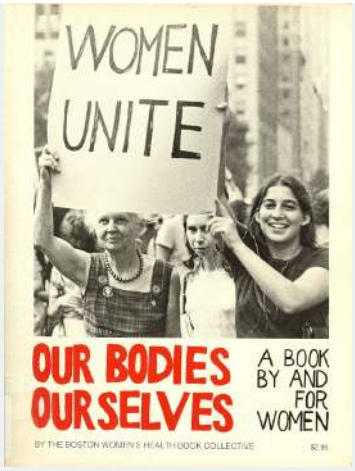
What can be done to improve world health? Because the poorest nations have the poorest health, it is essential that the wealthy nations provide them the training, equipment, and other resources they need to improve their health and healthcare. The residents of these nations also need to be given the resources they need to undertake proper sanitation and other good health practices. In this regard, organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) 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 healthcare professionals and medical care to poor nations.

Another US government organization, U.S.A.I.D., has saved lives and improved health across the globe, including for issues such as malaria, HIV, tuberculosis, and more. In fact, one study estimates that the program saved over 90 million lives over the two decades before 2025 (Cavalcanti et al. 2025). Moreover, aid from the US has been estimated to save over 3 million lives worldwide annually: "We suggest the number of lives saved per year may range between 2.3 to 5.6 million with our preferred number resting on gross estimates of 3.3 million" (Kenny and Sandefur 2025). With the massive cuts in funding to U.S.A.I.D. under the second Trump administration, an estimated 14 million lives may be lost (Cavalcanti et al. 2025). For an average of 18 cents per day, US taxpayers could help save millions of lives worldwide (Lambert 2025). From sociological and social justice perspectives, we must strengthen rather than cut funding for U.S.A.I.D. This is a matter of life or death for millions worldwide.

Individual Agency and Collective Action

We have already discussed some examples of individuals using their own agency and engaging in collective action to help reduce problems in health and medicine. For instance, the CAHOOTS volunteers described above who provide community-based mental health services used their agency to decide to take action. In the remainder of this section, we will focus on issues related to reproductive health and pregnancy, which are problems of health and medicine. If we are concerned about social justice and health, a model framework for addressing health inequities is that of the **reproductive justice movement**.

Women have always shared information about health, but this work became more focused with the 1970s women's movement. A women's collective wrote *Our Bodies Ourselves* (pictured below) to share concrete practical information about women's health. In their work, they told each other stories about how they learned about menstruation and experienced their first periods. Generally, information about menstruation at the time had been shrouded in mystery and shame. The book challenged this mystery and shame related to women's health, offering women clear, accessible information about health, information that wasn't generally accessible at the time. This collective is still going strong today (Our Bodies Ourselves Today 2023).



The Boston Women's Health Book Collective published *Our Bodies Ourselves* to educate women about women's health. How might information like this increase reproductive justice?

"Cover of the 1973 edition of 'Our Bodies, Ourselves'" by The Boston Women's Health Book Collective is included under fair use

Women's commitment to reproductive justice didn't stop with writing books and education. Feminists, including women, men, and nonbinary people, continue to work for reproductive justice. These efforts include supporting the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which protected the right to have an abortion. More recently, this social movement generated several Women's Marches on Washington D.C. and protests related to reproductive rights. The song "I Can't Keep Quiet" became one of the anthems of recent women's marches – feel free to listen if you'd like.



Feminist activists continue to advocate for reproductive justice. In the Boston Women's March in 2017, a protester carries a sign that says "Stop The War On Women."

"Boston Women's March 02" by Carly Hagins is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Beyond education, writing, and protesting, many organizations provide reproductive justice through healthcare services. SisterSong, the women of color reproductive justice coalition was formed in 1997 by 16 organizations of women of color. They write, "SisterSong's mission is to strengthen and amplify the collective voices of indigenous women and women of color to achieve reproductive justice by eradicating reproductive oppression and securing human rights" (SisterSong 2023).

They connect issues of gender, sexuality, class, and race to create a national multi-ethnic movement to support reproductive justice, which includes not only access to safe abortion, but access to contraception, and freedom from forced sterilization. The

organization collects funds and distributes them to birthing people of color and queer people who need birth support (Sistersong 2023).

These collective actions were in part inspired by an individual who used her agency to organize the reproductive justice movement. Loretta J. Ross is a scholar-activist who helped found the movement and has worked tirelessly to advance social justice regarding reproductive health issues. She explains:

> "I joined the women's movement in 1978 by working at the first rape crisis center in the country and learned about women's human rights, reproductive justice, white supremacy, and women of color organizing. I also researched and fought hate groups such as the KKK in the 1990s, and I founded a national center for teaching people about their human rights, and co-founded SisterSong. I want to share what I've experienced with emerging activists in hopes that you will join the transformative human rights movement that has changed the world."

Ross has participated in or produced a variety of resources related to reproductive health, antiracism, and other social justice projects. You may learn more about her at her website: Loretta J. Ross: Activist. Public Intellectual. Professor.

Finally, midwives and birth doulas are offering options to ensure reproductive justice. Black Doulas, for example, help Black birthing people to have babies safely. This alternative is important to combat the racism in reproductive care, in which Black women are three times more likely to die than white women from pregnancy-related causes.



Black Doulas improve maternal health outcomes for Black women and pregnant people. Why might *de-medicalizing* birthing health care result in better outcomes?

"Photo of Black pregnant woman and man" by Andre Adjahoe is licensed under the Unsplash License

A birth doula provides emotional and physical support to a pregnant person before, during, and after the birth. This culturally specific care improves outcomes for pregnant people: "As doula care is a proven, cost-effective means of reducing racial disparities in maternal health and improving overall health outcomes, policy advocates, legislators, and other stakeholders should undertake efforts to increase Medicaid and private insurance coverage of doula services" (Robles-Fradet and Greenwald 2022).

When we consider mental and physical health and well-being, we notice interdependent solutions supporting social justice. Each of us has agency in our own health and the health of our friends and families. We can care for ourselves and each other. At the same time, we experience different rates of adverse health outcomes as well as trauma, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination. We need

equity in health resources and treatment options. Organizations and programs like those described on this page work to address the systemic inequities in health experiences. Working together we can weave interdependent solutions for health resilience and social justice.

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Review of Medicine and Health Problems

Summary

1. A sociological approach emphasizes the relationship between health, medicine, and society. In particular, our social locations influence our health, access to healthcare, and experiences within the institution of medicine.
2. **Medicine** is the social institution responsible for health and healthcare, **epidemiology** is the study of health or disease and their causes, and **medical sociology** focuses on social issues related to health and the institution of medicine.
3. Distinguishing between **mental health**, **mental illness**, and **mental wellbeing** is important. Even people with mental illness can experience mental wellbeing, an active process that allows us to thrive mentally and emotionally.
4. The US is alone among the world's industrial nations in not offering universal national health insurance, and its absence is thought to help account for the country's low ranking in the industrial world on major health indicators. The US lags behind most other industrial nations in important health indicators such as infant mortality and life expectancy. Moreover, serious disparities exist within the US in the social distribution of health, as evidenced by the study of social epidemiology.
5. The functionalist 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 healthcare 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.
6. The experience of health or illness goes beyond the individual. People get sick or get well partially based on their experience of social location. A person's race, class, gender, or sexuality, for example, can partially predict their health outcomes. We can see health as a social problem because of these **health disparities** – different groups have differing experiences with health and medicine due to their social location and social inequality.
7. Social and structural issues such as *institutional racism* and *sexism* and *patriarchy* limit people's choices and impact their experiences with the institution of medicine and health outcomes.
8. Sociologists use the **social determinants of health** model to explore the social factors that influence the health outcomes of people in different populations. They use the ACES model to predict the impact of generational, historical, and childhood trauma on individual health outcomes. Both models help explain why oppressed people have poorer health outcomes than powerful people.
9. Health and the quality of healthcare differ widely around the world and reflect global inequality. The earth's poorest nations have high rates of infant mortality and life-threatening diseases such as AIDS and low life expectancy.
10. Access to affordable insurance or healthcare could change health outcomes, particularly for our most vulnerable people. But interdependent solutions don't stop at the federal government offering a national healthcare plan. States, counties, and communities can work together in creative ways to create healthy lives for every person. Health equity is social justice.

Questions

1. What do you think should be done to help improve the health of poor nations, and what role should the United States play in any efforts in this regard?
2. Do you think that the US should move toward the national health insurance model found in other Western nations, and why or why not?
3. Why do you think the US remains the only industrial nation without national health insurance?
4. Which theoretical approach do you most favor regarding how you understand medicine and health, and why is that your preferred perspective?
5. Think of the last time you visited a physician or other health-care professional – in what ways did this person come across as an authority figure possessing medical knowledge (think about the person's clothing, body position and body language, and other aspects of nonverbal communication)?
6. How would you present a sociological explanation of the higher rate of depression found among women than among men?
7. Some people believe that gender-affirming care is essential as it is healthcare, whereas others think it should be restricted – using points and concepts of this chapter to support your answer, what do you think? If you feel that it should be restricted, would your answer change if you considered that cisgender people routinely obtain gender-affirming care?

8. If you know anyone including yourself or anyone in your family who lacks health insurance, do you think the lack of health insurance has contributed to any health concerns, and how so?
9. How could you apply the *social problems process* to any health-related social problem?
10. Identify a community mental health resource within your own community – do you think that this intervention is effective, and why or why not?

Action Steps

1. Use your sociological imagination: When you or others assume that someone has health concerns due to their lifestyle or habits, consider what social forces may be impacting their health and their health choices.
2. Support nonprofits and similar organizations: Volunteer at or donate to a local health clinic or community-based health program.
3. Use your individual agency: Start a group on your campus to help educate medical staff on implicit bias and discrimination, to advocate for national health insurance, or to improve the mental health of college students.
4. Engage in collective action: Research local or national groups that are engaged in organized action around improving health or access to healthcare, select one, and figure out how to get involved in their efforts.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Drugs

- Overview of Drug Problems
- Theoretical Perspectives on Drug Problems
- Patterns of Drug Problems
- The War on Drugs
- Strategies to Address Drug Problems
- Review of Drug Problems
- References for Drug Problems

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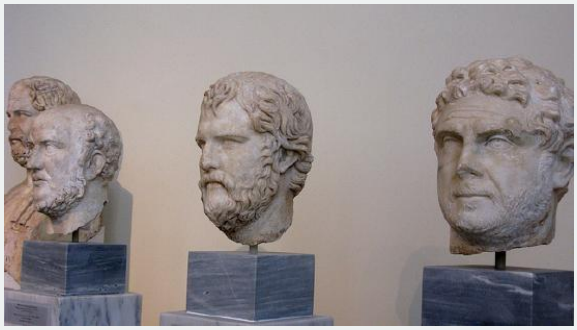
Overview of Drug Problems

Learning Objectives

- Explain the history of drug use and the racial basis for decisions to ban opium, cocaine, and cannabis in the US.
- Describe terms and causes of drug use from a sociological perspective.
- Summarize how various theoretical perspectives frame or explain harmful drug use.
- List rates of drug use or harmful drug use by various drug categories.
- Name examples of consequences of drug use or harmful drug use.
- Identify how drug use, harmful drug use, and consequences of them vary by social location.
- Describe the war on drugs and its consequences.
- Outline other, more suitable, strategies to reduce harmful drug use.

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: 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: 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

Documented 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: 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.” Thus, the US is no outlier when it comes to drug use. However, as we'll see, the nation may be an outlier among rich democracies regarding drug policy – how it's handled drug use and punished drug users. We focus on the US context of drug use next.

Drug Use in US History

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: C1). The Mayflower, the ship that brought the first Puritans to what eventually became the US, 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. Alcohol remained a popular drug, and use of this drug during the 1800s was probably greater than during colonial America (Faupel et al. 2010).

During the nineteenth century, Americans began to use drugs other than alcohol in great quantities. One popular drug was coffee (yes, coffee counts). 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.

Three other popular drugs in this era were opium, cocaine, and cannabis. 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, and was sold 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 US 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: 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.
>
> © *Thinkstock*

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 Chinese immigrants who began coming to the US 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 and discrimination against Chinese immigrants soared. Politicians, labor unions, and other parties began to target the smoking opium at opium dens and warned that Chinese immigrants were kidnapping little white children, taking them to the opium dens, and turning them into "opium fiends." This campaign had two effects: It further increased prejudice and discrimination 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 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.

Cannabis

A third legal drug during the late nineteenth century was cannabis. 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 US in increased numbers and some brought with them a habit of cannabis 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 cannabis and helped lead to the federal Marijuana Tax Act of 1937 that banned its use. Note that the use of 'marijuana' was strategic – to tie cannabis use to Mexican people.

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 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 we have seen, the history of drug regulation in the US is racialized. Moreover, it is a *racist* history. As we try to frame drug policy and as the US continues to try to deal with drug use, these basic facts must not be forgotten.

Defining Drugs and Drug Use

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 and other products to keep us alert, aspirin and other pain relievers, Tums and other products that reduce heartburn, Sudafed and other cold medicines, and so forth. Prescription drugs also certainly exist: Prozac and other antidepressants, Valium and other tranquilizers, Yaz and other birth control pills, Viagra and other erectile dysfunction products, and so forth. Sales of these prescription drugs amount to tens of billions of dollars annually. If you have ever used one of these products, you are technically a drug user, however silly that might sound.

The following substances are more likely to be identified as 'drugs': Alcohol, molly, cocaine, heroin, cannabis, LSD, meth, PCP, and tobacco. Much has been written about these drugs, and we will discuss them further in the chapter. But note that two of these drugs, alcohol and tobacco, are legal after a certain age, while the remaining drugs are typically illegal.

Substances that we commonly consider 'drugs' interact with our bodies in different ways. Drugs are often grouped by the kinds of physical effects they have. Some drugs, called *depressants*, slow down the central nervous system. *Hallucinogens* cause people to hallucinate, to see, hear, or experience things that are not physically real. *Narcotics*, derived from natural or synthetic ingredients, are effective at relieving pain, but they depress the nervous system. They are also highly physically addictive. *Stimulants* speed up the nervous system, potentially causing alertness, euphoria, or anxiety. Finally, *cannabis* may create euphoria, hunger, and relaxation and dull the sense of time and space. Some of these drugs are legal, often through prescriptions, whereas others are illegal. Even with prescriptions, however, a drug may be *misused*, meaning that it is being used in a way other than prescribed.

A concern in deciding how to think about and deal with drugs is the distinction between legal drugs and illegal drugs. It makes sense to assume that illegal drugs should be the ones that are the most dangerous and cause the most physical and social harm, but research shows this is not the case.

Rather, alcohol and tobacco cause the most harm even though they are legal. As Kleiman and his research team (2011: xviii) note about alcohol, "When we read that one in twelve adults suffers from a substance abuse disorder or that eight 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."

According to the CDC, cigarette smoking kills 480,000 people due to complications from smoking or secondhand smoke (CDC 2022). Alcohol use prematurely kills 140,000 people per year in the US. These deaths are caused by physical damage related to long-term use. They are also caused by drinking too much alcohol in a short period of time. DUI fatalities are one example of this premature death. The rate of premature death is much higher for legal drugs than illegal ones.



Smoking and alcohol cause more deaths than illegal drug use. Why are some drugs legal and other drugs illegal?

"Photo" by Charles Etoroma and "Photo" by Fred Moon are licensed under the Unsplash License

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: All drugs can be dangerous and 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.

There are competing ways to construct drug use as a social problem, but important distinctions exist between drug use and *harmful drug use*, including misuse, abuse, and addiction or disorders. These are not mutually exclusive, but they differ from each other in significant ways. Whereas drug use is simply the intake of a substance that produces a change in your body, this can happen without *addiction* or *physical dependence* but may lead to those outcomes. There is nothing inherently wrong with drug use, and some people may consider any use a problem whereas many do not. What matters from a sociological perspective is how harmful the drug use will be for users and for their family, friends, and community. **Harmful drug use** occurs when it negatively impacts a person's health, livelihood, family, community, freedom, or other important aspects of their life.

Addiction is the chronic, relapsing disorder characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use despite adverse consequences (National Institute on Drug Abuse 2020). Addiction is often associated with a mental health diagnosis such as substance use

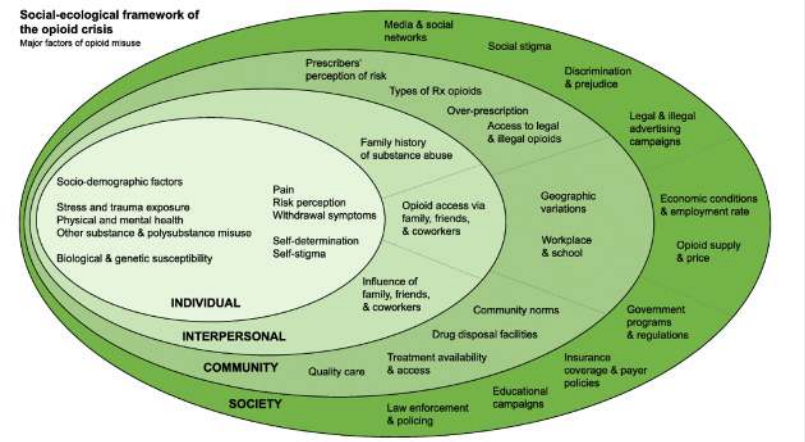
disorder. However, rather than using the diagnosis of 'addiction,' health professionals now use the language of **substance use disorder** (SUD), which is the diagnosis of a condition in which there is uncontrolled use of a substance despite harmful consequences. People with SUD have an intense focus on using a certain substance(s), such as alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs, to the point where the person's ability to function in day-to-day life becomes impaired (Saxon 2023). *Physical dependence* is the bodily experience, in that the body has built up a tolerance to the drug and that one must take the substance in order to not feel ill.

But it's not just harmful drug use that is a social problem. The unequal impact of drug use on families and communities is a social problem, as well as how certain social groups have been targeted in drug policy. For instance, the *opioid epidemic* impacts everyone, from individuals to families, hospitals, workplaces, communities, and governments. It goes beyond the experience of one individual. Further, the war on drugs disproportionately harms Black (and Brown) people, as we discussed with racialized social control in the Crime, Immigration, and Social Control chapter.

A Sociological Perspective

One of the dominant approaches to understanding SUDs or addiction involves looking solely at how a person's brain is affected by drug use. Another popular approach focuses on the psychology of the user and the chemical traits of the substance. Both approaches ignore social issues such as poverty, racism, and classism that increase the harmfulness of drug use for certain individuals, populations, and neighborhoods. Incarceration, disease (such as HIV), other negative health impacts, job loss, and family disruption are examples of harms associated with drug use that are more or less likely to occur depending on one's social location including their class, race, gender, sexuality, and more.

The sociological perspective focuses on the *social determinants of harmful drug use*. This perspective avoids blaming the individual and making them responsible for getting the proper treatment and resources to fix issues caused by social inequality and oppression. A sociological lens can help us see how social structures of oppression can change the outcomes of harmful drug use depending on the social location of an individual (Friedman 2002).



This social-ecological model framework of the opioid crisis is a complex model which examines individual, interpersonal, community, and societal factors for the opioid crisis. We can use this model to examine harmful drug use in general. Sociologists look at this problem at all levels, particularly focusing on how social location, social determinants of health, laws, policies, and practices influence drug use, misuse, and related health outcomes.

"The Social Ecological Framework of the Opioid Crisis" from "The opioid crisis: a contextual, social-ecological framework" by Mohammad S. Jalali, Michael Botticelli, Rachael C. Hwang, Howard K. Koh & R. Kathryn McHugh, Health Research Policy and Systems is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Social scientists point out that a person's social class may impact whether they can continue to work or go to school while using substances (Friedman 2002; Singer and Page 2014; Zinberg 1984). For example, white middle-class users of opioids, like heroin,

are less likely to get arrested or go to jail. Therefore they can more often keep their jobs and still earn money.

Racism in our society creates differences in how white people and people of color are treated when they use drugs. White people are more likely to be seen as people experiencing a medical condition. Therefore, they need drug treatment to recover. Black, Brown, and Indigenous people are more likely to be seen as criminals. They are more likely to be arrested and put in jail than receive treatment. This chapter will discuss how racist social structures shape the experiences of problematic drug use.

In this chapter, we will also see *social construction* at work. You may notice that we use the word *cannabis* to describe the drug that is commonly known as marijuana or weed. The common word marijuana reflects a racist past. As mentioned above, the US experienced an increase in Mexican immigration after the 1910 Mexican War of Independence. Some immigrants used the herb *mariguano* for casual smoking. Although the immigrants were important in providing needed agricultural labor, the increase in immigration raised xenophobic fears.

Mexican immigrants were often blamed for property crimes and sexual misconduct. White people in power conveniently blamed the use of 'marijuana' for this. For instance, "One Texas state legislator proclaimed on the senate floor: 'All Mexicans are crazy and this stuff [cannabis] is what makes them crazy.'" In 1937, Harry Ainsliger, head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics testified before Congress saying, "marihuana is an addictive drug which produces insanity, criminality, and death" (Ghelani 2020: 7-8). Associating the use of cannabis with Mexican immigrants by naming it 'marijuana' was a way to assert power and control over a particular ethnic group. This is using language as a social construction. To resist this oppression, we will use the word cannabis instead of the word marijuana in this chapter, except when we are quoting from other people.

In addition, we remember that a social problem arises when groups of people experience inequality. This point is particularly important when we discuss drug use and harmful drug use. Generally, people of all races use drugs at similar rates. However, people of color are likely to be arrested and jailed for drug offenses. White people are more likely to be seen as needing medical intervention, and therefore they are more likely to receive treatment. More specifically, "Although Black Americans are no more likely than Whites to use illicit drugs, they are 6-10 times more likely to be incarcerated for drug offenses" (Netherland and Hansen 2017). This racialized response to harmful drug use is a deep source of inequality, a key component of a social problem.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Drug Problems

To know how to reduce harmful drug use, we must first know what explains it. The major explanations for harmful drug use come from the fields of biology, psychology, and sociology. Each of these are explained below, including the three main sociological theoretical perspectives.

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.

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.



Research on identical twins suggests that alcoholism has a genetic basis.

Michael Dorausch – Identical Twins Jedward – CC BY-SA 2.0

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 harmful 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, a method called *cross-sectional research*. To answer this question adequately, *longitudinal research* examines the same people over time. 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 et al. 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.

From a sociological perspective, both biological and psychological explanations for drug use and addiction fail to account for the enormous influence of social factors, though some psychological perspectives do consider the significance of immediate environments such as family members and friends. Sociological explanations focus more closely on social contexts, including social bonds, groups, institutions, inequalities, and more.

Sociological Explanations

Sociological explanations emphasize the importance of certain aspects of the social environment – social structure, social bonds (such as to family, the community, or school), social interactions, and culture – on drug use and addiction. The sociological model of drug use and addiction examines how social phenomena may lead individuals to use mind-altering substances to cope with difficulty and distress. It also examines how social inequalities can make the impacts of drug use worse for some social groups than others.

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 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” (1994: 3). 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.

Within the sociological perspective, a sociopharmacological approach looks at how social, economic, and health policy might exacerbate harm to people using substances. **Sociopharmacology** is a sociological theory of drug use developed by long-time drug use researcher Samuel R. Friedman (2002), who writes that approaches toward understanding drug use that focus on the psychological traits of the people using the drugs and the chemical traits of the drugs ignore socioeconomic and other social issues that make individuals, neighborhoods, and population groups vulnerable to harmful drug use.

To consider how the sociopharmacological approach plays out in everyday life, consider how drug policy prohibits the use of heroin and results in several harmful effects. New syringes can be hard to find. People will inject in unclean and rushed circumstances, which may negatively impact their health by putting them at risk of contracting HIV or life-threatening bacterial infections. (We discuss the harm reduction approach to address this concern in the Strategies page.)

Friedman also notes that the social order matters. People who experience class, gender, racial, or other oppression suffer harm. As a way to deal with that harm, they may choose to self-medicate with drugs or alcohol. For example, working a low-paying service job where you deal with unhappy customers and mistreatment from your boss may lead you to blow off steam by using substances. Individualistic theories of drug use stigmatize and demonize individuals who use drugs as being weak or criminal. According to the sociopharmacological approach, if anything should be demonized, it should be the social order, not the individual who uses drugs (Friedman 2002).

This type of analysis is also thought of using the analytic concept of risk environments developed by Tim Rhodes. A *risk environment* is a social or physical space where a variety of things interact to increase the chances of drug-related harm (Rhodes 2002). An analysis of risk environment looks at how the relationship between the individual and the environment impacts the production or reduction of drug harms.

To the extent that all the factors discussed above matter for drug use, sociologists say, it is a mistake to view drug use as stemming solely from an individual's biology or psychology. 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, not just an individual problem.

Beyond these general sociological explanations of why people use drugs, we may examine the three classical sociological perspectives: Structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. The Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot table below summarizes this discussion.

Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Contributions
Structural 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.

Structural Functionalism

Recall that functionalist theory emphasizes the need for social stability, the functions that social institutions and social phenomena 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 some 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 have many dysfunctions for society, as discussed this chapter, and this fact must not be forgotten as we acknowledge the functions of drugs. Drugs use is dysfunctional when it interfere's with an individual's or social group's ability to fully contribute to society or when it otherwise harms an individual or others in that person's life. Some functionalists may agree with conflict theorists that the *criminalization* of Black people (discussed below) as part of drug policy is a dysfunction of the criminal justice system and the institution of the state more broadly.

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 drug use and drug policy in multiple respects. First, and as noted just earlier, much harmful 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 cope with their situation, and partly because the illegal drug market is a potentially source of income for people with little formal skills or education.

Second, conflict theory emphasizes that racial 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 cocaine are much harsher, gram for gram, than those for powder cocaine, even though the two drugs are pharmacologically identical. Crack users are primarily in poor Black urban areas, while powder cocaine users are primarily white, 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). This and other processes are part of a larger process of the criminalization of people of color, particularly Black people, for drug use. **Criminalization** is the act of making something illegal (Definition of Criminalize 2023) or deeming a social group as 'criminal.' The 1970 Comprehensive Drug Abuse and Control Act (US House 1970) created drug categorizations, called *schedules*, based on the drug's potential for abuse and dependency and its accepted medical use. This system of categorization acknowledged the medical use of some drugs while heightening the criminalization of other drugs. Criminalization is *racialized*, meaning that it varies by race. Black (and Brown) people have been hypercriminalized, particularly in the *war on drugs*. Conflict theorists emphasize the power dynamics and harms of racialized criminalization and the war on drugs.

Other evidence for this argument is seen in the history of the illegality of opium, cocaine, and cannabis. As discussed earlier, racial/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 Black Americans for crack cocaine, and prejudice against Mexican Americans for cannabis ('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. 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 social interactions. 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 cannabis in the presence of friends who are experienced cannabis users. This social interaction, he argued, is critical for new users to wish to continue using cannabis. To want to do so, they must learn three behaviors or perceptions from the experienced users who are 'turning them on' to cannabis use. First, new users must learn how to smoke a joint (cannabis cigarette, which was the common mode of use at the time) by deeply inhaling the smoke and holding in the smoke before exhaling. Second, they must perceive that the effects they feel after smoking enough cannabis (spatial distortion, hunger pangs, short-term memory loss) signify that they are 'stoned' (under the influence). Their friends typically tell them that if they are feeling these effects, that they are indeed stoned. Third, they must learn to define these effects as pleasurable – if people suddenly experience spatial distortion, intense hunger, or memory loss, they might very well worry they are not okay. To prevent this from happening, their friends say things to them such as, "Doesn't that feel good!" This and similar comments help reassure the new users that the potentially worrisome effects they are experiencing are not only bad ones but enjoyable ones. Becker demonstrated how cannabis use – a taboo topic at the time – is learned through social interactions.

Other interactionist theories may focus on symbols associated with drugs and drug use, such as the one portrayed below, which some people display on their clothes or accessories. Similarly, individuals use the phrase '420 friendly' (a linguistic symbol) to denote that they are welcoming to cannabis use and likely use themselves.



Cannabis is by far the most popular illegal drug in the United States, though it has been legalized in some states.

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Other symbolism can be seen in portrayals of heroin users appearing decades older than they are, to draw attention to the harms of the drug through the image of accelerated aging. Drug symbolism is even seen in Hollywood films such as The Wolf of Wall Street, in which drugs are associated with power and wealth. In the film, character Jordan Belfort (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) states, "On a daily basis I consume enough drugs to sedate Manhattan, Long Island, and Queens for a month. I take Quaaludes 10-15 times a day for my 'back pain,' Adderall to stay focused, Xanax to take the edge off, pot to mellow me out, cocaine to wake me back up again, and morphine, well, because it's awesome."

Finally, as with other topics, symbolic interactionism would be interested in how being labeled a 'drug abuser' or 'addict' would influence individuals, who may internalize that label and become more likely to engage in harmful drug use or who may have reduced feelings of self-worth. For instance, the image of a heroin user 'shooting up' is one that has appeared in many movies and

TV shows. It has captured the public's concern more than perhaps any other illegal drug, apart from opioids more recently and crack cocaine in the 1980s and 1990s. As sociologist Goode (2008: 307-308) explained,

> "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."

Labels such as 'addict' (used even by the sociologist above) are in fact stigmatizing, which is why health professionals typically no longer use them and instead refer to substance use disorder.

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Patterns of Drug Problems

Though not all drug use may be a social problem, excessive drug use is, and some drugs are so damaging to the body that any use is in fact harmful. On this page, we provide data on drug use, including harmful drug use, and its consequences.

Within this discussion we also incorporate how drug use and consequences vary by social location, including age, race, class, gender. For instance, men are more likely than women to use alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs. Why do these differences exist? A common thread for gender is *gender socialization*, particularly into *hegemonic masculinity*. Boys are taught and encouraged to be daring and risk-taking, 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. Racial differences in drug use of various types exist to some extent but are less clear-cut than gender differences and vary by the type of drug. This variation may be due to which drugs people have access to in their communities or networks, social class differences, and subcultural differences.

We first present data about drug use and misuse for specific types of drugs, then we discuss examples of consequences of drug use and harmful drug use.

Drug Use and Misuse

The two legal drugs that have serious consequences for their users are alcohol and tobacco. While recreational cannabis use is legal in some states, it remains illegal in other states and at the federal level, thus it is included in the illegal drugs section below.

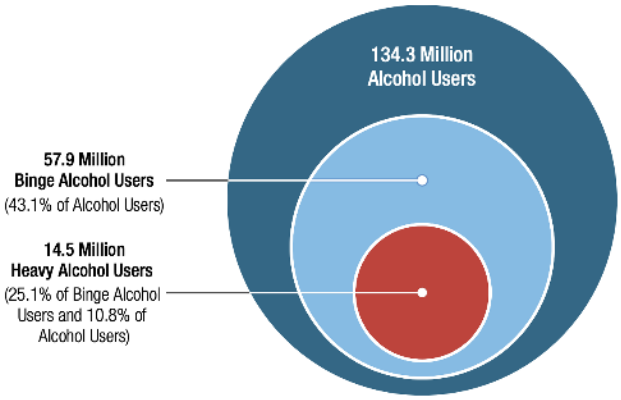
Alcohol

The amount of alcohol consumed annually by US drinkers is staggering. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA 2024), in 2022, the alcohol consumption rate of 2.5 gallons per capita equated to a person (aged 14 or older) consuming approximately an average of 533 standard drinks in a year.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the federal government administers a national survey which provides comprehensive data on drug use among adults aged 12 and over. They ask survey respondents whether they had used specific drugs in the past month from when the survey was completed. In 2024, there were over 134 million current alcohol drinkers, and among those over 43% were binge drinkers and over one in ten (10.8%) were heavy drinkers. Over five million youth (13.3%) aged 12 to 20 – those not old enough to drink legally – used alcohol in the past month, including 1.7 million under the age of 18 (6.6%); however, they are less likely to be heavy drinkers than those aged 18-25 (SAMHSA 2025).

Moderate alcohol use is far less damaging than more excessive use, though many people drink more than moderately. **Binge drinking** is defined as having at least four (for women) or five (for men) drinks on the same occasion at least once in the past month (30 days). **Heavy drinking** is defined as binge drinking on five or more days in the past month. 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.” Though, the 'some' that don't amount to nearly 60 million people aged 12 and older in the US.

Figure 7. Alcohol Use, Binge Alcohol Use, or Heavy Alcohol Use in the Past Month: Among People Aged 12 or Older; 2024



Note: Binge Alcohol Use is defined as drinking five or more drinks (for males) or four or more drinks (for females) on the same occasion on at least 1 day in the past 30 days. Heavy Alcohol Use is defined as binge drinking on the same occasion on 5 or more days in the past 30 days; all heavy alcohol users are also binge alcohol users.

This figure displays the number of people aged 12 and older who used alcohol, binge drank, and engaged in heavy drinking in the past month from when the survey was administered.

Source: SAMHSA 2025

As noted earlier, alcohol has a long history in the US 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 government 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, and the ban took effect a year later. The ban was eventually deemed a failure, and the passage of the Twenty-First Amendment in 1933 repealed the ban. 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 US (Jernigan 2009). US alcohol sales amount to billions annually (Smith 2011). The amount of money the public spends on alcohol is has been estimated at 12.5% of what it spends on food (US Department of Agriculture 2011). As authors at the American Medical Association explain:

> "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. ... 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" (Yoast & Williams 2004: 1).

As just one example of how the alcohol industry promotes its 'powerful drug,' the headline of a news article declared that the "alcohol companies go online to lure young drinkers" (Gardner 2010). According to the report, alcohol companies are increasingly using 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).



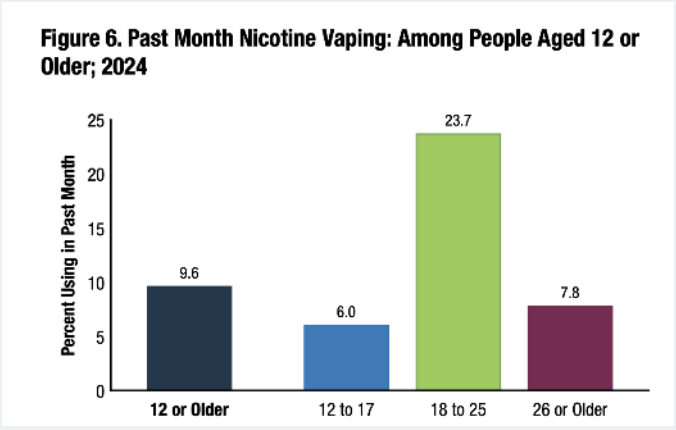
The alcohol industry is a major part of the US and worldwide economies and has been successful in promoting its continued use.

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Tobacco, Nicotine, and Vape

Nicotine, the major drug in tobacco, is another legal but dangerous drug. Over 11% of US adults (28.8 million adults) smoked cigarettes as of 2022. Over 13% of adult men and over 10% of adult women reported using cigarettes either 'every day' or 'some days' and had smoked at least 100 cigarettes during their lifetime. White and Black people (12.9% and 11.7%, respectively) are more likely to smoke cigarettes than Asian and Latino people (5.4% and 7.7%, respectively). People with a 4-year college degree are far less likely to smoke than those without one (5.3% versus 13.7% or higher) (CDC 2024b). However, thanks to more 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 generations ago.

Additionally, the SAMHSA (2025) survey found that 27.7 million people (9.6%) aged 12 or older used an e-cigarette or similar device to vape nicotine in the past month. Nearly a quarter of people aged 18-25 vape, as represented in the figure below. Another survey, the 2024 National Youth Tobacco Survey, found that over 10% of US high school students and over 5% of middle school students report using at least one tobacco product, including e-cigarettes (American Lung Association 2025).



Vaping nicotine is far more popular among the youngest adults (aged 18-25) than among other adults (aged 26 or older).

Source: SAMHSA 2025

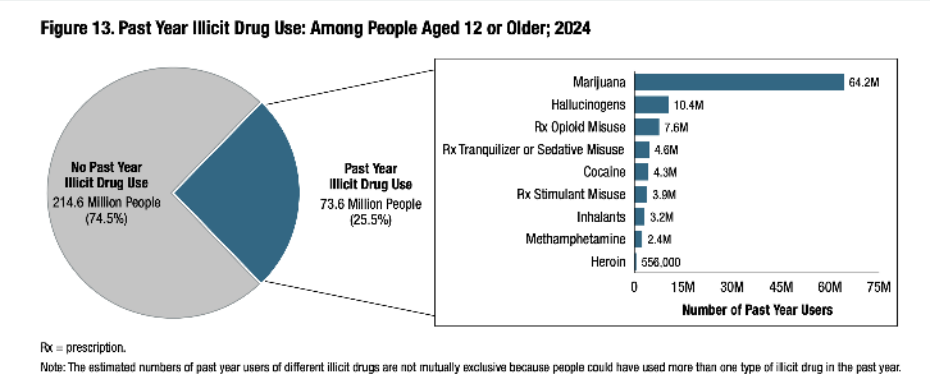
If you have ever watched any number of pre-1970s movies or television shows like "Mad Men" that portray life back then, you know that the US used to have a tobacco culture the way it now has an alcohol culture. Many people smoked cigarettes, and a large number smoked cigars or pipes. This particular 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 secondhand 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.

This is for good reason: Tobacco is a slow poison. It is unlikely that the Food and Drug Administration would approve this product, if a company had just manufactured cigarettes for the first time and it were not already used by millions. 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. We don't hear about someone “under the influence” of tobacco. This, however, makes it dangerous.

Illicit Drugs (Combined)

The SAMHSA (2025) survey also gathers data from its thousands of respondents about illicit (illegal) drug use in the past year, which includes "any use of marijuana or cannabis products (including smoking, vaping, and other modes of use), cocaine (including crack), heroin, hallucinogens, inhalants, and methamphetamine, as well as misuse of prescription stimulants, tranquilizers or sedatives (e.g., benzodiazepines), or pain relievers" (SAMHSA 2025: 8). Over a quarter of the population aged 12 or older, 73.6 million people, used illicit drugs in the past year, as displayed below.



This graphic displays the proportion of the population aged 12 and older who used illicit drugs in the past year, along with the number of users for each drug category. Cannabis is by far the most commonly used illicit drug today.

Source: SAMHSA 2025

These percentages may 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: Those experiencing houselessness, 'runaway' teens, and those incarcerated in prison, jail, or detention centers. Second, the survey includes people whose illegal drug use is relatively low, namely, 12-year-olds and young adolescents plus people in middle- or older-age. Thus, age matters: Young adults 18-25 years old consistently have the highest rates of drug use.

Below we explore more data on illicit drugs including cannabis, cocaine, heroin, opioids, and prescription drugs.

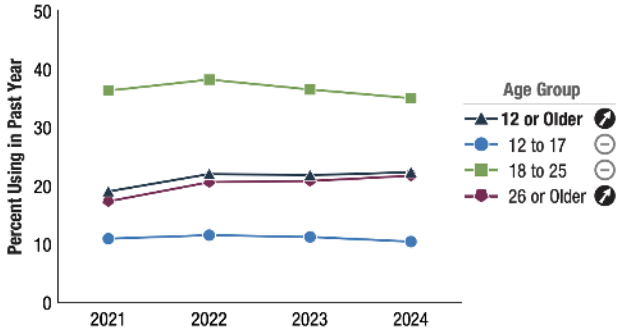
Cannabis

The most commonly used illicit drug by far is cannabis, with 64.2 million people using it in the past year (note that the categories are not mutually exclusive, meaning that the same individuals may be using cannabis as well as other drugs such as hallucinogens or opioids). Over one-third of young adults (12.2 million adults aged 18-25) used marijuana in the past year, with about 1 in 10 teens (2.7 million adolescents aged 12-17) using it in the past year. Additionally, more than one in seven people used cannabis in the past month alone, amounting to 44.3 million people, or over 15% of the population aged 12 or older. The majority of young people (aged 12 to 25) vaped the drug, whereas those aged 26 or older were more likely to use it a different way. Overall, smoking remains the most common mode of use, followed by eating (or drinking), then vaping, then other methods.

Hallucinogens

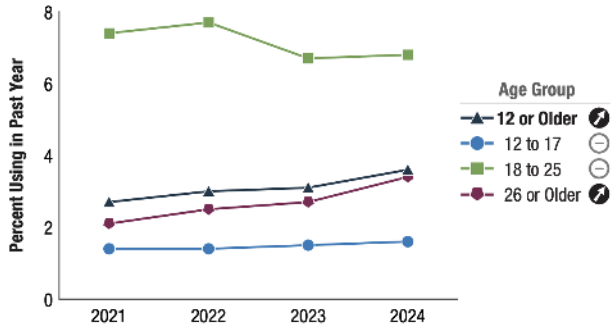
In the SAMHSA (2025) study, hallucinogens include drugs that cause hallucinations to various degrees including psilocybin mushrooms, LSD, MDMA (Molly or its predecessor Ecstasy), PCP, ketamine, peyote, and mescaline, among others. Hallucinogens are the second most common illicit drug, with 10.4 million people aged 12 and older (3.6%) using in the past year. Young adults (aged 18-25) are far more likely to use these drugs than other age groups, at a rate of 6.8% (2.4 million young adults).

Figure 15. Past Year Marijuana Use: Among People Aged 12 or Older; 2021-2024



Note: Estimates for 2021 may differ from previously published estimates because the 2021 analysis weights were updated to facilitate between-year comparisons.

Figure 19. Past Year Hallucinogen Use: Among People Aged 12 or Older; 2021-2024



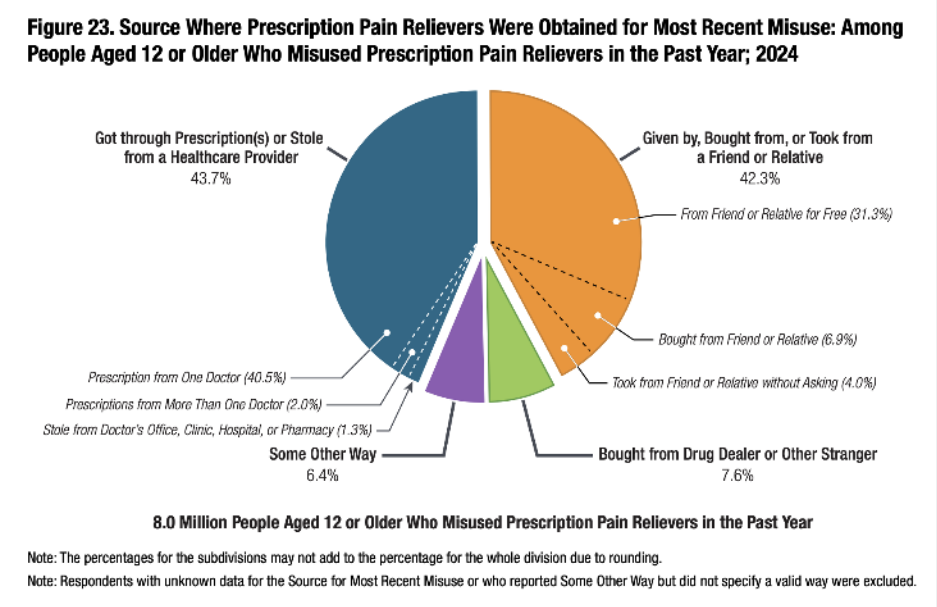
Note: Estimates for 2021 may differ from previously published estimates because the 2021 analysis weights were updated to facilitate between-year comparisons.

Young adults have the highest rates of use for most drug categories, with a far higher rate of cannabis and hallucinogen use than other age groups.

Source: SAMHSA 2025

Prescription Drugs and Opioids

Using prescription drugs for nonmedical purposes or recreation is considered a form of misuse, which is illegal. The SAMHSA survey includes "misuse of psychotherapeutic drugs currently or recently available by prescription in the United States, including prescription stimulants, tranquilizers or sedatives (e.g., benzodiazepines), and pain relievers" (over-the-counter drug misuse was excluded) (2025: 12). Most prescription drug misusers 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, but then are misused. Many experts fault physicians for overprescribing painkillers and other prescription drugs.



This graphic shows that the great majority of prescription pain relievers that are misused are obtained directly from a healthcare provider (mostly through prescriptions) or from a friend or relative.

Source: SAMHSA 2025

Because prescription drugs are beneficial for so many people, our nation faces a special difficulty in dealing with the misuse of these drugs. As the head of the National Institute on Drug Abuse explained, "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." Thus according to a news report, "These drugs must be somehow legal and illegal, encouraged yet discouraged, tightly regulated yet easily available" (Zuger 2011).

In 2024, 13.8 million people aged 12 and older had misused prescription psychotherapeutic drugs in the past year. Opioids are the most commonly misused of these, with 7.6 million people misusing opioids, followed by prescription tranquilizers or sedatives at 4.6 million, and prescription stimulants at 3.9 million. Within the opioid category, Hydrocodone (e.g., Vicodin®) is the most common prescription misused, followed by Oxycodone (e.g., OxyContin®). (Note that in the survey, opioid misuse excludes illegally made fentanyl.) Luckily, prescription opioid misuse has declined in recent years, from 3.0% (8.5 million people) in 2021 to 2.6% (7.6 million people) in 2024; however, there are still millions of people who misuse opioids as part of the *opioid crisis*.



Prescription opioids drove the *opioid crisis*. Many believe that the pharmaceutical industry and prescribing physicians should be held responsible for the great damage that (over)prescribing opioids has caused.

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Opioids more broadly include the prescriptions named above as well as similar drugs such as heroin, codeine, and morphine. Thus, there are more people that engage in opioid misuse when the measurement includes these drugs; however, the figure is only slightly higher as 95% of opioid misuse is through prescription opioids: 2.7% (7.8 million people aged 12 and older) misused opioids in the past year.

Opioid use produces a feeling of euphoria. For instance, after heroin is injected, "the user feels a flash, a rush, which has been described as an intense, voluptuous, orgasm-like 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: 308-309). As described here, 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 negative image of heroin users, describe in the prior page. Despite public concern, heroin use is quite rare. One-fifth of 1% of the population aged 12 or older (0.2%) used heroin in the past year, or 556,000 people. Heroin is one of few drugs that is less common among young adults than older adults, with 0.1% of adults aged 18-25 using and 0.2% of adults aged 26 or older using in the past year (SAMHSA 2025).

Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, has become a leading concern regarding drug use. It has been largely responsible for the rise in overdose deaths since 2013, as we will see below. The drug is strong and users may not understand the high risk or that the drug they're taking even has fentanyl present:

> "Fentanyl is 50 to 100 times stronger than morphine. Therefore, the risks for overdose or other adverse effects are substantially increased when people use fentanyl, especially among people whose bodies are not accustomed to the effects of opioids. IMF [Illegally Manufactured Fentanyl] is sometimes present in products that are sold as heroin or in counterfeit prescription drugs that are made to look like commonly misused prescription opioids. Some people who use IMF are not aware they are doing so" (SAMHSA 2025: 18-19).

The prevalence of fentanyl misuse is quite small statistically speaking, with 0.3% of adults aged 12 and older (816,000 people) misusing it in the past year and 0.2% (668,000 people) using IMF in the past year; however, because this drug is so dangerous, this figure is a top concern regarding harmful drug use. Moreover, as the SAMHSA report explains: "Because people who used IMF may have been unaware that they used it, caution must be taken in interpreting estimates of IMF use; these estimates are almost certainly an underestimate of true IMF use" (2025: 19).

The Applying Social Research box below discusses the roots of adolescent prescription drug misuse in the social institutions of family and education. 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 significance of prescription drug misuse, 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 (2009) analyzed data on adolescents in the national survey conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) 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 misuse 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 misuse by adolescents: We must engage in efforts to strengthen families and to improve our schools.
>
> *Source:* Ford 2009

Unlike other drugs, women are more likely than men to misuse prescription drugs (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. Because boys and men and socialized into *hegemonic masculinity*, which devalues and stigmatizes the seeking of medical care, girls and women are more likely to be seen by doctors who may prescribe these drugs.

Cocaine

Like opioids, cocaine produces a high that is considered pleasurable by its users. According to sociologist Erich Goode (2008: 288), "Cocaine's principal effects are exhilaration, elation, and euphoria – voluptuous, joyous feelings accompanied by a sense of grandiosity." As a stimulant, cocaine can increase 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. A more potent form, crack cocaine, 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).

Cocaine use, including crack, has declined since the 1980s, and today only 1.5% of the population aged 12 and older used the drug in the past year, and 2.3% for young adults aged 18-25 (SAMHSA 2025). Cocaine use thus is somewhat rare in percentage terms; however, that 1.5% translates to 4.3 million people, which is significant. Cocaine use may not be as harmful as other drugs, but it does have consequences. We discuss examples of consequences of drug use and harmful drug use next.

Consequences of Drug Use

Of all consequences of drug use and harmful drug use, perhaps the most severe is death: Smoking tobacco is the top preventable cause of death in the US, with 490,000 deaths annually. Secondhand smoke results in 19,000 deaths annually, for well over 500,000 people dying each year due to tobacco smoking (American Lung Association 2025). Excessive alcohol consumption (either over time or on one occasion) is also a leading preventable cause of death in the US, with 178,000 deaths annually (CDC 2024a). Drug overdoses amount to over 105,000 deaths annually, a figure that increased substantially since the early-mid 2010s due to synthetic opioids (Garnett & Miniño 2024). However, there are other consequences of drug use and harmful drug use, which we will also explore.

Legal Drugs

The rate of harmful alcohol use means that alcohol has serious personal and social consequences. One set of consequences involves individual and population health. The figure cited above – that harmful alcohol use is responsible for about 178,000 deaths annually – amounts to 488 deaths per day, or 20 per hour, as represented in the CDC graphic below. Excessive alcohol use has been estimated to have shortened the lives of those who died by an average of 24 years (CDC 2024a).



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shares graphics to educate the public about the harms of drug use. This one states that there are 488 deaths each day from excessive alcohol use, which is about 20 deaths every hour.

Source: CDC 2024a

This occurs primarily through the physiological damage it causes. About two-thirds of alcohol-related deaths arise from chronic conditions related to alcohol use, with the other third from binge drinking (CDC 2024). Heavy alcohol use can destroy the liver, increase blood pressure, weaken the heart and immune system, lead to neurological problems, raise the risk of incurring several kinds of cancer, and result in other concerns such as sexual dysfunction. Binge drinking can cause serious immediate health problems because it may lead to someone overdosing on alcohol. Harmful alcohol use was involved in over 7% of all emergency department visits in 2020 and involved in one in six drug overdoses in 2020-2021. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) explains:

> "Between 2015 and 2019, the leading causes of alcohol-attributable deaths due to chronic conditions in the United States were liver diseases (e.g., alcohol-associated liver disease and unspecified liver cirrhosis), cardiovascular diseases, cancers of various types (e.g., organs of the upper respiratory and digestive tracts, liver, colon, and breast), and alcohol use disorder" (NIAAA 2025).

Death from excessive alcohol use is gendered, just as alcohol use is, with over two-thirds of those dying being men and the other third being women (we do not have data on nonbinary people) (NIAAA 2025).

In addition to these health problems, alcohol use is responsible for more than 13,000 traffic fatalities annually, nearly one-third of all driving fatalities (NIAAA 2025). It also plays an important role in violent crime (Felson, Teasdale, & Burchfield 2008). Alcohol abuse can also lead to problems for families, including domestic violence and divorce, and the stress that results from having to deal with a family member's alcohol use disorder on a daily basis. The Children and Our Future box below discusses the impact of parental alcoholism on children.

✔ 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

Harmful alcohol use is also costly for society. In 2010 (the last year reliable data were available as of this writing), alcohol misuse cost the US $249 billion (NIAAA 2024b). Another estimate found that it costs the US 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).

Finally, binge drinking by college students has serious consequences (Center for Science in the Public Interest 2008; National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse 2007), such as:

- Binge drinkers are 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.

As we saw earlier, smoking tobacco kills nearly three times as many people every year as those killed by harmful alcohol use. Tobacco smoking is ranked in the top of preventable deaths and illnesses. A striking research finding is that about half of all cigarette smokers will one day die from a premature death caused by a smoking-related illness (King et al. 2011). Again, nicotine is a slow poison.

Tobacco kills in several ways. Smoking causes the great majority 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.

Cigarette smoking is also costly, as with harmful alcohol use. In 2018, it cost the nation over $600 billion, including nearly $372 billion in lost productivity and over $240 billion in healthcare costs (CDC 2024b). Additionally, secondhand smoke costs the nation around $7 billion per year, due to premature death. Medicaid spending alone amounts to over $68.3 billion in healthcare costs for smoking-related diseases annually – over one-fifth of its total spending (American Lung Association 2025). An older estimate found that Americans spend about $90 billion annually on tobacco products (CDC 2011).

Most vaping involves nicotine, and thus has similar consequences as those described above. One unique concern is the rate of vaping among the youngest adults (25 or younger). According to the CDC (2025):

- Nicotine poses unique dangers to youth because their brains are still developing.
- Nicotine can harm brain development which continues until about age 25.
- Youth can start showing signs of nicotine addiction quickly, sometimes before the start of regular or daily use.
- Using nicotine during adolescence can harm the parts of the brain that control attention, learning, mood, and impulse control.
- Adolescents who use nicotine may be at increased risk for future addiction to other drugs.
- Youth who vape may also be more likely to smoke cigarettes in the future.

However, other vaping involves different dangers: The aerosols found in e-cigarettes and other vaping devices can contain harmful substances such as chemicals known to cause cancer, chemicals that harm the gut, heavy metals (such as lead, tin, or nickel), small particles that infiltrate the lungs, and volatile compounds (CDC 2025).

Illicit Drugs

Cannabis use can cause several adverse outcomes (National Institute on Drug Abuse 2010). It may distort perception, impair coordination, and cause short-term memory loss, and people who are high from cannabis may be unable to safely drive a motor vehicle or operate machinery. In addition, regular cannabis smokers are at risk for respiratory problems. Chronic cannabis use is also associated with absence from school and the workplace and with social relationship problems, although it is difficult to determine whether cannabis is causing these effects or whether the association exists because someone with personal problems begins using cannabis regularly.

Health researchers are also concerned about the impacts of cannabis legalization on adolescent use. Increasing amounts of research reveal correlations between adolescent cannabis use and short and potentially long-term impairments on cognition, worse academic and vocational outcomes, and increased prevalence of psychotic, mood, and addictive disorders (Hammond et al. 2020). Though cannabis use rates among adolescents are higher in states that have legalized the substance, those rates were higher even before legalization (Ammerman et al. 2015; Choo et al. 2014; Wall et al. 2011). Legalization itself did not cause higher usage rates.

Other negative impacts of cannabis use have risen in states where cannabis is legalized. Motor vehicle accidents and deaths where cannabis was involved have increased. Young children and pets accidentally overdose more often. Finally, emergency rooms see more patients and hospitalize them more often due to potent cannabis causing psychosis, depression, and anxiety (Committee on Substance Abuse 2015, as cited in Hammond et al. 2020).

Despite these concerns, cannabis appears to be the most benign illicit drug in terms of health and social consequences, and it is also more benign than either alcohol or tobacco (Drug Policy Alliance 2011; Faupel et al. 2010). As noted earlier, these latter two drugs kill far more Americans annually. In contrast, cannabis does not kill many, and its use has not been associated with cancers in the

same way. A review of the evidence on cannabis 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: 247).

In summary, while not entirely safe, cannabis appears to be safer than either alcohol or tobacco. Even so, it remains an illegal drug federally and within several states. This fact underscores the issue that the legality 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 cannabis to be legal and for alcohol or tobacco to be illegal.

The public’s image and concern about heroin is partly deserved in some ways and partly undeserved in other ways. Like other opioids, 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 lifestyles that heroin users tend to live. However, 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. We discuss overdoses further below.

Applying Social Research

Experiences of Heroin Users in Rural New Mexico

We see differences in the harm caused by harmful drug use because of the lack of treatment centers in rural areas. The lack of treatment centers harms white people who live in these areas as well as people of color.

Anthropologist Angela Garcia (pictured below) spent several years researching heroin use among members of a Hispano (of Spanish decent) and Indigenous community in rural northern New Mexico.

Garcia's findings (2010) point to the loss of a connection to land and livelihood and the experience of settler colonialism as social determinants of harmful heroin use. **Settler colonialism** is a system that normalizes the continuous settler occupation of Indigenous lands and exploitation of Indigenous resources. It is *Eurocentric* in nature, assuming that European white ideas and values are superior (Cox 2017).

Garcia’s research found that dispossession of ancestral lands ruptured the link to cultural heritage and caused impoverishment. Together, the disconnection and poverty formed a source of never-ending emotional pain for users of heroin.

The sparsely populated rural setting also meant that drug treatment was less available.

By examining the history of dispossession and oppression that impacted this community, Garcia shows how the *social determinants of harmful drug use* can illuminate the root social causes of the problem.

If you would like to learn more, please watch Angela Garcia on “Postcolonial theory and psychological anthropology”. In the video, Garcia also discusses her relationship with those she studied, including the pain of returning to her home.



Anthropologist Angela Garcia studies heroin use among members of a Latinx community in rural New Mexico. How might geographic location and ties to land play a role in drug misuse, incarceration, and treatment?

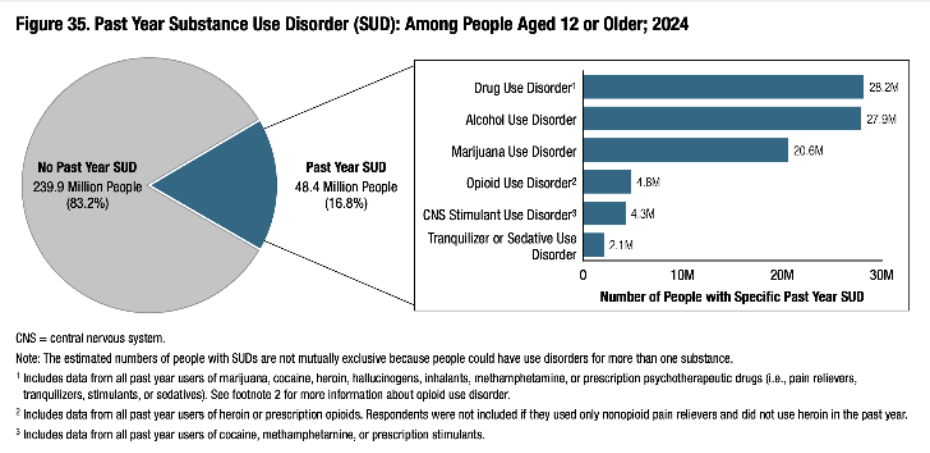
"Photo of Dr. Angela Garcia" © Stanford University is all rights reserved and included with permission

Finally, 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.

Substance Use Disorders

Another consequence of harmful drug use is the development of **substance use disorders** (SUDs), which refers to the medical diagnosis regarding harmful drug use. SAMSHA (2025: 21) describes SUDs as "characterized by impairment caused by the recurrent use of alcohol or other drugs (or both), including health problems; disability; and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school, or home." Thus, the definition of SUDs points to consequences for health, disability, and life responsibilities.

In 2024, 48.4 million people (16.8% of the population aged 12 or older) could be characterized as having a SUD in the past year. *Drug use disorder* (a broad category involving a long list of drugs) and *alcohol use disorder* were the top SUDs, with 28.2 million and 27.9 million people having them, respectively. The next largest category is *marijuana use disorder*, at 20.6 million people.



This chart displays the prevalence of Substance Use Disorders (SUDs), broken down by type of disorder. Drug use disorder (a broad category) and alcohol use disorder are the most common, with marijuana use disorder being third.

Source: SAMHSA 2025

Young adults have the highest rates of SUDs: Over a quarter of those aged 18-25 (9.1 million people), had an SUD in the past year. Among those aged 26 or older, 16.4% had an SUD in the past year (37.3 million adults), and among adolescents aged 12-17, 7.8% did (2.0 million teens). Among those adolescents, about two-fifths (792,000 teens) also had a major depressive episode in the past year. For all adults with an SUD (46.3 million adults aged 18 or older), slightly less than half (21.2 million adults) also had a mental illness in the past year. Additionally, among those who had any SUD in the past year, over one in five (21.3%) had a 'severe' disorder, defined as meeting meet six or more criteria among the eleven criteria for SUDs (SAMHSA 2025).

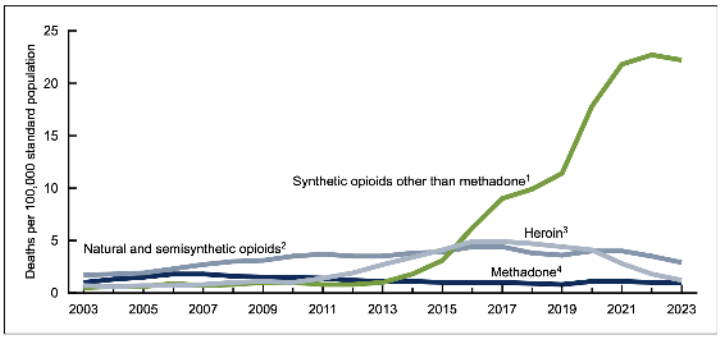
SUDs have consequences themselves. As Daley (2014) explains, research has documented that the impact on family members of those with an SUD include emotional burdens and relationship strain (e.g., frustration, anger, anxiety, fear, relationship tension), economic concerns (e.g., reduced income due to job loss, money spent on drugs), and family instability (e.g., separation/divorce, violence, removal of children by child protective services). Additionally, using drugs during a pregnancy can lead to fetal and child development problems (e.g., birth 'defects,' cognitive delays, oppositional disorders, psychiatric problems).

In addition to family-related consequences, SUDs impact society at large regarding population health, economic instability, and increased incarceration. For instance, SUDS "contribute to medical or psychiatric conditions, disability, and death as a result of accidents or diseases caused or worsened by substance use, or higher rates of suicidality, all of which affect society." Other social-level concerns are increased housing instability, crime, unemployment, and HIV transmission through shared needles (Daley 2014).

Drug Overdoses

We mentioned that the most serious consequence of harmful drug use is death, and those include drug overdoses. As stated above over 105,000 people in the US died in 2023 from drug overdoses. The rate of drug overdose deaths (deaths per 100,000 people) nearly quadrupled between 2003 and 2022, from 8.9 to 32.6. In 2023, it decreased slightly to 31.3 (Garnett & Miniño 2024). A large proportion of those deaths were due to synthetic opioids, as seen in the chart below. An increase was also seen with stimulants, such as cocaine and 'psychostimulants with abuse potential' (methamphetamine, amphetamine, and methylphenidate).

Figure 4. Age-adjusted rate of drug overdose deaths involving opioids, by type of opioid: United States, 2003–2023



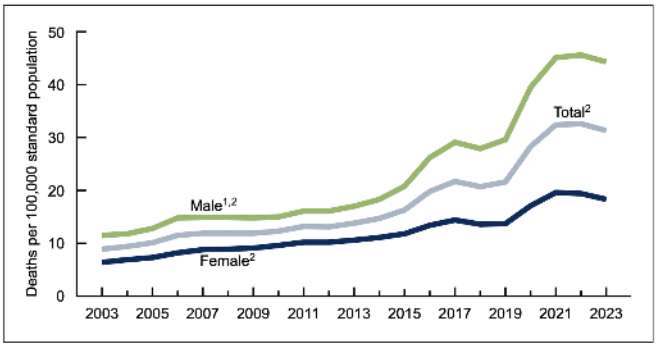
[1]No significant trend from 2003 to 2013; significant increasing trend from 2013 to 2021, with different rates of change over time; no significant trend from 2021 to 2023 ($p < 0.05$). Rate in 2023 significantly lower than in 2022 ($p < 0.05$).
[2]Significant increasing trend from 2003 to 2010; no significant trend from 2010 to 2021; significant decreasing trend from 2021 to 2023 ($p < 0.05$).
[3]Significant increasing trend from 2003 to 2016, with different rates of change over time; significant decreasing trend from 2016 to 2023, with different rates of change over time ($p < 0.05$).
[4]Significant increasing trend from 2003 to 2006; significant decreasing trend from 2006 to 2017; no significant trend from 2017 to 2023 ($p < 0.05$).
NOTES: Drug overdose deaths are identified using the *International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision* underlying cause-of-death codes X40–X44, X60–X64, X85, and Y10–Y14. Drug overdose deaths involving selected drug categories are identified by specific multiple cause-of-death codes: heroin, T40.1; natural and semisynthetic opioids, T40.2; methadone, T40.3; synthetic opioids other than methadone, T40.4. Deaths involving more than one opioid category (such as a death involving both methadone and a natural or semisynthetic opioid) are counted in both categories. The percentage of drug overdose deaths that identified the specific drugs involved varied by year, ranging from 75% to 79% from 2003 to 2013 and increasing from 81% in 2014 to 98% in 2023. Age-adjusted death rates were calculated using the direct method and the 2000 U.S. standard population.
SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, mortality data file.

As this chart clearly displays, synthetic opioids became a major concern as the rates of drug overdose deaths involving opioids soared after 2013. This helps visualize the depth of the opioid crisis.

Source: Garnett & Miniño, National Center for Health Statistics, CDC 2024

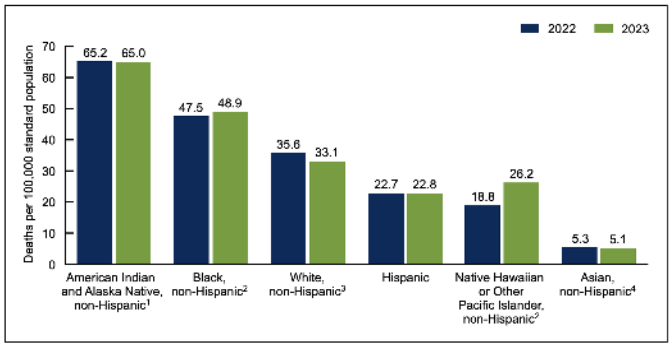
There is variation in overdose deaths by social location. For instance, men have higher overdose death rates than women, as seen in the left chart below. There are also racial differences, with a wide gap between racial groups with higher and lower rates of overdose deaths, as seen in the right chart below.

Figure 1. Age-adjusted drug overdose death rate, by sex: United States, 2003–2023



[1]Rate significantly higher than for females for all years ($p < 0.05$).
[2]Significant increasing trend from 2003 to 2022, with different rates of change over time ($p < 0.05$). Rate in 2023 significantly lower than in 2022 ($p < 0.05$).
NOTES: Drug overdose deaths are identified using the *International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision* underlying cause-of-death codes X40–X44, X60–X64, X85, and Y10–Y14. The number of drug overdose deaths in 2023 was 105,007. Age-adjusted death rates were calculated using the direct method and the 2000 U.S. standard population.
SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, mortality data file.

Figure 3. Age-adjusted drug overdose death rate, by race and Hispanic origin: United States, 2022 and 2023



[1]Group was significantly higher than all others in 2022 and 2023 ($p < 0.05$).
[2]Significant increase between 2022 and 2023 ($p < 0.05$).
[3]Significant decrease between 2022 and 2023 ($p < 0.05$).
[4]Group was significantly lower than all others in 2022 and 2023 ($p < 0.05$).
NOTES: Misclassification of race and Hispanic origin on death certificates results in the underestimation of death rates by as much as 34% for American Indian and Alaska Native non-Hispanic people and 3% for Asian non-Hispanic and Hispanic people. Misclassification for Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander non-Hispanic people has not been evaluated. Drug overdose deaths are identified using the *International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision* underlying cause-of-death codes X40–X44, X60–X64, X85, and Y10–Y14. Age-adjusted death rates were calculated using the direct method and the 2000 U.S. standard population.
SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, mortality data file.

The left side chart shows that drug overdose rates increased substantially from 2003 to 2022, with the largest increase in the second half of that period. It also shows a steeper increase for men, who have higher overdose rates that women. The right side chart shows that drug overdose rates are highest among American Indian and Alaska Native people, and that Asian people have far lower rates than others.

Source: Garnett & Miniño, National Center for Health Statistics, CDC 2024

Drug overdose death rates also vary by age, with young-to-middle adults having the highest rates (aged 25-64, with ages 35-44 having the highest). Teens and very young adults (aged 15-24) and older adults (aged 65 or older) have far lower overdose death rates.

To reiterate what we discussed before, not all drug use may be considered harmful. Many drugs used in moderation, such as alcohol or cannabis, do not carry the same risks and consequences as other drugs, such as fentanyl or tobacco, or as used excessively, such

as with heavy drinking. However, there are health concerns to consider even for moderate use of less harmful drugs. Thus, there consequences of drug use itself. *Harmful drug use*, however, carries more significant consequences including deteriorating health, distress to family members, economic costs to society, and other concerns such as housing insecurity and mass incarceration. We will further explore this last concern – *mass incarceration* – on the next page. The US took a punitive approach to drug use, harmful drug use, and substance use disorders (for some drugs at least, not tobacco nor alcohol), which led to a dramatic rise in the incarcerated population over the latter decades of the twentieth century through the first 15 or so years of the twenty-first century. This approach has consequences for individuals, their families, and society at large.

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The War on Drugs

We will discuss more strategies to address problems of drugs on the following page; however, one of the most controversial drug strategies will be discussed here. It involves the *criminalization* of 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. The **war on drugs** is an effort in the US since the 1970s to combat illegal drug use and distribution by greatly increasing penalties, enforcement, and incarceration for drug offenders (Britannica 2023b).



In the video What is the Drug War, narrated by Jay-Z, we learn about the history and impact of the War on Drugs. How has the War on Drugs impacted communities like yours?

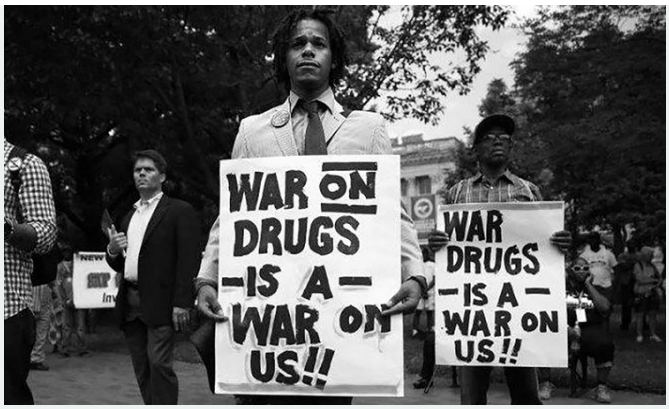
"What is the Drug War? With Jay-Z & Molly Crabapple" by Drug Policy Alliance is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

The war on drugs was partially in response to a significant global economic recession in the early 1980s. Angela Davis describes it this way:

> "By 1994, the deindustrialization of the US economy produced by global economic shifts, was having a deleterious impact on working-class Black communities. The massive loss of jobs in the manufacturing sector, especially in cities like Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, had the result, according to Joe Willam Trotter, that 'the black urban working class nearly disappeared by the early 1990s.' Combined with the disestablishment of welfare state benefits, these economic shifts caused vast numbers of Black people to seek other – sometimes 'illegal' – means of survival. It is not accidental that the full force of the crack epidemic was felt during the early 1980s and 1990s" (Davis 2021).

The massive expenditures on the curtailment of the drug epidemic also shifted our views on drug use. The US became much more punitive towards drugs, focusing on punishment rather than rehabilitation. The war on drugs created tougher sanctions on drug use in America. The courts treated harmful drug use as a criminal justice issue rather than as a substance dependence or public health issue. The Drug Enforcement Agency was created in 1973 to provide another arm of the government to tackle the specific issue of drugs. By the 1980s, lengthy sentences for drug possession were also in place. One to five-year sentences for possession were increased to more than 25 years.

The war on drugs and its associated policies also drove massive increases in prison populations. Between 1980 and 2010, the US prison population quintupled. The population only began to decline slightly in the 2010s. As of 2019, the US still imprisoned more than 2 million people in prisons and jails, though that figure has declined somewhat since due to changes in policy such as sentencing.



This photo is of activists protesting the war on drugs, with signs that read, "The War on Drugs Is A War On Us!" This 'war,' which continues today, disproportionately impacts people of color. What might be some of the causes and consequences of this war?

"Photo" from "Racial Justice Requires Ending the War on Drugs, Experts Say" by Emaline Friedman, Mad in America is in the Public Domain

Mass incarceration refers to the overwhelming size and scale of the US prison population. As previously discussed, the US has had the largest prison population in the world, but how did this come to be the case?

The war on drugs is one of the major drivers of the prison population in the United States. In 1971, President Richard Nixon declared this 'war,' dedicating increased federal funding and resources to quelling the supply of drugs in the US. This war continued to ramp up through the 1980s and 1990s, especially as crack cocaine became a growing concern in the media and public sphere. Crack cocaine was publicly portrayed as a highly addictive drug sweeping its way through America, allowing politicians to capitalize on this hysteria and pass policies that rapidly increased the prison population. Even so, the vast majority of arrests and enforcement were not of high-level, violent dealers. More often, police arrested small-time dealers or people struggling with addiction. In fact, during the 1990s, the period of the largest increase in the US prison population, the vast majority of prison growth came from cannabis arrests (King and Mauer 2006).

The 1980s and 1990s were also an era where states turned to partnerships with private companies to meet the booming demand for facilities, leading to the rise of private prisons, a process called the *privatization of prisons*. Private prisons are for-profit incarceration facilities run by private companies that contract with local, state, and federal governments. The business model of private prisons incentivizes them to keep their prisons as full as possible while spending as little as possible on care for inmates. Down 16% from its peak in 2012, private prisons still held 8% of all people incarcerated at the state and federal level as of 2019 (The Sentencing Project 2022). This general statistic hides state-to-state differences, though. For instance, Michigan and Oregon have no private prison facilities in the state, while Texas has the highest number of people incarcerated in private prisons.

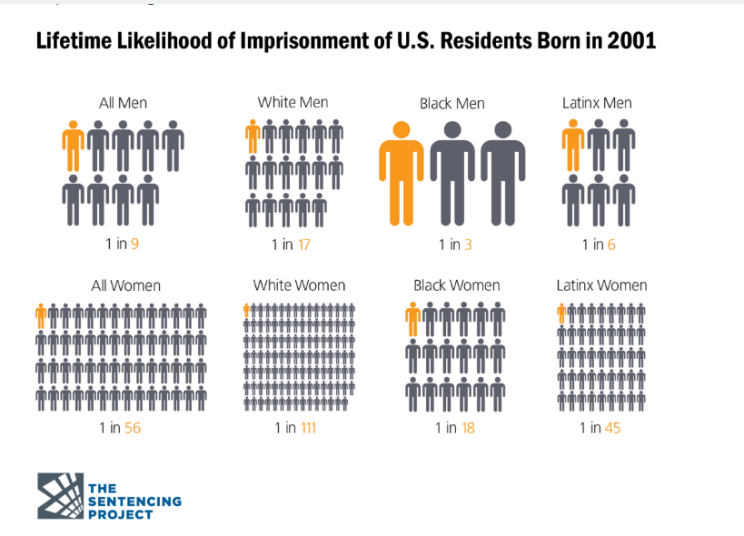
From the inception of the war on drugs, racial biases were at the center of these policy changes. For instance, one of Richard Nixon's top advisors, John Erlichman, explicitly admitted to this in a 2016 interview:

> "You want to know what this [war on drugs] was really all about? The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: The antiwar left and Black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or Black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and Blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did" (Baum 2016).

The war on drugs was a deliberately racist set of policies.

Even as the racial gap in incarceration has narrowed in recent years, the US still disproportionately incarcerates Black Americans. While Black Americans make up 12% of the population, they make up over 33% of incarcerated individuals, meaning that they are disproportionately represented in prisons and jails. Similar trends exist among Latino Americans: While they comprise 16% of the

US population, they account for 23% of incarcerated individuals. In contrast, while white Americans comprise 63% of the population, they only make up 30% of those incarcerated (Gramlich 2019).



This image shows the lifetime likelihood of imprisonment for men and women, by race/ethnicity. You are most likely to be imprisoned if you are a Black man and least likely to be imprisoned if you are a white woman.

"Lifetime Likelihood of Imprisonment of US Residents Born in 2001" © The Sentencing Project is included under fair use

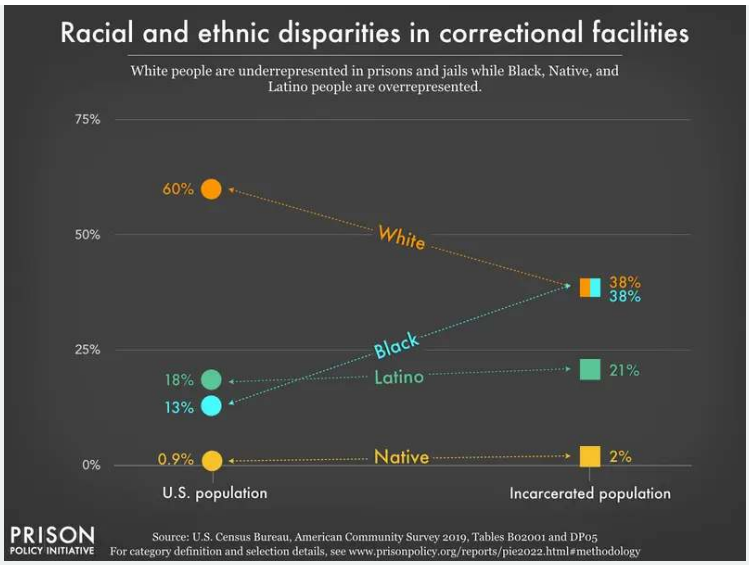
As introduced in the Crime, Immigration, and Social Control chapter, this network of policies and unequal institutional practices led to what scholar Michelle Alexander terms the *New Jim Crow*. This concept refers to the network of laws and practices that disproportionately funnel Black Americans into the criminal justice system, stripping them of their constitutional rights as a punishment for their offenses in the same way that Jim Crow laws did in previous eras. Because of these new mass incarceration policies, a new iteration of the racial caste system has emerged: One where Black Americans can legally be denied public benefits, housing, the right to vote, and participation on juries because of a criminal conviction.

The war on drugs was a racialized response to a worldwide economic downturn. We had other options. James Forman Jr. puts it this way:

> "Rising levels of abuse, addiction, and drug-related violence should have been a sign that something was wrong with America. It should have led the nation to focus on the myriad ways in which 350 years of white supremacy had produced persistent Black suffering and disadvantage. It should have caused politicians to interrogate the cumulative impact of convict leasing, lynching, redlining, school segregation, and drinking water poisoned with lead. Instead of asking, 'What kind of people are *they* that would use and sell drugs?' The nation should have been asking a question that, to this day, demands an answer: 'What kind of people are *we* that build prisons while closing treatment centers?'" (2021: 354).

The nation's response to drug use is a social problem. Social justice requires a different response.

Christopher A. Wray, Assistant Attorney General in 2004, said: "Nearly three-quarters of the people in federal prison are nonviolent offenders with no history of violence. Black men are disproportionately arrested and imprisoned" (Sentencing Project 2004). Many of these offenses are related to drug possession, and fewer of them are related to drug distribution. Although *harmful drug use* causes harm, these offenses are non-violent. By looking at the numbers in this way, we open the door to considering options for social justice that are effective rather than carceral (focusing on prisons).



This chart displays racial/ethnic disparities in US correctional facilities. If race and ethnicity didn't matter in the criminal justice system, we would expect to see the percentages of each group in the total population of the US and the percentage of people in correctional facilities to match. Instead, we see vast inequality, with white people far underrepresented and Black people far overrepresented.

"Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Correctional Facilities" from "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2023" by Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner © Prison Policy Initiative is included under fair use

As we have discussed in prior chapters, *disproportionality* is the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a social group compared with its percentage in the total population. We can see disproportionality across groups of many social locations. Racial disproportionality is related to harmful drug use and the criminal justice system. As we see in the figure above, in 2019, white people made up 60% of the overall population of the US, but they made up only 38% of people who are incarcerated. Black people made up 13% of the overall population, but they were also 38% of the incarcerated population. Latinx people were 18% of the total population and 21% of people in prison or jail. Finally, Native Americans were 0.9% of the population but 2% of those in jail. In every case, we see disproportionality.

However, the measure of disproportionality doesn't tell us why difference exists or what to do about it. If you consider the infographic The Social Ecological Framework of the Opioid Crisis from the prior page, you see many causes of inequality. The causes of disproportionality are often disparity. *Racial disparity* is the unequal outcomes of one racial or ethnic group compared with outcomes for another racial or ethnic group (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2021).

As we consider the war on drugs, we see that systems, laws, policies, and practices privilege white people over people of color. In one example, the sentencing for crack cocaine and powder cocaine are significantly different, as previously mentioned. Distributing 5 grams of crack cocaine had a 5-year mandatory minimum federal prison sentence. Distributing 500 grams of powder cocaine had the same sentence. More than 80% of the crack cocaine defendants in 2002 were Black, even though two-thirds of the crack cocaine users were white or Latinx (The Sentencing Project 2004). Powder cocaine is more likely to be used by wealthier people, who are disproportionately white (Vagins & McCurdy 2006).



This picture shows powdered cocaine and the implements to use it. How does the form of a drug and the perceptions of people who use it impact drug policy?

"Photo" by Colin Davis is licensed under the Unsplash License

Even when judges have more discretion in what sentences they impose, racial disparities exist:

> "Racialized assumptions by key justice system decision makers unfairly influence outcomes for people who encounter the system. In research on presentence reports, for example, scholars have found that People of Color are frequently given harsher sanctions because they are perceived as imposing a greater threat to public safety and are therefore deserving of greater social control and punishment" (Nellis 2021: 12-13).

These biases are both conscious and unconscious, and they occur at every level of the criminal justice system, from police to lawyers, to judges, to the politicians who make the laws in the first place. Structural racism and individual racist ideas result in racial disparity in the criminal justice system.

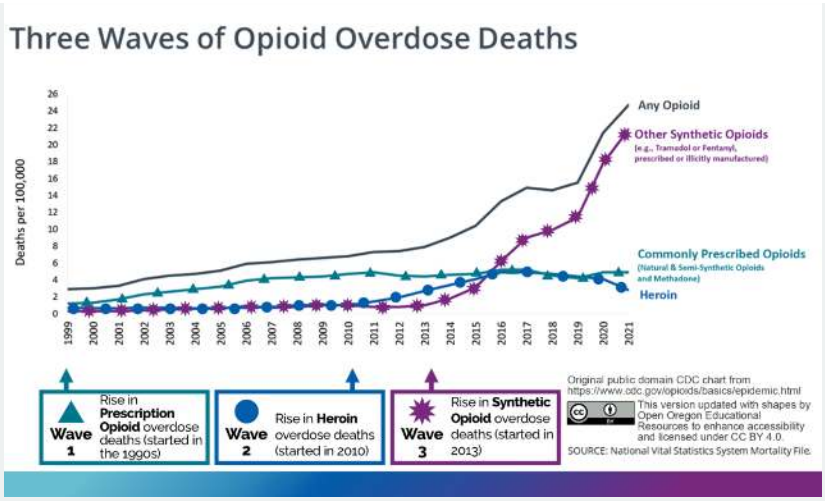
The Opioid Crisis

Another way to see the impact of the war on drugs and notice racism at work in response to harmful drug use is to examine the opioid crisis. The **opioid crisis** refers to the surge in fatal overdoses linked to opioid use (DeWeerdt 2019). The overdose fatality rate rose by 345% between 2001 and 2016 (Jalali et al. 2020). Opioids are a class of drugs that cause euphoria. Opioids include heroin, morphine, codeine, hydrocodone, OxyContin®, and fentanyl (Johns Hopkins Medicine 2023). Heroin is an illegal drug; the others are prescription drugs that doctors prescribe for pain relief.

Nearly 75% of drug overdoses in 2020 involved a legal or illegal opioid (Centers for Disease Control 2022). The CDC describes the crisis using three waves. The first wave started in the 1990s. In this wave, the deaths were primarily due to overdoses on prescription opioids, like OxyContin® and Vicodin®. This wave was a result of the overprescription of opioid-based painkillers, causing some individuals to become physically dependent.

The second wave started in 2010. The second wave was due to overdoses related to using heroin. This use of heroin partially resulted from a decrease in the amount of legally available prescription painkillers.

The third wave started in 2013. This wave marked an increase in overdose deaths from synthetic opioids like fentanyl and tramadol. While fentanyl can be prescribed, this wave was driven by illegally manufactured substances.



This chart displays the three waves of opioid overdose deaths. Each wave was caused by a different opioid substance. Each wave also had different racist responses.

See photo credit above

The response to heroin use and misuse was carceral (involving prisons). It was part of the war on drugs.

Race was at the core of drug policy that emerged from an increase in heroin use in urban centers in the 1960s. According to media accounts, the face of the heroin user at that time was “black, destitute and engaged in repetitive petty crimes to feed his or her habit” (Hart & Hart 2019: 7). A popular solution to this racialized drug scare was to incarcerate Black users of heroin and offer methadone treatment to white users.

New York state was a forerunner in creating harsh drug laws to address heroin use in cities. The infamous Rockefeller drug laws of 1973 created mandatory minimum prison sentences of 15 years to life for possession of small amounts of heroin and other drugs (Hart & Hart 2019). Ninety percent of those convicted under the Rockefeller drug laws were Black and Latinx, though they represent a smaller proportion of people who use drugs in the population (Drucker 2002).

The societal response to opioid use and dependence among white people during this crisis has been gentler, relying more on treatment than the criminal justice system (Hart & Hart 2019; James & Jordan 2018). According to statistics from the Bureau of Justice, 80% of arrests for heroin trafficking are among Black and Latinx people, even though white people use heroin at higher rates and are known to purchase drugs within their own racial community (James & Jordan 2018).

As we examine the response to the overprescription of opioids and the harmful use of fentanyl, we see a stark difference in public response. We see a focus on monitoring doctors so that they don’t overprescribe opioids. We see a focus on the overuse of opioids as a medical disease needing treatment rather than criminalizing the user of the drug.

Our response to drug use in the opioid crisis is racialized. Researchers Netherland and Hansen summarize the unequal response this way:

> "The public response to White opioids looked markedly different from the response to illicit drug use in inner city Black and Brown neighborhoods, with policy differentials analogous to the gap between legal penalties for crack as opposed to powder cocaine. This less examined ‘White drug war’ has carved out a less punitive, clinical realm for Whites where their drug use is decriminalized, treated primarily as a biomedical disease, and where White social privilege is preserved… in the case of opioids, addiction treatment itself is being selectively pharmaceuticalized in ways that preserve a protected space for White opioid users, while leaving intact a punitive, carceral system as the appropriate response for Black and Brown drug use" (Netherland & Hansen 2017).

We can see a racialized response in the differential access to treatment options for the harmful use of opioids white people who use opioids have been given more access to the preferred addiction treatment medication, buprenorphine. Treatment with buprenorphine is less stigmatized because it is dispensed like any other pharmaceutical medication at a private doctor’s office

Another treatment option is methadone. This method requires frequent visits to a methadone clinic. Often people of color receive treatment at the less-preferred methadone clinics (Hansen 2015). Politicians legalized Buprenorphine treatments for opioid use disorder, supporting white addicts (Netherland & Hansen, 2017).

These characteristics of the social landscape contribute to increased health harms, such as contracting HIV or hepatitis C, for Black people who use drugs. Health harms caused by substance use are higher among Black people who use drugs, not because they participate in riskier drug use behavior, but because they reside in under-resourced communities that hinder access to health-promoting services and materials (Cooper et al. 2011). Accordingly, opioid overdose rates for Black people have historically been higher than those for white people in some states. Recently this rate has been increasing more rapidly, though the media attention surrounding the opioid crisis mostly focuses on drug use by white people (James & Jordan 2018).

As we have seen, the war on drugs has targeted Black and Brown communities, resulting in their disproportionate representation in prisons. As discussed in the Crime, Immigration, and Social Control chapter and above, there are long-lasting consequences of this criminalization for individuals, families, communities, and society at large. Many scholars, activists, and criminal justice professionals today are against this harsh, punitive approach to drug use. Instead, they favor a variety of other practices and policies, which we discuss next.

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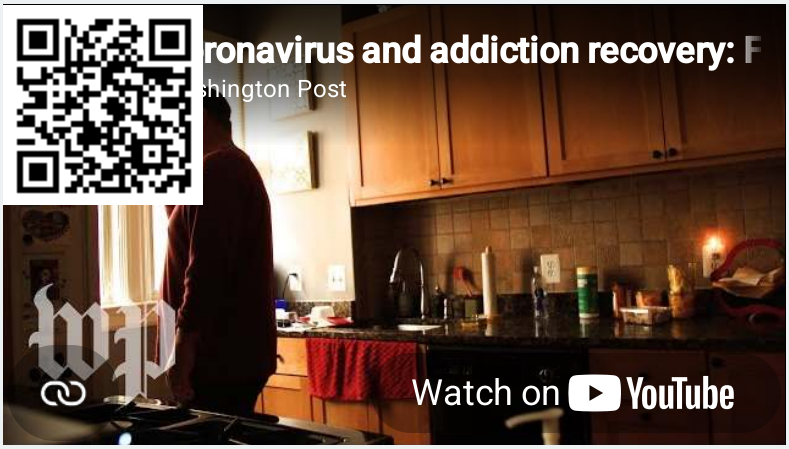
Strategies to Address Drug Problems

There are many individuals, organizations, and social movements who are working to address problems associated with harmful drug use. Social science, public health, biomedical, and legal scholars and researchers are diligently producing more evidence-based knowledge to guide societal efforts toward more humane and pragmatic responses to harmful drug use. Strategies to try to deal with this problem generally fall into various categories such as treatment, harm reduction, and other drug policies including those associated with the *War on Drugs* as discussed on the prior page. We elaborate on these strategies below. Finally, as social problems must be addressed interdependently, using both individual agency and collective action, citizens, lawmakers, health care workers, community advocates, and individuals must act to address drug-related problems. We review some examples of these efforts below.

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.

The video below focuses on the importance of in-person group meetings as part of drug treatment and the struggles faced by those in recovery as they attempted to stay sober during a global health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic.



The video Coronavirus and addiction recovery: Fighting isolation to stay sober encourages us to see connections across social problems. How did the COVID-19 pandemic make recovery from harmful drug use more complicated?

"Coronavirus and addiction recovery: Fighting isolation to stay sober" by The Washington Post is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

Perhaps the most famous treatment program is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), 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. Narcotics Anonymous shares the AA model. Other group settings are residential settings in which those seeking treatment stay at the facility, sometimes called detox units. In these settings, people check themselves into an organizational facility and may stay there for several weeks.

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 individuals off the drug to which they are addicted. For example, nicotine gum, patches, and other products are designed to help cigarette smokers stop smoking. Other individuals may ingest cannabis to reduce cravings for other more addictive drugs.

The various forms of treatment can be effective for some individuals and less effective or not effective for others, and most treatment programs do have a high failure rate (Goode 2012). A sociological perspective suggests that however effective treatment might be for some people, the origins of harmful drug use ultimately lie in the larger society – its social structure, social institutions, social interactions, and culture – and that these roots must be addressed for serious reductions in harmful drug use to occur. See the Applying Social Research box below for an example of group-specific structural causes of drug use and how it relates to treatment.

Applying Social Research

Indigenous Communities, Historical Trauma, and Drug Use

Indigenous people report the second highest rate of illicit drug use disorder between 2015 and 2019, at 4.8%. The highest percentage is among people who identify as two or more races or ethnicities. Indigenous people are also the highest percentage of people who sought treatment for illicit drug use disorders and received it (Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality 2021).

The work of researcher and professor Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (pictured below) explains how the historically-based trauma experienced by Indigenous communities in the United States may impact substance use. She emphasizes that the traumatic losses suffered across generations by the North American Indigenous populations meet the definition of genocide. She lists massive traumatic group experiences as part of the intergenerational trauma experienced by this community, which may contribute to substance use (2003:8).

This list includes traumas such as massacres, prisoner of war experiences, starvation, displacement, separation of children from families and placement in compulsory and often abusive boarding schools, disease epidemics, forced assimilation, and the loss of language, culture, and spirituality. All of this contributes to the breakdown of family kinship networks.

Brave Heart points to an 1881 US policy outlawing the practice of Native ceremonies, which prohibited traditional mourning practices. This undermined practices of healing and resolution that might improve wellness and potentially lower problematic substance use levels. Urban Indigenous people who use alcohol and/or other illicit substances reported symptoms of historical trauma (Wiechelt et al. 2012). Brave Heart points out that alcohol was not part of Indigenous culture except for in specific ceremonies before colonial contact. If you'd like to listen to Brave Heart herself, watch Historical Trauma in Native American Populations.

Researchers suggest that treatments for substance use disorder among Indigenous peoples should coincide with decolonizing practices. This means that Indigenous communities should be supported in making attempts and achieving control of land and services. Nutton and Fast report that:

> "…communities that have made attempts to regain control of land and services have been found to have lower suicide rates, reduced reliance on social assistance, reduced unemployment, the emergence of diverse and viable economic enterprises on reservation lands, more effective management of social services and programs, including language and cultural components, and improved management of natural resources" (2015: 842).

Identity formation can also be a helpful part of drug treatment for Indigenous individuals. Research indicates that increased participation of Indigenous peoples in their culture of origin can decrease the

prevalence of substance use disorder (Nutton & Fast 2015).

Finally, all drug treatment interventions should be culturally adapted for Indigenous communities. For example, among Indigenous people inhabiting the Great Plains, the Sun Dance was performed in thanksgiving for a bountiful year and a request for another year of food, health, and success. Today community members pledge to do the Sun Dance to maintain their sobriety from alcohol or drugs.



Researcher Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart of the Hunkpapa/Oglala Lakota examines drug use. How does her work explore generational trauma you might remember from the ACEs model in the Medicine and Health chapter?

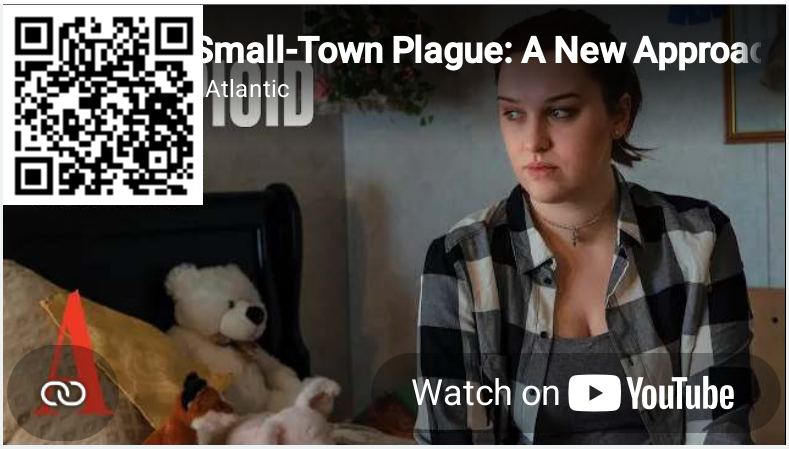
"Photo of Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart" is all rights reserved and included with permission

To address harmful drug use we must expand access to effective drug treatment. Expanding options takes collaboration by federal, state, and community partners to make a difference. Increasing funding for drug treatment, including drug treatment facilities, community-based drug treatment programs, and harm reduction programs (discussed below) can expand social justice for drug users.

Community-based drug treatment programs serve over 53% of people in recovery (Bowser 1998). They include Twelve Step programs and other peer-led recovery groups. These community-based organizations may serve people with specific social identities, such as recovery groups for firefighters, queer people, or women, as examples. In addition, a recent study found that even when harm reduction or drug treatment services were available, they couldn't offer enough wrap-around services to their clients. For example, even though many clients were unhoused, most programs didn't offer housing. Even when clients were parenting, the programs had no funding for childcare services (Krawczyk et al 2022).

Community-based programs may help reduce harmful drug use by increasing social connections and social capital. **Social capital** is defined as the social networks or connections that an individual has available to them due to group membership. Researchers may measure social capital by looking at voting rates, the number of non-profit and civic organizations in a community, and response rates to the census (Zoorob and Salemi 2017). These are all indicative of one's engagement with their community, as well as increased social linkages between people through community organizations. In other words, higher levels of social capital within a community might protect it from higher harmful drug use and overdose rates. Research documents the relationship between experiences with racism and illicit drug use among Black women (Ehrmin 2002), and finds that Black women used drugs less if they had a strong ethnic identity and were connected to their communities (Maclin-Akinyemi et al. 2019).

Community partnerships also help address the problem of harmful drug use. Multiple community organizations coming together – nonprofits, hospitals, criminal justice programs, schools, or whatever combination of local organizations – are stronger acting together than in isolation as they pool their resources. Watch the video below to see an example of the success of community partnerships.



Watch the first 5 minutes of the video A Small-Town Plague: A New Approach to Opioid Addiction, which describes community partnerships that support reducing harmful drug use in communities. How do these approaches leverage existing interdependence, individual agency, and collective action to reduce harm?

"A Small-Town Plague: A New Approach to Opioid Addiction" by The Atlantic is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

In addition, drug treatment programs should take an *intersectional* approach. Social class and race impact access to drug treatment. Most elective drug treatment programs require some form of payment for services. Those without insurance and without the financial means to pay will be unable to receive treatment. Researchers have also found that racial discrimination has prevented entry for Black and Indigenous people into more desirable forms of drug treatment (Hansen 2015). Thus, quality treatment may be out of reach particularly for individuals who are low-income and of color.

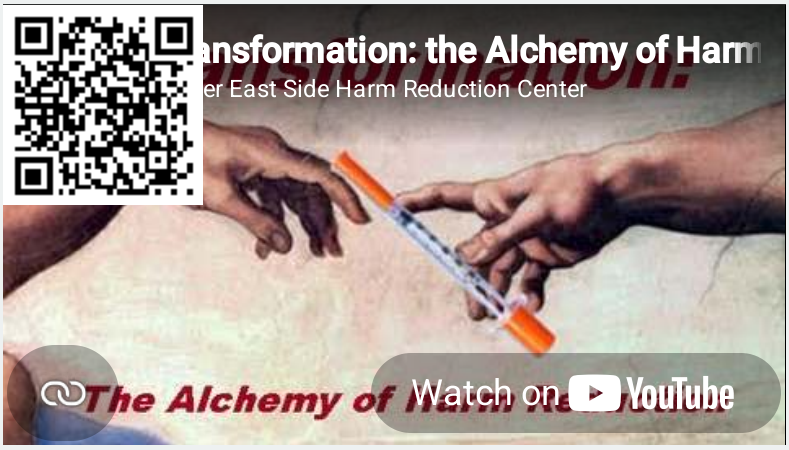
Race and class also play a role in determining which type of opioid use disorder treatment one will receive. Hansen (2015) found that people of color were often only offered the option of the less desirable methadone treatment, which requires near-daily visits to a clinic and a demeaning and constricting practice of surveillance (Bourgois 2000). In contrast, white middle-class individuals were more likely to be given the opportunity to receive buprenorphine treatment for their opioid use disorder. This type of treatment is more private and requires significantly fewer medical interactions. Hansen (2015) sees this systemic discrimination as not only a form of oppression for low-income people of color but also as a mechanism of maintaining the race and class privilege of white middle-class individuals.

Another approach, which overlaps with drug policy strategies, involves the use of drug courts. These began in the 1990s and now number more than 2,500 across the US. 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 drug courts save money compared to imprisoning drug offenders and that they are more effective than imprisonment in reducing offenders' drug habits (Stinchcomb 2010). Plainly stated, treatment is more effective at addressing drug use and addiction than is incarceration.

Harm Reduction

Another strategy involves harm reduction. **Harm reduction** is a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use (Harm Reduction Principles N.d.). Harm reduction is both a *public health approach* to drug use and also a *social movement* for social justice built on a belief in, and respect for, the rights of people who use drugs. It focuses on providing people who use drugs with the information and material tools to reduce their risks while using drugs. It recognizes that 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. Instead, this approach focuses on reducing the harm of substance use rather than requiring abstinence from all drug use. Similar harm reduction strategies are wearing seat belts or providing adolescents with condoms.

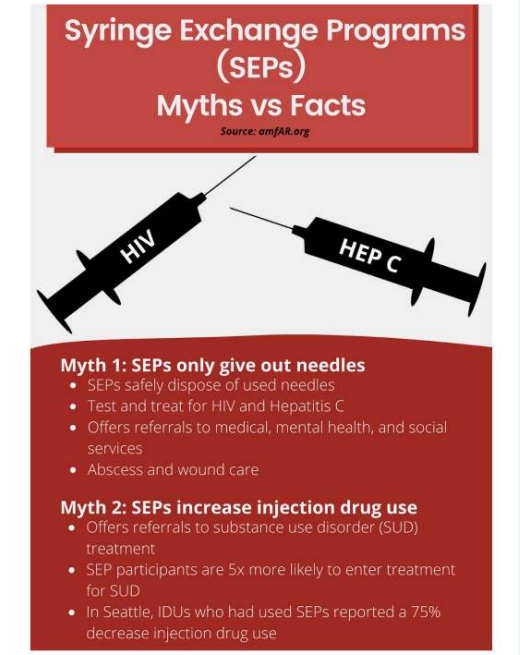
The first minute of the video below provides a list of the ways that harm reduction creates a safer environment for everyone. The philosophy behind harm reduction revolutionizes the way we respond to human problems, namely addiction, drug overdose, and HIV. Harm reduction uses a grassroots approach based on advocacy from and for people who use drugs and accept alternatives to abstinence of drug use that reduce harm (Marlatt 1996). According to the National Harm Reduction Coalition (2024), the central harm reduction organization in the US, a core principle of harm reduction philosophy "accepts for better or worse, that licit and illicit drug use is part of our world and chooses to work to minimize its harmful effects rather than simply ignore or condemn them."



Please watch at least the first 5 minutes of Transformation: The Alchemy of Harm Reduction. It describes an innovative harm reduction program in New York. As you watch, consider how this approach changes the conversation around harmful drug use. Also, how can syringe exchange be a starting place for creating social transformation?

"Transformation: The Alchemy of Harm Reduction" by Lower East Side Harm Reduction Center is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

One of the most well-known harm reduction practices is syringe exchange (see the infographic below). This strategy involves the distribution of clean, sterile needles for people who inject heroin, cocaine, or other drugs. Many of these users share needles, and this sharing may spread HIV, hepatitis, and other diseases. If they have a supply of 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. This became legal during the HIV epidemic of the 1980s and '90s to help people who inject drugs avoid infection with the then-deadly virus. The National Harm Reduction Coalition (2024) states that "Syringe service programs (SSPs) distribute sterile syringes, safer drug use supplies, and education to people who inject drugs."



In this infographic, we see myths about syringe exchange programs and the facts that dispel the myths. Syringe exchange programs reduce harm.

"Syringe Exchange Programs (SEP) Myths vs. Facts" from "Syringe Exchange Toolkit" by AIDS Advocacy Network, American Medical Students Association is included under fair use

Sometimes people oppose syringe service programs because they think it might enable drug use. Research shows the opposite. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019), new users of syringe service programs are "five times more likely to enter drug treatment and three times more likely to stop using drugs than those who don't use the programs."

The current *opioid crisis* in the US is causing a dramatic increase in infectious diseases associated with injection drug use, such as HIV or hepatitis C. Syringe service programs are known to reduce HIV and hepatitis C infection rates by an estimated 50 percent (Platt et al. 2017). When paired with medication-assisted treatment to treat opioid dependence, syringe service programs can reduce HIV and hepatitis C transmission by over two-thirds (Fernandes et al. 2017; Platt et al. 2017).

Syringe service programs can also prevent opioid overdoses by educating people who use drugs about ways to prevent overdose. Syringe service programs provide training on how to recognize an overdose and how to use naloxone or Narcan, a harmless medication that reverses opioid overdoses. Often syringe service programs will distribute overdose prevention kits that include naloxone (CDC 2019).

Currently, harm reduction is also associated with the distribution of the opioid overdose reversal antidote – Narcan or Naloxone. This harmless medication can almost instantaneously reverse an opioid overdose, saving a person's life.

The harm-reduction approach to address drug use can be controversial because some believe that it enables drug use. There is no scientific evidence to support this idea. Instead, scientific evidence shows that syringe exchange reduces HIV and hepatitis C rates, and the distribution of Narcan lowers drug overdose mortality rates (Chimbar & Moleta 2018; Fernandes et al. 2017; Platt et al. 2018).

Drug Policy

Many and perhaps most scholars think that the war on drugs has had little, if any, impact on drug use (Walker 2011), and many scholars recognize that this war brought with it many adverse consequences. As Kleiman et al. (2011: 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 19 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: 3). Decriminalization and even legalization of drugs should be seriously considered, the report concluded.

Given this backdrop, many drug experts question whether the nation's 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 – our society should do what it can to minimize the many harms that drugs can 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.

✔ 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 cannabis, 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. Cannabis 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% of Dutch residents ages 15–64 have used cannabis at least once in their lives, compared to 40% 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 cannabis possession and use, and their rates of cannabis 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 users receiving addiction treatment increased by 41%. 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 US in many ways, their experience strongly suggests that decriminalization of drugs may cause more good than harm. If so, the US has important lessons to learn from their experiences.

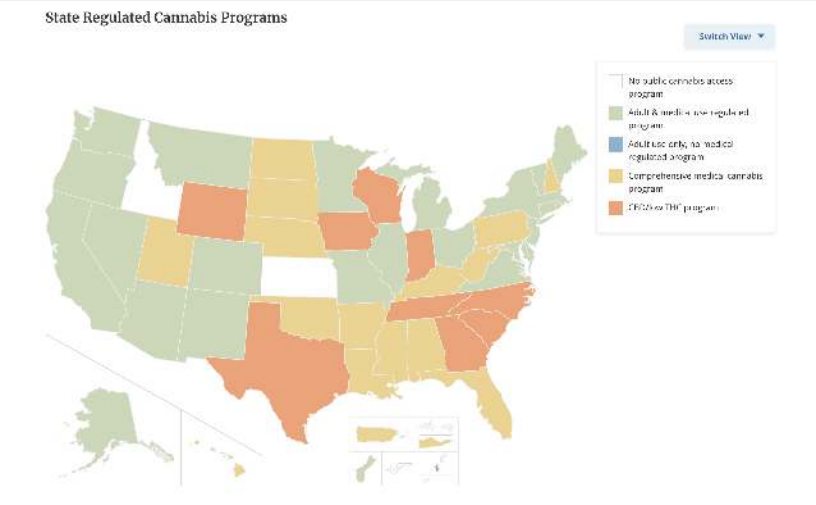
Sources: Hughes & Stevens 2010; Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2008; Reinarman & Hendrien 2004; Szaalavitz 2009; Tracey & Jahromi 2010

Some experts say that cannabis use should be decriminalized and that decriminalization of other drugs should be seriously considered. If cannabis were not only decriminalized but also legalized and taxed, it was estimated (in 2010 dollars) that this new tax revenue would amount to $8.7 billion annually and that about as much 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, treatment, and other needs (Kristof 2010). The great majority of US adults agree: Nearly 9 out of 10 believe that cannabis should be legalized for either medicinal or recreational purposes, with well over half feeling that it should be legal for both purposes. Conversely, only 1 in 10 are against its legalization (Pew Research Center 2024). We discuss legalization and decriminalization policies in more detail next.

Decriminalization and Legalization

Individuals who seek to decriminalize or legalize cannabis and the social movements they're involved in are often motivated by the nation's long history of systemic racism and the war on drugs. National social justice advocates recommend decriminalizing low-level drug offenses as a way to decrease oppression in our criminal justice system. **Decriminalization** is the act of reducing penalties for possession/use of small amounts from criminal sanctions to fines or civil penalties (Galvin 2014). For example, in order to address the racial and ethnic disparities in criminal justice systems, Ashley Nellis (2021) from the Sentencing Project recommends that we "discontinue arrest and prosecutions for low-level drug offenses which often lead to the accumulation of prior convictions which accumulate disproportionately in communities of color. These convictions generally drive further and deeper involvement in the criminal legal system."

Legalization means to make the possession and use of a drug legal (Galvin 2014a). In the decade after 2012, 24 states and Washington, DC legalized cannabis for adults over the age of 21. Legalizing cannabis has meant fewer arrests and jail time. For instance, in Oregon, the number of cannabis arrests decreased by 96% from 2013-2016, the year cannabis was legalized there for adult recreational use (Drug Policy Alliance 2022). Further, another seven states have decriminalized cannabis, as of summer 2024 (National Conference of State Legislatures 2024).



> This map, from the National Conference of State Legislatures, indicates which states have regulatory programs regarding the use of cannabis as of 2024.
>
> *Source*: National Conference of State Legislatures 2024

The Drug Policy Alliance, a nonprofit organization that advocates for the decriminalization of drugs, examined rates of youth cannabis use. They found that since the legalization of cannabis use in some states, youth use rates have remained stable and, in some cases, gone down. They have also found that legalization has not made roadways less safe due to driving under the influence of cannabis. Finally, they show that states are using the money generated through taxes on legal cannabis for social good (The Drug Policy Alliance 2022). For instance, in Oregon, 40% of the cannabis tax revenue goes to the state school fund, and 20% goes to alcohol and drug treatment.

However, health researchers remain concerned about the impacts of cannabis legalization. Hammond et al. (2020) point out that we must balance the negative impacts with the positive effect of decriminalization, reducing youth juvenile justice involvement. Youth involvement in the juvenile justice system can have long-lasting negative impacts on the life outcomes of youth. For example, involvement in the juvenile justice system may disrupt education or cause long-lasting mental health problems. We must consider the reduction of these types of issues alongside the known negative impacts of youth cannabis use.

Another equity issue arises with the legalization of cannabis and the rise of a money-making industry. A drug-related felony on an individual's record may be a barrier to gaining a license to sell cannabis through a dispensary. As we've discussed in this chapter, due to systemic racism within drug policy enforcement, those with drug-related felonies on their record are disproportionately Black. This means that Black entrepreneurs may be disproportionately blocked from entering the cannabis industry. Several states and cities have implemented equity programs to address this issue. In California, a prior drug felony cannot be the sole basis for denying a cannabis license. In Portland, Oregon a portion of cannabis sales tax revenue is spent on funding women-owned and minority-owned cannabis businesses (DPA).

Other Drug Policies

In addition to the measures discussed above, several other policies might well reduce certain kinds of harmful drug use or at least reduce the harm that both drugs and our current drug policies cause (Kleiman et al. 2011). These policies include, but aren't limited to, the following:

1. **Encouraging primary care physicians and other health-care providers to screen more carefully for harmful drug use.** Incorporating more careful screening could help identify harmful drug users and individuals at risk of engaging in harmful drug use, such as those experiencing mental health challenges, so that they may be referred to prevention or treatment programs and other resources.
2. **Providing legally prescribed heroin and/or substitute opiates, including methadone, for heroin users.** This method helps monitor and reduce levels of harmful drug use, particularly for drugs with severe health consequences. Its provision has proven effective in several other nations.
3. **Preventing harmful drug use through education-based prevention programs focusing 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 less likely to do so when they become adults. Some education strategies follow an *informational model*, involving public-service advertising, the distribution of drug pamphlets in medical offices, and other such efforts. However, some studies question the effectiveness of strategies based on this model (Faupel et al. 2010).
4. **Abandoning DARE and similar programs in favor of school-based prevention programs.** 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). According to Kleiman et al. (2011: 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*.** This method would involve providing those struggling with drug addiction or SUD with small cash payments for clean drug tests, as these rewards have been shown to be effective.
6. **Raising alcohol taxes.** According to Kleiman et al., 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,” they write, “there is no bargain as attractive as a higher alcohol tax" (2011: 204).

7. **Raising the tobacco cigarette tax.** Government data indicate that every 10% increase in the price of cigarettes reduces cigarette consumption among young people by four-fifths (CDC 2011). Raising taxes on cigarettes in the low-tax states may reduce cigarette smoking in these states. The new tax revenue could be used to fund treatment programs that help reduce smoking.
8. **Fully reintegrating former drug dealers and users in recovery into society.** This is the idea that former dealers and those in recovery 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.

No matter the approach, reducing harmful drug use and revising harmful drug policy is social justice. It helps address social inequalities including by reducing the disproportionate consequences of harmful drug use and policy for people of marginalized groups.

Individual Agency and Collective Action

We have already offered some examples of individual agency and collective action in reducing the problem of harmful drug use. For instance, harm reduction is both a public health approach and a social movement, the latter of which inherently involves individual agency and collective action as individuals decide to take action and collaborate with others to create social change. Here we will discuss a couple more examples of efforts to address harmful drug use and the consequences of the war on drugs.

Perhaps the most famous residential treatment program is the Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage, California. Betty Ford, the wife of President Gerald Ford, used her individual agency to publicly acknowledge and discuss her own alcoholism at a time when discussing those issues publicly was taboo, especially for women. Moreover, she used her privilege and standing to establish the Betty Ford Center, a residential rehabilitation treatment center in 1982. Mrs. Ford modeled the center's treatment program after the Hazelden Foundation's model of care, which dates back to 1949. The foundation's approach was revolutionary at the time, as a pamphlet from its early days makes clear: "Alcoholism is recognized at Hazelden for what it is—a disease—and not a moral deficiency."



This image is of Betty Ford, who used her individual agency and standing to establish the Betty Ford Center, a residential treatment program for people in need of alcohol and drug treatment.

Image courtesy of Betty Ford Center, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BETTYFORD.jpg

In 2014, the two organizations merged into the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, now the largest nonprofit addiction treatment center in the US. As the organization's website (2025) explains: "Today, in harnessing science, love and the wisdom of lived experience, the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation is a force of healing and hope across the country and around the world for families and communities affected by substance use and mental health conditions" (Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum n.d.; Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation 2025). This successful nonprofit organization is a result of individuals acting on their own agency.

Other individuals have engaged in individual agency and collective action efforts to help address drug-related problems. Cops likely do not come to mind when you think of who collectively fights against the war on drugs and racialized social control it involves. In fact, a group of police officers and other officials and professionals in the criminal justice system came together to establish an organization working toward the legalization of drugs. Now known as the Law Enforcement Action Partnership, the nonprofit organization advocates for policy that views harmful drug use as a public health problem, rather than a criminal justice problem. Read more about the organization and its members below.

People Making a Difference

Law Enforcement Against Prohibition

Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (LEAP), now known as Law Enforcement Action Partnership, 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. Many of these professionals were on the front lines in the war on drugs and have a unique perspective that should be considered in drug policy.

One of their members is MacKenzie Allen, a 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 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, the Law Enforcement Action Partnership is making a difference. In the image below, they identify the war on drugs as the root cause of other social problems. Read more about their perspectives on drug policy at their Drug Policy website.



This image, created by LEAP, illustrates that the war on drugs is the root cause of "a staggering array of problems in today's society," including racial disparities, overincarceration, violence, homelessness, human rights abuses, and more.

Sources: Allen 2001; Law Enforcement Against Prohibition 2011; Law Enforcement Action Partnership 2025; McNamara 2010

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Review of Drug Problems

Summary

1. Humans have used drugs of various types since prehistoric times. Alcohol has been a common drug in the US since the colonial period, and opium, cannabis, and heroin were common legal drugs in the late nineteenth century.
2. Our ideas about legal and illegal drug use and their consequences are *socially constructed*. They vary across time periods and are constructed in ways that reflect social inequalities. The distinction between legal and illegal drugs today lacks a logical basis, and has roots in racist thought.
3. **Harmful drug use** involves the use of a drug negatively impacting a person's life, family, or community. Whereas **addiction** refers to the physiological or psychological reliance on a drug, health professionals today prefer the language of **substance use disorder**, the medical diagnosis to describe the uncontrolled use of drugs despite harmful consequences.
4. Sociological approaches to explain harmful drug use and harmful drug policies focus on how structural inequalities like racism or economic inequalities influence their consequences. They also attribute harmful drug use to peer and cultural influences. Thus, they focus on social contexts rather than blaming individuals.
5. Structural functionalists view harmful drug use as having dysfunctions for society as it interferes with individuals' abilities to fully contribute to society. Conflict theories focus on social inequalities such as how the **criminalization** of Black people is a form of racialized social control, as well as how corporations are responsible for harmful drug use as they engage in problematic practices in order to increase profit. Symbolic interactionists emphasize how people become harmful drug users through their social interactions, as well as the symbolism and labeling or stereotyping of drugs and drug users.
6. The use and consequences of drugs are socially patterned, with variation by age, race, gender, social class, and other areas of social location. Outcomes of drug policies such as the war on drugs also vary by social location, with more adverse consequences for people in marginalized groups, particularly Black people and other people of color.
7. Examples of the consequences of drug use and harmful drug use include individual health complications including death, impacts on families such as stress, financial costs, and relationship strain, and impacts on society including poorer population health, high economic costs, more housing insecurity, and other consequences.
8. The **war on drugs** is a punitive approach to the problem of drug use or harmful drug use, which criminalizes drug use rather than taking a public health approach. Critics of the war on drugs strategy say that it does more harm than good, and they urge that serious consideration be given to **decriminalizing** or **legalizing** certain drugs.
9. Taking action to reduce harmful drug use and harmful drug policies requires improved treatment programs, changes in drug policy, and individual agency and collective action. Promising strategies include supporting **harm reduction** programs, funding community-based treatment programs, implementing successful educational prevention programs, raising taxes on legal drugs, and fighting racism and other systems of oppression in the criminal justice system.

Questions

1. Were you surprised to read that racial prejudice helped lead to bans on opium, cannabis, and cocaine, and why or why not?
2. Do you agree or disagree that the distinction between legal drugs and illegal drugs is not logical, and why?
3. Find an older video, print, or social media ad that is selling or against selling a mind-altering substance (e.g., prohibition, smoking in old movies, medical cannabis, etc) – how did this ad capture the beliefs or opinions of the drug at the time, and how have the views changed over time?
4. Taking into account the variation in drug use and abuse by age, gender, race, social class, how would you use this information to understand your own level of use (or nonuse) of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, and other drugs or the level of use of your peers?
5. How do biology, psychology, and sociology explain harmful drug use in different ways, and how might they complement each other rather than being only in competition?
6. Per the harm reduction approach, do you think that the US should make sterile needles and syringes freely available to people inject drugs, and why?
7. How can we see mass incarceration as a social problem related to the racialization of drug use?
8. Do you think that the war on drugs has done more harm than good or the reverse, and why?
9. What are the advantages and disadvantages of legalizing currently illegal drugs?

10. Which drug treatment services are available in your community, and are they community-based, medical, or carceral? Which do think are most effective?

Action Steps

1. Use your sociological imagination: Next time you have or hear a judgement about people who engage in harmful drug use or have a substance use disorder, describe how their use/disorder may be connected to social causes.
2. Support nonprofits and similar organizations: Volunteer for a local agency or group that provides wraparound support to individuals with substance use disorders or utilizes harm reduction approaches.
3. Use your individual agency: Start or join in efforts on your campus to encourage responsible drug use over harmful drug use such as for drinking and vaping, or reach out to your state representatives encouraging the state to raise taxes on alcohol and cigarettes to help reduce their harmful use.
4. Engage in collective action: Research local or national groups that are engaged in organized action around improving drug policy in ways that don't perpetuate social inequalities, select one, and figure out how to get involved in their efforts.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Conflict, War, and Terrorism

Overview of Conflict, War, and Terrorism
Theoretical Perspectives on Conflict, War, and Terrorism
Patterns of Conflict, War, and Terrorism
Militarism and the Military Budget
Strategies to Address Conflict, War, and Terrorism
Review of Conflict, War, and Terrorism
References for Conflict, War, and Terrorism

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Overview of Conflict, War, and Terrorism

Learning Objectives

- Define various types of conflict, war, and terrorism.
- Summarize sociological theoretical perspectives on and other explanations of conflict, war, and terrorism.
- Describe examples of each of the types of conflict, war, and terrorism, including how they overlap.
- Identify examples of the consequences of conflict, war, and terrorism.
- Summarize the concern over militarism and the size of the US defense budget.
- Outline approaches that show promise for preventing conflict, war, and terrorism and addressing their consequences.

In his Chance for Peace address in 1953, President Eisenhower called for the nation to reconsider its priorities: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed" (Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, National Archives 2025). Please read more of the quote below.

Quote

> Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.
>
> This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.
>
> The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: A modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some 50 miles of concrete highway.
>
> We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people. ...
>
> Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.
>
> –President Eisenhower

This quote is striking against the modern US defense budget, with accounts for nearly half of all the nation's *discretionary funds* (determined annually by Congress through appropriations), even excluding other defense-related costs such as certain veterans' benefits, which are considered nondefense spending. Other examples of nondefense spending include:

- Transportation
- Education, training, employment, and Social Services
- Income Security
- Health
- Administration of justice
- International Affairs
- Natural resources and environment
- Community and regional development
- General science, space, and technology
- Other such as administrative costs of Medicare and Social Security, housing credits, agriculture, and energy programs (Congressional Budget Office 2025).

In other words, we spend nearly as much in discretionary funds on defense alone as we do on education, health, the environment, and other concerns combined. To be fair, some of these concerns are also addressed through *mandatory funds* (automatic funds governed by law) such as Medicare and Medicaid, Disability Insurance, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),

tax credits, and so on. However, as of 2024 the US defense budget is larger than the next nine countries combined, and well over three times that of the next in line, China (Peter G. Peterson Foundation 2025).

In this sense, defense – against conflict, war, and terrorism – defines the nation. The US has been involved in conflict and war since its inception, and ramped up its concern with terrorism over the past few decades. In this chapter, we discuss conflict, war, and terrorism with a special focus on the US context. We also discuss the *militarism* that defines the nation, including the enormous US defense budget. This discussion aligns with the sociological concept of the *military industrial complex*, a term used by President Eisenhower in a different speech. In exploring strategies to address conflict, war, and terrorism, we question this complex and the US defense budget, especially with Eisenhower's framing – a 'theft' from the nation's well-being.

Defining Conflict, War, and Terrorism

Conflict, war, and terrorism are interrelated but each distinct. They are also vast and diverse, making them challenging to succinctly describe. Below we provide general definitions of conflict, war, and terrorism. We also describe different types of each. We refrain from offering many examples here, as we will focus on examples of each on the Patterns page.

Conflict

Conflict may occur between two or more groups as a result of competing ideologies or cultural values, differences in religious or ethnic identities, disputes over land or resources, and more. Conflict may be within or between nations, and may lead to war or not. Some patterns of conflict demonstrate how the actions of dominant groups inspired by ideology and prejudice have caused great harm, particularly to marginalized social groups. In this chapter we describe a few of patterns of interaction between social groups in conflict. Note how each includes a degree of physical and/or psychological violence. We will briefly define these types of conflict here, then provide examples of each on the Patterns page.

Segregation is one pattern of interaction that arises when social groups are in conflict. **Segregation**, as we've discussed in prior chapters, refers to the social and sometimes legal separation of social groups on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other social group membership. We have covered *racial residential segregation*, in which neighborhoods are separated by race, *occupational gender segregation*, in which jobs are separated by gender, and both *de jure* and *de facto educational segregation*, in which schools are separated by race and income – either by law or by fact. We will discuss racial segregation more broadly in this chapter, including de jure segregation. Segregation is a form of *social control* intended to maintain social hierarchies, with the dominant group enforcing the segregation.

Another pattern of conflict behavior is expulsion. **Expulsion** refers to when one group expels another group out of their home or homeland and into a different space. Expulsion includes a dominant group designating a specific area of the country in which another group is allowed to live, mandating that the group leave the country entirely, or forcing the group into concentration or internment camps. Expulsion is also a form of social control intended to disempower the group being expelled, displacing them from their homeland or secluding them from others.

Our final example is genocide. When describing Indian boarding schools in the chapter on Education, we introduced the concept of **genocide**: The systematic and widespread extermination of a cultural, ethnic, political, racial, or religious group. Genocide may involve the actual extermination of individuals in a specific group – widespread killings – or it may involve the eradication of a group's culture and identity. It is clear that with genocide, the dominant group seeks to eliminate another group entirely.

The US has, arguably, engaged in all of these patterns of interaction; with no doubt about the first two. We will review examples of US participation in these forms of conflict on the Patterns page.

War

War involves organized armed violence between social groups to achieve some objective. It has been defined as “sustained armed conflict” that causes “large-scale loss of life or extreme material destruction” (Worrell 2011: 1). Though when a war technically begins is often difficult to pinpoint, in the US, the Constitution grants Congress the sole power to declare that the nation is engaged in war.

Wars occur both between nations and within nations, when two or more factions engage in armed conflict. War between nations is called *international war* or **interstate war**, while war within nations is called *civil war* or **intrastate war**. The US has engaged in both. For instance, as aptly named, the US had the Civil War between the Union and the Confederacy in the 1860s. We have

engaged in many more interstate wars, such as the World Wars in the early-mid 1900s and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan more recently. We will list these and other wars that the US has participated in on the Patterns page, along with their *casualties*.

There are other types of war. *Total war* refers to those with no limits on weaponry or territorial scope, such as WWI which mobilized all of society's resources. *Just war* refers to those which are strongly supported by the public (they view it as morally correct or 'just'), such as WWII which many Americans viewed as just. *Proxy war* refers to those in which nations fight indirectly by taking sides in other wars, such as the Vietnam War which was a fight against the spread of communism (a thus a fight against Soviet ideologies). Today, there is *cyber war*, attacks on a nation's computer or online systems with hacking and malware, such as Russia's cyber attacks on the Ukraine and U.S.

Terrorism

Terrorism refers to the use or threat of violence against civilians or governments to achieve some objective. As the term suggests, it is intended to incite terror. Some terrorist attacks are conducted by organized networks of people such as with the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, and others are conducted by individuals such as with the bombing of the Oklahoma City Murrah Federal Building in 1995 (discussed below).

Although dozens of definitions of terrorism exist, most take into account what are widely regarded as three defining features of terrorism: The use of violence, the goal of making people afraid, and the desire for political, social, economic, and/or cultural change. A popular definition by political scientist Ted Robert Gurr (1989: 201) captures these features: Terrorism is "The use of unexpected violence to intimidate or coerce people in the pursuit of political or social objectives."

When we think about this definition, 9/11 certainly comes to mind, but there are, in fact, several kinds of terrorism – based on the identity of the actors and targets – to which this definition applies. One typology of terrorism, again by Gurr (1989), is well-cited: Vigilante terrorism, insurgent terrorism, transnational (or international) terrorism, and state terrorism. However, though vigilante terrorism is domestic terrorism, the latter may be broader.



As the attacks on 9/11 remind us, terrorism involves the use of indiscriminate violence to instill fear in a population and thereby win certain political, economic, or social objectives.

Image courtesy of Bill Biggart, http://www.flickr.com/photos/nostri-imago/4951407339

Vigilante terrorism is committed by private citizens against other private citizens. Sometimes the motivation is racial, ethnic, religious, or other hatred, and sometimes the motivation is to resist social change. The violence of racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan was vigilante terrorism, as was the violence used by white Europeans against Native Americans from the 1600s through the 1800s. What we now call "hate crime" is a contemporary example of vigilante terrorism. Vigilante terrorism is a form of **domestic terrorism**, which refers to when private citizens engage in acts of violence against other citizens of their own nation. However, domestic terrorism also includes when private citizens commit violence against state actors in order to influence policy or operations of the government, which overlaps with the next type of terrorism.

Insurgent terrorism is committed by private citizens against their own government or against businesses and institutions seen as representing the 'establishment.' US history is filled with insurgent terrorism, starting with some of the actions the colonists waged against British forces before and during the American Revolution, when "the meanest and most squalid sort of violence was put to the service of revolutionary ideals and objectives" (Brown 1989: 25). An example here is tarring and feathering: Hot tar and then feathers were smeared over the unclothed bodies of Tories. Some of the labor violence committed after the Civil War also falls

under the category of insurgent terrorism, as does some of the violence committed by left-wing groups during the 1960s and 1970s. A significant example of right-wing insurgent terrorism is the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols that killed 168 people.

Transnational terrorism is committed by the citizens of one nation against targets in another nation. This is the type that has most concerned Americans at least since 9/11, yet 9/11 was not the first time that Americans had been killed by international terrorism. A decade earlier, a truck bombing at the World Trade Center killed six people and injured more than 1,000 others. In 1988, 189 Americans were among the 259 passengers and crew who died when a plane bound for New York exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland. Agents from Libya were widely thought to have planted that bomb. Despite these American deaths, transnational terrorism has actually been much more common in several other nations: London, Madrid, and various cities in the Middle East have often been the targets of international terrorists.

State terrorism involves violence by a government that is meant to frighten its own citizens and thereby stifle their dissent. State terrorism may involve mass murder, assassinations, and torture. Whatever its form, state terrorism has killed and injured more people than all the other kinds of terrorism combined (Gareau 2010). *Genocide*, defined above, is the most deadly type of state terrorism, but state terrorism also occurs on a smaller scale. As just one example, the violent response of Southern white law enforcement officers to the civil rights protests of the 1960s amounted to state terrorism, as officers murdered or beat hundreds of activists during this period. Although state terrorism is usually linked to authoritarian regimes, many observers say that the US government also engaged in state terrorism and genocide during the nineteenth century, when US troops killed thousands of Native Americans (Brown 2009).

The Snapshot table below summarizes the types of conflict, war, and terrorism that we have discussed above.

Types of Conflict, War, and Terrorism Snapshot

Conflict	
Segregation	The social, sometimes legal, separation of groups
Expulsion	The expelling of a social group out of one space into another
Genocide	The systematic and widespread extermination of a group
War	
Interstate or international war	Sustained armed conflict between nations
Intrastate or civil war	Sustained armed conflict within a nation
Terrorism	
Transnational terrorism	Violence committed by citizens of one nation against targets in another nation
Domestic terrorism	Violence committed by citizens within one nation against targets in that nation
Vigilante terrorism	Violence committed domestically by citizens in the name of retribution or the social order
Insurgent terrorism	Violence committed by citizens against their government or 'establishment' organizations
State terrorism	Violence committed by a government against its own citizens

On the following pages we outline various explanations for conflict, war, and terrorism, offering special focus on sociological framings including the classical theoretical perspectives. We also discuss more examples of conflict, war, and terrorism and their consequences. We then shift attention to a related special topic: Militarism and the US military budget, which connects to a concept introduced in the Theoretical Perspectives page: The *military industrial complex*. Finally, we review potential strategies to reduce conflict, war, and terrorism and their consequences.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Conflict, War, and Terrorism

The enormity of conflict, war, and terrorism has long stimulated scholarly interest in why humans engage in it (Levy & Thompson 2010). A popular explanation for war derives from *evolutionary biology*. According to this argument, war is part of our genetic heritage because the humans who survived tens of thousands of years ago were those who were most able, by virtue of their temperament and physicality, to take needed resources from other humans they attacked and to defend themselves from attackers. In this manner, a genetic tendency for physical aggression and warfare developed and thus still exists today. In support of this evolutionary argument, some scientists note that chimpanzees and other primates also engage in group aggression against others of their species (Wrangham 2004). Similarly, it is easy to assume that terrorists must have psychological concerns that lead them to have sadistic personalities, and that they are simply acting irrationally and impulsively.

However, most researchers agree that terrorists are psychologically 'normal' despite their murderous violence and, in fact, are little different from other types of individuals who use violence for political ends. As one scholar observed,

> "Most terrorists are no more or less fanatical than the young men who charged into Union cannon fire at Gettysburg or those who parachuted behind German lines into France. They are no more or less cruel and coldblooded than the Resistance fighters who executed Nazi officials and collaborators in Europe, or the American GI's ordered to 'pacify' Vietnamese villages" (Rubenstein 1987: 5).

Additionally, scientists dispute the evolutionary explanation for several reasons (Begley 2009). First, the human brain is far more advanced than the brains of other primates, and genetic instincts that might drive these primates' behavior do not necessarily drive human behavior. Second, many societies studied by anthropologists have been very peaceful, suggesting that a tendency to warfare is more cultural than biological. Third, most people are not violent, and most soldiers have to be *resocialized* (in boot camp or its equivalent) to overcome their deep moral convictions against killing. If warlike tendencies were part of human genetic heritage, these convictions would not exist.



Scholars have attempted to explain why human beings wage war. A popular explanation comes from the field of evolutionary biology and claims that a tendency toward warfare is hardwired into our genetic heritage because it conferred certain evolutionary advantages. Sociologists, however, emphasize social factors in explaining war.

"US Army 51817 BAGHDAD" on Wikimedia Commons is courtesy of Sgt. Joshua Risner, US Army

Sociological explanations for conflict, war, and terrorism center social factors such as politics, populations, the environment, and other structural factors, as well as ideology and prejudice. We provide examples below before focusing on how the three classical sociological perspectives frame or explain war as well as conflict more broadly and terrorism.

Political Decisions. If warfare is not biological in origin, then it is best understood as a social phenomenon, one that has its roots in the decisions of political and military officials. Sometimes, as with the US entrance into World War II after Pearl Harbor, these decisions are sincere and based on a perceived necessity to defend a nation's people and resources, and sometimes these decisions are based on cynicism and deceit (Solomon 2006). A prime example of this latter dynamic is the Vietnam War. The 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, in which Congress authorized President Lyndon Johnson to wage an undeclared war in Vietnam, was passed after North Vietnamese torpedo boats allegedly attacked US ships. However, later investigation revealed that the attack never occurred and that the White House lied to Congress and the American people (Wells 1994). Four decades later, questions of deceit

were again raised after the US began the war against Iraq because of its alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction. These weapons were never found, and critics charged that the White House had fabricated and exaggerated evidence of the weapons in order to win public and congressional support for the war (Danner 2006).

Population Change. Although war is a social phenomenon arising from decisions of political and military officials, other phenomena can make it more likely that these officials will decide to go to war. Population growth may lead to armed conflict of various types, including war, because growing populations need more food, water, and other resources. History shows that when these resources become too scarce within a society, that society is more likely to go to war to wrest these resources from another society (Gleditsch & Theisen 2010).

Environmental Change. Environmental change is a source of armed conflict, including war (Fisman & Miguel 2010). The Environment chapter will discuss these problems further, with *climate change* as a main concern. When weather disasters and other environmental changes cause drought, flooding, or other outcomes, crops and other resources become scarcer. Historically, this scarcity has motivated societies to go to war.

Other Structural Factors. Many scholars say that terrorism also has structural roots. In this view, terrorism is a rational response, no matter how horrible it may be, to perceived grievances regarding economic, social, and/or political conditions (White 2012). The heads of the 9/11 Commission, which examined the terrorist attacks of that day, reflected this view in the following assessment: "We face a rising tide of radicalization and rage in the Muslim world – a trend to which our own actions have contributed. The enduring threat is not Osama bin Laden but young Muslims with no jobs and no hope, who are angry with their own governments and increasingly see the United States as an enemy of Islam" (Kean & Hamilton 2007). As this assessment indicates, structural conditions do not justify terrorism, of course, but they do help explain why some individuals decide to commit it.

Ideology and Prejudice. Conflict, war, and terrorism are also fueled by ideological reasons: Individuals and groups have certain belief systems that lead them to hold prejudice and other hostile feelings toward individuals, groups, or nations with different belief systems or backgrounds. Religion is an important ideology in this regard. Historically and also today, nations in the Middle East and elsewhere have gone to war or are otherwise in conflict because of religious differences. In another example, although the causes of World War II are complex, Hitler's effort to conquer much of Europe stemmed at least partly from his prejudicial ideology that Aryans (Germans and other Europeans with blond hair and blue eyes) were a superior species and that all others were inferior (Bess 2008).

Sociological Perspectives

The three major sociological perspectives offer different understandings of conflict, war, and terrorism. The Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot table below summarizes these assumptions.

Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Structural functionalism	War and terrorism serve important functions such as increasing social solidarity or helping preserve freedom and democracy. They may be dysfunctional for society when they violate social solidarity or have negative latent functions.
Conflict theory	War and militarism primarily advance the interests of the power elite, who benefit from the defense industry. Conflict, war, and terrorism also fuel the military-industrial complex and take billions of dollars from unmet social needs.
Symbolic interactionism	Symbols such as the national flag play an important role in raising support for war and national pride. Definitions of terms also play an important role in public opinion regarding conflict, war, and terrorism.

Structural Functionalism

Recall that functionalism emphasizes the usefulness of certain behaviors and social institutions for many aspects of society. One of functionalism's insights is that social problems might actually be useful in this way; however, they may also cause many difficulties. For instance, terrorism is a social problem that has negative consequences for society, but it also creates hundreds jobs in sectors of the economy that deal with national defense.

In this spirit, functionalism emphasizes the ways in which conflict, war, and terrorism are useful for society, however horrible they are in so many other ways. Perhaps the first sociologist to make this point for war was Robert E. Park, the 1925 president of the American Sociological Association (which was then called the American Sociological Society – a name that was later changed because of its acronym!). In January 1941, less than a year before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Park (1941) published in a leading sociology journal an influential essay called The Social Function of War: Observations and Notes.

Park's essay outlined several functions of war. First, war and conflict help resolve international disputes over matters such as territorial boundaries and religious and other ideologies. No matter what one might think of war, historically it has resolved disputes between nations, with the winner of the war winning the dispute. Even though very few people would say that war is a preferred method for resolving a dispute, it still has performed this function.

Second, conflict and war generate a stronger sense of social bonding and solidarity within the societies that are at war. Having a common enemy, people within a society in conflict or at war 'come together' with a shared purpose and feel more united and patriotic than before. This dynamic is called the *external conflict/internal cohesion* process (Markides & Cohn 1982). Although Park did not discuss terrorism, this form of armed conflict can also create social solidarity. In the days and weeks after 9/11, Americans and even nations across the world came together, as the president of France famously said, "We are all Americans."



War generates a sense of social cohesion among the people in a society that is at war.

Glenn Harper – Flags – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Third, wars many centuries ago, such as those in which ancient Rome in essence formed and grew from conquering various tribes, led to the development of the nation-state as a political institution. As these tribes came under the rule of nation-states, their separate tribal identities weakened as they gradually identified themselves as one people belonging to their nation-state. Park referred to this process as "the coming-together and integration of races and peoples" (1941: 569). Moreover, the size and resources of these nation-states allowed them to generate scientific, cultural, and political advances that played an important role in world history. War, then, indirectly contributed to these advances. Although nation-states still might have eventually developed even without war, their development was accelerated by war.

Other functions of war can also be cited. Some wars, including the American colonists' war against England and the Allies' war against Hitler and Japan, have helped maintain and establish freedom and democracy. In the past and also today, war and military service have also provided important opportunities for jobs and career advancement for people of color and women. Related to this, the US military provides millions of jobs annually and is a ready form of employment for people who only have a high school

education. More generally, the military and the defense industry are certainly important components of the US economy, and military spending in some eras has helped stimulate the US economy. In perhaps the most notable example of this effect, spending for World War II is commonly credited with helping to lift the US out of the Great Depression (Shiller 2012).

In a final function, weapons research and other types of military research have contributed to scientific and technological development in general. For example, military research played a key role in the early development of the Internet.

However, as with other problems, some structural functionalists focus on *latent functions* or negative consequences of conflict, war, and terrorism. For instance, a functionalist in this camp may argue that the lack of care for veterans after they return from war is a grave dysfunction of the institution of the state, which perpetuates other social problems such as mental health concerns, harmful drug use, and houselessness.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory's perspective is decidedly more critical than that of functionalism. There are different views within conflict theory about conflict, war, and terrorism but three related views stand out. The first view echoes President Eisenhower's concern over the power and influence of the **military-industrial complex**, which refers to the network of government and private industries that is driven by profit motives and influences policy, defense spending, and governmental operations (Auerbach & Baker 2021).

According to conflict theory, the US spends so much on the military and even goes to war because military officials, defense contractors, and political leaders work hand-in-hand in a rather cozy relationship. Although they may profess that their actions are meant to keep the nation safe, their ultimate goal is to enhance their political power and financial well-being. This cozy relationship may sound familiar.

The most famous critique of the military-industrial complex from a conflict theorist is that of sociologist C. Wright Mills in his book *The Power Elite* (1956). As discussed in prior chapters, the *power elite* is comprised of top government, business, and military leaders, which together constitute a ruling class that strongly influences society and works for its own interests, not for the interests of the nation. Members of the power elite, Mills said, see each other socially and serve together on the boards of directors of corporations, charitable organizations, and other bodies. When cabinet members, senators, and top generals and other military officials retire, they often become corporate executives; military officials in particular join defense contractors. Conversely, corporate executives often become cabinet members and other key political appointees, and defense industry executives often end up in the Pentagon. This circulation of the elites creates a rather cozy relationship that helps ensure their dominance over American life and in particular ensures that the military-industrial complex has an untold influence over economic and foreign policy.

A more recent critique of the military-industrial complex and foreign policy by sociologist Mark C. Worrell bluntly stresses the role played by the desire for corporate profits: "War is business and it is profitable… What we learned in the aftermath of World War II is that mass destruction is great for corporate profits… War is driven by corporate profits and corporations drive politics" (2011: 51). According to Worrell and other contemporary critics of what they call the *warfare state*, the US now has a permanent war economy. In their view, the *war on terrorism* after 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan "have only deepened the trend toward ever more concentrated state, corporate, and military power in a society that ostensibly embraces democratic values" (Boggs 2011: ix).

The second view of conflict theory concerns **imperialism**, the use of military power and other means to extend a nation's influence and control over other nations. This view, held by the more radical proponents of conflict theory, argues that war and other military ventures by the US are done for the sake of imperialism rather than for noble goals such as the preservation and extension of democracy. In this view, the US wages war and engages in other military actions to gain access to oil and other resources of other societies, with the ultimate aim of enriching multinational corporations and other parties. The characterization does not hold true for World War II, conflict theorists concede, but they argue it holds true for many and perhaps most other US wars and military actions, historically and today. In their view, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular were fought under false pretenses to maintain adequate oil supply and more generally to extend America's military and economic influence around the world (Worrell 2011).

A third view of conflict theory criticizes the size of the military budget and emphasizes the billions of dollars it takes from social needs such as poverty and climate change. As sociologist Carl Boggs argues,

> "The war economy, for its part, devours roughly one trillion dollars in material, technological, and human resources yearly… ensuring a pattern of waste, destruction, uneven development, eroded public infrastructures, and decimated social programs. Decaying American cities have become a supreme legacy of the warfare system" (2011: 17).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionist writing on war features several emphases. One theme concerns the perceptions and experiences of people involved in war: Soldiers, civilians, and others. There are many moving accounts, for example, both real and fictitious, of soldiers' lives on the battlefield and after they come home from war.

A second emphasis concerns the use of symbols to garner support for war or protest against war. Symbols such as the national flag evoke feelings of patriotism, perhaps especially when a nation is at war. The president and other politicians typically display a flag when they give major speeches, and it would be unthinkable for a flag not to be showing when the speech is about war. During the Vietnam War, protesters sometimes flew the US flag upside-down (the international symbol of distress) to show their hatred of the war, and others burned the flag in protest.

Another ubiquitous symbol during the Vietnam War was the so-called international peace symbol, originally designed in the late 1950s to symbolize concern over nuclear weapons. Vietnam War protesters wore this symbol on their clothing, and many put peace symbol decals on their motor vehicles, book bags, and other possessions.



The peace sign is an international anti-war symbol.

http://www.homemade-preschool.com/image-files/peace-sign-black.png

Other symbols can also be important. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, millions of Americans put magnetic yellow ribbons on their cars, SUVs, and pickup trucks to show their support for the troops. The largest manufacturer of the ribbons sold more than one million monthly a year after the war began. However, sales slipped as support for the war declined, and four years after the war numbered only 4,000 monthly (Ward 2007).

A third emphasis of symbolic interactionism concerns how concepts related to conflict, war, and terrorism come to be defined in ways that advance the goals of various parties. For example, a key goal of the military in basic training is to convince trainee soldiers that people they may face on the battlefield are 'the enemy' and, as such, an appropriate target for killing. Related to this goal is the need to convince trainees that when they kill an enemy soldier, the killing is a justified killing and not considered murder. Similarly, the military often refers to civilian deaths or wounding as *collateral damage* in a conscious attempt to minimize public horror at civilian casualties.

Another definitional issue concerns *terrorism*. As we shall discuss later, the definition of *terrorism* is subjective, as actions that some people might regard as 'terrorism' might be regarded by other people as 'freedom fighting' or some other much more positive term than terrorism. Symbolic interactionism is interested in subjective meanings such as these, as well as how they shape people's identities and interactions.

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Patterns of Conflict, War, and Terrorism

Caution

This page displays sensitive imagery (e.g., images of lynching and the Holocaust) and discusses sensitive topics (e.g., sexual assault and genocide).

There are countless examples of conflict, war, and terrorism across human history, and there are numerous examples in more recent centuries and even decades. On this page we apply the types of conflict, war, and terrorism discussed on the Overview page to real events occurring over the past few centuries including to the present day. Though we include a global perspective, which is necessary in discussing war, we focus largely on US involvement in conflict, war, and terrorism in the past and today. We also offer attention to several consequences of conflict, war, and terrorism, including the loss of life, liberty, and culture, sexual assault, fear, and other outcomes.

Conflict

In the subsections that follow, we provide examples of segregation, expulsion, and genocide in the US and abroad. Keep in mind the Caution box above, as you will encounter imagery that may be emotionally challenging to view – images that depict the realities and horrors of conflict, war, and violence. Please feel free to skip this imagery if needed.

Segregation

African Americans have a history of maltreatment that began during the colonial period, when Africans were forcibly transported from their homelands to be sold as enslaved people in the Americas. Though, even Black Americans who were not enslaved faced mistreatment and violence. For instance, during the 1830s, white mobs attacked free Black people and communities 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). This continued well into the twentieth century, when white mobs attacked Black Americans in several cities, with at least seven anti-Black riots occurring in 1919 that left dozens dead.

In this period, Jim Crow racism in the South led to segregation in all facets of life. As you may be familiar, Black and white people were to sit in different places on busses and trains, enter theaters from different entrances, use different restrooms, and even drink from different water fountains. This institutionalized separation was driven by white supremacy, which dominated Southern mentality at the time. **White supremacy** refers to a social system of power relations maintained through social institutions, social interactions, and other social systems that is based on the idea that white people are superior to other races. Zainab Cheema (2025) at American University describes it this way:

> "White supremacy describes structural hierarchies in society that translate the subjective meanings attached to various races and groups into differential relations of power. These relations of power are organized around the idea of white superiority, or the perception of whiteness as the norm and standard against which other races and ethnicities are defined. It is maintained through legal, social, political, and cultural systems enforcing racial dominance through the unequal distribution of power across society."

White supremacy is also cultural, meaning that it is built into the values, belief systems, practices, traditions, and norms of a culture or subculture. The National Education Association's Center for Social Justice (2020) explains:

> "*White Supremacy Culture* is a form of racism centered upon the belief that white people are superior to people of other racial backgrounds and that whites should politically, economically, and socially dominate non-whites. While often associated with violence perpetrated by the KKK and other white supremacist groups, it also describes a political ideology and systemic oppression that perpetuates and maintains the social, political, historical and/or industrial white domination."

We will return to white supremacy when we discuss terrorism below. Jim Crow segregation was a version of *racialized social control* that did not stop at the social separation of Black and white people. It also involved frequent violence: The lynching of thousands of African Americans and other kinds of abuses (Alexander 2010; Litwack 2009). *Lynchings* refer to public killings without due process. At the time, Black people in the South were frequently hanged extrajudicially (outside of the law/courts) at the

hands of white people. Thus, though Jim Crow segregation inherently refers to the legal separation of Black and white people in the South, we cannot neglect attention to the violence that accompanied it.

As discussed in the Sociology chapter, journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, now recognized as an early sociologist, researched and published accounts of lynching to help bring awareness of this reality to the North and across the world. One of her publications was accurately titled, "Southern Horrors."



During the era of Jim Crow racism in the South, several thousand African Americans were lynched.

US Library of Congress – public domain

During the Jim Crow segregationist period, Nazi racism 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 (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 Black Americans back then. The 'dilemma' referred to by the book's title was the conflict between the American democratic ideals of egalitarianism as well as 'liberty and justice for all' and the harsh reality of anti-Black prejudice, discrimination, and lack of equal opportunity. Even after segregation ended, 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 more recently that the status of people of color has actually been worsening in many ways since this report was issued (Massey 2007; Wilson 2009).

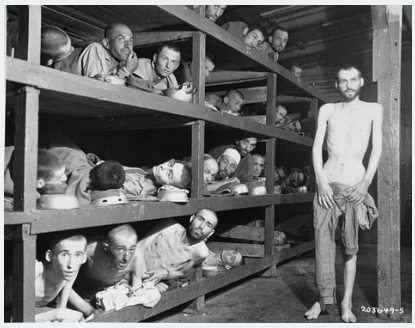
Another example of segregation in world history is *apartheid*. This refers to institutionalized racial segregation in South Africa, in which a white minority (by numbers) implemented policies of racialized social control in order to bolster and maintain white supremacy. This form of segregation has roots in Dutch and British colonization of the southern African nation as far back as the 1600s, in which white settlers exploited the indigenous African population. However, apartheid was not institutionalized until 1948 when the National Party, which represented the interests of white people, came into power (Anti-Apartheid Legacy 2025). This segregation lasted from that year until 1994.

Expulsion

After the attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II, governmental suspicion and cultural fear of Japanese individuals expanded, including of persons who were American citizens. The US Army, in the name of national security, first mandated curfews for and recommended evacuation of Japanese Americans in specific areas of the West Coast, which was deemed a military area during the war. However, in 1942 the military engaged in the process of forced evaluation and detention of Japanese-American residents in the West Coast region. As the National Archives (2025) explains, unless they were able to make alternate arrangements within days, "their homes, farms, businesses, and most of their private belongings were lost forever." An estimated 112,000 persons of Japanese descent were expelled to internment camps, with the majority of those (70,000) being American citizens. The Archives continues that for nearly three years or more, "four or five families, with their sparse collections of clothing and possessions, shared tar-papered army-style barracks."

Another example of expulsion in US history is the forced relocation of Indigenous communities commonly known as the Trail of Tears. In the early to mid 1800s, many tribes located between the early states and the Mississippi River ceded their land to the US government in several dozen treaties. In 1830 the Indian Removal Act was passed, which mandated that the remaining tribes in this area move west of the river. Over the next couple decades, an estimated 100,000 Indigenous people relocated by force or per treaties coerced by the government. For instance, Cherokee people had lived across the land of what became several southern states, but are now concentrated in what we call Oklahoma, the end of the Trail of Tears. In the process of this relocation, around 3,500 people perished from the Muscogee (Creek) nation alone. Others expelled include the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, Ponca, and Ho-Chunk/Winnebago nations (Mandewo n.d.; National Park Service n.d.). As we discuss below, the forced 'removal' of Indigenous people was part of a larger project of state-sanctioned genocide.

A recent example of expulsion outside the US is the internment of the Uyghur population, a primarily Muslim ethnic group living in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China. The Chinese government has been accused of engaging in crimes against humanity due to their mistreatment of Uyghur people, including allegedly detaining more than a million Uyghur individuals in hundreds of 're-education camps.' Additionally, several nations have accused China of engaging in genocide, as there have been reports of mass sterilization intended to reduce the Uyghur population (BBC 2022). We will discuss another example of expulsion and genocide co-occurring in the next subsection.



The Nazi holocaust killed some 6 million Jewish individuals and millions of other people including disabled and queer individuals. This historical event is at once an example of expulsion (involving concentration camps), genocide (with the aim of systematic annihilation), and state terrorism (at the hands of the state).

"Buchenwald Slave Laborers Liberation" via Wikimedia Commons is courtesy of US Holocaust Memorial Museum, National Archives and Records Administration

Genocide

We will now return to our discuss of genocide that began in the Education chapter, examining why scholars argue that this system of education and the larger processes that white settlers and the United States government engaged in were in fact genocide. According to Jeffrey Ostler, a historian at the University of Oregon, claims of genocide are contested by scholars and activists, like many other social problems. However, he provides evidence that the violence was systematic and intentional. To learn more, you are welcome to read Ostler's article exploring complexity in claims of genocide. In addition, let's review this history.

Recall that we mentioned how colonizers saw Indigenous people as a problem because they inhabited land that colonizers wanted. In response, colonizers established mandatory residential boarding schools for Indigenous children, in which thousands of children died across the US and Canada (AP News 2021; National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition N.d.; Newland 2022). Many of these deaths were due to infectious diseases, and many were due to violence or neglect. Even in cases where the children didn't die, colonizers accomplished **cultural assimilation**, the process of members in a subordinate group adopting cultural aspects of a dominant group. In this case, the colonizers valued their white European culture as superior to Indigenous cultures and forced other groups to conform. These pictures below tell of cultural assimilation at the Chemawa Indian School/Forest Grove Indian Training School.





The first photo portrays a group portrait of students from the Spokane tribe at the Forest Grove Indian Training School, taken when they were “new recruits.” In the second photo, “Seven months later – the children pictured are probably the Spokane children who, according to the school roster, arrived in July 1881: Alice L. Williams, Florence Hayes, Suzette (or Susan) Secup, Julia Jopps, Louise Isaacs, Martha Lot, Eunice Madge James, James George, Ben Secup, Frank Rice, and Garfield Hayes” (Francis 2019).

“Images” from A Tragic Collision of Cultures are in the Public Domain; courtesy of Pacific University Archives; caption © Mike Francis is in the Public Domain

In the Pacific University magazine, Mike Francis writes about these photos in more detail:

> "An 1881 photo of new arrivals from the Spokane tribe shows 11 awkwardly grouped young people, huddled together as if for protection in an unfamiliar place. Some have long braids of dark hair; some girls wear blankets over their shoulders; some display personal flourishes, including beads, a hat, a neckerchief.
>
> A second photo of the group is purported to have been taken seven months later… the same children are seated stiffly on chairs or arranged behind them. The six girls wear similar dresses; the four boys wear military-style jackets, buttoned to the neck.
>
> Further, one girl is missing in the second photo — one of the children who died after being brought to Forest Grove… The girl’s name was Martha Lot, and she was about 10 years old. Surviving records tell us she had been sick for a while with 'a sore' on her side and then took a sudden turn for the worse.
>
> The before-and-after photos of the Spokane children were meant to show that the Indian Training School was working: Young native people were being shaped into something 'civilized' and unthreatening, something nearly European. But today the before-and-after shots appear desperately sad – frozen-in-time witnesses to whites’ exploitation of Indigenous children and the attempted erasure of their cultures" (Francis 2019).

The video The Forest Grove Indian Training School, 1880–1885 tells more of the story if you wish to learn more.

The function of education in the case of Indigenous boarding schools doesn’t stop with cultural assimilation. White colonizers intentionally used boarding schools to strategically disrupt families and cultures. Beyond that, the government policies and practices related to the education of Indigenous children were part of a wider strategy of land acquisition. As early as 1803, President Thomas Jefferson wrote that discouraging the traditional hunting and gathering practices of the Indigenous people would make land available for colonists. Jefferson wrote:

> "To encourage them to abandon hunting, to apply to the raising stock, to agriculture, and domestic manufacture, and thereby prove to themselves that less land and labor will maintain them in this better than in their former mode of living. The extensive forests necessary in the hunting life will then become useless, and they will see advantage in exchanging them for the means of improving their farms and of increasing their domestic comforts" (Jefferson 1803, quoted in Newland 2022:21).

By removing people from the land and children from families, the US government made the land available to colonists, who were mainly from Europe, using education as one method of enforcement. Additionally, because children were forcibly removed from

their families, they and their descendants lost the rights to inherit any family land that may have remained. This is generational inequality in action. Indigenous students still have the lowest educational attainment of any group in the United States (Martinez 2014).

Moreover, tens of thousands of Indigenous people were killed by white settlers and US troops, and countless others died from diseases introduced by European settlers, which the immune systems of Native peoples were not equipped to manage. Scholars claim that this mass killing of Indigenous people – a reduction in their population from an estimated one million before colonization to about 240,000 in 1910 – amounts to genocide (Brown 2009).

Another example of genocide that overlaps with expulsion involves Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. There is a long history of Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is beyond the scope of this discussion; however, we will briefly review how this is considered both a form of expulsion and of genocide. Increasing conflict between the Arab and Jewish populations in the region in the 1930s and 40s resulted in the United Nations (UN) splitting Palestine into two states, one for each population, including the formation of the State of Israel. Armed conflict ensued then transformed into war, leading to the Nakba. According to the UN (n.d.), "the Nakba, which means 'catastrophe' in Arabic, refers to the mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war." This is expulsion. Even today, "Palestinians continue to be dispossessed and displaced by Israeli settlements, evictions, land confiscation and home demolitions." The Palestinian people are concentrated in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank areas.

The conflict escalated in October 2023 when Hamas, an armed Palestinian group in the Gaza Strip, brutally attacked Israel in October 2023. Hamas killed approximately 1,200 Israeli people and took 251 hostages. Hamas "has described the attack as a response to what it says are decades of Israeli oppression, the killings of Palestinians and years-long blockade of the Gaza Strip" and as "a reaction to what it claims are Israeli efforts to take over the al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem – Islam's third holiest site" (BBC 2025). Israel responded with a deadly military offensive that has resulted in millions of Palestinian people experiencing forced displacement and tens of thousands dying (nearly 65,000 as of late 2025), with a large proportion of those being women and children. Additionally, Israel has blockaded the Gaza Strip, halting the flow of food, medicine, and other necessities in the area and limiting Palestinians from leaving (BBC 2025). The blockades have led to widespread famine and an immeasurable health crisis in Gaza.

Because of these deaths, displacements, and consequences of the blockades, the some nations or organizations in the international community have accused Israel of committing genocide. For instance, South Africa brought a genocide case against Israel in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory declared that Israel has in fact engaged in genocide against Palestinians.

US President Trump facilitated a ceasefire deal in October 2025 in which the 20 living Israeli hostages and 2,000 Palestinian prisoners were released; however, ceasefire deals have been violated and the future of this conflict is unknown.

As we have seen, there is overlap between patterns of conflict including expulsion, genocide, and war. We discuss war in more detail next, focusing largely on US involvement in war.

War

More than 100 million soldiers and civilians are estimated to have died during the international and civil wars of the twentieth century (Leitenberg 2006). Hope arises from historical evidence that the number of international wars, civil wars, and other types of armed conflict has declined over the centuries, with the number in the past half-century being smaller than in centuries past (Pinker 2012). Reflecting this decline, a smaller percentage of the world’s population died in armed conflict during the past century than in earlier eras.

To illustrate this trend, compare two periods of history (Pinker 2012). The first is the thirteenth century, when the Mongol Empire under the initial leadership of Genghis Khan became an empire in Asia and Eastern Europe through wars and conquest in which it killed 40 million people. The second period is 1939–1945, when World War II killed 55 million people. Although 55 million is more than 40 million, the world’s population in the thirteenth century was only one-seventh its population during the World War II period. A quick calculation shows that about 11% of the world’s population died from the Mongolian wars, while 2% died from World War II. In terms of the risk of dying in war, then, the Mongolian wars were five times more deadly than World War II.



Although World War II killed an estimated 55 million people, a smaller percentage of the world's population died in armed conflict during the twentieth century than in earlier eras.

Reid Kasprowicz – A Flag for the Fallen – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Looking further back in world history, the death rate in prehistoric times from tribal warfare was extremely high. If this high rate had held true during the twentieth century, 2 billion people would have died in twentieth-century wars rather than the 100 million who did die (Pinker 2012). Although wars, other armed conflicts, terrorism, and genocide certainly continue, and 100 million is a terribly high number of deaths, the world overall is in fact more peaceful now than in the past.

That is the good news and a cause for hope. However, patterns of conflict, war, and terrorism continue. Even if they are less frequent and less deadly than in the past, that is of little comfort to the tens of millions of people around the world during the past century suffered in war and other armed conflict and who live in fear today of becoming a victim of armed conflict. Additionally, nuclear weapons pose a great threat today. The thirteenth-century Mongolians killed their 40 million with battleaxes and other crude weapons; the World War II deaths resulted from gunfire and conventional bombs. At the end of that war, however, the nuclear age began when the US dropped two atomic weapons on Japan that killed tens of thousands instantly and tens of thousands more from radiation exposure.

Those two weapons were small in both number and size compared to nuclear weapons today. More than 20,000 nuclear warheads now exist, with 4,800 being operational and almost 2,000 (held by the US and Russia) on high alert, ready to be used at any time (Federation of American Scientists 2011). Each of these warheads is an average of at least twenty times more powerful than each of the atomic bombs that decimated Japan. The Union of Concerned Scientists (2009) summarized their danger bluntly: "Nuclear weapons remain the greatest and most immediate threat to human civilization." However more peaceful the world is today, the threat of nuclear annihilation endures.

The United States at War

The history of the US has been written in war. The nation began with the colonial war against England. The American Civil War, also called the War Between the States, then occurred less than a century later. Between 1861 and 1865, at least 618,000 and perhaps as many as 750,000 soldiers in both the Union and the Confederacy died on the battlefield or from disease. The minimum estimate almost matches the number of American deaths in all the other wars the US has fought, and the maximum estimate greatly exceeds this number (see the table below).

U.S. Participation in Major Wars

War	Number of troops	Troop deaths	Troops wounded
Revolutionary War	184,000–250,000	4,435	6,188
War of 1812	286,730	2,260	4,505
Mexican War	78,218	13,283	4,152

Note: Deaths are from combat, disease, and other causes.

War	Number of troops	Troop deaths	Troops wounded
Civil War	3,867,500	618,222–750,000	412,175
Spanish-American War	306,760	2,446	1,662
World War I	4,734,991	116,516	204,002
World War II	16,112,566	405,399	671,846
Korean War	5,720,000	36,574	103,284
Vietnam War	8,744,000	58,209	153,303
Persian Gulf War	2,225,000	382	467
Iraq and Afghanistan Wars	2,333,972	6,251	47,566

Note: Deaths are from combat, disease, and other causes.

Sources: Fischer 2005; Hacker 2011; Martinez 2011; US Department of Defense 2012

The US has been at war in about a fifth of the years it has existed (Bumiller 2010). Between the end of the colonial period and 1993, the US military was involved in at least 234 declared wars, undeclared wars, or other situations abroad involving actual or potential armed conflict (Collier 1993). Since then, US armed forces have waged war in Iraq and in Afghanistan and also joined international military operations in such countries as Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Libya. By any measure, then, the US military has played a fundamental role, for better or worse, in the nation's foreign affairs historically and today. Supporters of this role say that the military has both protected and advanced the political and economic interests of the US, while critics have charge that the military has been an instrument of imperialism and devastation.

Terrorism

There's an old saying that "one person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist." This saying indicates some of the problems in defining terrorism precisely. Some years ago, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) waged a campaign of terrorism against the British government and its people as part of its effort to drive the British out of Northern Ireland. Many people in Northern Ireland and elsewhere hailed IRA members as freedom fighters, while many other people condemned them as cowardly terrorists. Although most of the world labeled the 9/11 attacks as terrorism, some individuals applauded them as acts of heroism. These examples indicate that there is only a thin line, if any, between terrorism on the one hand and freedom fighting and heroism on the other hand. Just as beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, so is terrorism. The same type of action is either terrorism or freedom fighting, depending on who is characterizing the action.

Americans would overwhelmingly agree that the 9/11 attacks in 2001 were in fact terrorism. This event remains in the nation's consciousness, and some readers may know someone who died on that terrible day. The attacks also spawned a vast national security network that now reaches into almost every aspect of American life. This network is so secretive, massive, and expensive that no one truly knows precisely how large it is or how much it costs (Priest & Arkin 2010). However, it is thought to include 1,200 government organizations, 1,900 private companies, and almost 900,000 people with security clearances (Applebaum 2011). The US spent an estimated $3 trillion the decade after 9/11 on the *war on terrorism*, including more than $1 trillion on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan whose relevance for terrorism has been sharply questioned. Strategies of how best to deal with terrorism continue to be debated, and there are few, if any, easy answers to these questions.



The 9/11 attacks spawned an immense national security network and prompted the expenditure of more than $3 trillion on the war against terrorism in the decade that followed.

Michael Foran – 9/11 WTC 32 – CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

However, foreign terrorism is not the only terrorist concern in the US. The FBI warned somewhat recently that domestic terrorism may be a greater threat to the nation than foreign terrorism. In a statement to the House Homeland Security Committee in 2019, Michael McGarrity, Assistant Director of the Counterterrorism Division at the FBI, stated:

> "We believe domestic terrorists pose a present and persistent threat of violence and economic harm to the United States; in fact, there have been more arrests and deaths caused by domestic terrorists than international terrorists in recent years. ... Individuals adhering to racially motivated violent extremism ideology have been responsible for the most lethal incidents, however, and the FBI assesses the threat of violence and lethality posed by racially motivated violent extremists will continue."

In particular, white nationalist extremist terrorism is the greatest concern. **White nationalism** is "a political and ideological movement advocating for the preservation of a white national majority within historically white nations" such as the US. Motivated by *white supremacy*, it centers on the belief that white people are superior to people of color, though it adds that white people are "deserving of national pride" (Caffrey 2023). The advent of the internet has resulted in the radicalization of individuals who come to align with this ideology (Caffrey 2023; McGarrity 2019). *Radicalization* refers to a "process through which an individual changes from a non-violent belief system to a belief system that includes the willingness to actively advocate, facilitate, or use violence as a method to effect societal or political change" (Department of Homeland Security 2022). Others are socialized into white nationalist ideology during childhood such as with Derek Black, heir to the KKK discussed earlier.

The domestic terrorism threat is concerned with violent extremism associated with white nationalism. According to the Department of Homeland Security (2022), "Violent White Supremacist Extremists (WSE) are defined as individuals who seek, wholly or in part, through unlawful acts of force or violence, to support their belief in the intellectual and moral superiority of the white race over other races." These extremists often target racially and religiously marginalized groups, and solo (white) men are the typical offenders. Examples of violent WSE attacks include when Dylan Roof murdered nine people at a Black church in 2015, when Fraizer Glenn Miller murdered three people outside of Jewish centers in 2014, and when Wade Michael Page murdered six people at a Sikh temple in 2012. Firearms were the weapon in all of these examples, and shootings are the most common type of attack in recent WSE incidents (Department of Homeland Security 2022).

Consequences of Conflict, War, and Terrorism

Some of the patterns of interaction in conflict are consequences themselves. For example, expulsion has the consequences of forced displacement and loss of one's home or homeland, and genocide has the consequences of the loss of culture and even of life. Thus, in this section we focus on other consequences, primarily of war and terrorism. We discuss **casualties**, which includes both injury and death. In some of this discussion we focus on death casualties specifically, whereas in others we may include those injured. We also discuss sexual assault as another horrendous consequence of conflict and war, as well as other consequences.

Civilians

As discussed above, there have been hundreds of thousands of troop deaths in American wars. The nation rightly grieved these deaths when they occurred and built monuments, such as the Korean and Vietnam veterans memorials in Washington DC, that list the names of the dead. However, John Tirman, director of the Center for International Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has worried that Americans have neglected the civilian victims of war. He applauds the Korean and Vietnam memorials in Washington, but laments that "neither mentions the people of those countries who perished in the conflicts ... When it comes to our wars overseas, concern for the victims is limited to U.S. troops" (Tirman 2012).

Tirman notes that approximately 6 million civilians and soldiers died in the Korean, Vietnam/Indochina, Iraq, and Afghanistan wars. Most of these victims were civilians, and most of these civilian deaths were the result of actions by the US and its allies. These deaths stemmed from bombs and other weapons that went astray, from orders by military and political leaders to drop millions upon millions of bombs on civilian areas, and sometimes from atrocities committed by US personnel. In World War II, Tirman adds, the US dropped two atomic bombs that killed tens of thousands of civilians, and it joined its allies in the carpet bombing of German and Japanese cities that also killed hundreds of thousands.



The two atomic bombs dropped by the US over Japan during World War II killed tens of thousands of civilians. Scholar John Tirman worries that Americans have generally ignored the civilian victims of US wars.

"*Victim of Atomic Bomb of Hiroshima*," *Wikipedia*

The carpet bombing, atomic bombing, and other actions in World War II that killed hundreds of thousands of civilians may have had strategic purposes, and the morality of these actions remains hotly debated today. But Tirman also notes that the Korean and Vietnam wars included many atrocities committed by American troops against civilians. To be blunt, American troops simply shot untold hundreds of Korean and Vietnamese civilians in cold blood.

Tirman describes one Korean incident in which machine gun fire from US warplanes killed about one hundred civilian refugees who were resting on a road. The remaining several hundred refugees hid and were shot at for three days by US ground soldiers. Tirman writes, "Surviving Koreans from the onslaught described in detail the chaotic panic they experienced; having believed the Americans were protecting them, they then saw the U.S. troops fire indiscriminately at men, women, and children at the scene" (2012: 107). At the end of the three days, about four hundred civilians lay dead.

Tirman explains that in Vietman, American troops and planes routinely razed villages to the ground, killing villagers indiscriminately, and then evacuated any survivors. Once they were evacuated, their villages were designated 'free fire zones,' and then often bombed indiscriminately once again, killing any villagers who managed to remain in these zones despite the evacuations. All these killings were outright slaughter.

In one example of what Tirman (2011: 153) calls a typical massacre, US soldiers arrived at a village that had just been bombed and ordered surviving residents to gather at the center of the town. After they did so, US ground troops shot them and left a pile of dead bodies that included 21 children. As this brief discussion indicates, although the massacre of 347 Vietnamese at the hamlet of My Lai is undoubtedly the Vietnam massacre that is best known (and perhaps the only known) to the American public, massacres were far from rare and in fact were somewhat common.

A central part of US military strategy in Vietnam involved destroying rice fields and the rest of the countryside to make it difficult for the Vietcong forces to engage in guerrilla warfare. To do so, it routinely deployed chemical weapons such as Agent Orange

(dioxin, a known carcinogen), napalm, and white phosphorous. Planes sprayed and bombed these chemicals. These actions did destroy the countryside, but they also destroyed humans. The Children and Our Future box below discusses this issue in greater detail.

Children and Our Future

Napalm Sticks to Kids

The book "Napalm Sticks to Kids" has emphasized that children are often the innocent victims of various social problems from the time they are born, with important consequences for their futures. There are also many innocent victims in wartime, but when children are victims, our hearts especially go out to them. The Vietnam War marked a time when many Americans became concerned about children's suffering during wartime. A key focus of their concern was the use of napalm.

Napalm is a very flammable jellylike substance made out of gasoline, soap, and white phosphorous. Napalm bombs were used in World War II to set fire to cities, military bunkers, and other targets. When napalm ends up on human skin, it causes incredibly severe pain and burns down to the bone, with death often resulting. Because napalm is very sticky, it is almost impossible to wipe off or remove with water once it does end up on skin.

Bombs containing napalm made by Dow Chemical were routinely used by the US military and its South Vietnamese allies during the Vietnam War to defoliate the countryside and to attack various targets. Some 400,000 tons of napalm were used altogether. When a napalm bomb explodes, it ignites an enormous fireball that burns everything in its path. Inevitably, Vietnamese civilians were in the path of the fireballs generated by the US and South Vietnamese militaries. An unknown number of civilians were burned severely or, if they were lucky, died. Many antiwar protests in the United States focused on the civilian suffering from napalm. Protesters at Dow Chemical's New York office carried signs that said, "Napalm Burns Babies, Dow Makes Money."

One of these civilians was a 9-year-old girl named Phan Thi Kim Phuc. An Associated Press photo of her running naked and screaming with burns after her village was napalmed was one of the most memorable photos of that war. Although she survived, it took seventeen surgeries to improve her condition.

A poem about napalm, reportedly written by members of the US First Air Cavalry, surfaced during the war. Some verses follow.

> We shoot the sick, the young, the lame,
> We do our best to kill and maim,
> Because the kills all count the same,
> Napalm sticks to kids.

> Ox cart rolling down the road,
> Peasants with a heavy load,
> They're all V.C. when the bombs explode,
> Napalm sticks to kids.

A baby sucking on his mother's t*t,
Children cowering in a pit,
Dow Chemical doesn't give a s!#t,
Napalm sticks to kids.

Blues out on a road recon,
See some children with their mom,
What the hell, let's drop the bomb,
Napalm sticks to kids.

Flying low across the trees,
Pilots doing what they please,
Dropping frags on refugees,
Napalm sticks to kids.

They're in good shape for the shape they're in,
But, God I wonder how they can win,
With Napalm running down their skin,
Napalm sticks to kids.

Drop some napalm on the barn,
It won't do too much harm,
Just burn off a leg or arm,
Napalm sticks to kids.

Sources: Ledbetter 2011; Vietnam Veterans Against the War 1971

Veterans

The attention given to civilians should in no way obscure or minimize the fact that veterans are also casualties of war. The Korean and Vietnam veterans' memorials in the nation's capital and so many other memorials across the nation remind us of the hundreds of thousands of brave soldiers who have died serving their country. But veterans are casualties in other ways. They may suffer terrible physical and mental wounds that can maim them for life (Dao 2012).

Veterans of the Vietnam War came back to a nation that often did not greet them as heroes. Many came back addicted to heroin and other drugs, many were unemployed, and many experienced houselessness. Many veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have also come back home with these problems. Their unemployment rate was 13.1% in late 2011, compared to only 8.5% for the general public, and the unemployment rate for veterans ages 20–24 was near 30% (Dewan 2011; Zornick 2012).

Many veterans experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), marked by nightmares, panic attacks, and other symptoms (Dao 2012). Veterans with PTSD may end up with marital or relationship strain and are more likely to commit violence against their spouses or partners. When these problems occur, they may worsen the psychological state of these veterans.

A related problem is suicide. One estimate found that for every 100,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who received health care from the Veterans Administration, 38 died by suicide. The suicide rate of the general population is only 11.3 deaths per 100,000 population. Thus, the suicide rate of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was more than three times higher than that of the general public (Martinez & Bingham 2011).



Veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan War have a higher suicide rate than that of the general public.

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Evidence from a national survey of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans underscored the problems they face (Pew Research Center 2011). Almost half of survey respondents said that their family relations were strained and that they often felt irritable or angry, 44% said that they had problems reentering civilian life; and 37% said that they suffered from PTSD.

One Iraq veteran with these problems is Tom Marcum, who came home with a brain injury, PTSD, and fits of violence and short-term memory loss. His wife April had to quit her teaching job to take care of him, and their life savings slowly dwindled. April missed the man she used to know: "The biggest loss is the loss of the man I married. His body's here, but his mind is not here anymore. I see glimpses of him, but he's not who he was" (Einhorn 2011). As the Marcums' situation indicates, spouses and other family members of veterans also are victims of war. Indeed, the Marcums' situation is far from rare among the families of the 2 million veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. As a news report summarized these families' experience:

> "Ms. Marcum has joined a growing community of spouses, parents and partners who, confronted with damaged loved ones returning from war who can no longer do for themselves, drop most everything in their own lives to care for them. Jobs, hobbies, friends, even parental obligations to young children fall by the wayside. Families go through savings and older parents dip into retirement funds" (Einhorn 2011).

Families of deployed troops also face many difficulties. There is the natural fear that loved ones will never return from their overseas involvement in armed conflict. This fear can take a psychological toll on all members of these families, but perhaps especially on children. One teenager recalled the tensions that arose when his father was in Iraq: "I was in eighth grade when my dad deployed to Iraq. A kid walked up to me and said, 'Your dad's a baby killer.' I didn't handle that well. We both wound up suspended for that one" (Ashton 2011). A recent study found that adolescents with a deployed parent are more likely than those with civilian parents to feel depressed and suicidal. They are also more likely to engage in drug use and binge drinking. Reflecting on these findings, an author of the study said, "It's really time to focus on the children that are left behind" (Ashton 2011).

After World War II, the GI Bill helped millions of veterans to go to college and otherwise readjust to civilian life, at least if they were white as people of color did not receive the same benefits. But many observers say that the US has neglected the veterans of later wars. Although education benefits and many other services for veterans exist, the nation needs to do much more to help veterans, these observers say (Baker 2012; Shusman 2012).

The high unemployment rate of the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans has made this need more urgent over the last couple decades. As one business writer put it, "Collectively, it is our patriotic responsibility to help our nation's service[people] thrive in today's economy" (Gerber 2012). Advocates for veterans with severe physical or cognitive problems also urge the government to greatly expand its very small program of monthly cash payments to these veterans' families to help replace their lost incomes (Einhorn 2011).

Rape and Sexual Assault

Women soldiers and veterans face a special problem – sexual assault. At least one-fifth and perhaps as many as 84% of all military service women are raped, sexually assaulted, or sexually harassed by other military personnel (Turchik & Wilson 2010). In 2010, more than 19,000 US military personnel were raped or sexually assaulted, most of them women (Stalsburg 2011). Only about one-seventh of these survivors reported these incidents. Of reported cases, only one-fifth went to trial, and only half of the defendants

were convicted. As these numbers make clear, military personnel who commit rape and sexual assault almost always avoid punishment.

Women veterans say that when they do report rape and sexual assault, military officials typically either blame them for what happened, ignore the crime altogether, or give the offender a very mild punishment such as not being allowed to leave a military base for a short period. When one woman who was raped by two soldiers in Iraq told her commander, he threatened her with a charge of adultery because she was married (Speier 2012).

Women veterans who experience rape or sexual assault often suffer PTSD. In fact, rape and sexual assault are the leading cause of PTSD among women veterans, while combat trauma is the leading cause of PTSD among men veterans. Women veterans who have these experiences also have higher rates of harmful drug use, unemployment, and houselessness. One veteran recalled being gang raped by her drill sergeant and four other soldiers, who then broke several bones in her body and urinated on her. Several years later, she was still having many health problems. She explained, “When I looked at the American flag, I used to see red, white, and blue. Now, all I see is blood” (Herdy & Moffeit 2004: 4).

In addition to psychological and physiological trauma, rape and sexual assault impose huge economic costs on the military because of medical expenses for helping survivors and for prosecuting their assaulters. Health care expenses for survivors amount to almost $1 billion annually, and the cost of prosecution amounts to $19 million annually (Stalsburg 2011).

Applying Social Research

Determining the Prevalence of Military Sexual Assault

As the text discusses, most military women who are raped or sexually assaulted do not report these crimes to military authorities. As a result, reported rapes and sexual assaults compose only a very small percentage of all military rapes and sexual assaults. To get a more accurate estimate of how many such crimes occur, sound social research is necessary.

Despite this need, research on sexual assault in the military was scant before the early 2000s. This type of research accelerated, however, after several scandals involving sexual assault and harassment occurred during the 1990s on military bases and at military academies. The primary mode of research involved survey questionnaires given anonymously to samples, many of them random, of military members. The samples are almost entirely of women, given their higher risk of being sexually assaulted.

In these surveys, between 10% and 33% of women report being raped (including attempts) while they were serving in the military. When sexual assaults and sexual harassment are added to the crimes mentioned to respondents, between 22% and 84% of women report being raped, sexually assaulted, and/or sexually harassed while serving. Very few studies include men in their surveys, but one study reported a 3% rate of sexual assault victimization for men while they were in the military.

One major problem in this research literature is that different studies use different definitions and measures of sexual assault. Regardless of these problems, this growing body of research documents how often rape and sexual assault in the military occur. It also documents the psychological and health effects of military sexual assault (MSA). These effects are similar to those for civilians, and include anxiety, depression, PTSD, poorer physical health, and poorer job performance (in this case, their military duties).

In shedding light on the prevalence of military rape and sexual assault and on the many negative effects of these crimes, social science research has performed an important service. Future research will no doubt build on existing studies to further illuminate this significant problem.

Source: Turchik & Wilson 2010

Other Consequences of War

When we think of the impact of war, the consequences for civilians and veterans as just discussed come most readily to mind. But not all civilians are affected equally. One of the many sad truisms of war is that its impact on a society is greatest when the war takes place within the society's boundaries. For example, the Iraq war that began in 2003 involved two countries more than any others, the US and Iraq. Because it took place in Iraq, many more Iraqis than Americans died or were wounded, and the war certainly affected Iraqi society – its infrastructure, economy, natural resources, and so forth – far more than it affected American society. Most Americans continued to live their normal lives, whereas most Iraqis had to struggle to survive the many ravages of war.

As historians and political scientists have described, wars have a significant economic and political impact. Many examples of this impact exist, but one well-known example involves the defeat of Germany in World War I, which led to a worsening economy during the next decade that in turn helped fuel the rise of Hitler. War can also change a nation's political structure, as when the winning nation (for interstate wars) or group (for intrastate wars) forces a new political system and leadership on the losing nation or group. Other political and economic changes brought by war are less obvious. World War I again provides an interesting example of such changes. Before the war, violent labor strikes were common in Britain and other European nations. When the war began, a sort of truce developed between management and labor, as workers wanted to appear patriotic by supporting the war effort and hoped that they would win important labor rights for doing so. Although the truce later dissolved and labor-management conflict resumed, labor eventually won some limited rights thanks partly to its support for the war. As a historian summarized this connection:

> "By the end of the war, labor's wartime mobilization and participation had increased its relative power within European societies. As a result, and despite the fact that endeavors to reward labor for its wartime cooperation were, in general, provisional, partial, and half-hearted, it was nonetheless the case that labor achieved some real gains" (Halperin 2004: 155).

Other types of less obvious social changes have also resulted from various wars. For example, the deaths of so many soldiers during the American Civil War left many wives and mothers without their family's major breadwinner, as women at the time were typically relegated to the role of homemaker. Their poverty forced some of these women to turn to sex work, resulting in a rise in sex work after the war (Rafter 1990).

In a positive example, the involvement of Black Americans in the US armed forces during World War II helped begin the racial desegregation of the military. This change is widely credited with helping spur the hopes of southern Black Americans that racial desegregation would someday occur in their hometowns (McKeeby 2008).

Consequences of Terrorism

The major impact of terrorism is apparent from its definition, which emphasizes fear and intimidation. Anyone around for 9/11, especially those who happened to be in or near New York City, will always remember how terrified the populace was to hear of the attacks and the fears that remained with them for the days and weeks that followed.

Another significant impact of terrorism is the response to it. As mentioned earlier, the 9/11 attacks led the US to develop an immense national security network as well as the Patriot Act and other measures that some say threaten civil liberties, to start the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and to spend more than $3 trillion in just one decade on homeland security and the war on terrorism. Airport security increased, and Americans grew accustomed to having to take off their shoes, display their liquids and gels in containers limited to three ounces, and stand in long security lines as they try to catch their planes.



Hardly anyone likes standing in the long airport security lines that are a result of the 9/11 attacks. Some experts say that certain airport security measures are an unneeded response to these attacks.

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People critical of these effects say that the 'terrorists won.' As one columnist wrote on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, “And yet, 10 years after 9/11, it’s clear that the ‘war on terror’ was far too narrow a prism through which to see the planet. And the price we paid to fight it was far too high” (Applebaum 2011). In this columnist’s perspective, the war on terror imposed huge domestic costs on the US. It also diverted US attention away from important issues regarding China, Latin America, and Africa, it aligned the US with authoritarian regimes in the Middle East even though their authoritarianism helps inspire Islamic terrorism, and it diverted attention away from the need to invest in the American infrastructure: Schools, roads, bridges, and medical and other research. In short, the columnist concluded:

> “in making Islamic terrorism our central priority—at times our only priority—we ignored the economic, environmental and political concerns of the rest of the globe. Worse, we pushed aside our economic, environmental and political problems until they became too great to be ignored” (Applebaum 2011).

To critics like this one, the threat to Americans of terrorism is 'over-hyped' (Holland 2011b). They acknowledge the 9/11 tragedy and the real fears of Americans, but they also point out that in the years after 9/11, the number of Americans killed in car accidents, by air pollution, by homicide, or even by dog bites or lightning strikes has greatly exceeded the number of Americans killed by terrorism. They add that the threat is overhyped because defense industry lobbyists profit from overhyping it and because politicians do not wish to be seen as 'weak on terror.' And they also worry that the war on terror has been motivated by and also contributed to prejudice against Muslims (Kurzman 2011).

However, the threat of foreign terrorism may be inflated while the threat of domestic terrorism may not be as pronounced as it should be. If Americans envision terrorism as perpetrated by foreign actors, particularly in racialized ways (such as by imagining that people of Middle Eastern descent are the threat), they neglect what experts say is a threat today – white nationalist domestic terrorism – as discussed above.

In this chapter, we've mentioned the costs of war and terrorism to the US government and its taxpayers. On the following page, we return to this consequence, focusing on the US military budget and a concept called *militarism*.

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Militarism and the Military Budget

In 1961, at the end of his tenure, President Eisenhower eloquently warned the nation about its *military industrial complex*:

> "Our military organization today bears little relation to that known by any of my predecessors in peace time ... This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence – economic, political, even spiritual – is felt in every city, every state house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society. ... In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist" (National Archives 2024).

The defense industry remains a powerful force in the US economy six decades after Eisenhower issued his warning, and US military spending continues unabated. In 2025, the US allocated $2.32 trillion in budgetary resources to the Department of Defense, an increase from $1.99 trillion in 2024, which amounts to 14.7% of the entire federal budget (USAspending.gov 2025). The funding bill, which is authorized annually, provided $824.3 billion in funding to the Department of Defense in 2024, an increase of $26.8 billion from the prior year, and the Office of Management and Budget (2025) reports that the US spent $874 billion on national defense that year.

These funding patterns are part of a larger phenomenon referred to as militarism. **Militarism** can be broadly defined as "a set of social practices that highlight the utility of organised violence, plays a central role in global security and military affairs" (Mabee & Vucetic 2025). Shaw (1991:9-15) explained that the term denoted "*the penetration of social relations in general by military relations*; in militarisation, militarism is extended, in demilitarisation, it contracts." On this page, we further explore militarism via the enormous US defense budget.

The US Military Budget

As large as it is, the billions of funding dollars just cited as the official figure for the US military budget is misleading in at least two ways. For instance, the official figure has excluded several military-related costs such as veterans' benefits and interest on the national debt from past military spending. When these costs are taken into account, the total military budget is far higher (Friends Committee on National Legislation 2012; War Resisters League 2012).



Critics say that US military spending is too high and takes needed dollars from domestic essentials like housing, schooling, food aid, and healthcare.

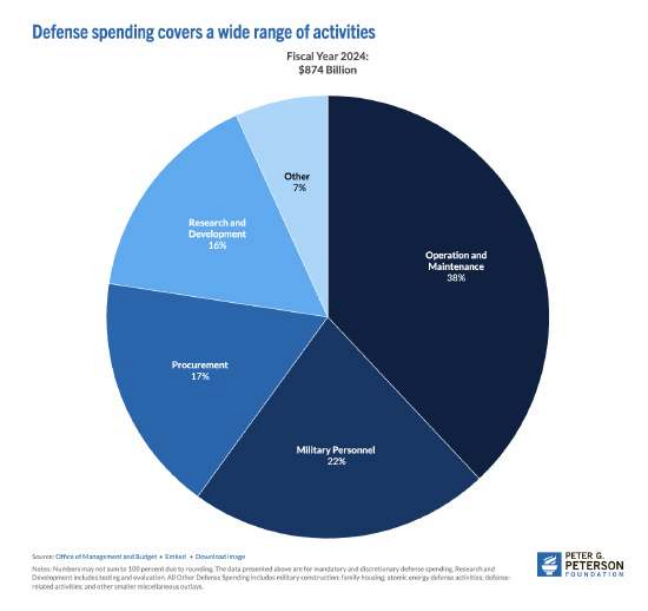
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Additionally, the calculation for the proportion of federal spending devoted to defense excludes additional military expenses just discussed, and it uses a misleading measure of federal spending. This latter fact needs some explanation. Federal spending includes both mandatory and discretionary spending. As its name implies, *mandatory spending* is required by various laws and includes such things as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, and interest payments on the national debt. Much of these mandatory expenses are funded by trust funds, such as Social Security taxes, which are raised and spent separately from income taxes. *Discretionary spending* involves the money the president and Congress must decide how to spend each year and includes federal

income tax dollars only. Critics of the military budget argue that it is more accurate to cite its share of discretionary spending rather than its share of all federal spending. Of the $1.81 trillion in discretionary spending in 2024, defense outlays accounted for 47%, at $850 trillion (Congressional Budget Office 2025). To put that another way, near half of all federal income tax dollars were used for military expenditures that year.

Another dimension of militarism involves arms exports by both the US government and US military contractors. Combining data on both types of exports, the US sent $12.2 billion in arms deliveries to other nations in 2010. This figure ranked the highest in the world and constituted almost 35% of all world arms exports that year. Russia ranked second with $5.3 billion in arms deliveries, while Germany ranked third with $2.6 billion (Grimmett 2011). Most arms exports from the US and other exporters go to developing nations. Critics say that these exports help fuel the worldwide arms race and international discord. They add that the exports at times go to nations ruled by dictators, who then use them to threaten their own people (Feinstein 2011; Shah 2011).

As mentioned above, according to the Office of Management and Budget, the US spent $874 billion on national defense in fiscal year 2024. $826 billion was spent on military activities and the remaining $47 billion was spent by other agencies including the Federal Bureau of Investigation on Department of Energy on defense related activities. Defense spending for 2024 on this wide range of activities is visualized in the table below. Moreover, the composition of defense spending has changed over time.

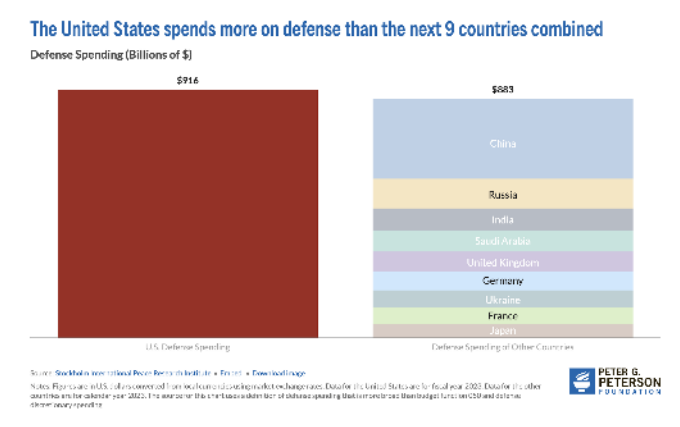


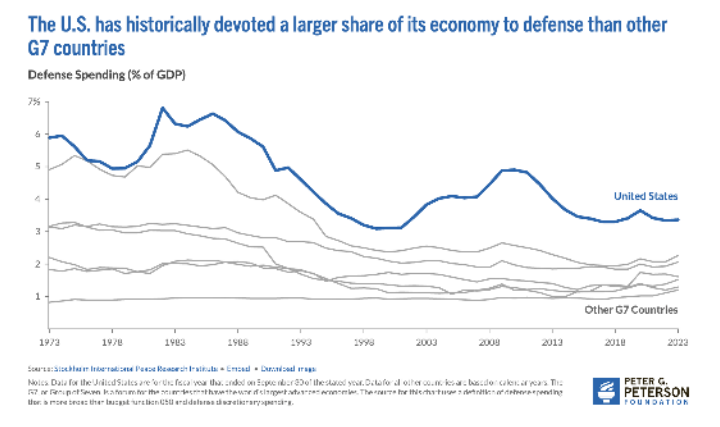
This pie chart displays the proportion of defense spending for various types of activities. Operations and maintenance is the largest category, followed by military personnel, procurement, and research and development.

Source: Peter G. Peterson Foundation 2025

The US Military Budget in an International Perspective

However it is calculated, the US military budget is by far the highest in the world and has accounted for 43% of the world's military spending. According to the Office of Management and Budget, the US is still known to spend more on defense, relative to the size of its economy and more than any member of the G7 (Peter G. Peterson Foundation 2025). Compared to the US, China's estimated military expenditure was $314 billion, Russia's estimated spending was $149 billion, while Germany and the UK's spending was $88.5 and $81.8, respectively (Liang et al. 2025). The charts below display US spending compared to other nations.





These charts compares US defense spending with that of other nations, including other G7 countries. (Note that the chart on the left side uses 2023 figures.) Explore these interactive charts on the Peter G. Peterson Foundation's Defense Spending page.

Source: Peter G. Peterson Foundation 2025

The US Military Budget in a Moral Perspective

Oscar Arias, a former president of Costa Rica and a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, echoed famous words from President Eisenhower quoted at the top of this page when he wrote that US military spending took money away from important domestic needs. “Americans are hurt,” he warned, “when the defense budget squanders money that could be used to repair schools or to guarantee universal health care” (Arias 1999).

In the decade since Arias wrote these words, the US spent more than $5.5 trillion on defense outlays in constant dollars, including $1.3 trillion on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Cost equivalencies illustrate what is lost when so much money is spent on the military, especially on weapons systems that do not work and are not needed. For example, the F-35 fighter aircraft has been plagued with “management problems, huge cost-overruns, [and] substantial performance shortfalls,” according to a news report (Kaplan 2012). Each F-35 costs about $300 million (in 2012 dollars). This same sum could have been used to pay the salaries of 10,000 new teachers earning $30,000 per year or to build twenty elementary schools at a cost of $15 million each. In another example using 2012 dollars, the Navy was designing a new series of nuclear submarines. Each submarine was projected to cost more than $8 billion to build and another $21 billion in constant dollars in operation and maintenance costs over its lifetime (Castelli 2012). This $29 billion sum for each of 12 submarines during its lifetime could provide 5.8 million scholarships worth $5,000 each to low- and middle-income high school students to help them pay for college.



The $300 million cost (in 2012 dollars) of each F-35 fighter aircraft could pay for the salaries of 10,000 new teachers.

"First F-35C Flight," Wikimedia, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:First_F-35C_Flight.ogv

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan provide additional examples. These wars cost the US about $1.3 trillion through 2012 (not accounting for costs after that year), for an average of more than $100 billion annually (Harrison 2012). This same yearly amount could have paid for one year's worth (in California cost figures) of all of the following:

- 146,000 police officers
- 9.5 million children receiving low-income health care (Medicaid)
- 1.7 million students receiving full-tuition scholarships at state universities
- 1.6 million Head Start slots for children
- 179,000 elementary school teachers
- 162,000 firefighters
- 2.5 million Pell Grants of $5,550 each (National Priorities Project 2012).

All these figures demonstrate that war and preparation for war indeed have a heavy human cost, not only in the numbers of dead and wounded, but also in the diversion of funds from important social functions and needs.

Lessons from Other Societies

Guns or Butter?

"Guns versus butter" is a macroeconomics phrase that illustrates the dilemma that nations face in deciding their spending priorities. The more they spend on their military (guns), the less they can spend on food for their poor and other domestic needs (butter).

In making this very important decision, Europe has chosen butter over guns. The wealthy European countries that compose the bulk of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an international consortium, spent 2.5% of their total economy (gross domestic product, or GDP) on their militaries. In contrast, the US spent 5.1% of its economy on its base military budget, which does not include costs for veterans' benefits, for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and military spending that falls outside the Pentagon's budget.

The European nations' decisions to limit their military spending allows more spending for social needs. As a result, observes one economics writer, most Europeans have "universal health care, deeply subsidized education (including free university tuition in many countries), modern infrastructure, good mass transit, and far less poverty" than the US has. Perhaps worse, the US ranks last among the world's 20 wealthiest democracies in life expectancy and infant mortality and also

ranks worst in the risk of dying before age 60. In addition, half of American children need food stamps at some time before becoming adults, while this problem is far rarer in Europe.

Compared to Europe, then, the US has chosen guns over butter, leaving far less money for its social needs. As an economics writer wryly noted, “So remember to take pride in American power, and remember that it comes at a very high price.” In making this classic macroeconomics decision, the US has much to learn from the wealthy nations of Europe.

Source: Holland 2011

The Debate over the US Military Budget

This diversion of funds is unfortunate, but some argue that it is necessary if the high level of US military spending is needed to ensure the nation’s security. Experts disagree over this issue. Some think that the US needs to maintain and in fact increase its level of military spending to replace aging weapons systems, to meet the threat posed by terrorists, and to respond to various other challenges around the world. Military spending is good for workers, they add, because it creates jobs and it contributes to technological development (Boot 2012; England 2012; McKeon 2012).

Other experts echo President Eisenhower’s concern over the size of the military budget (Bacevich 2011; Korb, Rothman, & Hoffman 2012; Lochhead 2012; Wheeler 2009). Noting that the military budget today exceeds the average budget during the Cold War, they think that military spending is far higher than it needs to be to ensure the nation’s defense with the Soviet Union no longer a threat. They say that the US could safely decrease its nuclear and conventional weapons arsenals without at all endangering national security. They also say that the stationing of some 300,000 American troops on 865 military bases abroad in 2011, including 81,000 troops in Europe and 220,000 in other nations, is hardly needed to ensure the nation’s defense. As one scholar said of the military bases, “It makes as much sense for the Pentagon to hold onto 227 military bases in Germany as it would for the post office to maintain a fleet of horses and buggies” (vanden Heuvel 2011).

These experts argue that the military budget is bloated for at least four reasons. First, the defense industry is very effective at lobbying Congress for increased military spending, with the cozy relationship among members of the *power elite* helping to ensure the effectiveness of this lobbying. Second, members of Congress fear being labeled 'weak on defense' if they try to reduce the military budget or do not agree to new weapons systems requested by the Pentagon. Regarding this fear, former US senator and presidential candidate George McGovern (2011: 47), a decorated World War II hero, writes, “We need to end the false choice between a bloated budget and a weak spine.”

Third, and helping to explain the success of this lobbying, military spending provides jobs and income to the home districts of members of Congress. Fourth, *military waste* in the form of cost overruns from poor accounting and other management failures is rampant. As just one example of such waste, a 2011 federal audit found that cost overruns over the prior two years had added at least $70 billion to projected costs of various weapons systems (Drew 2011). A major reason for this problem was that the Pentagon had begun building these systems before their designs had been completely tested.

Critics also argue that military spending actually produces fewer jobs than spending in other sectors (Ledbetter 2011). According to a 2011 estimate, $1 billion spent by the Pentagon creates 11,200 jobs, but the same $1 billion spent in other sectors would create 16,800 clean energy jobs, 17,200 health-care jobs, and 26,700 education jobs (Pollin & Garrett-Peltier 2011). To quote the title of one report, military spending is “a poor job creator” (Hartung 2012). This report concluded that “the more money we spend on unneeded weapons programs, the more layoffs there will be of police officers, firefighters, teachers, and other workers whose jobs are funded directly or indirectly by federal spending.”

As this overview of the debate over military spending indicates, the military remains a hot topic more than two decades after the Cold War ended following the demise of the Soviet Union. As we move further into the twenty-first century, the issue of military spending will present a major challenge for US political and economic institutions to address in a way that meets America’s international and domestic interests.

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Strategies to Address Conflict, War, and Terrorism

Conflict, war, and terrorism are challenging to prevent, especially as multiple causes influence their development. However, theory and research by sociologists and other social scientists point to several avenues that may ultimately help make the world more peaceful. Additionally, anti-war social movements have helped bring awareness to the horrors of war and to expose the level of dissatisfaction about war, which may pressure governments to avoid or end them.

Preventing and Ending Conflict or War

The usual strategies suggested by political scientists and international relations experts to prevent war include arms control and diplomacy. *Arms control* refers to international agreements to restrict the development or deployment of certain weapons. NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (2023), distinguishes between arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation:

- *Arms control* is the broadest of the three terms and generally refers to mutually agreed upon restraints or controls (usually between states) on the development, production, stockpiling, proliferation, deployment and use of troops, small arms, conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction. Arms control includes agreements that increase the transparency of military capabilities and activities, with the intention of reducing the risk of misinterpretation or miscalculation.
- *Disarmament* refers to the act of eliminating or abolishing weapons (particularly offensive arms) either unilaterally or reciprocally. It may refer either to reducing the number of arms, or to eliminating entire categories of weapons.
- *Non-proliferation* refers to "all efforts to prevent proliferation from occurring, or should it occur, to reverse it by any other means than the use of military force." Non-proliferation applies to both weapons of mass destruction (including nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons) and conventional capabilities such as missiles and small arms.

As the US government explains, the approaches are seen "as an effective means to promote transparency, ease military planning, limit forces, and protect against uncertainty and surprise," which have "produced formal treaties and agreements, informal arrangements, and cooperative threat reduction and monitoring mechanisms" (Library of Congress 2025).

Diplomacy involves communications between nations intended to establish or preserve positive relations. According to the Council on Foreign Relations (2025), diplomacy can occur through negotiations (formal discussions on disputes), consultations (conversations on shared problems), summits or conferences (talks between top officials), day-to-day interactions (conversations or activities), and back-channel talks (secret communications). Watch the video below for a hypothetical example of how diplomacy works.



> This video by the National Museum of American Diplomacy defines diplomacy, provides a hypothetical example, and lists diplomatic skills.
>
> *What Is Diplomacy and How Does it Work?* by the *National Museum of American Diplomacy* is licensed under *YouTube's standard license*

Beyond these two essential strategies, the roots of war must also be addressed. As discussed earlier, war is a social phenomenon and arises from decisions by political and military leaders. There is ample evidence that deceit accompanies many of these decisions, as leaders may go to wars for less than noble purposes. To the extent that this is true, citizens must always be ready to question any rationales given for war, and a free press in a democracy must exercise eternal vigilance in reporting on these rationales. According to critics, the press and the public were far too acquiescent in the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003, just as they had been acquiescent a generation earlier when the Vietnam War began being waged (Solomon 2006). To prevent war, then, the press and the public must always be ready to question assumptions about the necessity of war. The same readiness should occur in regard to *militarism* and the size of the military budget.

As we think about how to prevent war, we must not forget two important types of changes that create pressures for war: Population change and environmental change. Effective efforts to reduce population growth in the areas of the world where it is far too rapid will yield benefits, and one such benefit is a lower likelihood that nations will go to war. Effective efforts to address climate change will also yield benefits, again including a lower likelihood of war and ethnic conflict in certain parts of the world.

Finally, efforts to prevent war must keep in mind the fact that ideological differences and prejudice sometimes motivate decisions to go to war or to engage in the patterns of interaction we discussed such as expulsion and genocide. It might sound rather idealistic to say that governments and their people should respect ideological differences and be welcoming toward people who hold different religious or other ideologies or have different ethnic backgrounds. However, any efforts by international bodies, such as the United Nations, to achieve greater understanding along these lines will limit the potential for war and conflict. Research suggests that practices such as cooperative learning, in which individuals collaboratively teach and learn together, and portraying social norms in media or encouraging perspective taking and empathy in media are promising strategies to reduce prejudice (Paluck & Green 2009).

The same potential holds true for efforts to increase educational attainment within the US and other nations. Because prejudice generally declines as education increases, measures that raise education levels may reduce the potential for conflict and war. One remarkable story illustrates how education can be transformative: Derek Black is the son of KKK grand wizard Don Black, and it was assumed that he would take over his father's role as the head of the white nationalist movement. During his time in college he got to know people of other identities and backgrounds, and formed friendships with Jewish classmates. His education and opportunities to interact with others helped him learn to question the prejudicial that beliefs he was socialized into, and he eventually left and publicly renounced the white nationalist movement. To learn more, check out New York Times reporter Eli Saslow's book Rising Out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist.

In addition to these strategies to prevent or end war, some argue that it is vital to reduce the size of the US military budget. Defense analysts who believe that this budget is too high have proposed specific cuts in weapons systems that are not needed and in military personnel at home and abroad who are not needed (Arquilla & Fogelson-Lubliner 2011; Knight 2011; Sustainable Defense Task Force 2010). Making these cuts, these critics argue, would save the nation over $100 billion annually without endangering national security. This large sum could be reallocated to help meet the nation’s other needs, such as to reduce poverty, strengthen housing programs, expand access to education, and engage in other efforts that would have great benefits to the nation.

Reducing Terrorism

Because of 9/11 and other transnational terrorism, most analyses of stopping terrorism focus on this specific type of terrorism. Traditional efforts to stop transnational terrorism take two forms (White 2012). The first strategy involves attempts to capture known terrorists and to destroy their camps and facilities and is commonly called a *law enforcement* or *military* approach. The second strategy stems from the recognition of the structural roots of terrorism just described and is often called a *structural-reform* approach. Each approach has advocates among terrorism experts, and each approach has critics.

Law enforcement and military efforts have been known to weaken terrorist forces, but terrorist groups have persisted despite these measures. Worse yet, these measures may ironically inspire terrorists to commit further terrorism and increase public support for their cause. Critics also worry that the military approach endangers civil liberties, as the debate over the US response to terrorism since 9/11 so vividly illustrates (Cole & Lobel 2007). This debate took an interesting turn in late 2010 amid the increasing use of airport scanners that generate body images. Many people criticized the scanning as an invasion of privacy, and they also criticized the invasiveness of the “pat-down” searches that were used for people who chose not to be scanned (Reinberg 2010).

In view of all these problems, many terrorism experts instead favor the structural-reform approach, which they say can reduce terrorism by improving or eliminating the conditions that give rise to the discontent that leads individuals to commit terrorism. Here again the assessment of the heads of the 9/11 Commission illustrates this view:

> "We must use all the tools of U.S. power—including foreign aid, educational assistance and vigorous public diplomacy that emphasizes scholarship, libraries and exchange programs—to shape a Middle East and a Muslim world that are less hostile to our interests and values. America’s long-term security relies on being viewed not as a threat but as a source of opportunity and hope" (Kean & Hamilton 2007).

Although there are no easy solutions to transnational terrorism, then, efforts to stop this form of terrorism must not neglect its structural roots. As long as these roots persist, new terrorists will come along to replace any terrorists who are captured or killed. Such recognition of the ultimate causes of transnational terrorism is thus essential for the creation of a more peaceable world.

Individual Agency and Collective Action

History shows that social movements can help prevent or end armament and war and limit the unchecked use of military power once war has begun (Breyman 2001; Staggenborg 2010). Antiwar activism has been a part of US history since the Revolutionary War. US involvement in war has provoked protests, denunciation speeches and writings from public figures, and sustained and organized collective action that constitutes *social movements*.

Perhaps the most notable antiwar collective action was the antiwar social movement against the Vietnam War, particularly during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Much of this collective action was student-led, as college students have long played a vital role in pushing for social change. Protests spanned the nation and activists held teach-ins or sit-ins, destroyed draft cards, and engaged in civil disobedience.



In the 1960s and 70s student activist groups and others protested the Vietnam War, engaging in antiwar collective action to push for an end to the war.

Bring All the Troops Home Now, USD Alcalá 1971 by Alcalá yearbook, 1971, University of San Diego via Picryl is under the public domain

As The White House Historical Association (2025) explains, these actions put pressure on the government, for instance:

> "The Mayday Protest in 1971 is a prime example of how citizens used the nation’s capital as the ground on which to stage their disapproval. Activists planned to shut down the city completely, handicapping the government and making it impossible

for it to function. Protesters camped out in masses on the edges of downtown Washington on May 2, 1971. They chose this place so they would be able to spread out along the entrances to the city as quickly as possible the next day. Traffic was stopped, at least for a few hours, and although it angered some commuters, no one could disregard the strength of the movement. CIA director Richard Helms remarked that Mayday was 'one of the things that was putting increasing pressure on the [Nixon] administration to try and find some way to get out of the war.'"

Students, other individuals, and groups have engaged in collective action around other wars. For instance, Pro-Palestinian protests recently erupted across the nation, particularly on college campuses, to end the war in Gaza and stop the harm or genocide of Palestinian people. A historical example includes the Women's Peace Parade in 1914 was organized by feminist women to protest World War I. Feminist groups are still fighting for peace. One such group is the Feminist Peace Initiative, which was formed only in 2020 when the organizations Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, MADRE, and Women Cross DMZ invited a couple dozen women and gender nonconforming people, primarily BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color), to engage in antiwar and anti-militarism efforts and to push for revisions in US foreign policy. They have published a framework and a playbook to advance these feminist peace efforts. You may learn more about this group at their website A Feminist Vision for Peace.

Some organizations work for peace and provide support to those experiencing the consequences of war. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is one such organization, which has been instrumental in fighting for peace and aiding those impacted by war.

People Making a Difference

Working Toward Peace Across the World

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a Quaker organization that has long worked for peace and social justice. Its national office is in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and it has local offices in more than thirty other US cities and also in more than a dozen other nations.

AFSC was established in 1917 to help conscientious objectors serve their country in nonmilitary ways during World War I. After that war ended with the defeat of Germany and Austria, AFSC provided food to thousands of German and Austrian children. It helped Jewish refugees after Hitler came to power, and sent various forms of aid to Japan after World War II ended.

During the 1960s, it provided nonviolence training for civil rights activists and took a leading role in the movement to end the Vietnam War. Since the 1960s, AFSC has provided various types of help to immigrants, migrant workers, prisoners, and other 'have-not' groups in need of social justice. It also works to achieve nonviolent conflict resolution in urban communities and spoke out against plans to begin war in Iraq in 2003.

In 1947, AFSC and its British counterpart won the Nobel Peace Prize for their aid to hungry children and other Europeans during and after World Wars I and II. The Nobel committee proclaimed in part, "The Quakers have shown us that it is possible to carry into action something which is deeply rooted in the minds of many: sympathy with others; the desire to help others… without regard to nationality or race; feelings which, when carried into deeds, must provide the foundations of a lasting peace."

Today, the AFSC "works with communities worldwide to challenge injustice and build conditions for lasting peace" and declares "We are steadfast in our commitment to nonviolence and our belief in the transformative power of love to overcome conflict and oppression."

For over a century, the American Friends Service Committee has been active in many ways to achieve a more just, peaceable world. It deserves the world's thanks for helping to make a difference.

> For further information, visit http://www.afsc.org.

Thus, individuals have used their agency and participated in collective action across US history to help prevent or bring an end to war, and to help alleviate the harsh consequences of war and conflict.

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Review of Conflict, War, and Terrorism

Summary

1. President Eisenhower long ago warned of the dangers of a *military industrial complex* in the US, which has an enormous defense budget and can be characterized by **militarism**.
2. Patterns of interaction regarding conflict include **segregation** such as Jim Crow in the South, **expulsion** such as the internment of Japanese Americans in camps during World War II, and **genocide** such as the annihilation of Indigenous people and culture during colonialism and through part of the twentieth century.
3. **Interstate wars** occur between nations such as with US involvement in the Vietnam War and **intrastate wars** occur within nations such as the Civil War in the US.
4. Terrorism includes many forms depending on who the perpetrator is and whom they're targeting, such as **transnational terrorism**, **domestic terrorism**, and **state terrorism**.
5. War is best regarded as a social phenomenon rather than a biological phenomenon. Decisions to go to war are sometimes based on noble reasons, but they also involve deceit, prejudice, and other concerns.
6. War serves several functions according to structural functionalist theory, but can also have *latent functions* or be dysfunctional. Conflict theory emphasizes the **military-industrial complex** and the role the *power elite* play in it. Symbolic interactionist theory focuses on the experiences of soldiers in the military and civilians in wartime as well as symbols and subjective meanings of conflict, war, and terrorism.
7. **White supremacy** fuels conflict and terrorism, including historical mistreatment of Black Americans and Indigenous people and contemporary white nationalist extremist terrorism.
8. Civilians and veterans are both victims of war. Civilian deaths in war are almost inevitable, and atrocities are far from rare. American veterans are at greater risk for PTSD, unemployment, and several other problems that also affect their families. Sexual assault is also a common occurrence in war and in the US military.
9. The US has the highest military budget in the world by far. Debate continues over the size of this budget, with critics saying that the US would have a higher quality of life if the military budget were reallocated to be spent on unmet social needs.
10. Strategies to prevent conflict, war, and terrorism include arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation as well as various forms of diplomacy. Efforts to reduce prejudice and white supremacy would also reduce these problems. Antiwar social movements and other collective action have long been a part of US history as strategies to end war.

Questions

1. Which of the three theoretical perspectives on conflict, war, and terrorism do you most favor, and why?
2. Why do you think that the nation's flag has so much symbolic importance in American society?
3. Do you think that the US response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks has been appropriate or do you think that it has been overdone, and why?
4. Do you feel that the US defense budget should be increased, reduced, or stay about the same, and why?
5. If we do reduce the size of the defense budget in favor of addressing other social problems, which social programs or policies do you think are most important to reallocate funds to?
6. What do you think is the worst problem that veterans have faced in returning from the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan?
7. Do you think that deceit was involved in the decision of the US to go to war against Iraq in 2003, and why or why not?
8. Which strategies to prevent conflict, war, and terrorism or address their consequences do you feel are the most important, and why?

Action Steps

1. Use your sociological imagination: When you learn of an intrastate war in another nation, think of and research which structural factors contribute as causes of that war.
2. Support nonprofits and similar organizations: Volunteer at or donate to a local or national agency that provides veterans services such as for mental health, housing, or accessing government benefits.
3. Use your individual agency: Form or join a group on your campus or in the local community that calls attention to patterns of conflict, war, or militarism.

4. Engage in collective action: Research local or national groups that are engaged in peaceful/nonviolent antiwar collective action, select one, and figure out how to get involved in their efforts.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Environment

- Overview of Environmental Problems
- Theoretical Perspectives on Environmental Problems
- Patterns of Environmental Problems
- Strategies to Address Environmental Problems
- Review of Environmental Problems
- References for Environment

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Overview of Environmental Problems

Learning Objectives

- Explain what is meant by the assertion that environmental problems are social problems.
- Differentiate between climate change and global warming.
- Summarize the classical theoretical perspectives and other perspectives on environmental problems.
- Explain how climate change and global warming are caused by human activities.
- Describe other environmental problems facing the world today and their consequences.
- Analyze how social location helps us understand the experience and consequences of environmental problems.
- Explain the concepts of environmental injustice and environmental racism.
- List local, national, and international policies and practices that could help improve environmental problems.
- Describe how individual agency and collective action could support environmental and social justice.

At first glance, the environment may not seem to be a sociological topic. Isn't the natural and physical environment is something that geologists, meteorologists, oceanographers, and other scientists should be studying, rather than sociologists? In fact, the environment is very much a sociological topic for several reasons.

First, environmental problems are the result of human activity, and this activity like many human behaviors is a proper topic for sociological study. This textbook has discussed many human behaviors: Socialization and social interaction, racist and sexist discrimination, criminal behavior, and others. Just as these behaviors are worthy of sociological study, so are the human behaviors that harm (or try to improve) the environment.

Second, environmental problems have a significant impact on people, as do the many other social problems that sociologists study. We see the clearest evidence of this impact when a major hurricane, an earthquake, or another natural disaster strikes. In January 2010, for example, a devastating earthquake struck Haiti and killed more than 250,000 people, or about 2.5% of that nation's population. The effects of these natural disasters on the economy and society of Haiti will certainly also be felt for many years to come.



As is evident in this photo taken in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti, changes in the natural environment can lead to profound changes in a society. Environmental changes are one of the many sources of social change.

United Nations Development Programme – Haiti Earthquake – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Slower changes in the environment can also have a large social impact. *Industrialization* and population growth have increased the pollution of our air, water, and ground. *Climate change* threatens the whole planet, in ways that researchers have documented and will no doubt be examining for the rest of our lifetimes and beyond. We return to these environmental problems shortly.

A third reason is that many environmental problems reflect and illustrate social inequality based on various areas of social location such as social class, race/ethnicity, and gender. As with many problems in our society, marginalized groups often fare worse when it comes to the environment. We return to this theme later in our discussion of *environmental racism*.

A fourth reason the environment is a sociological topic is a bit more complex: Solutions to our environmental problems require changes in economic and environmental policies, and the potential implementation and impact of these changes depends heavily on social and political factors. In the United States, for example, the two major political parties, corporate lobbyists, and environmental organizations regularly battle over attempts to tighten or loosen environmental regulations.

Finally, efforts to improve the environment include social movements and, as such, are again worthy of sociological study. Sociologists and other social scientists have conducted many studies of why people join environmental movements and of the impacts of these movements.

Environmental Sociology

All these reasons suggest that the environment is quite fittingly a sociological topic, and one on which sociologists should have important insights. In fact, so many sociologists study the environment that their collective study makes up a subfield in sociology called **environmental sociology**, the study of the interaction between human behavior and the natural and physical environment. Simply put, it is the sociological study of the environment. According to a report by the American Sociological Association (Nagel, Dietz, & Broadbent 2010), environmental sociology has provided significant insights into such areas as public opinion about the environment, the influence of values on people's environmental behavior, and inequality in the impact of environmental problems on communities and individuals.

Environmental sociology assumes "that humans are part of the environment and that the environment and society can only be fully understood in relation to each other" (McCarthy & King 2009: 1). Because humans are responsible for the world's environmental problems, humans have both the ability and the responsibility to address these problems. As sociologists Leslie King and Deborah McCarthy (2009: ix) assert:

> "We both strongly believe that humans have come to a turning point in terms of our destruction of ecological resources and endangerment of human health. A daily look at the major newspapers points, without fail, to worsening environmental problems… Humans created these problems and we have the power to resolve them. Naturally, the longer we wait, the more devastating the problems will become; and the more we ignore the sociological dimensions of environmental decline the more our proposed solutions will fail."

Environmental sociologists emphasize two important dimensions of the relationship between society and the environment: (a) the impact of human activity and decision making and (b) the existence and consequences of environmental inequality and environmental racism. We now turn to the first dimension and will discuss the second on the Patterns of Environmental Problems page.

Human Activity

Perhaps more than anything else, environmental sociologists emphasize that environmental problems are the result of human decisions and activities that harm the environment. Masses of individuals acting independently of each other make decisions and engage in activities that harm the environment, as when we leave lights on, keep our homes too warm in the winter or too cool in the summer, and drive motor vehicles that get low gas mileage. Moreover, corporations, government agencies, and other organizations make decisions and engage in practices that greatly harm the environment. Sometimes individuals and organizations know full well that their activities are harming the environment, and sometimes they just act carelessly without much thought about the possible environmental harm of their actions. Still, the environment is harmed whether or not individuals, corporations, and governments intend to harm it.

A major example of the environmental harm caused by human activity was the British Petroleum (BP) oil spill that began in April 2010 when an oil rig leased by BP exploded in the Gulf of Mexico and eventually released almost 5 million barrels of oil (about 200 million gallons) into the ocean. Congressional investigators later concluded that BP had made a series of decisions that "increased the danger of a catastrophic well," including a decision to save money by using an inferior casing for the well that made an explosion more likely. A news report paraphrased the investigators as concluding that "some of the decisions appeared to violate industry guidelines and were made despite warnings from BP's own employees and outside contractors" (Fountain 2010).



The April 2010 BP oil spill occurred after BP made several decisions that may have increased the possibility of a catastrophic explosion of the well.

Image courtesy of International Bird Rescue Research Center, http://www.flickr.com/photos/ibrrc/4670207222

Sociologists McCarthy and King (2009) cite several other environmental accidents that stemmed from reckless decision making and natural disasters in which human decisions accelerated the harm that occurred. One accident occurred in Bhopal, India in 1984 when a Union Carbide pesticide plant leaked forty tons of deadly gas. Between 3,000 and 16,000 people died immediately and another half million suffered permanent illnesses or injuries. A contributing factor for the leak was Union Carbide's decision to save money by violating safety standards in the construction and management of the plant.

Another preventable accident was the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil tanker disaster, in which the tanker hit ground off the coast of Alaska and released 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound. Among other consequences, the spill killed hundreds of thousands of birds and marine animals and almost destroyed the local fishing and seafood industries. The immediate cause of the accident was that the ship's captain was an alcoholic and left the bridge in the hands of an unlicensed third mate after drinking five double vodkas in the hours before the crash occurred. Exxon officials knew of his alcoholism but let him command the ship anyway. Also, if the ship had had a double hull (one hull inside the other), it might not have cracked on impact or at least would have released less oil, but Exxon and the rest of the oil industry had successfully lobbied Congress not to require stronger hulls.

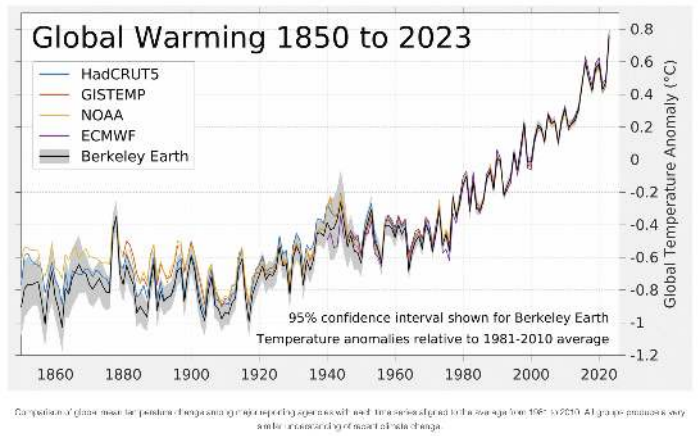
Hurricane Katrina was an environmental disaster in which human decision making resulted in a great deal of preventable damage. After Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and especially New Orleans in August 2005, the resulting wind and flooding killed more than 1,800 people and left more than 700,000 homeless. McCarthy and King attribute much of this damage to human decision making: "While hurricanes are typically considered 'natural disasters,' Katrina's extreme consequences must be considered the result of social and political failures" (2009: 4). Long before Katrina hit, it was well known that a major flood could easily breach New Orleans levees and have a devastating impact. Despite this knowledge, US, state, and local officials did nothing over the years to strengthen or rebuild the levees. In addition, coastal land that would have protected New Orleans had been lost over time to commercial and residential development. In short, the flooding after Katrina was a human disaster, not a natural disaster.

Our Greatest Concern

Scientists believe global climate change is the greatest challenge humanity has ever faced. But what exactly is climate change? How did we (humans) cause it?

Climate change refers to the long-term shift in global and regional temperatures, humidity and rainfall patterns, and other atmospheric characteristics. Unlike changes in weather that occur on a local level that can be measured in hourly, daily, or weekly fluctuations, climate change refers to longer-term fluctuations (both regionally or globally) that take place over a time scale of seasons, years, or decades.

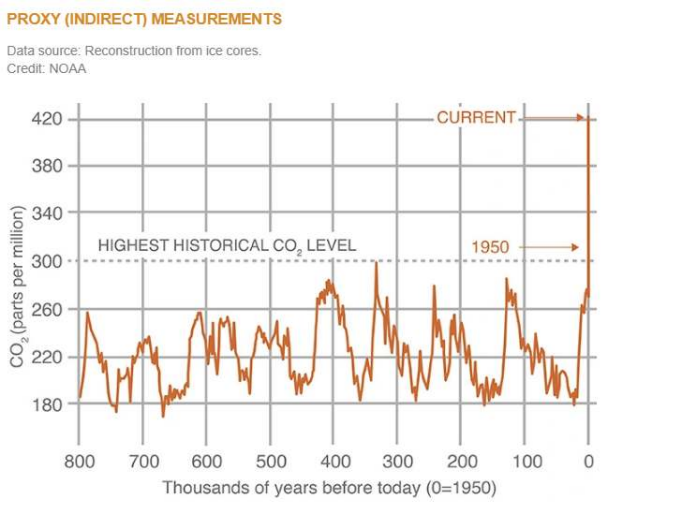
Climate change is inclusive of a wide variety of changes in the climate including temperature and rainfall patterns, as defined above. **Global warming** refers specifically to increases in the average temperature of the earth's surface. Scientists often use 'temperature anomalies' rather than actual temperatures to track global warming. A temperature anomaly compares the observed temperature with a baseline average temperature, with positive anomalies indicating a warmer temperature than the baseline. We see clear evidence of global warming in the chart below, which displays measurements for several different organizations including NASA (the GISS Surface Temperature Analysis, or GISTEMP).



This chart displays the rise in global temperature since 1860. Berkeley Earth explains, "All of the monitoring agencies with data available concur that 2023 is the warmest year in the observational record, and by a large margin."

Source: Rhode, Berkeley Earth 2024

In the past two centuries, an exponential increase in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases have been released into the earth's atmosphere, as the next chart below shows. Although there are some natural processes that affect the earth's climate, such as volcanic eruptions, the vast majority of scientists worldwide attribute the speed at which global warming has recently occurred to human activity, most notably the burning of fossil fuels. Scientists examine ocean sediments, ice cores, tree rings, and changes in glaciers to understand variations in Earth's climate over time.



This graph shows the level of Carbon dioxide (CO2) over time, starting from 800,000 years ago. Although some fluctuation is normal, CO2 levels have never been as high as they are now. The change is predominantly caused by human activities such as burning fossil fuels like coal, oil, and gas.

"Proxy (Indirect) Measurements" from "Carbon Dioxide" from NASA Global Climate Change/NOAA is in the Public Domain

Industrialization is one reason for the increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Since the Industrial Revolution, the concentration of greenhouse gasses is higher than at any other time in the past 800,000 years. This increase in greenhouse gasses is called the **greenhouse effect**, an imbalance between the energy entering and leaving the earth's atmosphere, resulting in a rise in global temperature. Because certain gasses absorb energy, such as carbon dioxide and methane, they trap heat and prevent it from being released into space, causing a rise in global temperature.

The burning of fossil fuels is not the only human activity contributing to the greenhouse effect. Other activities such as deforestation, urbanization, and unsustainable agricultural practices contribute to global climate change.

Climate change is a social problem because humans are causing the problem and are differently impacted by the problem. Climate change is a critical problem, no matter how we approach it. Scientists have consistently found that climate change is already a threat to societies and communities worldwide. Scientists are also studying how to minimize its effects on people and the environment more broadly and, with any hope, successfully plan for the uncertain future.

—

We share our planet with far more than just members of our species. Because a great deal of our daily life is centered around the world humanity has built, it's easy to forget that we are part of a greater whole – a whole in which we are but one of the billions of life forms that inhabit Earth, all equally dependent on a healthy and safe environment to live and to thrive. Human society and the natural environment are interconnected parts of this whole. However, the world we share with the larger circle of life is increasingly impacted by human activity. These impacts are so pervasive that scientists around the world name the current geological period of Earth's history the *Anthropocene*, or the age of humans.

In this chapter, we explore the causes and consequences of climate change. We find out why climate change is both an environmental issue and a social problem due to the inequitable power dynamics that place some communities at greater risk than others. We also discuss other environmental problems, such as those that target marginalized groups in the US and across the world. We examine how individuals and communities are responding to climate change and environmental problems. We take action to adapt to the current effects of climate change and to prevent further social and ecological harm. We want to leave behind a cleaner and safer environment for future generations. All of us deserve clean air, clean water and a healthy earth. Environmental justice is social justice.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Environmental Problems

The major sociological perspectives offer insights that help us understand problems relating to the environment; however, other perspectives are important for framing and consider strategies to environmental problems. We will first discuss the classical sociological paradigms, then shift to a discussion of other perspectives central to thinking about the environment. The Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot table below summarizes how each of the sociological perspectives frame or explain these problems.

Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Structural functionalism	Environmental problems are to be expected in an industrial society, but severe environmental problems are dysfunctional.
Conflict theory	The practices of multinational corporations and weak regulation of these practices account for many environmental problems.
Symbolic interactionism	People's social backgrounds affect their perceptions and understandings of environmental issues, which are important to appreciate if environmental problems are to be addressed.

Structural Functionalism

Functionalism considers pollution and other environmental problems to be an inevitable consequence of today's society, but it assumes that environmental problems that are too severe are certainly dysfunctional for society. Functionalists may see industrialization as a positive development for society as it provided industries and jobs, among other benefits. However, industrialization is a leading cause of accelerating global warming, which may cause societal dysfunctions if people are displaced, cannot work, or experience other consequences of environmental problems. Functionalism argues that other concerns such as population growth has implications for the environment, such as using up valuable resources and food supplies necessary for humans to survive and thrive.

Since functionalists are interested in the workings and interconnections of social institutions, they may also argue that it is a dysfunction of the institution of the state to allow corporations to engage in polluting practices that harm the environment. The government may limit corporations' use of fossil fuels, for instance, which would slow global warming and its consequences for society.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory assumes that the world's environmental problems are not inevitable and instead arise from two related sources. First, multinational corporations engage in practices that pollute the air, water, and ground. Second, the United States and other governments fail to have strong regulations to limit corporate pollution, and they fail to adequately enforce the regulations they do have. Thus, conflict theory argues that environmental problems reflect decisions by political elites and multinational corporations.



Conflict theory blames many environmental problems on pollution by multinational corporations that occurs because of weak regulations and a failure to enforce the regulations that do exist.

Kim Seng – Sugar Factory Producing Smoke Pollution into the Earth – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Feminist theories, which overlap with conflict theories, also help explain climate change and environmental inequality. They focus on the documented fact that women and children are disproportionately impacted by climate change and other environmental problems, and see patriarchy and capitalism as the causes. The video below explores this topic in more detail. This strand of feminist theory and action is called ecofeminism.



In the first 12 minutes of this TED Talk video, Gender inequality is showing up…in climate change, Canadian researcher Amber Fletcher discusses interviewing farm women to demonstrate how climate change impacts agriculture in Canada. How might environmental problems otherwise disproportionately impact women?

"Gender inequality is showing up… in climate change" by Amber Fletcher, TEDxRegina is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

Ecofeminism connects the domination of women and nonbinary people to the domination of the environment. If you would like to learn more, please read the article Ecofeminism: Encouraging Interconnectedness with Our Environment in Modern Society. In it, researchers Mondal and Majumder (2019) write, "bringing together feminism and environmentalism, ecofeminism argues that the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are consequences of patriarchy and capitalism."

In response to this and other gendered inequalities, women and nonbinary people are thinking, researching, and taking action, as mentioned on the Strategies page.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism offers four kinds of understandings of environmental problems. First, it seeks to understand why people engage or do not engage in activities related to environmental problems (e.g., recycling, limiting polluting activities). In order to address environmental problems, it is important to understand why people become involved, or fail to become involved, in various activities related to these problems.

Second, it emphasizes people's perceptions of environmental problems. To the extent that public attitudes play a key role in the persistence of these problems, it is important to know the reasons for public views on these problems so that efforts to address the problems may be better focused.

Next, symbolic interactionism assumes that environmental problems are to some extent *social constructs*, as these problems do not come to be considered *social problems* unless sufficient numbers of people and/or influential organizations in the public and private

sectors recognize them as problems. For example, lead was a serious health problem long before the US government banned it in paint in 1977 and in gasoline in 1990. As early as the first few years of the twentieth century, scientists were calling attention to the toxic properties of lead paint and more generally of lead itself. Still, lead was added to gasoline in 1922 to raise octane levels. Despite growing evidence over the next few decades of lead's toxic qualities, various industries continued to say that lead was safe for the general public (Michaels 2008). The banning of lead was ultimately due to the efforts of environmental groups and to the fact that the growing amount of scientific evidence of lead's dangers became overwhelming.

Finally, symbolic interactionism emphasizes that people from different social backgrounds and from different cultures may have different understandings of environmental problems.

Other Perspectives

In addition to the classical sociological theoretical perspectives, two other general frameworks are useful for examining environmental problems. The first directly connects to problems of the environment: The environmental injustice framework. The second we introduced in the Sociology chapter as an alternative to Western scientific knowledge: Indigenous perspectives.

Environmental Injustice Perspectives

Conflict theorists, critical race theorists, and other scholars agree that environmental problems are a product of racist and classist practices. **Environmental racism** is any environmental policy or practice which disadvantages people or communities based on race. Reverend Dr. Benjamin Chavis created this term in 1982 to describe the experience of Black people in Warren County, North Carolina. Black residents protested the siting of a toxic landfill in a predominantly Black community (Bullard 2000). To be more specific, Chavis (1994) defined environmental racism as:

> "racial discrimination in environmental policymaking and enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the presence of life-threatening poisons and pollutants for communities of color, and the history of excluding People of Color from leadership of the environmental movement" (Chavis 1994).

Environmental sociologist Robert D. Bullard (pictured below), often described as the "Father of Environmental Justice," expands on Chavis's work. His book *Dumping on Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (1990) was the first book describing environmental racism. Bullard discussed a landmark study he conducted in 1979 concerning the locations of all the municipal solid-waste sites in Houston, Texas, related to a lawsuit. The lawsuit *Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management* was in response to the siting of a landfill in a suburban middle-class neighborhood in which Bullard described as "an unlikely location for a garbage dump – except that over 82 percent of its residents were African American" (Bullard 1990:xiv).



Environmental sociologist Robert D. Bullard is often described as the "Father of Environmental Justice." What makes his work so powerful?

"Robert Bullard" by Dave Brenner, University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Results from Bullard's research inspired him to investigate four other Black communities in the South to see if there was indeed a correlation between race and increased exposure to toxic facilities. His research findings revealed that "the siting of local waste

facilities was not random" (1990:xiv) but were in fact clear examples of *institutional racism* – laws and policies that have intentionally and systematically marginalized Black communities for generations.

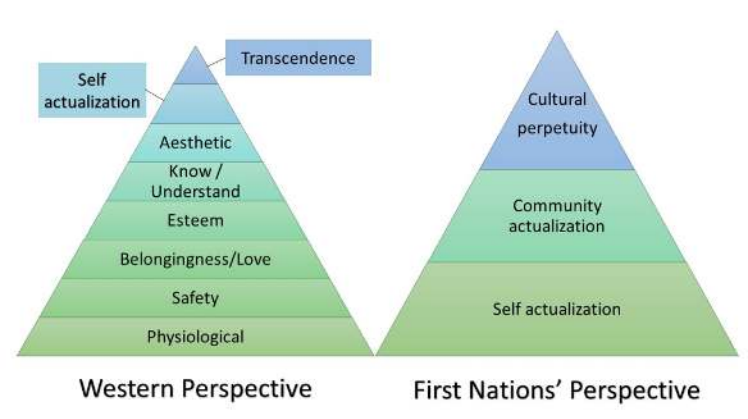
Bullard's groundbreaking research provided convincing evidence of environmental discrimination. At the center of this legacy of discrimination, he argued, was structural and individual racism, which led to the "impoverishment of Black communities... [making] it easier for Black residential areas to become the dumping grounds for all types of health-threatening toxins and industrial pollution" (1990:7). Bullard's work illustrated how and why past injustices continue to affect and harm historically oppressed communities today.

Environmental racism also includes the colonialist land theft from Indigenous people. Indigenous scholar Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz argued in *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, that "everything in US history is about the land," at least in terms of increasing European and Euro-American wealth and power (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014).

Researcher and activist David Pellow, who wrote the 2017 book *What is Critical Environmental Justice*?, agrees. He focuses more broadly on **environmental injustice**, in which environmental policies or practices disadvantage people in marginalized groups (not necessarily by race). He argues that environmental injustice was a major component of the European colonization agenda. From the theft of nearly all Indigenous historical lands; the extermination of entire cultural groups and millions of Indigenous peoples; the control, commodification, and over-exploitation of natural resources; and the enslavement of millions of Indigenous and African peoples to "work the land," environmental injustice and racism have been a problem in the US from the start. Environmental injustice can be traced much further back in US history to the exploitation and extermination of millions of Indigenous peoples and the violent seizure of their ancestral lands as a result of European and Euro-American colonization and warfare (Jarratt-Snider and Nielson 2020). If you would like to learn more about David Pellow's work, watch the video Polluting the Voiceless.

Indigenous Perspectives

In addition to the classical theoretical perspectives in sociology, other perspectives can help us frame and explain environmental problems. An indigenous perspective offers a different understanding of climate change and environmental inequality. Recall from the Sociology chapter that there are substantial differences between Indigenous and Western worldviews (see the table on the Sociological Concepts page). Another example of these differences can be seen in how we understand what people need to thrive and grow. You may have seen the triangle on the left in the image below at some point in your education – it is Maslow's hierarchy of needs.



This image shows a comparison between Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a Western Perspective, and the First Nations Perspective.

"Maslow's Hierarchy and First Nations Hierarchy" from "Connection" by Elizabeth B. Pearce, Wesley Sharp, and Nyssa Cronin, Contemporary Families: An Equity Lens 1e is licensed under CC BY 4.0. Based on research from Rethinking Learning by Barbara Bray

In 1938, American psychologist Abraham Maslow spent time with the people of the Blackfoot Nation in Canada prior to releasing his hierarchy of needs theory. Historians think he based the teepee-like structure on ideas from the Blackfoot Nation in North

America, but westernized it to focus on the individual rather than the community (Bray 2019). Maslow focuses on the needs of the individual, starting with the basic physical needs like food, water and shelter, moving to needs related to relationships and belonging, and then on to the highest level needs of becoming your best self.

In comparison, the ideas of the Blackfoot nation emphasize community. The well-being of the individual, the family, and the community are based on connectedness. Self actualization is actually the first layer, not at the top. Community actualization reflects our connection to family, friends, community and the world. We thrive when we contribute to and receive from our community. In addition, this model focuses on time. The top of the teepee is cultural perpetuity. It symbolizes a community's culture lasting forever.

There are other differences in Indigenous and Western worldviews of nature, land, and community, including those that relate to the social problem of environmental inequality. Let's look at how capitalism and colonialism causes or exacerbates the social problem of climate change.

Capitalism requires endless consumption and use of resources, which is not sustainable on a finite planet. When the goal is profit, people must buy more and more things. Creating more and more things uses even more planetary resources. This drive for profit shapes our values and our behaviors. For example, sociologists note that capitalism often requires **conspicuous consumption**, the purchase of expensive luxury goods or services to display one's wealth and status. Culturally speaking, it is not enough to have a small house with running water, heat, and electricity. Instead, capitalism requires that people always want more: A big house, two cars, and a nice vacation. We can see conspicuous consumption at work when we examine what people eat around the world.

Unlike capitalism, Indigenous economic systems do not rely on exponential growth and consumption. Many journals from early colonists describe the Americas as places with lush and ample resources. Indigenous peoples had consistently managed and stewarded the land using techniques perfected throughout generations. This knowledge today is called *Traditional Ecological Knowledge*, or TEK (NPS 2023a). To learn more about TEK, read Native Knowledge: What Ecologists Are Learning from Indigenous People.



Wood carvers Owen James, Herb Sheakley, and tribal member George Dalton, Jr. use Traditional Ecological Knowledge to craft art and homes. Here they hoist the Kaagwaantaan house post.

"Carvers Owen James and Herb Sheakley, and tribal member George Dalton, Jr. hoist the Kaagwaantaan house post" by the National Park Service is in the Public Domain

In addition to the decimation of Indigenous populations and the land that they lived on, *colonization* supported a worldview that contributed to ecological devastation today. In this view, land should be owned and subjugated, rather than tended and cared for. In

the words of authors Laura Dominguez and Colin Luoma (who write using UK English):

> "The widespread plunder of natural resources was a hallmark of colonisation. Nature was something that was to be commodified in order to enrich the colonial power. In turn, indigenous territories were treated as business enterprises, with seemingly unlimited resources to exploit. Undoubtedly, this had dire environmental consequences… The ideology that emerged was that nature was something that should be first exploited, then preserved, but all without the input, involvement, or participation of indigenous populations" (Dominguez & Luoma 2020).

Further, colonization supports a Western worldview that leads its participants to value individual well-being above all else. This leads to a lack of action and concern regarding the well being of our neighbors, plants, and animals who surround us, and of the health of the earth at large. An example from Latin America illustrates this mindset. Uruguayan journalist and poet Edwardo Galeano wrote *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* in 1971. He writes:

> "Latin America is the region of open veins. Everything from the discovery until our times, has always been transmuted into European – or later – United States capital, and as such has accumulated on distant centers of power. Everything: the soil, its fruits and its mineral-rich depths, the people and their capacity to work and to consume, natural resources and human resources" (Galeano 1971: 2).

The legacy of colonialism and capitalism on climate change continues today. The world markets for beef, soybeans, palm oil, wood products, sugar, and coffee support continued deforestation (Union of Concerned Scientists 2016). In fact, deforestation itself is a cause of climate change.

Cultural differences in worldviews, in this case relating to economic and power systems, produce varying explanations for climate change and environmental inequality. However, as we see above, the Western perspective of conflict theory agrees with the Indigenous perspective that capitalism is largely responsible for these social problems. Thus, different perspectives are not always in competition and rather may complement each other.

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Patterns of Environmental Problems

An overview of environmental problems, which include consequences of climate change, will indicate the extent and seriousness of this broad problem. On this page we discuss the consequences of climate change and other, often related, environmental problems and their consequences. We include how marginalized groups are disproportionately impacted by climate change and environmental problems, akin to other social problems.

Consequences of Climate Change

Consequences of climate change are numerous and pressing. Research suggests that 3.6 billion people across the globe currently live in areas that are highly susceptible to climate change (World Health Organization 2023). In this section, we provide several examples of these many consequences. They impact various populations differently, depending on our geographic location and social location.

Extreme Weather Events

As you watch the news, you may notice that extreme weather events occur regularly around the world. Many scientists argue that these events are caused or at least made worse by climate change. An *extreme weather event* is defined by the severity of its effects or any weather event uncommon for a particular location. Some examples of these types of severe and unusual events in the US include Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which killed over 1,800 people and caused $125 billion in damage; Hurricane Sandy in 2012, the third-most destructive hurricane ever to hit the nation; and the wildfires that engulfed West Coast states in the 2020s due to severe and prolonged drought and heat waves.



Hurricane Katrina was a devastating extreme weather event, killing 1,800 people and displacing many more.

[Hurricane Katrina] New Orleans, LA, August 30, 2005 by Jocelyn Augustino/FEMA via the U.S. National Archives on Picryl is in the Public Domain

A serious concern that Indigenous communities and other residents have is of the risk of a highly explosive gas pipeline being placed in a region increasingly inundated by annual wildfires. One of the large fires that swept through southern Oregon in September 2020 was located just a few miles from the planned route of the proposed Jordan Cove Energy Project pipelines.

And, as mentioned by communities of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, climate change and mismanagement of forests will continue to create ripe conditions for unprecedented wildfires. In the Good Fire podcast, which you can listen to if you'd like, hosts Amy Cardinal Christianson and Matthew Kristoff, along with guest Frank Lake, discuss the landscape surrounding fire management:

> "Wildfire management has long been the domain of colonial governments. Despite a rich history of living with, managing, and using fire as a tool since time immemorial, Indigenous people were not permitted to practice cultural fire and their

knowledge was largely ignored. As a result, total fire suppression became the prominent policy" (Kristoff 2019).

The Indigenous knowledge that might have protected us against wildfires has been suppressed. It is another consequence of *colonialism*, the domination of a people or area by a foreign state or nation (Definition of Colonialism N.d.), which continues to reproduce inequalities even today (Wolfe 2006).

Climate Displacement

Climate change can displace individuals or entire communities from their homes. A *natural disaster* is an unexpected natural event that causes significant loss of human life or disruption of essential services like food, water, or shelter (Drabek 2017). Because climate change is increasing, natural disaster rates and extreme weather events are also increasing, damaging homes and resulting in displacement. Hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods damage housing. They decrease the amount of housing in a community. Rates of home ownership decline (Sheldon and Zhan 2018). More people experience *houselessness* due to natural disasters than due to conflict or violence.

People also move because of climate change. **Climigration** is the act of people relocating to areas less devastated by flooding, storms, drought, lack of clean water, or economic disaster due to the forces of climate change. Many American families relocate as jobs disappear or land becomes flooded or arid. In response to an immediate disaster, many families move to live with relatives or friends. Some families have nowhere to turn.

For instance, Oregon is experiencing climate change and resulting increases in wildfire activity. Climate-driven wildfires in 2020 burned over a million acres and displaced tens of thousands of Oregonians (Oregon Forest Resources 2023). In southern Oregon, where affordable housing was already limited, low-income renters were left with few options. As of 2022, more than 500 survivors of the 2020 wildfires were living in shelters (Arden 2022). Watch the video below to see how climate-related *housing insecurity* is impacting survivors of the Jackson County Fires.



The video Oregon Already Has a Climate Refugee Crisis describes climate refugees in Oregon. Are you surprised to see climate refugees in the US?

"Oregon Already Has a Climate Refugee Crisis" by Vice News is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

In response to the increased risks of property loss as oceans warm and sea level rises, lending institutions are beginning to practice *bluelining*, which designates real estate considered high risk due to low elevation may not qualify for loans.

If you want to learn more about climate displacement worldwide, visit Climate Displacement by Country.

Cultural Loss

Many cultures around the world are intimately connected to their environment. Certain foods, medicine, dance, and art are unique to places with particular animals, plants, or climates. With drastic temperature changes, extreme disasters, and biodiversity loss among plants and animals, people cannot practice many customs. This contributes to significant cultural loss around the world. For example, salmon are an important symbol and food source for the Indigenous people in the Pacific Northwest (see the figure below).



This photo is of salmon returning to their spawning grounds near Port Hope, Ontario, Canada. How might access to salmon shape a culture? How might increasing lack of access to salmon impact that culture?

"Photo" by Brandon is licensed under the Unsplash License

The imagery of salmon in Indigenous art demonstrates a deep connection to natural surroundings. However, one effect of climate change is the warming of bodies of water worldwide. Like many fish, salmon require a specific temperature to spawn. As water temperatures increase, salmon cannot spawn as effectively or at all. This severely impacts species who eat salmon as a staple in their diet and the Indigenous peoples who practice traditional methods of harvesting, crafting with, and cooking salmon. Climate change can create cultural change or inhibit cultural expression.

Health and Death

Climate change threatens to produce a host of other problems, including increased disease transmitted via food and water, malnutrition resulting from decreased agricultural production and drought, and extinction of several species (Gillis & Foster 2012; Zimmer 2011). All these problems have been producing, and will continue to produce, higher mortality rates across the planet. The World Health Organization (2023) estimates that climate change will cause around 250,000 additional deaths per year between the years 2030 and 2050, from health concerns such as heat stress, lack of nutrition, malaria, and diarrhea. They visualize the health risks in the image below.

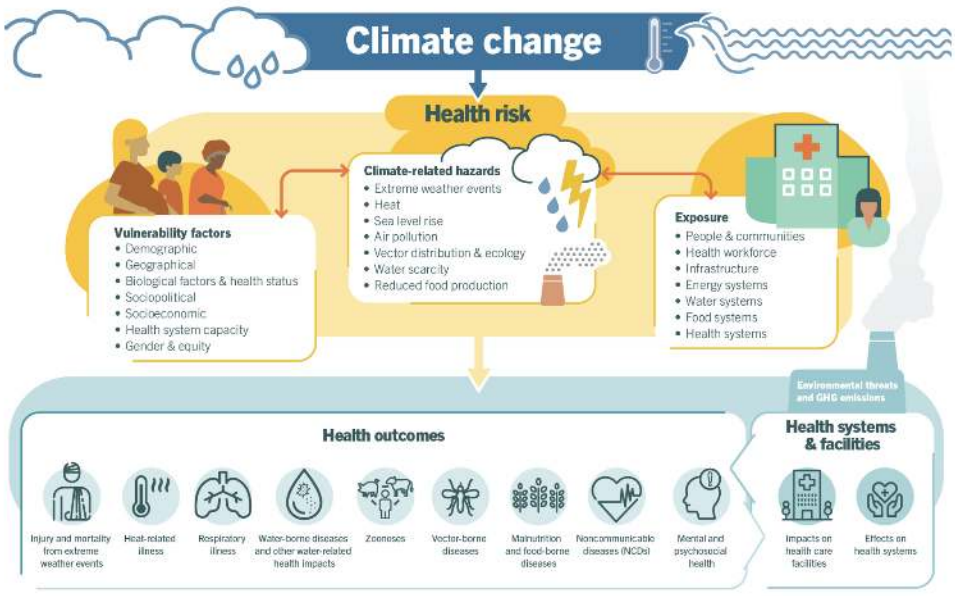


Figure: An overview of climate-sensitive health risks, their exposure pathways and vulnerability factors. Climate change impacts health both directly and indirectly, and is strongly mediated by environmental, social and public health determinants.

Climate change impacts health through hazards such as heat, pollution, extreme weather events, lack of access to food and water, and more mechanisms.

Source: World Health Organization 2023

In addition to direct health complications and death, the economic costs of climate-related health outcomes is enormously high. As the World Health Organization (2023) notes of climate change, "The direct damage costs to health (excluding costs in health-determining sectors such as agriculture and water and sanitation) is estimated to be between US$ 2-4 billion per year by 2030."

Conflict and War

Another problem caused by climate change may be violence and armed conflict (Agnew 2012; Fisman & Miguel 2010; Kristof 2008). Historically, when unusual weather events have caused drought, flooding, or other problems, violence and armed conflict have resulted. For example, witch-burnings in medieval Europe accelerated when extremely cold weather ruined crops and witches were blamed for the problem. Economic problems from declining farm values are thought to have increased the lynchings of Black Americans in the US South. As crops fail from global warming and reduced rainfall in the years ahead, African populations may plunge into civil war. According to an Oxford University economist, having a drought increases by 50% the chance that an African nation will have a civil war a year later (Kristof 2008).

Other Environmental Problems

There is a wide range of other environmental problems, often related to climate change either as consequences of it or due to their shared causes. Here we discuss problems related to the air, water, and earth (the ground), as well as consequences of nuclear power.

Air

Estimates of the annual number of US deaths from *air pollution* range from a low of 10,000 to a high of 60,000 (Reiman & Leighton 2010). The worldwide toll is much greater, as the World Health Organization (2025) warns that air pollution is associated with seven million premature deaths each year.

These deaths stem from the health conditions that fine particulates in the air cause, including heart disease, lung cancer, strokes, and respiratory disease such as asthma. Ambient or outdoor pollution is caused by energy production, vehicles, power generation,

waste incineration, and polluting industries, whereas household air pollution is caused by open fires, karosene, coal, and other sources.

Some air pollution stems from the burning of fossil fuels such as oil, gas, and coal. This problem occurs not only in the wealthy industrial nations but also in the nations of the developing world; countries such as China and India have some of the worst air pollution. In developing nations, mortality rates of people in cities with high levels of particulate matter (carbon, nitrates, sulfates, and other particles) are 15-50% higher than the mortality rates of those in cleaner cities. In European countries, air pollution is estimated to reduce average life expectancy by 8.6 months. The World Health Organization (2011) did not exaggerate when it declared that air pollution "is a major environmental health problem affecting everyone in developed and developing countries alike."

✔ Children and Our Future

Children and Environmental Health Hazards

As we consider environmental problems, we must not forget the world's children, who are at special risk for environmental health problems precisely because they are children. Their bodies and brains grow rapidly, and they breathe in more air per pound of body weight than adults do. They also absorb substances, including toxic substances from their gastrointestinal tract faster than adults do.

These and other physiological differences all put children at greater risk than adults for harm from environmental health hazards. Children's behavior also puts them at greater risk. For example, no adult of normal intelligence would eat paint chips found on the floor, but a young child can easily do so. Children also play on lawns, playgrounds, and other areas in which pesticides are often used, and this type of activity again gives them greater exposure. Young children also put their hands in their mouths regularly, and any toxins on their hands are thereby ingested.

Poverty compounds all these problems. Poor children are more likely to live in houses with lead paint, in neighborhoods with higher levels of air pollution, and in neighborhoods near to hazardous waste sites. Poor children of color are especially at risk for these environmental problems.

Three of the greatest environmental health hazards for children are lead, pesticides, and air pollution. Lead can cause brain and nervous system damage, hearing problems, and delayed growth among other effects; pesticides can cause various problems in the immune, neurological, and respiratory systems; and air pollution can cause asthma and respiratory illnesses. All these health problems can have lifelong consequences.

Unfortunately, certain environmentally induced health problems for children are becoming more common. For example, US children's asthma cases have increased by more than 40 percent since 1980, and more than four hundred American children now have asthma. Two types of childhood cancer thought to stem at least partly from environmental hazards have also increased during the past two decades: acute lymphocytic by 10% and brain tumors by 30%.

It should be evident from this overview that environmental health hazards pose a serious danger for children in the United States and the rest of the world. Because children are our future, this danger underscores the need to do everything possible to improve the environment.

Source: Children's Environmental Health Network 2009

Water

Water quality is also a serious problem. Drinking water is often unsafe because of poor sanitation procedures for human waste in poor nations and because of industrial discharge into lakes, rivers, and streams in wealthy nations. Inadequate sanitation and unsafe drinking water cause parasitic infections and diseases such as diarrhea, malaria, cholera, intestinal worms, typhoid, and hepatitis A.

The World Health Organization estimates that unsafe drinking water and inadequate sanitation cause the following number of annual deaths worldwide: 2.5 million deaths from diarrhea, including 1.4 million child deaths from diarrhea; 500,000 deaths from malaria; and 860,000 child deaths from malnutrition. At least 200 million more people annually suffer at least one of these serious diseases due to inadequate sanitation and unsafe drinking water (Cameron, Hunter, Jagals, & Pond 2011; Prüss-Üstün, Bos, Gore, & Bartram 2008).

The world's oceans are also at peril for several reasons, with "potentially dire impacts for hundreds of millions of people across the planet," according to a news report (ScienceDaily 2010). A major reason is that overfishing of fish and mammals has dramatically reduced the supply of certain ocean animals. This reduction certainly makes it difficult for people to eat certain fishes at restaurants or buy them at supermarkets, but a far more important problem concerns the ocean food chain (Weise 2011). As the supply of various ocean animals has dwindled, the food supply for the larger ocean animals that eat these smaller animals has declined, putting the larger animals at risk. And as the number of these larger animals has declined, other animals that prey on these larger animals have had to turn to other food sources or not have enough to eat. This chain reaction in the ocean food chain has serious consequences for the ocean's ecosystem.

One example of this chain reaction involves killer whales and sea otters in the ocean off of western Alaska (Weise 2011). Killer whales eat many things, but sea lions and harbor seals form a key part of their diet. However, the supply of these ocean mammals in western Alaska and elsewhere has decreased because of human overfishing of their prey fish species. In response, killer whales have been eating more sea otters, causing a 90% decline in the number of sea otters in western Alaska. Because sea otters eat sea urchins, the loss of sea otters in turn has increased the number of sea urchins there. And because sea urchins consume kelp beds, kelp beds there are disappearing, removing a significant source of food for other ocean life (Estes et al. 2011).

Another example of the ocean chain reaction concerns whales themselves. The whaling industry that began about 1,000 years ago and then intensified during the eighteenth century severely reduced the number of whales and made right whales almost extinct. In southern oceans, whale feces are an important source of nutrients for very small animals and plankton. As the whale population in these oceans has declined over the centuries, these animals and plankton that are essential for the ocean's ecosystem have suffered immeasurable losses (Weise 2011).

In addition to overfishing, *bycatch*, the unintentional catching and killing of fish, marine mammals, sea turtles, and seabirds while other fish are being caught, also endangers hundreds of ocean species and further contributes to the chain reaction we have described. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (2012) says that bycatch "can have significant social, environmental, and economic impacts." It costs the fishing industry much time and money, it threatens many ocean species, and it endangers the ocean's ecosystem." One example is sea turtles, whose numbers have declined so steeply in recent decades that six of the seven species of sea turtles are in danger of extinction. The major reason for this danger is bycatch from shrimp trawl nets and other types of fishing. This bycatch has killed millions of sea turtles since 1990 (Viegas 2010).

Other ocean problems stem from climate change. The oceans' coral reefs are among the most colorful and beautiful sights in the world. More important, they are an essential source of nutrients for the oceans' ecosystem and a major source of protein for 500 million people. They help protect shorelines from natural disasters such as tsunamis, and they attract tens of billions of dollars in tourism.



The decline of the whale population due to the whaling industry threatens the world's supply of plankton and other very small marine animals.

Image courtesy of Joel T. Barkan

Despite all these benefits, coral reefs have long been endangered by overfishing, tourism, and coastal development, among other factors. Scientists have now found that climate change is also harming coral reefs (Rudolf 2011). The global warming arising from climate change is overheating coral reefs throughout the world. This overheating in turn causes the reefs to expel the algae they consume for food; the algae are also responsible for the reefs' bright colors. The reefs then turn pale and die, and their deaths add to the ocean's food chain problem already discussed. Scientists estimate that three-fourths of the earth's reefs are at risk from global warming, and that one-fifth of all reefs have already been destroyed. They further estimate that almost all reefs will be at risk by 2050.

Global warming will continue to be a main culprit in this regard, but so will increasing acidity, yet another problem arising from climate change. As carbon dioxide is released into the atmosphere, much of it falls into the ocean. This lowers the oceans' pH level and turns the oceans more acidic. This increasing acidity destroys coral reefs and also poses a risk to commercial species such as clams, lobsters, and mussels.

An additional ocean problem stemming from climate change is rising sea levels (Daley 2011). Global warming has caused polar ice caps to melt and the seas to rise. This problem means that storm surges during severe weather are becoming an ever-greater problem. Even without storm surges, much coastal land has already been lost to rising ocean levels. Despite these problems, many coastal communities have failed to build adequate barriers that would minimize damage from ocean flooding.

Earth

Pollution of the air and water is an environmental danger, but so is pollution of the ground, particularly from hazardous waste. *Hazardous wastes* are unwanted materials or byproducts that are potentially toxic. If discarded improperly, they enter the ground and/or bodies of water and eventually make their way into the bodies of humans and other animals and/or harm natural vegetation.

Two major sources of hazardous waste exist: Commercial products such as pesticides, cleaning fluids, and certain paints, batteries, and electronics; and byproducts of industrial operations such as solvents and wastewater. Hazardous waste enters the environment through the careless actions of homeowners and other consumers, and also through the careless actions of major manufacturing corporations. It can cause birth defects, various chronic illnesses and conditions, and eventual death.

Sometimes companies have dumped so much hazardous waste into a specific location that they create *hazardous waste sites*. These sites are defined as parcels of land and water that have been contaminated by the dumping of dangerous chemicals into the ground by factories and other industrial operations. One infamous hazardous waste site is the Love Canal, an area in a corner of Niagara Falls, New York. During the 1940s and 1950s, a chemical company dumped 20,000 tons of toxic chemicals into the canal and then filled it in with dirt and sold it for development to the local school board. A school and more than eight hundred homes, many of them low income, were later built just near the site. The chemicals eventually leached into the groundwater, yards, and basements of the homes, reportedly causing birth defects and other health problems.



Love Canal, an area in Niagara Falls, New York, was the site of chemical dumping that led to many birth defects and other health problems.

Image courtesy of US Environmental Protection Agency, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Love_Canal_protest.jpg

Nuclear Power

Nuclear power has been an environmental controversy at least since the 1970s. Proponents of nuclear power say it is a cleaner energy than fossil fuels such as oil and coal and does not contribute to global warming. Opponents of nuclear power counter that nuclear waste is highly dangerous no matter how it is disposed, and they fear meltdowns that can result if nuclear power plant cores overheat and release large amounts of radioactive gases into the atmosphere.

The most serious nuclear plant disaster involved the Chernobyl plant in Ukraine in 1986. Chernobyl's core exploded and released radioactive gases into the atmosphere that eventually spread throughout Europe. The amount of radiation released was four hundred times greater than the amount released by the atomic bomb that devastated Hiroshima at the end of World War II. About five-dozen people (Chernobyl workers or nearby residents) soon died because of the disaster. Because radiation can cause cancer and other health problems that take years to develop, scientists have studied the health effects of the Chernobyl disaster for the last quarter-century. According to the United Nations Scientific Committee of the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR), an estimated 27,000 additional cancer deaths worldwide will eventually result from the Chernobyl disaster (Gronlund 2011).

Seven years earlier in March 1979, a nuclear disaster almost occurred in the US at the Three Mile Island plant in central Pennsylvania. A series of technological and human failures allowed the plant's core to overheat to almost disastrous levels. The nation held its breath for several days while officials sought to bring the problem under control. During this time, some 140,000 people living within twenty miles of the plant were evacuated. The near disaster severely weakened enthusiasm for nuclear power in the United States, and the number of new nuclear plants dropped sharply in the ensuing two decades (Fischer 1997).

Japan was the site of the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl in March 2011, when an earthquake and tsunami seriously damaged a nuclear plant in the Fukushima region, 155 miles north of Tokyo. More than 80,000 residents had to be evacuated because of the massive release of radioactive gases and water, and they remained far from their homes a year later as high levels of radiation continued to be found in the evacuated area. It will take at least thirty years to fully decommission the damaged reactors at Fukushima. A news report on the anniversary of the disaster described the desolation that remained:

> "What's most striking about Japan's nuclear exclusion zone is what you don't see. There are no people, few cars, no sign of life, aside from the occasional livestock wandering empty roads. Areas once home to 80,000 people are now ghost towns, frozen in time. Homes ravaged from the powerful earthquake that shook this region nearly a year ago remain virtually untouched. Collapsed roofs still block narrow streets. Cracked roads make for a bumpy ride... This nuclear wasteland may not be livable for decades" (Fujita 2012).

In February 2012, the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) issued a study that said the risk from nuclear power accidents in the US was 'very small.' If an accident should occur, the NRC concluded, plant operators would have time to cool down reactor cores and prevent or reduce the emission of radiation (DiSavino 2012). However, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS 2011) is more concerned about this risk. It says that several US reactors are of the same design as the Fukushima reactors and thus potentially at risk for a similar outcome if damaged by an earthquake. According to the UCS, "If [these reactors] were confronted with a similar challenge, it would be foolish to assume the outcome would not also be similar." It adds that although earthquakes can cause fires at reactors, US plants routinely violate fire protection standards. A news report on the similarities between US nuclear power plants and the Fukushima plant reached a similar conclusion, noting that US nuclear power plants "share some or all of the risk factors that played a role at Fukushima" (Zeller 2011).



Critics say many US nuclear plants lack adequate protection against several kinds of dangers.

© *Thinkstock*

As this conclusion implies, nuclear power critics say NRC oversight of the nuclear industry is too lax. A 2011 investigation by the Associated Press (AP) yielded support for this criticism (Donn 2011). The AP found that the NRC has been "working closely with the nuclear power industry to keep the nation's aging reactors operating within safety standards by repeatedly weakening those standards or simply failing to enforce them." The report continued, "Time after time, officials at the [NRC] have decided that original regulations were too strict, arguing that safety margins could be eased without peril." For example, when certain valves at nuclear plants leaked, the NRC revised its regulations to permit more leakage. Also, when cracking of steam generator tubes allowed radiation to leak, standards on tubing strength were weakened. And when reactors began to violate temperature standards, the NRC almost doubled the permitted temperatures. The investigation found 'thousands' of problems in aging reactors that it said the NRC have simply ignored, and it concluded that a 'cozy relationship' exists between the NRC and the nuclear industry.

A retired NRC engineer interviewed by the AP agreed that his former employer too often accommodated the nuclear industry by concluding that existing regulations are overly stringent. "That's what they say for everything, whether that's the case or not," the engineer said (Donn 2011).

Environmental Inequality

As mentioned on the Overview page, an emphasis of environmental sociology is the social inequality associated with environmental problems. **Environmental injustice** refers to the fact that people in marginalized groups, particularly low-income people and people of color, are disproportionately likely to experience consequences of various environmental problems. It has also been referred to as **environmental racism**, though this term refers more specifically to the greater likelihood of people of color to experience environmental problems and their consequences (Walker 2012).

According to the American Sociological Association report mentioned on the Overview page, the emphasis of environmental sociology on environmental injustice reflects the emphasis that the larger discipline of sociology places on social inequality: "A central finding of sociology is that unequal power dynamics shape patterns of social mobility and access to social, political, and economic resources." The report adds that global climate change will have its greatest effects on the poorest nations: "Many of the countries least responsible for the rise in greenhouse gases will be most likely to feel its impacts in changes in weather, sea levels, health care costs, and economic hardships" (Nagel et al. 2010: 17).



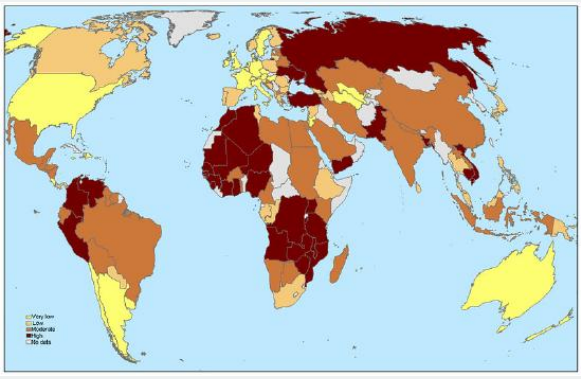
Climate change has the greatest impact on people in the poorest nations, even though these nations are the least responsible for greenhouse gases.

Image courtesy of Hamed Saber, http://www.flickr.com/photos/hamed/266139764

As the report notes, this injustice can be seen on a broader scale with inequality between nations around the world; however, it may also been seen on a smaller scale with inequality between communities within one nation.

Let's first examine this issue on a global scale. The index map below combines a country's vulnerability to climate change, and its readiness to improve resilience. Much of Africa is both vulnerable and not ready. Most of North America is less vulnerable and more ready. A common saying in the environmental movement is, "Those who contribute the least suffer the most." This means that the poorest people use the least planetary resources, so they contribute to climate change the least. However, they suffer the most from climate change.

Vulnerability to Climate Change



This map shows how vulnerable people in certain countries are to climate change. The United States, Australia, parts of Western Europe and the southern part of South America experience low vulnerability. Russia, most of Africa and Asia, and most of South America experience moderate or high vulnerability.

"Unequal Vulnerability" by WorldFish is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

For example, Africa contributes the least greenhouse gasses, but they are the most vulnerable to climate change. The US is a high contributor of emissions but the least vulnerable to climate change. While this model doesn't hold true for every country, the saying encapsulates a key issue with climate change.

Additionally, environment-harming industries go where resources exist, and the people there may be powerless to resist. To explore this further, we will look at the experience of people in Nigeria and oil production.

Nigeria is a country on the west coast of Africa, as shown in the figure below. More than 40% of the people in Nigeria live in *extreme poverty*, defined as living on less than $1.40 per day (Cuaresma 2018). Less than 15% of the people have access to clean fuel for cooking (Ritchie 2021), and less than 60% have access to sufficient electricity (Ritchie & Rosado 2021). At the same time, oil companies have made Nigeria one of the world's top oil exporters.

West African Nations



This map shows Nigeria (the blue nation toward the bottom right), a country on the west coast of Africa. Nearly everyone there lives on less than $30.00 a day, and many people live on much less.

"West Africa map" by PirateShip6 is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Oil companies use a practice called *gas flaring*, burning the waste gas from oil exploration rather than disposing of it in other ways (pictured below). Nigerians experience rashes and sores because of the toxic fumes. In one study, children exposed to flaring experience coughs, respiratory issues, fevers, and other poor health symptoms. The rate of child deaths in children under five also slightly increases with gas flaring (Alimi & Gibson 2022). The pollution contaminates the land, so women can't grow enough food. This pollution also contaminates water, leaving less for drinking and crop irrigation. One article notes that the women in the Niger Delta are poor because the environmental toxins are poisoning their plants. Women plant cassava to make their flour; however, the cassava roots are dying and the women can't replace them (Lawal 2021).



This image shows a flame of gas burning in the background, and low quality houses and the people who live in them. Gas flaring causes poor health in Nigeria.

"The impact of gas flaring on child health in Nigeria" by Ed Kashi, World Bank is included under fair use

Many people there are migrating to bigger cities, but that doesn't solve the local pollution and emissions problem. The article In Nigeria, Gas Giants Get Rich as Women Sink Into Poverty documents the story in more detail, including pictures of the impacts of the gas flares, if you would like to learn more.

Those who use the least resources are typically impacted the most by environmental problems. In the Nigeria case, the environmental impact occurs on a different continent than most of the people using the oil being produced. If you'd like to look

more deeply into this problem, watch Who Is Responsible For Climate Change? – Who Needs To Fix It?.

Looking at global level inequality is important, but it masks vulnerabilities that are unique to communities within nations. The pattern remains that those who contribute less experience more consequences. As noted before, we are experiencing more extreme weather events related to climate change. With Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, those who contributed the least to climate change suffered the most from this event. For instance, people with cars could evacuate, whereas people without cars often couldn't. People without cars contributed the least to CO2 emissions but experienced the most loss related to the extreme weather event (Bullard 2008).

Other examples of environmental injustice abound. Almost all the hazardous waste sites we mentioned earlier are located in or near neighborhoods and communities that are largely populated by low-income people and people of color. In other words, when factories dump dangerous chemicals into rivers and lakes, the people living nearby are very likely to be low-income and of color.

Moreover, with the US, evidence shows that although low-income people are especially likely to be exposed to environmental problems, this exposure is even more likely if they are people of color than if they are white. This highlights the intersection of classism and racism, an *intersectional* perspective. As a review of this evidence concluded,

> "It would be fair to summarize this body of work as showing that the poor and especially the nonwhite poor bear a disproportionate burden of exposure to suboptimal, unhealthy environmental conditions in the United States. Moreover, the more researchers scrutinize environmental exposure and health data for racial and income inequalities, the stronger the evidence becomes that grave and widespread environmental injustices have occurred throughout the United States" (Evans & Kantrowitz 2002: 323).

There has been much other scholarship on environmental injustice as well as on public policy efforts and activism aimed at reducing these forms of inequality. The Applying Social Research box below discusses some significant scholarship on environmental injustice.

Applying Social Research

Environmental Racism in the Land of Cotton

During the 1970s, people began to voice concern about the environment in the United States and across the planet. As research on the environment grew by leaps and bounds, some scholars and activists began to focus on environmental inequality in general and on environmental racism in particular. During the 1980s and 1990s, their research and activism spawned the environmental justice movement that has since shed important light on environmental inequality and racism and helped reduce these problems.

Research by sociologists played a key role in the beginning of the environmental justice movement and continues to play a key role today. Robert D. Bullard of Clark Atlanta University stands out among these sociologists for the impact of his early work in the 1980s on environmental racism in the South and for his continuing scholarship since. He has been recognized as a founder of environmental justice and was named by *Newsweek* as one of the thirteen most influential environmental leaders of the twentieth century, along with environmental writer Rachel Carson, former vice president Al Gore, and ten others.

Bullard's first research project on environmental racism began in the late 1970s after his wife, an attorney, filed a lawsuit on behalf of Black residents in Atlanta who were fighting the placement of a landfill in their neighborhood. To collect data for the lawsuit, Bullard studied the placement of landfills in other areas. He found that every city-owned landfill in Houston was in a Black neighborhood, even though Black Americans amounted to only one-fourth of Houston residents at the time. He also found that three out of four privately owned landfills were in Black neighborhoods, as

were six of the eight city-owned incinerators. He extended his research to other locations and later recalled what he discovered: “Without a doubt, it was a form of apartheid where whites were making decisions and black people and brown people and people of color, including Native Americans on reservations, had no seat at the table.”

In 1990, Bullard published his findings in his book *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. This book described the systematic placement in several Southern states of toxic waste sites, landfills, and chemical plants in communities largely populated by low-income residents and/or Black Americans. *Dumping in Dixie* was the first book to examine environmental racism and is widely credited with helping advance the environmental justice movement. It received some notable awards, including the Conservation Achievement Award from the National Wildlife Federation.

More recently, Bullard, along with other sociologists and scholars from other disciplines, has documented the impact of race and poverty on the experience of New Orleans residents affected by the flooding after Hurricane Katrina. As in many other cities, Black and low-income residents largely resided in the lower elevations in New Orleans, whereas white and higher-income residents largely resided in the higher elevations. The flooding naturally had a much greater impact on the lower elevations and thus on Black and poor people. After the flood, Black residents seeking new housing in various real estate markets were more likely than white residents to be told that no housing was available.

Bullard’s early work alerted the nation to environmental racism and helped motivate the Environmental Protection Agency in the 1990s to begin paying attention to it. His various research efforts are an outstanding example of how social research can increase understanding of a significant social problem.

Sources: Bullard 1990; Bullard & Wright 2009; Dicum 2006

As should be apparent from the discussion in this section, the existence of environmental injustice shows that social inequality in the larger society exposes some people much more than others to environmental dangers. This insight is one of the most important contributions of environmental sociology.

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As evident from this page, environmental problems have serious consequences for individuals and communities across the world. We hope that this chapter has made clear that climate change is a real, and pressing, social problem that is primarily caused by human activity. The hope inherent in this reality is that human activity can change. We as individuals can change our own behaviors and can encourage legislation that regulates the behaviors of corporations and even nations. We can also support environmental organizations or get involved in environmental social movements to help reduce climate change and address other environmental problems. We discuss these strategies on the next page.

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Strategies to Address Environmental Problems

When we look at environmental problems, the sheer size of the issues can be disheartening. These issues are difficult to resolve because their causes and solutions are interdependent. For example, people in the US need oil to create gasoline for cars and fuel for industry. This voracious need encourages oil companies to produce oil efficiently. Industrial efficiency may incentivize some companies to use gas flaring in Nigeria, as discussed on a prior page. The causes of environmental degradation are linked in both obvious and subtle ways.

Solutions to environmental problems, particularly when they are effective, also reveal the power of our interdependence. Making a difference with these social problems requires both/and thinking, both individual agency and collective action. To think more on this, one video that explores how we can take action is We WILL Fix Climate Change. We'll explore additional examples of collective action on regional, national, and international scales.

Laws, Policies, and Practices

The health of our planet depends on the successful implementation of environmentally-minded laws, policies, and practices. As sociology and science more broadly emphasize, the environmental problems that confront the world are the result of human activity, thus changes in human activity are necessary to save the environment. This is an example of individual agency in solving the climate crisis. However, these actions can be encouraged or even mandated by local, state, or national governments. Taking collective action can also pressure governments into implementing policies that can help address environmental problems.

One example of legislation that could have had a tremendous impact on environmental problems is the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). The Act included a variety of funding programs to address environmental problems such as climate change, air pollution, and even environmental injustice. One mechanism of the act was the use of subsidies for businesses, taxpayers, and other entities when they make purchases or investments that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The passing of this act was seen as a major win. As one author at the Economic Policy Institute explained,

> "Put simply, the IRA puts the U.S. on a path where meeting its global climate change commitments is within reach—commitments which would provide a genuine chance at securing a livable planet for future generations if they are kept. At the beginning of August 2022, there was no such path to secure this livable future, but there is now—and that is a mammoth victory" (Bivens 2023).

With the changing of the presidential administration, however, the disbursement of IRA funds was paused (WhiteHouse.gov 2025) and is likely to be canceled.

There are several other practices and laws that the US and other nations could undertake to help the environment. Environmental experts recommend a number of actions for the US to undertake (Lever-Tracy 2011; Madrid 2010; McNall 2011), including the following:

1. Reduce the use of fossil fuels by several measures, including mandating higher fuel economy standards for motor vehicles, closing down older coal-fired power plants, and establishing a *cap-and-trade* system involving payments by companies for carbon emissions that exceed a cap to encourage them to reduce these emissions.
2. Expand *renewable energy* (e.g., wind, sun) by setting a national standard to achieve in the years to come.
3. Establish mandatory electricity and natural gas reduction targets for utilities.
4. Reduce deforestation by increasing the use of sustainable building materials and passing legislation to protect forests.
5. Increase mass transit – including individuals' access to it – and build more bicycle lanes in cities.
6. Develop more efficient ways of using electricity and water and of recycling materials.



If the rooftops of houses were painted white or covered with light-colored shingles, atmospheric temperatures would reduce.

Ben Zibble – Shingles upon shingles – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Another interesting practice involves turning rooftops and paved surfaces white. In many US cities, roofs of houses, high-rises, and other buildings are covered with dark asphalt shingles. Dark surfaces trap heat from the sun and promote higher air temperatures. Painting roofs white or using white shingles to reflect the sun's heat would reduce these temperatures and help offset the effects of global warming (Levinson et al. 2010; Lomborg 2010). A similar offset would occur from changing the color of our streets. Many roads in cities and other areas are composed of dark asphalt, but using a lighter material would also help reduce air temperature and counter global warming. If these measures reduced air temperature in warm cities, less air conditioning would then be needed. In turn, electricity use and carbon dioxide emissions would decline.

Global Policies and Practices

Entire nations can – and must – collaborate to address climate change. In 2015 the United Nations brokered an international treaty known as the *Paris Climate Agreement*. The goal of the agreement is to limit the emission of greenhouse gasses worldwide to prevent additional global warming. This agreement was signed by 195 parties when it initially became a formal treaty (194 countries plus the UN). President Trump later withdrew the nation from the agreement, and the US is the only party to have withdrawn.

The United Nations (2022) wrote that, "The Paris Agreement is a landmark in the multilateral climate change process because, for the first time, a binding agreement brings all nations into a common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects."

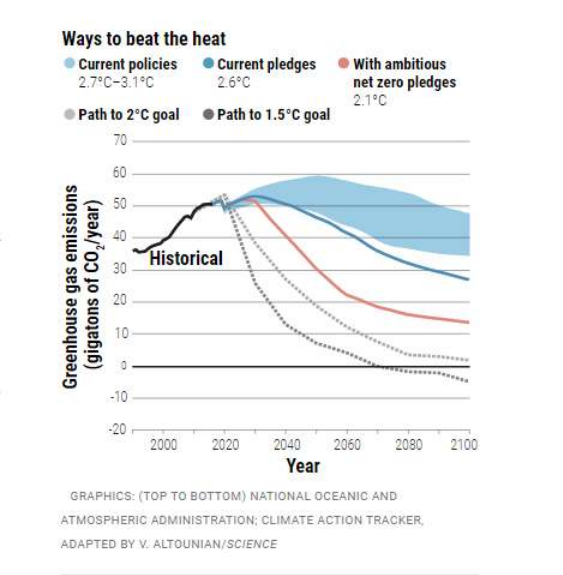
The core components of the agreement were:

- Countries will enact limits on greenhouse gas emissions for their countries by 2020.
- Countries will develop energy alternatives that reduce emissions.
- Countries that need help will receive financial, technological, and infrastructure assistance.

As you might expect, the implementation of this agreement is complicated. Some environmentalists argued that the agreement doesn't move fast enough to create the needed changes. When measuring progress in the five years since the agreement, the American Association for the Advancement of Science reported mixed results. On one hand, the implementation of some of the limits is starting to slow the emissions of greenhouse gasses. On the other hand, the United Nations has very little money to enforce the agreements, and countries such as the US can leave the agreement anytime.

If you'd like to learn more about the Paris Agreement, watch the brief video What is the Paris Agreement and How Does It Work?.

The chart below shows both the goal for emissions and our progress. If we stay with current policies shown in the blue-shaded area, the greenhouse gas emissions would result in an approximately 3% increase in global temperature, which is bad news for environmental problems. If we actually do the work specified in the Paris Agreement, temperatures would only rise by 2.6 degrees Celsius, which is a start, but most climate scientists believe we need to do more to sustain life.



This chart shows the amount of greenhouse emission changes we would need to make in order to meet a variety of different scenarios related to limiting global warming. Do you think that the Paris Agreement went far enough to try to address this environmental problem?

"Greenhouse Gas emissions – goals, progress, and vision" from The Paris climate pact is 5 years old. Is it working? by Warren Cornwall, Science is included under fair use

Another example of global collaboration is the UN's writing of 17 Sustainable Development Goals that have potential to transform the world, listed in the image below. The UN explains:

> "The Sustainable Development Goals are a call for action by all countries – poor, rich and middle-income – to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. They recognize that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and address a range of social needs including education, health, social protection and job opportunities, while tackling climate change and environmental protection."

Goal 13 is specifically about climate change: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. They recognize that climate change is caused by human activity and that it impacts all individuals across the globe. They call for investments in renewable energy, the transformation of industries (e.g., energy, transport, agriculture, forestry), financially supporting developing nations so that they can move toward greener economies, passing policies to achieve net-zero emissions, and prioritizing *adaptation* to the consequences of climate change. Adaptation specifically involves strategies such as "building storm-resistant housing, planting drought-tolerant crops, installing reliable water supplies and investing in social safety nets are among many adaptation essentials" (United Nations n.d.).



The UN established Sustainable Development Goals to transform the world, one of which is directly about climate change whereas others are understood as inherently related to environmental protection.

Source: United Nations n.d.

Even though progress is uncertain, these acts of global solidarity are unprecedented. World leaders are recognizing our shared interdependence and acting on a global scale to make a difference.

Environmental Organizations

In addition to laws, policies, and practices including the collaboration of governments worldwide, local and national organizations have the power to create local and global change.

For instance, the Oregon Student Public Interest Research Group (OSPIRG), which one of the authors of this textbook (Kim Puttman) was involved in, is one organization that was successful at creating change locally. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the group was instrumental in environmental activism in the state. They advocated for laws and policies that would reduce consumer pollution. Their legacy includes the Oregon Bottle Bill. To learn more about it, watch the brief video How Did We Get Here: Oregon's Bottle Bill.

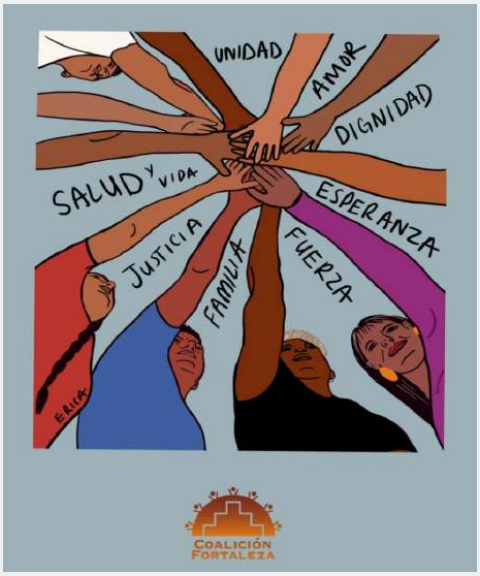
Then Oregon governor Tom McCall signed this bill, formally known as the Beverage Container Act of 1971, into law. With the support of other environmental groups and the legislature, the law became the first one in the nation to provide deposits on bottles and cans, encouraging people to return them rather than throw them away. The concept was both revolutionary and effective. In this post from the Oregon Historical Society, we see the consequences of this law, both then and now:

> "The Bottle Bill instantly reduced litter in Oregon. The share of beverage containers in roadside litter in the state declined from 40 percent before the law was passed to 10.8 percent in 1973 and 6 percent in 1979. The Bottle Bill also reinforces the practice of recycling. In the 2000s, about 84 percent of beverage containers were recycled, helping to make Oregon fourth in the nation for its rate of recycling" (Henkles 2022).

In the case of action in one state, activists, beverage manufacturers and bottlers, grocery store owners and clerks, the legislature, and the governor all had to agree on what to do about the pollution problem. From a relatively small beginning, the impact of this state law has grown. Multiple US states have enacted similar laws. The bottle bill has even grown in Oregon. The most recent iterations established bottle drops, a more efficient and hygienic way to process bottles and cans. Solving this kind of problem requires using our interconnectedness effectively, and the consequences continue rippling into the world.

In another example, the Almeda fire in southern Oregon impacted several communities which housed seasonal farm workers, mixed-status families, and low-income people. As a response, Latina and Indigenous women formed Coalición Fortaleza. It is a fire

survivor organization which is creating options for survivors of the Almeda Fire in southern Oregon using sustainable practices.



Coalición Fortaleza grew from the experience of the Almeda Fire in southern Oregon. They value Unidad/Unity, Amor/Love, Dignidad/Dignity, Esperanza/Hope, Fuerza/Strength, Familia/Family, Justicia/Justice and Salud y Vida/Health and Life. With these values they are creating alternatives that support environmental justice.

"Artwork" © Erica Alexia Ledesma is all rights reserved and used with permission

Coalición Fortaleza are working to re-home everyone. In doing so, they are strengthening their community and finding solutions that sustain Mother Earth. They write:

> As experts of our own lived experiences, we have the imaginations, local knowledge and largest stake in ensuring that the rebuilding solutions don't recreate the systems and conditions that have kept us in poverty and without access to life-saving information and resources. We will focus on community-led solutions that will serve our most impacted members" (Coalición Fortaleza 2023).

The group is committed to using the disruption of their community and its rebuilding in sustainable ways to challenge the existing structures of power and create new, more equitable environmental justice.

Organizations that help address environmental problems may be community-based, or they may be governmental. For instance, the Superfund program of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), begun about thirty years ago, monitors and cleans up hazardous waste sites throughout the country. Their website states:

> "EPA's Superfund program is responsible for cleaning up some of the nation's most contaminated land and responding to environmental emergencies, oil spills and natural disasters. To protect public health and the environment, the Superfund program focuses on making a visible and lasting difference in communities, ensuring that people can live and work in healthy, vibrant places" (EPA 2025).

Since its inception, the Superfund program has identified and taken steps to address more than 1,300 hazardous waste sites. About 11 million people live within one mile of one of these sites. To learn more, visit the EPA's Superfund website.

Individual Agency and Collective Action

We see individual agency in people calling attention to environmental problems with actions such as petitioning, engaging in lawsuits against offending corporations, or kickstarting a social movement. Two examples of individuals who created social change

around hazardous waste dumping are described in the People Making a Difference box below.

People Making a Difference

In Praise of Two Heroic Women

Considering activism against hazardous waste dumping, two women stand out for their contributions.

One is Lois Gibbs, who led a movement of residents of Love Canal to call attention to the dumping of hazardous waste in their neighborhood. Gibbs had never been politically active before 1978, when evidence of the dumping first came to light. After reading a newspaper article about the dumping, she began a petition to shut down a local school that was next to the dump site. Her efforts generated a good deal of publicity and prompted state officials to perform environmental tests in the homes near the site. Two years later the federal government authorized funding to relocate 660 families from the dangerous area. Gibbs later wrote:

> "It will take a massive effort to move society from corporate domination, in which industry's rights to pollute and damage health and the environment supersede the public's right to live, work, and play in safety. This is a political fight. The science is already there, showing that people's health is at risk. To win, we will need to keep building the movement, networking with one another, planning, strategizing, and moving forward. Our children's futures, and those of their unborn children, are at stake."

The second woman is Erin Brockovich, the subject of a 2000 film of that name starring Julia Roberts. Brockovich also was not politically active before she discovered hazardous waste dumping while she was working as a legal assistant for a small California law firm. As part of her work on a real estate case, she uncovered evidence that Pacific Gas & Electric had been dumping a toxic industrial solvent for thirty years into the water supply of the small town of Hinkley. Her investigation led to a lawsuit that ended in 1996 with the awarding of $333 million in damages to several hundred Hinkley residents.

Both Lois Gibbs and Erin Brockovich have remained active on behalf of environmental safety in the years since their celebrated initial efforts. They are two heroic women who have made a very significant difference.

Sources: Brockovich 2010; Gibbs 1998

The examples in the sections above also inherently involve individual agency and collective action. For instance, individuals use their agency in drafting legislation to help address climate change and joining environmental organizations. Individuals involved in those environmental organizations then engage in collective action to push for social change. Below we discuss other examples of collective action including social movements. This discussion helps set the stage for our final chapter on Social Movements and social change more broadly.

Ecofeminist and Youth Climate Action

Collective action can also be taken within social movements, and there are various movements across the US and the globe that are fighting against environmental problems.

In addition to being a feminist theory that fundamentally names the oppression of women and nonbinary people with the destruction of the environment, *ecofeminism* champions taking action. Women themselves say that they must become climate change activists to create a world where their children can survive and thrive. To witness one example, you may want to watch the

TED talk EcoGrief and Ecofeminism, where Heide Hutner tells her own story of cancer. She also links her grief and her activism to the activism of women around the world.

Others are taking collective action to address environmental problems. One such group is youth, who have been incredibly inspirational in fighting for social change. Young people worldwide are taking action to end climate change, using social media to connect rich and poor countries. Their passion is creating action in new ways. Let's meet two activists and explore what youth climate action looks like.

Quote

In my culture, my people believe that water is one of the most sacred elements. It's something we honor. My people believe that when we're in the womb, we live in water for nine months and our mother carries us in the water. As a fetus, we learn our first two teachings: how to love the water and how to love our mother. As women, we're really connected to the water in a spiritual way. We believe that we're in ceremony for nine months when we carry a baby. Another way to look at it is that water is the lifeblood of Mother Earth, and Mother Earth is female.

– Autumn Peltier 2021

Autumn Peltier (pictured below) is a world-renowned water protector, activist, and citizen of the Wikwemikong First Nation on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, Canada. Since she was 8 years old, she has fought for clean water in Canada. In 2019, Peltier was appointed as the Anishinabek Nation Chief Water Commissioner following the death of her great-aunt, Josephine Mandamin, who had been the previous Chief Water Commissioner.



This is Autumn Peltier, youth water activist, at the World Economic Forum 2021. What unique worldview do Indigenous activists bring to climate change activism?

"Photo" of Autumn Peltier by the World Economic Forum is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Peltier criticized the Canadian Prime Minister, spoke at the United Nations, and led youth and Indigenous advocacy efforts. If you would like to learn more about Autumn Peltier, she tells her story in The teen fighting to protect Canada's water – meet Autumn Peltier.

Another youth climate activist is Greta Thunberg (pictured below), from Sweden. She began protesting in front of government offices in 2018 with other young people. This small action has grown into a worldwide movement, using youth energy and new forms of social media to mobilize and educate people. In a speech in Berlin in March 2019, Thunberg said, "We live in a strange world where children must sacrifice their own education in order to protest against the destruction of their future. Where the people who have contributed the least to this crisis are the ones who are going to be affected the most."



Greta Thunberg, environmental activist, holds a sign reading “School Strike for Climate Change.” Why do you think that young people are particularly active in environmental activism?

“Thunberg in front of the Swedish parliament, holding a ‘Skolstrejk för klimatet’ sign” by Anders Hellberg is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Thunberg's movement, Fridays for Future (or #FridaysForFuture), started when she and other activists protested in front of the Swedish parliament to draw attention to climate change. Their social media posts went viral and encouraged other youth to take action (Fridays for Future 2022). The movement continues to mobilize youth around the world. 100,000 people marched in Glasgow in 2021 to protest during the Global Climate Conference. Some estimated that 7.6 million youth have participated in global climate action. Youth are taking action worldwide, in both rich and poor countries (Hasegawa 2022).

Karen O’Brian, Elin Selboe, and Bronwyn Hayward propose that young people engage in three kinds of activism regarding climate change and environmental justice: Dutiful dissent, disruptive dissent, and dangerous dissent.

The dutiful dissenters create change by working within the system. They may work with school organizations to create recycling programs or policies around investment. O’Brian, Selboe, and Hayward (2018) explain, “Through dutiful dissent, youth activists work within existing systems to express their discontent with business as usual and to promote alternative responses to climate change.”

In contrast, disruptive dissenters stage strikes and protests that highlight inequalities and injustices:

> "Disruptive actions explicitly challenge power relationships, as well as the actors and political authorities who maintain them, often through direct protests and collective organization. They may involve starting or joining petition campaigns or boycotts, disrupting international climate meetings to draw attention to hypocrisy and exclusion of important voices, or protesting key concerns through political marches or rallies."

Finally, dangerous dissenters begin to create alternatives to existing structures and systems to create social change:

> “Dangerous dissent challenges existing paradigms or ways of understanding the relationship between climate change and social change... [They] enable people to present organized challenges to mainstream power relationships and conventional environmental behavior” (O’Brian, Selboe, and Hayward 2018).

For example, the reading The Next Generation Sonoran Desert Researchers tells the story of the Sonoran Desert on both sides of the US-Mexico border. They provide alternative explanations of ecological issues and alternative methods of creating change.

In these three models, youth activists are leading actions and movements for social change and the environment.

Indigenous Resistance

Collective action also takes the form of resistance to oppressive practices, including those that harm the land and local communities.

Indigenous resistance to colonialism and climate destruction continues worldwide. Indigenous cultures are rooted in place, tradition, and land stewardship. Because there are Indigenous peoples on every acre of land that is habitable by humans, each act of destruction to the environment is also an act of destruction to the Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous people currently steward 80% of the world's biodiversity (Raygoredetsky 2018). This is true because Indigenous peoples both resisted exploitation and created new systems for protecting the land, its inhabitants, and their cultures. These acts of resistance continue today. To learn more, watch Indigenous World View Can Preserve Our Existence.

A well-known example of Indigenous resistance in the United States is the land stewardship known as #noDAPL or Standing Rock. The picture below shows Indigenous Water Keepers protecting the water. The NoDAPL movement began when the Standing Rock Sioux people decided to fight the construction of a pipeline known as the Dakota Access Pipeline. This pipeline would be built on their ancestral land, destroying cultural resources and violating centuries-old treaties made between the tribe and the US government.



This picture is of Water Protectors protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline in Standing Rock, North Dakota. Individuals from across the nation, and the world, joined in protest. Do you know anyone who went to Standing Rock?

"Photo" from "Cities, Schools, and Government Officials" by NoDAPL Archive is included under fair use

This led to intense protests where Indigenous peoples, allies, and community members from all over the world came to occupy and resist the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. More than 300 people were injured, and hundreds were arrested during these protests by the US government (Montare 2018). While the Dakota Access Pipeline was built, the NoDAPL movement paved the way for many contemporary Indigenous resistance movements in North America.

Another historical example of Indigenous resistance is the Zapatista movement (pictured below). In 1994, an Indigenous armed organization named the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) declared war on the Mexican Government. They demanded, "work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace." This uprising began in Chiapas, Mexico, as an occupation of land and continues to this day.



These are activists in the Zapatista Movement. In 1998, Zapatista women in Amador Hernadez, Southern Mexico, demanded daily that the Mexican military leave the village's communal landholdings so that they could have sovereignty over their own land and culture.

"In 1998, Zapatista women in Amador Hernadez demanded daily that the Mexican military leave the village communal landholdings" by Tim Russo from A Spark of Hope: The Ongoing Lessons of the Zapatista Revolution 25 Years On, Hilary Klein, North American Congress on Latin America is included under fair use

The Indigenous and some politically aligned non-Indigenous peoples still assert sovereignty over their economic, social, and cultural development. The Zapatista movement is a current example of how Indigenous communities can defend their lands, cultures, and each other.

Environmental Justice

Finally, the scientists, scholars, and members of the public who document the social problem of environmental injustice and racism have prompted the call for environmental justice (EJ). This call is both a social movement and an academic theory. As discussed on the Theoretical Perspectives page, *environmental justice* is an academic theory explaining the causes and consequences of environmental inequality and supporting action.

As a movement, **environmental justice** is an intersectional social movement pioneered by Black Americans, Indigenous peoples, Latinx, lower-income, and other historically oppressed people fighting against environmental discrimination within their communities and across the world. It is rooted in the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement and its fight to end racial segregation and structural inequality in the 1950s and 1960s. It operates "under the assumption that all Americans have a basic right to live, work, play, go to school, and worship in a clean and healthy environment" (Bullard 2000).

The EJ movement began to receive widespread public attention in the early 1980s after a series of grassroots actions took place against the polluting practices of toxic industries. Federal and state governments failed to regulate these industries in historically marginalized communities, which also experience discrimination in access to education, housing, health, and other institutions, social problems that we discuss throughout this book. With a deep awareness of institutional racism and the socioeconomic inequalities in the US and elsewhere, early EJ activists recognized that all forms of injustice were interconnected.

Therefore, the struggle for a healthy environment must also include access to quality schools and education, adequate and safe housing, green spaces, fresh food, clean water, and sustainable employment opportunities (Checker 2007). What makes this movement unique and strong is the intersectionality of the injustices it seeks to address and the diverse communities it brings together to address various types of social inequities (Schlosberg 2007).

Many EJ activists and scholars also recognize how social inequalities of all kinds are deeply embedded within the structure of the government. Therefore, they find it hard to rely on government oversight to protect their communities because often, the government and the legal system allow these injustices to occur in the first place (Estes 2019). Many communities who strive for environmental justice create local solutions themselves. They form alliances, conduct direct action campaigns, invest in mutual aid efforts, and practice direct democratic principles to achieve their goals (Pellow 2017). We'll look at some examples in the section Environmental Justice is Social Justice.

Finally, *critical environmental justice* (CEJ) is often referred to as the 'second generation' of environmental justice activism and scholarship. In part, CEJ considers how all forms of structural inequality put targeted communities at risk of environmental harm and how all forms of inequality violate the human right to live in a healthy, safe, and thriving environment. By drawing on numerous fields of inquiry – critical race studies, Black feminist studies, Indigenous studies, and more – CEJ strives to understand, document, and radically oppose in action intersectional forms of injustice that perpetuate oppression and exploitation on multiple levels (Pellow 2018).

For example, a community might move because chemicals were spilled in their neighborhood. Environmental justice scholars might focus on the experience of that one group of people. Critical environmental justice scholars would point out that even if the people are temporarily safe, they are likely to experience environmental injustice again. The discrimination they face is structural and historical, not just located in their own neighborhood. In addition, critical environmental justice scholars look at the intersection of all social locations to better understand power and oppression in environmental degradation and healing.

In short, critical environmental justice takes a holistic approach to understanding, exposing, and ultimately resisting the practices and policies of governments and industries that prioritize profit over the lives of people, all other life forms, and even the future of our planet.

We live on one planet. All of our actions affect each other. Critical environmental justice tells us that those who create the least harm are often harmed the most. Laws like the bottle bill and the Paris Agreement, community re-building with Latina and Indigenous fire survivors, individual agency in changing human activities, and youth- and Indigenous- led protests show us the way forward. How might you commit to environmental justice?

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Review of Environmental Problems

Summary

1. **Environmental sociology** is the sociological study of the environment. One major emphasis of environmental sociology is that environmental problems are largely the result of human activity and human decision making. A second major emphasis is that environmental problems disproportionately affect low-income people, people of color. and women.
2. **Climate change** is a broad term referring to significant changes in the environment or weather, and **global warming** refers specifically to the rise in the earth's temperature.
3. Climate change is a social problem because the activities of humans are the major contributor to creating the climate crisis. We also know that climate disasters and environmental challenges impact groups unequally based on their social location, which characterizes them as a social problem.
4. All human groups are not responsible equally for climate change. One of the causes of the climate crisis is emissions from fossil fuels. In general, people from industrialized countries use more fossil fuels and produce more CO2. However, less industrialized countries have fewer resources to guard against the effects of climate change, so people in those countries are harmed more despite contributing less to the crisis.
5. Structural functionalism argues that environmental problems are necessary but can be dysfunctional. Conflict theory blames multinational corporations for environmental problems, and feminist theorists focus on patriarchy and capitalism. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes people's activities and perceptions in regard to the environment. Indigenous perspectives examine colonialism and capitalism in producing environmental problems.
6. The consequences of climate change are vast, including displacement, the loss of home and culture, health complications, and more. Environmental problems also include air, water, and ground pollution (including hazardous waste), and consequences of nuclear power. They also focus on inequality, with **environmental injustice** or *environmental racism*.
7. The impacts of environmental problems disproportionately impact people in marginalized groups and from low-income nations. For example, poor women in Nigeria can't farm like they used to, and their families are sick because of gas flaring. People who were poor and Black couldn't evacuate New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina because they didn't have cars. Low-income people and people of color are more likely than others to have hazardous waste dumped into their communities.
8. Colonization as a social and economic system extracts resources from the people and lands of colonized areas to contribute to the wealth and power of the colonizers. This extractive form of economics prioritizes making profits over sustainable care for people and land.
9. Indigenous worldviews value communities and relationships. The land is sacred and must be cared for. Because Indigenous cultures choose practices that nourish the land for generations, they offer solutions for healing our earth.
10. Strong policies or laws, changing our practices, and both individual agency and collective action are critical to ending the climate crisis. We need worldwide agreements like the Paris Agreement to set standards and targets for changing our collective behavior. We need the social movements of feminists, youth, and Indigenous people to remind us how important this is, to mobilize the public, and fight for environmental justice. Environmental justice is social justice.

Questions

1. What's one thing that you did recently that was bad for the environment, and how might you avoid that behavior in the future?
2. Which one of the environmental problems discussed in the text concerns you the most, and why?
3. Which of the three classical theoretical perspectives seems to have the best approach in how it understands environmental problems, and how so?
4. How do Indigenous perspectives differ from and complement the classical sociological perspectives?
5. How do cultural worldviews contribute to causing climate change and to ending it?
6. How much of environmental injustice do you think is intentional, and how much does intent matter given the consequences?
7. What does it mean to say "Those who contribute the least, suffer the most" when we talk about environmental justice?
8. What do you feel are the most important strategies to address environmental problems right now, and why?

Action Steps

1. Use your sociological imagination: When someone tries to claim that global warming or climate change aren't the products of human activity, help them see the big picture of how humans have in fact caused or accelerated these problems.
2. Support nonprofits and similar organizations: Volunteer at or donate to a community-based, local, or national environmental organization.
3. Use your individual agency: Organize a speaker series on your campus that will highlight various environmental problems or start a recycling or compost program on your campus.
4. Engage in collective action: Research local, national, or international groups that are engaged in organized action around environmental problems, select one, and figure out how to get involved in their efforts.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Social Movements

Overview of Social Movements
A Sociological Perspective on Social Movements
Social Movements and the Social Problems Process
Review of Social Movements
References for Social Movements

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Overview of Social Movements

Learning Objectives

- Outline what constitutes social movements and social change.
- Describe what it means to be antiracist and feminist, and how antiracist and feminist movements have helped address social problems.
- Identify key goals of the Black Lives Matter movement and how its organizers view forms of oppression as interconnected.
- Summarize differences between the types of social movements and between social movement theories.
- Explain the stages of social movements including how Black Lives Matter organizers effectively used social media in each of the stages.
- Apply the social problems process to better understand the history of racism and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Quote

Social movements are not marginal to society. They are social engines of social change.

– Aldon Morris

When you hear “Black Lives Matter," what do you think of? You might think of protests, police violence against people of color, or some of the counter-protests. Fundamentally, Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a response to racial inequity. *Racial inequity* exists when different racial groups experience unequal outcomes. In 2013, #BlackLivesMatter emerged as an urgent and provocative claim driving the most recent iteration of a centuries-long social movement for racial justice in the US. **Racial justice** is a response to racism that seeks to change social systems in order to reduce racial inequities and to address the social and interpersonal conditions caused by racial inequities.

As you might recall, *racism* is the systemic, institutionalized oppression of people of color. It is the marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities. **Antiracism**, then, is the fight to dismantle and prevent racist policies and ideas that produce and normalize racial inequities. BLM is an antiracist movement that focuses largely on police brutality but also on racism more broadly and on other *systems of power* that oppress people in marginalized groups.

In the summer of 2020, many cities across the US erupted in nightly protests against police brutality and the overpolicing of Black people. Protests across the nation captured national attention. These protests of outrage and dissent amplified critical narratives about policing and racism that continue to shape public policy. To see highlights of the protests in one city, watch at least the first five minutes of the video below.



This video, 100 Days of Protest in Portland, shows how civil unrest in Portland continued for more than 100 days and captured national attention in 2020. Watch at least the first 5 minutes of this video,

to begin our exploration of social movements in response to the social problems.

"100 Days of Protest in Portland" by The Oregonian is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

Since the summer of 2020, BLM-inspired strides towards racial justice, in terms of both public opinion and policy change, have coincided with a so-called 'anti-woke backlash.' That backlash has involved attempts by conservative activists and elected officials to censor educational materials about racism, intersectionality, critical race theory, queer theory, and other critical theories, despite that racialized police brutality and other forms of racism and oppression continue. In 2024, the police killed 1,375 people (Mapping Police Violence 2025). Black, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, Native American, and Latinx people are more likely to be killed by the police than white people. If you would like to look at the most current statistics, feel free to examine Mapping Police Violence.

In this chapter, we consider the impacts of the Black Lives Matter social movement as a case study of how *social movements* can drive *social change*. We will provide another example of social movements, specifically feminist movements, though we will offer more attention to BLM. We will offer a sociological perspective on social movements, with BLM as an illustrative example, including types of movements, theorizing about movements, and the stages of movements.

We will also apply the *social problems process* to problems of racism and the BLM movement. To understand how sociologists think about social movements, we will trace out a history of BLM organizing within a broader antiracist movement to reimagine safe communities and consider theoretical and activist lineages with roots in the emancipatory sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois and the civil rights movement of the mid-20th Century.

We will get to know Alicia Garza, Ayọ Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, organizers with a bold abolitionist vision who built a platform that has transformed the global conversation about racism, policing, and the value of Black lives. Before proceeding, because we discuss the Black Lives Matter social movement throughout this chapter, please watch the following TED Talk in which these three advocates discuss the goals and purpose of Black Lives Matter as well as other social problems and social justice.



As you watch the Ted Talk An interview with the founders of Black Lives Matter: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, please pay attention to how Cullours, Garza, and Tometi talk about social justice, movement building, and organizing for social change.

"An Interview with the Founders of Black Lives Matter" by TED is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

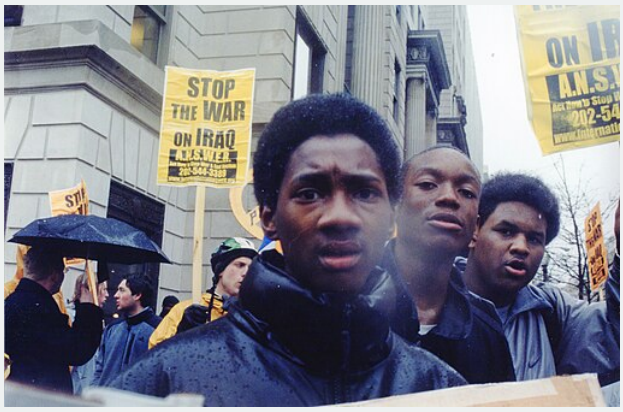
Social Movements

Social movements are purposeful, organized, sustained collective action to bring about (or oppose) *social change*. They involve large groups of people that work toward a common goal, often a social justice oriented goal. Social movements are not one-time events such as riots or memorials but are ongoing – for years, decades, or even centuries. They are not spontaneous but highly organized, though the degree and structure vary widely.

Social change refers to changes that occur throughout the structure or culture of a society. Thus, social change is about large-scale changes in social institutions, cultural values, and other societal processes. It is not a phenomenon like a fad or viral video, but a broader, more encompassing change in society. However, despite that social change refers to broad changes within society's structure or culture, the social movements that bring about social change can occur even at local levels.

Movements can happen locally, at state or national levels, and worldwide. Try to think of several examples of social movements, from local to global. No doubt you can think of some movements, perhaps on all of these levels, especially since modern technology has allowed us a near-constant stream of information about the quest for social change around the world.

Local social movements typically refer to those in cities or towns but can also affect smaller constituencies, such as college campuses. Sometimes colleges are smaller hubs of a national movement, as seen during Vietnam War, Black Lives Matter, and Free Palestine protests. Other times, colleges are managing a more local issue.



Students have long been central to social movements and collective action more broadly. This image is of an antiwar student walkout to protest the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

Student WalkOut WDC 20 March 2003 by Elvert Barnes via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

There is also state-level organizing. For example, the 2022 Supreme Court ruling that reversed *Roe v. Wade* and ended the federally guaranteed right to abortion (and potentially to privacy for all) was met with a flurry of responses at the state level. Anti-abortion organizers had worked for years to prepare for this decision by putting in place *trigger laws* to immediately outlaw or severely restrict abortion access in their home states and others in the event of such a reversal. Other states responded with legislation to support access to abortion and other reproductive services. A notable and surprising response came from voters in Kansas, often considered reliably conservative and, by extension, anti-abortion. Kansas voters soundly rejected an attempt to repeal existing language in the state constitution that protects the right to abortion access. Each of these outcomes was shaped by competing social movements at the state level that either favor or oppose abortion access.

Many worldwide social movements mobilize *collective action* in response to global social problems such as poverty, inequality, and exploitation. Pro-democracy movements are also rising in response to perceived increases in authoritarianism and fascism. Some analysts cite the Arab Spring in 2010, Occupy Wall Street in 2011, and Black Lives Matter in 2020 worldwide protests to argue that we are in an age of global protests. Researchers estimate that BLM and antiracist protests took place in 93 countries and territories across the globe after the murder of George Floyd (Pressman & Devin 2023).

We will explore the BLM movement in more detail on the following pages. For now, let's see a different example: Feminism.

Feminist Movements

Feminism refers to the belief that there should be gender equality in economic, political, and social life. In the US, feminism as a social movement began during the abolitionist period before the Civil War, though it has taken various forms over the decades and even centuries, with differing goals and tactics.

Feminist movements in the US have greatly advanced the cause of women’s equality and changed cultural views about gender. In the 'first wave,' abolitionists such as Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton focused on many issues

including coverture (laws that effectively defined women as their husband's property) and the right to gain education, but especially the right to vote, which the feminist Suffrage Movement won in 1920.



Suffragettes and other feminists fought for women's equality for hundreds of years in the US and abroad. A major win in the US occurred over 100 years ago when women won the right to vote. However, Black women and other women of color were disenfranchised, and the fight continued in antiracist and resistance movements of the twentieth century.

Suffragette Procession, 1911 by unknown via Picryl is under the Public Domain

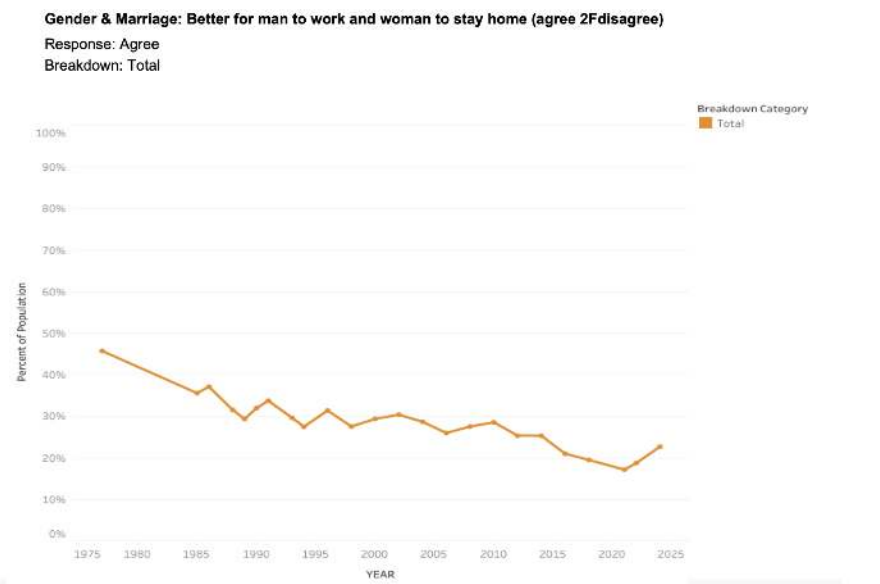
The 'second wave' of the feminist movement began in the late 1960s, as women active in the Civil Rights movement and other social justice movements turned their attention to women's rights such as to education, work, and bodily autonomy. This movement profoundly changed public thinking and social institutions, though as we have seen, much gender inequality remains. In the 'third wave' of feminism that began in the 1990s, the focus on women and sexism expanded to include others who face gender oppression such as *cissexism* (the systemic oppression of trans people), as well as other forms of oppression such as racism, classism, and ableism.

However, there were always feminists who fought against systems of oppression apart from sexism. For instance, feminists of color throughout US history such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Ella Baker, and Audre Lorde have fought against multiple systems of oppression, argued that all forms of oppression are connected. They and others took an *intersectional* approach that emphasizes the intersections between varying forms of oppression, such as how racism can exacerbate experiences of sexism for women of color.

What evidence is there for the impact of the contemporary women's movement on public thinking? The General Social Survey (GSS), the Gallup poll, and other national surveys show that the public has shifted away from sexist views toward more feminist views. To illustrate this, let's consider the GSS question that reads:

> Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree... 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.

The figure below shows that agreement with this statement has dropped substantially since the mid-1970s (this figure excludes the response 'strongly agree'). In 1977, nearly two-thirds of the population (64% of respondents) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the statement. This figure dropped to 22% in 2021, or less than a quarter of the population. However, an anti-feminist backlash has developed over the past few years, which increased the figure to 32% in 2024. In other words, support for sexist gender roles declined in this period from two-thirds of the public to one-third of the public.



This chart illustrates the decline in agreement with the idea that it's better for men to do paid work outside the home and women to do unpaid work inside the home, which measures the *breadwinner/homemaker* ideology. (Note that this chart excludes those who 'strongly agreed.')

Source: Davern, Bautista, Freese, Herd, & Morgan, GSS Data Explorer, 2024

Another GSS question that has measured sexist attitudes over the years asked whether respondents feel that, "Most men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women." In 1977, nearly half of respondents agreed (49%), whereas in 2018 only 14% agreed.

Similarly, the GSS asked, "If your party nominated a woman for President, would you vote for her if she were qualified for the job?" In 1970, 70% of respondents agreed, while this figure grew to 96% in 2010. Although we have not yet had a woman president, Hillary Clinton did win the popular vote in the 2016 presidential election, and survey evidence indicates the public is overwhelmingly willing to vote for a woman.

As demonstrated by these responses to GSS survey questions, sexist views have indeed declined. You may check out more GSS data trends via the GSS Data Explorer's Key Trends site.

Today some individuals say, “I’m not a feminist, but…,” and then go on to add that they hold certain beliefs about gender 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. To be clear, *feminism* at its basic is simply the belief in gender equality.

Feminist movements have made great strides in changing public understandings of gender issues in marriage, family, sexuality, work, education, and even sexual assault and rape. Recall that a *constructionist* view is interested in how our collective understandings of a social problem develop. Below we explore that process in more detail, using the example of feminism's impact on conceptions of rape.

Feminism, the Social Construct of Rape, and Social Justice. We can see that the social problem of rape is *socially constructed* because our ideas change over time. Initially, European courts and lawyers defined rape as a crime of property. This view of women’s bodies is profoundly disturbing to us today but was common in seventeenth-century English law. Legally, women were considered the property of their fathers or their husbands, and coverture laws dictated that a woman's legal personhood was dissolved into that of her husband's upon marriage. Further, it was thought that married women could not be raped by their husbands because consent was implied as part of the marriage contract.

When feminist activists in the 1970s challenged this legal definition of rape, related laws began to change. Rape, which included marital rape, became defined as a crime of violence and social control against an individual person (Rose 1977). In a more recent study, researchers examined how rape was defined in a college community between 1955 and 1990 (Abu-Odeh, Khan, &

Nathanson 2020). Early descriptions of rape in school and community newspapers painted the picture that white women students were safe on campus. If they ventured beyond campus to predominantly Black neighborhoods, they risked being raped. Although this assumption was wrong, people believed that rape was a crime committed by a Black or Brown man who was a stranger rather than by a white man who the survivor already knew. This story relied on the false racial myth that Black men were dangerous. In addition, from this perspective, the police were responsible for keeping white women safe (Abu-Odeh, Khan, & Nathanson 2020).

With the work of feminist activists, the concept of rape and the response to rape changed. In the 1970s and 1980s, women's centers and health professionals defined rape as an act of sexual violence that supported the power of men and an issue that threatened women's health. The person who experienced rape began to be called a *survivor* rather than a *victim*. Men who raped or committed other kinds of sexual harassment could be identified as part of the campus community rather than being defined as strangers. Changes in the social construction of rape allowed for more effective community responses in preventing rape, prosecuting rape, and supporting the healing of rape survivors (Abu-Odeh, Khan, & Nathanson 2020). (Notably, the definition of legal rape has recently expanded to include victims of any gender, not only women.)

Feminist activists continue this work. Black activist Tarana Burke (pictured below) founded the #MeToo movement in 2006 so survivors of sexual violence could tell their stories. These stories highlight how common sexual violence is for women, as well as nonbinary people and men. It expands our conversation about rape to a wider discussion around the causes and consequences of sexual violence.



Black feminist activist Tarana Burke, picture above, is the founder of the #MeToo Movement. How has #MeToo changed your willingness to talk about sexual violence or to take action?

"Tarana Burke" by Marco Verch is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Actor Alyssa Milano drew attention to this movement when she tweeted #MeToo in 2017 (on Twitter, now known as X). This movement has resulted in some changes in the law (Beitsch 2018) and in stronger prosecution of perpetrators of sexual violence in some cases (Carlsen et al. 2018). If you would like to learn more about #MeToo from Burke herself, please watch the TED Talk Me Too Is a Movement, Not a Moment.

In this constructionist view, the definition of rape, the actors in the crime, and the responsibility for fixing the problem changed over time in ways that advanced social justice, largely due to activists engaged in feminist movements. Feminist movements and activists have also helped create social change in regard to workplace environments, access to education, portrayals of women in media, and many other arenas of socia life and institutions.

On the following pages we will explore social movements in more depth, including the various types of movements, the stages of movements, and how movements align with another constructionist view – the *social problems process*.

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- **1.2: Defining a Social Problem** by Kimberly Puttman is licensed CC BY 4.0. Original source: https://openoregon.pressbooks.pub/socproblems1e/.

A Sociological Perspective on Social Movements

Scholars including sociologists who study social movements have classified different types of social movements that have varying goals and approaches, have theorized about the development and success of social movements, and have identified several phases of the life cycle of social movements. On this page we review some of this literature.

Types of Social Movements

One of the most common and important types of social movements is the **reform movement**, which seeks limited, though still significant, changes in some aspect of a nation's political, economic, or social systems. It does not try to overthrow the existing government but rather works to improve conditions within the existing regime. Some of the most important social movements in US history have been reform movements, including most feminist movements, the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam-era antiwar movement, some queer liberation movements, and the environmental movement. For instance, in the first wave of feminism, advocates sought gender equality within existing social institutions. They asked for participation in the institutions of the state (being able to vote) and education (being able to attend college). They did not wish to dramatically reinvent these institutions or overthrow them, but sought smaller reforms within them.

A **revolutionary movement** goes further than a reform movement, seeking to overthrow existing social institutions or systems and to bring about new ones and even a new way of life. Revolutionary movements have been common throughout history. The abolitionist ideals at the heart of BLM organizing principles can be considered revolutionary in that they challenge the very premise of policing as an effective or humane response to social problems. The Black Lives Matter website invites visitors to "join the movement for Freedom, Liberation and Justice" (Black Lives Matter 2023). Building on the work of social theorists like Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Michelle Alexander, BLM organizers articulate an abolitionist vision that does not seek to reform policing but to replace the current criminal justice system with a system of transformative justice and community care. To learn more about what organizers mean by "abolish the police," watch the 3-part series, Imagining Abolition.

> Quote
>
> Abolition is about presence – the presence of life-giving systems that allow people to thrive and be well, that prevent harm and better equip communities to address harm when it occurs.
>
> – Ruth Wilson Gilmore
>
> ...to have a world with no hunger; that's the abolitionists' goal.
>
> – Richie Reseda, Abolitionist, Producer, Organizer

Another type of political movement is a **reactionary movement**, so named because it tries to block social change or to reverse already achieved social change. #BlueLivesMatter emerged in 2016 as a call to support and respect police and to defend the criminal justice institution and traditions of police. Supporters assert that police officers are doing dangerous and misunderstood jobs that deserve respect. They claim that BLM organizing has made police work more dangerous and that the police have been victims of deliberate misinformation. This can be considered a reactionary movement as the goal is to block the social changes and maintain the status quo.

In general, a reform movement attempts to work within existing systems and institutions to address social problems, a revolutionary movement attempts to dismantle or fundamentally alter current systems and institutions to address social problems, and a reactionary movement attempts to halt or reverse recent social change of social movements that address social problems. Some movements may fall into more than one classification, such as how 'second wave' feminism involved both reform and revolutionary qualities, or how the recent backlash to women's rights is both reactionary and takes a reform approach. In addition to these classifications, scholars have theorized about social movements.

Theory on Social Movements

Sociologists and other social scientists have proposed theories to frame and explain social movements. We explore a few examples of this theorizing below.

New Social Movement Theory

New social movement theory, a development of European social scientists in the 1950s and 1960s, attempts to explain the proliferation of postindustrial and postmodern movements. Rather than being one specific theory, it is more of a perspective that revolves around understanding movements as they relate to social class, politics, identity, culture, and social change. The Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (pictured below) looks at how technology is transforming social movements.



Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells connects the power of the internet with the efficacy of social movements to explain their effectiveness in new ways.

"Photo of Manuel Castells" by Jorge Gonzalez is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

He argues that because the internet allows communication between people, often outside a government's control, social movements can be formed more rapidly and sometimes more effectively today. He also believes that people act when their fear turns into anger about the oppression they experience and when they are motivated by hope. He writes:

> "…the second condition for individual experience to link up and form a movement is the existence of a communication process that propagates the events and the emotions attached to it. The faster and more interactive the process of communication is, the more likely the formation of a process of collective action becomes, rooted in outrage, propelled by enthusiasm and motivated by hope" (Castells 2015).

We see this combination of technology and passion present with BLM-inspired organizing, and also with interrelated social movements for racial, gender, and disability justice, like *ecofeminism*, which focuses on patriarchal society as a source of environmental problems.

Resource Mobilization Theory

White American sociologists McCarthy and Zald (1977) proposed a new theory about social movements that emphasizes resources in the success of social movements. In **resource mobilization theory**, they say that social movements are successful when they can gather people and use their economic, political, and social resources to create change. *Resources* include money, people, and power. The more money, people, and access to power a movement has, the greater its ability to create social change. Resource mobilization can include funding secured from sympathetic allies and donors from within or outside of the impacted community, which can give a movement increased visibility and influence. In short, movements to address social problems will be more successful when strong resources are mobilized.

Joel Best (2021), who outlined the *social problems process*, agrees that resources are central to the process of addressing social problems. Best writes (2021: 24), "A society's members are not equal; some have more money than others, or more power, more

status, more education, more social contacts, and so on" which are "resources that people can draw on in the social problems process." In other words, because of social inequalities, some social problems will be more quickly addressed by social movements. For instance, when claimsmakers who have ample resources make their claim about the social problem of interest they can draw on their resources, making it easier for their claims to be taken seriously. Those with a high degree of resources may even have influence over media coverage.

Indigenous Perspective Theory

Aldon Morris (pictured below) researches the origins, nature, patterns, and outcomes of global movements that have successfully resisted and overthrown systems of oppression and injustice. With **Indigenous perspective theory**, Morris argues it was the mobilization of the Black community's internal resources, knowledge, power, and skill that powered both the twentieth century civil rights movement (CRM) and the twenty-first century movement for Black lives (BLM).



Sociologist Aldon Morris was the 112th president of the American Sociological Association. His work in social movements centers on the efficacy of Black organizing, which powered social movements.

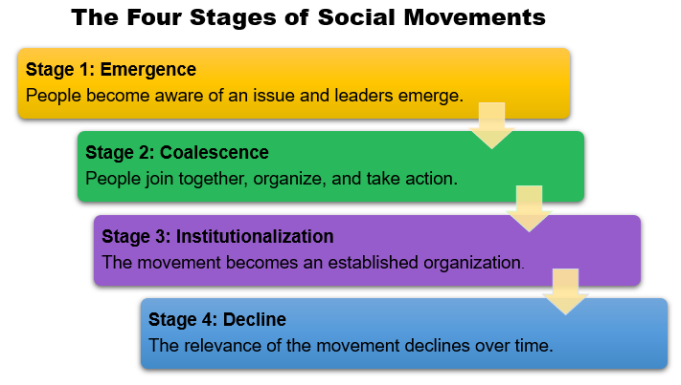
Dr. Aldon Morris © Emile Pitre is all rights reserved and included with permission

In both cases, specific systems of domination were identified by members of oppressed communities, who also planned and executed direct action and brought change. These community-based processes, which center on collective agency and lived expertise, become the foundation for a political base from which deliberate and effective collective action can emerge. To learn more about this work, please either watch the brief video How Do People Make Change or read From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter.

In addition to classifications of social movements and theorizing on social movements, scholars have studied the stages that social movements typically go through from their emergence to their end.

Stages of Social Movements

Sociologists who study the lifecycle of social movements examine how they emerge, grow, and in some cases, die out. Blumer (1969) and Tilly (1978) outlined a four-stage process of emergence, coalescence, institutionalization, and decline, shown in the figure below.



The Four Stages of Social Movements are Emergence, Coalescence, Institutionalization, and Decline. Where do you think the movement inspired by #BlackLivesMatter is today in these stages?

"The Four Stages of Social Movements" by Kimberly Puttman, based on the work of Blumer and Tilly, is licensed under CC BY 4.0

In the following subsections, we describe and consider the role of social media in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in each of these stages. First, please read these social media posts by two organizers of the BLM movement:

Quote

We don't deserve to be killed with impunity. We need to love ourselves and fight for a world where Black lives matter. Black people, I love you. I love us. We matter. Our lives matter.

– Alicia Garza, Facebook Post on July 13, 2013

Declaration: black bodies will no longer be sacrificed for the rest of the world's enlightenment. I am done. I am so done. Trayvon you are loved infinitely. #blacklivesmatter.

– Patrisse Cullors, Facebook comment on July 13, 2013

Emergence

In the *emergence* stage, people become aware of an issue, and leaders emerge. In becoming aware of a social problem and joining a movement, individuals develop a shared consciousness of that problem that helps strengthen the movement. Successful social movements rely on leadership of some form, though some are far more hierarchical than others.

Hashtag activism is the act of building up public support via social media for a cause, using a hashtag (#) (Pratim 2018: 252). When Patrisse Cullors answered Alicia Garza's social media declaration with #BlackLivesMatter, the message resonated deeply as part of an overwhelming outpouring of collective grief and anger on social media. Between July and December of 2013, the hashtag was used 5,106 times. By 2016 Twitter (now X) reported that #BlackLivesMatter was the third most popular hashtag in the platform's 10-year history, with nearly 1,200,000 tweets (Sichynsky 2016).



This organizer is holding a picture of Trayvon Martin, and using her phone to spread the word. A series of viral posts on Facebook introduced the world to the power of a hashtag after the acquittal of the person who killed Trayvon Martin.

"Rally for Trayvon Martin 24" by Ryan Vaarsi is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Patrisse Cullors and Alicia Garza were already seasoned and well-networked organizers with experience using social media, as was Ayọ Tometi, who responded to the posts with plans to purchase the domain blacklivesmatter.com. Together, they deftly used social media to amplify the voices of overpoliced, under-resourced communities of Black people, as they declared to one another, "We matter" and to Americans, "Stop killing us." Ayọ Tometi, an organizer with a background in communications, did purchase the website, where they linked to organizing resources and articulated the following principles:

- We are expansive. We are a collective of liberators who believe in an inclusive and spacious movement. We also believe that in order to win and bring as many people with us along the way, we must move beyond the narrow nationalism that is all too prevalent in Black communities. We must ensure we are building a movement that brings all of us to the front.
- We affirm the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. Our network centers on those who have been marginalized within Black liberation movements.
- We are working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise.
- We affirm our humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.
- The call for Black lives to matter is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation (Birdsong 2016).

Coalescence

Next is the *coalescence* stage, when people join together and organize in order to publicize the issue and raise awareness. As we discuss below, collective action in social movements may involve protests, sit-ins, or demonstrations. It may also rely on more formal means such as speaking at legislative sessions or hosting educational workshops.

At this stage, social media is also transformative. Over the following year, the seasoned organizers described above skillfully leveraged social media to build legitimacy for their claims.

The most popular Twitter hashtag in its first decade was #Ferguson, with 1.7 million tweets between 2014 and 2016 (Anderson 2016). Ferguson, Missouri, is where BLM coalesced as a global movement. When Ferguson, Missouri, erupted in rage and grief over the killing of Michael Brown, Patrisse Cullors and Darnell L. Moore used social media to call for a "Freedom Ride" to Ferguson. Inspired by the activists who mobilized for Black lives during the Civil Rights era, this Freedom Ride would focus national attention on this most recent example of state-sanctioned violence against Black lives.

The plan successfully mobilized the #BlackLivesMatter Social network to gather in St. Louis for three days of solidarity with local organizers, including the *Organization for Black Struggle* (OBS) and *Missourians Organizing for Reform and Empowerment* (MORE).



These marchers in Ferguson, Missouri, protested the killing of Michael Brown. Ferguson is a town of about 18,000 people. Are you surprised that such a small town became the epicenter of a revolutionary movement?

"Protestors demonstrating down West Florissant Ave" by Loavesofbread is licensed under CC-BY-SA 4.0

Their goal was to build a sustainable coalition around the following demands:

- Justice for the family of Michael Brown and other victims of law enforcement and vigilante violence
- The demilitarization of law enforcement
- National investment in jobs, housing, and schools in Black communities (Mosendz 2014).

The use of #BlackLivesMatter was so prevalent during the Ferguson protests that organizers asked Twitter users to stop using it unless directly related to the actual activities and information about the protests.

Since Ferguson, #BlackLivesMatter has been the go-to search term for antiracist organizing. On Dec. 4, 2014, after a New York grand jury declined to indict police officers in the death of Eric Garner, #BlackLivesMatter appeared 189,210 times – the most it was ever used in a single day. On the first anniversary of Garners' death, the hashtag appeared more than 228,000 times in two days. When Senator Bernie Sanders defended the BLM movement, the hashtag appeared more than 127,000 times on Twitter the following day as many users voiced support for Sanders (Anderson 2016).

Social media users report changing their minds about BLM and issues related to race and policing because of their interactions on social media platforms. Between Ferguson and Minneapolis, the world had a conversation on social media about what we mean when we say "Black Lives Matter."

Social media is credited with helping #BLM to break through decades of *colorblind racism* and helped people feel okay saying that "Black Lives Matter" (Jennings 2020). Between 2014 and 2020, police killed at least 7680 people in the US. Though only 12% of the population were Black, 25% of those killed were Black (Haddad 2021). Every time another Black life ended due to police brutality, the message got out again. More people engaged in the emerging network. By the time George Floyd's murder went viral, a match was struck. Around the world, seven years of organizing exploded into the streets.



Hashtags are a recent development in the history of social movements but have been significant in their success. #NoDAPL, pictured here, represents the environmental justice movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline led by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in 2016.

NoDAPL by Gone Coastal via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Institutionalization

In the *institutionalization* stage, the movement no longer requires grassroots volunteerism. The movement is now an established organization, typically with a hierarchy of leadership and paid staff.

Social media can accelerate a movement toward the institutionalization stage. In some cases, like #BlackLivesMatter, one or more formal organizations might exist alongside the hashtag or general sentiment.

BLM originally operated with a decentralized leadership structure and relied on fiscal sponsorship from a larger non-profit for financial oversight. The stated intention was always to distribute funds to local chapters that were well-positioned to respond to the needs of local communities. This infrastructure was temporarily overwhelmed after receiving 90 million dollars in donations during 2020. Social media coverage during this period included accusations of misuse and misappropriation of funds, and the organization came under scrutiny for a lack of transparency. In this case, social media inhibited the success of the movement, though it did produce structural change in the organization.

The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation responded to these growing pains by reorganizing and creating a Transparency Center on the website with updates on a new board of directors and links to tax filings. Their 2022 disclosures list 42 million dollars in assets and reports distributing more than 26 million dollars in grants to local BLM chapters and directly to families of victims of police violence in 2021 (Morrison 2022).

Decline

When people fall away and adopt a new movement, the movement successfully brings about the change it sought, or when people no longer take the issue seriously, the movement falls into the *decline* stage.

Decline simply refers to the winding down of an effort. It doesn't necessarily mean that a movement is not successful. On the contrary, a period of decline naturally follows successful efforts.

It is also important to note that the status quo is not easily changed, and successful social movements also face periods in which their gains are challenged and tested. That's why it is important to view individual interconnected social movements within a larger historical context, as we will in our discussion of the social problems process on the following page.

The Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century was undoubtedly one of the most successful social movements in history, yet in spite of the notable gains, the movement eventually lost momentum when the most visible leadership and supporters, including Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Bobby Kennedy, were assassinated, while more radical organizers, like Angela Davis, Fred Hampton, and Assata Shakur were *criminalized*. Feel free to click the following links if you'd like to know more about Angela Davis, Fred Hampton, and Assata Shakur.

Morris (2021) observes that, "the decentralized leadership structure of the BLM movement and other contemporary social movements seems to have provided a bulwark against this sort of decapitation." When Garza, Tomati, and Cullors were targeted with misinformation and disinformation about them, the movement itself did not falter. Distributed leadership allowed the movement to thrive while the original organizers continued to develop new projects in their quest for a world that values Black lives.

As of 2025, the BLM website is maintained by the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, with current updates about the status of their ongoing work for racial justice and liberation. They also provide a link where people can report disinformation related to BLM. #BlackLivesMatter still trends on social media to signify racial injustice.

While the Black Lives Matter movement may have passed, it leaves a lasting legacy that continues to shape anti-incarceration and anti-violence social justice organizing around the county. It also helped spark a national conversation on systemic racism and inspires antiracist thought and action today.

On the next page, we revisit the *social problems process* from our first chapter, applying the BLM movement and broader antiracist collective action to that process.

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Social Movements and the Social Problems Process

Recall from the Social Problems chapter that most social problems go through a *social problems process* consisting of the following stages of development: *Claimsmaking*, *media coverage*, *public reaction*, *policymaking*, *social problems work*, and *policy outcomes* (Best 2021). In this section, we will trace this pattern through the BLM movement and protests of 2020, focusing on Portland, Oregon as a local example. This page also explores inequalities and discrimination in policing, and connects the goals of the BLM movement to historical antiracist action.

Steps 1-2: Claimsmaking and Media Coverage

Claimsmaking: In this step, people and groups identify an issue, and they try to convince others to take it seriously. The problem in this step is called a claim "an argument that a particular troubling condition needs to be addressed" (Best 2020:15). In this stage, people who may not agree that a problem exists agree on what to do about it or who should take action.

Media Coverage: In the second step, claimsmakers use media to build a base of people and groups who agree with them on the causes, impacts, and desired outcomes of the particular issue at hand.

On Monday May 25, 2020, Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd. One of four Minneapolis police officers who arrested Floyd for allegedly trying to pass a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, Chauvin forced Floyd to the ground and knelt on his neck for more than eight minutes. Floyd struggled to breathe, cried out in fear and pain to his mother and to his God, and foretold his own death, but Chauvin did not let up until Floyd lost consciousness. Floyd was pronounced dead at the hospital later that afternoon. Like Ahmaud Arbery, killed by white vigilantes in February 2020, and Breonna Taylor, killed by police in March 2020, Floyd is one on a very long list of Black people killed recently by police and vigilantes in the U.S.



George Floyd is one of a long list of Black people killed by police and vigilantes in the US. Did you see video footage of Mr. Floyd's Murder? How did it impact you? (Please take caution if you have not yet seen the video and want to watch it; it is deeply disturbing.)

"George Floyd Memorial" by Fibonacci Blue is licensed under CC BY 2.0

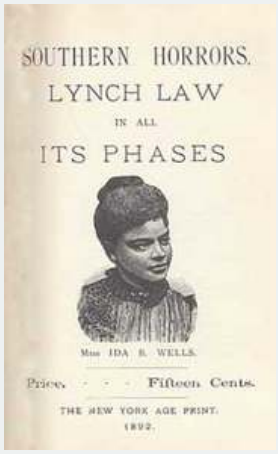
Horrified bystanders captured a video of Floyd's murder and shared it on social media. In the first week after Floyd's murder, 3.4 million original posts and 69 billion engagements accounted for around 15% of all posts on Twitter (now X) during that week. By June 8th, #BlackLivesMatter was mentioned in 1.2 million original posts (Wirtschafter 2021).

However, this hashtag didn't start in 2020. #BlackLivesMatter is a hashtag that first went viral in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer (discussed below). In the decade following its introduction, #BlackLivesMatter became a popular organizing tool on social media. This hashtag draws attention to racist violence in the US It is a code for a set of claims about racism, policing, lynching, and underserved communities. **Underserved communities** are groups with limited access to resources or are otherwise disenfranchised (FEMA 2023).

Below we examine how the claim of the BLM movement reflects prior claims of racist policing and violence, and underserved or under-resourced communities.

Lynchings, as discussed in a prior chapter, are extrajudicial killings in which an individual or a mob kidnaps, tortures, and kills persons suspected of crime or social transgressions. *Extrajudicial killings* are murders by a person with authority, without any legal process (OMCT World Organization Against Torture 2023). In the US, the victims are most often Black individuals. The perpetrators are almost never punished. More than 4,400 lynchings have been documented in the US between 1877 and 1950 (Taylor and Vinson 2020). Racially-motivated lynchings are a means of *social control* that reinforces the dominance of white people and oppression of Black people within a racial hierarchy.

In the late 19th and early 20th Century, the journalist Ida. B. Wells wrote about lynchings as part of her work to document discrimination against Black people (see the figure below). She found that the prevalent claim that Black men were lynched because they raped white women, was a lie, a myth. Instead, she argued that lynching was a method of social control to suppress Black freedom and the right to vote by violence and murder.



Journalist Ida B. Wells wrote *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law In All Its Phases* in 1892 to expose the racial violence in the South. Do you see evidence of racial violence in your community?

"Southern Horrors: Lynch Law In All Its Phases, book cover, 1892" by Ida B. Wells is in the Public Domain

Sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois led the N.A.A.C.P. in an anti-lynching campaign that reduced lynchings. This campaign inspired the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-20th century. Despite the progressive gains that these movements achieved, the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed teenager on his way home, and the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who killed him, was a painful reminder that the extrajudicial killing of Black people has never stopped.

Explicit racial (and gender) bias has been demonstrated in some police departments. In a 2022 investigation of the Minneapolis Police Department, researchers found "patterns of discrimination in arrests and use of force," and that:

> "based on interviews and a review of 700 hours of body camera footage, identified an exhaustive list of slurs that officers and supervisors consistently use against women and Black people, including suspects, witnesses, bystanders and their own colleagues" (Dewan 2022).

Portland police also have a well-documented record of individual police officers expressing racist ideas about Black people. A 2012 report documents a long and troubled history of racist policing, including an incident of harassment in which several Portland officers left dead animals at a popular restaurant owned by a Black person. You have the option to read the full 2012 report, Black and Blue: Police-Community Relations in Portland's Albina District, 1964-1985.

Violence arises from prejudice. As you might remember, *prejudice* is an unfavorable preconceived feeling or opinion formed without knowledge or reason that prevents objective consideration of an individual or group. Many advocates for police and policing resist claims of racism by asserting that such attitudes are the result of individual prejudice held by a few "bad apples" rather than a *culture of racism*. Robin DiAngelo (pictured below), an educator who studies racism, has written extensively about

the lengths people will go to to avoid being labeled 'racist,' even when expressing racist ideas (DiAngelo 2018). Most people, including police officers, resist being thought of as racist, but individual racial bias is only one dimension of racism.



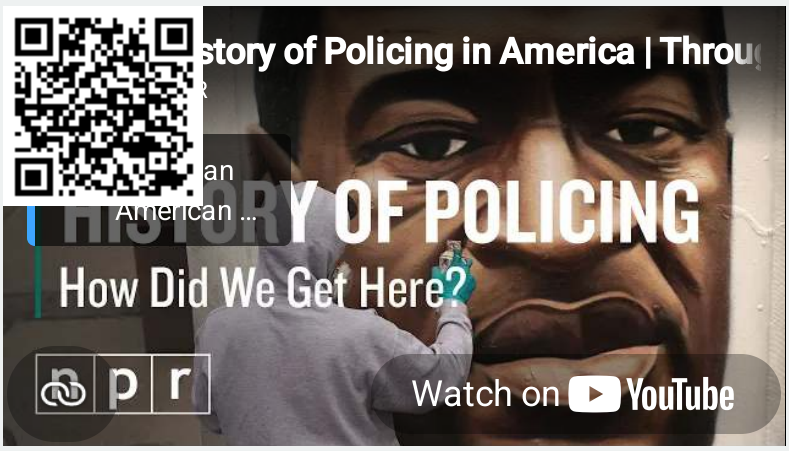
Robin DiAngelo is a white working-class educator and author. She has written extensively about the lengths people will go to to avoid being labeled racist, even when expressing racist ideas.

"Robin DiAngelo, PhD, 2021" by Jason P Toews is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Claims of racism and racist policing also rest on racial disparities and historical patterns of policing. As discussed, *racial disparity* is the unequal outcomes of one racial or ethnic group compared with outcomes for another racial/ethnic group (Children's Bureau 2021:2). Racial disparities are sometimes called *racial inequities*. For example, BLM organizers and their allies point to higher percentages of Black people being stopped, arrested, imprisoned, and killed by police than white people. In Portland, Black people make up only 5.3% of the city population, yet they accounted for 22.6% of traffic stops and 16% of pedestrian stops in 2019. They are also arrested at a rate 4.3 times higher than white people. Furthermore, Black people are killed by Portland police 3.9 times more than white people (Levinson 2021).

This pattern of racial inequity repeats in cities across the US. A 2020 study found "that while Black people were much more likely to be pulled over than Whites, the disparity lessens at night, when police are less able to distinguish the race of the driver." This is evidence of racial discrimination. The study also found that Black people were more likely to be searched after a stop, though white people were more likely to be found with illicit drugs (Pierson et al. 2020). In the US, Black men are about 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than white men, and Black women are about 1.4 times more likely to be killed by police than white women (Edwards, Lee, & Esposito 2019).

Claims of racist policing also rest on scholarship about the history of policing in America. For example, Irish police officers in 1830's Boston were specifically hired to police communities of formerly enslaved Black people (NPR 2020). Slave patrols and Jim Crow-era policing of Black communities are well documented (NAACP N.d). Please watch the brief video below to learn more about this history.



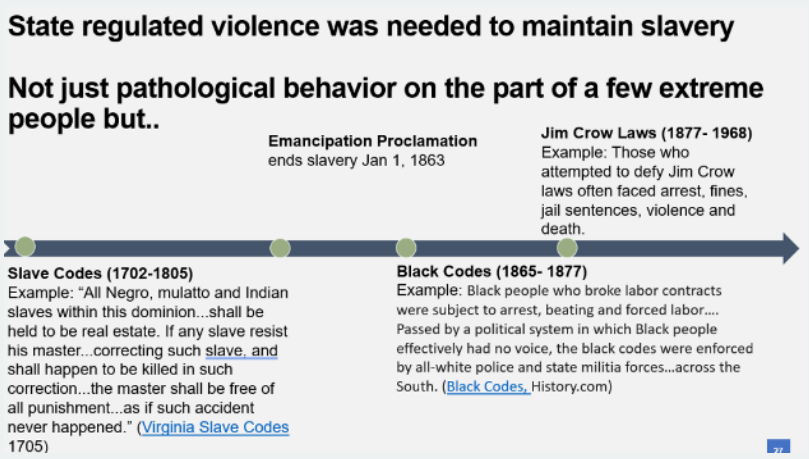
Please watch the video NPR Throughline, History of Policing in America to learn more about the history of policing.

"History of Policing in America | Throughline" by NPR Podcasts is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

This historic construction of racist policing recalls *Racial Formation Theory* by Omi and Winant (1986), which we introduced in the Sociology chapter. The theory describes how racial classifications are created, changed, and recreated through racial projects, like policing, which attach meaning and power to racial categories. Policing becomes a racist practice when Black people get profiled as more likely to be considered a threat to public safety than white people.

Critical Race Theory, also previously introduced, helps us understand how legal statutes like The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 (H.R.5484) actually create and sustain racial inequity. These laws include the Crime Bill (H.R.3355), which significantly expanded prisons and funded 100,000 new police officers. They also include the 1998 Amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), which limits access to financial aid for students who have been convicted of a drug felony (Whitman & Exarhos 2020).

Thus, the institution of the state contributes to racial inequities is the US, and within in it the *criminal justice system*, which relies on legal codes, criminalization, policing, and punishment to mediate conflict, protect property, and maintain social order. Critical race scholarship further places this legislation within the historical context of legal statutes that regulated Black lives. A timeline of these laws and policies is shown in the figure below. These laws began with the Slave Codes, then after the Civil War, they became Black Codes. They restricted Black people's right to own property, conduct business, and move freely through public spaces. They fed a convict leasing system that replaced slavery as a source of cheap labor for enslavers. Black Codes then became Jim Crow Laws in many states, legally segregating Black people and white people. In each case, the laws reinforced the racist and false ideas that Black people are dangerous and needed controlling.



State-sanctioned violence was needed to maintain slavery and subsequent racial inequality, using Slave Codes, Black Codes, and Jim Crow laws. Although these three sets of laws are now illegal, where do you see racial inequality supported in other laws, policies, or practices?

"Infographic: State Regulated Violence Was Needed to Maintain Slavery" by Kimberly Puttman and Michelle Culley, Open Oregon Educational Resources, is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Claim: Under-resourced Communities

This claim centers the social devastation of historic racism in communities of color, and people whose communities have been historically under-resourced, over-policed, disproportionately impacted by social problems, and underrepresented in terms of institutional power because of their assigned race category.

The history of exclusion, segregation, and discriminatory lending practices described in the Neighborhoods and Housing chapter created the social and economic conditions in the under-resourced communities we are looking at in this chapter. **Under-resourced communities** are areas with relatively high poverty rates that lack robust economic infrastructure. While the term often refers to

cities and suburbs with populations of over 250,000 people, many rural communities are also under-resourced (adapted from Eberhardt, Wial, and Yee 2020:5). In the South, Midwest, and Northeast, these neighborhoods are disproportionately Black. In the West, these neighborhoods are disproportionately Latinx.

The legacy of economic exclusion and discrimination is well demonstrated in a 2014 report from Portland State University. The report found that Black family income is less than half that of white family income. The poverty rate among Black children is nearly 50% compared to 13% for white children. Local unemployment levels in 2009 for Black people were nearly double the unemployment rate for white people.

Researchers also found that "fewer than one-third of Black households own their homes, compared to about 60% of white households, and that Black people have experienced housing displacement and the loss of community as the historic Albina District has gentrified" (Coalition of Communities of Color 2014:3). The same study also documented substantial disparities for health outcomes like diabetes, stroke, and low birth weight, and in access to health insurance, prenatal care, and mental health care. If you would like to read the full report, consider how The African American Community in Multnomah County: An Unsettling Profile clearly documents racial inequity.

Demands for police reform and prison abolition argue that policing and the prison system are inadequate responses to the social problems that impact historically disadvantaged communities. The call for "defunding the police" is a call for redirecting resources to programs that directly support the well-being of communities disproportionately impacted by poverty, so that police may focus on their actual job, public safety.

Social geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore (pictured below) applies a Marxist analysis to the economic conditions that accompanied the massive expansion of prisons in California. She demonstrates that the US prison system grew to contain and control surplus labor as low-wage workers in historically disadvantaged communities lost access to jobs during the 1980s and 1990s. She also argues that mass incarceration prevents displaced workers from building robust labor movements that might challenge these exclusionary economic conditions (Wilson Gilmore 2007).



Social geographer and Black activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore traces the physical locations of prisons to better understand how economic systems create privilege and oppression. Along with Angela Davis, she champions prison abolition. What do you think a world without prisons would be like?

"Ruth Wilson Gilmore" by Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

In 1996, Gilmore partnered with Angela Davis to organize Critical Resistance, a social movement organization that challenges the idea that imprisonment and policing are acceptable solutions for social, political, and economic social problems. The contemporary *prison abolition movement*, with which many BLM organizers are aligned, can trace its roots to these organizing efforts. Visit Critical Resistance if you'd like to learn more.

As our discussion of these claims makes clear, the US has a long history of systemic, institutionalized racist practices. The claim of the BLM movement is that racist practices continue today and that more must be done to address this problem. Once this claim is publicized in the media, the public reacts.

Step 3: Public Reaction

Public Reaction: According to Best (2021), in this step, individuals, groups, and organizations begin to align to a particular explanation of the problem and request a change in policy or law. Most of the time, at this step, it is the power of social movements that create the changes in policy or law.

A **protest** is a public expression of objection, disapproval, or dissent towards an idea or action (Merriam Webster 2023). Social movements have used sustained protests to disrupt civic life, draw attention to how the system is not working, and demand change. However, protesting is not the only collective action that social movements take. They may engage in *sit-ins*, where groups of people occupy a space, *demonstrations*, where they may take a more performative action to draw attention to a cause, *civil disobediance*, which halts the normal operations of an organization or public space such as blocking a highway or prohibiting workers from entering their work space, or other social movement tactics. We will focus on protests in this section, though an example of successful antiracist sit-ins is described in the People Making a Difference box below.

✔ People Making a Difference

College Students and the Southern Civil Rights Movement

Anthropologist Margaret Mead said, “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

Protests began on May 26, 2020, in Minneapolis and around the US, growing to more than 7700 BLM-inspired protests by mid-August. Juneteenth weekend alone saw as many as 25 million people in the US, including many celebrities and public figures, publicly demand justice and change.

On Thursday, May 28, 2020, the Pacific Northwest Youth Liberation Front (PNYLF) (pictured below) organized a protest at The Multnomah County Detention Center demanding an end to state-sanctioned violence against Black people. The young, mostly white protesters chanted, “Black Lives Matter,” “I Can’t Breathe,” and “Defund the Police.” PNYLF followers describe themselves as a "decentralized network of autonomous youth collectives dedicated to direct action towards total liberation" (Graves 2020). For PNYLF, total *liberation* includes ending mass incarceration. If you would like to learn more about the history of mass incarceration, check out this fact sheet from The Brennan Center for Justice.



The Pacific Northwest Youth Liberation Front protested during Black Lives Matter protests in Portland, Oregon. Why do you think young people emerge as leaders in movements for social justice?

“Photo of The Pacific Northwest Youth Liberation Front” by PNWYLF is included under fair use

The charged protests in downtown Portland were not the only protests for Black Lives in the state. Thirty-three Oregon towns saw overwhelmingly peaceful protests like the 25-50 people enthusiastically singing “Black Lives Matter” as they paraded up and down the main street in Manzanita every weekend throughout that grim COVID summer. More than 2,000 cities in 60 countries around the world saw similar protests (Wikipedia 2022).

It was and remains a contested, often heated conversation. Smaller groups of pro-police counter-protesters soon declared that “Blue Lives Matter,” positioning the lives of police over the lives of the Black people whom they disproportionately kill. White supremacists joined in, declaring that “White Lives Matter.” This highlights the significance of *framing*, how a social movement frames their claim. The claim “Black Lives Matter” means that Black lives matter, too. Not that they only matter, or that they matter most, but that they also matter even thought they are treated as if they do not matter. However, this framing quickly met the *counterframes* described above, slowing the momentum of the movement.

Public reaction to a social movement's claim and aims is central to the movement's success. In the BLM movement, the nation- and world-wide protests that occurred, particularly in the summer of 2020, helped fuel the movement.

Steps 4-6: Policy Making, Social Problems Work, and Policy Outcomes

Policy Making: In this step, governments create new laws and organizations create new policies to implement as a response to the social problem.

Social Problems Work: Once a new policy is put into place or the law is signed, organizations and institutions must act to implement the change.

Policy Outcomes: In this final step, claimsmakers examine the outcomes of the policies and actions taken to respond to the social problem. Often, the outcome of this step is the refinement of a claim and a request for more action.

BLM took center stage in Oregon and across the nation as we seemed to enter into an urgent public conversation about racism, alternatives to policing, and what it might look like if Black lives really mattered. Here we provide some examples of proposed and implemented policies in Oregon that resulted from BLM-related organizing.

The small town of Vernonia, Oregon, was one of several that issued resolutions supporting racial equality and inclusion. Book clubs and racial equity work groups were convened. If you'd like to learn more about this work, please review the blog Victory in Vernonia.

Additionally, more than 800 people, organized by Unite Oregon and Imagine Black, testified in June 2020 at city budget hearings and urged city officials to redirect $50 million dollars from policing to community support and to sever connections between Portland Public Schools and the Portland Police Bureau. The city budget cut $15,000,000 in funding for School Resource Officers and two other controversial policing programs. The Mayor also responded with a list of 19 proposed police reforms, 13 of which he achieved within the year. Check out their websites if you would like to learn more about Unite Oregon and Imagine Black.



Testifying about the impact or experience of social problems at hearings is one form of advocacy that can create social change.

Jeremiah Bey Ellison at Minneapolis City Council Hearing by Tony Webster via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

In July 2020, The Electoral Justice Project of the Movement for Black Lives introduced the Breathe Act, which "offers a radical reimagining of public safety, community care, and how we spend money as a society." Two Members of Congress, Rashida Talib and Ayanna Pressley stepped up to champion the measure's "four simple ideas":

- Divest federal resources from incarceration and policing
- Invest in new, non-punitive, non-carceral approaches to community safety that lead states to shrink their criminal-legal systems and center the protection of Black lives – including Black mothers, Black trans people, and Black women
- Allocate new money to build healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities
- Hold political leaders to their promises and enhance the self-determination of all Black communities (Movement For Black Lives 2020).

In April 2021, the Portland City Counsel's Racial Equity Steering Committee issued a 65-page report with recommendations for police reform that included improved racial equity training and assessment, along with proposed changes in the way law enforcement responds to *houselessness* and mental health crises (Abdurraqib 2021).

Also in 2021, the Oregon legislature passed HB 2930 to hold police more accountable for sexual assault and racial bias. By August 2022, the commission formed to draft the new rules and released a draft proposal for public comment. The proposal has been widely criticized for being too lenient and allowing officers who commit serious crimes to keep their jobs (Levinson 2022).

Portland police followed through on several of the requests, including more robust anti-bias training (Byrne 2021). Police agencies across the state have prioritized increasing racial and gender diversity in their recruitment and have begun to screen new hires for racial bias.

However, these efforts have not been broadly supported by police officers. The majority of police personnel surveyed in 2021 thought that additional anti-bias training was unnecessary, and 15% of respondents said they had plans to leave within the year. A respondent quoted in the report described a general feeling within the rank and file that had been "betrayed" by "city leaders,

elected officials, and community" (Gennaco et. al. 2022: 47). Those who advance an abolitionist vision, in which there are no under-resourced communities, assert that we can't train our way out of racism.

A growing coalition of organizers emerging from the 2020 protests continues to work towards *decarceration* (undoing mass incarceration), transformative justice, and community care. For example, Don't Shoot PDX, which was organized in 2016, continues to offer programming for young people impacted by racial injustice and police violence, as well as "mutual aid [including] food, household supplies, and clothing distributions to marginalized families, houseless communities, indigenous reservations and rural populations in the region" and legal outreach community members who experience racism and discrimination (Don't Shoot PDX 2022). If you'd like to learn more about Don't Shoot PDX, you can check out their website at Don't Shoot PDX.

In this chapter, we have taken up the national BLM movement and local Portland protests as a case study of social movements. We used the *social problems process* framework to contextualize the protests. We considered how theories about the social, historical, and political construction of race and racism help us understand how racist policies and racist ideas produce and substance racial inequities. We also identified harmful racist ideas about under-served communities and racist policies that strive to contain rather than enrich under-served communities.

We also looked at the uses of social media for social movements, and we located Garza, Cullors, and Tometi within interdependent organizing traditions that touch back to Black Feminist Theory, the 20th century Civil Rights movement, and the emancipatory sociology of Du Bois. We considered how #BlackLivesMatter makes powerful claims that engage critical consciousness, calling attention to all the places where Black lives don't seem to matter.

We did the work that BLM invites us to do as we analyze how policing in under-resourced communities creates and sustains racism. Finally, we considered how an antiracist framework, which centers on the well-being of people most impacted by police violence and mass incarceration, can advance social justice, and create a world where no one goes hungry.

Though the chapter centered the learning of sociological perspectives on social movements, we hope that this chapter also inspired you to get involved in local, state, national, or global social movements to fight against the social injustices we covered throughout this textbook and to secure a more just world for everyone.

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Review of Social Movements

Summary

1. **Social movements** are sustained and organized action intended to bring about (or sometimes oppose) **social change**, which is large-scale structural or cultural changes in society.
2. **Antiracism** means supporting antiracist policy through actions or expressing antiracist ideas. It means actively challenging racist thoughts or behaviors or dismantling racist laws, policies, and practices. When we apply this to social problems, one way to take action is to identify racial inequality and the policies and practices that create it, understand the racist ideas that justify the policies, challenge them, and implement new policies and practices.
3. Similarly, **feminism** is the belief in gender equality in economic, political, and social realms. Being feminist at its basic means actively challenging sexist laws, policies, and practices. However, it also means challenging other systems of oppression, as all oppression is interconnected.
4. Sociologists have different ways to explain social movements. They can categorize social movements by their levels, types, and stages. They can also discuss why social movements are effective or ineffective.
5. **Reform movements** seek incremental change within existing social structures or institutions, whereas **revolutionary movements** seek to overthrow institutions in favor of a more just social structure. **Reactionary movements** are in reaction to unwanted social change or to another social movement.
6. **New social movement theory** examines why social movements succeed using technology, interests based on identity, and harnessing the emotions of fear, anger, and hope. **Resource mobilization theory** argues that movements are successful when they can engage resources like leadership, membership, money, or social media to convince people to take action. **Indigenous Perspectives** argue that oppressed people use internal resources to sustain their activism rather than external resources.
7. The four stages of social movements are the *emergence stage*, when people become aware of an issue, and leaders emerge; the *coalescence stage*, when people join together and organize to publicize the issue and raise awareness; the *institutionalization stage*, when the organizing typically begins to rely on a paid staff, and the *decline stage*, when the movement successfully brings about the change it sought, or when people no longer take the issue seriously. In each stage #BLM organizers used social media in hashtags, tweets, web pages, Facebook pages, and other social media presence to achieve their goals. Although racism persists, they succeeded in expanding the possibility for liberation and social justice.
8. Policing in the US can be traced back to 'slave patrols' in the South that empowered white men to hunt Black people, who were considered the property of enslavers. After slavery was abolished, white people routinely overpoliced Black communities. In many communities across the country, laws were created to control and contain the movement of Black people, Native Americans, and immigrant populations who were perceived threats to white people and their property. While civil rights organizers, led by Black and Brown people, have successfully challenged and abolished most of these laws, racist ideas about who counts as a criminal persist.
9. BLM organizers articulated claims that identified historical patterns of overpolicing in **under-resourced** communities of color as the reason for disproportionate rates of Black (and Brown) people killed by police. The public responded with record-breaking protests to demand new approaches to public safety that would redirect public resources away from policing and towards programs that increase the well-being of people who live in under-resourced communities. The robust organizing network that emerged is continuing efforts to reduce police violence by rethinking policing, public safety, and community well-being.
10. We can use the BLM movement to apply the social problems process, starting with *claimsmaking* and *media coverage* in which claims that Black lives matter (too) were spread through social media via **hashtag activism**, to *public reaction* where many people across the nation engaged in **protest** and became involved in the movement, to *policy making*, *social problems work*, and *policy outcomes* in which a variety of strategies were proposed, implemented, and evaluated to address the concerns of the BLM movement.

Questions

1. Imagine a future in which your needs are met, you and your loved ones are safe, and you are able to spend your time how you wish – what would be different, and what kind of world would we need in order to achieve this for everyone?
2. Do you consider yourself antiracist and/or feminist, and why or why not? If you responded no, does this mean that you don't believe in racial justice and/or gender equality, and why don't you?

3. What do you think when you hear “Black Lives Matter,” and how have your thoughts on it changed after reading this chapter?
4. Why is “All Lives Matter” a racist response to “Black Lives Matter?” Where does “Blue Lives Matter” fit into this conversation?
5. Choose another social movement apart from BLM – how did that movement move through the four stages discussed in this chapter, or which stage is it currently in?
6. Choose another social movement apart from BLM – how would you explain the movement using Best’s *social problems process*?
7. How is BLM an effective response to intersectional social problems?
8. What can you do to use your understanding of antiracism and feminism to support social justice?

Action Steps

As with all prior chapters, *you* are encouraged to take action! Select a social problem that you feel is pressing in this moment, use your individual agency to decide how best to achieve social change regarding that social problem, engage in collective action with other individuals or organizations to help address that social problem, and/or get involved in a local or national social movement to that fights to eliminate that social problem. You have the power to be a change maker.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Social Problems

Overview of Social Problems
Understanding Social Problems
Social Problems, Social Change, and Social Justice
Review of Social Problems
References for Social Problems

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Overview of Social Problems

Learning Objectives

- Identify what constitutes a social problem.
- Summarize the objectivist, subjectivist, and constructionist approaches to social problems.
- Describe the stages of the social problems process.
- List three sources of social change regarding social problems.
- Connect the concepts of agency, interdependence, and collective action to social change.
- Explain what is meant by social justice as it relates to social problems.

When you think about the current issues facing our society and our planet, you might name war, addiction, climate change, houselessness, or the global pandemic as social problems. You would be mostly right. However, sociologists need to be more specific than that. Because they are trying to explain what social problems are or how to fix them, they need a much more precise definition. Sociology professor and author Anna Leon-Guerrero (pictured below) defines a *social problem* as "a social condition or pattern of behavior that has negative consequences for individuals, our social world, or our physical world" (2016:4). We will define social problems again on the following page.



Sociologist Dr. Anna Leon-Guerrero, pictured here, defined social problems has having consequences for both our social and our physical world. Why might this matter?

Photo of Dr. Anna Leon-Guerrero, © *Pacific Lutheran University* *(all rights reserved and included with permission)*

Individuals have problems. Social problems, though, go beyond the experience of one individual. They are experienced by groups, nations, or people around the world. An individual experiences job loss, but the wider social problem may be rising unemployment rates. An individual may experience a divorce, but the wider social problem may be changing expectations around marriage and long-term partnerships. Solving a social problem is a collective task, outside of the capability of one individual or group.

In his book *The Sociological Imagination*, American sociologist C. Wright Mills helps us understand the difference between individual problems and social problems and connects the two concepts. Mills (1959) uses the term *personal troubles* to describe troubles that happen both within and to an individual. He contrasts these personal troubles with social problems, which he calls *public issues*. Public issues transcend the experience of one individual, impacting groups of people over time.

To illustrate, a recent college graduate may be several hundred thousand dollars in debt because of student loans. They may have trouble paying for living expenses because of this debt. This would be a personal trouble. If we look for larger social patterns, however, we see that as of 2021 about 1 in 8 Americans have student loan debt, owing about 1.6 trillion dollars (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2021). The volume of this debt and the harm that is being caused stretch far beyond the experience of a few individuals. Student loan debt becomes a public issue.

In addition to differentiating personal troubles and public issues, Mills also connects them using the *sociological imagination*, a quality of mind that connects individual experience and wider social forces. In other words when we use our own sociological

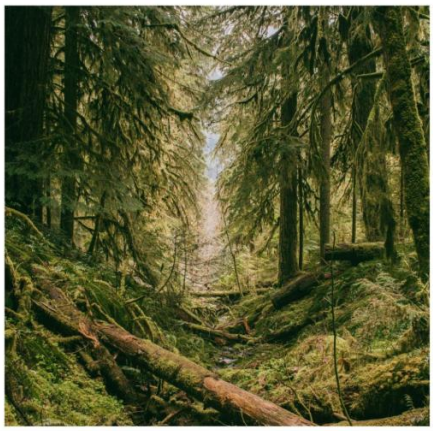
imaginations, we start with our own lives, our biography. We connect with the experience of other people and their history. We consider how our own past actions and the historical actions of others may have contributed to our current reality. We use our sociological imaginations to consider what the outcomes of our actions or of social policies might be. When you use your sociological imagination, complicated social problems begin to make sense.

Thus, it is not just that one person gets sick from COVID-19. The social problem is that our healthcare systems are overwhelmed with sick patients. People are experiencing different rates of exposure to COVID-19. Their health outcomes differ because of their race, class, and gender. Because social problems affect people across the social and physical worlds, the solutions to social problems must be collectively created. It is not enough for one person to get well, although that may really matter to you. Instead, we must act collectively, as groups, governments, or systems, to identify and implement solutions. Our health is personal, but getting well depends on all of us.

Current sociologists highlight other complex relationships of the social world. In the 2019 Society for the Study of Social Problems Presidential Address, society president Nancy Mezey explores the topic of climate change as a social problem. Understanding and solving climate change requires a deep understanding of the relationship between people and systems. She emphasizes that "society is not just a collection of unrelated individuals, but rather a collection of people who live in relationship with each other" (Mezey 2020:606). To make this point, she uses the work of sociologist Allan Johnson. In his book *The Forest and the Trees*, Johnson compares the physical world to our social world:

> In one sense, a forest is simply a collection of individual trees, but it is more than that. It is also a collection of trees that exist in particular relation to one another, and you cannot tell what that relation is by looking at the individual trees. Take a thousand trees and scatter them across the Great Plains of North America and all you have is a thousand trees. But take those same trees and put them close together, and now you have a forest.
>
> The same individual trees in one case constitute a forest and in another are just a lot of trees. The "empty space" that separates individual trees from one another is not a characteristic of any one tree or the characteristics of all the individual trees somehow added together. It is something more than that, and it is crucial to understand the relationships among trees that make a forest what it is. *Paying attention to that "something more" — whether it is a family or a society or the entire world – and how people are related to it lies at the heart of what it means to practice sociology* (Johnson 2014:11-12, emphasis added).

Using this comparison, Mezey reminds us that human society is made up of interdependent individuals, groups, institutions, and systems, similar to the living ecosystem of the forest. This similarity is illustrated in the figure below. The reach of a social problem can also be planet-wide. As the response to COVID-19 demonstrates, migrations between countries, vaccination policies for any nation, and the responses of health systems in local areas can all impact whether any individual is likely to get COVID-19 or to recover from it. A social problem, then, is one that involves a wider scope of groups, institutions, nations, or global populations.




A society consists of more than individual people, just like a forest consists of more than just individual trees: The forest around Cougar Hot Springs, Oregon has more than just individual trees. Tokyo, Japan has more than individual people.

> *"Photo" by Deric is licensed under the Unsplash License; "Photo" by Chris Chan is licensed under the Unsplash License*

—

In this textbook, we will introduce you to a variety of historical and contemporary social problems. We will focus primarily on the United States; however, we will also discuss a global perspective in various areas of the textbook. We will explore social problems related to economic inequality, housing, crime and social control, social institutions (family, work, education, media, and medicine), drugs, war and terrorism, and the environment. We will end with a discussion of social movements, which help create social change around social problems.

Each chapter includes an overview where we introduce the broad topic and related concepts (the Overview page), a summary of sociological theoretical perspectives that explain or frame social problems related to that broad topic (the Theoretical Perspectives page), an in-depth examination of social problems including patterns or trends, variation, historical perspectives, sociological concepts, and/or consequenes (the Patterns page), and a review of the main points of the chapter as well as thoughtful questions to ponder to connect deeper to the material (the Review page). A few chapters have an additional page on problems or concepts that deserve special attention. Additionally, the Review page includes Action Steps that you can take to help address social problems related to that chapter's topic. You have the power to take action!

Before proceeding to our sociological discussion of historic and contemporary social problems, we must describe what sociology is. In the following chapter, we introduce *sociology*, define the *sociological imagination* and several other foundational sociological concepts, present an overview of sociological theoretical perspectives, and describe different types of sociological research.

First, however, we will describe social problems in more detail in the remainder of this chapter. In the following pages, we define *social problems*, introduce the *social problems process*, and discuss social change as it relates to social problems including individual agency, interdependence, collective action, and social movements.

As you read this textbook, keep an open and brave mind toward the social problems and concepts that you learn about. Some topics are difficult or uncomfortable to encounter, and others may challenge your existing views of the social world. If that occurs, ask yourself, 'What in me is being challenged?' or 'Why am I feeling defensive?' Note that the patterns we discuss are in fact *patterns*. You might think of an *exception* to the pattern, though the general pattern still persists, and is typically very well documented. We provide much evidence (data and social science research findings) in these pages; however, there is far more evidence outside this textbook as well.

We hope that you will finish this textbook with a strong sociological understanding of social problems including their patterns, causes, consequences, and solutions. We also wish that you will feel empowered to create social change yourself, as you have the agency to help address social problems!

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Understanding Social Problems

A **social problem** is a social condition or behavior that a segment of society views as harmful and in need of a solution. It involves any social condition that has negative consequences for large numbers of people (recall personal troubles versus public issues), and that is generally recognized as needing to be addressed. A *social condition* is an observable social phenomenon.

For instance, within a specific society we might observe that women and men are treated differently. We might see this in how men are paid more than women for the same work, how men are portrayed more positivity in media than women, how men are allowed to vote when women are prohibited, or how men are allowed to leave home unaccompanied when women are required to have a chaperone. This is *gender inequality*. The social condition is that the inequality exists, and is observable – we can witness it first hand and measure it in research. The majority of people in some societies have come to understand gender inequality as harmful and in need of a solution. Thus, it is a social problem. Other societies, however, may not view that inequality as harmful and in need of remedy. Thus, it remains a social condition. This highlights how social problems may be approached from different lenses.

Approaches to Social Problems

You might have heard someone claim, "Well, that's subjective. I disagree." What this person mean is that there is no one truth to the matter – no one reality nor one correct interpretation of it. In other words, they mean that there is no *objective* truth on the matter. Rather, this person is stating that our understanding of the matter is up to personal interpretation. It varies from individual to individual or group to group. It is *subjective*. These general terms can be applied to how we understand social problems.

Objective and Subjective Approaches

The **objectivist approach** to social problems focuses on measurable characteristics, or the objective reality of the problem. In other words, for any condition or behavior to be considered a social problem, it must have negative consequences for large numbers of people.

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. However, a *body of evidence* – work by academic researchers, government agencies, and other sources – may point to extensive consequences. The reasons for these consequences may be debated, and 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, some Americans say that they do not think it is happening (Leiserowitz et al. 2011).



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, the product of human activity, and a serious threat, some Americans continue to believe that climate change is not happening, not human-caused, nor a social problem. We return to this problem in the Environment chapter.

Wikimedia Commons – public domain

Sociologists generally delight in *statistics*, those numbers that measure rates, patterns, and trends. You might think that a social problem exists when things get measurably worse in ways we can see with statistics, such as when unemployment rises, food prices increase, deaths from AIDS skyrocket, or gender-related hate crimes explode. Changes in the numbers, the objective measures, provide only part of the story. Sometimes these changes go unnoticed in the wider society and don't result in action. Other times one community takes action, but another community with similar statistics does not.

Disputes and variation like these point to the **subjectivist approach** to social problems, which focuses on the feeling that something is a problem. It holds that there must be a perception by enough people in society that a social condition or behavior is wrong or harmful and needs to be addressed for it to be considered a social problem.

This view lies at the heart of the *social constructionist* approach to social problems (Rubington & Weinberg 2010). In this view, many types of negative social conditions and behaviors exist. Many of these are considered sufficiently negative to acquire the status of a social problem; however, some do not receive this consideration and thus do not become a social problem, and some become considered a social problem only if individuals, groups, policymakers, or other parties call attention to the condition or behavior.

Constructionist Approach

The **constructionist approach** focuses on the process of why and how a social condition becomes a social problem. In order to understand this perspective, we must describe social constructs. *Social constructs* are shared understandings that are jointly accepted by large numbers of people in a society or large group. This concept asserts that while material objects and biological processes exist, it is the meaning that we give to them that creates our shared social reality. The video below provides more examples of this concept.



This video, Social Construction, explores what it means to jointly create our social reality. What else do you see that is socially constructed? [Transcript]

"Social Construction " by Elizabeth Pearce, Kimberly Puttman, and Colin Stapp, Open Oregon Educational Resources, is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Austrian-born American sociologist Peter Berger and American-Austrian sociologist Thomas Luckmann introduced the term social construction in 1966. They wrote a book called *The Social Construction of Reality*. In it, they argued that society is created by humans and human interaction. These interactions are often habits. They use the term *habitualization* to describe how "any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be … performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort" (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Not only do we construct our own society, but we also accept it as it is because others have created it before us. Society is, in fact, habit.

For example, a school building exists as a school and not as a generic building because you and others agree that it is a school. If your school is older than you are, it was created by the agreement of others before you. By employing the convention of naming a building as a 'school,' the school, while socially constructed, is made real and assigned specific expectations as to how it will be used.

For another example, we can look to symbols, such as gestures and language. Sociologists who study how we interact recognize that language, including body language, reflect our values. If you have learned a foreign language, you know that every word does not translate easily. The same is true for gestures. What does the gesture in the figure below mean? While Americans might recognize a thumbs-up as meaning 'got it' or 'great,' in Germany it would mean 'one,' and in Japan, it would mean 'five.' Thus, our construction of reality is influenced by our symbolic interactions.



What do you think the person in the photo, gesturing "Thumbs up," is trying to say? Depending on his country, he may be saying *great*, *one*, or *five*. Even our hand gestures are socially constructed.

"Photo" by Aziz Acharki is licensed under the Unsplash License

Another way of looking at the social construction of reality is through an idea developed by white American sociologists Dorothy Thomas and William Thomas. The Thomas theorem states, "If [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928). Let's look at an example of how the social construction of our current understanding of rape led to the public viewing it as a real social problem.

The history of attention given to rape and sexual assault in the United States before and after the 1970s provides an example. These acts of sexual violence have no doubt occurred throughout history and certainly were common in the US before the 1970s. Although perpetrators (most often men) were sometimes arrested and prosecuted for rape and sexual assault, sexual violence (most often against women) was otherwise ignored by policymakers and received little attention in textbooks or the news. 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 (which we will return to in the Social Movements chapter), it soon focused on rape and sexual assault as serious crimes and as manifestations of gender inequality. Thanks to this focus, rape and sexual assault eventually entered the public consciousness, views of these crimes began to change, and policymakers began to give them more attention. In short, sexual violence against women became a social problem.



Before the 1970s, rape and sexual assault were 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 social condition or behavior into a social problem.

Image courtesy of Women's eNews, http://www.flickr.com/photos/wenews/5167303294/

A key belief of the social constructionist view is that perception matters at least as much as reality, and sometimes more so. In line with this belief, social constructionism emphasizes that individuals, 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 evidence for it, 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 US wrote journal articles, textbooks, and newspaper columns in which they warned women not to go to college. The reason? They claimed 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 individuals turned the idea of women going to college into a social problem, mobilized a portion of the public to fight against women's admittance to colleges, and helped implement or reinforce restrictions on women's access to college.



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 warned women not to go to college because they claimed 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.

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In a related dynamic, various parties can distort certain aspects of a social problem that do exist: Politicians can give speeches, the news can use scary headlines and heavy coverage to capture interest, and businesses can use advertising and influence news coverage. News 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. This misleading 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. Thus, there is racial bias in news coverage of violent crime, which is thought to heighten the public's prejudice toward Black Americans.

Sociologists argue that social problems are socially constructed. In order to explain why some social conditions or behaviors become relevant to particular communities, sociologists propose a process, or sequence of steps, that a condition undergoes before it becomes a social problem. Sociologist Joel Best proposes a useful six-step process.

The Social Problems Process

In order to explain why social problems arise, sociologists look for patterns across many social problems. As early as 1940, Richard Fuller and Richard Myers proposed a model for social problem creation, action, and resolution. They called the model a *natural history of a social problem*. Fuller and Myers asked us to be excellent observers, looking at the social world the way a biologist would study nature. A biologist would observe, gather evidence, and explain patterns she sees. Sociologists who study social problems also observe and organize details into steps or models. They use those models to explain social phenomena or predict what might happen next.

More recently, sociologist Joel Best (2020) proposed a detailed framework for the **social problems process** (see the figure below). In it, Best includes steps for identifying and examining what a social problem is. He considers modern technology by describing how social media can rally people to a cause or promote government programs. He also expands our understanding of how the government takes action with social problems and helps us think about what happens next. This model is helpful because it allows us to explore what is common in social problems, and perhaps more importantly, what is effective in trying to solve them. The following sections walk through the model step by step.



Best's model of claimsmaking contains the six steps of the Social Problems Process. How might you explain social problems based on this model?

"Best's Model of Claimsmaking" by Kimberly Puttman, based on Joel Best's model of social problems, CC BY 4.0

Step One: Claimsmaking

In this step, people and groups identify an issue and try to convince others to take it seriously. In this step, the problem is called a claim, or "an argument that a particular troubling condition needs to be addressed" (Best 2020:15). In this stage, people disagree about whether a problem exists. They disagree on who should take action.

In Best's classic example, civil rights activists claimed that racial segregation in public spaces, employment, housing, voting and other aspects of social life was unacceptable. Predominantly Black activists held sit-ins, boycotts, marches, and demonstrations to assert their claim. The people conducting these actions are *claimsmakers*, the "people who seek to convince others that there is a troubling condition about which something needs to be done" (Best 2020:15).

Step Two: Media Coverage

In the second step, claimsmakers work to find other people and groups who agree with them on the causes, impacts, and desired outcomes of the particular issue at hand.

Civil rights activists (pictured below) used newspapers, radio, and television to build an audience sympathetic to the needed civil rights changes. Dr. King and other speakers used their gifts for impassioned speaking to encourage media coverage and gain wide agreement about how and why civil rights laws should change.

Media coverage also includes social media, sometimes with heavy reliance on social media platforms, as with the #MeToo movement highlighting the social problem of sexual harassment and assault.

Step Three: Public Reaction

In this step, individuals, groups, and organizations begin to align to a particular explanation of the problem and request a change in policy or law.

Often, at this step, it is the power of social movements that creates the changes in policy or law. For example, the marches for civil rights led to Congress passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.



This photo captures the Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C., in which Black and white leaders protested together.

"Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C." by Rowland Scherman, Wikimedia Commons is in the Public Domain

Step Four: Policy Making

In the policy making step, governments create new laws. These laws force institutions to create new policies to address social problems.

Response to the social problem requires institutions with power to take action to make change. With the example of civil rights, race-based segregation and some forms of discrimination became illegal at the federal level.

Step Five: Social Problems Work

Once a new policy is put into place, people must act to implement the change. Thus, policy implementation is the 'work.'

For the civil rights movement, this work included integrating schools, which we will discuss in a later chapter. It also included registering Black people to vote. It included ending legal *de jure segregation* of public spaces, even though *de facto segregation* still exists today, as we will see.

Step Six: Policy Outcomes

In this step, claimsmakers examine the outcomes of the policies and actions taken to respond to the social problem. Often, the outcome of this step is making the claim stronger and requesting more action.

The civil rights movement became a training ground for other protests. People who learned to organize, march, and lead non-violent resistance in the civil rights movement used these skills to advocate for women's rights, end the war in Vietnam, and expand LGBTQ+ rights.

Although the steps of the social problems process appear to be linear, moving from 1 to 2 to 3, and so on, Best (2020) notes that there are feedback loops in which one step can impact another and another. In other words, this process is not meant to be understood as perfectly linear but as nonlinear and always in flux.

We continue the cycle of social problem creation and resolution, moving toward a new – and potentially transformative – normal.

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On the next page, we focus on social change as it relates to social problems, including the power of individual *agency* – which you have – as well as *collective action* and *social movements*. We also define *interdependence*, which highlights how we all rely on each other to create a social world where we can all thrive, in which we all have *social justice*.

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Social Problems, Social Change, and Social Justice

Social problems are persistent. Many have continued for decades and even centuries, and some 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 or depressed outlook (Johnson, 2005).

We want to counter that outlook by highlighting both how social change occurs and what you personally can do to help address social problems. You have the power to help!

Change is possible. As just one of many examples, consider the conditions that workers face in the United States. As the Work and Economy chapter will discuss, 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 labor movement, a social movement that began during the 1870s. Workers now have a standard eight-hour work day, a minimum wage (though many think that it is far too low today), the right to strike, and much safer workplaces than before the labor movement.

Again, positive change is possible, and it does occur. That's why this book stresses individual *agency*, *collective action*, and ultimately *social change*.

Social Change

Social change refers to large-scale changes across the structure or culture of society. How does social change occur as it relates to social problems?

One source of change in social problems is social science theory and research. Since the 1800s, theory and research in sociology and the other social sciences have pointed to the reasons for social problems, potentially successful ways of addressing them, and actual policies that succeeded in addressing some aspect of a social problem. Our discussion of social problems and their solutions in this textbook is based on sound social science theory and research, and many chapters will present examples of how findings from social science research have either contributed to public policy or have the potential of doing so.

Another source of social change in social problems is the lessons learned from other nations' experiences with social problems. Sometimes these lessons for the US are positive ones, as when another nation has tackled a social problem more successfully than the US, and sometimes these lessons are negative ones, as when another nation has a more serious problem than the US and/or has made mistakes in addressing this problem. The US can learn from the good examples of other nations, and it can also learn from the bad ones. For this reason, many chapters of this book discusses such examples. In this regard, the US has much to learn from the experiences of other long-standing democracies like Canada, European nations, and Australia and New Zealand.

Despite its great wealth, the US 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 to help their populations – taking action before the problem develops or at the start of a problem – than US federal and state governments. Because the US has much to learn from their positive examples, this book's chapters discuss policies that enable other democracies to address certain social problems far more successfully than the US has addressed them.



Other democracies such as many in Europe rank higher than the United States on poverty, health, and other social indicators. For this reason, the US may have much to learn from their positive examples.

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In addition to the lessons learned from social science research and theory, and from other democratic societies, social change can be a response to individuals and groups taking action, such as pressuring policymakers to pass and enact policy, changing our cultural understandings of various social phenomena, or providing direct relief to those experiencing a social problem. Below we discuss how individual agency and collective action matter for social change, and how we are all interdependent upon each other.

Agency

Individuals and groups can create social change, as they have **agency**, in this case the capacity to make decisions about how to help address social problems and to take action. Many people have public-service jobs or volunteer in all sorts of activities involving a social problem: They assist at a food pantry, help clean up a riverbank, and so forth. Others take on a more activist orientation by becoming involved in advocacy groups or a larger social movement.

Our nation is a better place today because of the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movements, the gay rights movement, the environmental movement, and other social movements too numerous to mention. We will return to *social movements* below and in our final chapter, but for now our point is that you have the agency to join one! You also have agency to take other types of action such as described above. According to Frances Fox Piven (2006), a former president of the American Sociological Association, it is through such efforts that "ordinary people change America."

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 is not easy, but it can and does occur. Eleanor Roosevelt (1960, p. 168) 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.

Change also occurs via individuals because policymakers propose, pass, and enact laws and 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. In other words, they have the agency to act on their own.

Finally, individuals have agency in deciding how to approach difference and diversity. Instead of viewing difference as division, as some politicians do today, we view difference as a source of strength and power. Our diversity can be a source of innovative solutions to social problems. We are stronger when we value our differences, rather than fear our differences.

Interdependence

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the *sociological imagination* helps us see wider social forces at play in our individual lives. **Interdependence** is the concept that people rely on each other to survive and thrive (Schwalbe 2018). Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asserts that we are all *interrelated*, another word for interdependence, in his 1967 Christmas Speech in the quote box below.

> Quote
>
> All life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality. ... This is the way our universe is structured; this is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.
>
> –Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., activist, sociologist, and minister

Interdependence is everywhere, but specific examples of social, economic, and physical interdependence may help us see it more clearly. With *social interdependence*, we rely on other people to cooperate to support our life. We give the same cooperation to others in turn. Sociologists sometimes call this kind of social interdependence *social integration* (Berkman et al. 2000)

For example, when you consider your own life, you might notice how many people helped you become the person you are. When you were a baby, you needed an adult to feed, clothe, and keep you warm. Maybe you were lucky, and someone read you bedtime stories. As we widen this picture, we see that your caregivers relied on store owners, doctors, farmers, truckers, business people, and friends to support the work of caring for you. You may not have had a happy childhood, yet you lived long enough to read these words. This textbook was brought to you by authors, editors, artists, videographers, designers, musicians, librarians, and other students like you. These relationships demonstrate our social interdependence.

In addition to social interdependence, we experience *economic interdependence*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw empty shelves and rapidly rising food prices at the grocery store. The pandemic was disrupting the global supply chain. Some farmers in Mexico and South America couldn't get their food across the US border (Lopez-Ridaura et al. 2021). US car manufacturers couldn't get electronic chips manufactured in China. Our experiences with the pandemic underlined the reality of our economic interdependence.

We express this economic interdependence in relationships that describe the power of workers and the power of business owners. **Power** is the ability of an actor to sway the actions of another actor or actors, even against resistance (Fox Piven 2008). In 2017, Francis Fox Piven, the president of the American Sociological Association, defined **interdependent power**, arguing that while wealth and privilege create power, workers, tenants, and voters also have the power of participation, or non-participation. For instance, we saw interdependent power during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Great Resignation, with people deciding to resign from their jobs rather than return to work for low wages, until wages began to rise.

Finally, and maybe foundationally, we experience *physical interdependence*. Imagine being on a boat in a glacial lake in Alaska. The tour guide, a biologist, may ask the people on the tour about how many oceans there were in the world. The visitors would desperately try to remember fifth-grade geography, and count the various oceans they could remember. Atlantic, Pacific, Indian... Maybe five? Seven? The biologist may shake her head, "No." The visitors are stumped. She then reveals that scientists who study the ocean now say that we have just one ocean, which contains all the ocean water across our entire planet. Debris from a tsunami in Japan has washed up on beaches from the tip of Alaska to the Baja peninsula and Hawaii. Most of the plastic pollution found in the ocean is carried by rivers across the world. We are physically interdependent.

Each of these ways of considering our interdependence matters when studying social problems and creating change. Because our actions affect one another, any social problem or solution may ripple through our social world.

For example, social scientists examined mask-wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as behavioral economics researcher Dr. Vera te Velde from the University of Queensland. Dr. te Velde wanted to find out what would make wearing a mask a social norm. *Social norms* are the rules or expectations that determine and regulate appropriate behavior within a culture, group, or

society. (We will discuss norms in more detail in the Sociology chapter.) Dr. te Velde finds that when people trust each other and their government, they are much more likely to wear masks. Trust and shared agreement around social norms encourage consistent behavior. In other words, when we notice our interdependence and trust that others will follow social norms, we are more likely to follow them too.



If you would like to learn more about Dr. te Velde's research, watch The Importance of Social Norms" (episode 8).

Sociologist Michael Schwalbe, in *The Sociologically Examined Life*, calls this mindfulness of interdependence. When we are aware, or mindful, of how our actions impact others, we are noticing our interdependence. We then often act for the good of all.

In a more explicit analysis of racism, Black author and activist Heather McGhee (2021) argues that we collectively benefit when we organize for social justice across race, class, and gender divides. This *solidarity dividend* is reflected in the gains that come when people work together across their differences to accomplish what we can't do individually, improving everyone's lives.

Collective Action

When we work together to create social change, we are engaging in collective action. **Collective action** refers to the actions taken by a collection or group of people acting based on a collective decision (Sekiwu and Okan 2022). Collective action can occur in the form of *mass behaviors* (many people engaging in the same activity), independent action such as boycotts, strikes, or demonstrations (those that occur independently of a larger social movement), or action within *social movements*.

Social movements are sustained and organized efforts to bring about (or oppose) social change. For instance, the organization Fight for $15 (see the figure below) worked to increase the minimum wage to at least $15.00 an hour, from its low wage of $7.25. They deliberately name racism as a cause of division and multiracial unity as a source of power. One organizer says: "We've got to build a multiracial movement, a different kind of social justice movement for the [twenty-first] century" (Fight for $15 activist Terrance, quoted in McGhee 2021:132). These organizing tactics that emphasize our interdependence are working – we saw increases to the minimum wage in several states due to these efforts, even prior to general wage increases during the COVID-19 pandemic, which again was a response to our interdependent power.



This photo portrays the social movement Fight for $15 – who do you see represented? It shows multiracial coalitions leveraging interdependence to build social justice.

No photo credit provided

The interdependent nature of social problems also requires interdependent solutions. Sociologists who study social problems are particularly committed to taking action. They try to understand why a problem occurs to inform policy decisions, create community coalitions, or support healthy families. In the best cases, they seek to know their own biases and work to remediate them, so their research is used to create change.

This challenge is explicitly stated by the Society for the Study of Social Problems President Nancy Mezey, who tells us that studying problems is not enough. We must focus on the most critical social problem of all – climate change – to support all of us in taking action.

Quote

> The theme for the 2019 SSSP meeting is a call to sociologists and social scientists in general to draw deeply and widely on sociological roots to illuminate the social in all social problems with an eye to solving those problems…. I am calling on you, the reader, through this presidential address to focus on what is perhaps the largest social problem: Climate change. Indeed, because we have been focusing on individual rather than social solutions regarding climate change – we are now facing grave and imminent danger.
>
> – Nancy Mezey (2020:606)

Social Justice

To confront the social problems of our world, we need a *both/and approach* to their resolution: We act with individual agency to create a life that is healthy and nurturing, and we act collectively to address interdependent problems. The chapters in this book will explore reasons for hope – leaders, community groups, and ordinary people actively engaged in creating a more just, equitable, and resilient world. We act to create **social justice**, full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet all their needs (Bell et al. 2007:1). Social justice is when everyone has what they need to equally partake in opportunities. Social justice is when certain social groups are no longer systematically targeted for their race, gender, or sexuality. Social justice is when we eradicated social inequalities.

Among many *scholar–activists*, scholars who engage in activism for the social problems they study, two women embody the power of this approach. The following biographies introduce two researcher activists embodying the intersection of study and action. With scholar-activists leading the way, we will explore the causes and consequences of social problems locally, nationally, and internationally.

Jane Addams (pictured below) was a wealthy white woman who combined community building, research, and activism. During her lifetime, the US was grappling with industrialization, urbanization, immigration, World War I, and the Great Depression. Addams responded to these challenges with action.



Pictured here is Jane Addams, white activist, scholar, and Nobel Prize winner. How might the time period she was born into and her social location have influenced her activism?

"Jane Addams" by Gerhard Sisters is in the Public Domain

Addams created and lived at Hull House, a Chicago community center for immigrants in the late 1800s. Hull House was a center for kindergarten and daycare for children, where teachers taught adults and children to read and speak English. Community members could get help in finding jobs and learning about union activities. In creating Hull House, Jane Addams used both individual agency and collective action – the both/and approach.

In addition to being a community activist, Addams was a scholar and a researcher. She studied the causes of the social problems she saw. Even though she was not allowed to attend a regular university because she was a woman, she worked with the men sociologists at the University of Chicago School of Sociology to understand the deep roots of poverty, hunger, and violence in her Chicago neighborhood.

She was also a thought leader in identifying the causes and consequences of poverty and oppression. In addition, she created a network of peace activists and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 for her efforts in promoting international peace (Michals 2017). Her work for social justice included both scholarly reflection and community action, hence she was a scholar–activist. If you'd like to learn more about Jane Addams and her work at Hull House, watch this video documentary about Jane Addams, or read this biographical statement for the Hull House Museum.

Quote

The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain… until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.

– Jane Addams, community activist, scholar, and Nobel Prize winner

Angela Davis (pictured below), a Black activist and scholar, is another woman who embodies the power of both/and thinking when combining individual agency and collective action. The challenges of her time included the Vietnam War. The sociologist C. Wright Mills developed the idea of the *military-industrial complex*, that military spending related to war led to profits for wealthy businessmen (Rosen 1973). Also, some women at the time agitated for equality in work and home as the second wave of feminist activism was building. Protesters in the civil rights movement also were fighting to end segregation and win equality in voting, housing, education, and other social spheres.



Pictured here is Angela Davis, Black activist and scholar. How does her analysis and her action relate to her social location (for instance, her gender and race identities)?

"Angela Davis" by Bernard Gotfryd has no known copyright restrictions, courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division

In this tumultuous time of social change, Davis started her career as a scholar but soon became an activist protesting the unjust treatment of three Black prisoners in 1970. The combination of scholarship and activism led her to study the deeper causes of the expansion of the prison system. She coined the term *prison industrial complex*, the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment to solve economic, social, and political problems (Tufts University Prison Divestment 2023). We will discuss both concepts (the military- and prison-industrial complex) in later chapters.

She saw that Black and Brown men were disproportionately imprisoned and that wealthy corporations and governments benefited from it. Her passionate commitment to radical social change, supported by careful critical analysis, continues today. She says, "The real criminals in this society are not all of the people who populate the prisons across the state, but those who have stolen the wealth of the world from the people" (Davis quoted by George 2020). With others, she founded Critical Resistance in 1997, an organization to abolish the prison industrial complex.

Davis and her collaborators saw interconnected social problems and interdependent solutions in their fight for social justice. Davis embodies the both/and approach to addressing social problems, taking individual action to care for herself and others and connecting activists in social activism in her work toward social justice. If you would like to learn more, consider exploring Angela Davis's early activism, read her work on the prison industrial complex in Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex, or listen to the speech Angela Davis talks at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Quote

You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.

– Angela Davis, antiracist and feminist activist and scholar

To review, addressing social problems requires individuals to act. Individual *agency* is the capacity for all of us to actively and independently choose to create change. In other words, any individual can choose to vote, protest, parent differently, or be authentic about who they are in the world. Your choice may be limited by your race, class, or gender, among other identities, but each act of positive agency matters.

Interdependence highlights how we all rely on each other to thrive, and how we have *interdependent power* to come together and create social change.

Collective action is when we do come together to take action. These kinds of actions people take are creative responses to local, state, national, or global problems. Collective action can be setting up a distribution center for food or clothes after a community experiences an extreme weather event, reinvigorating an Indigenous language or educating about Indigenous worldviews,

connecting businesses and nonprofits to provide digital literacy skills training, or organizing a demonstration to call attention to racialized mass incarceration.

Collective action is also seen in protests, marches, sit-ins, or other actions of *social movements*, which are ongoing and organized attempts to bring about social change.

Individuals, communities, and organizations imagine the future they want to see and take organized action to make it happen. When we take this action, we help achieve *social justice*, where everyone has full and equal participation in society and all needs are met.

We hope that the examples in various chapters of 'People Making a Difference' as well as the 'Actions Steps' listed at the end of each chapter inspire you to get involved in taking action and creating social change. Like scholar-activists, you can follow the both/and approach, enacting your individual agency and participating in collective action.

You can be a change maker.

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Review of Social Problems

Summary

1. A **social problem** is a social condition or behavior that a segment of society views as harmful and in need of a solution. The condition must negatively impact large numbers of people and a large enough proportion of the public must recognize that harm for the social condition to become a social problem. Thus, social problems differ from personal problems.
2. Most social problems share several characteristics such as existing beyond the experience of one individual, being socially constructed but real in its consequences, and needing interdependent solutions.
3. The **objectivist approach** to social problems focuses on the reality of the problem through evidence whereas the **subjectivist approach** relies on the feeling that something is a problem rather than on factual evidence. The **constructionist approach** recognizes that social problems are *social constructs*, and is interested in why and how a social condition becomes constructed as a social problem.
4. Sociologists use a six step **social problems process** to describe how social problems arise and resolve: *Claimsmaking* in which claims are made about the problem, *media coverage* in which claimsmakers seek media attention on the problem, *public reaction* in which the public responds to the claims and media coverage, *policymaking* in which policies or programs are written to help address the problem, *social problems work* in which policies/programs are implemented to help address the problem, and *policy outcomes* in which policies/programs are evaluated and revised to help address the problem.
5. Sources of **social change** – change that occurs throughout the structure or culture of society – include (but aren't limited to) lessons learned from social science research or theory and from other societies, action taken by individuals such as proposing policy or establishing an organization, action taken by large groups of individuals such as striking or participating in social movements.
6. We all have individual **agency** to help create social change and address social problems by choosing to take action. When large numbers of us take action together, we're engaging in **collective action**, which may take the form of participating in a **social movement**, a sustained and organized effort to bring about social change. Addressing social problems requires a *both/and approach*: Individual agency and collective action.
7. **Interdependence** describes how we all rely on each other to survive and thrive. To help address social problems, we may use our **interdependent power** – the people's power of participation or non-participation in civic, economic, or political areas of social life.
8. Our effective response to social problems strengthens **social justice**, creating a society that meets everyone’s needs equitably.

Questions

1. Select a social problem that interests you – how would you describe how it meets the definition of a social problem as described by Leon-Guerrero?
2. What do you think is the most important social problem facing our nation right now, and why do you think it's the most important?
3. How might the social problem you identified above be viewed through objectivist and subjectivist lenses? Which did you rely on in selecting that problem?
4. 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, and why or why not?
5. Do you share Eleanor Roosevelt’s optimism that social change is possible, and why or why not?
6. How would you explain sexual violence or COVID-19 as a social problem using Best’s model of the Social Problems Process?
7. Using the problem you identified in #1 or 2 above, how might individuals use their agency and engage in collective action to help address that problem, and how might the concept of interdependent power be important for addressing that problem?
8. Jane Addams and Angela Davis took very different actions to create social justice – why do you think that their actions are so different?
9. If you've participated in any volunteer or other activity involving a social problem, why did you do so and what was your experience like? If not, why have you not participated in such an effort?

Action Steps

1. Learn and educate: Follow multiple credible news sources (e.g., New York Times, NPR, BBC) to see what claimsmakers are claiming about social problems, investigate the claims using credible sources of data (e.g., peer-reviewed social science research publications, Pew or Gallup polls, nonpartisan research organization reports), and help educate others on the reality of those social problems or conditions.
2. Take action: Explore how you can get involved in various efforts to address social problems by visiting the websites of or calling local nonprofit organizations, select one option of engagement that works with your schedule and responsibilities, and commit to participating in that effort.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Sociology

Overview of Sociology
Sociological Concepts
Sociological Theory
Sociological Research
Review of Sociology
References for Sociology

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Overview of Sociology

Learning Objectives

- Describe what sociology is as an academic field of study.
- Illustrate the use and benefits of a sociological imagination.
- Explain what is meant by the claim that social forces shape our lives and choices.
- Define foundational sociological concepts such as social institutions, culture, and systems of power.
- Connect social location to social inequality and to how people experience and theorize about social problems.
- Summarize classical and contemporary sociological theoretical perspectives.
- Differentiate between approaches to knowledge about the social world.
- List advantages and disadvantages of specific sociological research methods.
- Identify the benefits of different types of action research.

The study of social problems is based in the wider field of **sociology**, the systematic study of society. Sociology is interested in all things social: Social interactions, social identities, social groups, social institutions, social inequalities, and so on. With systematic data collection and analysis, sociology examines all levels of social phenomena, from two people talking to systems that span the globe.

In this chapter, we explain the sociological imagination, which guides how sociologists examine society. We then introduce several other foundational sociological concepts that will appear in our discussions on social problems. Next we will explore how sociological theoretical perspectives help to understand why our world works the way it does. We will end with sociological research methods, the broad and specific approaches sociologists take to systematically study society.

The Sociological Imagination

On the Social Problems overview page, we introduced you to American sociologist C. Wright Mills (pictured below) who wrote the book *The Sociological Imagination.* Mills helps us to connect our own individual lives to larger social forces, including connecting seemingly individual problems to larger social problems. To review, Mills uses the term *personal troubles* to describe troubles that individuals experience. He contrasts these with larger social forces and social problems, which he calls *public issues*.

Individuals do have personal problems; however, social problems reach beyond any one individual because they impact large groups of people, sometimes even entire nations or the whole world, as we will see in future chapters. We offered examples of how an individual losing their job may be tied to national unemployment rates, how an individual getting divorced may be tied to economic instability, and how an individual being in debt due to student loans may be tied to the national volume of student loan debt. Other examples include that an individual developing an addiction may be tied to the opioid crisis, an individual experiencing eviction may be tied to the national housing crises, or an individual facing the destruction of their home due to a hurricane can be tied to climate change. In each of these examples, we are reframing the *personal trouble* as a *public issue* (Mills 1959), or the seemingly individual problem as a social problem.

The **sociological imagination** is a quality of mind that connects individual experience and wider social forces. In other words, it is the skill of connecting personal troubles to public issues. Mills writes, “The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. This is its task and its promise” (1959:6). When we use our sociological imagination, we connect our own lives or other's lives ('biography') to historical and contemporary social forces to explain our current realities. We can also use our sociological imagination to consider what solutions would best resolve social problems in ways that reach beyond helping one individual.



This is sociologist C. Wright Mills (on the left), who wrote about the sociological imagination.

"Sociologist C Wright Mills" by Institute for Policy Studies is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Having a sociological imagination also helps us see that we should not automatically fault individuals for the problems they face. Many people are poor, unemployed, in poor health, have family problems, use drugs, or commit crime. When we hear about these individuals, it is easy to think that their problems are theirs alone, and that their own personal or moral failings are to blame for their situation. Sociology takes a different approach, as it stresses that problems such as these are often rooted in problems stemming from aspects of society itself. In other words, social forces shape people's lives. Mills coined the term sociological imagination to refer to the ability to appreciate the structural basis for seemingly individual problems.

Let's return to unemployment as an example, which Mills himself discussed. If only a few people are unemployed, Mills wrote, we could reasonably explain their unemployment by saying they were lazy, lacked responsibility, and so forth. If those accusations were accurate, 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 (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."

The high US unemployment rate stemming from the severe economic downturn that began in 2008 – the Great Recession – 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 undoubtedly lack employment because they 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.



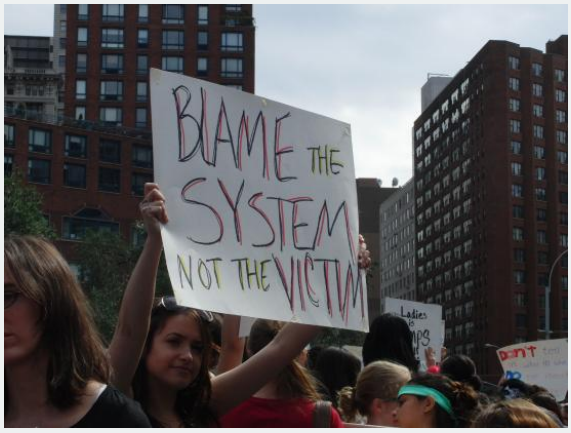
When only a few people are out of work, it is fair to say that their unemployment is their personal trouble. However, when millions of people are out of work, as has been the case over various periods in the US, unemployment is more accurately viewed as a public issue. As such, its causes lie not in the unemployed individuals but rather in our society's economic and social systems.

"The line of hope…" by Rawle C. Jackman is licenced CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Picking up on Mills's insights, William 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 or social forces 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 condition of America's urban schools, which, he said, are overcrowded, decrepit structures housing old textbooks and dated 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, eviction, poor health, divorce, drug addiction, discrimination, and other challenges. If instead we take *blame-the-system approach*, we would focus our attention on the various *social forces* that account for these difficulties, such as our economic system, failures of our social institutions, cultural values and norms, institutionalized discrimination, and any other social-level phenomena. A sociological understanding suggests that this approach is ultimately needed to help us deal successfully with the social problems facing us today.



In this photo, an activist is holding a protest sign stating, "blame the system not the victim." Sociology doesn't assume that individuals have no agency in their lives, but focuses on how social forces shape their lives – the impact of 'the system.'

"Blame the system not the victim" by Peter via flickr is licensed as CC BY 2.0

You may think that relying on social forces or a blame-the-system approach may mean that sociologists claim we have no individual *agency* in our lives or how we handle the social problems we personally face. Although sociologists focus more on social forces, they do realize that individuals have agency in making choices about their lives. However, they also understand that those very choices are constrained by social forces.

Sometimes social forces shape the way that people make choices. Someone may choose to quit their job because the US lacks universal childcare and the cost of childcare is higher than the pay for that job. Someone may choose to steal food from the store because they pay at their job is so dismal they can't afford much else than rent. Someone may choose to opioids because their doctor prescribed them after an injury and they became physically dependent upon the drug. In these cases, individuals do have agency in making a choice, but social forces shape the choice they make.

In other cases, social forces limit the very choices available to people. Someone may not be able to 'climb out' of poverty because the only available jobs they have skills for pay minimum wage; they cannot simply choose higher paying jobs. Someone may not be able to access higher education because their state does not have programs to cover the high costs for low-income students; they cannot simply choose to go to college. Someone may not be able to improve their health because they lack insurance coverage and cannot afford costly medical bills; they cannot simply choose to get quality health care. In these cases, the choices that individuals have to them are restricted.

Thus, the sociological imagination helps us connect our own lives and choices to larger social forces, and helps us reframe seemingly personal problems as social problems. To understand social problems from a sociological perspective – a primary goal of a Social Problems course – use your sociological imagination when we explore the numerous social problems covered in this textbook.

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The sociological imagination is a foundational concept that illustrates sociology's approach to studying the social world. In this textbook, we use the sociological imagination to (1) examine a variety of social problems, demonstrating how they are in fact social rather than individual problems, (2) explain and frame social problems as they relate to social forces, and (3) imagine and evaluate proposed and existing strategies to address social problems.

First, however, we must describe other foundational sociological concepts (ideas or conceptions; typically bolded or italicized) that we will use throughout this textbook. Up next we will define and discuss *social institutions* and *social structure*, *culture* and *socialization*, *social identities* such as for race, class, or gender, *social location* and *systems of power*, and *intersectionality*. As we introduce these concepts, think of how each is applicable to your own life. For instance, which social institutions are most central to you? How exactly were you socialized into the culture? What are the systems of power attached to your social identities? You may begin to see how your own life is shaped by these larger social forces.

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Sociological Concepts

The *sociological imagination* helps us develop the skill of connecting our own and others' lives to the wider social context, enabling us to see how social forces shape our lives and choices. We take that approach in this section, linking our lives to larger social forces including social institutions, culture, socialization, social location, systems of power, and intersectionality. Each of these is a foundational sociological *concept* – an idea in sociology, presented as a term with a definition, that will guide our discussion of social problems. As we discuss these concepts, consider how they shape your own life.

Social Institutions and Social Structure

Each of us interact with social institutions on a daily basis, and social institutions strongly shape our lives in various ways. **Social institutions** refer to established patterns of interaction or relationships that serve to support society and guide our behavior. Examples of social institutions are family, education, the state, media, medicine, work, and religion. Each of these play a significant role in shaping how we think, what we believe, what we value, and how we behave. Thus, social institutions have a strong influence on our lives.

Social institutions are inescapable even when we feel removed from them. For instance, you may not feel that media influences you – perhaps you feel exempt from the impact of advertising or don't use social media. However, media shapes larger cultural ideas about beauty or attractiveness, ideologies such as how we should form families, cultural expectations such as gender roles, and so on. Media also shapes the beliefs and behaviors of those whom you interact with regularly. Media advertising likely influences your thoughts even if you feel exempt from its power since ads are processed over and over again in our subconscious mind.



Some people feel that the institution of media does not impact them despite the ongoing bombardment of ads, social media posts, and other media in our lives.

"Times Square Billboards" by Matthew Mendoza via flickr is licensed as CC BY–SA 2.0

In this textbook, we will focus attention to social problems of several social institutions, though others will be discussed at various points throughout the text. We have chapters on family, work and economy, education, media, and medicine (the institution tied to health and health care). We will also incorporate discussion on the institution of the state (government, law, criminal justice, and military) despite that it does not have its own chapter.

Social institutions in part comprise the **social structure**, how society is organized. In society, we have clear patterns of interaction or relationships through social institutions, which is one component of its organization. Another component is *social groups* and the statuses we assign to them. As discussed in the social identities and social locations sections below, some social groups have more power and privilege in society, whereas others lack it. In other words, we have a hierarchy of social groups according to our social class, race, gender, and other identities. The social structure also involves the *roles* we are expected to play based on our

social identities. The clearest example of this is gender roles, which we discuss below. Finally, *culture* constitutes the social structure, as it dictates our beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors. We discuss culture in more detail next.

Culture and Socialization

Each one of us is both a product of and a contributor to our *culture* – we are heavily influenced by our culture, often in ways we do not realize, and we reinforce our culture in day-to-day interactions, our individual expressions, and other mechanisms. **Culture** refers to the shared beliefs, values, norms, and practices within a large social group.

Cultural *values*, what a culture prioritizes or thinks is right and wrong, are supported by beliefs that strengthen them, norms that maintain them, and symbols and language so that they can be learned. Additionally, culture involves arts and artifacts as well as people's collective identities and memories. It also involves traditions or customs, such as types of celebrations for births or weddings or practices during specific holidays. Culture is everywhere, all the time.

In social interactions, we adhere to social *norms*, various rules, expectations, and standards that are created and maintained in our specific culture. When we violate social norms, we often receive some form of disapproval ranging all the way from a frown to violence. For example, someone trying to engage in small talk with you may ask: "What do you think of the weather we're having?" A common response might be, "I'm so tired of the rain" or "I've absolutely enjoyed the sunshine." If you ignore the question, you would be violating a norm since the norm is to respond to the question. Alternatively, if you respond with a detailed analysis of meteorology (the study of weather), you would also violate the norm of small talk. These norms and the norm violations are concrete examples of culture.

Other examples of the components of culture are visualized in the image below. As a sociologist exploring a social problem, we might look at how the culture(s) of the participants reflect different values, norms, languages, or laws in order to better understand the problem.



The culture wheel helps us to understand what is common and different in many cultures. For the various components listed, how might that component in your own culture (or cultures) differ from that of another culture?

"The Culture Wheel" © AndreaGrace J. Fonte Weaver is all rights reserved and included with permission

Anthropologist Edward Tyler (1871) was one of the earliest social scientists to define culture, stating that it was "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits" that people learn from other members of their group. In other words, culture is taught and learned. Each us of learns about our culture throughout our lives, from the moment we are born, through childhood and even adulthood. **Socialization** is the process whereby individuals learn

the culture of their society, including cultural norms, values, identities, and more. The process of learning culture is also called *enculturation* by anthropologists.

Many *agents of socialization* socialize us into cultural norms, values, and practices. Agents of socialization include both *social institutions* such as family, education, media, and religion, as well as groups or individuals such as parents, peers, teammates, and coworkers. We are typically socialized into the same norms, values, and practices by multiple agents of socialization, which reinforces dominant cultural expectations.

A Western example of socialization or enculturation is the belief that we must work to earn the right to live. Children are taught from a young age that we must work jobs until we are old in order to afford basic necessities, such as food, shelter, water, and belonging within our communities. This is steadily reinforced throughout adolescence and into adulthood through toys, media, job fairs, career days, and paychecks. In the West we are also socialized into certain norms of interaction such as the norm of small talk described above as well as other norms such as saying 'thank you' when someone holds the door for you, facing forward in the elevator, or not busting out in song in the middle of class.

We are also socialized into our social identities and expected roles attached to them, such as learning how we are supposed to act as girls or boys in Western culture. For instance, family members, teachers, peers, media, and other agents help to socialize people into their *gender roles* and also help them develop their gender identity (Andersen & Hysock, 2011). 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 sons, for example, by throwing them up in the air or by gently wrestling with them, and play more quietly with daughters. They give girls dolls and kitchenettes to play with and boys action figures or toy guns.



Barbie-like dolls have come a long way since the original Barbie, but they continue to be advertised and thought of as "girls' toys" and shape cultural gender expectations and beauty standards.

"A group of dolls sitting next to each other" by Pixabay via Picryl is considered under public domain

Another example is the institution of education: School playgrounds provide a location for gender-linked play activities just described to occur, and perhaps more importantly, teachers at all levels treat their girl and boy 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). These are merely a few examples of the ways that social institutions socialize us into gender in ways that may make us feel like gender differences are 'natural,' when they are in fact primarily socially constructed.

✔ Children and Our Future

Gender Socialization Through Children's 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.

One way that culture is significant for understanding social problems is because we can examine the problem from different culture's worldviews. Allen Johnson defines a **worldview** as: "The collection of interconnected beliefs, values, attitudes, images, stories, and memories out of which a sense of reality is constructed and maintained in a social system and in the minds of individuals who participate in it" (2014:180). A worldview is a perception of reality reinforced by people in the culture. Worldviews can conflict, complicating our understanding of social problems as well as what strategies we should engage in to resolve them.

For instance, there are substantial differences between Indigenous and Western (or colonialist) worldviews. The United Nations (N.D.) explains, "Indigenous peoples have in common a historical continuity with a given region prior to colonization and a strong link to their lands. They maintain, at least in part, distinct social, economic, and political systems. They have distinct languages, cultures, beliefs, and knowledge systems. They are determined to maintain and develop their identity and distinct institutions, and

they form a non-dominant sector of society." Although Indigenous peoples worldwide are significantly different from one another, Indigenous people, social scientists, and activists agree that there is a common Indigenous worldview.

We've summarized some core differences between Indigenous and Western worldviews in the table below. Each worldview defines relationships to wealth and to land, among other components. In the Indigenous view, land is sacred. Generation after generation, people care for the land and are nourished in return. Wealth is shared. In the Western worldview, land is owned or controlled. A major life goal is to accumulate individual wealth. This belief supports the economic practices of *capitalism*.

Differences Between Indigenous Worldviews and Western Worldviews

Worldview	Indigenous Perspective	Western Perspective
Priorities	Collectiveness (group is prioritized)	Individualism (individual is prioritized)
Wealth	Wealth is shared	Wealth is individually accumulated
Nature	The natural world is more important	Human law is more important
Land	Land is sacred; humans belong to the land	Land is a resource; it must be controlled
Silence	Silence is valued	Silence needs to be filled
Sharing	Practice of generosity	Assumption of scarcity
Binaries	Binaries do not exist	Binaries are central

Adapted from "Differences between the Indigenous World View and the Western World View" by Avery Temple, licensed under CC BY 4.0

It is important to understand that not all Indigenous people have a purely Indigenous worldview, and not all Western people have a purely Western worldview. Rather, these are general patterns of worldviews common to many Indigenous and Western people.

To learn more about Indigenous worldviews from an Indigenous person please read the story "What I Learned from Coyote," and the explanation of worldview "As I had shared with Coyote." In them, Jennifer Anaquod, Indigenous educator, researcher, and member of the Muscowpetung Saulteaux First Nation in Saskatchewan, describes her worldview through story. Describing the world through story is part of Indigenous culture.

Social Identities

Each one of us is unique. We like to listen to different music, eat different food, learn in different ways, and have different life experiences. Pause for a moment, and consider what makes you a unique person. At the same time, sociologists know that any person's experiences and life chances depend in part on the social groups they are a member of. How long you may live depends partly on whether you are a woman, nonbinary person, or a man. It depends on whether you are Black, Brown, Indigenous, Latinx, mixed race, or white. It depends whether you are rich or poor. It depends on whether you are straight, lesbian, or pansexual (and so on). It depends on whether you are able-bodied or disabled. And the list continues.



In this video, Social Identities [Video], we explore the diversity of our social identities and the relationship of identity to power and privilege. How do you identify? Transcript

"Social Identities Video" by Elizabeth Pearce, Kimberly Puttman and Colin Stapp, Open Oregon Educational Resources, is licensed under CC BY 4.0

However, race, gender, class, sexuality, or ability aren't in and of themselves social problems. Instead, the problem is the meaning and value society attributes to these categories. We have socially constructed inequality in our society based on these areas of social location. Some people have power and privilege. Others have less. Power and privilege influence the trajectories of their lives.

These identities and their relationship to power also help us understand social problems in a more nuanced way. Traditionally, sociologists have sometimes explained social problems by using only one dimension of identity – just age, or just race, or just gender. However, these models do not capture the interdependent nature of society and related social problems. More powerfully, sociologists use the concepts of *social identity*, *social location*, and *intersectionality* to begin to explain systemic inequalities.

A **social identity** consists of the combination of social characteristics, roles, and group memberships with which a person identifies. According to sociologist Allan Johnson, social identity is "the sum total of who we think we are in relation to other people and social systems" (2014:178). Our social identity includes the following attributes:

Social Class

Some social scientists believe that social class is the most important factor in determining how your life will turn out. A *social class* is a group that shares a common social status based on factors like wealth, income, education, and occupation. Sometimes, social scientists will use the word socioeconomic status (SES) instead of class to emphasize that the classification includes factors related to money and cultural or social factors.

We can see the challenge of class in the figure below, in which a person who is houseless is carrying all of his possessions, near a New York store selling expensive luggage. Our class affects our available choices and opportunities. This dimension can include a person's income or material wealth, educational status, and occupational status. It can include assumptions about where a person belongs in society and indicate differences in power, privilege, economic opportunities, and social capital. People in lower social classes (the poor and working-class) may experience **classism**.



A houseless person on the streets of New York walks beneath a sign for TUMI, a store that sells exclusive bags for travel. He carries several bags full of items. How does this picture demonstrate the inequality present in social problems?

No photo credit provided

Social class and culture can also shape a person's worldview, their understanding of the world. It can also influence how they feel, act, and fit in. It can impact the types of schools a child may attend, a senior's access to health care, or an adult's experience of work. The differences in norms, values, and practices between lower and upper social classes also impact well-being and health outcomes (Cohen 2009; Pearce 2020).

Race/Ethnicity

One dimension of diversity we focus on is *race*, a socially constructed category with political, social, and cultural consequences based on incorrect distinctions of physical difference. Historically, race has been defined using observable physical or biological criteria, such as skin color, hair color or texture, or facial features. Today, scientists understand that the definition of race based on these biological characteristics is both wrong and harmful.

Human racial groups are more alike than different. In fact, most genetic variation exists within racial groups rather than between groups. We see differences in outcomes such as academic achievement or life expectancy based on race. However, these differences in outcomes are due to the racism embedded in economic, historical, and social factors (Betancourt and Lopez 1993), not in biology.

The meanings and definitions of race have also changed over time and are often driven by policies and laws, and this social construction has consequences. People of color (Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous people) may experience **racism**, a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities (Kendi 2019). Because race, power, and inequality are linked, white people can experience *racial bias* but not systemic racism.

Ethnicity refers to a group of people with a shared cultural background, including language, location, or religion. Ethnicity is not necessarily the same as nationality, which is a person's status of belonging to a specific nation by birth or citizenship. For example, an individual can be of Japanese ethnicity but British nationality because they were born in the United Kingdom. Ethnicity is defined by aspects of subjective culture, such as customs, language, and social ties (Resnicow et al. 1999).

While ethnic groups are combined into broad categories for research or demographic purposes in the United States, there are many ethnicities among the ones you may be familiar with. You may hear Hispanic, Latino/a or Latinx as common terms that refer to people of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Spanish, Dominican, or many other ancestries. Asian Americans have roots in over 20 countries in Asia and India. The six largest Asian ethnic subgroups in the United States are Chinese, Asian Indians, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Japanese. If you want to learn more about the complexity of ethnicity for Asian Americans, review this report from the Pew Research Center.

In the social sciences, we often refer to five main racial groups in the US: Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Native American/Indigenous, Asian, and white. However, there is variation in how researchers and organizations collect data about race and ethnicity. For instance, the US Census defines 'Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin' as ethnicity rather than race, of which individuals may be white or non-white.



The US Census only recently asks you if you are “of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?” Why do you think this might be?

No photo credit provided

Gender

Gender is a social expression of a person’s identity which influences the status, roles, and norms for their behavior. Gender differs from *sex* assigned at birth, a biological designation usually limited to female or male, which fails to capture the variation in human bodies as there have always been intersex people who do not neatly fit into the binary sex categories we have constructed of female or male. We sometimes use the words *gender identity* or *gender expression* to clarify that we mean how someone identifies or expresses their gender, rather than to describe their biological sex. Like sex, gender also exists beyond a binary of woman and man – gender exists on a continuum. People may identify as nonbinary, genderqueer, bigender, woman, man, and so on (Kosciw, Palmer, and Kull 2015).

However, *gender* is also a sociological concept which refers to the attitudes, behaviors, norms, and roles that a society or culture associates with an individual’s biological sex. Gender describes the meanings attached to femininity and masculinity. Sociologists agree with other scholars that gender is a social construct. Cultures create gender expectations and differentiate people based on those. Most cultures have some form of gender categories, though they vary in number and characteristics.

Because we have social hierarchies around gender or sex and gender identity, we have –-isms that describe the systems of oppression that people in those marginalized groups face. Women may experience systemic **sexism** and transgender people may face system **cissexism** (not that the latter term points to the dominant group – *cis*gender people).

As a socially constructed concept, gender has magnified perceived differences between the sexes. The overreliance on gender as a differentiating force has created limitations in attitudes, roles, and how social institutions are organized. We can see these limitations when we think about who can use which bathroom, as illustrated in the figure below. We see the influence of gender when we look at what jobs we think are appropriate for women, men, or nonbinary people. We notice it when we look at how parenting responsibilities and household chores are divided within families. Gender influences the distribution of power and resources, access to opportunities, and *social control*, including gender-based violence (Bond 1999).



Gender is both socially constructed and real in its consequences. Depending on your gender identity, you may or may not have access to a public bathroom, or may not be able to use the bathroom safely. Many businesses and organizations have shifted toward a more inclusive approach, designating bathrooms as gender neutral.

No photo credit provided

Gender, then, is a complex construct. How sociologists understand gender changes as we listen carefully to people who don't fit into binary gender boxes, as well as to those who feel they do fit into a strict gender binary. How each of us 'does' gender also changes as we become more authentically ourselves throughout our lives. In other words, gender develops and is something we 'do' throughout life. Additionally, gender inequities are present in every social institution and many social interactions. Trans people are in a unique position to explain the experience of gender inequity. To learn more, you may watch Paula Stone Williams, a transgender woman, describing how she was treated differently when she transitioned in the TED talk I've lived as a man and a woman.

Sexuality

Sexuality, often referred to as sexual orientation, refers to a person's emotional, romantic, erotic, and spiritual attraction toward another person or toward specific erotic acts or contexts (Flanders et al. 2016). Typically when social scientists discuss sexual identity, they are referring to the self-label that points to the gender(s) of whom someone is attracted such as lesbian, gay, heterosexual, bisexual, queer, asexual, pansexual, and fluid. However, other sexual identities and categories exist such as kinkster, dominatrix, polyamorous, ethnically non-monogamous, swinger, and so on. Sexual identity is different from gender identity or gender expression, despite that both are included in the 'LGBTQ+' acronym. The 'LGB' letters point to sexuality (lesbian, gay, and bi), the T points to gender (transgender), and the Q points to both (queer sexuality or genderqueer gender).

Apart from being a self-identity, 'queer' refers broadly to non-normativity, meaning any sexual identity or practice that is outside of what has been construed as 'normal' and privileged in society. Monogamous vanilla (non-kink) heterosexuality came to be designated as 'normal' while all other sexualities were deemed 'abnormal,' and thus sexuality influences the distribution of power and resources, as with gender, race, and class. However, social scientists and researchers across all fields understand that there is no inherent 'normal' sexuality, and that the normal/abnormal binary is a social construct that reinforces hierarchies of privilege and oppression. Typically when sociologists speak of oppression tied to sexuality, they are referring to the systemic oppression that LGBTQ+ people face, which is called **heterosexism** (again this term names the dominant group – *hetero*sexual people).



Sociologists, as well as biologists, psychologists, and other researchers, now understand that sexuality exists on multiple continuums. How might this variation complicate the study of social problems related to sexuality?

No photo credit provided

Age

Some people say that age is just a number, specifically the number of years you've been alive. As you age, you experience developmental changes and transitions that come with being a child, adolescent, adult, or elder.

Sociologists group people based on their age. Age groups are made up of individuals regarded by society as holding a similar position based on their age. Power dynamics, relationships, physical and psychological health concerns, community participation, and life satisfaction can all vary for these different age groups. For example, baby boomers are retiring. Millennials often value meaningful, purposeful work over just making money. Generation Alpha is a new generation, born after 2010. While it's too soon to tell how Generation Alpha will make its mark, they will be shaped by global social problems.



Being old is often stigmatized, but it's not all bad. How does your age change your experience of the social world?

No photo credit provided

As each person ages, they experience different life stages. In the youth-focused culture of the United States, getting old can be something to be feared, and older individuals do in fact experience discrimination – the system of oppression called **ageism**. However, as we look at the smiling faces of the older women in the figure above, we see that getting older can be a positive experience.

Ability

Please take a moment to look at the picture below before we proceed.



Physical ability and disability look different for every person. Can you confidently tell when someone is disabled?

"Disabled and Here," no photo credit provided

All of these people are labeled as disabled. What do we mean when we use this label? Traditional views of disability follow a *medical model*, primarily explaining diagnosis and treatment models from a pathological perspective (Goodley and Lawthorn 2010), meaning that medical professionals and researchers see the person with the disability as 'broken.' In this approach, individuals diagnosed with a disability are often discussed as objects of study instead of complex individuals with agency.

A *social model* of disability views diagnoses from a social and environmental perspective. In the social model, the social problem of disability is that society doesn't meet the needs of individuals with different abilities, not that the people themselves are limited. Thus, the social model centers **ableism** – the oppression of disabled people – as a cause of social problems, rather than the disabled person. A social model looks at all the social factors that might impact a person's ability to fully participate in everyday life, not just at a particular impairment as with the medical model.

Identities and Culture

Ideas about and categories that people identify with for social class, race, gender, disability, and so on vary by culture. For instance, defining disability or ability depends on culture (Goodley and Lawthorn 2010). Culture may impact whether or not certain behaviors are considered sufficient for inclusion in a diagnosis. For example, cultural differences in assessing what is considered 'typical' development have impacted the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders in different countries. Culture may influence how people talk about their symptoms (Office of the Surgeon General, Center for Mental Health Services, and National Institute for Mental Health 2001). Additionally, many cultures across the world did not construct a binary understanding of gender limited to two categories, but rather constructed three, four, or even more genders. Whereas in Western culture sexuality came to be constructed as what someone *is* rather than what someone *does*, this was not the case in many other cultures around the world (until Western ideas dominated there). In US culture the racial category 'white' was originally constructed to exclude groups we now understand as 'white' including Italian, Irish, or Jewish. Thus, the experience of culture can significantly impact the lived experience of individuals diagnosed with a disability, who have been deemed 'abnormal' or inferior by way of sexuality or gender, and who are not considered in the dominant group such as in the category 'white.'

These core social identities, along with the culture in which you live, influence how you experience the world. They may change over time or stay the same. There may be other social identities that matter to you. Now that you have this basic understanding of the most important dimensions of social identities, we can explore why social identity matters in social problems.

Social Location and Systems of Power

Describing just one characteristic of a person's identity is insufficient to understand them. Similarly, understanding any social group requires understanding their complex experiences. For this, we turn to the concepts of social location, systems of power, and intersectionality.

Social location refers to the combination of factors including gender, race, social class, age, ability, religion, sexuality, nationality, and so on, in relationship to power and privilege (Brown et al. 2019). In other words, each area of social location places us in a social hierarchy of privilege and oppression, because the culture has constructed social hierarchies for gender, race, class, and so on.

In the chart below, people with characteristics on the right side, such as white, able-bodied, and middle-class have more power and privilege. **Power** is the ability to sway the actions of another actor or actors, even against resistance. **Privilege** is "an advantage that is unearned, exclusive to a particular group or social category, and socially conferred by others" (Johnson 2018:148). The group with power and privilege is referred to as the *dominant group*.

Non-dominant, or *marginalized groups*, are located on the left side of the chart, such as working-class, LGBTQ+, or elderly people. **Marginalization** is a process of social exclusion in which individuals or groups are pushed to the outside of society by denying them economic and political power (Oxford Reference 2022). People in marginalized groups have less access to power. A similar concept is **oppression**, or systemic and institutionalized obstacles that people in marginalized groups face. In the section above, we named the systems of oppression that people in marginalized groups face such as classism, racism, and heterosexism.

Oppression may involve individual or institutional discrimination, though sociologists typically emphasize the latter. **Individual discrimination** refers to the denial of rights, privileges, or opportunities to members of specific social groups at the hands of an individual person, or discrimination that individuals practice in their daily lives. For instance, someone might refuse to serve a disabled person at a store, skip over a woman applicant for a construction position, make a racist joke at work, or make a homophobic comment to friends. Individual discrimination is fueled by prejudice – *prejudice* is the attitude, while *discrimination* is the behavior. More specifically, **prejudice** refers to a set of negative attitudes, beliefs, and judgments about whole social groups, and about individual members of those groups. Someone can be prejudiced against dominant groups and discriminate against people in dominant groups.

In contrast, only those in marginalized groups experience institutional discrimination. **Institutional discrimination** is the patterned denial of rights, privileges, and opportunities to members of marginalized groups within social institutions. This type of discrimination does not just affect a few isolated people within marginalized groups, but is discrimination that pervades the practices of whole institutions, such as medicine, work, media, and education. In this textbook, we will see many examples of institutionalized discrimination such as how job applicants with Black-sounding names are less likely to receive call backs than those with white-sounding names, how women are less likely to receive promotions at work than men even in women-dominated fields, and how LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience harassment and assault at school than heterosexual cisgender youth.

Together, the *system of privilege* that the dominant group experiences and the *system of oppression* that the marginalized group experiences comprise the system of power for each area of social location. **Systems of power** can then be defined as the systemic privilege and power or systemic oppression associated with social location.

Systems of Power

Area of Social Location	Marginalization		Power	
	System of Oppression	Oppressed Groups	System of Privilege	Privileged Groups
Social class	*Classism*	Working-class and poor people	*Class Privilege*	Middle-class and upper-class people
Race	*Racism*	People of color	*White Privilege*	White people
Gender	*Sexism*	Women	*Male Privilege*	Men
	Cissexism	Transgender and nonbinary people	*Cisgender Privilege*	Cisgender people
Sexuality	*Heterosexism*	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer+ people	*Heterosexual* or *Straight Privilege*	Heterosexual people
Age	*Ageism*	Older and elderly adults	*Age Privilege*	Young and middle-aged adults
Ability	*Ableism*	Disabled people	*Able-bodied* or *Neuro-typical Privilege*	Able-bodied and neurotypical people

This chart lists various areas of social location and for each, names the system of oppression and system of power that each group that experiences and the groups who experience them.

"Systems of Power Chart" by Emily Pain is licensed as CC BY 4.0

Rather than only being indicators of your identity, your social location describes the access (or lack thereof) that you have to wealth, status, political power, economic stability, or other social resources. Identities you have that align with dominant groups means that you experience their systems of privilege. Identities you have that align with marginalized groups means that you experience their systems of oppression. Many people experience both simultaneously, as they fall into both dominant and marginalized groups, and one does not cancel out another.

Citizens, for example, have the right to vote, the right to travel in and out of countries safely, and the possibility of applying for federal financial aid to finance school. They also have the right to work and receive government benefits like health insurance, social security, and unemployment. Citizenship itself conveys power to that social group. At the far end of citizenship, we find people who are undocumented, or living in a country without any citizenship rights. Undocumented people cannot vote, legally enter the country, or receive government aid to pay for education. Undocumented people may be deported. Being safe where you live is a privilege. When you lack this safety, you experience a specific kind of oppression called *nativism*.

For another example, heterosexual monogamous people have always had the right to marry their partner and adopt children, been well represented in mainstream film and children's books, and been considered 'moral' and 'normal' within social institutions such as medicine and religion. Conversely, lesbian/gay and polyamorous people have been locked out of the institution of marriage and family, been excluded from the institution of media or portrayed negatively, and been considered 'immoral' and 'abnormal' within other social institutions. The system of oppression that describes this marginalized of lesbian, gay, and other queer people is *heterosexism*.

Many names of systems of oppression end in –ism, such as racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. The systems of privilege also have names, often starting with the dominant group followed by the world 'privilege.' For instance, *white privilege* is one dimension of privilege. White sociologist Peggy McIntosh (pictured below) writes, “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in every day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious” (1989). If you want to dig deeper into these invisible privileges, see White Privilege, Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack. McIntosh lists many examples of privileges, or unearned advantages, that white people have (McIntosh 1989). The Racial Equity Project adapts her work and defines *white privilege* as “the unquestioned and unearned set of advantages, entitlements, benefits and choices bestowed upon people solely because they are white” (MP Associations 2023).



White sociologist and feminist researcher Dr. Peggy McIntosh began to see her white privilege, which she was previously unaware of, when she examined sexism and male privilege. She wrote an essay to challenge other white feminists to see their own white privilege.

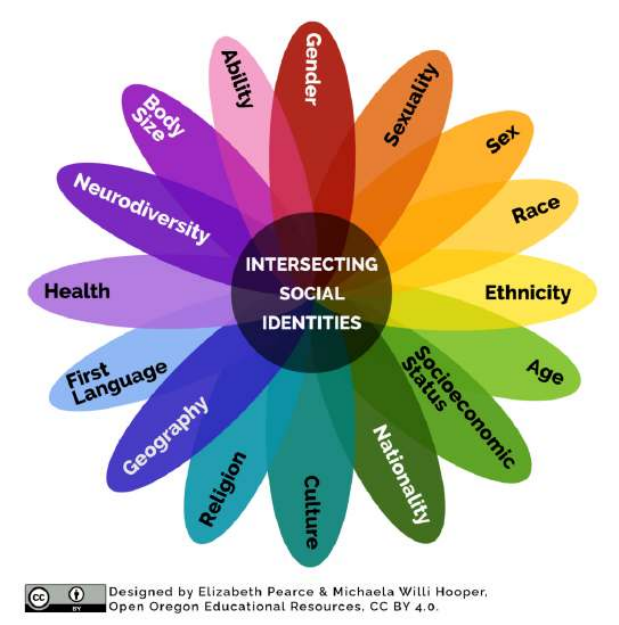
No photo credit provided

However, no one is just Latinx, or just middle-class, or just able-bodied. No one is only white, or only a man, or only low-income. We are all of our identities at once. We all have simultaneous identities by way of class, race, gender, sexuality, and so on. Thus, many of us experience some oppression and some privilege. Those systems of oppression and privilege can interact with each other.

Intersectionality

Today, multidimensional models of power and marginalization are widely used to describe society. Before the twenty-first century, many sociological models focused on only one dimension of identity or location to discuss social issues. These *single determinant models* focused only on race, or gender, or class, or age alone as the most important explanation for a person's experience. However, these models are insufficient.

Intersectionality is the idea that overlapping social identities produce unique inequities that influence the lives of people and groups (Crenshaw 1989). Social identities such as gender, race, or class don't exist independently. Rather, they change a person or group's experience in relationship to each other. This concept is illustrated in the figure below, where the areas of social location overlap.



In this image representing intersectionality, we can see that various social identities overlap creating intersectional identities for many people. How might your own identities overlap to give you unique experiences?

See photo credit above

Intersectional studies have their origin in the Combahee River Collective. The collective was founded in 1974 by a group of Black feminist women in the United States who challenged how white feminists and leaders in the civil rights movement did not address Black women's needs. These Black women understood that the oppression of race, class, gender, and sexual identity are interconnected. They argued that we must understand these interlocking systems and work to dismantle them. You may read the full Combahee River Collective Statement.

Quote

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.

Combahee River Collective 1978

Articulated most recently by Black legal scholar and activist Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw (pictured below), intersectionality asserts that race, class, gender, and other social locations must be considered simultaneously to understand any group's relationship to power and privilege. Crenshaw exposes how gender and race were historically divided into separate fields of study. Because of this division, 'race' ended up referring to the experiences of men of color, the universal racial subject. Meanwhile, in studies of 'gender,' white women are perceived as the universal woman subject. However, we know that Black women have different experiences of discrimination and oppression than either Black men or white women. Crenshaw writes, "Intersectionality is… a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power. Originally articulated on behalf of Black women, the term brought to light the invisibility of many constituents within groups that claim them as members but often fail to represent them" (Crenshaw 2015). To listen to Crenshaw in her own words, you may watch her recent talk which discusses the impact of intersectionality, 30 years after she popularized the term: Kimberlé Crenshaw at the 2020 MAKERS Conference.



Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Black lawyer, scholar, and activist, articulated the theory of intersectionality. How does using the lens of intersectionality increase the transformative power of our analysis and our actions toward social justice?

No photo credit provided

Moreover, Crenshaw and other scholars such as sociologist Patricia Hill Collins have advanced the framework of intersectionality to focus on how systems of power *interact*. For instance, how may racism exacerbate experiences of sexism for women of color? How may the experience of cissexism be worsened by the classist experience of poverty for trans people in poverty? Hill Collins (2000) reminds us that systems of power include systems of privilege as well. Thus, an intersectional framework is also interested in how a system of privilege protects against a system of oppression. How may white privilege protect white women from further experiences of sexism? How may class privilege protect trans people from further experiences of cissexism?

Thus, intersectionality focuses on both how overlapping identities produce unique experiences for us and how the systems of power attached to our identities interact with each other. Take a moment to think of how your identities overlap, and how the systems of oppression or privilege you experience may interact.

—

In this textbook, we will use these concepts to frame social problems, particularly in regard to discussing causes of social problems and identifying groups who disproportionately experience social problems. Please return to this page if you see any of these concepts in future chapters and would like a refresher on what the concept entails.

Now that we have introduced several foundational sociological concepts, we turn to classical and contemporary sociological theoretical perspectives.

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Sociological Theory

As a reminder, *sociology* is the systematic study of the social world. Although sages, leaders, philosophers, and other wisdom holders have pondered the social world throughout history, sociology applies scientific principles to understanding the social world. The first question they often ask is, "Why does the social world work the way it does?"

They answer that question by proposing and testing theories. Scientists pose theories to explain how and why society works the way it does. More specifically, a **theory** is a statement that describes and explains social phenomena, and how social phenomena are related to each other. Theories help us to understand patterns in the social world. For our purposes, theories help explain social problems.

Multiple theories may full under one broader theoretical umbrella, as they use the same lens to view the social world and develop theory to explain social phenomena. That theoretical umbrella is often referred to as a **theoretical perspective** (or *paradigm*, or *framework*). These are broad, overarching perspectives that sociologists take to study society. For our purposes, you may think of them as the lens through which sociologists try to understand social problems.

Social theory helps us put into words the underlying mechanisms that guide society and our social interactions (Lemert 1999). By analyzing society in this way we can better understand the causes and consequences of social problems. In this page, we cover various aspects of social theory. We discuss the levels of sociological analysis, provide detail on the three classical theoretical perspectives in sociology, and introduce several foundational sociologists in the context of their social location and time period.

Theoretical Perspectives and Levels of Analysis

Broad theoretical perspectives and specific theories can be categorized as either macro or micro, based on the size of the phenomenon they seek to explain. **Macro-level analysis** examines larger social systems and structures, such as the capitalist economy, bureaucracies, and religion. For example, German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engles tried to understand why workers were protesting against factory owners. Their theory of capitalism helps us understand poverty by outlining the ways profit is generated through worker exploitation. They proposed that revolution was an inevitable outcome of the unequal distribution of wealth between the rich, who owned land and factories, and the poor, who didn't.

According to Marx ([1867] 2012), the worker is not paid the full value of their labor. The business owners, or bourgeoisie, takes a percentage of the value created by the worker and keeps it as profit. The bourgeoisie are always looking for ways to decrease worker wages and increase profit, which results in low-wage work and working poverty. Marx and Engels were revolutionary thinkers because they followed the money – who had it and who didn't – to explain conflict in society. Marx himself was poor, unlike many sociologists of the time. By analyzing and critiquing capitalism, Marx explained a hidden part of everyday experience. In this way, theory can be liberating because it allows us to better understand the workings of the social world in which we live.

Marx and Engels focused on the large social institutions of work and economy, positioning this theory as macro-level analysis. Their critique of capitalism inspired the development of the broad theoretical perspective *conflict theory*, which we discuss below.



In professional photography, photographers may zoom out to capture larger objects of focus or zoom in to capture smaller details. Similarly, in sociology, sociologists may zoom out and take a macro

perspective on the social world or may zoom in and take a micro perspective.

"Nikon D750 with Micro-Nikkor 105mm f/2.8 VR" by Jeff Geerling via flickr is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Micro-level analysis examines the social world in finer detail by discussing social interactions and the understandings individuals make of the social world. A good example of micro-level theory comes from Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman, who studied one-on-one social interactions and the meanings that emerged from them. Goffman (1963) is famous for having created a theory about *stigma*, the social process whereby individuals who are different in some way are rejected by the greater society in which they live based on that difference. He explains that stigma is generated when a person possesses an attribute that makes them different and may cause them to be perceived as bad, dangerous, or weak. Goffman (1963) writes that the person possessing this attribute of stigma, "is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (p. 3). The possession of stigma can introduce tension into everyday social interactions (Bell 2000). Stigma plays the role of a mark that links its bearer to undesirable characteristics, which in turn causes the stigmatized person to experience rejection and isolation (Link et al. 1997). For instance, having a diagnosis of mental illness often carries stigma.

Goffman's theories have roots in social theory created in the early twentieth century by George Herbert Mead, an American philosopher who described how social processes created one's understanding of oneself or their *social self*. According to Mead (1934), the self is not a biological body or an inherent personal quality. Instead, the self is an image generated entirely from experiences in the social world. The social insights offered by Goffman, Mead, and other micro-level theorists help us understand how situations come to be defined as social problems through the meanings made in social interactions between people. As we know, situations are not automatically defined or understood as problems; we attach meanings and labels to situations that make them social problems.

One of the most common micro-level sociological approaches is the *symbolic interactionist* theoretical perspective, which focuses on the study of one-on-one or small group social interactions and the meanings that emerge from them.

Next we will provide more detail on the classical theoretical perspectives, including symbolic interactionism and conflict theory mentioned above, as well as structural functionalism, another macro-level approach.

Classical Theoretical Perspectives

Many sociology textbooks organize their material around the broad sociological theoretical perspectives. The three classical perspectives are **structural functionalism** (often shortened to functionalism), **conflict theory**, and **symbolic interactionism** (often shortened to interactionism). These frameworks tend to correspond to theories created by prominent white male scholars of the nineteenth century. Because they are used so regularly within our field, we have offered a summary of each paradigm, and will discuss each within our chapters on social problems. 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. The Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot table below summarizes the three broad perspectives.

Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Level of analysis	Major assumptions	Views of social problems
Structural functionalism	Macro	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	Macro	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	Micro	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.

Structural 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 1897). 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.

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.



Émile Durkheim was a founder of sociology and is largely credited with developing the structural functionalist perspective.

Marxists.org – public domain

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.

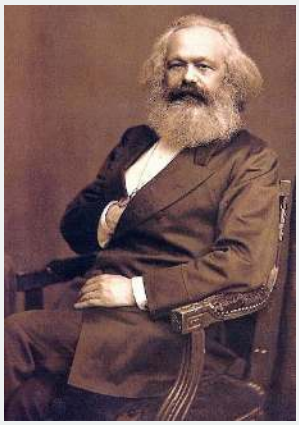
Conflict Theory

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, they felt that a revolution was needed to eliminate capitalism and the poverty and misery they saw as its inevitable results (Marx 1867; Marx & Engels 1848).

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.



Karl Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels were intense critics of capitalism. Their work inspired the development of conflict theory in sociology.

Wikimedia Commons – public domain

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.

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), 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.

Applying the Three Perspectives

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 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.



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.

"Burglar Burglary Robbery" by d-keller is available under Pixabay's content license

Sociological Theorists and Social Location

The people who study the social world choose the questions that they study and the theories they explore based on the social problems they experience based on their own social location, and based on the social problems occurring in their societies. Because each theorist experiences a unique social identity, they see the world in a unique way. Researchers Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) explain it this way:

> "The way that we as researchers view and interpret our social worlds is impacted by where, when, and how we are socially located and in what society. The position from which we see the world around us impacts our research interests, how we approach the research and participants, the questions we ask, and how we interpret the data."

Understanding the social location of scientists and activists helps us to be conscious of our own bias related to who creates knowledge, and to work to change it.

Early Sociological Theorists

French Jewish sociologist Émile Durkheim studied the social problem of suicide. He used structural functionalist theory, a sociological approach which maintains that social stability is necessary for a strong society, and adequate socialization and social

integration are necessary for social stability. Society's social institutions, such as the family or the economy, perform important functions to help ensure social stability. He explored the social breakdown caused by the Industrial Revolution and urbanization.

The rate of suicide was increasing in France, where he lived. At that time, the Holy Roman Catholic Church described suicide as a mortal sin against God and the church. People who committed suicide were not allowed to be buried on church grounds. In contrast, Durkheim proposed several reasons that people decide to commit suicide. In his book *Le Suicide* (pictured below), Durkheim argued that industrialization created change so fast that people couldn't adjust quickly enough. He also said that suicides were increasing because relationships between people were breaking down. These theories helped explain the increase in suicides during industrialization. You have the option of learning more about Émile Durkheim if you wish.


LE

SUICIDE

ÉTUDE DE SOCIOLOGIE

PAR

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This photo displays the title page of Émile Durkheim's book on suicide. His work is foundational in sociology because it explores the patterns related to suicide instead of blaming the actions of an individual.

"Image of the book cover of Suicide" by Zyephyrus, Wikimedia Commons is in the Public Domain

English social theorist Harriet Martineau studied the social problems of poverty and slavery. Unusual for the time, she was an educated woman. Because she was both white and wealthy she was able to study and research. She traveled to the American South and interviewed people to understand more about contradictions between American ideals of freedom and liberty, and the lived reality of slavery. She also examined women's roles, women's rights, and family life as a field of sociological study. If you'd like, you can learn more about Harriet Martineau.

German sociologist Max Weber studied the social problems of capitalism and bureaucracy. He agreed with Marx about the importance of the economic inequality driving social disruption. However, he argued economics alone was insufficient to explain revolution. He added the idea that people's beliefs and values contributed to the choices that they made. Most specifically, he said that the value of hard work in Protestantism contributed to the spread of capitalism. If you'd like, you can learn more about Max Weber.

Each of these theorists was responding to social concerns of the time in which they lived, whether they were experiencing social upheaval, war, economic depression, or economic stability. As we can see from the figure below, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber were responding to social forces related to the Industrial Revolution. Martineau examined changes in women's roles related to the Industrial Revolution and the American Civil War.



This visual describes Pre-World War II sociological thinkers. How did the social location of the sociologist impact what they studied and what they learned?

"Key Sociological Thinkers: Industrial Revolution to the Great Depression" by Michaela Willi Hooper and Kimberly Puttman, Open Oregon Educational Resources, is licensed under CC BY 4.0; images Harriet Martineau by Richard Evans, Karl Marx by John Jabez Edwin Mayal, Anna Julia Cooper by C.M. Bell, Jane Addams by George de Forest Brush, Ida B. Wells Barnett by Mary Garrity, W.E.B. Du Bois by James E. Purdy, and Eugene Kinckle Jones in The Messenger are in the Public Domain

Though many of the most recognized classical theorists of sociology came from European white cultural backgrounds during the nineteenth century, plenty of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color were creating social theory and adding to our understanding of social problems. Their voices were silenced, unlike the so-called "founding fathers" of sociology, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim.

For instance, Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964) and Ida B. Wells (1862–1931) explored the experiences of Black people during and after slavery. In fact, the roots of intersectional feminism (discussed below) can be found in their work. In their own ways, Cooper and Wells-Barnett brought a sociological consciousness to their response to the Black experience and focused on the toxic interaction between difference and power in US society (Madoo and Niebrugge 1998).

Cooper and Wells-Barnett looked at society through the lenses of race, gender, and class. Although they worked separately, they created a Black feminist sociology together. They both pointed out that "domination rests on emotion, a desire for absolute control" (Madoo and Niebrugge 1998:169). Their point was that societal domination is not just about making a profit or otherwise increasing one's financial status. Rather, there is an emotional factor within societal domination. Cooper (1892) provides an example by noting the extra expense paid by railroad companies in providing a separate car for people of color.

Though Wells-Barnett was a journalist, she made contributions to sociological thought by way of her activism against lynching. She researched and published accounts of lynching that showed the out-of-control aggression of white Americans towards Black people (Madoo and Niebrugge 1998). After examining the various excuses used by Southern whites for their attacks on Black people, Wells-Barnett ([1895] 2018) wrote that there would be no need for her research, “If the Southern people in defense of their lawlessness, would tell the truth and admit that colored men and women are lynched for almost any offense, from murder to a misdemeanor” (p. 11). If you want to learn more, read about Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

Other people of color contributed to sociological thought and social activism in sociology's earlier years. For instance, Eugene Kinkle Jones was the first person of color on the executive committee for the National Conference of Social Work. He advocated for better housing, access to healthcare, and economic opportunities for Black people (Wright et al 2021). W. E. B. Du Bois was one of the first sociologists to publish scholarly work that discussed race and racism.



W. E. B. Du Bois at the Office of The Crisis, a magazine of the NAACP. Du Bois founded the Atlanta School of sociology, but his groundbreaking contributions to sociology were suppressed. Why do you think this happened?

“W. E. B Du Bois at the Office of The Crisis, a magazine of the NAACP” is in the Public Domain; courtesy of the New York Public Library

Du Bois provided a critical intervention into sociological theory and his writings critiqued the absence of racial analysis from previous social theory. Du Bois was the first Black American to earn a PhD at Harvard, which he did in 1895. He studied economics, history, sociology, and political theory. Du Bois is an influential sociologist because he takes a systemic sociological approach to the experience of race, he describes how the experience of White people and Black people are qualitatively different, and he collects and displays data that support his theories.

First, Du Bois argues that the economic and social inequality experienced by formerly enslaved people was caused by systemic issues rather than by individual character traits. This is a sociological approach to explaining a social problem. He debates Booker T. Washington, who believes that formerly enslaved people need education and training to fix any issues in their lives. Du Bois writes: "[Washington’s] doctrine has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro’s shoulders and stand aside as critical and rather pessimistic spectators; when in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend our energies to righting these great wrongs" (Du Bois 1903: Section III). Du Bois says that the nation, the United States, is responsible to make changes that will create equality for formerly enslaved people.

Quote

> Daily the Negro is coming more and more to look upon law and justice, not as protecting safeguards, but as sources of humiliation and oppression. The laws are made by men who have little interest in him; they are executed by men who have absolutely no motive for treating the black people with courtesy or consideration; and, finally, the accused law-breaker is tried, not by his peers, but too often by men who would rather punish ten innocent Negroes than let one guilty one escape.
>
> – W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*

Second, Du Bois describes how Black people experience themselves differently than White people. One of his most influential contributions to sociological theory came from his discussion of *the veil* and *double consciousness*. He writes that the Black

American is “born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (1903:3). He points out that Black Americans have a double consciousness. They see themselves, and they see how white Americans see them.

Finally, Du Bois established the first school of American sociology at Atlanta University. With his team, he also created some of the first data visualizations in American sociology to illustrate the conditions of life for Black Americans. The infographic in the figure below shows the percent of Black enslaved people and free people between 1790 and 1870, when slavery became illegal. These studies and infographics were part of his groundbreaking sociological analysis of poverty among Black Americans. His words are still quoted today among advocates of racial justice and his analysis continues to inform our experiences and conversations around race. To learn more about Du Bois, read this Smithsonian article.



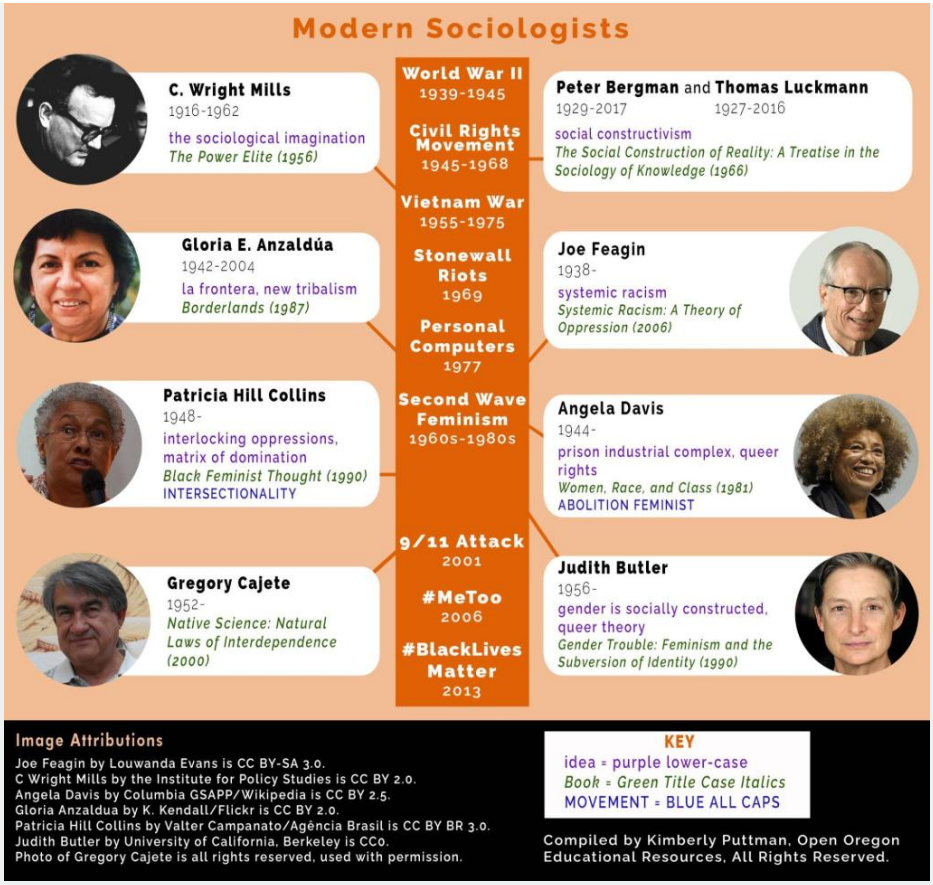
This depicts Du Bois’s infographic on the proportion of freedmen and slaves among American Negros. These data visualizations are the first infographics related to slavery.

“Proportion of freemen and slaves among American Negroes” by Atlanta University students is in the Public Domain; courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

All of these social theorists and activists contributed in significant ways to how we understand the reasons for social problems. They called out classism, racism, patriarchy, nativism, and other systems of power as reasons for social inequality. However, sociological thought continues to respond to the problems of modern society.

Modern and Emerging Sociological Theorists

After the Second World War, sociologists expanded on previous sociological thought. They developed a variety of theoretical frameworks that explore race, class, and gender. They explored the intersections between these classifications of power and oppression. While the classical theories remain useful, the new set of theories digs deeper into why structures and practices of inequality persist. They also leverage new understandings of systems thought. We discuss several examples of modern and emerging theories below.



These modern sociologists propose theories that explain racism, sexism, classism and other overlapping experiences of oppression. How do these theories relate to current social problems?

"Modern Sociologists" by Michaela Willi Hooper and Kimberly Puttman, Open Oregon Educational Resources, is all rights reserved due to photo restrictions; "C. Wright Mills" by Institute for Policy Studies is licensed under CC BY 2.0, "Joe Feagin" by Louwanda is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0, "Angela Davis" by Columbia GSAPP is licensed under CC BY 2.0, "Gloria Anzaldua" by K. Kendall is licensed under CC BY 2.0, "Patricia Hill Collins" by Valter Campanato/Agência Brasil is licensed under CC BY BR 3.0, "Judith Butler" by University of California Berkeley is Public Domain, CC0 1.0

Feminism. In early sociology, sociologists often studied the experiences of white wealthy men and generalized what they discovered to "all people." Du Bois made it clear that race matters. Similarly, early women sociologists asserted that gender matters. Sociologists like Martineau, Wells, and Cooper examined women's lives to see how they were different from men's lives. They also looked at how race mattered specifically to women. Although we know today that binary structures of gender do not fully capture the human experience, the sociologists at that time were revolutionary in differentiating women's and men's experiences.

In the 1970s, as women began to enter college in greater numbers and more researchers were female, they created a new theoretical approach in sociology. **Feminist theory** is a theoretical perspective initially stating that women are uniquely and systematically oppressed and challenging ideas of gender roles. Today it has expanded to include gender oppression more broadly, as well as the intersections of gender with race, class, sexuality, disability, and other areas of social location. Despite the variations between different types of feminist approaches, four characteristics are common to the feminist theory:

1. Gender is a central focus or subject matter of the perspective.
2. Gender relations are viewed as a problem: the site of social inequities, strains, and contradictions.
3. Gender relations are sociological and historical in nature and subject to change and progress.

4. Feminism is about an emancipatory commitment to change: the conditions of life that are oppressive for women need to be transformed (Little 2014).

One of the sociological insights that emerged with the feminist perspective in sociology is that "the personal is political" (Hanisch 1969). In other words, how women live their lives from washing dishes, to caring for children, to deciding not to have children, to the experience of sexual violence give them a unique political perspective. Until women sociologists looked at women's lives, their experiences were invisible or unimportant. You are welcome to read more about the personal as political.

White British-born Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith's development of standpoint theory was a key innovation in sociology that enabled women's experiences and issues to be seen and addressed in a systematic way (Smith 1977). Scientists of the time argued that science was logical and objective. In **standpoint theory**, Smith argued that where you stand, or your point of view, influences what you notice (Smith 1977). Women and other marginalized people see systems of oppression more clearly because they experience them. Smith recognized from the consciousness-raising groups initiated by feminists in the 1960s and 1970s that academics, politicians, and lawyers ignored many of the immediate concerns expressed by women about their personal lives. You have the option to learn more about Dorothy Smith and consciousness-raising if you'd like.



Canadian sociologist Dr. Dorothy Smith developed the standpoint theory, the idea that where you stand in society influences what you see. How does where you stand influence what you see in the social world?

"Photo" of Dorothy Smith by Schmendrick2112 via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Part of this limitation was caused by the way sociology was traditionally done by men. Smith argued that instead of beginning sociological analysis from the abstract point of view of institutions or systems, women's lives could be more effectively examined if one began from the "actualities" of their lived experience in the immediate local settings of "everyday/everynight" life. She asked, "What are the common features of women's everyday lives?"

From this standpoint, Smith observed that women's position in modern society is acutely divided by the experience of dual consciousness. One consciousness was centered in family. Then they had to cross a dividing line as they went out in the world, dealing with work or the institutions of schools, hospitals, and governments. Women had to use a second consciousness to navigate this. These institutions didn't see women's real and personal understandings of the world (Smith 1977).

The standpoint of women is grounded in relationships between people because they have to care for families. Society however, is organized through "relations of ruling," which translate the substance of actual lived experiences into rules and laws. Power and rule in society, especially the power and rule that limit and shape the lives of women, operate as if there is one objective reality, rather than differences in people's lived experiences. Smith argued that the abstract concepts of sociology, at least in the way that it was taught at the time, only contributed to the problem. This theory, while it seems obvious now, was revolutionary at the time. And, though groundbreaking, it had its limits.

The feminist perspective within social theory has changed throughout the years. From the 1800s until the mid-twentieth century, the central focus or subject matter was differences between women and men. Race and class were generally ignored. Black feminists pointed out that previous forms of feminist theory were mostly concerned with the issues of white middle-class and wealthy women. This was a critical intervention into the perspective of feminist theory.

Intersectionality. Black feminist founders of sociological thought such as Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells (discussed above) planted the seeds for the emergence of influential sociological theory from the 1980s and 1990s, which centered on the experiences of Black and Indigenous women of color. **Intersectionality**, as you read in the prior page, is a perspective and a theory that analyzes and interrogates the ways race, class, gender, sexuality, other areas of social location, and their systems of power overlap and work together. The video What is Intersectional Feminism? below describes this approach.



In this video, Kimberlé Crenshaw discusses Intersectional Feminism. As you watch, consider the question, "How can we see intersectional feminism as a challenge to white feminism?"

"Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw: What is Intersectional Feminism?" by Omega Institute for Holistics Studies is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

Though the concept of intersectionality is most often attributed to critical race legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (pictured above), within sociology Patricia Hill Collins is recognized for providing complex and detailed analyses of the concept. Her theorization of the *outsider within* perspective shows how Black women "have a clearer view of oppression than other groups" whose identities are different (1986:20). Hill Collins (1986) details how Black women participate in social systems but not as insiders, given their oppression. Participating in a social system that oppresses them, Black women have a unique standpoint that offers more information. They can see more clearly how our social structures of race and gender work intersectionally.

Hill Collins' (1986) theory of *interlocking oppressions* points out philosophical foundations that underlie multiple systems of oppression. It is common in sociology to explain inequality in terms of race, class, or gender alone. With some additional complexity, sociologists discuss issues of oppression related to race and class or age and gender, for example. Though, Hill Collins argues that these additive approaches missed the point. Instead, Collins explains that oppression exists as a *matrix of domination*, a concept which says that society has multiple interlocking levels of domination that stem from the societal configuration of race, class, and gender (Andersen and Hill Collins 1992). Patriarchy and ableism work together to make disabled women and nonbinary people invisible. Systemic racism, cissexism, and classism interlock to oppress low-income transgender people of color. This Black feminist analysis sees the holistic experience of interlocking and simultaneous oppressions and challenges people to see wholeness instead of difference (Hill Collins 1986).

These same oppositional differences are seen in the work of Chicana theorist and activist Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004). Anzaldúa theorizes the idea of the borderlands, or *la frontera* (see the video below). The borderlands is a terrain, both literal and imagined, where we live. Living in the borderlands involves the simultaneous occurrence of contradictions. Anzaldúa (1987) writes that when you live in the borderlands you are a "forerunner of a new race, half-and-half – both woman and man – neither – a new gender (p. 216). She uses various writing styles including poetry, as well as various languages to write her theory. In this way, she challenges the dominant way of composing scholarship. Her transitions between languages and dialects were groundbreaking. They served to question the dominance of certain languages (such as English) and ways of speaking (such as "proper" English).



In this video, actor Nancy Rodriguez performs To Live in the Borderlands by Gloria Anzaldúa. As you watch, consider what borders the people in the poem live between. What borders do you live between?

"To Live in the Borderlands by Gloria Anzaldua" performed by Nancy Rodriguez, The Young Center is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

Together these Black and Indigenous theorists of color advanced scholarly understandings of difference and oppression. Many of them also used nontraditional methods to articulate their ideas, often using personal experience or placing value on emotion. This contrasts with historical ways of doing theory that emphasized objectivity and reason. Objectivity refers to the idea of conducting research with no interference by aspects of the researcher's identity or personal beliefs. Contemporary scholars believe it is impossible to ever be completely objective. Another similarity between these theorists is the links they made between composing scholarly work and doing activism out in the world. They worked to bridge the two and advocate for a reciprocal relationship so that what was happening in the world directly impacted scholarly work.

Racial Formation Theory. To better understand race and racism, social scientists examine racial power dynamics in the United States and throughout the world. Sociologists have long understood race to be a social construct. Race is a product of social thought rather than a material or biological reality. Yes, people have different levels of melanin in their bodies, but that is as far as any biological notion of race goes. One sociological theory of race, **racial formation theory**, describes race as an ongoing, ever-evolving construction with historical and cultural roots (Omi and Winant 1986). The long-lasting economic inequality caused by slavery and systemic racism combines with all of the racial stereotypes circulating in media and popular thought to create our current racial formation.

Racial formation refers to the categories of race we currently have in this country and all of the meanings popularly attached to them. The United States counts race differently in different decades. In 1790, the census counted free white women and men, other free people, and slaves. In 2010, the categories expanded to include white, Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Other, and Hispanic. By 2020, though the categories didn't change much, people could select more than two options. These census changes help us to more accurately reflect our multiracial and diverse population (Marks and Rios-Vargas 2021).

While understanding the socially constructed nature of race is important, American social theorist Joe R. Feagin (2006) criticizes racial formation theory for failing to include an understanding of how slavery generated huge profits for white Americans, who then passed that money on to their future generations. Feagin's view of systemic racism insists on understanding the long-lasting impacts of slavery and recognizing White-on-Black oppression as firmly embedded within US society. Feagin (2006) writes, "For a long period now, white oppression of Americans of color has been systemic – that is, it has been manifested in all societal institutions" (p. xiii). If you'd like to learn more, you can read about Joe R. Feagin.

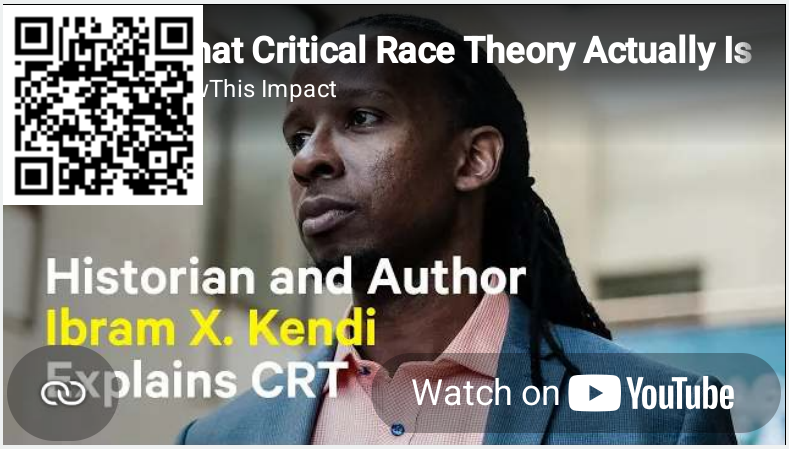
Critical Race Theory. Other theories of racism emerged in the 1980s. You may have seen the words 'critical race theory' on social media or in your local newspaper. **Critical Race Theory** (CRT) is the theory that systemic racism is embedded in US institutions, rather than just in behavior of individuals (recall our discussion of *individual* v. *institutional discrimination*). The NAACP defines Critical Race Theory in the quote below.

Quote

Critical race theory, or CRT, is an academic and legal framework that denotes that systemic racism is part of American society – from education and housing to employment and healthcare. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is more than the result of individual bias and prejudice. It is embedded in laws, policies and institutions that uphold and reproduce racial inequalities. According to CRT, societal issues like Black Americans' higher mortality rate, outsized exposure to police violence, the school-to-prison pipeline, denial of affordable housing, and the rates of the death of Black women in childbirth are not unrelated anomalies.

– NAACP Legal Defense Fund 2023

Ibram X. Kendi describes Critical Race Theory, including its misconceptions and politcalization, in the video that follows.



Historian Ibram X. Kendi explains Critical Race Theory in this video What Critical Race Theory Actually Is — and Isn't [Video]. How does Critical Race Theory build on historical sociological theories of race?

"What Critical Race Theory Actually Is — and Isn't" by NowThis News is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

CRT emerged in the 1980s out of a concern by legal scholars of color that the measures installed by the civil rights movement to alleviate racial injustice were no longer addressing the problem, or never did. Critical race theorists take a systemic view of racism. They see racism not as a quirk within our society but as an everyday occurrence within many, if not all, parts of life (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). They raise questions about the law's ability to address systemic racial inequality.

One discussion about CRT revolves around what to teach children in K-12 schools. Some white people worry that white children are being made to feel guilty for being white. However, this is a misunderstanding of the theory. It's not about guilt. It's about *structural racism*, the totality of ways in which societies foster racial discrimination through mutually reinforcing systems of housing, education, employment, earnings, benefits, credit, media, health care, and criminal justice (Bailey et al 2017).

The American Sociological Association supports teaching CRT because understanding how race impacts inequality is fundamental to changing racist laws, policies and practices (ASA 2023). Advocates for racial justice affirm the importance of discussing race and racism with children in school settings. To learn more, check out the blog Critical Race Theory: 'Diversity' Is Not the Solution, Dismantling White Supremacy Is.

Queer Theory. By calling this theoretical paradigm *queer*, scholars reject the stigmatizing effects of labeling. Instead, they embrace the word *queer* – once derogatory – and reclaimed it for their own purposes, as with *queer politics*. **Queer theory** is an interdisciplinary approach to sexuality and gender that identifies Western society's rigid splitting of gender into women's and men's roles and questions how we have been taught to think about sexuality and gender. The perspective highlights the need for more flexible and fluid notions of sexuality and gender that allow for change, negotiation, and freedom. One concrete example would be allowing individuals to write in their gender on forms or leave it blank.

French social theorist Michel Foucault (1978) traced the history of the concept of sexuality and saw that powerful forces encouraged its development as part of an effort to reveal and eliminate any deviant forms of sexual expression. Foucault's work on sexuality raises many questions: Why are we asked to identify as a specific sexuality? Wouldn't we be freer if sexuality wasn't categorized (e.g., homosexual/ heterosexual)? Of course, many LGBTQ+ activists would argue otherwise, given the power of self-identification and advocacy for rights and respect, but this perspective does raise important questions about sexual liberation. You may learn more about Michel Foucault.

Another well-known queer theorist, Judith Butler, also critiqued categorizations, but their objections include gender identities. As with Foucault, Butler felt that these categories were limiting. Butler is recognized among sociologists for developing the theory of *gender performativity*. This theory describes gender as a way of appearing to others through clothing, nonverbal communication, make-up, as so on, instead of an inner feeling or identity. Thus, gender is a matter of learned performance and can be reconstructed (Wilchins 2004). In the video below, Butler is asked to reflect upon gender performativity decades after proposing the theory.



In this video, "Judith Butler: Looking back on 'Gender Trouble'", Judith Butler reflects upon and describes misinterpretations of their theory of *gender performativity*.

"Judith Butler: Looking back on 'Gender Trouble'" by Otwarty Uniwersytet is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

In this approach, sociologists understand that gender is something we do, not only something we are. Like symbolic interactionists, they say that gender expression is an intentional choice made in everyday interactions, though it is bound by social forces that constrain those choices. This theory opens the doors for us to re-think what we want gender to mean or for us to do away with the concept of gender altogether and replace it with something else. Theorists who use queer theory strive to question the ways society perceives and experiences sex, gender, and sexuality, creating a new scholarly understanding. Visit Judith Butler's UC Berkeley page for more information about their work.

—

Historical and contemporary theories and theorists assist us in thinking deeply about the causes and consequences of social problems, such as racism, poverty, and gender discrimination. Using social theory helps us to understand why social problems exist. This understanding, in turn, can help us better address or prevent them.

However, theory is not the whole picture. Sociologists also rely on systematic research to form or test their theories about the social world. Thus, theory and research go hand in hand. The following page will present various types of sociological research to help you understand how we know what we know about social problems.

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Sociological Research

In the prior page, we explored how sociologists explain things about the social world. They propose a *theory*, an idea about why things happen. They begin to systematically explain, for example, why social class is prevalent in industrialized societies or why implicit bias is so common. But how do they pick which theory is right? Which idea works to explain or predict what might happen next?

As you saw in earlier in this chapter, *sociology* is the systematic study of society and social interactions to understand individuals, groups, and institutions through data collection and analysis. Sociologists look for evidence that supports or challenges their theory, or they build theory from their data. They often use the *scientific method*, a common set of steps that allow them to gather data, analyze the data, and share results. However, this is not the only method of research, as we will discuss.

In this page we will review approaches to knowledge – frameworks for studying the social world – including the scientific method, the interpretive framework, and Indigenous frameworks. We also provide examples of a variety of sociological (and broader social science) *research methods*. We will also discuss some advantages and disadvantages of those methods, as each research method has its own strengths and weaknesses.

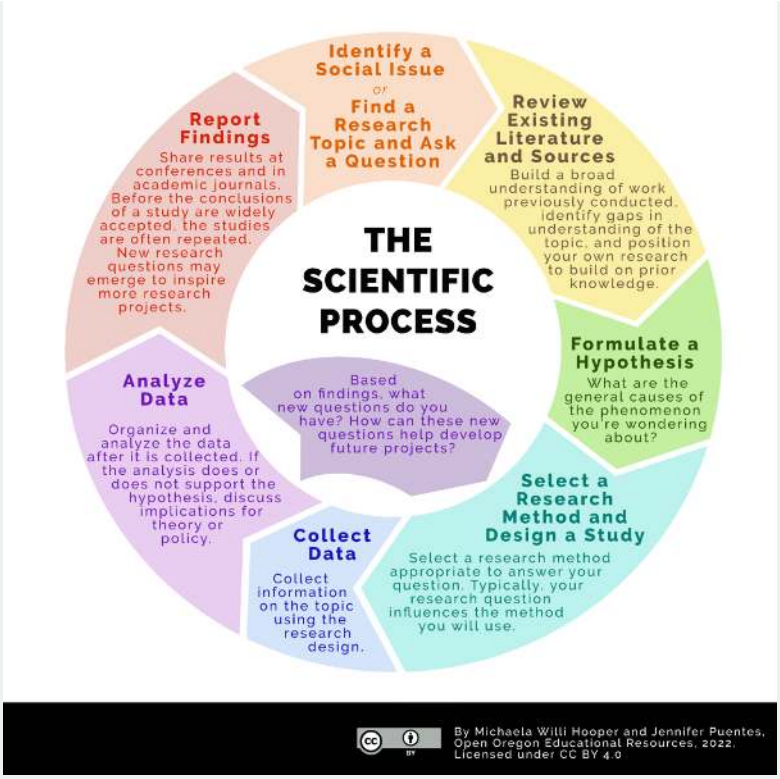
Additionally, sociologists who study social problems often hope their findings will support effective action to address the social problem. Like SSSP President Nancy Mezey, who we met in a prior page, social problem scientists study *and* act. We will examine some of the research methods that combine learning and doing.

Approaches to Knowledge

Many scientists use shared approaches to figure out how the social world works. You have likely heard of the scientific method, as this is what children in the US learn in grade school. However, there are other methods of equally important value in social science research. We will discuss three approaches to studying the social world.

The Scientific Method

The most common approach is the **scientific method**, an established scholarly research process that involves asking a question, researching existing sources, forming a hypothesis, designing a data collection method, gathering data, and drawing conclusions. Often this method is shown as a straight line. Scientists proceed in an orderly fashion, executing one step after the next. However, it is not perfectly linear as scientists return to prior steps, such as the example in the image below.



The Scientific Method is an ongoing process. Each step feeds the next step. How is this different from a linear model you may have previously learned about?

"The Scientific Process" by Michaela Willi Hooper and Jennifer Puentes, Open Oregon Educational Resources (2022), is licensed under CC BY 4.0

This method emphasizes *objectivity*, the unrealistic idea of conducting research with no interference by aspects of the researcher's identity or personal beliefs. In other words, an overriding principle of the scientific method is that research should be conducted as objectively as possible. Science uses evidence to prove theories. At the same time, all scientists, like all people, have unconscious biases. They make assumptions about the way the world works.

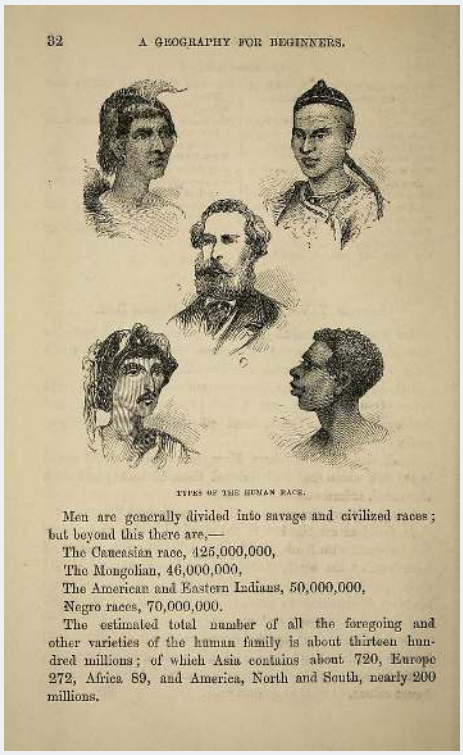
It is sometimes difficult to see these assumptions clearly. For example, suppose you unconsciously assume that women are weaker than men. In that case, you may label behavior emphasizing social connection as soft or passive rather than focusing on how important connection is to human health and happiness. 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.

In some cases, scientists use *pseudo-scientific methods* – illegitimate or unsound methods – to justify oppression. As early as 1684, French physician François Bernier classified people into different races based on where they lived in the world. Each race had a distinct temperament or set of characteristics. By the early 1800s, European and American white scientists classified people into five distinct biological races, with characteristics of more or less intelligence and diligence.

In another example, the French naturalist Georges Cuvier dissected the body of Sarah Baartman, a Khoekhoen tribal African woman, in 1817. The Penn Museum (2023) explains, "He claimed that she had a small brain and a resemblance to a monkey. For him and many of his contemporaries, the examination of her body, and the bodies of other Africans, proved their inferiority to Europeans, showing 'no exception to this cruel law which seems to have condemned to eternal inferiority the races with cramped and compressed skulls.'"

Both examples typify scientific racism, the use of pseudo-scientific methods to justify racial inequality. These "scientific" studies became a justification for slavery. However, even after slavery ended, scientific racism continued. In the 1800s and early 1900s,

some white scientists and doctors conducted horrific experiments attempting to prove that Black people had thicker skins, felt less pain, and were less intelligent than white people (Tucker, nd, Villarosa 2021). These studies are not accurate.



32 A GEOGRAPHY FOR BEGINNERS.

TYPES OF THE HUMAN RACE.

Men are generally divided into savage and civilized races; but beyond this there are,—

The Caucasian race, 425,000,000,
The Mongolian, 46,000,000,
The American and Eastern Indians, 50,000,000,
Negro races, 70,000,000.

The estimated total number of all the foregoing and other varieties of the human family is about thirteen hundred millions; of which Asia contains about 720, Europe 272, Africa 89, and America, North and South, nearly 200 millions.

This image displays a page in a geography book published in 1864. 'Scientists' for centuries used illegitimate pseudo-scientific methods to exaggerate physical differences between social groups and to attempt to position Western European white men as superior to everyone else.

"A geography for beginners" by K.J. Stewart via Wikimedia Commons is in the Public Domain

However, we continue to see the results of these beliefs in our medical and healthcare system today. When we look at pain management, for example, Black people are 22% less likely than white patients to receive pain medication (Sabin 2020). The ways in which “science” justified racist beliefs continue to influence our health care system today. We’ll discuss this more in the chapter on Medicine and Health. Even though social science is based on collecting and analyzing data, it often reflects the norms and values of the scientists and the existing social hierarchies.

Because objectivity is not entirely possible, scientists rely on collaboration to correct bias and validate results. The scientific method is a circular process rather than a straight line, as shown in the figure below. The circle helps us to see that science is driven by curiosity and that learnings at each step move us to the next step in ongoing loops. This model allows for the creativity and collaboration that is essential in how we create new scientific understandings.

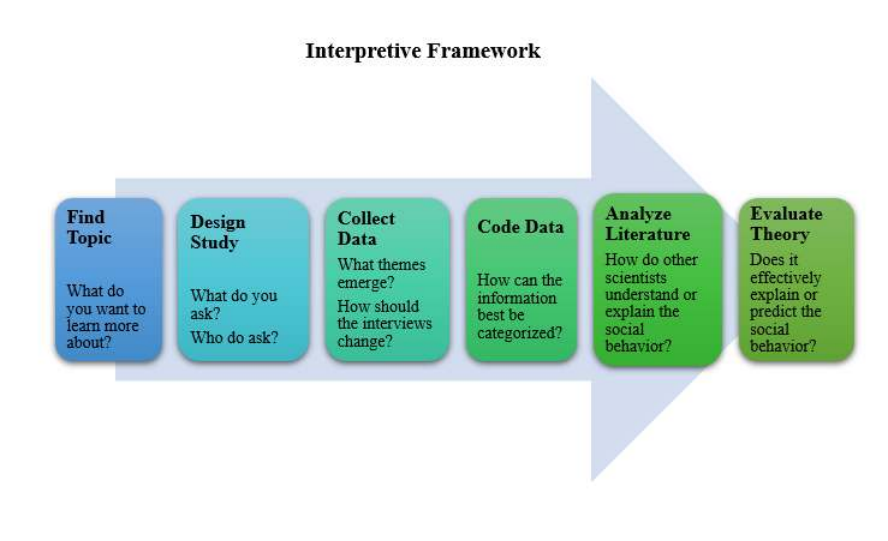
Additionally, not all research follows this precise process. For instance, *qualitative research* (discussed below) may not formulate a hypothesis to be tested with data as the second step, but rather may collect data first then build theory from that data.

The Interpretive Framework

In contrast to the scientific method, the **interpretive framework** is an approach that involves detailed understanding of a particular subject through observation or listening to people’s stories, not through hypothesis testing. This framework comes from *grounded theory* developed by sociologists Glasser and Strauss, grounding a theory first in data and then theorizing (Chun Tie, Birks and Francis 2019).

Researchers try to understand social experiences from the point of view of the people who are experiencing them. They interview people or look at blogs, newspapers, or videos to discover what people say is happening and how people make sense of things. This

in-depth understanding allows the researcher to create a new theory about human activity. These steps are similar to the scientific method but not the same, as shown in the figure below.



Rather than starting with a hypothesis, in the Interpretive Framework you start with a topic and ask people about it. As you look at the interview data, themes emerge. How is this model different from the scientific method?

No photo credit provided

In the interpretive framework, the researcher might start with a topic they are interested in. In one study, researchers were interested in improving medical care for women potentially experiencing miscarriages. They wanted to understand the experience of going to the emergency room from the perspective of pregnant women. They designed interviews that asked the pregnant women and the nursing staff about their experience. During the interviews, the women mentioned that most emergency room personnel did not include their partners in the process. The researchers added interviewing the partners as part of their study design.

Once the interviews were complete, the researchers analyzed the data and identified themes. They proposed a model called "Threads of Care" which emphasized the need to include both the pregnant person and the partner in understanding the physical processes associated with miscarriages and in providing gender-specific emotional support. Because the scientists included partner interviews, they discovered that both people involved in the pregnancy experienced uncertainty, loss, and grief, not just the pregnant person (Edwards et al 2018).

Even though both the traditional scientific method and the interpretive framework start with curiosity and questions, the people who practice science using the interpretive framework allow the data to tell its story. Using this method can lead to insightful and transformative results. You can find things you didn't even know to expect because you are listening to what the stories say.

The social context of this framework is interesting from a sociological perspective. You may have noticed that most of the early recognized sociologists in this chapter were wealthy white men. Often, they looked at economics, poverty, and industrialization as their topics. They were committed to using the scientific method. Although women like Harriet Martineau and Jane Addams examined a wide range of social problems and acted on their research, social science was considered a domain of men. Even in 2020, women are less than 30% of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) workforce in the United States (American Association of University Women 2020).

Feminist scientists challenge this exclusion and the kinds of science it creates. Feminist scientists argue that women and nonbinary people belong everywhere in science. They belong in the laboratories and scientific offices. They belong in deciding what topics to study so that social problems of gendered violence or maternal health are studied also. They belong as participants in research, so that findings apply to people of all gender identities. They belong in applying the results to doing something about social problems. In other words:

> "Feminists have detailed the historically gendered participation in the practice of science – the marginalization or exclusion of women from the profession and how their contributions have disappeared when they have participated. Feminists have also noted how the sciences have been slow to study women's lives, bodies, and experiences. Thus from both the perspectives of the agents – the creators of scientific knowledge – and from the perspectives of the subjects of knowledge – the topics and interests focused on – the sciences often have not served women satisfactorily" (Crasnow 2020).

For instance, you may have seen the movie *Hidden Figures* or read the book. In it, women, particularly Black women, were the computers for NASA, manually calculating all the math needed to launch and orbit rockets. However, politicians and leaders did not recognize their work. Even when they were creating equations and writing reports, women's names didn't go on the title pages.

The practice of science often excludes women and nonbinary people from leadership in research, research topics, and as research subjects. The feminist critique of the traditional scientific method, and other critiques around the process of doing traditional science created space for other frameworks to emerge, including the interpretive framework described above. However, this is not the only alternate approach that sociologists use to explore the social world.

Indigenous Frameworks

Like the feminist scientists discussed the previous subsection, Indigenous scientists provide an alternative framework to mainstream science. Each Indigenous group has a unique way of understanding their own land and a method of learning that respects that place. At the same time, many Indigenous scientists share similar frameworks. Indigenous science is the scientific framework of Indigenous cultures worldwide, a time-tested approach that sustains the community and the environment.

Although mainstream scientists and Indigenous scientists share a common goal of understanding the social world, the frameworks that they use to create that understanding are deeply different. We will examine differences in their approaches to discovery, research methods, and consequences of doing science to more deeply understand the power of the Indigenous framework. Then, we will explore how weaving Indigenous and mainstream ways of knowing can lead to transformational knowledge that supports social justice.

Quote

> Our research has shown us that Indigenous sciences and foundational principles have the power to heal and rebalance in this world, as well as to address serious illness. Our intent is to open a pathway that would allow for this knowledge and understanding to safely and respectfully be introduced – or in some cases reintroduced – to the world through science.
>
> – Joseph American Horse, leader of the Oglala Lakota Oyate

You may remember from our prior discussion that people use different ways of knowing to understand the social world. Indigenous scientists value many ways of knowing. Robin Wall Kimmerer, an Indigenous biologist from the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, writes this:

> "Native scholar Greg Cajete has written that in indigenous ways of knowing, we understand a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit. I came to understand quite sharply when I began my training as a scientist that science privileges only one, possibly two, of those ways of knowing: mind and body. As a young person wanting to know everything about plants, I did not question this. But it is a whole human being who finds the beautiful path" (Kimmerer 2013).

Although Kimmerer is referring to biology, the same difference exists in social science. Mainstream social scientists using the scientific method focus on intellectual ways of knowing. Indigenous social scientists leverage the power of knowing through mind, body, emotion and spirit. Let's look at each of these characteristics in turn.

First, both frameworks value the mind, the intellectual understanding of what is. However, they focus on two different ways of organizing that knowledge. Indigenous frameworks focus on interdependence and interconnectedness. Mainstream science will often break things down into parts to understand what each part does. While that may help understand details, it doesn't give the whole picture of a process or help understand the interdependence in the social and physical world.

In an Indigenous example, Lakota scientists use the image of a tipi to describe their scientific model. In this model, they focus on interrelatedness, interconnectedness, and the vitality of life. These components of the models are compared to tipi poles, which provide structure for the model itself. They write:

> "…these foundational poles are being used to signify the principles of *Mitakuye Oyasiŋ* (interrelatedness), *Škaŋ* (the constant motion of life) and *Paowanžila* (interconnectedness), which serve as the basis for our scientific systems" (American Horse et al. 2023:7).

Rather than focusing on splitting things into component parts to understand them, Indigenous scientists focus on connection and relationship in social systems. They also connect back to the ancestors and forward to future generations to imagine how any findings from science might impact the people and the environment. This interconnectedness includes both space – the interconnectedness and interdependence of water, air, earth, and beings – and time – back to the ancestors and forward to next generations. This is very different from the Western scientific perspective, which presumes objectivity and does not assume responsibility towards the subjects it studies.



Scholar Gregory Cajete, a Tewa Indian from Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico, articulates the differences between Indigenous and Western ways of doing science.

"Photo of Gregory Cajete" © Gregory Cajete is all rights reserved and included with permission

Gregory Cajete (picture above), the social scientist that Robin Wall Kimmerer referenced, is a Tewa Indian from Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico. He describes the conflict in this way:

> "But the sources of knowledge of nature and the explanations of natural phenomena within a traditional Native American context are often at odds with what is learned in 'school science' and proposed by Western scientific philosophy. Herein lies a very real conflict between two distinctly different worldviews: the mutualistic/holistic-oriented worldview of Native American cultures and the rationalistic/dualistic worldview of Western science that divides, analyzes, and objectifies" (Cajete 1999:146).

This conflict in approach is fundamental. At the same time, a few mainstream social scientists sometimes use models of social ecosystems and interdependence. Using interconnectedness and interdependence empowers social justice. If you'd like to learn more about the power of this perspective from Gregory Cajete, please watch A Pueblo Story of Sustainability.

In addition, both frameworks consider the body, or the physical reality of social phenomenon. However, while Western science will carefully measure the parts, Indigenous scientific frameworks are grounded in a sense of place. Explore the textbook from British Columbia called Knowing Home: Braiding Indigenous Science with Western Science if this interests you. The authors write:

> "In contemplating a title for this book, the phrase 'Knowing Home' reflects that traditional knowledge and wisdom is contextual. The stories and testimonies of Indigenous peoples are usually related to a home place. In the words of Kimmerer:
>
> To the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: identity, our connection to the ancestors, the home of non-human kinfolk, our pharmacy, our grocery store, our library, the source of everything that sustained us. Our lands were where our responsibility to the world was enacted, sacred ground. It belonged to itself; it was a gift, not a commodity, so it could never be bought or sold" (Snively & Williams 2013:17).

A sense of an interconnected place is essential in the Indigenous framework. Although mainstream social scientists will collect data about people carefully using the scientific method, their goal is to generalize their findings. Indigenous science grounds new findings within the context of a specific place in the physical world.

In the video below, Kimmerer has a longer conversation about what it means to be American. Starting at minute 55:25, she discusses how the Western approach to discrete naming and classifying, apart from a place, can prevent learning. Consider reflecting upon how the practices she introduces might change your own approach to science.



Biologist and storyteller Robin Wall Kimmerer reflects on the difference between naming and classifying in the Western scientific tradition and understanding relationships in the Indigenous traditions in this video, "Consider This with Robin Wall Kimmerer [YouTube]" (watch from 55:25 to 57:20).

"Consider This with Robin Wall Kimmerer" by Oregon Humanities is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

Another way the frameworks differ wildly is in the integration of emotion and spirit with the mind and the body. When we examined the scientific method earlier in the chapter, we noted that the scientific method emphasizes objectivity. Mainstream scientists often argue that beliefs, values, emotions, or faith have no place in effective science. Indigenous frameworks say that emotion and spirit are valid ways of understanding the world. For example, the Lakota scientists write:

> "It is important to note that the Lakota do not traditionally have the concept of 'religion' as is present in Western culture (Goodman 2017). Rather, Tunkašila's [the Creator's] energy and other dimensions are foundational to our scientific systems. Their presence is measurable, visible, and replicable. When certain conditions are created, we can enter these realms. …. *They are as real and tangible as the physical earth, but exist in different energetic planes*" (American Horse et al. 2023: 7, emphasis added).

Indigenous scientists incorporate both emotion and spirit into their framework arguing that the integration of mind, body, emotion and spirit are essential to both healthy living and effective science.

Differences in research methods demonstrate the impact of focusing on emotion and spirit in addition to mind and body. Like the Interpretive framework, the Indigenous framework also values story as a source of truth. Oral traditions, or stories, are one way that Indigenous people convey knowledge. Indigenous scientists value these stories as sources of wisdom and knowledge. Jacinta Koolmarie is an Adnyamathanha and Ngarrindjeri Indigenous person from Australia who is studying stories of her elders. She asserts that Indigenous stories provide valid evidence about the natural and social world. Please consider diving into that idea in her video The myth of Aboriginal stories being myths.

This perspective contradicts that of mainstream science. For example, Joel Best (2018), who provides the model of the social problems process in the prior chapter, argues that *case studies*, a technical word for stories, are not useful in explaining social problems. He values measurements and numbers instead. In both the Interpretive framework and the Indigenous framework, stories matter.

Finally, the frameworks differ in how they think about the purpose of science. Like social problem scientists and feminist scientists among others, Indigenous scientists agree that the purpose of science is to understand more deeply so that we can take action.

Indigenous science challenges the dominant narratives of power and colonization in the Americas, for example. Colonization is the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the Indigenous people of an area. Many schoolchildren learn the

mistaken idea that the Spanish conquerors brought the horse to the Americas. Indigenous oral history disagrees.

Yvette Running Horse Collins, a Lakota scientist challenges this colonialist history, examining the oral traditions of the Lakota people, finding the Creator gifted the tribe with horses long ago (Figure 4.8) She writes:

> "…you cannot have a Lakota separate of the horse as we were – and are – one with them. As is the case in our language, there is no past, present, or future for us with Šungwakaŋ. The Horse Nation is with us and a part of us and has been so since 'time immemorial'" (American Horse et al. 2023: 21).

Her work stands in direct opposition to the more common narrative, challenging the truthfulness of colonizer accounts. This resistance is essential in the work of decolonization.

At the same time, the Indigenous framework and Western science are not binary opposites. They share a commitment to finding truth through exploring the social world. Increasingly, scientists working in both traditions are collaborating and discovering how the methods enhance one another. Using both approaches simultaneously creates powerful new knowledge that moves us toward justice.

For example, in a recent collaboration in anthropology, scientists tried to resolve the contradiction between Indigenous history and White dominant culture understandings of society and horses. Specifically, they wanted to know if horses were part of Indigenous culture before the arrival of the Spanish conquerors. The team acknowledges the colonialist viewpoint of dominant culture, writing:

> "Over recent decades, the story of people and horses has largely been told through the lens of colonial history. One reason for this is logistical – European settlers often wrote down their observations, creating documentary records that partially chronicle the early relationships between colonists, Indigenous cultures and horses in the colonial West. Another reason, though, is prejudice: Indigenous peoples in the Americas have been excluded from telling their side of the story" (Taylor and Collin 2023).

Then, they use Western science to date the bones of horse skeletons, finding that the bones pre-date the colonists. They combine the quantitative data with the qualitative data gathered from Indigenous stories to tell the deeper truth. Horses were part of Indigenous culture long before the arrival of the Spanish conquerors. This evidence challenges mainstream ideas of history, and the oppression that created those ideas. If you're interested in learning more about this powerful collaboration, you can read the full report Standing For Unči Maka (Grandmother Earth) And All Life: An Introduction To Lakota Traditional Sciences, Principles And Protocols And The Birth Of A New Era Of Scientific Collaborations.



Horses are an active part of life for the Lakota and many other Plains nations today. How does learning more about the Indigenous history of the horse challenge the ways of Western science?

"Image" © Jacquelyn Córdova/Northern Vision Productions is included under fair use

From the Western scientific method to the Interpretive framework to Indigenous ways of doing science, we are all curious about why our social world is the way it is. We construct different frameworks to make sense of our interactions and institutions. Each framework starts from a different set of assumptions and uses different ways of gathering evidence. They each have a unique way of deepening our understanding of social problems, and moving forward with justice.

Sociological Research Methods

Social scientists have many ways to collect the data to research their questions and allow them to explain and predict the social world. The ways in which social scientists collect, analyze, and understand research information are called **research methods**. These research methods define *how* we do social science. Sound research is an essential tool for understanding the sources, dynamics, and consequences of social problems and possible solutions to them.

In this section, we examine some of the most common research methods. Research methods are often grouped into two categories: **quantitative research**, data collected in numerical form that can be counted and analyzed using statistics, and **qualitative research**, non-numerical, descriptive data that is often subjective and based on what is experienced in a social setting. From the table and discussion below, surveys and experiments are quantitative studies, whereas field research and in-depth interviews are qualitative studies. Some of the strongest scientific studies combine both approaches. New research methods go beyond the two categories, exploring international and Indigenous knowledge or doing research for the purpose of taking action.

The Major Sociological Research Methods Snapshot table below summarizes the methods and some of their advantages and disadvantages.

Major Sociological Research Methods Snapshot

Method	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages
Surveys	Collects answers from many subjects who are asked a variety of questions, and analyzes the responses with statistics.	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	Compares an experimental group who is exposed to the independent variable with a control group who is not exposed, and analyzes the differences.	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.
Observations / field research	Observes individuals and groups in their natural social setting, and analyzes the extensive field notes.	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.
In-depth interviews	Conducts many face-to-face (or online or phone) interviews with participants, and analyzes the transcriptions.	Interviewing people provides in-depth knowledge on how they understand or experience a social phenomenon.	Interviews are time-consuming to conduct as each may be 30 minutes to a few hours in length, and they are time-consuming to transcribe without quality software.
Secondary data	Analyzes existing data (does not collect original data to analyze)	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

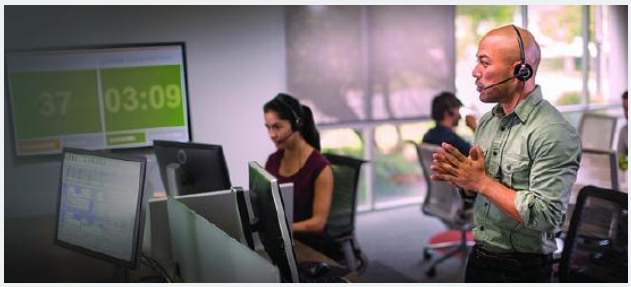
Do you strongly agree? Agree? Neither agree or disagree? Disagree? Strongly disagree? If you've heard this before, you've probably completed your fair share of surveys.

As a research method, a *survey* collects data from subjects who respond to questions about behaviors and opinions, often in a questionnaire or sometimes an interview. Surveys are one of the most widely used scientific research methods. The standard survey format allows individuals a level of anonymity that other methods may not allow for.

Not all surveys are considered sociological research. Many surveys people commonly encounter focus on identifying marketing needs and strategies rather than testing a hypothesis or contributing to social science knowledge. Questions such as, "How many hot dogs do you eat in a month?" or "Were the staff helpful?" are not usually designed as scientific research. Surveys gather different types of information from people. While surveys are not great at capturing the ways people really behave in social situations, they are a great method for discovering how people feel, think, and act – or at least how they *say* they feel, think, and act. Surveys can track support for same-sex marriage or report individual behaviors (such time in prayer or in housework) or information such as employment status, income, and education levels – socioeconomic status indicators.

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 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 and online surveys. Most Gallup polls are conducted over the telephone (both landline and cell phones). 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

One way researchers test social theories is by conducting an *experiment*, meaning the researcher investigates relationships to test a hypothesis. This approach closely resembles the scientific method. 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, including the subfield of social psychology. Some sociologists still use field experiments, however, and they remain a powerful tool of social research.

There are two main types of experiments: *Lab-based experiments* and natural or *field experiments*. In a lab setting, the research can be controlled so that data can be recorded in a limited amount of time. In a natural or field-based experiment, the time it takes to gather the data cannot be controlled but the information might be considered more accurate since it was collected without interference or intervention by the researcher. Field-based experiments are often used to evaluate interventions in educational settings and health (Baldassarri and Abascal 2017).

Typically, the sociologist selects a set of people with similar characteristics, such as age, class, race, or education. Those people are divided into two groups. One is the *experimental group* and the other is the *control group*. The experimental group is exposed to the independent variable(s) and the control group is not. To test the benefits of tutoring, for example, the sociologist might provide tutoring to the experimental group of students but not to the control group. Then both groups would be tested for differences in performance to see if tutoring affected the experimental group of students. In a case like this, the researcher would not want to jeopardize the accomplishments of either group of students, so the setting would be somewhat artificial. The test would not be for a grade reflected on their permanent record as a student, for example.

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).



In this field experiment, researchers investigated whether employers would discriminate against applicants with foreign names. The researchers found that if the application was from Brian instead of Boleslav, the person was twice as likely to get a job interview. What other indicators of social location might influence hiring?

"Image of Boleslav Makarey Experiment" from Seven Examples of Field Experiments for Sociology © Revise Sociology is included under fair use

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.

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 the 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.

At the beginning of a field study, researchers might have a question: “What is it like to be houseless?” Participant observation is a useful method if the researcher wants to explore a certain environment from the inside. The ethnographer will be alert and open-minded to whatever happens, recording all observations accurately. Soon, as patterns emerge, questions will become more specific, and the researcher will be able to either make connections to existing theories or develop new theories based on their observations. This approach will guide the researcher in analyzing data and generating results.

Field research studies consist of both participant observation and nonparticipant observation. Their names describe how they differ. 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.

Participant observation refers to a style of research where researchers join people and participate in a group’s routine activities for the purpose of observing them within that context. This method lets researchers experience a specific aspect of social life. A researcher might go to great lengths to get a firsthand look into a trend, institution, or behavior. For instance, a researcher might work as a waitress in a diner, experience homelessness for several weeks, or ride along with police officers as they patrol their regular beat. Often, these researchers try to blend in seamlessly with the population they study, and they may not disclose their true identity or purpose if they feel it would compromise the results of their research. 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).

The data in observational studies are the *field notes* that researchers take when they are in the field, or shortly after. The notes are trascribed then analyzed for patterns.

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.

In-depth Interviews

Interview studies, often referred to as *in-depth interviews*, involve one-on-one conversations with participants designed to gather information about a particular topic. They are typically conducted face-to-face, but may be online (such as through Zoom) or on the phone. An interview study is not like journalism in which the reporter talks with only one 'expert' or person who experienced someone. Rather, in-depth interview studies often involved interviews with 30 or 60 or even 100 or more individuals.

The data in interview studies are the transcriptions of the interviews – what the participants have said. The researchers transcribe the interviews then *code* them, looking for patterns across the data.

Interviews can take a long time to complete, but they can produce very rich data. In fact, in an interview, a respondent might say something the researcher had not previously considered, which can help focus the research project.

In-depth interviewing is an art. Researchers have to built rapport – trust with the participant, maintain a conversational-style interview, manage which questions are being addressed in the *interview guide* and which to return to, and be careful not to use leading questions. For instance, the interviewer must avoid leading the respondent into certain answers by asking questions like, "You really like building community in your neighborhood, huh?" Instead, researchers should allow the respondent to answer freely by asking questions like, "How do you feel about community building in your neighborhood?"



In-depth interviewing is sometimes referred an 'art' because the researcher must be skilled enough to establish rapport and maintain a conversational tone in each interview, to help the participant build trust and feel comfortable answering questions.

"Women In Tech - 82" by WOCinTech Chat via flickr is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Some observational studies, described above, also use in-depth interviews with individuals from the communities or social setting they are studying.

Secondary Data

Sometimes sociologists do not gather their own data but instead analyze existing data that someone else has gathered, a processed referred to as *secondary data* analysis. Sociologists might study works written by historians, economists, teachers, or early sociologists. They might search through periodicals, newspapers, magazines, or organizational data from any historical period. Or, they might use data collected by other researchers, agencies, or organizations. 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.

Secondary data analysis is advantageous to sociologists because 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.

International Research

International research is conducted outside of the researcher's own immediate geography and society. This work carries additional challenges, considering that researchers often work in regions and cultures different from their own. Researchers need to make special considerations to counter their biases, navigate linguistic challenges, and ensure the best cross-cultural understanding possible. Students at Oxford University's Masters in Development Studies offer a map and descriptions of field projects around the world. What are some interesting projects that stand out to you?

For example, in 2021, Jörg Friedrichs at Oxford published his research on Muslim hate crimes in areas of North England where Islam is the majority religion. He studied police data on racial and religious hate crimes in two districts to look for patterns related to the crimes. He related those patterns to the wider context of community relations between Muslims and other groups. He presented his research to hate crime practitioners in police, local government, and civil society (Friedrichs 2021).

Action Research

So far in this section, we've learned about research frameworks and research methods, the ways in which scientists study social problems. But that's not enough. Social problems sociologists love to take action. Some specific research methods combine researching the problem and taking effective action.

Action research is a family of research methodologies that pursue research (or understanding) and action (or change) at the same time (SFSU, N.d.). We see this when the government changes a policy based on data, or a community organization tries a new evidence-based approach to providing services. One of the most visible applications of social problems research is through humanitarian or social action efforts.

Humanitarian Efforts

Humanitarian approaches involve improving human welfare or human lives. One effective example of social action efforts is in the work of Paul Farmer. Farmer was a public health physician, anthropologist, and founder of Partners in Health. Until his death in 2022, he focused on epidemiological crises in low and middle-income countries.

One trend that Farmer championed was the importance of good health and health care as human rights. He contributed to a broader understanding that poor health is a symptom of poverty, violence, and inequality (Partners in Health 2009). If you want to learn more, please watch the NPR video essay Paul Farmer: I believe in health care as a human right where he describes this view.

Farmer applied this human rights perspective to pandemics. His book, *Fevers, Feuds and Diamonds: Ebola and the Ravages of History*, looks at the 2014 Ebola crisis and what we can learn from it to apply to the COVID-19 epidemic. In a PBS Newshour interview, he spoke of his work during the Ebola outbreak:

> "Early in the Ebola outbreak, almost all of our attention was turned towards clinical services. But we kept on bumping into things we didn't understand and sometimes even our colleagues from Sierra Leone and Liberia didn't understand. And that just triggered an interest in a deeper understanding of the place, the culture, the history" (Public Broadcasting Service 2021).

Farmer shares his experiences both as a medical doctor and a researcher, asking the questions: "Who is most impacted by disease? How might things have been done differently? What can be done now?" His research on Ebola focused on circumstances in West Africa where lack of medical resources and decades of war played a role in the epidemic and how the epidemic itself, as we experience in the United States with COVID-19, revealed underlying problems and inequities in society (Public Broadcasting Service 2021).

Community-Based Action Research

Community-based research takes place in community settings. It involves community members in the design and implementation of research projects. It demonstrates respect for the contributions of success made by community partners. Research projects involve collaboration between researchers and community partners, whether the community partners are formally structured community-based organizations or informal groups of individual community members. This type of research aims to benefit the community by achieving social justice through social action and change.

Community-based research is sometimes called *participatory action research* (Stringer 2007). In partnership with community organizations, researchers apply their social science research skills to help assess needs and outcomes and provide data to improve living conditions. This cycle is illustrated in the figure below.

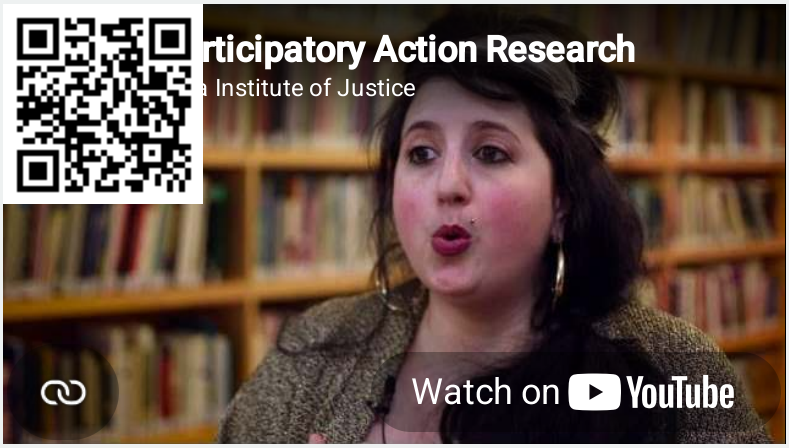


The action research cycle is a continuous process in which the researcher and the community learn about the social problem, figure out a root cause or diagnosis, plan an action that will impact the root cause, take action or make the change, evaluate the results, and continue to learn more. How is this cycle different from the scientific method we examined earlier?

"Action Research Cycle" from "Interpretive Research" by Anol Bhattacherjee, Social Science Research: Principles, Methods and Practices (Revised edition) is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

The research is rigorous and often published in professional reports and presented to the board of directors for the organization you action research. As it sounds, *action research* suggests that we make a plan to implement changes. Often with academic research, we aim to learn more about a population and leave the next steps up to others. This is an important part of the puzzle, as we need to start with knowledge. Still, action research often aims to fix something or at least quickly translate the newly acquired findings into a solution for a social problem.

To learn more about participatory action research, check out the quick video below for an introduction with Shirah Hassan of Just Practice.



Participatory action research involves the people that the researcher is studying in the study design and execution. Based on the results, organizations and people take action. As you watch this video, you might consider," How might this increase social justice?"

"Participatory Action Research" with Shirah Haasan by Vera Institute of Justice is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

Community-based action research looks for evidence. As new insights emerge, the researchers adjust the question or the approach. This type of research engages people who have traditionally been referred to as *subjects* as active participants in the research

process. The researcher is working with the organization during the whole process and will likely bring in different project design elements based on the organization's needs. Social scientists can bring more formalized training, but they draw both on existing research/literature and the goals of the organization they are working with. Community-based research or participatory research can be considered an orientation for research rather than strictly a method. Often a number of different methods are used to collect data. Change is the purpose of the research.

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Now that we have an understanding of the field of sociology including sociological research, sociological theoretical perspectives, and sociological concepts, we can begin to explore specific social problems as they relate to a variety of broad topics. We will start with poverty and economic inequality in the next chapter.

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Review of Sociology

Summary

1. **Sociology** is the scientific study of society. It studies social problems, as well as other areas of social life such as social interactions, social groups, social inequalities, and social institutions.
2. According to C. Wright Mills, the **sociological imagination** involves the ability to connect our individual lives to larger social forces. It allows us to see how social problems are *public issues* rather than *personal troubles*, and how social problems require structural solutions.
3. Social forces such as cultural ideas, our social identities, and our access to social institutions shape our lives and the choices we make, and can constrain the very choices we have available to us. The sociological imagination supports a *blame-the-system* view over a *blame-the-victim view*.
4. There is an array of foundational sociological concepts that guide our understanding of social problems. **Social institutions**, established patterns of interaction that guide our behavior, and **culture**, shared norms, practices, and beliefs, constitute the **social structure**, how society is organized. We all experience **socialization**, the learning of our culture including *worldviews* and *social identities*. Our social identities are tied to social hierarchies and thus to **systems of power**, systemic privilege or oppression, which according to **intersectionality** can interact to produce unique experiences in our lives.
5. People differ in their relationship to privilege and power, based on their **social location** – one's location in social hierarchies. Social problems are manifestations of this inequality, which is is both personal and structural. Thus, different social groups experience social problems in unique ways. Additionally, the social locations of scholars matter because they influence what questions scholars ask, how they gather their data, and how they interpret the results. According to Du Bois and Collins, scientists who belong to groups that experience oppression are more likely to be able to describe and explain the systems that contribute to structural inequality.
6. Several theoretical perspectives in sociology exist, with three classical paradigms. **Structural functionalism** emphasizes the functions that social institutions or social phenomena serve to ensure the ongoing stability of society. **Conflict theory** highlights the conflict or power differentials among different social groups and how social institutions perpetuate inequality. **Symbolic interactionism** focuses on how individuals construct and interpret shared meanings during social interactions and how those shape their understandings of themselves and their lives. The functionalist and conflict perspectives fall under macrosociology (the macro level of analysis) and the interactionist perspective falls under microsociology (the micro level).
7. Contemporary sociological theoretical perspectives are numerous. Examples include **feminist theory**, which focuses on gender oppression and all oppression more broadly, **racial formation theory**, which emphasizes how race is an ongoing social construction tied to systemic racism, and **queer theory**, which questions rigid gender and sexual identity categories and embraces fluidity and liberation.
8. A research framework or approach or knowledge organizes the questions the social scientist might ask, the ways the research is designed, the kinds of information the scientist considers valid, and the use of the research outcomes. In the **scientific method**, researchers start with a measurable hypothesis and collects data to prove or disprove the hypothesis. In the **interpretive framework**, the researcher has a set of core questions but allows participant behavior or interviews to reveal themes or answers. In **Indigenous frameworks**, researchers emphasize interdependence and connection, using energy, spirit, and stories in addition to physical evidence or sociological information to learn things.
9. Each of the sociological **research methods** we covered has its strengths, from *survey* studies, which help us understand trends over time and can be generalized to the larger population, to *participant observation* studies, which give us detailed understandings of social life, to *in-depth interview* studies, which offer deep knowledge of how people experience or understand social phenomena. However, each method also has disadvantages, such as how surveys are expensive and may not fully capture the truth, how participant observation is open to researcher interpretation and can't be generalized, and how in-depth interviews are time-consuming and rely on strongly skilled interviewers.
10. Social problems sociologists often engage in research so that they and others can take effective action. **Action research** involves taking action as part of the research process. *Humanitarian approaches* help improve human lives and *community-based approaches* or *participatory action* have the benefit of collaborations with community partners. The goal of both approaches is social change.

Questions

1. What's an example of a 'private trouble' you've experienced or heard of someone experiencing, and how may it be tied to or reflect a structural problem in society?
2. Exactly how were you socialized into your culture(s), including cultural ideals or values, norms, and traditions?
3. Identify 4-5 of your social identities (related to social class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, or disability) – for which do you have power/privilege, and for which do you experience oppression? How might the systems of power attached to each of those identities interact for you?
4. Which one of the three classical sociological theoretical perspectives most appeals to you so far, and why does it?
5. How does one of the contemporary sociological theoretical perspectives align with one or more of the classical perspectives?
6. Find a news article or clip that describes why a current social problem exists – do you see any of the theoretical perspectives in this chapter being applied to explain the social problem?
7. Considering the various approaches to knowledge, do you think that social scientists can truly use objectivity in their scientific process, and why or why not?
8. Which type of sociological research method sounds most interesting to you, and why?
9. Some politicians argue that we're creating conflict by focusing on our differences, whereas others argue that by understanding the causes and consequences of our differences, we can begin to create a more just world – which position do you take, and why?

Action Steps

1. Strengthen your sociological imagination: Apply a sociological imagination to your own life and the lives of those around you to better understand them. In other words, connect your individual lives and choices to larger social forces and reframe seemingly personal problems as social problems. When these issues come up in conversation, explain how our lives are connected to larger social forces to help others develop a sociological imagination.
2. Use your power: Consider how power/privilege and oppression operate in your life based on your combination of social identities, identify how you could use your power to help address social problems (either that you face yourself or that others face), and use that power when opportunities arise.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Poverty and Economic Inequality

- Overview of Poverty and Economic Inequality
- Theoretical Perspectives on Poverty and Economic Inequality
- Patterns of Poverty and Economic Inequality
- Strategies to Address Poverty and Economic Inequality
- Review of Poverty and Economic Inequality
- References for Poverty and Economic Inequality

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Overview of Poverty and Economic Inequality

Learning Objectives

- Understand how official poverty in the United States is measured, as well as its limitations.
- Describe the extent of poverty and economic inequality.
- Summarize how the classical sociological theoretical perspectives frame or explain poverty and economic inequality.
- Identify differences in poverty by social location and other factors such as race, gender, age, and family structure.
- List some of the consequences of poverty.
- Summarize the causes and consequences of increasing economic inequality.
- List successful and promising strategies to reduce poverty and economic inequality.

Sociologists group people according to how much they have. However, sociologists consider more than money in their defining of these groups. Instead, they define **stratification** as a socioeconomic system that divides society's members into categories ranking from high to low based on things like wealth, power, and prestige. Systems of stratification can be as extreme as slavery or apartheid. They can be as long-lasting as caste. Or they can be as common as **social class**, a group that shares a common social status based on factors like wealth, income, education, and occupation.



This picture demonstrates stratification. In the front, we can see the tarps and belongings of houseless people. In the background, we see the skyscrapers of a modern wealthy economy. Where do you see stratification at work in your own life?

"Photo" by Alan Taylor is licensed under CC BY-2.0d

Wealth includes anything you own – your house, your car, and perhaps your inheritance from your great-grandmother. *Income* is the money a person earns from work or investments. Income may include your paycheck or royalties from the book that you wrote. Another term for this combination of factors is *socioeconomic status* (SES), an individual's level of wealth, power, and prestige.

Karl Marx, the German philosopher introduced in the Sociology chapter, focused on ownership of wealth or businesses to define class. In his model, workers who own nothing except the clothes on their backs would always conflict with the rich, those who owned businesses and property. Max Weber, another German sociologist from the prior chapter, added ideas of skill status and power to the concept of social class.

The chart below shows one model of class in the US, comparing the education, occupation, income, housing status, and percentage of population for each social class. Although sociologists don't always agree on the names of the classes or where the boundaries are, we can begin to see how social stratification itself changes people's life chances. For example, people in the capitalist class, who are only about 1% of the total population, not only have more money, but more access to prestigious education and jobs. These connections help them maintain their wealth and power.

US Social Class Structure, 2020

Social Class	Percent of Population	Household Income	Education	Occupation	Housing
Capitalist	1%	$650,000+ (often inherited)	Elite university, private tutoring	Investors, heirs, and executives	Own multiple personal homes and others' homes; concentrated in large cities
Upper-class	9%	$200,000- $650,000	Prestigious university	Executives, professionals,and investors	Own a primary home and a vacation home
Upper-middle-class	8%	$150,000- $200,000	College, university, or advanced degree	Professionals and upper managers	Own at least a primary home
Middle-class	27%	$75,000- $149,000	High school, some trade school or apprentice- ship	Lower managers, supervisors, trades, farmers	Depending on race may own or rent a home
Lower-middle-class	17%	$50,000- $75,000	High school	Factory workers	Rent a home
Working-class	20%	$25,000- $49,000	Some high school	Service workers, retail or tourist economy workers	Rent homes, but housing insecure
Lower-class / Poverty	18%	Under $25,000	Less than high school	Unemployed, disabled, or receiving other government assistance	Housing insecure or houseless

This table shows the characteristics of each social class in the United States, and the percent of each class in the United States population. Do you know anyone who has changed their social class?

No credit provided

On the other hand, people of the lower class may experience poverty. **Poverty** is the state of lacking the material and social resources an individual requires to live a healthy life. In this social class, people are often housing insecure or houseless. They may experience hunger and can't access medical care. Social justice advocates often argue that stabilizing a person's housing is the first thing that should happen when someone is houseless. This stability supports people in addressing other concerns such as partner violence or chronic health conditions. We will discuss housing instability further in the following chapter. This chapter focuses on other aspects of the social problem of poverty, as well as the widening gap between those at the bottom and those at the top of the social class hierarchy.

Measuring Poverty

The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) today uses two slightly different models when calculating poverty: Poverty thresholds and poverty guidelines.

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 threshold* (the 'poverty line'), was needed. A government economist, Mollie Orshansky, first calculated this threshold 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).

Further, the 'poverty line' does not capture the many hardship experiences of people who live under it or right above it. Poverty scholar Matthew Desmond (2023: 23) explains:

> "Poverty is often material scarcity piled on chronic pain piled on incarceration piled on depression piled on addiction—on and on it goes. Poverty isn't a line. It's a tight knot of social maladies. It is connected to every social problem we care about—crime, health, education, housing—and its persistence in American life means that millions of families are denied safety and security and dignity in one of the richest nations in the history of the world."

Thus, when we discuss the poverty line, we should keep in mind the lived experiences of the people who live under or near it, rather than focusing exclusively on how many people fall under it.



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.

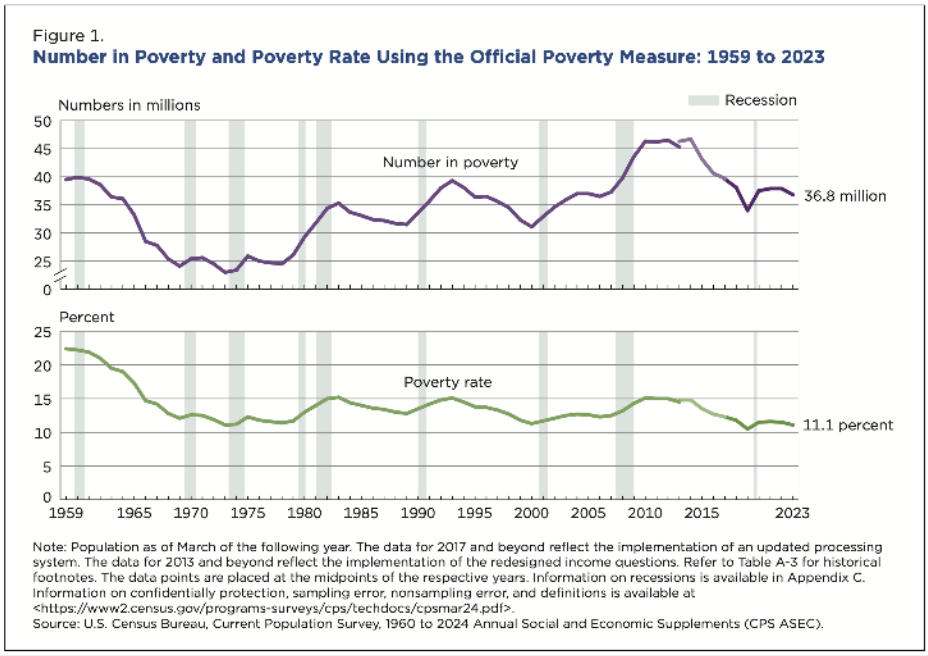
Wikimedia Commons – public domain

The poverty threshold is adjusted annually by the US Census and is used mainly for statistical purposes, for instance measuring how many people are in poverty. *Poverty guidelines*, on the other hand, are released yearly by the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services and are a simplified version of the thresholds. Poverty guidelines are used for administrative purposes, to help determine who qualifies for federal programs. It is adjusted for inflation and takes into account the number of people in a family. In 2025, the poverty guideline for a family of four within the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia was $32,150. This means that the poverty guidelines are different for persons living in Alaska or Hawaii. For four persons living in Alaska it is $40,190, and is $36,980 for four persons in Hawaii (ASPE 2025). Thus, a four-person family earning even one more dollar than $32,150 in 2025 in Texas, for example, was *not* officially poor, even though its 'extra' income could hardly lift the family 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, Chau, & Aratani 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 official measure of poverty developed in 1963. In 2023, 11.1% of the US population, or 36.8 million Americans, lived in official poverty (Census 2025). The figure below shows the trend in official poverty since 1959. Poverty rates declined substantially over the 1960s, before rising and falling over the subsequent decades.



This chart displays the number of people in poverty (top) and the percentage of people in poverty (bottom) from 1959 to 2023. Notice the decline over the 1960s. What do you think helped reduce the poverty rate in that decade?

Source: Shrider 2024; U.S. Census Bureau

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 the US in 2022, more than 1 in 6 individuals (16%) experienced episodic poverty, and more than 1 in 5 children (21.3%) experienced it (King 2024). As these figures indicate, people go into and out of poverty, but even those who go out of it usually do not move very far from it.

Problems in the official poverty measure have led the Census Bureau to develop the *Supplemental Poverty Measure* (SPM) in 2009. This measure takes into account the many family expenses in addition to food, as well as 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 measure yields an estimate of poverty that is typically 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.

The SPM in 2023 was 12.9% (Census 2024a), far higher than the 11.1% figure calculated with the official poverty measure. Without the help of Social Security, SNAP (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 the twice-poverty threshold – 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 in the US. Using this threshold in 2023, 26.9% of the US population fell below twice the poverty threshold – $61,800 for a family of four (Shrider 2024). Twice-poverty data paint a discouraging picture.

Later in this chapter we will examine more data related to poverty, such as variation by race, gender, and family structure. We will also discuss the consequences of poverty. Now, we turn to the broader issue of economic inequality.

Economic Inequality

Economic inequality 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 or should be. When the gap between them is large, we say that much economic inequality exists; when the gap between them is small, we say that little economic inequality exists.

There are two common measures of economic inequality: *Income inequality*, which measures differences in individual or household income, and *wealth inequality*, which measures differences in individual or household wealth. Household income or wealth is sometimes called family income or wealth.

The US has a very large degree of economic inequality, for both income and wealth. A common way to examine income and wealth inequality is to rank the nation's families by income from lowest to highest and then to divide this distribution into fifths, or quintiles. We can categorize the poorest fifth of the nation's families (the 20 percentile 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 (the 20 percentile with the highest incomes). We then examine income inequality by seeing what percentage each fifth has of the nation's entire income. In 2023, the poorest fifth earned only 3.1% of the nation's income, while the richest fifth enjoyed 51.9% (Census 2024b). Another way of saying this is that the richest 20% of the population had more income than the remaining 80% of the population.

We may also look at the wealth distribution. At the end of 2024, the top 10% of households had $8.1 million on average and controlled 67.2% of total household wealth in the nation. In contrast, the bottom 50% of households had only $60,000 on average and held only 2.5% of total household wealth in the nation. Additionally, income and wealth are tightly connected. For instance, the top fifth of households by income held over 71% of total household wealth in late 2024 (Kent 2025).

The video below uses older data – economic inequality is even worse today than when it was made – though it illustrates clearly how uneven the wealth distribution is, and compares the reality to what people think is happening and what people feel should be happening.



This video helps us visualize the extent of economic inequality, though it is larger today than when the video was made. Which distribution do you think is fair, or in other words, how much inequality do you think is too much?

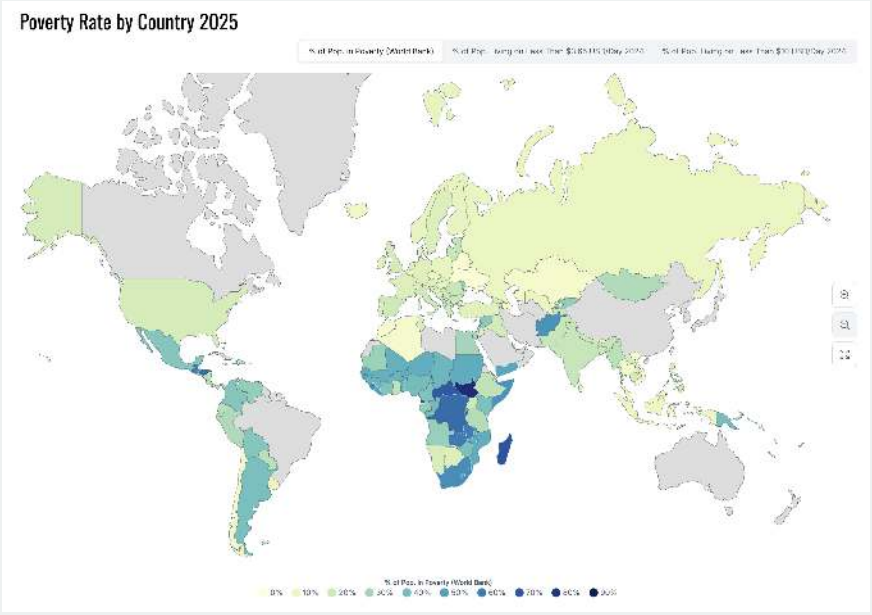
Wealth Inequality in America *by politizane is licensed under the standard YouTube license*

We will discuss changes in economic inequality over the past five decades on the Patterns page, as well as what factors contributed to increasing inequality.

Global Inequality

As serious as poverty and economic inequality are in the US, poverty in much of the rest of the world may be 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, though there are some areas of overlap in experience such as lacking access to adequate health care or to clean water.

The data map below displays the proportion of people in poverty across the globe in 2025. We see clear variation in different regions of the world, with poverty concentrated in Africa.



This map illustrates the proportion of people in poverty in 2025, with darker-shaded countries having more poverty. Where does the United States stand relative to other portions of the world?

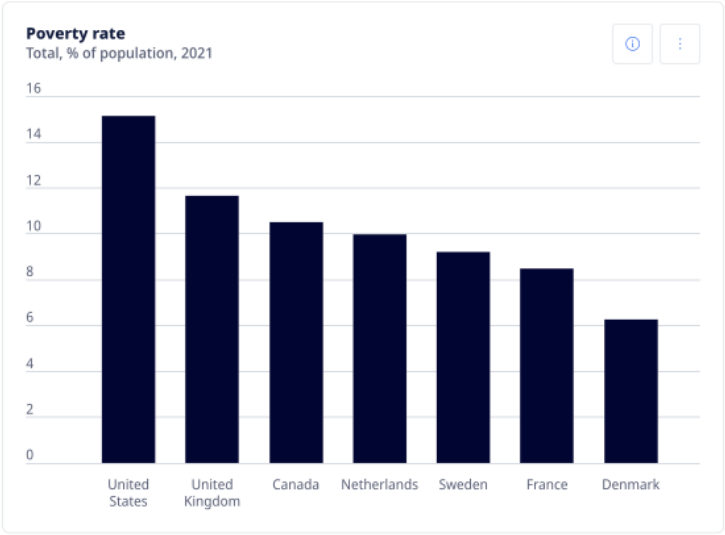
Source: World Population Review 2025

The highest poverty rate is found in South Sudan at 82.3%, followed by Equatorial Guinea at 76.8%, and Madagascar at 70.7%. In contrast, Ukraine, Belarus, and Vietnam have the lowest poverty rates at 1.6%, 3.9%, and 4.3%, respectively (World Population Review 2025). You might think that the US would be near the bottom with a low poverty rate; however, it is quite far up the list. Feel free to check out the list or the map at the World Population Review's Poverty Rate by Country site.

Lessons from Other Societies

Why the US has More Poverty than Other Western Societies

The chart below displays poverty by nation, as defined by half the median household income of the total population. In 2021, 15.2% of the US population lived in poverty. By comparison, other Western democracies had far lower poverty rates with this measurement. For instance, the poverty rate was 11.7% for the United Kingdom, 10.5% for Canada, and 6.3% for Denmark – less than half of the US rate.



Source: OECD 2025

Why is there so much more poverty in the US than in its Western counterparts? Several differences between the US and the other nations stand out (Brady, 2009; Russell, 2011). First, other Western nations have higher minimum wages and stronger labor unions than the US 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 US. As sociologist John Iceland (2006: 136) 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 (2006: 17) 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."

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 US has so much more poverty than other democracies in part because it spends so much less than they do on helping the poor. The US 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.

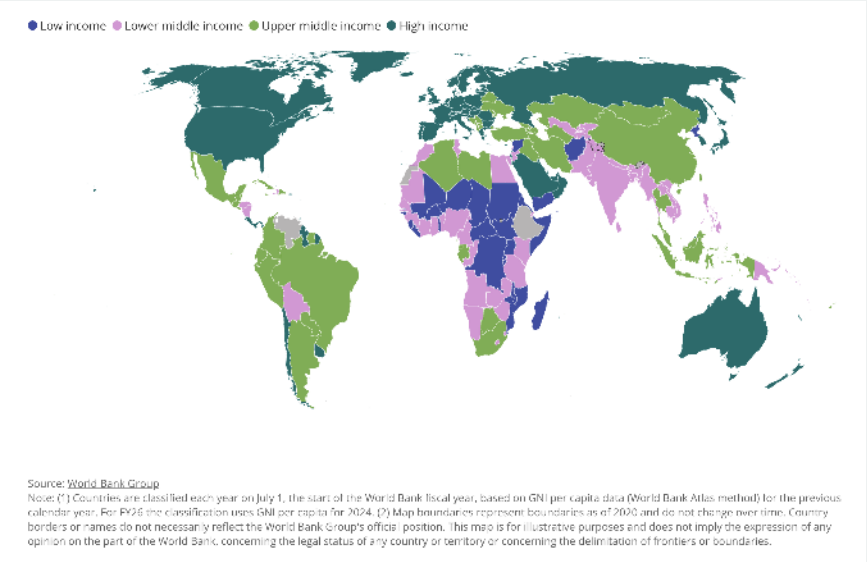
As the Nobel laureate economist Paul Krugman (2006: A25) summarizes this lesson, "Government truly can be a force for good. Decades of propaganda have conditioned many Americans to assume that government is always incompetent… But the [British experience has] shown that a government that seriously tries to reduce poverty can achieve a lot."

Researchers at the World Bank estimate that across the world in 2019, 648 million people (8% of the world population) lived in *extreme poverty*, measured with the international poverty line (IPL) of $2.15 per day (equivalent to US dollars). Moreover, if we consider the poverty line of upper-middle-income countries at $6.85 per day, we find a more striking figure: Almost half (47%) of the global population lived below that poverty line (Schoch et al. 2022).

To understand global inequality more broadly, 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 size) or gross national income (GNI) per capita (the total income of a nation divided by its population size).

The figure below depicts this typology of nations (with the middle category divided into upper-middle and lower-middle), using GNI. As should be clear, whether a nation is wealthy, middle income, or poor is heavily related to the continent on which it is found. High income nations are concentrated in North America (e.g., the US, Canada) and much of Europe, (e.g., the UK, Spain, France), with a few other areas of the world (e.g., Australia, Saudi Arabia), while low income nations are concentrated in Africa (e.g., Sudan, Niger, Liberia). You may check out an interactive map on the World Bank's site The World by Income and Region.

Global Income Inequality Map



Source: World Bank Group 2025

While this textbook focuses primarily on social problems in the US, we include a global perspective here due to the high degree of inequality that exists in poverty and economic inequality across the world.

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In the following pages, we frame poverty and economic inequality using the classical sociological theoretical perspectives: Structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. We also discuss individualistic versus structural explanations of poverty. Next, we explore patterns in poverty and economic inequality, including variation in poverty rates, the many consequences of poverty, the connection between economic inequality and policy, and the consequences of economic inequality. We then discuss various strategies to address poverty and economic inequality.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Poverty and Economic Inequality

Why does poverty exist, and why and how do poor people end up being poor? The sociological perspectives introduced in the prior chapter 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. The Snapshot table below summarizes these three approaches.

Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Functionalism	Stratification is necessary to encourage people with special intelligence, knowledge, and skills to enter the most important occupations. For this reason, stratification is inevitable. However, poverty may also be viewed as a dysfunction of social institutions.
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. People in power make decisions that benefit them and widen economic inequality.
Symbolic interactionism	Stratification affects people's daily interactions, beliefs, and conceptions of themselves. The experience of poverty is a hardship that involves endless challenges.

Structural Functionalism

As discussed, 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 social class stratification or economic inequality exists because it 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.
2. These jobs require more skills and knowledge than other jobs.
3. Relatively few people have the ability to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to do these jobs.
4. Societies must promise higher incomes and other rewards to encourage people with the skills and knowledge to do these jobs.

For example, the job of a brain surgeon is more important than the job of a retail cashier. It takes more skills and knowledge to perform brain surgery than to check out customers. Most of us would be able to do a decent job of retail cashier, but very few of us would be able to become brain surgeons. Brain surgeons are paid far, far higher than retail cashiers, and likely have other benefits such as strong retirement packages and vacation days. Thus, stratification is thus necessary and inevitable.

To illustrate their assumptions further, say we have a society where retail cashiering and doing brain surgery both provide an income of $150,000 per year. (This example is *very* hypothetical, but please keep reading.) If you decide to work retail, 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 and testing. While you have spent 19 additional years beyond age 16 getting this education and training, and potentially taking out tens

of thousands of dollars in student loans, you could have spent those years in retail making $150,000 a year, or $2.85 million extra overall. Which job would you choose?



Functionalist theory argues that the promise of high income is necessary to encourage talented people to pursue important careers such as surgery. If physicians and restaurant servers made the same high income, would enough people decide to become physicians?

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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. 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.

This particular functionalist view may sound somewhat 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 less money than physicians, and professors earn less on 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, this 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. Race, class, gender, and other areas of *social location* impact people's opportunities. 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, this functionalist explanation does not justify the extremes of wealth and poverty found in the US 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 annually 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, work conditions, and other positive aspects they offer? The functionalist view does not answer these questions adequately.

Another line of functionalist thinking focuses more directly on poverty than on stratification. This particular functionalist view provocatively argues that poverty exists because it serves certain positive functions for our society. These functions include the

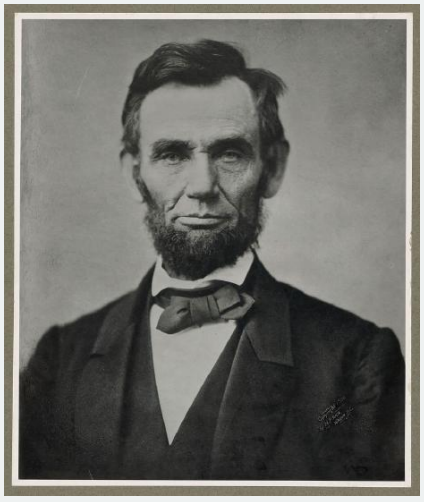
following: (1) poor people do the work that other people do not want to do; (2) the programs that help poor people provide a lot of jobs for the people employed by the programs; (3) the poor purchase goods, such as day-old bread and used clothing, that other people do not wish to purchase, and thus extend 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.

However, a different functionalist perspective focuses on how poverty may be a dysfunction of *social institutions* such as the state (government, law, policy), education, work, or family. For instance, if the state fails to provide for its poor or if higher ed is inaccessible to the poor, then society is missing out on the innovations and contributions of low-income individuals. Thus, there is instability in the social structure that must be addressed.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory's explanation of economic inequality 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, media, and other *social 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, people of color, and other marginalized groups. In this regard, it reflects one of the early critiques of the functionalist view that the previous section outlined. As we will see in this textbook, there are various obstacles that make it difficult for the poor, women, and people of color in the US to move up the socioeconomic ladder and to otherwise enjoy healthy and productive lives.



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 emphasizes that individuals and groups at the top of social hierarchies have the power to make decisions about the nation that benefit them, which then reproduce existing social hierarchies. One concept that aligns with this perspective is the **power elite**, proposed by C. Wright Mills (of the *sociological imagination*), which describes the close ties between individuals at

the top of the government, military, and corporate sectors. These highly-networked and wealthy individuals have strong influence over national policy decisions, such as the lowering of tax rates for the wealthy or the weakening of regulations for corporations, policies which benefit them. They may also pass legislation that cuts into social welfare programs, worsening conditions for people at the bottom of the social class hierarchy and widening economic inequality.

Symbolic Interactionism

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

Many detailed, insightful sociological books on the lives of the poor reflect the symbolic interactionist perspective (e.g., Anderson 1999; Liebow 1993; Rank 1994). These texts 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 being poor. In this view, 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.

After years of systematically studying people in poverty, scholar Matthew Desmond (2023: 13-23) describes poverty like this:

> "poverty is about money, of course, but is also a relentless piling on of problems. Poverty is pain, physical pain. ... Poverty is traumatic, and since society isn't investing in its treatment, poor people often have their own ways of coping with their pain. ... On top of the pain, poverty is instability. ... Poverty is the constant fear that it will get even worse. ... Poverty is the loss of liberty. ... Poverty is the feeling that your government is against you, not for you; that your country was designed to serve other people and that you are fated to be managed and processed, roughed up and handcuffed. ... Poverty is embarrassing, shame inducing. ... Poverty is diminished life and personhood. It changes how you think and prevents you from realizing your full potential."



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

Photo by Oto Godfrey is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

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 classic film *Pretty Woman*, Richard Gere plays a rich businessman who hires a sex worker, played by Julia Roberts, to accompany him to fancy parties and other affairs. Roberts' character 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. Thus, we are *socialized* into social class just as we are into gender and other social identities.

Levels of 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. The Explanations of Poverty table below summarizes these explanations.

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 (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*. 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, age, and other forms of 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 (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 (2006) 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.”

Most sociologists favor the structural explanation. As later chapters in this textbook document, racial/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 (Goszkowski 2008), which causes 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 particular scholars concede that 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 cultural values and practices.

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Patterns of Poverty and Economic Inequality

Variation in Poverty

Who are the poor? Although the official poverty rate in 2023 was 11.1%, this rate differs by areas of *social location*, such as race/ethnicity, gender, and age, and it also differs by region and by family structure. Poverty rate differences based on these characteristics are critical to understanding the social patterning of poverty in the US. We look at these characteristics in this section.

Race/Ethnicity

Do you think that most poor people in the US are Latinx/Hispanic, Black/African American, Native American, Asian, or white?

If you are like the majority of people who answer a similar question in public opinion surveys, you would have picked Black/African American. When Americans think about poor people, they tend to picture Black 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 are non-Hispanic white Americans, rather than Black Americans as many believe. However,

Franco Folini – Homeless guys with dogs – CC BY-SA 2.0

The public's racialized image of poor people is mistaken, as Census data reveal that the most typical poor person is white. To be more precise, in 2023 there were 24,290 white people in poverty (or 14,890 white non-Hispanic people) versus 8,020 Black people. White Americans comprise the greatest number of the nation's poor (Shrider 2024).

It is also true, though, that race/ethnicity affect the chances of being poor. In other words, some racial groups are overrepresented among the poor. In 2023, while only 7.7% of non-Hispanic white Americans are poor, 17.9% of Black Americans and 21.2% of American Indian and Alaska Native Americans are poor. The chart below shows Census data for poverty by racial/ethnic category. 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).

People in Poverty by Race/Ethnicity, 2023

Racial/Ethnic Category	**Total Number** (in thousands)	**Number in Poverty** (in thousands)	**Percent in Poverty**
White (all)	249,500	24,290	9.7
White (not Hispanic)	192,600	14,890	7.7

Racial/Ethnic Category	Total Number (in thousands)	Number in Poverty (in thousands)	Percent in Poverty
Black	44,870	8,020	17.9
Asian	21,820	1,975	9.1
American Indian and Alaska Native	4,021	851	21.2
Two or More Races	10,250	1,478	14.4
Hispanic (any race)	65,400	10,890	16.6

This chart displays 2023 Census data on poverty by race/ethnicity. Which groups have the highest raw numbers of people in poverty and which have the highest poverty rates?

Source: Shrider 2024

Education

Poverty varies greatly by educational attainment. A college education is strongly protective against the risk of experiencing poverty.

In 2023, people with a bachelor's degree (a 4-year college degree) or higher had a poverty rate of only 4%. In contrast, a quarter of people (25.1%) without a high school diploma were in poverty. Having some college experience is also somewhat protective as the poverty rate is 8.5% compared to those with a diploma but no college at a rate of 13.1% (Shrider 2024).

Gender

Women are more likely than men to be poor. According to the Census (which uses the language of biological sex), 11.9% of females live in poverty, compared to only 10.2% percent of males. These figures translate to a large gender gap in the actual number of people, as over 20 million women live in poverty, compared to less than 17 million men (Shrider 2024). The higher rate of poverty among women is called the **feminization of poverty** (Iceland 2006). We will see more evidence of this pattern when we look at the section on family structure that follows.

You may have heard the claim that women comprise 70% of the worlds poor; however, that figure is misleading and the gender gap is complicated. For instance, Carolina Sánchez-Páramo and Ana Maria Munoz-Boudet (2018) at the World Bank explain:

> "We have such questionable 'facts' because existing poverty data makes it hard to have a clear picture of the true gender dimensions of poverty. Poverty is, generally, measured at the household level—meaning that if a household lives in extreme poverty, we assume that everyone under that roof lives at the same level of deprivation. However, evidence and common sense tell us that this is rarely the case; women, children, people with disabilities, and elders, for example, often receive smaller portions of food or have less invested in their education and health."

Additionally, there are gender differences in global poverty rates:

> "poverty rates are highest among children, particularly among girls. There are 105 girls for every 100 boys living in extreme poor households, across all ages. ... As boys and girls get older, the gender gap in poverty widens further. 122 women between the ages of 25 and 34 live in poor households for every 100 men of the same age group. This coincides with the peak productive and reproductive ages of men and women, and likely reflects that as young women become wives and mothers, they often stop working in order to care for their husbands and children" (Sánchez-Páramo & Munoz-Boudet 2018).

Data suggest that poverty rates in the US are higher for transgender individuals than cisgender individuals. One study, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey, found that in 2020 transgender people had a poverty rate of 35%, which dropped to 21% in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, likely due to increased governmental relief funding (Wilson et al. 2023).

Age

Turning to age, 15.3% of children lived in poverty in 2023, over 11 million children (Shrider 2024). About 37% of all children live in poverty for at least one year before turning 18 (Ratcliffe & McKernan 2010). The poverty rate for US children has been 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, Bernstein, & Shierholz 2009).



The poverty rate for US children is the highest in the Western world.

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As with race/ethnicity for the general population, the proportion of children in poverty varies by race. Black children have a poverty rate of 25% and American Indian and Alaskan Native children of 28.8%, while white non-Hispanic children have a rate of 8.7% (Shrider 2024).

At the other end of the age distribution, 9.7% of people aged 65 or older are poor, about 5.8 million seniors (Shrider 2024). The proportion of seniors in poverty declined substantially in the 1960s and 70s, primarily due to government programs: Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). However, the decline in poverty among the older population means that children now have a higher proportion of people in poverty when considering age.

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 12.4%. The West is next at 11%, followed by the Midwest and Northeast, both at 9.8% (Shrider 2024). The South's higher 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).

Poverty also varies considerably worldwide, as discussed on the Overview page. Though the US has a high rate of poverty among rich industrialized nations, other nations globally have far higher poverty rates. Poverty is especially concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa.

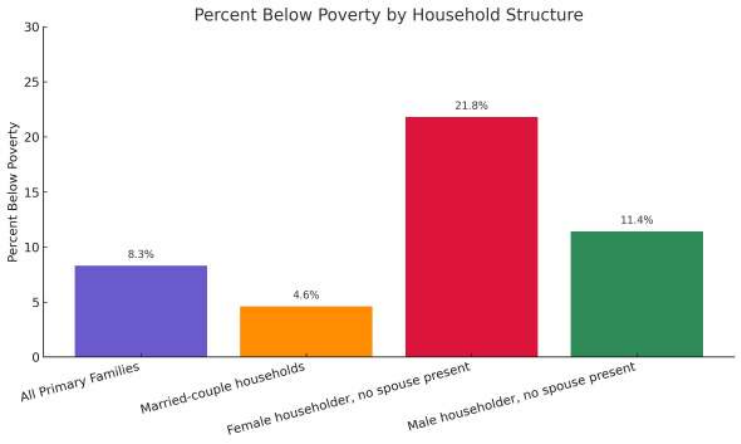
Family Structure

There are many types of family structures measured by the Census, including households comprised of a married couple, an unmarried couple, a single-parent, and those living with unrelated individuals. In the US, 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 (one-adult households often have lower incomes), and one-adult families are more likely to be headed by a woman (women generally have lower incomes than men). Of all families headed by a solo woman, 21.8% live in poverty, compared to only 11.4% of families headed by a solo man. The poverty rate for households headed by women provides additional evidence for the *feminization of poverty* concept introduced

earlier. In contrast to one-adult families, 8.3% of all primary families (a group of two or more related individuals, which could include married, cohabiting, or solo adults) and only 4.6% of married-couple families live in poverty (Shrider 2024).

Poverty and Family Structure, 2023



This chart displays the percentage of people in poverty by family structure using 2023 Census data. Why might single-mother families experience such higher rates of poverty than other family structures?

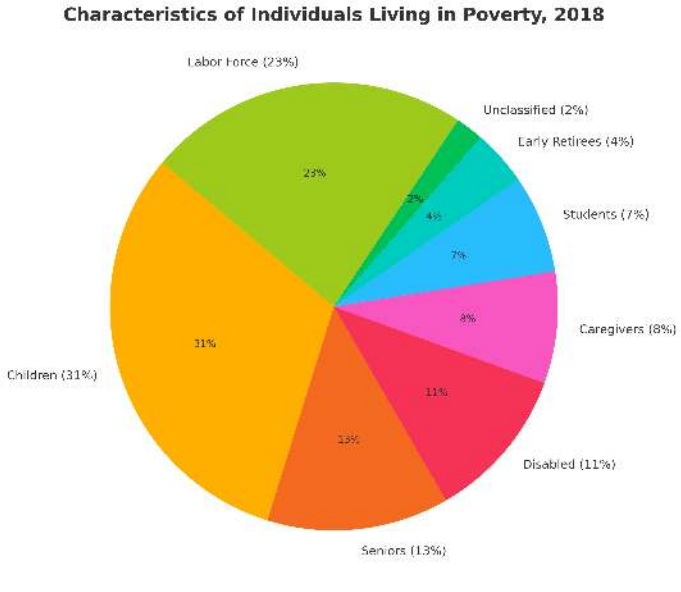
Source: Adapted from Shrider 2024, "Table A-2. Families and People in Poverty by Type of Family: 2022 and 2023"

Regarding children in various family structures, the pattern persists: Children are most likely to be in poverty in single-mother families (36.7%), less likely to be in poverty in single-father families (20.3%) or any primary family (15%), and far less likely to be in poverty in married-couple families (7.2%) (Shrider 2024).

Labor Force Status

Some Americans think that the poor do not participate in the labor force (paid work) because they're lazy or lack the motivation but could work if they really wanted to. However, government data show that most poor people are in the labor force – either working or actively looking for work (unemployed) – or unable to work.

Many people in poverty who do not work in fact cannot work. They likely fall into one or more of these categories: They are children, seniors, full-time students, full-time caregivers, and/or disabled. (Separately, it is important to note that disabled adults have a far higher rate of poverty than non-disabled adults, at 22.3% and 8.9%, respectively.) For instance, analysis using 2018 Census data found that among individuals living in poverty, 31% were children, 13% were seniors, 11% were disabled, 8% were caregivers, and 7% were students (Bauer, Moss, & Shambaugh 2019).



This pie chart displays characteristics of people in poverty using 2018 Census data (the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement). How does it challenge the idea that people in poverty refuse to work because they're lazy or lack motivation?

Source: Adapted from Bauer, Moss, Shambaugh 2019, "Figure 1. Characteristics of Individuals Living in Poverty, 2018"

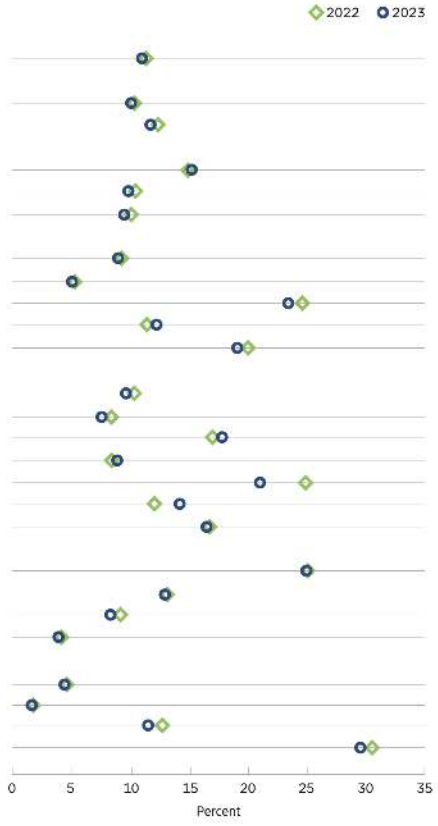
While it is true that poverty rates are higher for people who do not work (29.7% in 2023) than for those who work part-time year-round (11.7%) and who work full-time year-round (1.8%) (Shrider 2024), most people in poverty who are not working for pay aren't doing so due to their age, disability, or other responsibilities (caregiving or school).

Fluctuation in Poverty Rates

Poverty rates fluctuate, sometimes quite rapidly, including for specific social groups. When we discuss changes, we focus on those that are *statistically significant*, meaning there was a meaningful change (denoted by an asterisk under the 'change' column in the chart below). For instance, between 2022 and 2023, there was statistically significant decrease in poverty for the white population, women, adults (aged 18 to 64), and those with some college education. In contrast, poverty rates grew at a statistically significant rate for mixed race individuals (Shrider 2024). The data chart below displays more changes between 2022 and 2023, for a variety of areas of social location and other characteristics.

Figure 2.
People in Poverty Using the Official Poverty Measure: 2022 to 2023

ALL PEOPLE	2022	2023	Change
Total	11.5	11.1	*-0.4
Sex			
Male	10.5	10.2	-0.3
Female	12.5	11.9	*-0.5
Age			
Under 18 years	15.0	15.3	0.3
18 to 64 years	10.6	10.0	*-0.6
65 years and older	10.2	9.7	-0.5
Type of Unit			
In primary families	9.4	9.1	-0.3
In married-couple families	5.4	5.2	-0.3
In female-householder families	24.7	23.6	-1.1
In male-householder families	11.6	12.4	0.7
Unrelated individuals	20.1	19.2	*-0.9
Race and Hispanic Origin			
White	10.5	9.7	*-0.7
White, not Hispanic	8.6	7.7	*-0.9
Black	17.1	17.9	0.7
Asian	8.6	9.1	0.4
American Indian and Alaska Native	25.0	21.2	-3.8
Two or More Races	12.2	14.4	*2.2
Hispanic (any race)	16.9	16.6	-0.2
Educational Attainment[1]			
No high school diploma	25.2	25.1	-0.1
High school, no college	13.3	13.1	-0.2
Some college	9.3	8.5	*-0.9
Bachelor's degree or higher	4.3	4.0	-0.2
Work Experience[2]			
All workers	4.8	4.5	*-0.3
Worked full-time, year-round	1.9	1.8	-0.1
Less than full-time, year-round	12.8	11.7	*-1.1
Did not work	30.7	29.7	-0.9



* An asterisk preceding an estimate indicates change is statistically different from zero at the 90 percent confidence level.
[1] Population limited to individuals 25 years and older. In 2023, the overall poverty rate for this group was 9.5 percent.
[2] Population limited to 18- to 64-year-olds. In 2023, the overall poverty rate for this group was 10.0 percent.
Note: Population as of March of the following year. Details may not sum to totals due to rounding. More details available in Tables A-1 and A-2.
More information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions is available at <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/techdocs/cpsmar24.pdf>.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2023 and 2024 Annual Social and Economic Supplements (CPS ASEC).

For each row in this chart, the blue dot being on the right side indicates that the poverty rate increased from the year prior (it was higher in 2023 than in 2022), whereas the green diamond being on the right side indicates that the poverty rate decreased (it was higher in 2022 than in 2023). Which social groups saw meaningful changes between 2022 and 2023?

Source: Shrider 2024

Additionally, as we have seen, poverty can be measured in a variety of ways. Thus, it is good practice to examine current poverty rates directly from reliable data sources (e.g., U.S. Census, World Bank, OECD, and other reputable research organizations), and ensure that any comparisons made between social groups use the same measurement of poverty.

Experiencing poverty or living near the poverty line means facing an array of challenges related to health, medical care, housing, education, and more. Below we discuss many examples of the consequences of poverty.

Consequences of Poverty

Poverty can have devastating consequences for the people who live in it. Researchers have found that poverty is associated with several types of material hardship, including for health, housing, food, payment of bills, neighborhood problems, and more (Iceland, Kovach, & Creamer 2021). Poverty and income are associated with adulthood socioeconomic status, a variety of health

and educational outcomes, and other outcomes such as for neighborhood or family problems (Bakalar 2011; Duncan & Magnuson 2011; Hair, Hanson, & Wolfe 2015; Mode, Evans, & Zonderman 2016; Ratcliffe & McKernan 2010).

Children

Many 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% of children who were never poor end up being poor as young adults, 32% of poor children are poor as young adults (Ratcliffe & McKernan 2010).



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

One 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 (men only)
- were five times as likely to have borne a child (women only).

Below we discuss other examples of consequences of poverty, focusing on several broad areas: Health and Health Care, Education, Housing, Crime, and Families.

Health

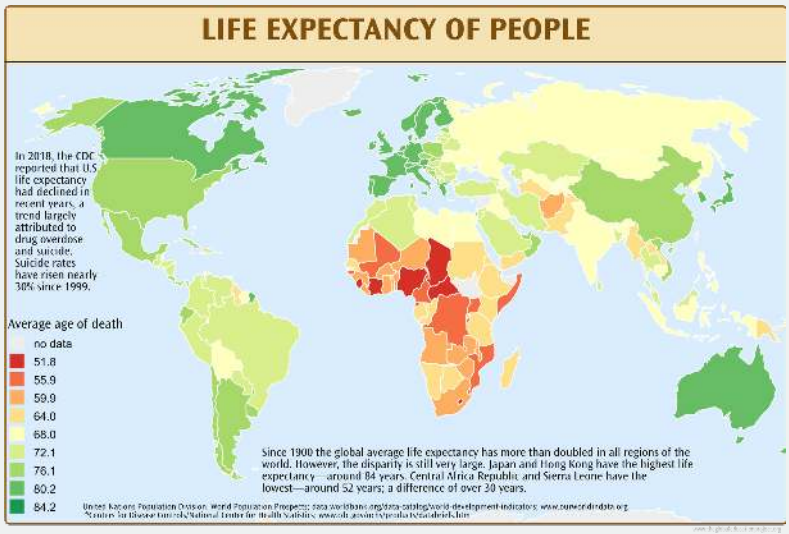
The poor are more likely to have many kinds of health problems, including infant mortality, earlier adulthood mortality, and mental illness, and they are also more likely to receive inadequate medical care. Poor children are more likely to have inadequate nutrition and, partly for this reason, to suffer 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.

One indicator of health outcomes is **mortality**, which measures deaths. Poverty is associated with higher mortality. One study found that in the US in 2019, current poverty was associated with approximately 183,000 deaths and cumulative (sustained) poverty was associated with 295,431 deaths (among people aged 15 years or older). This association was particularly strong between ages 40 to 70. Cumulative poverty was found to be associated with approximately 60% greater mortality than current poverty (Brady, Kohler, & Zheng 2023).

Neighborhood economic status is also associated with mortality, with higher neighborhood-level economic status decreasing mortality rates. Notably, the association between poverty and mortality varies by race and gender, with Black men living in poverty having the highest rates of mortality (Mode, Evans, & Zonderman 2016).

Taking a global perspective, life expectancy differs among nations, and poverty affects a nation's overall life expectancy to a startling degree. Life expectancy is highest in North America, Western Europe, and certain other regions of the world and lowest in Africa, where people may live shorter lives by 30 years than in other regions of the world (Global Education Project N.d). As discussed on the Overview page, global poverty is concentrated in Africa.

Average Life Expectancy Across the Globe

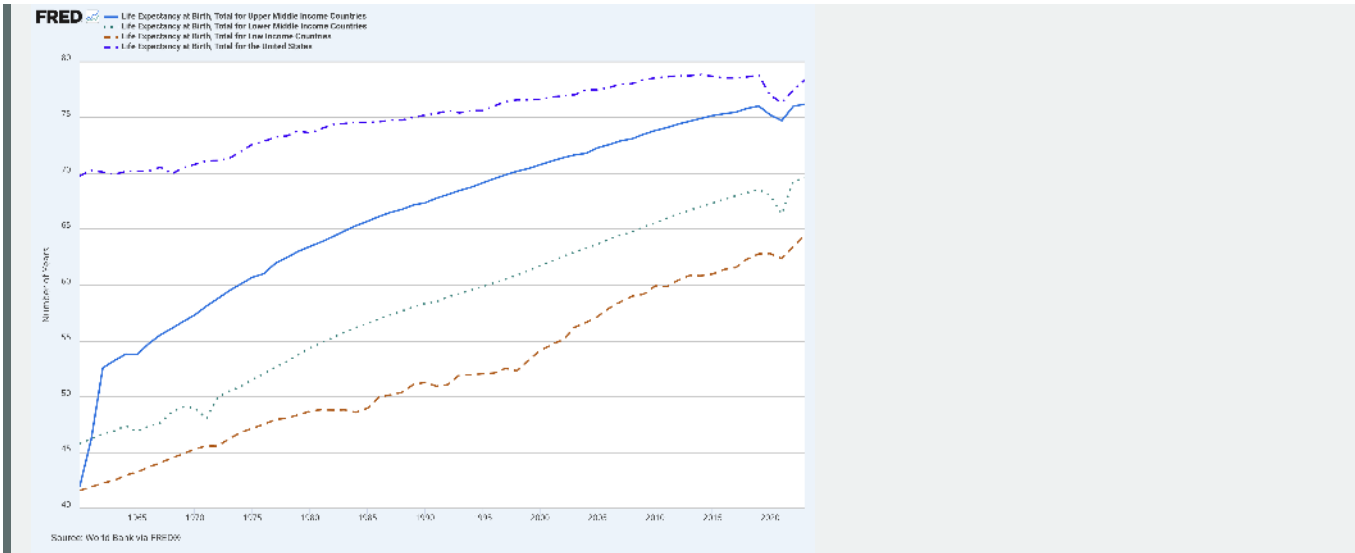


Life expectancy has increased worldwide over the past several decades; however, disparities remain. How does this map compare to the map of global economic inequality?

Source: Global Education Project N.d; data from United Nations Population Division, World Population Prospects, Centers for Disease Control, and National Center for Health Statistics

Another way of visualizing the relationship between global poverty and life expectancy appears in the figure below, which depicts average life expectancy at birth for upper-middle-income nations, lower-middle-income nations, low-income nations, and the United States alone (data for upper-income nations was not available). Life expectancy for low-income nations was 64.5 years in 2023, compared to 76.2 years for upper-middle-income nations and 78.4 years for the US. You may explore this interactive graph yourself at its FRED Graph page of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Country Income and Life Expectancy



This chart compares life expectancy at birth for three levels of country income as well as the US, from 1960 to 2023. Life expectancy has risen dramatically across all country income levels, though disparities remain.

Source: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2025; data from World Bank

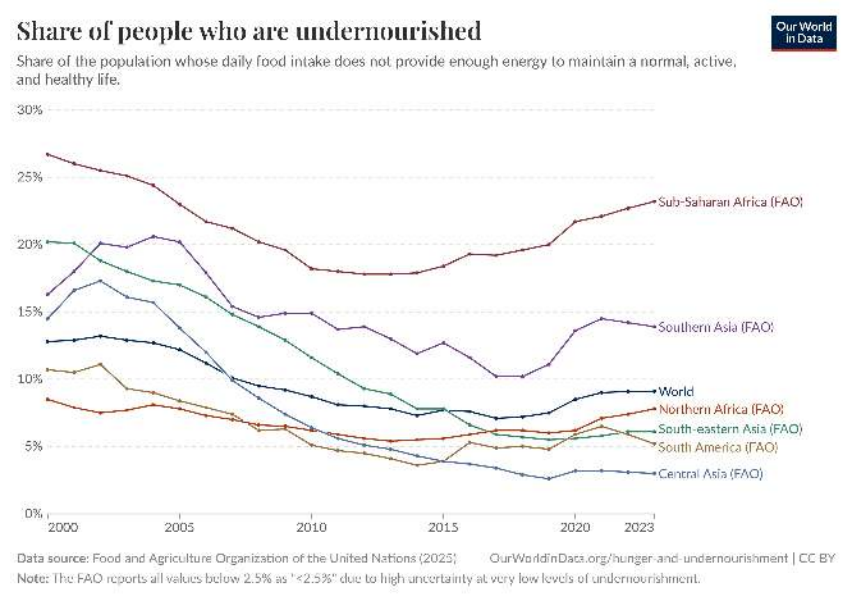
A key contributor to life expectancy and also a significant consequence of global poverty in its own right is child mortality, the number of children who die before age 5 per 1,000 children. The child morality rate in African nations is far higher than in other regions of the world. UNICEF (2025) explains, "A child born in sub-Saharan Africa is, on average, 18 times more likely to die before the age of 5 than one born in Australia and New Zealand. The risk of under-five death in the highest-mortality country is 80 times greater than in the lowest."

Another measure of mortality associated with poverty is **maternal mortality**, or the number of women who die during childbirth for every 100,000 live births. Maternal mortality increased recently in the US, from a rate of 9.9 deaths (per 100,000 live births) in 1999 to a rate of 17.4 deaths in 2018. There are strong racial differences in the US maternal mortality rate: In 2018 Black childbearers were at a 2.4 times higher risk of maternal mortality than white childbearers. Moreover, poverty is related to this outcome: There was a 120% higher risk of material mortality in the most-deprived areas than in the most-affluent areas, measured with county-level socioeconomic status deprivation indices (Singh 2020).

Every day in 2023, over 700 women died worldwide from preventable pregnancy- and childbirth-related causes, amounting to 260,000 childbearers dying during or following pregnancy or childbirth. Around 92% of these deaths occurred in low-income and lower-middle-income countries, with the great majority in Sub-Saharan Africa (around 70%) followed by southern Asia (around 17%) (WHO 2025). Women in poor nations have been found to be 42 times more likely than those in wealthy nations to die from complications during pregnancy or childbirth (World Bank, 2012).

In addition to mortality, poverty impacts how people eat. In the US in 2023, 13.5% of families – 18 million households – experienced **food insecurity**, in which they "were uncertain of having or unable to acquire enough food to meet the needs of all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food" (USDA 2025). Two related health indicators are *hunger* and *malnutrition* or undernourishment, when people do not have a sufficient daily food intake. Hunger is the result of a lack of food, whereas malnutrition can stem from a lack of food but also may be due to a poor diet (UNICEF USA 2025). Malnutrition is exacerbated by infections and diseases such as diarrhea that sap the body of essential nutrients.

In 2023, 1 in 11 people across the globe faced hunger, around 733 million people, with as high as 1 in 5 in Africa facing hunger. More specifically, the estimated proportion of the population facing hunger in Africa is 20.4%, compared with 8.1% in Asia, 6.2% in Latin America and the Caribbean, 7.3% in Oceania, and <2.5% in North America and Europe (WHO 2024). Despite gains in other areas, hunger has continued to rise in most subregions of Africa and in areas of Asia.

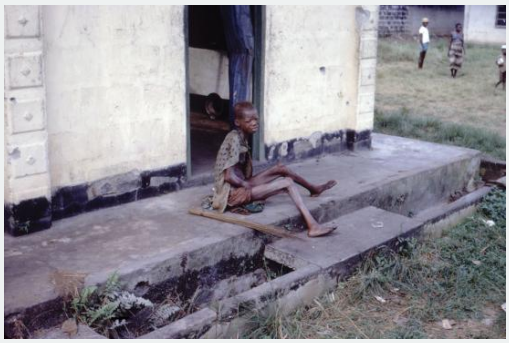


This chart displays the proportion of undernourished people between 2000 and 2023 by world region. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of undernourishment of any world region, as well as concentrated poverty as we have seen.

"Number of people who are undernourished" by Our World in Data is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Focusing on children, over 82% of families with children (29.7 million households) were food secure in 2023, and in 374,000 households, one or more child experienced reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns at some time during the year, referred to as *very low food security* (USDA 2025). For children under age 5, over 190 million children across the globe experience undernutrition (UNICEF USA 2025).

Children who are malnourished are at much greater risk for fat and muscle loss, brain damage, blindness, and death. 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 millions of deaths of children annually (UNICEF 2006; WHO 2010). It also impacts children's educational and other outcomes: "All forms of malnutrition threaten a child's ability to survive and thrive. Well-nourished children do better in school, are better able to participate in their communities and are more resilient against disease, disasters and other emergencies" (UNICEF USA 2025).



Over 700 million people worldwide face hunger, and over 190 million children are undernourished. What do you think that a rich nation like the U.S. could do to help alleviate these global problems?

Image courtesy of Dr. Lyle Conrad at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ID# 6874

Two other indicators of a nation's health are access to safe drinking-water, sanitation, and hygiene ('safe WASH'). Poor nations are much less likely than wealthier nations to have adequate access to safe WASH. When people lack this access, they are at a greater risk for life-threatening diarrhea, serious infectious diseases such as cholera and typhoid, and parasitic diseases such as schistosomiasis (WHO 2010, 2025). 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.

Education

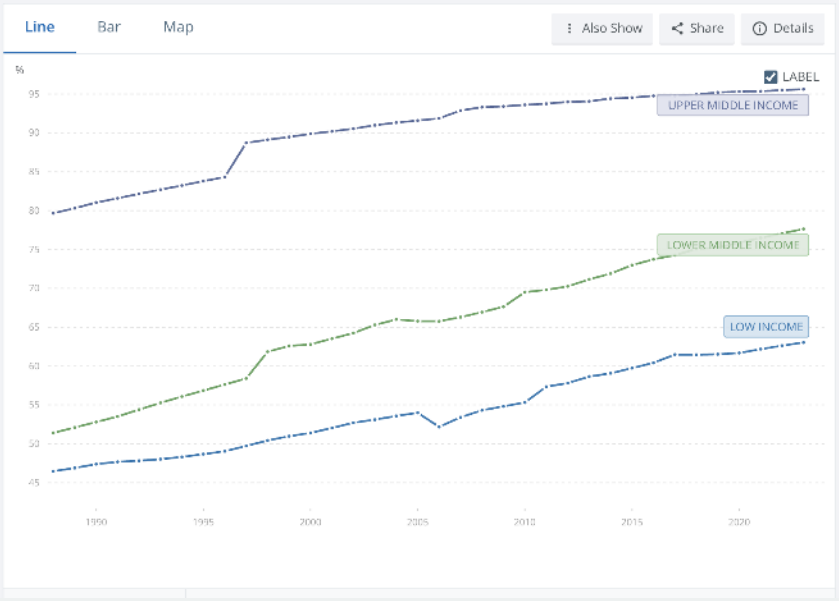
Poverty also inhibits children's educational success. Children from low-income or impoverished families often have lower levels of *school readiness*, starting school behind children from more affluent families. More specifically, research consistently finds that poverty decreases school readiness via several factors: The incidence, depth, duration, and timing of poverty, community characteristics (such as crime and neighborhood poverty levels), and how poverty impacts children's social networks (family, friends, and neighbors). Researchers Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller (2007: 702) explain:

> "A child's home has a particularly strong impact on school readiness. Children from low-income families often do not receive the stimulation and do not learn the social skills required to prepare them for school. Typical problems are parental inconsistency (with regard to daily routines and parenting), frequent changes of primary caregivers, lack of supervision and poor role modelling. Very often, the parents of these children also lack support."

Additionally, poor children may go to rundown schools with inadequate facilities where they receive inadequate schooling, in part due to the educational funding structure in the US, which relies on neighborhood property taxes. In short, richer neighborhoods have better funded schools whereas low-income neighborhoods have lower funded schools. Children from low-income families are also less likely than those from higher income families to graduate from high school or to go to college. One study found that only 62% of persistently poor children complete high school by age 20, compared to 90% of children who are never poor (Ratcliffe & Kalish 2017). A lack of education in turn may keep them and their own children in poverty, helping ensure a cycle of *generational poverty*.

For a global perspective, the World Bank (2021) warns: "In recent years, it has become clear that many children around the world are not learning to read proficiently. Even though most children are in school, a large proportion are not acquiring fundamental skills. Moreover, 260 million children are not even in school. This is the leading edge of a learning crisis..." The organization has proposed the concept of **learning poverty** to describe when children are unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of 10 years. They find that over half (53%) of children in low- and middle-income nations are unable to read and understand a simple story by the end of their primary schooling, and that the level is as high as 80% in low-income nations (World Bank 2021).

A similar education-related measurement is **adult literacy**, the percentage of people 15 and older who can read and write a simple sentence. Per the chart below, once again we see that people in low-income and lower-middle-income nations are worse off. In poor nations in 2023, only about 63% of adults (aged 15+) were literate, whereas in upper-middle-income nations the rate was 96% (World Bank 2024). 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.



This chart displays adult literacy levels for low-income, lower-middle-income, and upper-middle income nations (upper-income data were not available). What do you think we can do to increase literacy rates, particularly in low-income nations?

Source: World Bank 2024

Housing

The poor are, not surprisingly, more likely to be cost-burdened, live in unsafe housing, unable to buy their own homes, and houseless than the non-poor. The poor also 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 is part of a larger *housing crisis*, a major national social problem.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), defines **cost-burdened households** as those that spend more than 30% of their income on their rent or mortgage and other housing costs. In 2023, nearly half (49.7%) of US households who are renters – which the great majority of the poor are – spent more than 30% of their income on housing, amounting to over 21 million renter-households (Census 2024c). Being cost-burdened leaves far less money for other expenses, including those related to health and education as discussed above, as well as childcare, transportation, and other major and daily expenses.

Additionally, around 26 million people in the US experience being unhoused at some point during their lives (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al. 2018). We will discuss *houselessness* and other housing issues in more detail in the following chapter on Neighborhoods and Housing.

Crime

Crime and incarceration are associated with family income. In short, being raised in a poor family increases the risk of crime and incarceration. Senior Fellows at the Brookings Institute found that boys from low-income families – the lowest 10% of the income distribution – were 20 times more likely to be in prison on a given day in their early 30s than those from high-income families. They estimated that nearly 1 in 10 of the lowest-income boys are incarcerated when they reach age 30 (Looney & Turner 2018).

As we will discuss in the Crime and Social Control chapter, *criminalization* and incarceration are considered by sociologists and other social scientists to be forms of *social control* that fuel social inequalities. People in poverty who become incarcerated

experience the loss of rights, which can further perpetuate their low socioeconomic status.

Family Problems

The poor are at greater risk for family problems such as divorce and domestic violence (Bonomi et al. 2014; Karney et al. 2022). A major reason for many of the problems families experience is stress. Even in families that are not poor, running a household, caring for children, and trying to pay bills can cause stress. Families that are poor typically experience more stress because of their poverty, so the ordinary stresses of family life become even more intense. Compounding this situation, when these problems occur, poor families have fewer resources than wealthier families to deal with these problems. We will discuss family problems further in the Family chapter.

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 (2011: 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."

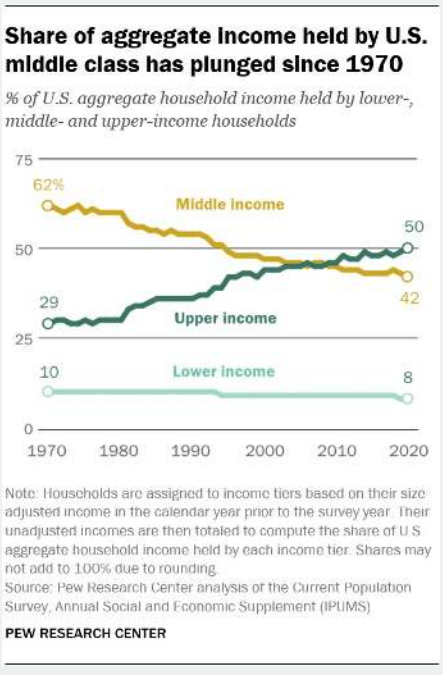
In short, poverty can change the way the brain develops in young children. The major reason for this effect is stress. Children growing up in poverty experience multiple stressful events: neighborhood crime and drug use; divorce, parental conflict, and other family problems, including abuse and neglect 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: 2).

One way poverty gets "under children's skin" is as follows (Evans, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov 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 (2011: 12) 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 (2011: 27) 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.

Economic Inequality

Economic inequality in the US has increased over the last five decades. The middle-class is slowly shrinking, as shown in the chart below, while those in upper-income households are earning significantly more. More people are becoming *downwardly mobile*, moving into a lower class. If you would like more details on this transition, you can explore this report from Pew Research: How the American Middle Class Has Changed in the Past Five Decades.

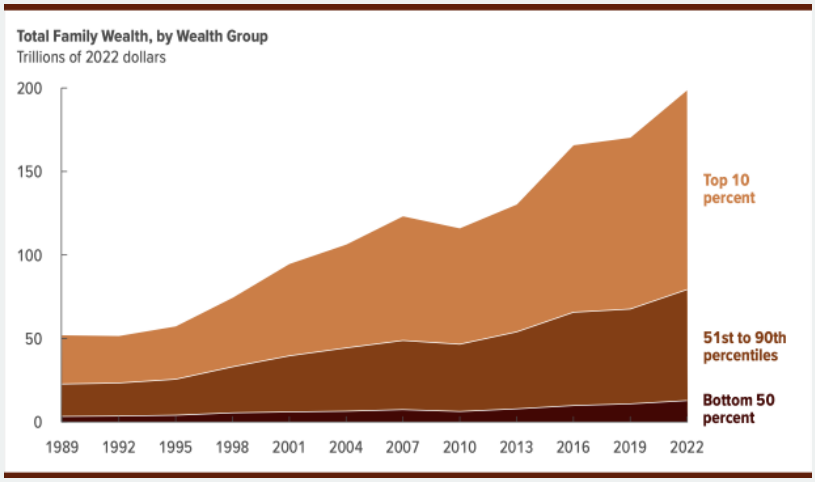


Middle-class income share has plummeted. In 1970, middle-income households made 62% of the US income. By 2020, their share fell to 42%. How do you think this might impact housing stability?

"Share of aggregate income held by U.S middle class has plunged since 1970" from How the American middle class has changed in the past five decades © Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. is licensed under the Center's Terms of Use

Wealth inequality in the US is even more pronounced, and growing. According to Robin DiAngelo, “More and more wealth is being concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. The US has the highest level of income inequality among G7 countries. The wealth gap between America’s richest and poorest families more than doubled from 1980 to 2016” (DiAngelo 2021:156).

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) provides data on the wealthiest 10%, the bottom 50%, and those in between. In 2022, families in the top 10% of the distribution held 60% of all wealth in the nation, and families in the bottom half held only 6% of the nation's wealth. In the chart below, we see that the top 10% saw their wealth grow at a far higher rate than all others, especially in relation to the bottom half (CBO 2024). Thus, family wealth has grown far faster for those at the top of the class hierarchy than everyone else. You may check out an interactive data chart at the CBO's Trends in the Distribution of Family Wealth page.



This chart displays family wealth trends of the top 10%, bottom 50%, and all families in between. What do you think allowed for the wealthiest families to grow their wealth much faster than the rest of the population?

Source: Congressional Budget Office (CBO) 2024

Why did economic inequality increase so dramatically since the 1980s? The loss of manufacturing jobs and unions accounts for some of this increase, as well as the rise of low-wage service positions. As factories shut down and moved overseas, a process called **offshoring**, Americans experienced the loss of all levels of jobs at these factories. Offshoring occurs in large part because it's cheaper for corporations to operate in lower-income nations – think of what corporations likely don't have to provide there: Retirement benefits, health insurance, vacation days, decent wages, and workplace safety mechanisms. Another process that occurred in the 1980s is **deunionization**, or the decline in the strength of unions, which serve to protect workers such as fighting for higher pay, better benefits, and safer work conditions. Deunionization places more power in the hands of corporations and weakens worker power.

Another reason for growing economic inequality is the increase in service positions, which are unstable and low-paid. In these positions, such as retail or fast food workers, employees may only be able to work part time, are 'disposable' (meaning they can be fired for little cause and replaced with another worker), and earn very low wages, sometimes as low as the federal minimum wage of $7.25 per hour. As the rise of service positions meant low pay for more workers at the low end of the income distribution, CEOs at the high end began earning an astronomical amount of compensation, leading to an extreme gap between our poorest and our richest individuals.

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 other families. To be more specific, they account for only 0.7% of the income of the bottom four-fifths of the nation’s families, but for 18.8% of the income of the top fifth, 38.2% of the top 1%, and a striking 51.9% of the top 0.1% (Hungerford 2011). In a related statistic, three-fourths of all capital gains are received by

the top 1% (Krugman 2012). Relative to its national wealth, the US is the lowest-taxed industrial democracy in the world (Leonhardt 2012).

In addition, at various periods the wealthiest have paid far less in taxes than other Americans. Many very wealthy families and individuals pay a lower percentage of their income in taxes than middle-class and upper-middle-class families do because so much of the wealthiest families' income is from dividends and capital gains. In fact, the four hundred wealthiest families and individuals in the country paid only 18.1% of their income in federal tax in 2008, and only 16.6% the year prior (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: 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 feels, "Such low taxes on the very rich are indefensible" (Krugman 2012: 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% for the poorest fifth but by 65% for the wealthiest fifth (excluding the top 1%), and it also grew by a whopping 275% for families in the top 1 percent (Congressional Budget Office 2011). As a result, economic inequality increased.

Recently, the second Trump administration again expanded tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans, while cutting government aid for the poorest Americans (Parlapiano et al. 2025). You may learn more about this bill by checking out the New York Times article Everything in Trump's Big Tax and Spending Law, and How Much It Will Cost or Save.

Consequences of Economic Inequality

Why should we care if economic inequality has increased and if the US has the highest degree of inequality of all industrial democracies? One answer is that it is a matter of fairness. The US 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 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. Think of the Trump administration tax breaks mentioned above – the less taxes wealthy people pay, the less funding for government programs to help the poor. In fact, it is widely understood that the administration cut those government programs to make room for tax cuts. For the same reason, high economic inequality is also associated with a shrinking of the middle-class. In the US, as both poverty (and near poverty) and wealth have increased, the size of the middle-class has decreased.

Second, a high degree of economic inequality is also associated with low **social mobility**, the movement of people up or down the socioeconomic ladder. As noted earlier, the US is the most economically unequal of all industrial democracies. It also has less upward social 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, which is contributes greatly to the strength of 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 former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers 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: 10).

Additionally, we see economic inequality impact other social problems, such as for housing. One interesting way that we see this inequality affecting housing, which we will discuss further in the next chapter, is the impact of the increase in vacation rentals. While Airbnb, VRBO, and other vacation rental and home share options may increase the number of inexpensive places to stay in an area, they reduce the number of long-term rental units. They also tend to increase the rental prices, decreasing the supply of affordable housing. Wealthy people benefit from these options because they make more rental income on properties they own.

People who most need affordable housing are pushed out of the rental markets because they can't afford to stay (Barron, Kung, and Proserpio 2020; Lee 2016).

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 is related to our ability to survive and thrive.

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Strategies to Address Poverty and Economic Inequality

The United States government greatly reduced poverty during the 1960s through a series of programs and policies. The poverty rate declined from 22.2% in 1960 to 11.1% in 2023, with some fluctuation in between. Other democracies have much lower poverty rates than the US because, as many scholars believe, they have better funded and more extensive programs to help their poor (Brady 2009; Russell 2011). Lessons from the 1960s-70s and the experience of other democracies are clear: It is possible to reduce poverty 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 a low in 1973 is that the US began cutting back on the programs and services it had provided (Soss et. al. 2007). Another major reason is that changes in the national economy during the past several 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 US, they have continued to try to help their poor rather than neglect them.

To renew the US effort to help the poor, it is essential that facts about poverty become better known so that a fundamental shift in thinking about poverty and the poor can occur. Rank (2011) says that one aspect of this shift must include the recognition 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 an "injustice of a substantial magnitude.," or more simply put, a "moral outrage."

> Quote
>
> 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.
>
> – Mark Rank (2011), poverty expert

Sociologist Joe 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. 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 US, 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 US will not increase its antipoverty efforts unless a new wave of political activity by and on behalf of the poor arises.

In the sections below, we discuss a variety of programs, policies, and practices that help address poverty and economic inequality. We end with a discussion of the role of individual agency and collective action.

Antipoverty Programs and Policies

What types of programs and policies show promise for effectively reducing poverty? A sociological understanding of poverty emphasizes its structural basis – poverty is rooted in social, political, and economic structures of society rather than in the lack of willpower, laziness, or other moral failings of poor individuals themselves. Individuals born into poverty face a lack of opportunity from their first months up through adulthood, and poverty becomes a self-perpetuating, vicious cycle.

This perspective 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; 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 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" (Cancian & Danziger 2009: 32).

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.
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.



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

Economic security programs have been found to reduce poverty, and are increasingly doing so (Trisi & Saenz 2021). For instance, governmental programs lowered poverty among Black families by 16 percentage points and among white and Latinx families by 12 percentage points in 2017. These programs lowered poverty even further for children, by 35 percentage points for Black children, 32 points for Latinx children, and 10 points for white children. The authors explain:

> "Economic security programs such as Social Security, food assistance, tax credits, and housing assistance can help provide opportunity by ameliorating short-term poverty and hardship and, by doing so, improving children’s long-term outcomes. Over the last half-century, these assistance programs have reduced poverty for millions of people – including children, who are highly susceptible to poverty’s ill effects" (Trisi & Saenz 2021).

Let's explore the The Child Tax Credit (CTC) and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) as examples.

The CTC has been described as "one of the single best tools in our toolbox to fight child poverty" (Hamad, quoted in Sobotko 2024). The expansion of the program during the COVID-19 pandemic involved offering benefits to low-income families (rather than primarily to middle- and high-income families has it had for decades) and distributing funds on a monthly basis rather than in a lump sum after a tax return. After this expansion, child poverty rates declined dramatically, by nearly half, though they rose again once it expired at the end of 2021 (Sobotko 2024).

The EITC is an extensive antipoverty program that has been successful in raising many families out of poverty annually. It involves a tax credit for low- to moderate-income filers, which may reduce taxes owed and increase the annual refund, and varies according to whether the filer has children or dependents or is disabled (IRS 2025).

These tax credits reduce poverty. For instance, social scientist Rita Hamad's research team found that the expansion of the CTC was found to reduce anxiety and depression among low-income parents, which may also increase mental health for their children, and

that the EITC is associated with positive outcomes for child development and childbearing (Sobotko 2024). Researchers at the Brookings Institute (Duncan & Holzer 2023) found that the EITC strengthens children's educational outcomes and chances of upward social mobility.

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.

Sources: Blitstein 2009; Mink 2008; Parrott & Sherman 2008; Rivera 2008

Researchers Ratcliffe and Kalish (2017) focus on how to improve the economic success of persistently poor children. They recommend utilizing hospitals to help connect families with resources, such as on-site staff connecting low-income patients to cash and food assistance or public health insurance. They also suggest expanding housing voucher programs, helping enroll parents into subsidized employment or education and training programs, basing Supplemental Security Income on the needs of whole families, and addressing conditions of poor neighborhoods through 'place-conscious' initiatives coordinated by community groups.

A report from the Brookings Institute (Duncan & Holzer 2023) also provides recommendations for improving the lives of children and reducing intergenerational poverty. Based on research, the authors recommend that strengthening our schools would help. More specifically, reducing harsh punishments of students of color (which we will return to in the Education chapter), increasing the diversity of the teacher workforce, and increasing access to college or high-quality occupational trainings for low-income youth would help reduce intergenerational poverty. For health, they recommend that Medicaid cover all low-income parents and children, that programs to provide meals to children be expanded such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

To learn more about recommended programs, policies, and practices to reduce poverty, you may read The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities' testimony The Nation Has Made Progress Against Poverty But Policy Advances Are Needed to Reduce Still-High Hardship or the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's page Policy and Programs to Reduce Intergenerational Poverty.

Tax Codes and Wages

The degree of economic inequality has grown during the past few decades 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, many corporations pay a much lower percentage than required per law because of various loopholes and shelters in the federal tax code. From 2009 to 2011, 280 corporations paid an average of only 18.5% of their profits in federal taxes, despite that corporations were supposed to pay 35%, 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 instance, in ten-year period beginning in 2002, General Electric paid only 2.3% of its profits in federal taxes.

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: B1).

Additionally, the federal minimum wage has remained at $7.25 per hour since 2009, and has not adjusted for inflation. Raising the minimum wage would mean that households have more income to spend after paying rent or the mortgage, including heat for the home, nutritious food for children, and other necessities that help families survive and thrive.

Global Poverty

International aid programs may help reduce poverty worldwide, and help address its consequences such as providing medicine and food to families in low-income nations. One promising trend has been a switch from macro efforts focusing on infrastructure problems and on social institutions (such as schools) to micro efforts such as providing cash payments or small loans directly to poor people in poor nations – a practice called *microfinancing* – or giving them materials to improve health such as bed nets to prevent diseases from mosquitos (Banerjee & Duflo 2011; Hanlon, Barrientos, & Hulme 2010; Karlan & Appel 2011). However, the evidence on the success of these efforts is mixed (Bennett, 2009; The Economist 2010). Much more to help the world's poor certainly needs to be done.

In this regard, sociology's structural approach 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 social class, gender, race, and other forms of inequality play in perpetuating global poverty. For global poverty to be reduced, social inequality must be reduced.

Writers Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (2010) emphasize the need to focus efforts to reduce global poverty of women. We have already seen one reason this emphasis makes sense: Women are 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. This indicates that aid to women will help in many ways.

Individual Agency and Collective Action

As Soss (2011) 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." In other words, we must engage in collective action to achieve social change. One major national social movement attempted to address economic inequality by positioning 'us' against the richest people.

In 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement gave national attention to extreme 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. Social movements like this can bring global attention to the issue of economic inequality and its ties to capitalism, discussed further in the Work and Economy chapter.

✔ Social Movement Profile

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 US and hundreds more across the globe. “We are the 99%,” they said again and again, as 'occupy' became a verb heard repeatedly throughout the nation.

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 poll by the Pew Research Center (Pew 2011), 44% of Americans supported the Occupy Wall Street movement, while 35% opposed it. Almost half (48%) said they agreed with the concerns raised by the movement. In the same poll, 61% said the US economic system “unfairly favors the wealthy,” while 36% said it was fair to all Americans. In a related area, 77% 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% of Democrats agreed that a few rich people and corporations have too much power, compared to 80% of Independents and 53% 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

However, taking collective action through social movement activities is not the only way that individuals can help. Any one person can change the lives of people in poverty, for instance, if they choose to use their individual agency. A person with some free time can volunteer at a shelter or community clinic, call or write lawmakers, or attend town hall meetings. A person with extra income can develop a program to feed hungry children or adults, donate to organizations working toward eradicating poverty, or provide microloans such as those discussed above or gift funds through Mutual Aid programs. Though these actions may not necessarily address the root causes of the problem, they do address the consequences of the problem such as hunger or lack of medical care, and they can help move the needle in the right direction.

Below is one example of a single person who developed a program to feed hungry children experiencing houselessness. What else can individuals do?

✔ 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. Because they cannot afford the deposit for an apartment, the motels are their only alternative to houselessness (discussed further in the next chapter). 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.

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Review of Poverty and Economic Inequality

Summary

1. **Poverty**, the state of lacking material and social resources, is measured by the US government with a calculation that considers the cost of food and family size. This measure has several limitations such as how it fails to capture other significant costs today, does not adjust for the cost of living, often produces lower poverty rates than newer measures, and neglects the experience of people living right above the poverty line who live in similarly difficult circumstances.
2. Though poverty has come down since 1960, the poverty rate is high in the US with a rate consistently over 10% of the population, specifically at 11.1% in 2023 or 38.6 million Americans. This contrasts sharply with the income and wealth controlled by the richest Americans: The top 10% control over two-thirds of the nation's household wealth. This gap between the rich and the poor is called **economic inequality**, and it has been increasing. Despite that poverty is far nigher in other nations such as South Sudan (82.3%), the US has a high poverty rate among wealthy industrialized nations.
3. To explain poverty and economic inequality, the functionalist perspective says that **social 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 that stratification exists because of discrimination against, and blocked opportunities for, the 'have-nots' of society. Symbolic interactionism does not necessarily try to explain why poverty or economic inequality exist, but does attempt to understand the experience of being poor including meanings and stereotypes.
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. Sociology aligns with structuralist explanations as it focuses on social forces.
5. There is wide variation in poverty rates in the US. Children, people of color, people in the South, and single-parent families headed by women have especially high poverty rates, along with others. 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.
6. Consequences of poverty include that children raised in poverty are more likely to drop out of school, experience employment difficulties, and be in poverty themselves, and consequences for children and adults include lower life expectancy, higher maternal mortality, higher risk of food insecurity, lower levels of education and literacy, more housing problems, higher rates of neighborhood crime, and family problems such as violence and divorce.
7. Economic inequality has been increasing in the US for over four decades for several reasons such as **offshoring**, **deunionization**, the growth of service positions, and changes in policy including tax rates. Consequently, more Americans may experience blocked upward **social mobility** – moving up in the social class hierarchy, political and social polarization may accelerate, economic growth may slow as the middle-class shrinks, more residents encounter housing challenges, and it violates American values of equality and fairness.
8. A sociological perspective holds that poverty reduction could occur if the structural causes of poverty are successfully addressed. A variety of policies and programs have or may reduce poverty such as Social Security, the Child Tax Credit, and the Earned Income Tax Credit. Other practices include connecting families with resources, improving educational conditions for children, and providing microloans to low-income individuals. To reduce poverty and economic inequality, reverting the dismantling of the social safety net, increasing wages, and revising tax codes would support those at the lowest end of the economic hierarchy and redistribute the income and wealth hoarded by those at the top. Using our individual agency and engaging in collective action such as participating in social movements can also help reduce poverty and the gap between the rich and the poor.

Questions

1. How would you summarize to another person the limitations of the U.S. official poverty measure?
2. Estimate what a family of four (2 parents + 2 young children) in your area would have to pay annually for food, clothing, shelter, housing, childcare, transportation, electric, and other necessities of life – how does this sum of money compare with the current official poverty line for a family of four?
3. Why does the structural view of poverty align more closely with a sociological perspective than the individual view, and with this in mind, which classical theoretical perspective do you think best frames or explains poverty?
4. Suppose you could wave a magic wand and invent a society where everyone had about the same income no matter which job they performed – do you think that it would be difficult to persuade enough people to become physicians or to pursue other

important careers, and why so?
5. How would you explain to a friend that it is inaccurate to assume poor people lack the motivation to work?
6. What do you think are the most pressing consequences of poverty, and why are those the most pressing?
7. How would you summarize the causes and consequences of increasing economic inequality?
8. How would you describe the cultural changes (hint: in the way we think about poor people) and structural changes that must occur to effectively address poverty?
9. Which three policies, programs, or practices that could reduce poverty do you think are the most promising, and why?

Action Steps

1. Use your sociological imagination: When others blame the poor for their situation or perpetuate stereotypes about poor people, help them connect poverty to larger social forces and reframe it from a personal condition to a social problem.
2. Support nonprofits and similar organizations: Contribute money or volunteering time to a local, state, or national organization that provides various kinds of aid to the poor.
3. Support local students: Organize a food and/or clothing pantry on your campus, or if there already is one, learn how to help keep the pantry stocked throughout the academic year.
4. Use your individual agency: Identify several local, state, and federal officials that work on policy or programs, find out how to email or call them, and write and email or call (leave a voicemail) that encourages them to expand antipoverty programs.
5. Engage in collective action: Figure out when the next demonstration, protest, or march related to poverty or economic inequality is nearby, research how to participate safely, and participate in the event.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Neighborhoods and Housing

- Overview of Neighborhood and Housing Problems
- Theoretical Perspectives on Neighborhoods and Housing
- Patterns of Neighborhood and Housing Problems
- Strategies to Address Neighborhood and Housing Problems
- Review of Neighborhoods and Housing
- References for Neighborhoods and Housing

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Overview of Neighborhood and Housing Problems

Learning Objectives

- Define terms that describe specific neighborhood and housing problems such as racial residential segregation and housing insecurity.
- Explain how the three major sociological perspectives frame neighborhood and housing problems.
- Describe a historical and a contemporary perspective on racial residential segregation.
- Understand the extent and experience of housing insecurity and houselessness.
- Analyze how social location connects to neighborhood and housing problems.
- List several consequences of neighborhood and housing problems.
- Evaluate existing and proposed solutions to neighborhoods and housing problems.

As you may recall, social problems go beyond the experience of the individual, resulting in a conflict in values. They arise when groups of people experience inequality, are socially constructed by real consequences, and must be addressed interdependently. Examples of inequalities are that some people find housing easily, live in integrated neighborhoods, and have secure housing, while others experience housing discrimination, residential segregation, and housing insecurity. These experiences vary by *social location* such as gender, race, class, age, or sexuality, or combinations of these. In this chapter, we discuss a variety of social problems related to neighborhoods and housing including their theoretical framings, patterns, consequences, and solutions. Below we introduce and provide historical background about these issues.

Residential Segregation

We will explore **racial residential segregation**, the separation of neighborhoods by race (and often social class), as a social problem of neighborhoods and housing. To understand this contemporary problem, we must understand the roots of racially segregated housing policies, which requires us to start with enslavement and the racist ideas that justified it.

Scholar Ibram X. Kendi asserts that any policies that result in racial inequity and ideas that justify or excuse racial inequity are racist. Racist ideas about the supposed inferiority of people who are Black include ideas about “degeneracy,” uncleanliness, laziness, sexual habits, drug use, and dishonesty. Even though slavery was illegal in many northern states, people in northern cities were still taught that Black people were different from and inferior to white people.

As early as 1830, free Black people who made their way to northern cities were not welcome in many communities. Poor people who were Black lived in racially segregated housing. Often, they had to move when developers and landowners found more profitable uses for the land. Even affluent and educated Black people with the resources to buy property experienced displacement and discrimination.

In 1850, Seneca Village, a thriving Black community of 1600 people outside of New York City, was displaced by eminent domain to build Central Park (Staples 2019). The community boasted successful businesses, a vibrant church, and a school. Newspapers and magazines, however, relied on racist ideas and racial epithets (like the n-word) to describe the community as a decrepit shantytown. They also claimed the residents were unable to properly care for the valuable real estate they held. Residents who owned the land were compensated, but the land was undervalued. This land grab was conveniently justified by the emergence of the powerful racist idea that property values go down where Black people live. If you’d like to read this article for yourself, please explore this Gotham Gazette Article, Death of Seneca Village.

Between 1910 and 1970, in the Great Migration period, more than six million Black people relocated from the rural south to cities in the north and west in search of better jobs. Many people in the North accepted the same racist ideas that fueled the brutal racism of the south. As in New York, a century before, many white people feared that home ownership by Black people would lower property values.



People created racially segregated neighborhoods through deliberate creation and implementation of racist laws, policies and practices. Although residential segregation is now illegal, neighborhoods remain segregated. Why do

you think this is?

"Sign: 'We Want White Tenants in our White Community" by Arthur Seigel, Office of War Information is in the Public Domain

During the postwar housing boom of the '40s and '50s, the GI Bill provided low-interest home loans to returning veterans. New suburban communities sprang up. The American dream of home ownership became a reality across the US, at least for white Americans. According to Heather McGee, "The mortgage benefit in the GI bill pushed the postwar home ownership rate to three out of four white families – but with federally sanctioned housing discrimination, the Black and Latinx rates stayed at around two out of five, despite the attempts of veterans of color to participate" (McGee 2021:22). Government-sanctioned discrimination also impacted Indigenous communities, as described in the Community Profile box below.

✔ Community Profile

Indigenous Land and Home Ownership

In Multnomah County, Oregon, Indigenous people make up 2.5% of the population, but 10% of people who are unhoused (Schmid 2017). Native Americans have a high poverty rate, with 25.9% of Native Americans experiencing poverty in 2021, according to the US Census (KFF 2022).

The government's control over Indigenous people's living conditions contributes to this circumstance. When the US government forcibly removed Native Americans to reservation lands, it also retained ownership of that land. The government holds reservation lands "in trust" for the tribal nations. Trusts are financial arrangements that allow a third-party trustee to hold and control assets on behalf of a beneficiary. The underlying justification for most trusts is that the beneficiaries can not be trusted to properly manage their assets. While this might be acceptable for minor children who inherit large sums of money, this paternalistic oversight of Native American people perpetuates systems of displacement and genocide that have been visited upon Indigenous people in the Americas for 600 years.

We hear about tribal rights and casinos, and debate using harmful stereotypical images for sports teams. However, most non-tribal members don't recognize how the US government limits homeownership for Native Americans (Schaefer Riley 2016). For example, Native Americans who fought alongside white GIs in World War II have been denied the opportunity to create the same generational wealth as other American veterans. Because reservation land is held in trust, the returning Native American veterans were excluded from the GI Bill home loans for homes on reservation land.

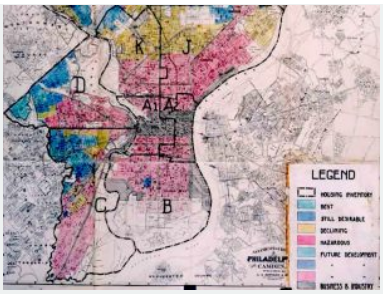
Although not all Indigenous people agree that private land ownership is the right goal today, the lack of access to homeownership via the GI Bill is one of several discriminatory policies that racialized homeownership in the mid-20th century.

This structural racism also occurred with standard mortgage loans. Black families were routinely denied loans for the new suburban homes. They were forced to buy houses in older, more urban communities. Once Black families bought homes in urban neighborhoods, real estate agents routinely took advantage of white homeowners' fears of lower property values to persuade them to sell their property at a low price. The agents then turned a profit, reselling them to Black families at higher prices. Lenders charged them higher interest rates. Realtors and lenders made big profits from this "block-busting" practice.

They also succeeded in lowering the value of homes in rapidly segregated neighborhoods. Since these homes were assessed at low value, the tax base of these neighborhoods was restricted. Tax-funded infrastructure, like public works and schools, was underfunded. In other words, it was not Black people's presence but white homeowners' prejudice, grounded in racist ideas, that led to lower property values and created under-resourced communities.

Redlining is the discriminatory practice of refusing loans to creditworthy applicants in neighborhoods that banks deem undesirable. The federal government created the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1933, and the Federal Housing Association (FHA) in 1934, and the real estate industry worked to segregate whites from other groups to preserve property values in neighborhoods where white people lived. This is *institutional discrimination.*

Lending institutions and the federal government did this by creating maps in which the places where people of color and/or immigrants lived were colored red (see the figure below). Then, those areas were designated to be "dangerous" or "risky" in terms of loaning practices.



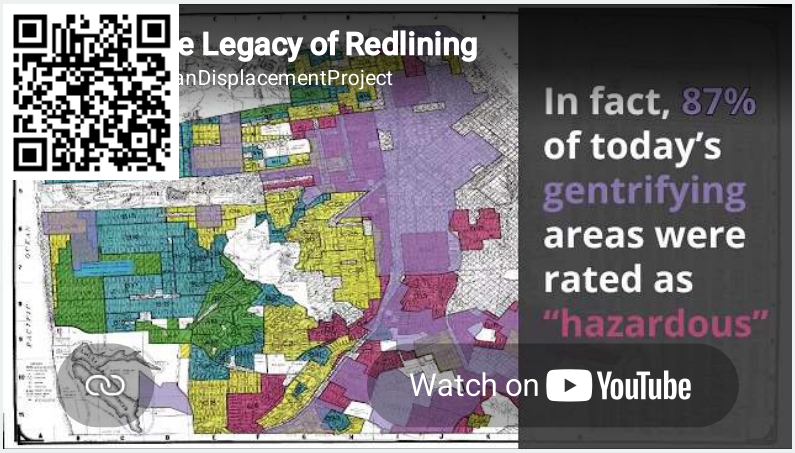
Lending institutions and the federal government created maps in which the places where people of color and/or foreign-born lived were colored red and designated to be “dangerous” or “risky.”

“Home Owners’ Loan Corporation Philadelphia redlining map” from Wikipedia is in the Public Domain

In 1968, the Fair Housing Act, part of the Civil Rights Act, outlawed these practices. The Fair Housing Act is an attempt at providing equitable housing to all. It makes it illegal to discriminate against someone based on skin color, sex, religion, and disability. Also banned is the practice of real estate *lowballing*, where banks underestimate the value of a home. This practice forces a borrower to come up with a larger down payment to compensate for the lower loan value. Offering higher interest rates, insurance, and terms and conditions to people from historically underrepresented groups is illegal. Denying loans and services based on an applicant’s protected class is also illegal.

Still, much damage was done prior to its passage. For decades, the federal government poured money into home loans that almost exclusively favored white families. Homeownership is the most accessible way to build equity and wealth, particularly for the middle-class. It was denied to many historically marginalized families for decades. Once the Fair Housing Act passed, local governments used other legal methods to justify racist real estate practices, and discriminatory housing practices continue today.

Please watch the video below to learn more about redlining, including its connection to *gentrification* (discussed in the Patterns page).



This video discusses the history of redlining and other neighborhood problems. How does this highlight discrimination in housing practices?

The Legacy of Redlining by Urban Displacement Project is licensed under the standard YouTube license

Housing Insecurity and Houselessness

Personal Profile

Kandi (her street name) was 12 the first time she ran away from home. She had read about running away in books like *My Side of the Mountain*. These stories were supposed to be cautionary tales, but they showed Kandi a path out of an abusive home. She just wanted out. Rather than stay in one place for very long, she hitchhiked cross-country. She spent a lot of time in truck stops and bars. She used a lot of drugs. Every once in a while she got arrested, and

there were close calls with dangerous people. She experienced sexual harassment daily and was sexually assaulted and exploited many times.

As she got older and tougher, she learned how to make people respect her *no* and pay for her *yes*, at least most of the time. She got her first bartending job at the age of 15. It was easy to find work, but she never stayed anywhere for long. She told people that she chose "the road." Given the options, it seemed like a rational choice.

People she met shared spare pieces of their lives. She encountered art, music, and big ideas. She went to a lot of parties and listened to many stories around many fires. Sometimes, she had fun—once she got picked up because a group of whitewater rafters needed one more person to paddle. She learned how to survive, but dreamed of more, and spent long hours constructing a better life in her imagination. Eventually, in fits and starts, she began to move towards a life that was safer and softer.

It took years to get stable, but eventually, in her 20s she landed in a small coastal town and fell in love. She stayed put long enough to find a chosen family and make a home. Home was hard for Kandi to hold on to, and she continued to experience housing insecurity into her 40s until she went back to school for a better-paying career. Kandi is in her 50s now, stable, and happy with her family and work. She knows how lucky she is.

Kandi, described in the Personal Profile above, is one of an estimated 26 million people in the United States who have been unhoused during their lifetimes (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al. 2018). While Kandi now maintains stable housing, an estimated 11.4 million people in the United States reported housing insecurity in the summer of 2021. People experience housing insecurity when they are behind on rent and/or likely to be evicted in the next month (Pagaduan 2021).

Statistics about houselessness don't tell the whole story, though. As a student, you may be housing insecure. You may know other students who couch surf, change addresses frequently or sleep in their cars. In 2022, the station KGW featured a student-created comic about unstable housing. As you watch the Comic Book Profiles 10 Portland State University Students' Struggles With Housing Instability video below, please consider how housing instability has impacted these students.



In this video, Portland State University students describe their experiences of houselessness via a comic book series. Do these stories sound familiar?

"Comic Book Profiles 10 Portland State University Students' Struggles With Housing Instability [Video]" by Bryant Clerkley, KGW8 is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

Kandi, college students, and others experience the social problem of **houselessness**, the condition of not having a place to live. As the cost of housing increases and wages stay the same, more and more people find themselves losing their housing or at risk of losing their housing. Stable housing also

becomes one of the factors that can help resolve some of the other social problems we discuss throughout this textbook.

You may notice that we use the words *houseless*, *unhoused*, or *housing insecure* instead of *homeless* in most cases. As you'll remember from the start of this textbook, a characteristic of a social problem is that it is socially constructed. One way we can recognize that a social problem is socially constructed is because the language used to define a problem changes over time.

Sociologists and community advocates currently prefer the terms houseless, unhoused, or housing insecure to define the social problem. This language helps emphasize structural problems that may cause someone to be without a home rather than the stigma associated with the word *homeless*. However, we may still use homelessness as this term aligns with measurements and governmental definitions of houselessness and housing instability.



Every year over 4 million young people experience houselessness, like this youth who might be couch surfing. How does this make houselessness a social problem?

"Photo" by Rex Pickar is licensed under the Unsplash License

Homelessness is defined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as being unsheltered, having inadequate shelter, not having a permanent fixed residence, and/or lacking the resources to secure stable housing (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2012). HUD uses four categories of homelessness, as described in the figure below, to determine eligibility for housing services. These subsidized and supported housing services include Emergency Shelters, Transitional Housing, Rapid Rehousing, Housing Choice Subsidized Housing Vouchers (also known as Section 8), and Homelessness Prevention Services.

US Department of Housing and Urban Development: Four Categories of Homelessness

1) Literally Homeless

Individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, meaning:

- Has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not meant for human habitation; or
- Is living in a publicly or privately operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements (including congregate shelters, transitional housing, and hotels and motels paid for by charitable organizations or by federal, state, and local government programs); or
- Is exiting an institution where (s)he has resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter or place not meant for human habitatiinstitutionely before entering that institution.

Note: An individual or family only needs to meet one of the three subcategories to qualify

2) Imminent Risk of Homelessness

An individual or family who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence, provided that:

- Residence will be lost within 14 days of the date of application for homeless assistance;
- No subsequent residence has been identified; and
- The individual or family lacks the resources or support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing.

Note: Includes individuals and families who are within 14 days of losing their housing, including housing they own, rent, are sharing with others, or are living in without paying rent.

3) Homeless Under Other Federal Statutes

Unaccompanied youth under 25 years of age or families with Category three children and youth who do not otherwise qualify as homeless under this definition but who:

- Are defined as homeless under the other listed federal statutes;
- Have not had a lease or ownership interest in permanent housing during the 60 days prior to the homeless assistance application;
- Have experienced persistent instability as measured by two moves or more during the preceding 60 days; and
- Can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time due to special needs or barriers

Note: Includes individuals and families who are within 14 days of losing their housing, including housing they own, rent, are sharing with others, or are living in without paying rent.

4: Fleeing/Attempting to Flee Domestic Violence

Any individual or family who:

- Is fleeing or is attempting to flee domestic violence;
- Has no other residence; and
- Lacks the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing

Note: *Domestic Violence* includes dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, and other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or family member that either takes place in or him or her afraid to return to, their primary nighttime residence (including human trafficking).

These definitions are part of policies around houselessness. These policies may help people who need it but exclude others who are also houseless. Who do you think is missing from these guidelines?

"Categories of Homelessness" adapted from The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act by Nora Karena is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Housing instability can be harder to see than houselessness. **Housing insecurity** is a broad set of challenges related to housing, such as the inability to pay rent or utilities or the need to move frequently (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2019).

Housing insecurity is difficult to describe because there are many measurements of it. According to government definitions, if a person or a family are within 14 days of losing their housing and does not have the resources "to obtain permanent housing," they are considered by HUD to be *at imminent risk of homelessness*. Additionally, a *cost-burdened household* is a household in which 30% or more of a household's monthly gross income is dedicated to housing, making it difficult to pay for necessities.

Signs or measurements of housing insecurity include missing a rent or utility payment, having a place to live but not having certainty about meeting basic needs, experiencing formal or informal evictions, foreclosures, couch-surfing, and frequent moves. It can also include exposure to health and safety risks such as mold, vermin, lead, overcrowding, and personal safety fears such as abuse.

This student-created ancillary is a tri-fold pamphlet with information about *soft evictions*, including what people can do if they are the victim of a soft eviction.



Soft eviction by Ashley Miller, Samuel Shea, and Caden Kooiker is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

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In this chapter, we discuss social problems related to neighborhoods and housing. As you may have noticed, there is some overlap between this chapter and the last, as most people who experience housing insecurity and houselessness are living in poverty. However, we will dive into a range of neighborhood and housing related problems in the Patterns page that were not covered in the Poverty chapter. First we will frame neighborhood and housing problems using the classical theoretical perspectives in sociology. As with each chapter, we will end with a discussion on strategies to help address these problems.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Neighborhoods and Housing

Theorizing on neighborhood and housing problems overlaps heavily with theorizing on poverty, as housing insecurity and houselessness are experiences of poverty. Thus, on this page we offer more attention to neighborhoods and ask that you review the Theoretical Perspectives on Poverty and Economic Inequality page for a more comprehensive understanding of housing problems as they connect to poverty. A general overview of the classicial theoretical perspectives is presented in the Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot table below.

Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Structural functionalism	Neighborhoods serve important functions for society through social cohesion and integration; however, they can be dysfunctional when they are high in crime or lack social cohesion or integration. Housing insecurity serves positive functions such as necessitating employment for those working in the nonprofit sector; however, it may also be viewed as a dysfunction of social institutions to provide for all so that they may fully contribute to society.
Conflict theory	Political and economic elites use their resources to enrich their positions and to take resources from the poor and people of color. Problems such as residential segregation and housing insecurity are a result of discriminatory practices and policies that serve to perpetuate social hierarchies.
Symbolic interactionism	Residents of different neighborhoods differ in their types of interactions, perceptions of social life, and norms and values. Stereotypes of people experiencing houselessness serve to justify the harmful idea that they are not deserving of welfare or empathy, which can shape housing and welfare policy.

Structural Functionalism

Neighborhoods can influence our health and educational outcomes, thus from a functionalist perspective, they play an important role in society. In 1887, German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1887/1963) raised a question when he wrote about the changes that occurred as societies changed from small, rural, and traditional cultures to larger, urban, and industrial settings. He said that a sense of community, or *Gemeinschaft*, characterizes traditional societies. In these societies, family, kin, and community ties are quite strong, with people caring for each other and looking out for one another. As societies grew and industrialized and as people moved to cities, he wrote, social ties weakened and became more impersonal. Tönnies called this type of society *Gesellschaft*, and he was quite critical of this development. He lamented the loss in urban societies of close social bonds and of a strong sense of community, and he feared that a sense of rootlessness in these societies begins to replace the feeling of stability and steadiness characteristic of small, rural societies.

One of the key founders of sociology, scholar Émile Durkheim, was more positive than Tönnies. He certainly appreciated the social bonds and community feeling, which he called *mechanical solidarity*, characteristic of small, rural societies. However, he also thought that these societies stifled individual freedom and that social ties still exist in larger, urban societies. He called these latter ties *organic solidarity*, which he said stems from the division of labor. When there is a division of labor, he wrote, everyone has to depend on everyone else to perform their jobs. This interdependence of roles creases a solidarity that retains much of the bonding and sense of community found in small, rural societies (Durkheim, 1893/1933).

We may apply this classical theorizing to the neighborhood level. People in neighborhoods with higher levels of social integration and bonding have better outcomes. Contemporary research tends to emphasize that strong social bonds do exist, even today (Guest,

Cover, Matsueda, & Kubrin 2006). Many residents live in neighborhoods where people do know each other, associate with each other, and look out for each other. In these neighborhoods, a sense of community does exist. The social bonding that exists in these communities can then protect against neighborhood and housing problems. For instance, low-income neighbors may be more likely to come together to fight against an exploitive landlord if they have high bonding and solidarity, or even against a corporation known for dumping toxic waste building a facility near their neighborhood – an issue of *environmental injustice* that we'll cover later in this textbook.

As discussed in the Poverty chapter, functionalists may view poverty and the experience of housing insecurity as serving positive functions for society such as justifying the employment of those who work for nonprofits that address poverty and housing insecurity. However, functionalists may also view housing insecurity as a dysfunction of social institutions such as the state (government, law, policy) or work (availability of jobs) to provide for all so that they may fully contribute to society. Similarly, functionalism may argue that neighborhoods can be dysfunctional if they block individuals' abilities to be productive members of society such as if the neighborhood is high in crime or low in social integration.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory assumes a basic conflict between society's 'haves' and 'have-nots,' or between the economic and political elites and the poor. This type of conflict manifests itself in housing, in which the 'haves' and 'have-nots' live very different residential lives. The affluent live in neighborhoods with large expensive homes and well-funded schools (due to higher property taxes on those homes), whereas low-income people live in neighborhoods with smaller less-costly homes and poorly-funded schools.

This view attributes neighborhood and housing 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 neighborhoods and housing discrimination, for example, may prevent Black Americans from escaping low-income areas and from moving to areas with greater employment opportunities. Housing discrimination prevented many Black families from purchasing homes over the 1900s, which means far lower levels of intergenerational wealth, as homeownership is the primarily mechanism for growing wealth for those who are not rich. The schools that many low-income children and children of color attend are 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.

Some recent applications of conflict theory emphasize the importance of *political economy*, the interaction of political and economic institutions and processes. In this way of thinking, political and economic elites (bankers, real estate investors, politicians, and others) collaborate to advance their respective interests. This development often takes the form of displacing poor urban residents from their homes so that condominiums, high-rise corporate buildings, posh shops, or other buildings favoring the rich can be built, a process we'll return to called *gentrification*. More generally, these elites treat neighborhoods as settings for the growth of their wealth and power, rather than as settings where real people live, go to school, work at a job, and have friends and acquaintances. Sociologists John Logan and Harvey Molotch use the term *growth machine ideology* to characterize the view of the city that guides these elites' policies and practices (Logan & Molotch 2007).

Thus, problems such as racial residential segregation and housing insecurity are a result of discriminatory practices and policies at the hands of those in power. These practices and policies then reinforce existing social hierarchies, perpetuating the oppression of the poor and of people of color.

Symbolic Interactionism

Consistent with the overall approach of symbolic interactionism, scholars of neighborhoods who take this approach focus on the nature of residents' interactions with each other, the reasons for their patterns of interaction, and their perceptions of various aspects of social life. Their work has yielded many rich, vivid descriptions of the urban life, for instance. Many of these accounts have concerned the lives of people in low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color. The late Elliott Liebow wrote two of the most famous accounts. The first of these two was his majestic *Tally's Corner* (1967), which depicted the lives of Black men who 'hung around' a particular neighborhood street corner. His second account was *Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women* (1993), which, as its title implies, depicted the lives of houseless women.

These and other accounts depict cities or neighborhoods as places where social norms and values prevail, in contrast to views that depict them as wild, chaotic places. Building on these more positive accounts, more recent work by sociologist Elijah Anderson (2000) emphasizes that most poor urban residents are 'decent' (as they call themselves), law-abiding people who strongly disapprove of the crime and drug use in their neighborhoods. He also emphasizes that neighborhoods are filled with parks and other public settings in which people from different racial and class backgrounds gather every day and interact in various ways that help foster interracial understanding. Anderson calls these settings *cosmopolitan canopies*, and says they "offer a respite from the lingering tensions of urban life and an opportunity for diverse peoples to come together. … Through personal observation, they may come casually to appreciate one another's differences and empathize with the other in a spirit of humanity" (Anderson, 2011, pp. xiv–xv). Theoretically, this many help people forge connections to those that they would not otherwise have interactions with due to racial residential segregation.

Additionally, symbolic interactionism is interested in how people understand the experience of poverty and housing insecurity. One such experience is **stereotyping**: Generalizing about a large group of people, often in misleading or harmful ways. Stereotypes of people in poverty or experiencing houselessness include that they are lazy, irresponsible, and living off of welfare, or that they will use any money given to them for drugs. This stereotyping serves to justify the cultural idea that people in poverty or who are houseless are not deserving of welfare or empathy. Those cultural ideas in turn may shape housing and welfare policy, such as with the racialized stereotype of the 'welfare queen' (a low-income Black mother) in the 1990s that was used to justify the overhauling of the welfare system under the Clinton administration.

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Patterns of Neighborhood and Housing Problems

On this page we will explore two broad areas of neighborhood and housing problems: 1) Residential segregation and the housing industry and 2) housing insecurity and houselessness. We provide a contemporary perspective on housing problems including on racial discrimination and *gentrification*. We then discuss research findings on housing instability and houselessness, as well as tie them to the *housing affordability crisis*. Finally, we discuss consequences of these problems, including the *racial wealth gap*, health and well-being outcomes, and educational inequalities.

Residential Segregation and the Housing Industry

Although federal law now prohibits segregated housing, neighborhoods across the country are nonetheless highly segregated by race, which we named in the Overview page as **racial residential segregation**. Black individuals and families in particular are highly segregated by residence in many cities, much more so than is true for other people of color. This residential segregation is so extensive that it has been termed *hypersegregation*.

In a widely cited book, sociologists Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton (1993) termed this situation "American apartheid." They said that these segregated neighborhoods result from a combination of several factors, including (a) "white flight" into suburbs, (b) informal – and often illegal – racially discriminatory actions that make it difficult for African Americans to move into white neighborhoods (such as real estate agents falsely telling black couples that no houses are available in a particular neighborhood), and (c) a general lack of income and other resources that makes it very difficult for African Americans to move from segregated neighborhoods.

Recall our discussion on a historical perspective on residential segregation and housing discrimination in the US from the Overview page. We will now discuss how discriminatory housing practices continue even today.

Contemporary Perspective

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 Black and Latinx applicants 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 applicants who are Black, Latinx, and white with similar incomes, employment, and credit histories. Some studies are purely statistical, and some involve individuals who independently visit the same mortgage-lending institutions. Both types of studies find that Black and Latinx applicants 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 people buying houses in certain neighborhoods are considered redlining, and they violate the law (Ezeala-Harrison, Glover, & Shaw-Jackson, 2008).



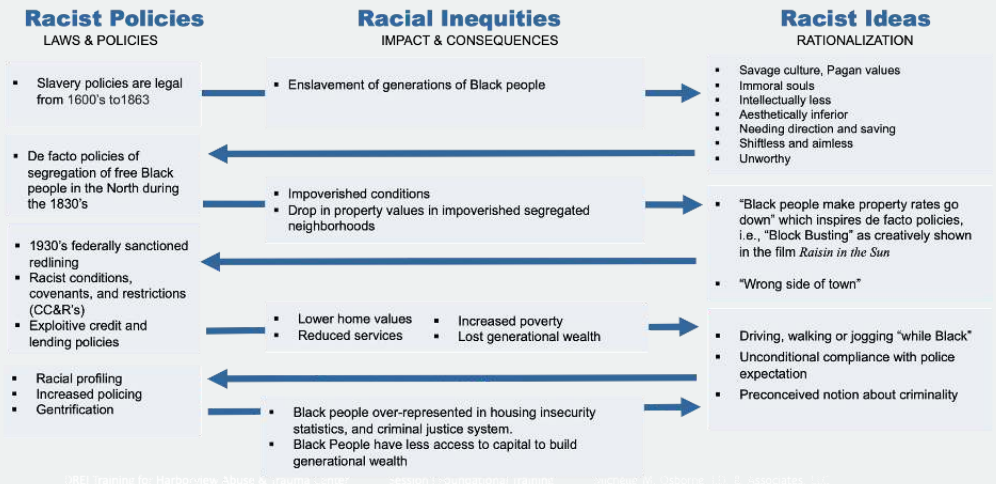
Banks have rejected mortgage applications from people who wish to live in certain urban, high-risk neighborhoods. This practice, called redlining, violates the law. Because many of the loan applicants who experience redlining are people of color, redlining is an example of institutional discrimination.

Taber Andrew Bain, http://www.flickr.com/photos/88442983@N00/2943913721

In addition to mortgage rejections, a pattern of subtle discrimination today 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 Black 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.

Today, despite repeated efforts by city officials to create more mixed-race and mixed-income neighborhoods, many neighborhoods remain demographically segregated. In cities across the US, the available inventory of affordable housing has been reduced by redevelopment and **gentrification** – the process by which investors, corporations, and affluent (often white) individuals move into neighborhoods that are historically low-income (and of color), displacing the people who live there as rents, taxes, and costs of local goods and services increase. City planning projects have continued to benefit white homeowners while communities of color have been burdened, displaced, excluded, and disproportionately vulnerable to housing insecurity.

Racism in the housing industry is *systemic* and *institutional*. Please take some time to examine the chart below. It shows how Racist Policies, Racist Inequalities, and Racist Ideas reinforce each other over time. Starting with the first box, we see that slavery was legal until 1863. Racist laws and policies created the institution of slavery. The impact and consequences of those laws, or racist inequalities, result in millions of people being enslaved. Racist ideas rationalize or normalize the practice of slavery by asserting the false idea that Black people are less than human – that they are immoral, lazy, and stupid.



This chart illustrates Ibram X Kendi's definition of racism as "…a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produce and sustain racial inequities" (2016). Notice the connections between racist policies in housing, racial inequities, and racist ideas. We can say that the entire system is racist because each component reinforces the other and leads to even more racial inequity.

"Racist Policies, Racist Inequities, and Racist Ideas in Housing" by Nora Karena, Michelle Osborne, and Toni Belcher is licensed under CC BY 4.0

These false ideas about the character and capabilities of Black people caused both de-facto segregation in the North and legalized segregation in the South. Jim Crow laws in the South and segregated housing policies in the North kept neighborhoods separate.

Consequently, Black people lived in poorer neighborhoods, and even when they owned homes, their property was worth less. This reinforced beliefs about inequality – that if Black people moved into your neighborhood, the neighborhood would decline.

Over time, these false beliefs solidified into policies such as redlining, restrictive housing covenants, and other laws that further restricted Black people's access to home ownership, which has had serious consequences. For instance, the lack of homeownership reduced Black families' possibilities of creating generational wealth. Additionally, because there were "right" and "wrong" places for Black people to be, police surveilled Black people who were out of place – walking or driving while Black. They, and other white people often assumed that Black people were criminals if they were outside their own neighborhoods, another racist idea.

These mistaken ideas drove policies and practices around racial profiling and increased policing. Black people are arrested more often, not because they commit more crimes but because they are surveilled more. This cycle creates disproportionate housing instability for Black people and exacerbates other social problems. We return to consequences of discriminatory housing practices below.

Applying Social Research

The Poor Neighborhoods of Middle-Class Black Children

In a society that values equal opportunity for all, scholars have discovered a troubling trend: Black 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 Black 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 study by sociologist Patrick Sharkey (2009) 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 Black families find themselves having to live in poor urban neighborhoods. About half of Black 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: Black 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 Black 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." 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 (2011) for the Russell Sage Foundation found that Black 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: It is important to do everything possible to improve the quality and economy of the poor neighborhoods in which many Black children, middle-class or poor, grow up.

Housing Insecurity and Houselessness

In cities throughout the United States, adults and children live in the streets, abandoned vehicles or houses, cheap motels, or in someone else's home temporarily. All of these situations – not just living on the streets – are examples of **houselessness**, the condition of not having a place to live. In cities with extremely cold or hot climates, houselessness can be life-threatening during the winter or summer months. But regardless of climate, those experiencing houselessness face other concerns. For instance, research finds that one-third of the houseless are victims of violence or theft during the year, a rate of victimization four times higher than the general population (Wenzel, Leake, & Gelberg, 2001).



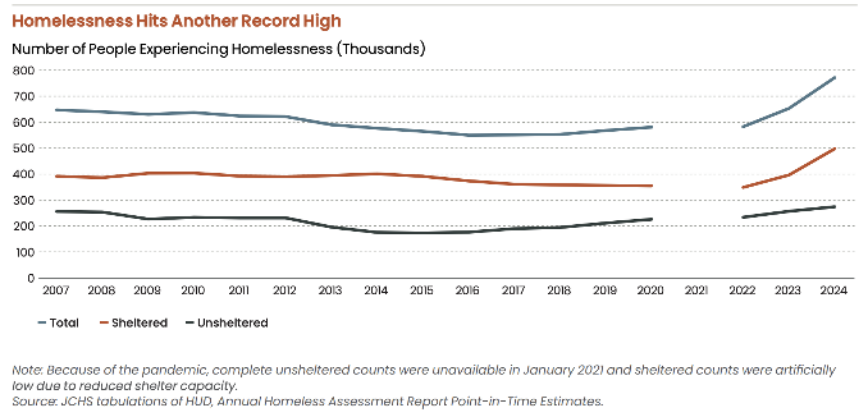
Houselessness is a major problem in many cities. The federal government estimates that 650,000 Americans are without a home on any given night.

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As should be clear, the problem of houselessness cannot be understood solely from the problem of *poverty*; however, there are important social class differences. Wealthy families that lose their homes, such as after a fire, usually can expect to find suitable temporary lodging and have their homeowners' insurance pay for a new home (Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010). In contrast, poor families who can no longer pay their rent or mortgage payments face eviction and houselessness from which they find it difficult to recover.

It is rather challenging to determine the actual number of houseless persons. For example, if a family is living in the streets, we would all agree they are houseless. But if they are sleeping on a friend's couch or in a cheap motel, should they be considered 'homeless?' Keeping these measurement problems in mind, on one single night, there were more than half million (653,104) people experiencing houselessness, and the number of people experiencing houselessness exceeds the number of available shelter beds – with over 200,000 fewer beds than needed (Soucy, Janes, & Hall 2024).

The chart below uses data from HUD's *point-in-time survey*, when they estimate the houseless population at one point in time. We see that levels were relatively stable for many years, then began to increase after the COVID-19 pandemic. (They were unable to collect data during pandemic years.) Houselessness reached a 'record-high' of 771,480 people at the time of the count, which was an 18% increase over one year and a 33% increase from four years prior (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University 2025: 40).



This chart illustrates that, with some variation, rates of homelessness were relatively stable from 2007 to 2020, but have been increasing since 2022.

Source: Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University 2025

Because people move in and out of houselessness, the number of people who experience it at least part of the year is undoubtedly much higher. National survey evidence suggests that 14% of Americans have been houseless at least once in their lives, a figure much higher than that in most European nations (Lee et al. 2010).

The video below tells part of the story of houselessness in one specific area of the nation: Portland, Oregon. Please take the time to watch the first 6 minutes of this 11 minute video that tells this story. As you watch, consider who is speaking and whose voices are not heard. These stories are powerful but insufficient. Who else may be houseless?



The housing problems that Portland experiences are common across the United States. Which of these problems and solutions do you see in your community?

"City of Roses or City of Homeless? Portland's human tragedy" by KOIN 6 is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

On the night of January 26th, 2022, when the temperature dipped down into the 20s, *at least* 14,655 unhoused people were counted in Oregon. In Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas Counties, 6,633 people were unhoused, an increase of more than 25 percent since the last count in 2019 in Multnomah County alone (Hasenstab 2022). Of those counted, 3,525 met the HUD definition of unsheltered, while 3,108 spent that cold winter night in temporary shelter or transitional housing. More than 60% of the unhoused people that night met the definition of chronically homeless, having a disabling condition, *and* having been unhoused for at least 12 months (Multnomah County 2022). The annual *point-in-time count* of unhoused people does not consider people who were temporarily doubled-up with friends and family unhoused, even though they also lack a permanent residence.

Encampments of unhoused people, sometimes called tent cities, have become a common, often unwelcome fixture in Portland. You can read about Dignity Village in Portland, Oregon, an encampment community that is self-organized and offers some security. Because many encampments are not officially legal, people living in them lack stability and live under the threat of being "swept" or evicted. In 2017, 255 encampments were reported across the US, ranging in size from 10 to over 100 people living in them, but that number does not include many more illegal encampments. Encampments are a response to the fact that shelters constantly operate at maximum capacity, and communities do not have enough affordable housing (Tent Cities in America 2022).



Sidewalk tent camps in Northeast Portland, Oregon, United States. Do all people who are houseless live like this?

"Northeast Portland homeless camp tents" by Graywalls is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Shelters provide needed temporary immediate service to over 1.5 million Americans each year. Shelters provide some relief against crime, hunger, and the many other problems arising from houselessness, but too few shelters exist to meet the demand, and those that do exist are underfunded. Many nonprofit organizations also provide additional supportive services and housing assistance for families and individuals. Day shelters, such as Rose Haven in Portland, Oregon, also offer support and food to unhoused people. Some churches allow people to car-camp and/or erect tents on the church property and have provided hygiene centers that include showers, hand-washing, laundry, and food services.

Tensions exist between tent dwellers, staff, and users of shelters, and the business and home-owning communities since being unhoused is messy, and people who are unhoused are vulnerable to crime and abuse. In Corvallis, Oregon, the community has struggled for years to find a permanent location for the men's overnight cold-weather shelter. Advocates for people who are unhoused argue for a location close to needed city services; accessibility is important when walking, bicycling, and public transportation are the primary modes of getting around.

A larger share of Americans are **housing insecure**, meaning that they face an array of challenges related to housing. To measure this, one study used a *residual-income approach*, which estimates whether households have enough money left after paying rent and utilities to afford a decent standard of living, and found that 19.2 million (62.1%) were cost burdened. However we measure it, the cost burden puts people at risk for being homeless (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2022).

College students are another group of people who are often housing insecure. You watched a video of their stories earlier in this chapter. In addition to qualitative stories, we have quantitative data about how many college students experience housing instability, as shown in the figure below.

Food Insecurity and Housing insecurity at Two-year and Four-year Colleges

	Two-Year College		Four-Year College		Overall	
	Number of Students	Percentage	Number of Students	Percentage	Number of Students	Percentage
No needs ("Secure")	14,965	30	10,179	39	25,144	33
Food insecure, housing insecure, or homeless ("Insecure")	34,111	70	15,861	61	49,972	67
Food and housing insecure	19,021	39	7,723	30	26,744	36
Housing insecure and homeless	7,846	16	2,917	11	10,763	14
Food insecure and housing	6,485	13	2,394	9	8,879	12

Students in community colleges often experience more food and housing insecurity than students in four-year colleges. Do you think that this is causation or correlation?

"Food Insecurity and Housing Insecurity at Two-year and Four-year Colleges" by the Hope Center is included under fair use

A recent national survey, the 2019 #RealCollege Survey, found that students at two-year institutions had higher levels of food insecurity and housing insecurity or houselessness than students at four-year colleges. This report indicates that more than half of community college students are struggling with stress related to having a safe, stable place to care for themselves and their families.

The College and University Basic Needs Insecurity Report found that being a woman, transgender, Native American, Black, Latinx, and 21 or older increased your chances of being housing insecure or homeless. Although men, people who are white, young (18–20), and athletes were less likely to experience houselessness or housing insecurity, they still did so in double-digit percentages (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2019).

Using our Oregon example, the median individual and household income in 2020 was $35,393 and $65,677, respectively. Average rents also increased significantly (US Census 2020). More than 35 percent of Portland renters surveyed reported being behind on rent, and more than 56,000 households in the Portland region are considered housing insecure (Bates 2020).

Rural communities have unique housing pressures, especially in resort areas where housing stock tends to be inadequate. One rural area is Lincoln County, Oregon, where wages are generally lower than most of the rest of the state. The average income of a

Lincoln County resident is $25,130 a year (BestPlaces 2020). If we calculated that a person could only use 30 percent of their income for housing to remain stable, their rent could be $7,539 per year or $628.25 per month.



This picture shows what rural houselessness looks like in Klamath County, Oregon. How might the experience of being houseless, or the services and policies needed to end houselessness be different between cities and countrysides?

"Homeless service providers say counting homeless in rural areas can be more difficult because they are often less visible than in urban areas" by Molly Solomon, OPB is included under fair use

The fair market rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Lincoln County is $877 (RentData.org 2022). At fair market value, the renter would be paying about 42 percent of their income. When you add that less than one percent of all homes in Lincoln City, Oregon, are vacant and available to rent (Bestplaces 2020), you begin to see the fragility of our housing system. Even when work is plentiful, houselessness is only a step away. One job loss, one major illness, or commonly, one landlord who chooses to sell their property rather than continue to rent, and houselessness occurs.

One driver of housing insecurity is the *housing affordability crisis*. Adequate housing is not affordable for many individuals and families across the nation, as housing prices can be very high, plus residents' incomes can be quite low. For every 100 extremely low-income renters, there are just 31 affordable units (National Coalition for the Homeless 2020). Cities in particular have a great need for adequate, affordable housing. Recall that housing is considered affordable when a household pays no more than 30% of its annual income on housing. In the US, 21 million renter households are cost-burdened (Census 2024c).

Housing and Social Location

Housing problems vary by social location such as social class, race, and gender. Additionally, correlations between social location and housing stability reveal some ways that social class mobility can be limited by race, gender, and age. Here we will provide some examples of this variation.

Social class. As you might expect, communities with high poverty rates tend to have high rates of unhoused people. Housing stability is a prerequisite for class mobility (Ramakrishnan et al. 2021). Homeownership is a milestone for upward social mobility, so long as the homeowner is not cost burdened. Housing is generally a household's largest expense whether we rent or own. For people who own, though, their house payments become an investment, possibly generating more wealth over time. Those who rent do not see any investment return on their monthly payments.

Race/Ethnicity. In 2022, the nationwide Point-in-Time Homeless Count identified 421,392 people who were unhoused. Of these people, 230,839 were white. White people make up the majority of houseless people by raw numbers. However, Black people represent 13% of the total US population, representing over 30% of the unhoused population. This comparison indicates *disproportionality*, which is the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a racial/ethnic group compared with its percentage in the total population (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2021). Black people are disproportionately houseless. Native American and Native Alaskan, and certain groups of people who are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders also experience disproportionate rates of houselessness and housing insecurity.

National Point In Time Homeless Count By Race and Ethnicity, 2022

Race/Ethnicity	Total Number	Percent
Race		
American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous	15,491	3.7%
Asian or Asian American	6,559	1.6%
Black, African American, or African	137,638	32.7%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	6,429	1.5%
White	230,839	54.8%
Multiple Races	24,458	5.8%
Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic/Non-Latin(a/o/x)	328,799	78.0%
Hispanic/Latin(a/o/x)	92,581	22.0%

Most homeless people are white, but people of color are often disproportionately represented. What does this mean?

"National Point In Time Homeless Count By Race and Ethnicity" from "The 2022 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress" by the US Department of Housing and Human Development is in the Public Domain

The story for Latinx people is a bit different. Black and Hispanic people in the United States share similar risk factors for houselessness. However, Hispanic people experience lower rates of houselessness (Conroy and Heer 2003). Some researchers argue that Hispanic people have strong social networks – ie, they can live with family. However, when Conroy and Heer tested this theory in Los Angeles, they found that houselessness for Latinx people was undercounted because they were more likely to live in abandoned buildings rather than using shelters or churches where they might be counted. In more recent research in LA County, Chinchilla finds this to be true. She also adds that Latinos were less likely to engage in housing services. They were also more likely to live in overcrowded households (Chinchilla 2019).

This picture is changing over time. Nationwide, the 2022 Point-In-Time count shows that rates of houselessness for Hispanic/Latino people have increased by 7.6 percent. The causes of this increase are complex. However, part of this increase may be due to the impacts of COVID-19. Because Hispanic/Latino people are more likely to be seasonal or temporary workers, they have less access to COVID-19 relief funds. Therefore, they were more likely to be evicted (Chinchilla, Moses, and Visotzky 2023).

Whenever a social problem impacts members of a specific race at a higher rate than the general population, we can say that *racial inequity* exists. Ibram X. Kendi asserts that any policies that result in racial inequity and ideas that justify or excuse racial inequity are racist.

Gender, Sexuality, and Age. Seventy percent of people who are unhoused identify as men (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2021). Most of these men are in their 50's and 60's. They meet the definition of chronically homeless. In 2021, in Los Angeles County, California, 83% of the 1800 unhoused people who died were men. Most of those deaths were classified as preventable (Dolak 2022).

Women have lower rates of houselessness overall but are more likely to face housing insecurity. They are more likely than men to be unemployed and renters. This increases their risk of becoming severely cost burdened by housing (Zillow 2020). Additionally, most unhoused single parents are women.

A 2022 survey found that 30% of transgender people experienced houselessness during their lifetime (James et al. 2024), and a 2021 survey found that 28% of LGBTQ+ youth experienced homelessness or housing instability during their lifetime (The Trevor Project 2022). Socially constructed ideas of 'normal' or 'acceptable' identities hinder many people from accessing shelter, housing, and many other services. Specifically, in the case of shelters, transgender women may be refused admittance by the women's shelter and are at risk of violence at the men's shelter (National Center for Transgender Equality 2019).

People in families with children make up 30% of the homeless population, and unaccompanied youth (under age 25) account for another 30% of unhoused people. Youth experiencing houselessness are at a higher risk of an array of adverse health and educational outcomes than those who are housed, as described below.

Consequences of Neighborhood and Housing Problems

Massey and Denton (1993) argue that residential segregation worsens the general circumstances in which many urban African Americans live. Several reasons account for this effect. As whites flee to the suburbs, the people left behind are much poorer. The tax base of cities suffers accordingly, and along with it the quality of city schools, human services, and other social functions. All these problems help keep the crime rate high and perhaps even raise it further. Because segregated neighborhoods may be poor and crime ridden, businesses do not want to invest in them, and employment opportunities are meager. This fact worsens conditions in segregated neighborhoods even further. Consequently, concluded Massey and Denton, racial segregation helps to keep very poor people living in deep poverty and decaying neighborhoods.

Other research supports this conclusion. As a review of the research evidence summarized this situation, "Whether voluntary or involuntary, living in racially segregated neighborhoods has serious implications for the present and future mobility opportunities of those who are excluded from desirable areas. Where we live affects our proximity to good job opportunities, educational quality, and safety from crime (both as victim and as perpetrator), as well as the quality of our social networks" (Charles, 2003, pp. 167–168).

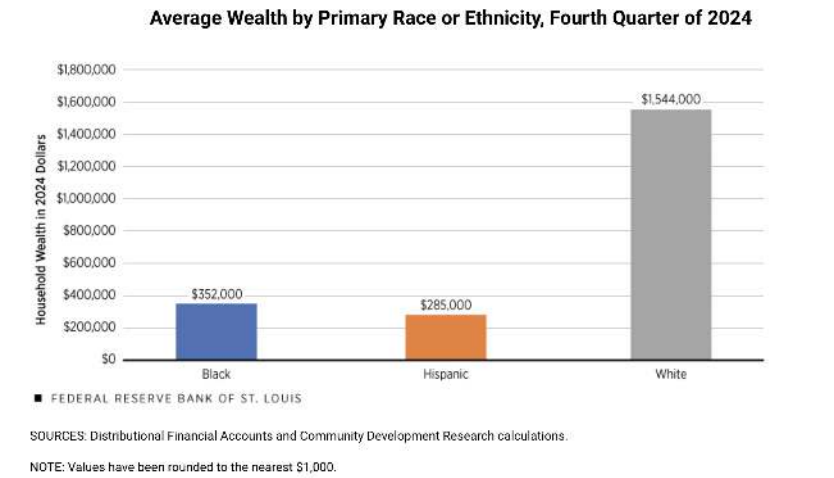
The hypersegregation experienced by Black residents cuts them off from the larger society, as many rarely leave their immediate neighborhoods, and results in *concentrated poverty*, where joblessness, crime, and other problems reign. For several reasons, then, residential segregation is thought to play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

We will now examine a few other consequences of residential segregation, housing discrimination, housing insecurity, and houselessness.

The Racial Wealth Gap

Homeownership is responsible for most wealth growth among the middle-class. Due to *redlining*, GI Bill exclusions, and decades of racial discrimination in the housing industry, many Black families and other families of color have experienced blocked opportunities to grow wealth in order to pass it down through the generations of their families. This is one cause of the current **racial wealth gap**, the discrepancy in wealth between white and Black families or Latinx families. White families have recently had up to 10 times more in wealth than these families of color (Sullivan, Hays, & Bennett 2024).

In the fourth quarter of 2024, white families had about 1.5 million in wealth on average whereas Black families had just over $350,000 and Latinx families had less than $300,000 (Kent 2025). The chart below illustrates this large gap.

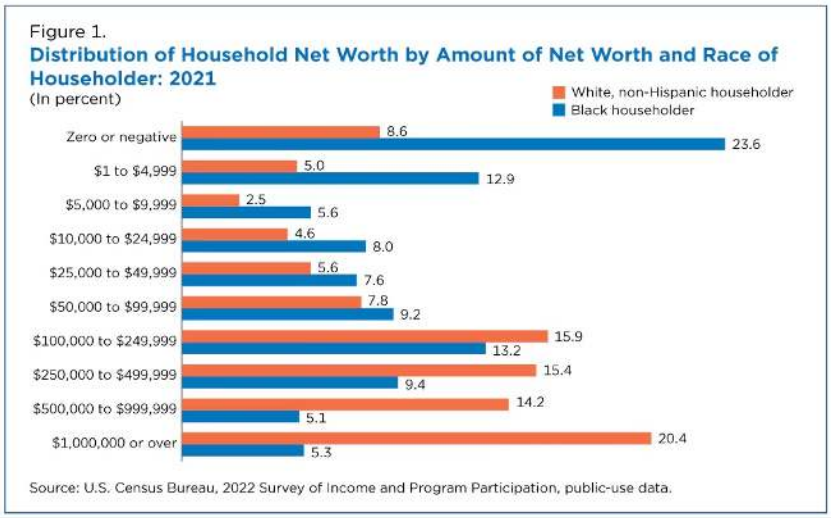


This chart displays the racial wealth gap. How is this a consequence of neighborhood and housing problems?

Source: Kent 2025

Wealth growth has been faster in recent years for white families than others, though is has been growing for all groups. For instance, with an end point of late 2024, "white household average wealth grew 68%, from $918,000 to about $1.5 million, since the end of the Great Recession; Black household average wealth grew 53%, from $231,000 to $352,000; and Hispanic household average wealth grew 63%, from $175,000 to $285,000" (Kent 2025).

A large racial gap also exists in regard to having no net worth or having *negative net worth*, that is, having your debt exceed your assets. The Census reports that in 2021, just under 1 in 4 households with a Black householder had zero or negative wealth, compared to 1 in 12 households with a white householder (Sullivan, Hays, & Bennett 2024). The chart below displays the distribution of household worth among Black and white households, with the top bar representing having zero or negative net worth.



This chart helps visualize the racial wealth gap, showing that white households are far more likely to have over 1 million in net worth while Black households are far more likely to have zero or negative net worth. What do you think that we can do to help close the racial wealth gap?

Source: Sullivan, Hays, & Bennett 2024

Health and Well-being

As discussed in the prior chapter, poverty is associated with a variety of adverse health and well-being outcomes. The experience of housing insecurity or being unhoused has similar outcomes. For instance, research has found that experiencing houselessness is associated with a higher risk of physical and mental health problems and other difficulties. In particular, the unhoused are much more likely than the housed to experience hunger and food insecurity, and they are up to twenty times more likely to suffer from chronic illnesses such as hepatitis, high blood pressure, tuberculosis, and vascular disease. On average, houseless adults die by their midfifties, about twenty years shorter than the average life span of housed adults (Lee et al. 2010).

The long-term impacts for youth who are unhoused include significantly higher rates of emotional, behavioral, and immediate and long-term health problems, along with increased risks for substance use and suicide. Four out of five children experiencing houselessness have been exposed to at least one serious violent event by age 12 (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration 2022).

Children and adults experiencing houselessness may face other consequences related to well-being, such as a higher risk of contracting diseases or experiencing violence. The US Conference of Mayors (2011) compiled information on houselessness in twenty-nine cities across the country, and found that over a quarter (26%) had a severe mental illness, 13% were survivors of domestic violence, and 4% were HIV positive.

LGBTQ+ unhoused individuals may be a greater risk as they have higher rates of mental health problems overall due to social factors such as stigma and family rejection, which can be exacerbated by the experience houselessness or housing insecurity. One study found that LGBTQ+ youth who experienced houselessness or housing instability have higher rates of mental health challenges then stably-housed LGBTQ+ youth. Housing insecure LGBTQ+ youth also had higher rates of victimization, being in foster care, and food insecurity (The Trevor Project 2022).

In addition to housing insecurity, residential segregation also impacts health outcomes. Neighborhoods of color are more likely than white neighborhoods to be **resource deserts**, areas lacking critical amenities. There are several types of resource deserts including for health care, transportation, or green spaces; however, one that strongly impacts health is *food deserts*, areas that lack access to nutritious affordable food. If there is no large grocery store nearby, which offers access to healthy and low-cost produce, neighborhood residents sometimes must resort to purchasing food at the 'corner store' or fast food shops, which offer foods high in fat, sodium, and sugar. Eating those foods then worsens health outcomes. Living in a food desert can even shorten one's life span (Massey et al. 2023).

✔ Applying Social Research

Residential Segregation and Health Outcomes

Social scientists have long thought that poor urban neighborhoods pose, in and of themselves, significant health risks for their residents. These neighborhoods may lack supermarkets with fresh fruits and vegetables, and they lack safe parks and other settings for exercise. They are also neighborhoods with high crime rates and thus much stress. For all these reasons, they should impair the physical health of their residents. Reflecting this argument, the residents of poor urban neighborhoods do, in fact, exhibit significant health problems compared to the residents of wealthier neighborhoods.

Although this argument might sound compelling, the residents of poor and wealthier neighborhoods might differ in other ways that affects their respective health. For example, people living in wealthier neighborhoods are generally more educated and more conscious of taking care of their health. If their health then is better than that of their counterparts in poor neighborhoods, it is difficult to know how much the neighborhood setting itself plays a role in the health of residents.

For this reason, a real-life experiment provided compelling evidence of the importance of the quality of a neighborhood for one’s health. In the 1990s, the federal government conducted an experiment in

which 1,800 poor urban women were randomly selected and, with their permission, assigned to move from their neighborhoods to wealthier neighborhoods. The women were studied a decade after they moved. In particular, they were weighed and had their blood checked for evidence of diabetes. Their results were then compared to women in their original neighborhoods who were not selected to move away. The women who did move away ended up with somewhat lower rates of diabetes and obesity than those who stayed behind.

The experimental design of this study allowed the researchers to conclude that the change in neighborhoods was the reason for their improvement in these two health measures. Reflecting this conclusion, the secretary of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development said, “This study proves that concentrated poverty is not only bad policy, it’s bad for your health.” A news report observed that the results of this study “offered some of the strongest support yet for the idea that where you live can significantly affect your overall health, especially if your home is in a low-income area.”

The results of this experimental study underscore the need to improve the living conditions of poor urban neighborhoods, as these conditions affect many life outcomes of the adults and children who live in them.

Sources: Ludwig et al. 2011; Stobbe 2011

Educational Inequality

Children who are unhoused or have unstable housing may experience numerous academic difficulties, including below-grade level reading, high rate of learning disabilities, poor school attendance, and failure to advance to the next grade or graduate. The Housing Matters initiative via the Urban Institute reports that housing instability affects educational outcomes such as decreased school attendance, lower testing scores, a higher likelihood of completing high school late, and a lower likelihood of completing schooling at all (Chen 2024).

For instance, experiencing housing insecurity and houselessness can lead to to higher rates of absenteeism and switching schools more often ('mobility'), which may harm students' educational success. Galvez and Luna (2014) of the Urban Institute gathered the following research findings:

- "Among a sample of children living in a Los Angeles homeless shelter, approximately 16 percent missed more than three weeks of school in the previous 3 months.
- Chronically homeless children in a New York City supportive housing demonstration project missed on average 30 percent (54 of 180) school days each year. After families received supportive and stable housing, attendance improved by an average of 25 days per school year.
- Among a cohort of 10,000 third-grade students in Philadelphia, students with one or more homeless episodes were 30 percent more likely to meet the school district’s definition of 'truant' compared to students with only one homeless episode. ...
- An early study of a large sample of Denver K-12 students found that as mobility increased, academic achievement suffered. More mobile students had lower test scores and were more likely to perform below grade level compared with students who did not move. ...
- A sample of homeless adolescents in New York City changed schools more frequently than their low-income but stably housed peers (an average of 4.2 school moves since kindergarten, compared to 3.1). The higher mobility was associated with higher rates of being held back in school. ...
- Half of the sample of homeless New York City adolescents repeated a grade and 22 percent repeated two or more grades; in comparison, 40 percent of low-income youth who had never experienced homelessness repeated one grade and only 8 percent repeated two or more.
- Among Chicago homeless children, one third were held back at least once. Among homeless students who entered shelter in 10th grade, nearly half dropped out of high school."

You may explore more educational outcomes discussed in the report Homelessness and Housing Instability: The Impact on Education Outcomes.

Children and Our Future

The Plight of Houseless Children

The faltering economy and wave of home foreclosures of the past few years resulted in what has been called a "national surge" of houseless children. The number of children who are houseless at least part of the year now reaches more than 1.6 million annually, equal to more than 2 percent of all American children. Because of their circumstances, they are at greater risk than their housed peers for hunger, asthma and other chronic health conditions, and stress and emotional problems.

They are at also greater risk for poor school performance. Amid the surge in children's houselessness, the nation's schools marshaled their resources to help their houseless children. An official with a private charity that helps poor families pointed out the obvious problem: "It's hard enough going to school and growing up, but these kids also have to worry where they'll be staying that night and whether they'll eat. We see 8-year-olds telling Mom not to worry, don't cry."

School districts began sending special buses to shelters, motels, and other settings for houseless children and their parents so that the children could continue attending their regular school. They also assigned social workers to help houseless families and other personnel to bring them school supplies, to drive them to look at shelters where they could live, and to perform other tasks. Federal legislation in fact requires schools to take extra measures to help houseless children, but school superintendents say that the federal government has not provided them the necessary funds to carry out the intent of the legislation. This lack of funding adds to their school districts' already dire financial situation.

Charity Crowell, age 9, was just one of the hundreds of thousands of houseless children the schools were trying to help. During the semester her family became houseless, her grades fell to C's from her usual high standard. One reason was that she had trouble staying awake in class. She explained why: "I couldn't go to sleep, I was worried about all the stuff."

Another houseless student, Destiny Corfee, age 11, became houseless after her parents lost both their jobs and then their house and had to move into their van. The family then parked the van at a Walmart so that their children could go into the store and clean themselves before they went to school. Recalling life in the van, Destiny said, "I was embarrassed that maybe one of my friends might see me. I don't want anybody to know that I was actually in there."

Sources: Bassuk, Murphy, Coupe, Kenney, & Beach 2011; Eckholm 2009; Pelley 2011

These are but a few examples of the consequences of neighborhood and housing problems. We will further discuss inequality in medicine/health and education in later chapters, as well as racial and other inequalities.

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Strategies to Address Neighborhood and Housing Problems

A sociological perspective offers some insight into suitable solutions to neighborhood and housing problems, as it reminds us that these problems are intimately related to inequalities of social class, race, gender, and sexuality rather than only to individual circumstances or behaviors. For instance, it is common for people concerned with addressing houselessness to focus resources and programming on fixing the personal problems of people who are unhoused. Many shelter and housing programs offer social support, motivational coaching, counseling, and even 'life skills' classes. When we consider that many people who are unhoused have experienced trauma, mental health crises, and substance use disorder before becoming houseless, this approach makes sense. It makes even more sense when we become aware of the trauma, alienation, mental health crises, and substance abuse patterns that can develop while people are unhoused. Many people who are unhoused are often in need of robust social and therapeutic support as they make their way back to stability.

Although it is critical to provide affordable adequate housing and to reduce mental health and other concerns, it is also important to remember that various social inequalities affect who is in most need. Ultimately, strategies aimed at providing affordable housing will not succeed in addressing these problems unless they recognize the reach of social inequalities and try to reduce or eliminate these inequalities. Thus, strategies to address housing problems must include *structural solutions*, including those that address the root of the problem rather than only try to alleviate the problem once it already exists.

Understanding, acknowledging, and repairing past injustices are critical steps toward making homes equitably available to everyone. Tenants unions are working to empower renters and reduce evictions. Housing advocates, many of whom have been unhoused, are lobbying for more funding for affordable housing. Nonprofit housing service providers continue developing and delivering trauma-informed services that support the social and emotional needs of people striving for housing stability. In addition, community-based efforts resource and support residents of historically marginalized neighborhoods. Each of these interdependent solutions creates stable housing, a component of social justice.

Existing and Proposed Policies and Practices

Housing distribution was historically discriminatory towards marginalized groups such as people of color and low-income people. The Fair Housing Act passed in 1968 and banned the sale, rental, and other housing practices that indicated preference or discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin. In 1974, it was amended to include sex, and in 1988 to include people with disabilities and people with children. Policies that reinforce and more strongly monitor violations of the Fair Housing Act could help reduce housing discrimination and its many consequences for people in marginalized groups.



Many years of social activism, including protests, contributed to the creation and passage of the Fair Housing Act.

"Fair housing protest, Seattle, Washington, 1964" by Seattle Municipal Archives is licensed under CC BY 2.0

In 2016, a rule by the Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD) ensured equal access to Community Planning and Development programs regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or marital status. Gender non-conforming individuals may find it difficult to access services because this rule applies to one specific program, not to all of them. To date, the Fair Housing Act does not include gender identity or sexual orientation. Only a handful of states have made it illegal to discriminate based on sexual orientation and gender identity, creating a challenge for LGBTQ+ families and individuals (HUD 2016, 2022).

The Equality Act would amend the Civil Rights Act to "prohibit discrimination on the basis of the sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnancy, childbirth, or a related medical condition of an individual, as well as because of sex-based stereotypes." This Act was sent to the Senate in May 2019 after passing the House but was not taken up for consideration. It was reintroduced in 2023. If you would like to learn more, you can read The Equality Act.

To address the racial wealth gap, which is in large part a consequence of redlining and housing discrimination, Signe-Mary McKernan and Caroline Ratcliffe (2013) recommended in a testimony to a Senate committee:

1. Make homeownership tax subsidies more progressive: Revise mortgage interest deduction benefits and offer a first-time homebuyers tax credit to low-income families.
2. Promote retirement savings: Enact federal legislation to create automatic individual retirement accounts (IRAs) and expand the Saver's Credit to boost low-income families' assets and ability to save for retirement.
3. Reauthorize existing programs: Reauthorize the Assets for Independence program, established under the Assets for Independence Act (1998), which authorized the largest source of funding for individual development accounts (IDAs) for low-income households to help save for homeownership and other large expenses.
4. Increase access to high-quality education for low-wealth families: Pass policies that subsidize higher education, which will boost earning capacity and the ability to accumulate wealth.
5. Improve access to micro and small business capital: Ensure that low-wealth families are able to obtain small business loans, as self-employment can increase earnings and wealth (McKernan & Ratcliffe 2013: 2).

To address housing insecurity and houselessness, the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University (2025) recommends building more housing trust funds and passing bond issuances which fund affordable housing projects and housing assistance programs, taxing corporations on high-income earners to fund housing development, implementing stronger tenant protections such as limiting annual rent increases, passing zoning reforms to facilitate housing developments, shifting toward low-cost manufactured housing, and more.

Focusing on improving educational outcomes for children experiencing housing insecurity, Gallagher and colleagues (2020) in a report for the Urban Institute explain:

> "When housing is safe and high-quality, stable and affordable, and located in well-resourced, low-poverty neighborhoods, children tend to do better in school, parents report improved mental health, and the whole family benefits. Researchers have identified four interconnected elements of housing as foundational to improving educational outcomes among low-income children: Affordability, stability, housing quality, and neighborhood quality (Brennan, Reed, and Sturtevant 2014; Cunningham and MacDonald 2012; Newman 2008). Also known as the 'housing bundle,' these elements create and support conditions that affect children's success both in and outside the classroom" (Gallagher et al. 2020: 4).

Housing affordability means that households should pay 30% or less of their income on housing so that they do not have to decide choose between paying rent or the mortgage versus paying for other necessities such as food and clothing. Residential stability refers to the need to reduce residential mobility, the number of moves that children experience. Housing quality considers both harmful physical conditions and overcrowding in the home, with healthier conditions and fewer residents improving outcomes for children. Neighborhood quality focuses on the neighborhood's access to resources and other aspects such as lower crime, more investment, and stronger social integration (Gallagher et al. 2020).

To help make the 'housing bundle' a reality and improve childrens' educational outcomes, the following practices could be implemented: Case management (e.g., coaching, mentoring, and tracking of families), resident services (e.g., connecting residents with educational or childcare services), on-site educational programming (e.g., after-school programs), housing subsidies (e.g., providing homes for housing insecure college students or families with gradeschool-aged children), and more (Gallagher et al. 2020). Feel free to read more details in the report Aligning Housing and Education: Evidence of Promising Practices and Structural Challenges.

Other policies and practices discussed in the prior chapter on Poverty may also help to address housing insecurity and houselessness.

Housing First

A relatively new and innovative approach to addressing houselessness is the Housing First model. Simply put, the idea is that if people have stable housing, solving other problems becomes more likely. Having a secure home, consistent access to schooling, transportation, and support services means that people can be more successful in addressing overlapping issues such as mental health, addiction, and seeking employment. Please watch the short video below for a quick rundown on Housing First principles.



Please watch this video to learn the five key principles of the Housing First Model of housing services. Why might this approach make a difference in ending houselessness?

"Pandemic shows importance, effectiveness of Housing First programs" by CBC News: The National is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

Many communities and housing service providers have adopted the Housing First approach. Utah's Housing First approach is a model for how these services can be made available. Through the collaboration of many local organizations and donations from local churches, real permanent semi-communal housing and services such as counseling are provided. One location, Grace Mary Manor, provides affordable housing for 84 formerly houseless people. Through programs like this, Utah decreased its houseless population by 91% (McEvers 2015).

Individual Agency and Collective Action

Individuals and communities are taking the initiative to improve neighborhood livability by increasing resources that benefit families, such as informal libraries, green spaces, and art houses. In the Social Movements chapter, we will look at how Black Lives Matter organizes mobilized resources for community care and mutual aid that prioritize the well-being of residents in under-resourced communities. Now we will turn to individual and community-based responses.

When we look at the state level, Oregon Governor Tina Kotek declared a state of emergency related to the increase in houselessness in most counties in the state in 2023. She set a much higher target for building affordable housing (Griffin 2023). She requested funding from the legislature to provide rent assistance, increase the number of shelter beds and advocate staff, and fund organizations that are working to address disparities in houselessness (Kotek 2023). In March 2023, the Oregon Legislature approved 200 million dollars in funds for these efforts. While it is too soon to tell how much impact the clear political will and the funding will have on the state of houselessness in Oregon, this work is a step in the right direction.

The city of Portland, Oregon has also been taking innovative steps to end houselessness. One effort is the Residential Infill Project. This change in zoning regulations passed in 2020, allowed for the creation of duplexes, triplexes, apartment builds of no more than six units, and accessory dwelling units in zones labeled for single-family homes only. However, these additional housing units had

to meet housing affordability standards. With this change, more multi-family homes than single-family homes were built in Portland during the first year. While that's only 367 units of affordable housing in one year, the impact of this change will only grow (Wallace 2023).

In a second initiative in April 2022, Organizers with Portland Neighbors Welcome convened the first YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard!) Conference in support of their stated mission:

> "We believe that every neighborhood in our city should be open and available to people with diverse backgrounds and incomes, and that every person who wants to sleep indoors at night should be able to. We support policies that can deliver an abundant supply of homes that are affordable to rent or buy at every income level and every household size, and ensure that all tenants can live without fear of eviction or displacement. We advocate for those land use, housing, and transportation policies that will make Portland a fairer and more sustainable city" (Portland Neighbors Welcome 2022).

If you want to be inspired about what is possible, feel free to listen to these recordings from the YIMBY conference.

People Making a Difference

Working to Achieve Social Justice

Nancy Radner has been a tireless advocate for the homeless and for social justice more generally. From 2006 to 2012, she served as the head of the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness, which works with eighty-four homeless service agencies and manages more than $50 million in state and federal funding for homeless services. The Alliance also gathers and distributes various kinds of information on homelessness and coordinates political, educational, and public relations events to increase understanding of homelessness.

Before joining the Chicago Alliance, Radner was a program officer at the Corporation for Supportive Housing, a national organization that engages in many kinds of efforts aimed at helping the homeless and other low-income individuals find affordable housing. She also served as a staff attorney at the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago, where she specialized in housing law.

In 2012, Radner left the Chicago Alliance for another social justice position when she joined the Ounce of Prevention Fund as director of Illinois policy. The Ounce, as this Illinois organization calls itself, advocates for early childhood education and other programs and policies aimed at helping low-income children.

Many people who receive a law degree from a top law school, as Radner did, take a job in a large law firm or with a large corporation and spend their careers helping the wealthy. Instead, Radner chose to use her legal knowledge to help achieve social justice for the poor. She once said of her efforts to end homelessness, "People call us starry-eyed dreamers. But I actually say we're steely-eyed realists because ending homelessness is not hard. We know exactly how to do it. And what we're trying to do is create the political will to get it fully done. We can't prevent people from losing their housing. But what we can do is ensure that if that happens that there's a system in place to get them out of homelessness really quickly."

In working her entire career to help the poor and homeless, Nancy Radner has helped make a difference.

Sources: Kapos 2012; Schorsch 2010

College students are often housing insecure. One example of a local effort to address this is a coalition of local colleges and nonprofits that banded together to create housing options in response to the housing instability of COVID-19. Portland State University, Portland Community College, and Mount Hood Community College, along with the nonprofits College Housing Northwest, Native American Youth and Family Center, and New Avenues for Youth, created a new program. This program provides rental assistance for college students enrolled in their programs. If you'd like to read more about the successful programs, you can read the articles Pilot Program to Address Student Homelessness Expands This Fall and Affordable Rents for College Students. Your own college likely supports meeting students' basic needs, including housing. You can talk to your instructor or student services to learn more about these programs. You can also use your individual agency to start or assist with such programs on your own campus.

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Review of Neighborhoods and Housing

Summary

1. There are a variety of neighborhood and housing problems. For instance, **racial residential segregation** is the separation of Neighborhoods by race. Currently, many neighborhoods in large cities are *hypersegregated* and some are **gentrifying**, with wealthier (white) individuals moving into and displacing residents of low-income neighborhoods (of color). **Housing insecurity** refers to a broad set of challenges related to housing such as being cost-burdened, evicted, or not being able to pay bills, and includes the experience of **houselessness**, not having a place to live.
2. Structural functionalism takes the view that neighborhoods and housing insecurity may serve important functions for society such as increasing social cohesion and justifying nonprofit employment, though it also holds that related problems are dysfunctional because they inhibit people's abilities to fully contribute to society. Conflic theory emphasizes power dynamics between social groups such as the rich and the poor, such as how those in power have used discriminatory housing practices and policies to maintain social hierarchies. Symbolic interactionism focuses on people's social interactions within different neighborhoods, as well as meanings attached to certain identities or circumstances such as **stereotypes** of those in poverty or who are houseless.
3. The discriminatory housing practice of **redlining** historically fueled residential segregation, though discrimination in the housing industry continues even today in mortgage applications and broker practices. Sociologists recognize that racist exclusionary policies have created residential segregation and housing instability. Wider social forces like the economy, access to jobs or education, or the amount of affordable housing in an area influence who is housing insecure.
4. Houselessness and housing insecurity are on the rise in the U.S., though they are difficult to measure. The experience of housing insecurity may include being stressed about and unable to pay bills, being *cost-burdened* – spending 30% or more income on housing, or being *evicted* – forced to move from one's home. Houselessness may involve sleeping on friends' couches, in a car, in abandoned buildings, or in tents.
5. Social location such as race, gender, and sexuality influences who experiences housing insecurity and houselessness – even though most houseless people are white men, people of color are disproportionately houseless as they are overrepresented in that population.
6. Consequences of neighborhood and housing problems include the **racial wealth gap** – the large gap in wealth between white and Black (or Latinx) families, differential health outcomes such as a higher risk of hunger, chronic illness, and mental health challenges among the houseless, a lack of critical amenities in the neighborhood or **resource deserts** including *food deserts* in which people lack access to affordable healthy foods, and differential education outcomes such as the lower school achievement of children experiencing housing instability.
7. Action from advocates, policymakers, nonprofits, and businesses along with changes in laws and policies are necessary to end residential segregation, housing discrimination, housing insecurity, and houselessness. Interdependent solutions include funding more shelters and temporary housing, focusing on housing first, building more affordable housing, decriminalizing houselessness, and other options. Safe housing is a basic human right, and housing stability is social justice.

Questions

1. How have you witnessed or experienced racial residential segregation in your own life, and what do you think are some consequences of that segregation?
2. The chart Racist Policies, Racist Inequities, and Racist Ideas in Housing illustrates Ibram X Kendi’s definition of racism as “…a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produce and sustain racial inequities” (2016) – what are examples of the policies, inequities, and ideas that have impacted who has a home?
3. What are some stereotypes that you've heard about people experiencing houselessness, and what impact did those stereotypes have on how you understand unhoused people?
4. How do the classical theoretical perspectives' framings of neighborhood and housing problems overlap with and differ from their framings of poverty?
5. Identify a neighborhood in your city or a nearby city that is experiencing gentrification – how do you think that the original residents of that neighborhood feel about the changes, and do you think those changes are more positive or negative?
6. Different populations experience houselessness for unique reasons – pick one population (e.g., the elderly, women, Black families, LGBTQ+ youth, Indigenous communities, and so on) and answer: Why are these folks houseless? What

interdependent laws, policies, or community solutions would best help?
7. How do you think that consequences of neighborhood and housing problems vary by social location such as by race, gender, sexuality, or disability, and what does that suggest about solutions to these problems?

Action Steps

1. Use your sociological imagination: When you encounter someone perpetuating stereotypes about unhoused people, help the person use their sociological imagination to understand the structural causes of houselessness and to build empathy for the unhoused.
2. Support nonprofits and similar organizations: Contribute money or volunteer time to a local, state, or national organization that provides aid or shelter to those experiencing houselessness.
3. Use your individual agency: Call or send emails to local, state, and federal officials that encourage them to strengthen housing programs, including those that aim to build affordable housing, integrate residents from different backgrounds, offer vouchers in mixed-income neighborhoods, and so on.
4. Engage in collective action: Research organizations that are engaging in action around neighborhoods and housing such as YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard!), select one, and find out how to get involved in their efforts.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Crime, Immigration, and Social Control

Overview of Crime and Immigration
Theoretical Perspectives on Crime
Patterns of Crime and Immigration
Social Control and the Criminal Justice System
Strategies to Address Crime and Social Control
Review of Crime, Immigration, and Social Control
References for Crime, Immigration, and Social Control

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Overview of Crime and Immigration

Learning Objectives

- Explain the general public's concern about crime, especially in relation to media.
- Describe how crime is categorized and measured in the United States.
- Summarize how the three major sociological perspectives frame problems of crime, and how specific theories within them explain crime.
- Identify myths and realities related to the connection between crime and immigration.
- Describe how crime varies by areas of social location such as social class, race, gender, and age.
- List several consequences of crime, particularly for white-collar crime and violence against women, and of social control.
- Define terms related to the criminal justice system and inequality such as social control and the prison industrial complex.
- Evaluate solutions to reduce crime and address other problems related to the criminal justice system.

Put most simply, crime is behavior that is prohibited by the criminal law because it is considered harmful or offensive. This simple understanding, 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 race, nationality, social class, or other areas of *social location*?

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 results in social disapproval. This definition reflects the common sociological view that deviance is concerned with what other people think about the behavior. This view is reflected in an often-cited quote from sociologist Howard S. Becker (1963: 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 sex work, may be considered very deviant because the culture 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 engaged in the behavior of which they are suspected), and people with no criminal record have in fact engaged in harmful and even criminal behavior.

In this chapter, we'll cover a variety of social problems and concerns related to crime and the criminal justice system. Keep in mind as we discuss these issues that what is considered 'deviant' or 'criminal' is *socially constructed*, that there are problems in the ways we treat or punish people deemed 'criminal,' and that the targeting of people deemed 'criminal' perpetuates social inequalities. We will discuss crime itself including perceptions and myths, definitions and definitions, variation among perpetrators and victims, and consequences of crime. We will also connect crime to immigration, particularly the myth of the criminal immigrant, as well as to *social control*, particularly in the criminal justice system.

Public Concern about Crime

The American public is clearly concerned about crime. In a 2024 Gallup poll, nearly two-thirds of the public (64%) thought that crime had risen from the previous year, down from 77% in the year prior. Over half (56%) described crime as 'extremely' or 'very' serious (Brenan 2024). In 2023, 40% said that they would be afraid to walk alone at night within a mile of their home, half worried about having their car stolen or broken into, and over a quarter (28%) feared being murdered (Saad 2023). 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 thinks the crime rate has been rising, this rate has actually been declining since the early 1990s. Regarding the fear of being murdered, homicides are quite rare, it does not rank among the top ten causes of death, 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. Why?

Media Myths

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 sensationalized 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*. For example, research indicates that more than 25% of crime stories on evening newscasts and in newspapers concern homicide, even though homicide comprises less than 1% of all crime (Feld 2003). Similarly, the vast majority of crime stories feature violent crime, even though violent crime comprises only about 12-14% 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 or another *property crime*.



News media often 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 Black people or other people of color as well as crimes with white victims. A greater percentage of crime stories involve people of color as offenders than is accurate 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 Black people 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 white people are victims of crimes.

In addition to news media, politicians and government officials have exaggerated the extent of crime, posting false claims on social media or conducting news interviews or filmed press conferences, which is then covered in the news media. Thus, media myths about crime and 'criminals' help fuel public fear about crime. What's the reality of crime?

Measuring Crime

It is surprisingly difficult to know how much crime occurs. Usually when it occurs, only the criminal and the victim, and sometimes occasional witnesses, 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 National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) (formerly the Uniform Crime Reports), published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). With data from police departments around the country, NIBRS logs details on each reported crime incident, such as demographic information about victims and offenders, relationships between the two. However, many crime victims do not report their crimes to the police, and the police thus do not know about them to report them to the FBI. These unreported crimes represent 'hidden crimes' or, as they are often called, the 'dark figure of crime.'

This underreporting of crime represents a major concern. To get a more accurate picture, 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. The figures can be striking: The Bureau of Justice Statistics, using the NCVS, counted 6,419,060 violent crimes and 13,637,450 property crimes in 2023, for a total of over 20 million crimes (Tapp & Coen 2024).

The image below, from a Bureau of Justice Statistics report, indicates the differences between the NIBRS and the NCVS. We can see that for 2022 the NCVS estimates more property crimes and violent crimes than the NIBRS as well as more property crime in 2021; however, the NCVS estimates fewer violent crimes in 2021. Thus, we should keep in mind when examining crime data that figures may not match because of the differing measurement used.

Rate of crime per 1,000 reported to police in the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) and in the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), 2021 and 2022

	Rate per 1,000 persons			
Type of crime	2021 NIBRS[a]	2022 NIBRS[a]*	2021 NCVS	2022 NCVS*
Violent crime excluding simple assault	4.00	3.98	2.91 †	4.70
Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter	0.07	0.06	~	~
Rape/sexual assault[b]	0.46 †	0.42	0.25 ‡	0.40
Robbery	0.61	0.65	1.00 †	1.58
Aggravated assault	2.85	2.85	1.66 †	2.72
	Rate per 1,000 persons		Rate per 1,000 households	
	2021 NIBRS[a]	2022 NIBRS[a]*	2021 NCVS	2022 NCVS*
Property crime	19.44	20.65	27.82 †	32.44
Burglary[c]	2.73	2.75	3.66	4.53
Motor vehicle theft	2.73	2.96	3.32 †	4.42

Note: National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) crime rates are normally reported per 100,000 persons but were recalculated for this report to align with the reporting of National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) crime rates per 1,000 persons. NIBRS violent and property crime rates are calculated per 1,000 persons. NCVS violent crime rates are calculated per 1,000 persons, and NCVS property crime rates are calculated per 1,000 households. See the FBI's Crime Data Explorer to review the confidence intervals associated with each of the NIBRS crime estimates. See *Criminal Victimization, 2022* (NCJ 307089, BJS, September 2023) for NCVS standard errors.

~Not applicable.

*Comparison year.

†Difference with comparison year is significant at the 95% confidence level.

‡Difference with comparison year is significant at the 90% confidence level.

[a]Includes crimes against persons age 11 or younger, persons who are homeless, persons who are institutionalized, and crimes against commercial establishments. These populations are included in NIBRS, but out of sample for the NCVS.

[b]See the Glossary on the FBI's Crime Data Explorer for the Uniform Crime Reporting Program's definition of rape. See *Criminal Victimization, 2022* (NCJ 307089, BJS, September 2023) for details on the measurement of rape or sexual assault in the NCVS.

[c]NIBRS defines burglary as forcible entry, unlawful entry where no force is used, or attempted forcible entry of a structure to commit a felony or theft. The NCVS defines burglary as the unlawful or forcible entry or attempted entry of places, including a permanent residence, other residence (e.g., a hotel room or vacation residence), or other structure (e.g., a garage or shed) where there was a completed or attempted theft.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 2021 and 2022; and Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Incident-Based Reporting System, 2021 and 2022.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics

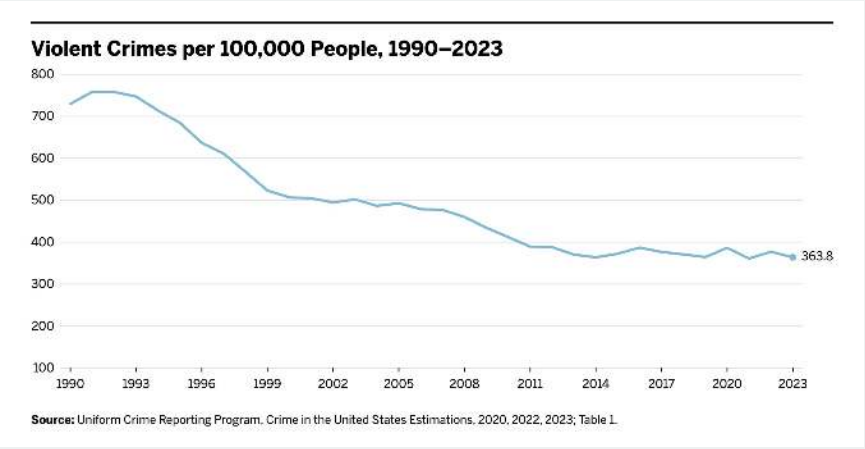
A third source of crime information is the self-report survey. Here subjects, usually adolescents, indicate on an anonymous questionnaire whether and how often they committed various offenses in, say, the past year. Typically, they also answer questions about their family relationships, school performance, 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.

Types of Crime

Many types of crime exist. Criminologists commonly group crimes into several major categories: Violent crime, property crime, white-collar crime, organized crime, and consensual or victimless crime, though there are other categories such as cybercrime or transnational 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. A full discussion of the many types of crime is beyond the scope of this chapter; instead we highlight here the most important dimensions of some 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. A sizable proportion of the American public fears being victimized by violent crime, including murder, as mentioned above. Though, women fear crime more than men. In the 2023 Gallup poll, women were more likely than men to say that fear of being victimized by crime has prevented them from walking or jogging alone in their area, as well as less likely to go to parks, talk to strangers, and attend crowded events due to fear of victimization (Saad 2023). The decline in violent crime over the past several decades has not lightened these fears, likely in part due to the media myths discussed above.



Data consistently show declining rates of violent crime since the 1990s. How did your perception of violent crime rates differ from this reality?

Source: Grawert 2024

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 in the criminal victimization of women. Homicide has been falling, as with violent crime in general.



Homicide surged during the pandemic but has steadily been declining since.

Source: Wu and Arango 2025

Other 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 the argument escalates.

Second, 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 or romantic partners and exes) and other relatives commit almost 30% 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. 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. Although white people fear victimization by Black people more than by other whites, whites in fact are much more likely to be killed by other white people. Fifth, men commit about the great majority of all homicides. Men are much more likely than women to commit most forms of crime, and this is especially true for homicide and other violent crime.

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 or declining since. 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).

Property Crime

Property crime (burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson) is far more common than violent crime. For instance, the FBI reported 380.7 violent crimes per 100,000 people and 1,954.4 property crimes per 100,000 people in 2022, a difference of over 1,500 (Gramlich 2024). 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. Many Americans have installed burglar alarms and other security measures in their homes and similar devices in their cars and SUVs due to the fear of victimization.

Larceny or theft is by far the most common type of property crime. 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 man with a scowl on his face, or a handsome middle-aged man dressed in an expensive business suit? The former image likely comes to mind first, yet white-collar crime is arguably much more harmful than other forms of 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, a sociologist who defined **white-collar crime** in the 1940s as “a crime committed by a person of respectability and high social status in the course of his occupation” (1949: 9). 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 US 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, called *corporate crime*. As we discuss on the Patterns page, corporate crime involves a heavy economic and health toll on its victims and for society at large.



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

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,' many of us think of something like the Mafia, vividly portrayed in the *Godfather* movies and other films, that comprises several highly organized and hierarchical Italian American 'families.' The emphasis on Italian

domination of organized crime overlooks these other groups' 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, sex work, 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.

Victimless Crime

Victimless crime, or *consensual crime*, refers to behaviors in which people engage voluntarily and willingly even though these behaviors violate the law. Illegal drug use is a major form of victimless crime; other forms include sex work, gambling, and pornography. These behaviors are not entirely victimless, as illegal drug users, for example, may harm themselves and others, though they are conceptualized as being without a victim.

Victimless crime raises two questions: 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? Problems arise from laws against crime. For example, laws against sex work may perpetuate gender and class inequalities and the criminalization of minor drug crimes resulted in mass incarceration.

Critics of crime laws for this form of crime say we are now in a new prohibition and that our laws against illegal drugs, sex work, 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.

As we have seen, there are many categories and types of crime. Some involve victims, others do not. Some involve low-income people trying to survive, some involve rich people trying to gain more wealth. Some involve violence, some involve property. And so on. Crime itself is a social problem, and we will discuss more consequences of crime for victims, families, and society. First, however, we will turn to an introduction of how immigration fits into a chapter on crime.

Immigration

In this chapter we cover immigration for a few reasons: The false connection between immigrants and crime, the reality that some immigration is unauthorized, and the ways that the institution of the state has engaged in *social control* of immigrants.

Immigration is a source of great controversy in the US and in many other countries. This controversy is perhaps almost inevitable, as increasing numbers of migrants can affect aspects of society such as city crowding and housing availability. However, the fact that immigration can cause these complications does not justify the prejudice and hostility that have routinely greeted migrants to the US and elsewhere. As the number of immigrants in the US grew rapidly in various historical eras, native-born white people perceived threats to their jobs, land, and other resources and responded with mob violence.

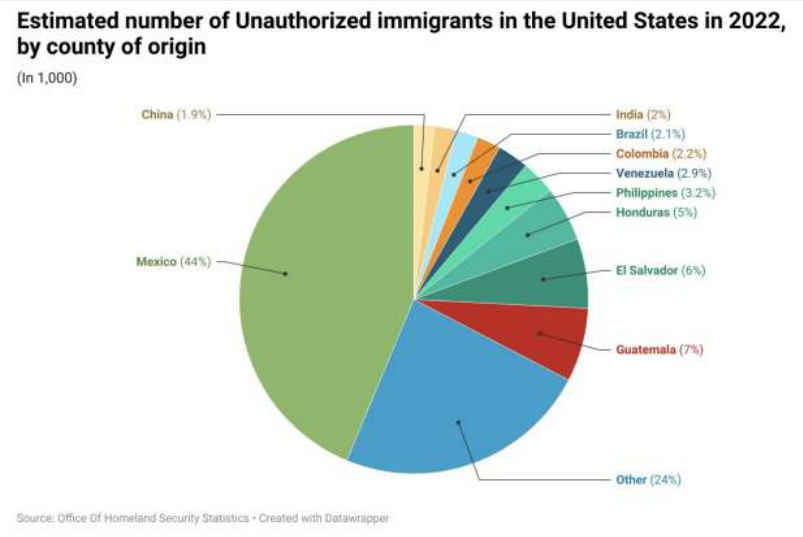
The history of the US is filled with prejudice and hostility of this type. This nation was settled, or colonized, by immigrants who came to these shores seeking political and religious freedom and economic opportunity (we will discuss in a later chapter what this meant for Indigenous peoples on this land). Despite this reality, when great waves of immigrants came to the US beginning in the nineteenth century, they were hardly greeted with open arms (Roediger 2006). During the first half of this century, some three million Irish immigrants, most of them Catholic, moved to the US. Because these immigrants were not Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the native-born white population (most of whom were Anglo-Saxon Protestants) deeply disliked them and even considered them to be a different 'race' than white. During the 1850s, the so-called Know-Nothing Party, composed of native-born white people, was openly hostile to Irish immigrants and would engage in mob violence against them, even murder. Later waves of

immigrants from Italian, Polish, and Jewish backgrounds also were not considered fully 'white' and were subject to employment discrimination and other prejudice and hostility.

Beginning with the California gold rush of 1849 and continuing after the Civil War, great numbers of Chinese immigrants came to the US and helped to build the nation's railroads and performed other important roles. They, too, were greeted with hostility by native-born whites who feared that the Chinese were taking away their jobs (Pfaelzer 2008). As the national economy worsened during the 1870s, riots against the Chinese occurred in western cities. In more than three hundred cities and towns, white mobs went into Chinese neighborhoods, burned them down, and murdered some Chinese residents while forcing the remainder to leave town. Congress outlawed Chinese immigration in 1882, with this ban lasting for almost a century.

During the 1930s, rising numbers of Mexican Americans in the western US led to similar hostility (Daniels 2002). The fact that this decade was the time of the Great Depression deepened white citizens' concerns that Mexican immigrants were taking away their jobs. White-owned newspapers falsely claimed that these immigrants posed a violent threat to white Americans, and that their supposed violence was made more likely by their use of 'marijuana' – a term that was intentionally Spanish to tie cannabis use to Mexican people in order to demonize them. It is estimated that at least 500,000 Mexican people returned to their native country, either because they were forcibly deported or because they returned there themselves under great pressure.

This student-created ancillary displays data on unauthorized immigrants in the US and addresses misconceptions and realities about unauthorized immigrants.



When people think about immigration to the United States, they often picture Mexicans crossing the southern border. But the story is much bigger than that. Immigrants come from all over the world, each with their own reasons for leaving home. Many come from Central American countries like Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, fleeing poverty, gang violence, and political instability. Others, like Haitians, are escaping the aftermath of natural disasters. Still more come from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, seeking education, safety, and a chance at a better life. Geography plays a role, too. It's no surprise that the largest numbers of unauthorized immigrants come from South and Central America, including Mexico, because the countries are nearby and land travel is possible. But numbers only tell part of the story. Every immigrant has a journey filled with challenges, hopes, and dreams. The United States immigration system touches millions of lives, shaping communities, workplaces, and schools across the country. And while headlines often focus on certain groups, every immigrant contributes to American society in meaningful ways through work, culture, and

community. Understanding the full story of immigration means recognizing the struggles and strengths of all those who come, not just the ones most visible in the news.

Datawrapper. N.d. “Create Charts, Maps, and Tables.” www.datawrapper.de/.

Office of Homeland Security Statistics. 2025. “Estimates of the Illegal Alien Population Residing in the United States.” ohss.dhs.gov/topics/immigration/illegal/population-estimates.

Origins of Unauthorized Immigrants by Aniyah Martinez, Sophia Wozniak, Colin Talbot, Sandra Gil is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Immigrants in the US today continue to experience hostility and *stereotyping*. With research findings and data, in this chapter we will counter the historical and contemporary misconception that immigrants are 'illegal,' bad people likely to be engaged in criminal activity that fuels much anti-immigrant sentiment. We will return to this issue on the Patterns page.

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Theoretical Perspectives on 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 such as why higher crime rates are associated with certain locations and social identities. For example, if California has a higher crime rate than Maine, and the US 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 discussion of the major sociological perspectives and several specific theories of crime follows, and a summary appears in the Snapshot table below.

Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot

Major perspective	Specific theory	Summary
Structural functionalism	Social disorganization	Certain social characteristics of urban neighborhoods contribute to high crime rates. These characteristics include poverty, dilapidation, population density, and population turnover.
	Strain	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.
Conflict theory	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: The reasons girls and women commit crime; the reasons female crime is lower than male crime; the victimization of girls and women by rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence; and the experience of women professionals and offenders in the criminal justice system.
Symbolic Interactionism	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.

Structural Functionalism

The functionalist perspective focuses on structural issues, known as *social structure theories*, which stress that crime results from the breakdown of society's norms and social organization. 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.

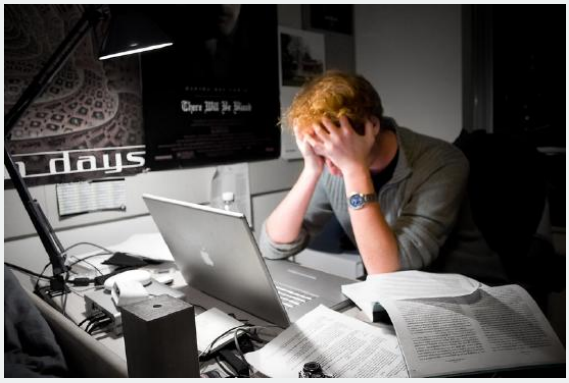
Social Disorganization Theory

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).

Strain Theory

Another popular explanation is **strain 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 US 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. Strain occurs when there is a gap between cultural goals and legitimate means to achieve them.

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.



Strain theory emphasizes the frustration that individuals face when they are unable to reach cultural goals, in which they may resort to crime to achieve those goals.

Frustration by Peter Alfred Hess via Flickr is licensed under CC BY 2.0

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).

Conflict Theory

The conflict perspective emphasizes the role of power dynamics. Specific theories under this perspective often focus is on the use and misuse of the criminal law and criminal justice system to deal with crime.

The first 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 (Miller & Brunson 2000).

In addressing the second area, on why crime is less common among women than men, scholars often cite two reasons: *Gender 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.

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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).

Symbolic Interactionism

The interactionist perspective focuses on *social process theories*, which stress that crime results from the social interaction of individuals with other people, particularly their friends and family. 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.

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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 the institutions of family and education 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, 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.

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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.

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Patterns of Crime and Immigration

On this page we discuss variation in crime, which is a difficult task as there are many types of crime, many sources of crime data, and variation in both crime and victimization. We then shift to consequences of crime, with a special a focus on white-collar crime and violence against women, which deserve more attention in public discourse. We then turn to a discussion on immigration, focusing largely on misconceptions and stereotypes about immigrant criminal activity.

Variation in Crime

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 including gender, age, social class, urban/rural residence, and race and ethnicity.

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: 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: 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.

This student-created ancillary involves an interview with a formerly incarcerated person to explore what being incarcerated was like for them and their family. The students also question how poverty affected their behavior, and how being incarcerated effected their life after being released.



In the United States, poverty and incarceration are closely intertwined, forming a persistent cycle that many people struggle to break. Low-income communities encounter this problem the most, because of inadequate educational resources, limited access to stable employment, and other factors, which increase the chances of someone becoming involved with the criminal justice system; even after incarceration the obstacles continue (Borrelli 2023). Incarceration leads to higher rates of poverty by reducing income on the individual and family levels, as an incarcerated person is unable to meaningfully contribute to family income. A previously incarcerated person's earnings may also be reduced, as it is more difficult for people with felonies to find employment, and even if they do get a job, they earn lower wages. This keeps many individuals stuck between financial hardships and lasting consequences of a conviction (Gottlieb 2017).

Brorrelli, Brianna. 2003. “The Interplay of Mass Incarceration and Poverty.” *Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law and Policy* X(2): 287-313.

Gottlieb, Aaron. 2017. “Incarceration and Relative Poverty in Cross-National Perspective: The Moderating Roles of Female Employment and the Welfare State.” *Social Service Review* 91(2): 293–318.

Poverty in Relation to Incarceration by Veronica Gibbs, Kayne Guiles, and classmates is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA

Race

In discussing who commits crime, any discussion of race must be careful because of the possibility of racial *stereotyping*. Keeping this in mind, race does seem to be related to criminal offending; however, sociologists trace the causes to structural conditions and the overlap between race and social class rather than to race itself.

In particular, research finds that Black and Latinx people have higher rates of street crime than white people. For example, although Black people comprised about 13% of the US population in 2019, they accounted for 33% of nonfatal violent crime arrests that year (Beck 2021). Latino people also have higher crime rates than non-Latino white people, but lower rates than those for Black people.

Why do these differences exist? Today, scholars attribute racial differences in offending to several structural factors (Unnever & Gabbidon 2011). First, Black and Latinx people are more likely than white people on average to be in poverty, and poverty contributes to higher crime rates. Second, they are also more likely to live in urban areas, which also contributes to higher crime

rates. Third, the systemic and ongoing racial discrimination they experience may lead to anger and frustration that in turn can promote deviant behavior. Although there is less research on the criminality of Native American people, they too appear to have higher crime rates than white people because of higher rates of poverty and experiences of racial discrimination (McCarthy & Hagan 2003).

In examining racial differences in street crime rates, it is important to keep in mind that affluent white people commit most white-collar crime, and especially corporate crime, as it is white people who typically lead and manage corporations. Just as social class affects the type of crime that people do, so does race. Wealthy white people commit much crime, but it is white-collar crime they tend to commit, which is glossed over by the news media and often by the criminal justice system.

Gender

Simply put, men commit much more crime than women. In 2019, 73% of all arrests were men, 88% of murder and non-negligent manslaughter arrests were men, and 97% of rape arrests were men (FBI n.d.). In the NCVS, victims report that men commit most of the violent crimes they experience, and self-report studies find that men far outpace women in the commission of serious street offenses.

The key question is why such a large gender difference exists. Some scholars may attribute this difference to biological differences between the sexes, but criminologists and social scientists attribute it to social factors. One of these is *gender 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.



Men generally have higher crime offender rates than women. A cause of this gender difference is *gender socialization* – 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: Though most crimes are committed by adults, 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% of all arrests even though they comprise only about 14% 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).

Urban and 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.

This student-created ancillary covers the topic of recidivism, including how it may vary based on age, race, and gender, as well as an example of lived experience relating to recidivism.

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/@go/page/255460

Recidivism

SOCIAL PROBLEMS



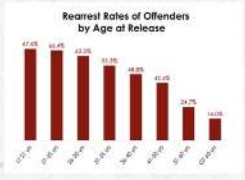
WHAT IS RECIDIVISM?

Recidivism refers to the tendency of a person's relapse into criminal behavior, typically measured by instances of rearrest, reconviction, and/or return to prison-with or without a new sentence- within 3 years of their release (National Institute of Justice, n.d.).
Unfortunately, in the United States, approximately 7 out of 10 former inmates are rearrested within 5 years of their release (James, 2015, as cited in Cowling, 2023, p. 6).

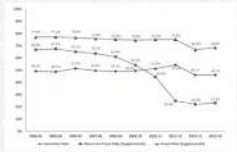
RECIDIVISM & AGE

Looking at the data from the USSC.gov, we can conclude that older people have a lower risk of reoffending again compared to younger people. The percentage difference between the two categories of LT 21 years and GT 60 years is around 51.6% which is the biggest gap between all the others.

Just 16.0% of offenders older than 60 years of age at the time of release were rearrested. In comparison, more than two thirds (67.6%) of offenders younger than 21 at the time of release were rearrested." (United States Sentencing Commission 2016)



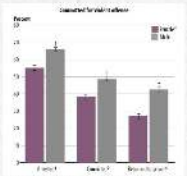
RECIDIVISM & RACE



Recidivism rates vary considerably within the nation's population across different racial and ethnic groups. For instance, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR, 2023) Authority data indicates that the conviction rates within 3 years for California state prisoners released in fiscal years 2013-2014 were 47.6% for Hispanic/Latino, 46.8% for White, 46.6% for American Indian/Alaskan Native, 45.6% for Black/African American, 40.8% for Asian/Pacific, and 33.5% for Other. For the year 2010, the U.S. Sentencing Commission reported rearrest rates for released offenders at 58.2% for Black, 46.5% for Hispanic, 42.9% for White, and 50.2% for Other racially classified groups (U.S. Sentencing Commission, 2022). Control for risk factors under the PATTERN risk assessment model posited by the Justice Department showed that Asian individuals had about 33% lower odds of recidivism than White offenders, Hispanic 10% lower, and Black individuals are equal to White offenders (OJP, 2022).

RECIDIVISM & GENDER

In 2012, a total of 408,300 individuals were released from state prisons across 34 states, with approximately 11% of them being women. Among those who committed violent crimes, 55% of the women were rearrested, 38% received a new conviction, and 27% returned to prison within 5 years of release. In comparison, 66% of the men were rearrested, 49% were convicted again, and 43% returned to prison (Durose & Antenangeli, 2023).
This data shows that a higher proportion of men than women were rearrested, reconvicted, and reincarnated.



Recidivism by Kaylynn Barratt, Celia Kempema, Paola Hidalgo-Agustin, and Dinh Nguyen is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

2025 NOVEMBER SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Recidivism



SOCIAL PROBLEMS

A REAL LIFE LOOK AT RECIDIVISM

Hi, my name is Kaylynn, and recidivism is a topic I care deeply about because I've experienced its impact firsthand. My older brother, Nick, is 28 years old and has unfortunately spent about a third of his life incarcerated. His first offense occurred at age 15 when he committed a burglary but received little more than a slap on the wrist. A few years later, he committed another burglary and was sentenced to five years of probation. Just a few months after that, he was involved in a third burglary and, at 18, received a four-year prison sentence.

After his release, things started off well—he secured a good-paying job and even moved into his own apartment. But over time, he became complacent and slowly slipped back into old habits. This led to him losing his job and cycling in and out of jail multiple times. He remained out of prison for about two years before committing another felony, which resulted in a six-year sentence that he is currently serving.

I understand that the basic facts might make Nick appear like a hardened criminal, but I truly believe he is a good person. Many factors contributed to his incarceration, including our parents' divorce when we were young, growing up in poverty, falling in with the wrong crowd, struggles with addiction, and feeling trapped by the system. All we can do is be of support to him and hope that the next time he comes home, he stays home.

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Consequences of Crime

Crime has a variety of consequences, including obvious consequences such as death in the case of homicide and less obvious consequences such as the financial loss to society or the impact on family members of incarcerated people. In this section, we

discuss some of the general consequences of crime; however, we focus in on two areas that we feel deserve more attention in public discourse: White-collar crime and violence against women.

White-collar crime often goes unpunished, or the wealthy people who commit these crimes are able to buy their way out of harsh punishments such as incarceration as they have access to resources such as highly successful attorneys or the ability to pay fines. The inattention to this type of crime by the media means that the public is less aware of its extent and consequences, and white-collar crime, especially corporate crime, has enormous consequences.

Violence against women highlights how systemic inequalities, such as sexism and male power, connect to other social problems such as crime. Women are disproportionately victimized by the violence crimes of rape and sexual assault, and endure other forms of systemic violence such as femicide and genital mutilation. The lack of policy or legal attention to these violent crimes perpetuates and normalizes male power, sexism, and violence against women. For these reasons, we emphasize both of these forms of crime below.

General Consequences of Crime

Some consequences of crime are clear: Loss of property in property crime, injury in violent crime, and death in homicide. However, overall financial costs are considerable. Excluding white-collar crime, crime was estimated to cost more than $2.6 trillion in 2017, 3% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product, with violent crime accounting for the great majority of those costs (Miller et al. 2021). In 2019, property crime was estimated to result in $15.8 billion in losses (FBI n.d.).

In addition, there are health costs of crime. Being victimized by crime or living in a neighborhood with high crime can lead to mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as physical health concerns such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and even mortality. For instance, one study found that neighborhood violent crime was associated with levels of cardiovascular and coronary artery disease deaths (Eberly et al. 2022). More generally, victims of violent crime report being more likely to experience an array of health concerns than those not victimized by violent crime, including chronic illness, disability, and other concerns that impact mental health such as bankruptcy (Alliance for Safety and Justice 2024). Studies also suggest that crime victimization adversely impacts other outcomes such as unemployment, occupational functioning, intimate relationships, and parenting practices (Hanson et al. 2010).

Further, there are costs to the families of incarcerated people. Children of incarcerated parents or who have experienced parental incarceration have higher rates of adverse outcomes than those without incarcerated parents or who have not experienced parental incarceration, such as more aggression or other behavioral problems, a higher risk of dropping out of school, and physical and mental health complications (Economic Policy Institute 2016). Families may also experience the loss of household income when a member is incarcerated and often pay hefty fees or costs related to the incarceration such as court fees or visitation transportation costs.

White-collar and Corporate Crime

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).

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, which is still a large figure. 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.

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.

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 one 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 (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.

Caution

We next discuss violence against women, including sexual assault.

Violence Against Women

As mentioned on the Overview page, women fear being victimized by crime more than men. This includes victimization for property crimes such as auto theft as well as violent crimes such as sexual assault. In this subsection we will focus on the experience of crimes directed at women, particularly sexual assault or rape and global concerns such as female genital mutilation and sexual slavery.

Susan Griffin began a classic essay on rape in the early 1970s 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” (1971: 26).

When we consider interpersonal violence of all kinds – homicide, assault, robbery, and rape or sexual assault – men are generally 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 social media or the Internet and in videos, magazines, and other media. Finally, women are more likely than men to be victims of *domestic violence*, or violence between partners in intimate relationships. These acts are thus an extreme manifestation of the gender inequality women face in other areas of life, and perpetuate that inequality as well.

It is estimated that one-third of women worldwide 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 US, violence against women is common in the US as well. Like homicide, about three-fourths of all rapes and sexual assaults involve individuals who know each other, not strangers.

Because women often do not tell police they experienced sexual assault, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which involves survey interviews of thousands of people nationwide, may yield a better estimate of rape than other measures but is likely far from perfect. The NCVS found that there were 481,020 rapes reported in the 2023 survey (Tapp & Coen 2024). Other research indicates that up to one-third of US women will experience 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, concluded that "it is more common than not for a woman to have an experience of sexual assault during their lifetime" (1995: 22).



Up to one-third of US women experience a rape or sexual assault, including attempts, at least once in their lives.

Wikimedia Commons – public domain

Studies of college students also find a high amount of rape and sexual assault. About 20-30% 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 university campus of 10,000 students, 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 public image of rape in American culture is of a 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% of all rapes and sexual assaults are committed by someone the woman knows, including partners or spouses (typically men), and only 20-35% by strangers (Barkan 2012). A woman is thus 2-4 times more likely to be raped by someone she knows than by a stranger.

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 high-school dropout men who think these women lack virtue and should be punished with rape (Polgreen 2011).

In some cultures, young girls routinely have their genitals removed, often with no anesthesia, in what has been termed *female genital mutilation*. This practice is thought to affect more than 100 million girls and women across the earth and has been considered an act of torture (Kristoff 2011; Rogo, Subayi, & Toubia 2007). *Sex trafficking* is a form of psychological and physical violence that has been found to occur in higher numbers in countries like Cambodia, India, Nepal, and Thailand, where young girls are often stolen from their parents and forced to engage in sex work in what amounts to *sexual slavery*. The number of girls (and

sometimes other children) under age 18 who work as 'sex slaves' is thought to reach into the millions and to be larger than the number of African enslaved people during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Kristoff & WuDunn 2010). It is important to note, however, that sex trafficking occurs within the US as well.

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 enough money or goods (Kethineni & Srinivasan 2009). This is one of several forms of *gendercide*, the deliberate destruction of a gender group. This term is a play on the word 'genocide,' the deliberate destruction of an ethnic group. This type of gendered violence universally takes the form of *femicide*, the systematic destruction of the gender group women or the sex female.



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. Although femicide has been reported to decline in recent years, it does still occur.

Wikimedia Commons – CC BY 2.0

In sum, women and girls around the world experience horrendous, systematic acts of violence that result in serious injury of the body or mind, bodily mutilation, forced sex work, or death – the most serious consequence of crime.

Immigration

Immigration continues to be a major concern for many Americans today, and there is an array of misconceptions and stereotypes about who immigrants are.

One stereotype about immigrants is that they are 'criminal' or have a high likelihood of being involved in gangs. In contrast, many studies find that immigrants, both authorized and unauthorized, have lower crime rates than non-immigrants (Wadsworth 2010). These low rates are thought to stem from immigrants' stable families, strong churches, and high numbers of small businesses that make for stable neighborhoods. Ironically, as immigrants stay longer in the US, the crime rates of their children, and then those of their children's children, become higher. As immigrant families stay longer in the US, then, their crime rates tend to rise, in part because they become 'Americanized' (Sampson 2008).

In addition to the stereotype of criminality, immigrants have been accused of being 'lazy' or 'freeloaders.' However, research suggests that immigrants often have a strong work ethic and data reveal that there is a large number of working immigrants in the US who contribute to the economy and pay taxes. In fact, unauthorized immigrants compose more than five percent of the US labor force, a number equivalent to eight million workers. Households headed by unauthorized immigrants paid an estimated $11.2 billion in state and federal taxes in 2010. in 2012 the Immigration Policy Center estimated that if all unauthorized immigrants somehow left the United States, the US economy would suffer an annual loss of 2.8 million jobs, $552 billion in economic activity, and $245 billion in gross domestic product (GDP), and that's in 2012 dollars.

Research indicating that immigrants are less likely to commit crime than US-born individuals and contribute to society through paid work and a strong work ethic help to combat the false stereotypes described above. These stereotypes are often *racialized*, meaning that racial prejudice fuels these beliefs. For instance, scholars have argued that Americans' concern about immigrants centers mostly on Mexican immigrants even though they are less than a majority of all immigrants. According to political scientist Victoria M. DeFrancesco Soto (2012), this focus stems from racial prejudice:

> "Opposition to immigration is not a concern rooted in personal economic concerns. Neither is it a concern having to do with state's rights. Anti-immigrant sentiment isn't even about immigrants as a whole. As rigorous social scientific research shows, opposition to immigration is closely linked to the negative racial animus toward one very specific group, Latinos."

Racial prejudice has fueled crime against immigrants for centuries. For instance, Chinese migrants who came to the United States in 1860s, primarily to build railroads, were stereotyped as dirty drug addicts and victims of mob violence at the hands of US-born individuals.



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.

Marku1988, *http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chinese_Emigration_to_America.jpg*

Another issue related to crime and immigration concerns immigrants who have been the victim of crime. Unauthorized, and even some authorized, immigrants face tough decisions about whether to report when they are victimized by crime due to fear of interactions with the police and criminal justice system. For instance, for immigrant women experiencing domestic violence, fear of deportation can be an abuser's weapon (Constable 2012). It is often difficult for individuals to leave an abusive partner for a variety of reasons, but abused immigrant women face a special problem in this regard. Because often they are allowed to live in the US only because their husbands are legal residents or citizens, they fear deportation if they go to the police and their husband is deported. Other unauthorized immigrants who have been victimized by crime similarly fear that they will be deported if they go to the police.

We will further discuss issues concerning the police in the following page on *social control* and the criminal justice system.

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Social Control and the Criminal Justice System

The *criminal justice system* is part of the social institution of the state, along with government and the military, and is comprised of officers, the court system, the prison system, and more. In a democracy like the United States, the criminal justice system must balance its major tasks of public safety and crime reduction with the protection of individual freedoms such as 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 reduce crime and make the public safe, and how well does it observe individual rights and liberties, not treating people differently based on their social class, race, gender, and other areas of *social location*? Are there problems related to our criminal justice system?

This page offers a discussion on some of these concerns, including regarding policing practices, the court system, the prison system, and the immigration system. We connect this discussion to the concept of **social control**, efforts to control the population. Social control is about behaviors or sanctions that attempt to get people to conform to social norms, expectations, and laws. We all engage in *informal social control* with behaviors that attempt to get people to abide by social norms such as scowling at someone who littered, telling girls that they're "so ladylike sitting quietly in that pretty dress," ending a friendship with someone who did something we think is immoral, or shaking our head at someone who's dressed outside the norm – these are positive and negative *sanctions* that get people to conform.

The institution of the state engages in *formal social control* with fines, incarceration, deportation, or other punishments for violations of social norms and laws. In particular, the police and court, prison, and immigration systems are mechanisms of social control. On this page we will question whether formal social control at the hands of the state is applied differently to various social groups. We will also discuss consequences of this form of social control for targeted groups, incarcerated individuals and their families, and immigrants.

The 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).

A few aspects of police behavior are especially relevant for 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 several 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 next concern is *police bias*, in which police hold and act on racial biases and other biases against people in marginalized groups. For instance, researchers Pierson and colleagues (2020) found racial disparities in traffic stops in which Black drivers were less likely to be stopped by police after sunset. The "veil of darkness" protects Black drivers as police are less able to discern their race at night. The team of researchers also found that police were more likely to search Black and Latinx drivers for contraband, suggesting that the bar for searching these drivers was set lower than for white drivers.



Police have been found to be less likely to pull over Black drivers after sunset, when the driver's race is not visible.

Source: Untitled by Anonymous is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

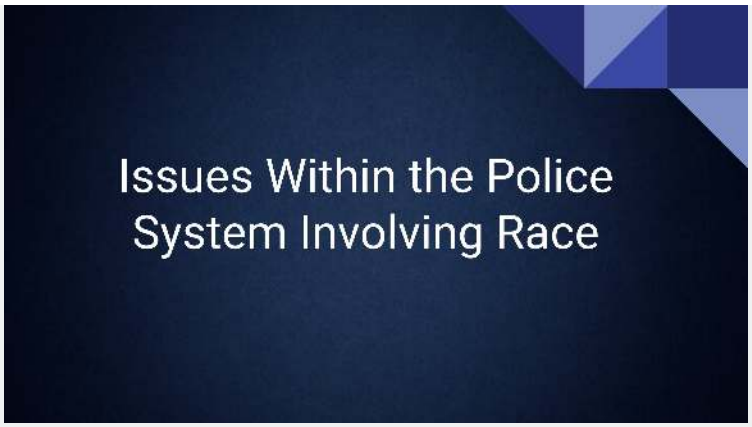
Related to police bias is the concern of *police brutality*, which has caught the attention of the public in recent years. Police brutality involves unjustified or excessive use of force by police. Police are permitted and even expected to use physical force when necessary to subdue suspects. Given the context of police work noted above (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. However, brutality occurs when there is no reasonable justification for excessive force, such as when a suspect has been pinned down on the ground and immobilized.

Police brutality has resulted in the loss of life and in other injuries. In the US, the police kill between 900-1,100 people annually (Fagan & Campbell 2020; NAACP 2025), with the great majority of these killings involving a fatal shooting at the hands of the police. Black people are overrepresented in police killings in the US. According to Mapping Police Violence, in 2025, Black people are 2.8 times more likely to be killed by police. Black people are also more likely to be killed by police when unarmed themselves (Mapping Police Violence 2024). Fagan and Campbell (2020) explain:

> "We find that, across several circumstances of police killings and their objective reasonableness, Black suspects are more than twice as likely to be killed by police than are persons of other racial or ethnic groups; even when there are no other obvious circumstances during the encounter that would make the use of deadly force reasonable."

In addition to individual-level racial bias, research indicates that state-level *structural racism* (e.g., racial residential segregation, racial disparities in incarceration rates, and economic indicators) is associated with racial disparities in police killings of unarmed individuals (Mesic et al. 2018). George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Trayvon Martin, Aura Rosser, and Patrick Lyoya are few of many Black Americans who have been killed by police in recent years. You may visit Al Jazeera's Know Their Name project by Alia Chughtai to learn more about some of these individuals and other Black individuals killed by police.

This student-created ancillary offers an overview of the police as a form of social control through a critical perspective. Please view the full presentation here.



The Police and Social Control by Mira Byers, Analy Lopez, Kaleb Kidder, and Kimberly Castaneda is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

The Court System

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 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) are the titles of two popular critiques of the courts written several decades ago, and these titles continue to apply to the criminal court system 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 may likely have been found guilty and perhaps even received a death sentence.

Many criminal defendants are poor. Although they enjoy the right to free legal counsel, in practice they often 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.



Public defenders often have a high caseload, which results in the inability to be as effective in representing their defendants as they would be if they had a more manageable caseload.

Source: Untitled by Anonymous is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

A 2006 report by a New York state judicial commission reflected these problems. 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 (Hakim 2006). 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% 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).

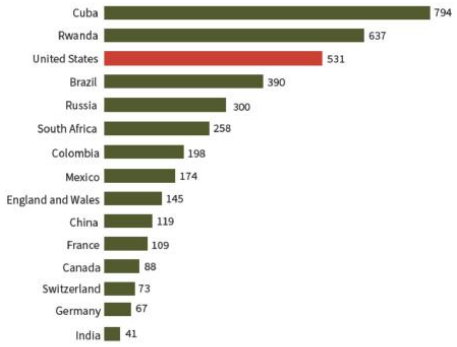
An additional concern is the death penalty. Moral questions about the state's killing of convicted offenders aside, the death penalty is racially discriminatory. While some studies find that Black people are more likely than white people who commit similar homicides to receive the death penalty, the clearest evidence for racial discrimination involves the race of the victim: Homicides with white victims are more likely than those with Black victims to result in a death sentence (Paternoster & Brame 2008). This difference, whether intended or not, suggests that the criminal justice system values white lives more than Black lives. In fact, evidence about this discrimination and the ineffectiveness of this type of punishment 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."

The Prison System

The US has housed more than 1.5 million people in state and federal prisons and more than 750,000 in local jails. This peak of approximately 2.3 million people behind bars is about double the figure in 1990, exponentially bigger than in 1975, and yielded an incarceration rate of the highest of Western democracies both in terms of raw numbers and per capita (which considers overall population size). Today, the US remains among the highest in both raw and per capita figures, though it is no longer the highest for per capita.

Figure 3. International Rates of Incarceration



Source: World Prison Brief, compiled and hosted by the Institute of Crime and Justice Policy Research at Birkbeck, University of London.

The US held the highest rate of incarceration worldwide in terms of both the total prison population and the prison population per capita, and continues to be among the highest today – far higher than its neighbors of Canada and Mexico.

Source: The Sentencing Project 2024

This high rate is troubling, and so is the racial composition of prisoners in the US. Nearly 7 in 10 prisoners are people of color, primarily Black or Latinx, a rate far higher than they comprise the general population, meaning that incarceration rates are strongly disproportionate. In 2022, the incarceration rate per 100,000 people was 1,196 for Black individuals, 603 for Latinx, and 229 for white (The Sentencing Project 2024).

Additionally, the corrections system costs the nation more than $80 billion annually. Together with the police ($62.2 billion) and judicial and legal system ($29 billion), the entire system costs $182 billion annually, excluding private prison profits, discussed below (Prison Policy Initiative 2017). What does this huge expenditure accomplish? It would be reassuring to know that the high US incarceration rate keeps the nation safe and even helps reduce the crime rate; however, many criminologists think that the surge in imprisonment during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s did not help reduce the crime rate 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 instead of on crime punishment, namely incarceration (Welsh & Farrington 2007).

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 (employers may discriminate against applicants convicted of a crime, or those deemed 'criminal') and a lack of friendships with law-abiding individuals, as our earlier discussion of *labeling theory* and *differential association* indicated. Partly for these reasons, imprisonment ironically may increase the likelihood of future offending (Durlauf & Nagin 2011).

Living conditions behind bars merit further discussion. Although some minimum-security federal prisons may have clean, adequate facilities, state prisons and local jails are often 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: 293). These conditions increase the odds that inmates will leave prison or 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.

Organization Profile

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

The Immigration System

The state engages in social control of immigrants at two levels: Individual state governments and the federal government. In recent decades, many states enacted strict laws for immigrants, including the denial of schooling and various social services to undocumented immigrant families. Arizona, Georgia, and Alabama enacted some of the most restrictive legislation in the early 2010s.

Arizona's 2010 law made failing to carry immigration documents a crime and required the police to question and detain anyone they suspected of being an unauthorized immigrant. Previously, these restrictions had been the sole province of the federal government. Critics argued that this new law would lead to racial and ethnic profiling, as only people who looked Mexican would be stopped by police for suspicion of being illegal (Archibold 2010). They also noted that the new law caused an economic loss of $250 million during the first year after its enactment from a loss in conference and convention business in Arizona (Brown 2011).



Arizona is one of several states that have enacted very restrictive laws regarding immigration.

Image courtesy of Nevele Otseog, http://www.flickr.com/photos/45976898@N02/4574551377/

Georgia's 2011 law allowed police to demand immigration documents from criminal suspects and to hold suspects for deportation by federal officials who do not provide documentation. The law also made it more difficult to hire workers without proper documentation, increased the penalties for businesses that hire these workers, and provided penalties for people who house or transport undocumented immigrants. Georgia's Chamber of Commerce worried about the law's economic impact, and in particular was concerned that the law would reduce tourism. Reports estimated that if the law forced all undocumented workers to leave Georgia, the state's agricultural industry would lose up to $1 billion annually, since unauthorized workers form the bulk of the Georgia's farm labor force (Berman 2011).

Alabama's 2011 law also allowed police to detain people suspected of being unauthorized immigrants. In addition, it required schools to record the immigration status of all students and also required people seeking a driver's license to prove that they were US citizens. The law led to very long lines to renew driver's licenses, and because many migrant workers left the state, crops went unharvested on the state's farms. Business leaders feared the law would harm the state's economy, a fear that was heightened when a German executive at Mercedes-Benz was detained by police (Ott 2012). Several months after the Alabama law took effect, a study by a University of Alabama economist concluded that it had forced at least 40,000 and perhaps as many as 80,000 undocumented workers to leave the state (Lee 2012). The exit of so many workers caused an estimated annual loss to Alabama's GDP of at least $2 billion, a loss in state and state revenue from income and sales taxes of at least $57 million, and a loss in local sales tax revenue of at least $20 million.

The federal government is the entity responsible for detaining and deporting unauthorized immigrants. More than 600,000 people were detained by the government in August 2025 (Goldberg 2025), and according to ICE, their detentions cost $152 per day per person (Bustillo & Hurt 2025), which amounts to tens of millions of dollars. Most detainees are in custody for technical violations of immigrant laws, such as overstaying a visa, rather than for serious criminal behavior. As such, detained immigrants typically do not pose a public danger.

Critics decry the conditions under which undocumented immigrants are detained (Semple 2011). They say that detainees are denied basic due process rights, such as the right to have a court-appointed attorney, more than four-fifths have no legal representation at all, and those who do receive legal assistance often receive incompetent assistance. Recently, New York Times reporter Emma Goldberg (2025) brought attention to the severity of this issue: Reports of suicide attempts in ICE detention facilities are persistent as detainees do not receive adequate mental health care.

Additionally, the federal government has issued eight million deportation orders since 1895, with seven million of those (nearly 88%) occurring since 1991. According to the Mapping Deportations (2025) project, nearly 99% of all deportation orders since 1991 have been for people from countries that are majority of color, with the great majority targeting people from Central America and Mexico.

Social Control

With the concerns discussed above in mind, we now return to the concept of social control. We have seen that people of color, particularly who are Black, are disproportionately likely to experience police brutality including being killed by the police, that they are more likely to get the death penalty after homicide (especially if the victim was white), and are overrepresented in the prison population. Additionally, Black and Latino people have been arrested and imprisoned for drug offenses far out of proportion to their actual use of illegal drugs, an issue we return to in a later chapter when we discuss the *War on Drugs*.

This racial disparity has contributed to what professor Michelle Alexander (2010) terms the **new Jim Crow**, in which criminalization operates in similar ways to Jim Crow, resulting in discrimination and disenfranchisement of Black people after incarceration. Alexander argues that criminalizing Black people is the newest form of *racialized social control*, in which Black people are hyper-targeted by the state and its criminal justice system. Racialized social control in the US began with slavery, then transitioned into Jim Crow segregation, then finally into criminalization today.

People who are convicted of crimes in some states experience the loss of voting rights, the inability to gain certain forms of employment, exclusion from serving on juries, and other forms of discrimination – which reflects the disenfranchisement and discrimination Black people experienced in the Jim Crow era. Additionally, the fees of incarceration keep people trapped in the criminal justice system. For instance, phone calls to family members are costly, court fees may pile up, and bail can be in the thousands.



Michelle Alexander discusses *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* at the Miller Center Forum.

Source: Michelle Alexander speaks at the Miller Center Forum, December 3, 2011 by Miller Center is licensed under CC BY 2.0

This connection between the criminal justice system, slavery, and contemporary racialized social control is part of the **prison industrial complex**, which ties mass incarceration to capitalism, slavery, and social control. The other connection – between mass incarceration and capitalism – concerns (1) the rise of the private prison industry in which prisons are owned and operated by private corporations rather than by a state government or the federal government, and (2) the use of coerced or forced prison labor to create goods, or the industries that profit off of individuals who are incarcerated or on probation. Thus, formal social control results in corporate profits.

Beyond raising questions regarding the morality of profiting off of humans behind bars, the privatization of prisons has been found to increase incarceration rates. Researchers Galinato and Rohla found that "a rise in private prison beds per capita increases the number of incarcerated individuals per capita and average sentence length" (2020). In other words, private prisons lead to higher levels of incarceration, further fueling mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex.

The issues of prison calls and bail mentioned above highlights how corporations and other businesses profit off of the costly fees incarcerated people and their families incur. Jeremy Cherson and David Gaspar (2025) of the Bail Project explain:

> "Today, families are often asked to come up with thousands of dollars for bail with little notice. That's in a country where over a third of adults would not be able to cover an unexpected expense over $400. Bail bond agents profit from this imbalance and lobby hard to protect it. This helps preserve a system where most of the people in local jails haven't been convicted of a crime."

Further, pretrial detention for low-income individuals who cannot post bail has consequences, as one day in jail has been found to cause lasting harms, including the mental and physical health toll of jail conditions, as severe as increasing their risk of death. Pretrial detention also disrupts individuals' ability to work and support their families, and is a stigmatizing event. In a briefing for the Prison Policy Initiative, Nam-Sonenstein (2024) writes:

> "The criminal legal system views pretrial detention as a necessary sacrifice that prioritizes crime prevention and court attendance over personal liberty. However, detention is demonstrably ineffective on both fronts: when compared to releasing people pretrial, jail counterintuitively *worsens* these outcomes on day one while making the system decidedly more unjust for those behind bars."

Returning to our discussion on immigration, the prison industrial complex and social control can also be seen in how the state handles immigration, as with the examples discussed above and how some immigrant detention facilities are privatized, meaning that, again, corporations are profiting off of detainees. Despite the realities that immigrants commit less crime than US-born people and that they contribute much to the economy, in 2025, the federal government has unleashed a massive campaign against immigrants, conducting raids in spaces where Latino people work or frequent, demonizing Black immigrants (e.g., Haitians living in Ohio), deporting undocumented immigrants by airplane, and more.

It is clear that the institution of the state, including police and the court, prison, and immigration systems, continues to engage in racialized social control. Black and Brown people are targeted by the state, evidenced in data that show their overrepresentation in

arrests, convictions, incarcerations, and detentions. Racialized social control serves to reinforce and justify existing social hierarchies, which is social injustice.

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Strategies to Address Crime and Social Control

Over the last several decades, the United States used a *get tough approach* to fight crime. This approach involved longer prison terms, the building of many prisons and jails, and the privatization of prisons. Scholars doubt that this surge in imprisonment achieved significant crime reduction at an affordable cost, and they worry that it has led to greater problems and injustices.

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 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 proposed solutions rest on the extensive body of theory and research regarding the factors underlying crime in the US, while other proposals call for criminal justice reforms. We highlight some of these strategies here, as well as strategies to lighten the consequences of *social control* and other problems of the criminal justice system.

Applying Social Research

"Three Strikes" Laws Strike Out

The *get-tough* approach 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. 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" (Kovandzic, Sloan, & Vieraitis 2004). 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" (Kovandzic, Sloan, & Vieraitis 2004: 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

Strategies to Reduce Crime

A first strategy to reduce crime and its consequences involves 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 recent survey found that victims of violent crime agree with this approach:

> "By a three-to-one margin, victims believe that the most effective way to reduce crime is to create more jobs and housing instead of long sentences," and "By a nearly two-to-one margin, victims of violence prefer investment in prevention, crisis assistance, and communities over more spending on arrests and punishment" (Alliance for Safety and Justice 2024: 4).

A second strategy involves changes in how parents and guardians raise boys. To the extent that the gender difference in serious crime stems from *gender socialization* patterns, changes in boys' socialization should help reduce crime (Collier 2004). This would take a large-scale cultural effort, but if families raise their boys to be less aggressive or dominating and to manage emotions and conflict in healthier ways, they will help reduce the nation's crime rate. As 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 ... men have a great deal more to learn" (Daly & Chesney-Lind 1988: 527).

A third strategy similarly involves cultural changes, as well as structural changes, as gender inequality manifests in the form of violence against women. A sociological perspective tells us that economic and gender inequality are causes of gendered sexual violence, and that we must make far-reaching cultural changes by challenging people's beliefs about sexual assault, gender inequality, and gender socialization, as well as far-reaching structural changes by engaging in efforts to reduce poverty and to empower women. This last task is especially important, for a sociological perspective on rape "means calling into question the organization of sexual inequality in our society" (Randall and Haskell 1995: 22). Other strategies may not tackle the root of gendered sexual violence but would help survivors manage its consequences. For instance, building more and offering stronger

funding for rape-crisis centers, would help individuals who experience sexual assault. However, we can see inequality even in these efforts: Because the antirape movement was begun by white middle-class women feminists, the rape-crisis centers they founded tended to be near where they lived, such as college campuses, and not in the areas where women of color or low-income women lived, such as inner urban areas and Native American reservations. This meant that people of color and low-income people who experienced sexual violence were more likely lack access to the kinds of help available to white middle-class women (Matthews 1989).

A fourth strategy involves expansion of *early childhood intervention* (ECI) programs and nutrition services for poor families and their children. ECI programs generally involve visits by social workers, nurses, or other professionals to young, poor parents shortly after they birth a child, as these 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 have physical and neurological health benefits that help young children's development and ability to succeed in early schooling.

Another 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).

✔ Lessons from Other Societies

Preventing Crime and Treating Prisoners in Western Europe

The text suggests the *get-tough approach* that the US 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 US has much to learn from Western Europe. In contrast to the 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 US, Denmark had to deal with rapidly growing crime rates during the 1960s. Whereas the US 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 US 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 US, the advantages of their approach should be kept in mind as the US evaluates its get-tough policies. There may be much to learn from their less punitive approach to crime.

Sources: Dammer & Albanese, 2011; Waller & Welsh, 2007

There are a few of many potential strategies which focus on efforts that would help address the roots of crime and, ultimately, help to reduce it. Strategies such as these would in the long run be more likely than the get-tough approach to create a safer society and at the same time save the nation 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 common is that the laws against it are weakly enforced. More consistent enforcement of these laws should help reduce white-collar crime, as would harsher punishments for individuals convicted of white-collar crime (Rosoff et al. 2010).

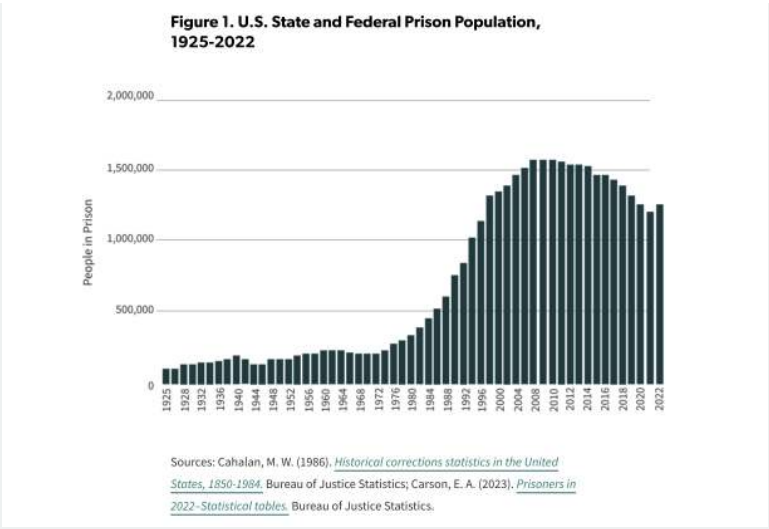
Strategies to Lessen Other Impacts

In addition to reducing crime, a variety of solutions may help reduce the impacts of other problems in the criminal justice system, such as reforms in police, sentences, and bail. Individuals may use their *agency* to engage in action to lessen these consequences such as by working with non-profits or joining with others in *collective action*.

Police reform has been proposed as a strategy to help address racialized police brutality, as well as to reduce crime. Examples of police reform include policies such as requiring body-cams at all times to record encounters between targeted groups and police, ending qualified immunity policies that allow police to avoid liability for injuries or deaths of suspected offenders, implementing stronger racial bias training, and combating the militarization of the police force that resulted in the police handling weaponry and machinery mimicking those in war as well as the culture in which police are taught to view themselves as soldiers in 'wars' against the public such as the 'war on drugs.'

Calls to 'defund the police' are not actually about defunding the police entirely, as the phrase may suggest. Rather, 'defund the police' means reallocating resources from police departments to other agencies or community-based programs that better serve community members experiencing houselessness, mental health crises, unemployment, and other concerns, particularly those related to poverty. Theoretically, this approach would free up more time and energy for police to focus on their job of public safety, lifting the burden they currently carry in responding to other concerns, and would reduce crime as the root causes of much crime – poverty, housing, mental health, and so on – are better addressed when agencies that offer those services are well-funded.

Sentencing reform may also lessen the impact of incarceration on individuals, families, and society at large. In short, mass incarceration is reduced when sentences are reduced. In fact, changes in sentencing such as accelerated releases coincided with a dramatic in the prison population since 2010. The decline in the prison population occurred for over a decade, until 2022 when the population increased again (The Sentencing Project 2024).



Changes in sentencing such as early release, along with reduced admissions, helped reduce the prison population in the 2010s.

Source: The Sentencing Project 2024

Another sentencing reform example includes eliminating remaining mandatory minimum sentencing policies that mandate a minimum sentence for specific crimes, which contributed to the rise of mass incarceration over several decades, and instead allowing judges to assign sentences with discretion. People who have been victimized by violent crime prefer this strategy: "Seven out of ten victims of violence prefer sentencing policies that allow judges to consider the individual circumstances of the crime, the victim, and the defendant over sentences that require uniform sentence lengths for specific crimes" (Alliance for Safety and Justice 2024: 4).

Individual Agency and Collective Action

Individuals and non-profit organizations have engaged in action to help address and lessen the impacts of problems in the criminal justice system. Individuals have established community-based, local, and national organizations that help address these problems, some of which have grown into large projects that not only serve the populations impacted by these problems but help educate the public and advocate for national change. For instance, The Sentencing Project "advocates for effective and humane responses to crime that minimize imprisonment and criminalization of youth and adults by promoting racial, ethnic, economic, and gender justice." In particular, they seek to end the practice of long sentencing that keep people incarcerated, end the disenfranchisement of people with convictions so that they may gain voting rights, and protect youth involved in the criminal justice system (The Sentencing Project 2025).

The Bail Project is an organization that focuses on bail reform. They recognize that the bail system it two-tiered: People with money can pay bail to be released from jail while people without money cannot. They pay bail for low-income individuals who otherwise would not be able to pay their way out of jail. Additionally, through their Community Release with Support model, they assist with notifications of and transportation to court, as well as helping individuals access support services such as for housing or substance use (The Bail Project 2025). While some politicians have claimed that bail reform would increase crime by allowing (low-income) offenders to live freely rather than being held behind bars, research suggests that bail reform does not lead to increased crime (Craigie & Grawart 2024).

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

Other examples are community-based organizations that aim to reduce crime, protect youth at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, or emphasize healing after victimization through restorative justice. For instance, Chicago CRED (2025) takes a targeted, integrated, and holistic prevention model to reduce violent crime in Chicago, particularly gun violence, by focusing on structural issues such as job training and education, community approaches such as street outreach, and well-being programs such as therapy and life coaching. Youth Advocate Programs, Inc (2025) provides wraparound community-based services as alternatives to youth incarceration and advocates for changes to incarceration policies and for alternatives to incarceration. Equal Justice USA (2025) uses a restorative and healing justice approach to help those harmed to rebuild their lives through dialogue and other services.

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Addressing crime, social control, and other problems related to the criminal justice system is a large feat that will take action and change at all levels – from individuals using their agency and engaging in collective action together; to community, local, and national non-profit organizations advocating for policy changes; to the institution of the state recognizing and acting to diminish these harms and to create structural changes relating to poverty, education, and job training; and the broad culture redefining gender expectations that link aggression with masculinity and rejecting the normalization and glorification of violence. Everyone has a place in this fight; you can take action.

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Review of Crime, Immigration, and Social Control

Summary

1. Crime is a major concern for the general public, who often fear being victimized by crime. News media coverage of crime contributes to these fears. The media overdramatize crime, cover it frequently, and give much attention to violent crime even though most crime is not violent. The news media also disproportionately depict people of color as offenders and white people as victims.
2. The nation's major source of crime statistics is the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS, formerly the UCR) and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Self-report surveys, typically given to adolescents, are another form of crime measurement.
3. Major categories of crime include **violent crime**, **property crime**, **white-collar crime**, and more. Much violent crime is relatively spontaneous and emotional, and typically involves victims and offenders who knew each other before the act occurred. Property crime is far more common than violent crime, particularly theft. Corporate crime and other kinds of white-collar crime arguably cost the nation more than street crime in economic loss, health problems, and death, and corporate violence involves unsafe working conditions, unsafe products, and environmental pollution.
4. There are many sociological theories of crime. Social structure theories highlight poverty and weakened social institutions as important factors underlying crime. 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 sexual assault and domestic violence, and the experiences of women professionals and offenders in the criminal justice system. Social process theories stress the importance of peer relationships, social bonding, and social reaction.
5. Crime is socially patterned. Men commit more serious crimes than females. Black and Latinx people have higher street crime rates than white people, poor people have higher street crime rates than the wealthy, and youth in their teens and early twenties have higher street crime rates than older people. However, wealthier white people may be more likely to engage in white-collar crime.
6. Consequences of crime include financial costs for individuals, families, and society at large as well as adverse physical and mental health outcomes. White collar crime in particular has enormous economic and health costs, and violence against women perpetuates gender inequality in the US and internationally.
7. The link between immigration and crime has been fueled by racialized stereotyping and myths about immigrants. In reality, immigrants are less likely to commit crime than US-born people, and contribute strongly to the economy.
8. **Social control** refers to efforts to control the population. The institution of the state engages in *formal social control*, which involves laws and punishments for violating them. The state has also engaged in *racialized social control*, targeting Black and Brown people through criminal justice and immigration systems, and fueling the **prison industrial complex** which links mass incarceration to capitalism and slavery.
9. Several problems also exist in the criminal justice system itself. Police *corruption*, *bias*, and *brutality* remain serious concerns, while low-income defendants receive inadequate legal representation, if at all. Prisons, jails, and immigrant detention facilities involve overcrowding and other horrendous conditions. The criminal justice system costs tens of billions of dollars annually, yet scholars question the potential of this system to reduce crime.
10. Proposals to address crime and social control problems aim to reduce poverty and improve neighborhood living conditions. to change gender socialization patterns and other cultural ideas. to expand early childhood intervention programs and nutrition services, and to implement reforms in policing, sentencing, and bail processes. Strategies also include individual agency and collective action such as establishing community-based organizations.

Questions

1. Why (else) do you think that 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, and which do you think is the best measurement tool?
3. 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?
4. Do you think that consensual or victimless crimes should be made legal, and why or why not?
5. Which specific theory of crime do you think best explains property, violent, and white-collar crime, and why?

6. How would you outline differences in crime by social location and explain the reasons for these differences?
7. If you've had an encounter with a police officer, how would you describe the officer's demeanor, and how do you think your own race, class, or gender impacted that encounter?
8. If immigrants seem to be faring fairly well and abiding by the law, why do you think that so many Americans have negative attitudes about immigrants?
9. Social science research has not shown the get-tough approach to be effective or cost-efficient – why do you think that this approach has been so popular in the US since the 1970s?
10. Of the strategies outlined to reduce crime or problems in the criminal justice system, which do you think would be most effective if it were implemented with adequate funding, and why?

Action Steps

1. Use your sociological imagination: When you hear anti-immigrant sentiment or stereotyping, help the person use a sociological imagination to explain why they might believe those ideas or stereotypes, especially from a historical perspective.
2. Support nonprofits and similar organizations: Contribute money or volunteer time to community-based organizations that try to address problems in the criminal justice system and support people impacted by it.
3. Use your individual agency: Write a plan for a small action or establish a campus group that will help support people impacted by problems of crime or social control, or work for an organization that provides early childhood intervention services.
4. Engage in collective action: Research organizations that are planning action toward, raising awareness about, or educating the public or legislators on problems in the criminal justice system.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Family

- Overview of Family Problems
- Theoretical Perspectives on Family Problems
- Patterns of Family Problems
- Strategies to Address Family Problems
- Review of Family Problems
- References for Family

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Overview of Family Problems

Learning Objectives

- Understand the status of the nuclear family and other family ideals from a historical perspective.
- Describe the diversity of family forms today, including variation by social location.
- Summarize how the three major sociological perspectives and other theoretical perspectives frame family problems.
- Describe problems and consequences of divorce, family violence, the division of labor, and belonging.
- Connect these problems to larger social inequalities and cultural ideals.
- List strategies to address social problems of the institution of family.

When you think of family, what comes to mind? It may be the family you grew up in. It may be the family group you formed in college or with friends. It may be the family you are in now with a partner. Or it may be the favorite family you watch in movies or TV. We experience a wide range of families throughout our life.

As usual, sociologists are more specific. We have the definition of the US census, "A family is a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together" (US Census 2021). We have the definition based on our "ideal" family, the **nuclear family**, the mom, the dad, two children, a dog, and a white picket fence. However, the lived experience of family is often different than both of those definitions.

Many sociologists consider **family** as a group of two or more people who are related by blood, marriage, adoption, or a mutual commitment of care. 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 have benefits: 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 the *nuclear family* mentioned above: A married heterosexual couple and their young children living by themselves under one roof. An *extended family*, which consists of parents, children, and other relatives, has a nuclear family at its core. Many *one-parent* families begin as nuclear families that dissolve upon divorce or separation or, more rarely, parental death.



Historically many children lived with only one parent rather than in a nuclear family (pictured here) because adults died earlier and many babies were born to unmarried parents.

Wikimedia Commons – CC BY 2.0

Although some prehistoric societies featured nuclear families, other societies studied by anthropologists have not had them. For instance, in some cultures, a father does not live with a woman after she births 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 has worked well in these societies. In particular, children are cared for and grow up to be productive members of these societies (Smith 1996).

These examples 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. In short, the nuclear family is not the only viable form of family organization (Seccombe 2012).

In fact, although nuclear families are idealized in many 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 outside of marriage. 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 often had relatively small nuclear families, while non-nomadic groups often had larger extended families. Because nuclear families among enslaved people were difficult to achieve due to social control at the hands of white landowners, enslaved people 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 couples 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, the divorce rate dropped after having risen steadily earlier in the century. 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 (at least if they were white). Suburbs sprang up, and many families moved to them. Some families during the 1950s did indeed fit the *Leave It to Beaver* model of the **breadwinner-homemaker** suburban nuclear family, in which the father/husband went out of the home for paid work and the mother/wife remained in the home doing unpaid domestic work.

Even so, less than 60% 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, misuse of other drugs, 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 (particularly white middle-class women, as other women were already working). They did so to increase their families' incomes and to achieve greater self-fulfillment. More than 60% of married women with children under six years of age are now in the labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025), compared to less than 19% in 1960. At about the same time, divorce rates increased for several reasons that we examine later in this chapter.

Thus, the claim that US society was structured around a 'traditional family' and the idealization of that family form is somewhat misleading or misconstrued as US families have always been in flux and the nuclear family never represented all family forms (Coontz 1995).

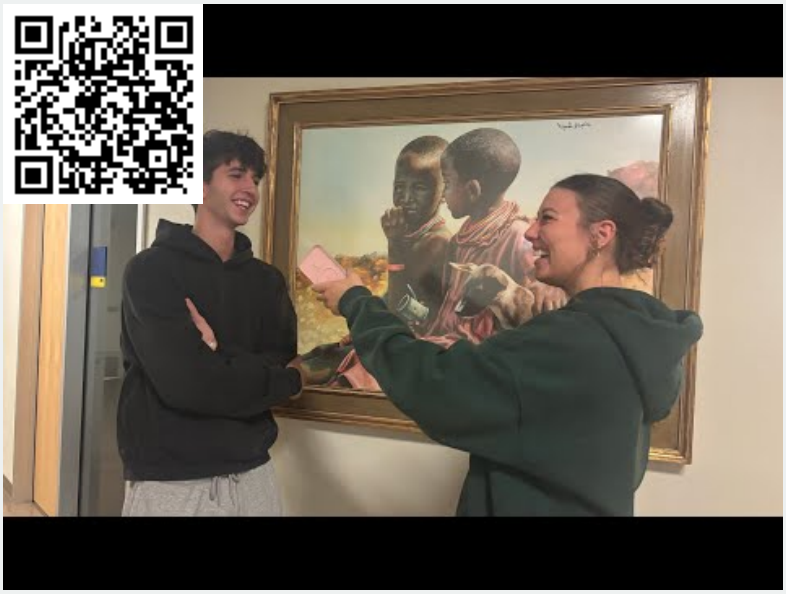
Your own family may be just you and your kids right now. It may be that you live in an extended family, with parents and grandparents, a cousin and the baby, who is your niece but sometimes feels like your daughter. Some of your family may live here in the US, and some of your family lives elsewhere. It could be that the very word 'family' makes you a little sick to your stomach. Perhaps a parent disappeared from your life when you were young or kicked you out because you are LGBTQ+. Families are diverse themselves as are our experiences with them.

This chapter focuses on a variety of social problems related to family. We cover problems that typical textbooks may cover such as disparate outcomes for children and adults of different family structures. However, we also ask the question, "Who belongs?" We will consider who gets to decide what *family* is. We will look specifically at ethnicity and power, particularly in how definitions of citizenship and belonging have changed over time. We will also look at how LGBTQ+ families are changing definitions of belonging for themselves and others. We begin with a general discussion of families in the US today.

Contemporary Families

When sociologists examine the ways in which people live together and form families, they notice that diversity in family forms is increasing, although families have always been in flux. In this section we will introduce patterns and trends of contemporary US families, including marriage, cohabitation, and divorce, contexts for children and grandparents, and variation by social location.

This student-created ancillary involves interviews with individuals on their perceptions of family.



In this video, we asked people in downtown Grand Rapids what family means to them. We received some heartfelt answers. Everyone shared a different perspective, from the value of everlasting relationships to dependable support systems. We explored how traditional family roles have changed over time and what has remained the same, including how society's expectations influence family life. Finally, we touched on what changes could make family life easier. Everyone's perspective demonstrates that while families differ from one another, strong relationships and support systems are what hold families together.

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How Do People Really View Family? by Lexy Bening, Jenni Morales-Sandoval, Bri Vanderveen, Jordyn Harrington, and Kyle Pierpont is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

Marriage

Marriage rates have fallen in the United States. According to the US Census, in 2024 less than half of the population aged 15 years or older were married and not separated (47.9%), over one-third had never married (34.8%), slightly over 10% were divorced, over 5% were widowed, and less than 2% were separated while married (Census 2024).

In the figure below, we see that the adjusted marriage rate for women (the number of marriages in the past year per 1,000 women) has fallen substantially from 1970. The rate was 76.5 that year, then reached a low of 28.0 in 2021 during the COVID pandemic, before rising again to pre-pandemic levels (Loo 2023).



Marriage rates fell steadily over the latter half of the twentieth century before leveling out in the 2010s.

Source: Loo 2023, National Center for Family & Marriage Research (NCFMR) at Bowling Green University

Although there has been a 'decline of marriage' in the US, its symbolic significance remains strong. In a recent PEW study, among young adults (aged 18 to 34) who had never married, 69% reported that they want to marry one day, whereas less than a quarter (23%) said that they aren't sure and 8% said that they don't want to marry (Aragão 2024). As a culture, marriage continues to be strongly valued as it has benefits such as for health and finances, formalizes intimacy and love, and is seen as a status symbol (Cherlin 2004). 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).

In several ways, the US 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 US has higher rates of marriage than other Western nations such as the United Kingdom, Denmark and Poland. Third, the US also has higher rates of divorce than other Western nations. Fourth, Americans are more likely than other Westerners to remarry once they are divorced, to cohabit in short-term relationships, and in general, to move from one monogamous intimate relationship to another, a practice called *serial monogamy*.



Americans place more emphasis than Europeans on the ideal of romantic love as the basis for marriage. This emphasis helps account for why the US has a higher divorce rate than many European nations.

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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, many 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: 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.

Cohabitation

Cohabitation refers to when partners live together but are not married. Cohabitation was once stigmatized as US culture strongly idealized the nuclear family, though the culture has warmed up to the practice over the past several decades.

The census reports that about 8% of the household population, that is 26 million, lived in cohabiting-couple households in 2020. About 25 million or 95% lived in opposite-sex cohabiting-couple households, while about 1 million were in same-sex households. Cohabiting families are the most common living arrangement among persons. The average cohabitation lasts less than two years but research now shows that percentage of cohabiting unmarried unions lasting at least 5 years has increased to over 40 percent (Lamidi et al. 2019). Cohabitation ends when the couple either separates or gets married – about half of cohabiting couples 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% of cohabiting couples have no biological children, about 45% live with a biological child of one of the partners, and 21% live with their own biological child. (These figures add to more than 100% because many couples live with their own child and a child of a partner.)

Cohabiters have a variety of reasons for choosing cohabitation over marriage. Some consider cohabitation a 'trial marriage,' seeking to learn whether they are suitable partners. Some enter into cohabitation due to financial insecurity, as living with a partner is more cost saving than living alone. Others may feel that they are not yet ready to marry but are ready to live together.

Divorce

The US divorce rate has risen since the early 1900s, with several peaks and valleys, and is now among 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 since the 1980s and today is only slightly higher than its peak at the end of World War II.

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 women's movement is sometimes blamed for the divorce rate by making women think marriage is an oppressive institution, trends 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.

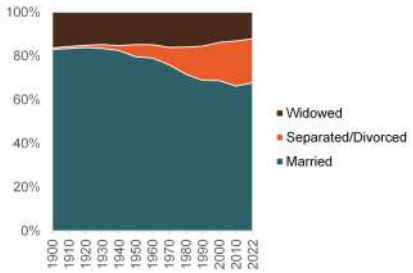
Research indicates that in 1900, there were 4.1 divorces for every 1,000 married women; by 2022, that number had nearly quadrupled to 14.6. In general rates of divorce declined after reaching its peak of 22.6 in 1980. The first chart below (on the left) indicates the rates of divorce for women from the 1900s to 2022. The second (on the right) shows that in 1900 less than 1% of women who had ever been married were currently separated or divorced; by 2022 that number had increased to 20% (Loo 2024).

Figure 1. Women's Divorce Rate, 1900-2022



Source: NCFMR analyses of data from the National Vital Statistics, CDC/NCHS, 1900-2000; U.S. Census Bureau 2000 Decennial Census; U.S. Census Bureau (IPUMS), American Community Survey, 2010 and 2022 (IPUMS). Note: Data for Alaska begin in 1959. Data for Hawaii begin in 1960.

Figure 2: Current Marital Status of Ever-Married Women, 1900-2022



Source: NCFMR analyses of U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 1900-2010 (IPUMS); U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2022 (IPUMS). Note: Data for separated were not available until 1950. The term "ever-married" refers to women who are either currently or previously married and thus includes all women except those who are never-married.

Contrary to popular belief, the divorce rate has not been rising in recent decades; however, it did rise over the 1900s until around 1980 and the proportion of divorced and separated people increased over that period.

Source: Loo 2024, National Center for Family & Marriage Research (NCFMR) at Bowling Green University

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.

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 strongly stigmatized; now it is considered a normal part of life. Many no longer feel that 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.



Disapproval of divorce has declined since the 1950s, and divorce is now considered a normal part of life.

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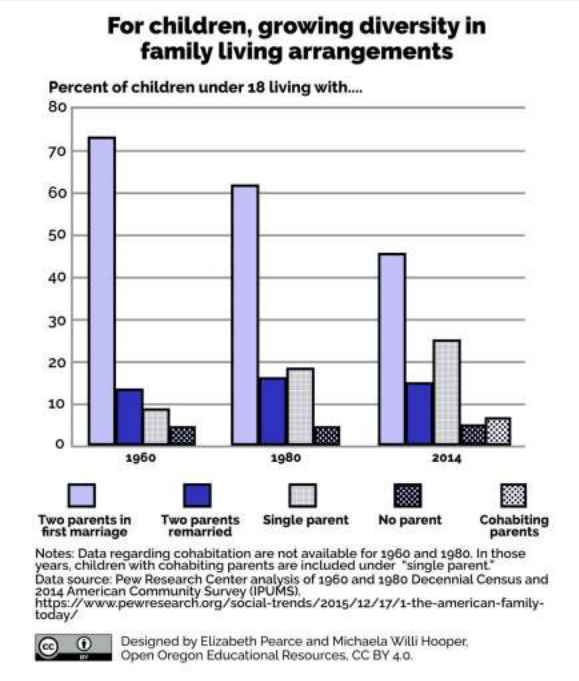
Another reason divorce rose during the 1960s and 1970s may be that divorces became easier to obtain legally. In the past, most states required couples to prove that one or both had committed actions such as mental cruelty, adultery, or other such behaviors in order to get divorced. Today almost all states 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 likely one of several reasons for the rising divorce rate after the 1950s (Kneip & Bauer 2009).

We have 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, many 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 marry 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.

Children

In 2023, over 70% of children lived with two parents, 21% lived with only their mother, over 4% lived with only their father, and the rest lived in other households (Census 2023). For married opposite-sex and same-sex households, children under the age of 18 were present in 37.6% and 17.3% of households, respectively. For cohabiting households, the figures are 33.8% and 9.5%, respectively (Hernandez 2024).

As with other family changes, children's living arrangements have changed over the past 60+ years. When you examine the graph in the figure below you might notice that in 1960 the most common context for children to be raised was in households with two parents in their first marriage. In 2014 on the other hand, approximately 45% of these families were two-parent first marriages, down from 70%. We see the growth of children living in single-parent families and in cohabiting-parent families.



This chart displays changing living arrangements for children, including the rise of children in cohabiting families. What family form does your family fit?

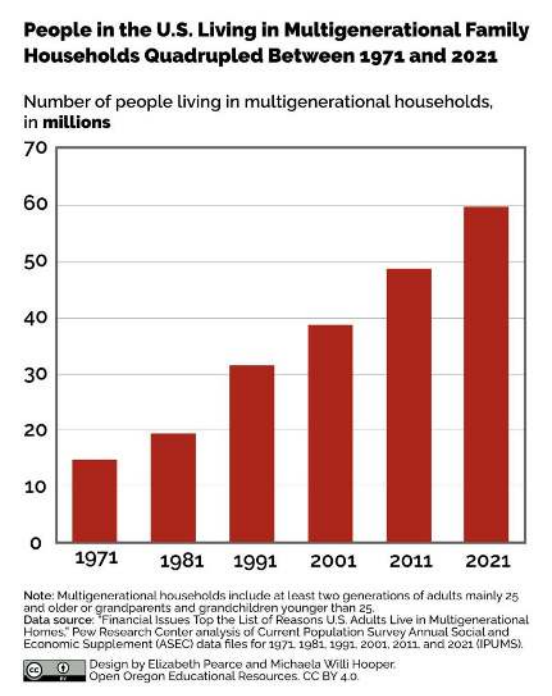
See image credit above

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: 41). We might be more likely to think of parents' impact on children when discussing family problems, though children can impact parents' well-being as well.

Children have these effects because raising them can be 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.

Multigenerational Families

In the US, the number of people living in multigenerational households is increasing. *Multigenerational families* include those families with two or more adult generations and families with grandchildren under age 25 and grandparents living together.



The number of Americans who live in multigenerational households has increased since the 1970s.

See image credit above

People living in multigenerational households say they save money by living together. Some people say that caring for an elderly adult or young children is a reason to live together (Mitchell 2022). Currently, in the United States, Asian, Hispanic, and Black families are more likely to live in multigenerational households than white families. (Mitchell 2022) However, this family form

was also common for white families before the 1950s (Shayesteh 2023). Before the 1950s and the rise of suburban architecture, the extended or multigenerational household was the most common family form.

Extended families are common in collectivist societies. A *collectivist society* focuses on meeting the needs and goals of all members of a group rather than focusing on individual successes. Interconnected relationships with families and communities are important, and form a key part of an indicollectivistntity (Cherry 2022). In collectivist societies, your family might help you pick your partner, in part based on whether they got along with your relatives (Bejanyan, Marshall, & Ferenczi 2015).

In contrast, the ideal of the nuclear family is common in individualist societies. An *individualistic society* emphasizes the needs and success of the individual over the needs of the whole community. People attribute success to the hard work of the individual person (Cherry 2023). People more often pick their partners based on romantic love or at least individual choice (Bejanyan et al. 2014). Laws, policies and practices in the US often assume that the nuclear family is the best family form, which marginalizes multigenerational families as well as all other non-nuclear families.

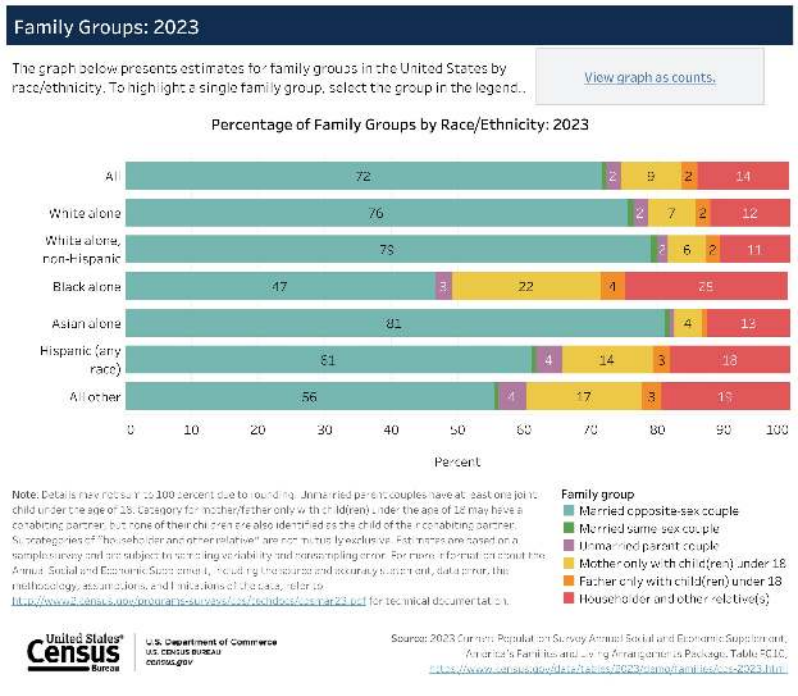
Social Location

Family structures and experiences in the US today vary by social location such as by social class, race/ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and nationality or immigrant status. Here we will provide some examples of that variation.

Social Class. Education – a marker of social class – greatly affects whether we marry and stay married, and marriage is less common among people without a college degree. Additionally, while marriage rates have fallen overall, the drop is largest among low-income people. Though this may be related to education as education and income are connected; however, another reason is fewer job prospects for low-income men, which reduce the economic benefits of marriage (Ahn & Winters 2025). Researchers Chambers, Goldman, & Winkelmann (2025) found that the education gap in marriage when specifically comparing college-educated and non-college-educated women is more than 50% smaller in geographic locations where men have the lowest rates of joblessness and incarceration. The data "show that lagging male college enrollment has primarily harmed the marriage prospects of non-college women" (2025: 1).

This difference in marriage rates perpetuates economic inequalities. 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.

Race/Ethnicity. Families in the US exhibit a fair amount of racial/ethnic diversity. For instance, Black and Native American families are less likely to be married than other racial groups, especially Asian and white (Census 2024). Black, Latinx, and Native American children and families are more likely to live in poverty than white or Asian families, and as a result are at a greater risk for the problems that children in poverty experience. Children are also more likely to live with only one parent among Latinx and especially Black families than among white and Asian families. Among households with children under age 18, 45% of Black households in 2023 were two-parent families compared to 67% for Latinx households, 76% for white households, and 88% for Asian households (Census 2023).



This chart displays family structure by race/ethnicity. We see that the most common family structure overall is married opposite-sex couple households, though they comprise less than half of Black households, and that Black households are more likely than others to have other relatives in the home.

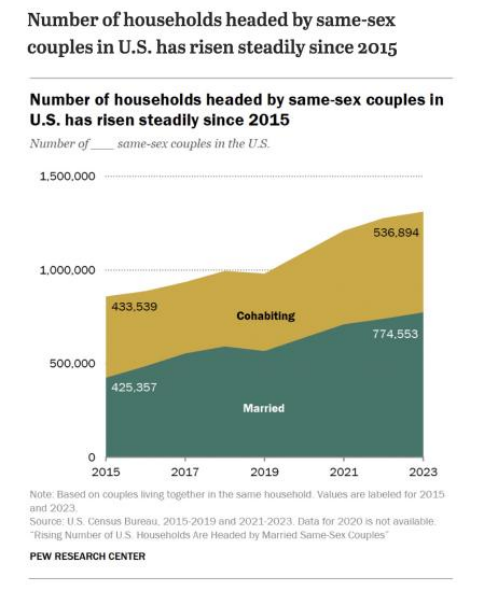
Source: Census 2023

The status of Black families in particular has been the source of controversy, in part due to the large number of Black children living in single-parent households. Many scholars attribute the high number of 'fatherless' Black families to the forcible separation of families during slavery and to the fact that so many young Black men today are hyper-criminalized (as we discussed in the prior chapter), unemployed, or are facing other problems, often due to structural causes (Patterson 1998). Some observers say this high number of fatherless families in turn contributes to poverty, crime, and other problems among Black Americans (Haskins 2009), but other observers argue that this blame is misplaced. Extended families and strong women-headed households in the Black community have compensated for the absence of fathers (Willie & Reddick 2010). The problems Black Americans face, they add, stem to a large degree from their experience of *racism*, the impacts of segregated neighborhoods, the lack of job opportunities, and other structural difficulties (Sampson 2009). It's also important to keep in mind that many Black fathers are present and central in their children's lives.

Beyond these facts lie other racial differences in family life (Wright, Mindel, Tran, & Habenstein 2012). Studies of Latinx and Asian families find they have especially strong family bonds and loyalty. Extended families in those groups and among Native Americans are common, and these extended families have proven a valuable shield against the social problems that all three groups face due to structural discrimination and poverty.

Gender and Sexuality. It is difficult to quantify how many people in the US are in LGBTQ+ families and the number who are parenting. Census data give us some idea, although the numbers are likely underreported. The Census counted approximately 10.7 million adults who identify as LGBTQ+ and 1.4 million adults who identify specifically as transgender. Approximately 1.1 million are in same-gender marriages, and 1.2 million are part of an unmarried same-gender relationship.

The number of same-gender family households have been increasing in recent years. In the image below, the Pew Research Center uses Census data to display how in the short period between 2015 (when same-sex marriage was legalized) and 2023, the number of married same-gender households rose from from 425,357 to 774,553 and the number of cohabiting same-gender households rose from 433,539 to 536,894.



Same-gender family households are increasing steadily, in part due to cultural shifts in the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people and families.

Source: Hays & Minkin 2025, Pew Research Center

Same-gender families are less likely to be raising children than opposite-gender families, though many same-gender families do have children. As shown in the chart below, 31% of same-gender couples, both married and partnered, are raising children, somewhat lower from the 43% of opposite-gender couples raising children (US Census 2022). Of LGBTQ+ people, approximately 48% of women and 20% of men under age fifty are raising children (data on nonbinary parents are not available). LGBTQ+ couples are more likely to adopt or foster children or to be stepparents (US Census Bureau 2022). Approximately 3.7 million children in the US have a parent who is LGBTQ+.

Same-Gender Marriages and Relationships

	Same-Gender Marriages	Unmarried Same-Gender Relationships	Opposite-Gender Couples
Number of People	1.1 million	1.2 million	–
Percent Raising Children	31%	31%	43%

The numbers of LGBTQ+ and heterosexual cisgender families who are parenting are becoming more equal. Older LGBTQ+ people are less likely to have children, while younger LGBTQ+ people are more likely to have children, so we expect that the numbers will equalize in the future. What social factors can explain this trend?

"Same Sex Marriages and Relationships" by Heidi Esbensen, Sociology of Gender: An Equity Lens is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Much of the literature on same-gender relationship quality focuses on comparing their relationships to opposite-gender relationships. This work has repeatedly found that LGBTQ+ relationships experience the same satisfaction level compared to non-LGBTQ+ relationships and that LGBTQ+ relationships are just as well adjusted as their heterosexual cisgender counterparts and experience similar stressors. With *marriage equality*, the recognition of same-gender marriage as a human and civil right, as well as recognition by law and support of societal institutions, LGBTQ+ families now face less legal discrimination. Furthermore, in an analysis of 81 parenting studies, sociologists found no quantifiable data to support the notion that opposite-gender parenting is superior to same-gender parenting. Children of lesbian couples, however, were shown to have slightly lower rates of behavioral problems and higher rates of self-esteem (Biblarz and Stacey 2010).

However, gender and sexuality is not limited to LGBTQ+ people, as heterosexual cisgender partners often take on gender roles dictated by the culture. Opposite-gender couples may struggle with how to equitably divide housework and childcare, as cultural norms dictate that women should take on more of that burden – and they do, even among couples that have egalitarian values. Interestingly, *gender roles* are also present in some same-gender families in which partners have varying gender expressions, with the more feminine-presenting partner taking on more of the domestic work than the more masculine-presenting partner (Carrington 1999).

Applying Social Research

How Well Do Children of Same-Gender Couples Fare?

Many opponents of same-gender marriage claimed that children are better off if they are raised by both a mother and a father and that children of same-gender couples fare worse as a result. As the National Organization for Marriage (2011) stated, “Two men might each be a good father, but neither can be a mom. The ideal for children is the love of their own mom and dad. No same-sex couple can provide that.”

Addressing this contention, social scientists have studied the children of same-gender parents and compared them to the children of opposite-gender parents. Although it is difficult to have random, representative samples of same-gender couples’ children, a growing number of studies find that these children fare similarly psychologically and in other respects as opposite-gender couples’ children.

Perhaps the most notable published paper in this area appeared in 2001 in the *American Sociological Review*, the preeminent sociology journal. The authors, Judith Stacey and Timothy J. Biblarz, reviewed almost two dozen studies that had been done of same-gender couples’ children. All these studies yielded the central conclusion that the psychological well-being of these children is no worse than that of opposite-gender couples’ children. As the authors summarized this conclusion and its policy implications, “Because every relevant study to date shows that parental sexual orientation per se has no measurable effect on the quality of parent-child relationships or on children’s mental health or social adjustment, there is no evidentiary basis for considering parental sexual orientation in decisions about children’s ‘best interest.’”

Biblarz and Stacey returned to this issue in a 2010 article in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, the preeminent journal in its field. This time they reviewed almost three dozen studies published since 1990 that compared the children of same-gender couples (most of them lesbian parents) to those of opposite-gender couples. They again found that the psychological well-being and social adjustment of same-gender couples’ children was at least as high as those of opposite-gender couples’ children, and they even found some evidence that children of lesbian couples fare *better* in some respects than those of opposite-gender couples. Although the authors acknowledged that two parents are generally

better for children than one parent, they concluded that the sexual orientation of the parents makes no difference overall. As they summarized the body of research on this issue: “Research consistently has demonstrated that despite prejudice and discrimination children raised by lesbians develop as well as their peers. Across the standard panoply of measures, studies find far more similarities than differences among children with lesbian and heterosexual parents, and the rare differences mainly favor the former.”

This body of research, then, contributes in important ways to national debates on the rights of LGBTQ+ families. If children of same-gender couples indeed fare well, as the evidence indicates, concern about these children’s welfare should play no part in these debates.

Belonging

One social problem that we will discuss related to the institution of family is *belonging*. All of us want to belong. Social scientists say that everyone needs to feel connected in some way. Throughout this book, we highlight how we are all interconnected. Why are we talking about the social problem of belonging?

First, we talk about belonging because lack of belonging is a cause and consequence of many social problems. **Belonging** is a feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences. It is a fundamental human need that predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioral outcomes (Allen et al. 2021). One of the smallest social groups we might belong to is a family. Families themselves also belong in communities and wider society. Though, some families are treated as if they belong and some aren't. Thus, belonging is tied to social inequality.

We will focus on belonging related to *ethnicity* and being LGBTQ+ or *queer*, which we spend time on here because they are complex concepts. For instance, Jewish, Irish, and Latinx have in common not that they are each tied to a specific nation, religion, nor racial group, but that each of these groups shares a cultural background, including cultural traditions and values. People who identify as Jewish may practice the Jewish religion. According to devout Jewish beliefs, children are Jewish if their mothers are Jewish. Almost 30% of Jewish people in the US identify as Jewish but don’t practice Judaism as a religion (Pew Research Center 2021). They may still enjoy latkes as holiday food but not celebrate Shabbat regularly.





Being Jewish is both a religion and ethnicity. Some people who identify as Jewish don’t practice the related religion, whereas others do. In the photo to the left, Jewish advocates Bel Kaufman, Rachel Cohen Gerrol, and Rachel Sklar are being honored for their social justice work. In the photo to the right, Jewish individuals are praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

“Event honorees – Rachel Sklar, Bel Kaufman, Rachel Cohen Gerrol” by Jewish Women’s Archive is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0; “Western Wall, Jerusalem” by yeowatzup is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Irish is yet another ethnic group. The five million people who lived in Ireland in 2023 have an Irish ethnicity by way of culture and nationality. However, more Irish people live outside of Ireland than in the country (Haynie 2016). Their ethnicity is Irish, but not their nationality. Some people speak Irish. Others say they are Irish because their grandparents or great-grandparents emigrated from there. Still others learn Irish step dancing or storytelling or the harp and pennywhistle.

The complexity of ethnicity can also be demonstrated through language. Although the terms 'Hispanic' and 'Latino' are often used interchangeably, they are not the same, as shown in the figure below. *Hispanic* usually refers to native speakers of Spanish. *Latino* refers to people who come from, or whose ancestors came from, Latin America. Not all Hispanics are Latinos. Latinos may be of any race or ethnicity; they may be of European, African, Native American descent, or mixed ethnic background. Thus, people from Spain are Hispanic but are not Latino.



Latino refers to people whose ancestors came from Latin America and speak Spanish, Portuguese, or French. *Hispanic* refers to native Spanish speakers, including people from Spain but not countries like Brazil. How does this distinction highlight the complexity of ethnicity?

See photo credit above

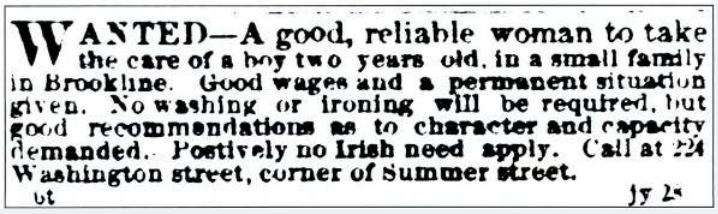
One of the reasons some people prefer 'Latino' is that it focuses on Latin America. It excludes Spain, the country that colonized much of Latin America. Many Mesoamerican people identify with the country of origin of themselves or their families. *Origin* refers to the geographical location where a person was born and grew up. This includes regions of the United States, as well as other countries. In immigrant families, children may call themselves Mexican American or Puerto Rican if their families originated from those countries.

A term that has recently emerged is 'Latinx.' *Latinx* is used as a gender-neutral alternative to Latino or Latina. Latinx does not position men as the default category for an entire group in the way that Latino does, which marginalizes Latina women. Moreover, Latinx does not imply or impose a gender identity on people. Latinx is an invitation to LGBTQ+ people; an acknowledgment that gender non-conforming people exist. Although this term has been the subject of debate, it is commonly used as a self-referential to describe a person's own identity. To hear varying perspectives on this language, watch the short video Hispanic, Latino, Latinx: What's in a name? and a TikTok in which actor John Leguizamo discusses the term.

Fundamentally, ethnicity is tied to oppression and privilege. Let’s look at some examples: First, some ethnic groups experience violence related to their ethnicity. More than 60% of all European Jewish people were murdered during the Holocaust in World War II (The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum N.d.), a state-sanctioned form of *genocide*. We will discuss this concept further in the chapter on Conflict, War, and Terrorism, as well as other anti-Jewish sentiment and discrimination that continues to impact Jewish families today.

Other forms of discrimination have been prevalent in history but are less common today. For example, the advertisement in the figure below illustrates anti-Irish sentiment as it notes that "no Irish need apply." Although academics debate how many of these signs were actually posted, there was widespread anti-Irish prejudice and discrimination in the mid-19th century immigration to the

United States. Irish immigrants fought to redefine these laws, policies, and practices. Now, most people of Irish ethnicity define themselves as white.


WANTED—A good, reliable woman to take the care of a boy two years old, in a small family in Brookline. Good wages and a permanent situation given. No washing or ironing will be required, but good recommendations as to character and capacity demanded. Positively no Irish need apply. Call at 224 Washington street, corner of Summer street.
ot jy 2

This advertisement from an 1868 Boston newspaper is advertising for a reliable woman to care for a child. It asserts, “Positively no Irish need apply.” This statement reflects discrimination, which was institutionalized within the social institution of work.

“No Irish need apply” by Unknown Author, Wikipedia is in the Public Domain

Thus, ethnicity is part of how people in power define who belongs in our society and who doesn’t. In the following page will examine the intersection of ethnicity and another area of social location, immigration. In particular we will look at Latinx immigrant family experiences. First, however, we will provide a historical background on citizenship and begin to illustrate how belonging is institutionalized.

The social institution of the state – i.e., the government – regulates who gets to belong in a country, state, or community. They decide who gets to be a citizen and who gets to be a family. Race determined citizenship historically, and continues to influence belonging today. For instance, enslaved people were not citizens of the new country of the United States. However, free white persons who had lived in the US for two years and were “of good character” could become citizens (Blakemore 2020). In addition, white children who were born in the US could become citizens.

This concept of *birthright citizenship* means that a child born in a country becomes a citizen, regardless of the citizenship of their parents. This concept was powerful for a new country, because it began to allow the formation of an American identity. Citizenship allowed people to vote and to run for public office. Citizens must pay taxes to support the government, but they also receive public benefits. Today, some of the public benefits are Social Security and Medicare. Even though birthright citizenship is a powerful concept, it didn’t apply to everyone when it was initially established.

In 1790, Black people were over 20% of the US population and over 40% of the population in Southern states (Bouton 2010). In order to maintain *white supremacy*, white people did not grant birthright citizenship to enslaved people. Only the Fourteenth Amendment, which was ratified after the Civil War, offered birthright citizenship to all Black people born in the US.

Today, slavery is illegal, and Black people have full citizenship, but the historical oppression that is tangled in capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and citizenship continues to harm people today. For example, Black families continue to experience more housing instability than white families, which we explored in a prior chapter. Thus, historical state regulation of who belongs continues to influence families' experiences today.

Families challenged by immigrant and ethnic prejudice are not the only kinds of families that experience inequality in the US. We will discuss inequality by way of other areas of social location, with the example of LGBTQ+ families. Approximately 3.3 million people live in same-gender marriages and partnerships, and this number is growing. However, these families experience social, economic, and legal challenges. Before we look at the experience of these families, let’s examine a unique word: Queer.

For some people, 'queer' is a bad word. For others, it is a source of power. Please take a moment to watch the video below from activist Tyler Ford about the history of the word queer. How do you understand this word?



In this video, transgender activist Tyler Ford examines the history and implications of the word *queer*. How might using the word queer be empowering for LGBTQ+ people?

"Tyler Ford Explains The History Behind the Word 'Queer'" by Tyler Ford is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

Two authors of this textbook (Kim Puttman and Emily Pain) openly identify as queer. *Queer* as in different, but also as in challenging dominant ideas about what identity, sexuality, love, relationship, and family look like. For instance, Puttman's lesbian marriage expands what it means to be a "normal" and "healthy" family. Both authors embrace their queer identity as a source of power, even though it is also a source of marginalization. We stand with generations of activists before us, chanting, "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!"

Quote

> In its simplest form, queer means upending mainstream norms about sexuality and gender (particularly the ones that say that being straight is the human default and that gender and sexuality are hardwired, binary, and fixed rather than socially constructed, infinite, and fluid). It also usually speaks to solidarity across lines of race, class, dis/ability, gender, sexuality, and other identities as part of a radical politics of transforming the status quo and working toward collective liberation.
>
> –Alex Kapitan (2021) on the Radical Copy Editor blog

Moving forward in this chapter, we will use the term *queer families* as a form of empowerment and connection to social justice advocacy.

In the following page we will describe a variety of social problems related to the institution of family, such as outcomes for children and adults in different family forms, the impact of gendered roles and expectations, multiple forms of family violence, and (lack of) belonging with the examples of immigrant and queer families.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Family Problems

You may already be thinking about some of the reasons that people have different experiences of belonging. You might have some reasons in mind for why families have unequal access to resources and legal protection from the state. Sociological views on family problems generally fall into the structural functionalist, conflict, and social interactionist approaches introduced toward the beginning of this textbook. Let's review these perspectives, which are summarized in the Snapshot table below.

Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Structural 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 reproduction, and it provides 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.

Structural Functionalism

Recall that the functionalist perspective emphasizes that social institutions perform several important functions to help preserve social stability. Functionalists then uphold the notion that family is an important social institution and that families play a key role in stabilizing society. As such, the family performs several important functions.

First, the family is the primary unit for the *socialization* of 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 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 functionalist 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 *breadwinner/homemaker nuclear family* was the best arrangement for children, as it provided for a family's economic and childrearing needs. Any shift in this arrangement, they warned, would harm children and, by extension, the family as a social institution and even society itself.

These views are widely criticized today, because they assume that women are mothers who should work inside the home, and that men are fathers who should work outside the home, which perpetuates gender inequality. It's more likely that functionalists today would identify *dysfunctions* of the family, such as when they fail to properly socialize or protect children, or dysfunctions of other social institutions such as when the state fails to support families in poverty.

Functionalists can also help us understand the social problem of belonging by looking at how families support belonging. For example, immigrant families face many challenges. Immigrant families are disproportionately poor. They experience *nativism*, laws and policies which privilege citizens over non-citizens. For example, many immigrants can't use the usual governmental social safety nets. A function of the family for immigrants, then, is to ensure survival of the members of that family. The family becomes an essential survival strategy. For example, Hispanic families value "la familia" or *familism*, a strong commitment to family life that stresses the importance of the family group over the interest of an individual. Hispanic families are more likely than white families to live in extended family groups, share economic resources, and encourage reciprocity and solidarity (Landale et al. 2006). *La familia* creates belonging.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists agree that the family serves important functions, but they also point to problems within the family that the functionalist perspective minimizes or overlooks all together. Rather than examining the functions of a family, conflict theorists look at power and inequality related to families. The conflict perspective emphasizes that many of the problems we see in today's families stem from capitalism, economic inequality, and *patriarchy*.

According to conflict theorists, families reproduce class inequalities (Calder 2016). In other words, the family as a social institution contributes to social inequality. For instance, children of wealthy families usually have access to better education for their than poor families. Because families pass along wealth, resources, and opportunities to their children, and because families differ greatly in the amount of wealth and resources they have, the family helps reinforce existing inequality. Additionally, 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.

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; 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 non-school 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

As family developed through the centuries, and especially during industrialization, it became more and more of a *patriarchal* unit (since men made money working in factories while women were expected to stay home doing unpaid work), helping to reinforce men's status at the top of the social hierarchy. In heterosexual contexts, husbands today usually earn more money than their wives, and many men continue to feel that they are the head of their families. When women resist this old-fashioned notion, spousal conflict may occur.

Feminist theories of the family argue that society is structured to privilege men over women; the theory works to understand and transform inequalities. This theory emphasizes how gender roles are constructed within the family, including the *socialization* of children. Feminist theorists also assert that resistance to patriarchal family structures is an important way to address inequality in social problems.

More recently, conflict theorists say that families differ in their experiences of *family autonomy*, the ability of a family to make their own decisions about their future or about the treatment of their members (Calder 2016). The idea of family autonomy is often championed by politically conservative people. They argue that a family has its own integrity. Families should not be subject to the intervention of the state. Parents should be able to make decisions for their children, like whether or not to be immunized, without the county health department or the school board requiring compliance. However, liberals also support family autonomy, like the protesters in the figure below.



This image is of protesters with signs that say "families belong together," including Migui Adams (center) who wears a shirt referencing Melania Trump's controversial jacket.

"Photo" by Eman Mohammed from "For Women At D.C.'s 'Families Belong Together,' The Protest Was Personal" © NPR is included under fair use

A sociological concept that helps us understand how power and the problem of belonging connect is the **immigration industrial complex**: "The immigration industrial complex is the confluence of public and private sector interests in the criminalization of undocumented migration, immigration law enforcement, and the promotion of 'anti-illegal' rhetoric" (Golash-Boza 2009:295). Like the *military industrial complex* and *prison industrial complex* that we discuss in other areas of this textbook, the immigration industrial complex criminalizes, detains, and deports undocumented immigrants. Conflict sociologists ask, who benefits from these

actions? Although some of the original work related to the military-industrial complex comes from functionalist sociologists, conflict theories have deepened this work.

In this analysis, we see economic and social forces at work. On the one hand, the number of available immigrant visas is very low. However, businesses in the US are dependent on low-wage workers to sustain their profits. The undocumented labor force constitutes nearly 5% of the civilian labor force in the US. This includes 29% of all agricultural workers, 29% of all roofers, 22% of all maids and housekeepers, and 27% of all people working in food processing. Without the undocumented labor force, it is likely that food grown in the US would be grown elsewhere, thereby raising prices for consumers (Golash-Boza 2009).

With high labor force numbers, it would seem useful to reform immigration laws so that people could come here legally. Instead, the US has invested in a *War on Terror*. The Department of Homeland Security, which houses the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), had a budget of over $1 trillion for a 20-year period. The number of agents and officers dedicated to immigration and border protection almost doubled between 2003 and 2019. The related agency budgets increased similarly. This money supports increased detaining and deporting of undocumented people in ways that often violate their human rights (Golash-Boza 2009).

Sociologist Tanya Golash-Boza (2009) summarizes the connection between money, power, and oppression. She compares the military industrial complex, the prison industrial complex, and the immigration industrial complex in this way:

> "These three complexes share three major features: (a) a rhetoric of fear; (b) the confluence of powerful interests; and (c) a discourse of other-ization. With the military build-up during the Cold War, the 'others' were communists. With the prison expansion of the 1990s, the 'others' were criminals (often racialized and gendered as Black men). With the expansion of the immigration industrial complex, the 'others' are 'illegals' (racialized as Mexicans). In each case, the creation of an undesirable other creates popular support for government spending to safeguard the nation" (Golash-Boza 2009:306).

By examining power and resources, conflict theorists focus on why inequality in belonging occurs. We will discuss inequality in belonging for immigrant families on the following page.



This image shows the border wall between the United States and Mexico at Nogales, Mexico. The white crosses contain the names of people who have died while trying to cross the border. Conflict theorists would ask, who truly benefits when border crossings are restricted?

"Wall of Crosses" by Jonathan McIntosh is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionists view the world in terms of symbols and the meanings assigned to them (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). The family itself is a symbol. Through interaction, we create and maintain a definition of what family means. To some, it is a father, mother, and children; to others, it is any union that involves respect and compassion. Interactionists stress that family is not an objective, concrete reality. Like other social phenomena, it is a social construct that is subject to the ebb and flow of social norms and ever-changing meanings. Problems, however, would arise when the meanings and expectations about family or marriage do not coincide with reality.

Some studies, for example, focus on how husbands and wives in heterosexual cisgender families 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.

Using symbolic interactionism, sociologists examine how queer families *do gender*. For example, in same-gender couples, there often isn't a 'mother' and a 'father' or a man breadwinner and woman homemaker. Therefore, the couple negotiates who does what rather than falling back on cultural gender expectations. Family roles are no longer tied to gender. They are negotiated related to the skills, abilities, and needs of each person in the family. The family *does gender* every day, with the choices that they make about who pays bills, who changes diapers, and who takes out the trash.

Social interactionist perspectives on the institution of family also examine how family members and intimate partners 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. According to this 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 separation may occur (Kaufman & Taniguchi 2006).

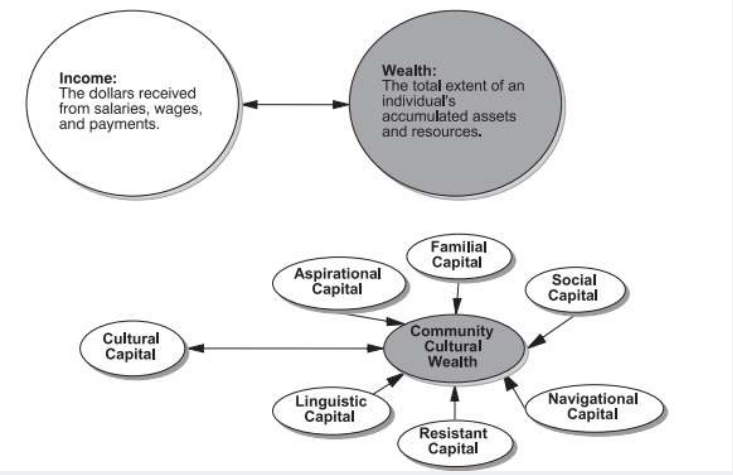
Other Perspectives

Beyond the classical theories of family problems discussed above, there are *queer theorists* and *critical race theorists* who explain social problems of family. They challenge traditional ideas of family and power, arguing that our changing family structures demonstrate resistance to patriarchy, racism, classism, and heteropatriarchy.

Heteropatriarchy is a system of oppression designed to reproduce and reinforce the dominance of heterosexual cisgender men and oppression of women and queer people (Everett et al. 2022), combining both gender oppression and sexuality oppression in ways that other systems of power do not capture alone. Queer theorists challenge the idea that marriage and family are the only healthy ways to be in a relationship. Early in *queer politics* activism, many lesbians and gay men argued that it was important to explore non-heteropatriarchal relationships. Marriage itself was illegal, so many queer people formed *families of choice* (aka, *chosen families*). Queer theorists also explore how queer people choose their families.

A **chosen family** is a deliberately chosen group of people that satisfies the typical role of family as a support system. These people may or may not be related to the person who chose them. These family groups are connected by conscious decision and lived experience rather than biology, adoption, or legalized relationships. Queer people often construct families of choice to create social resilience because many are kicked out of their families of origin (Levin et al. 2020). Some of the original research related to families of choice was conducted during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. To take care of each other, queer folk created families of choice to get groceries, take care of the sick, or bury the dead, like a *family of origin* might (Jackson Levin et al. 2020).

Thus, the family can be a source of strength for its members. Educator and researcher Tara Yosso expands on this idea, from a critical race theory perspective. She argues that students of color draw upon **community cultural wealth**, the interdependent overlapping forms of knowledge, skills, abilities and networks possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist racism and other forms of subordination (Yosso 2023).



Community Cultural Wealth is the interdependent overlapping forms of knowledge, skills, abilities, and networks possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of subordination (Yosso 2023) Other than income and wealth, what resources do you bring to support your family's belonging?

"Community Cultural Wealth" from "Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth" by Tara J. Yosso, Race Ethnicity and Education, © Taylor & Francis Group Ltd is included under fair use; Yosso recommended using this image in a personal email communication to the original authors of the Puttman et al (2025) textbook

One of the components supporting community cultural wealth is *familial capital*. Yosso writes:

> "Acknowledging the racialized, classed, and heterosexualized inferences that comprise traditional understandings of 'familia", familial capital is nurtured by our 'extended family', which may include immediate family (living or long passed on) as well as aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends who we might consider part of our familia. From these kinship ties, we learn the importance of maintaining a healthy connection to our community and its resources. Our kin also model lessons of caring, coping and providing (educación), which inform our emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness" (Yosso 2006:79).

The family itself can be a source of power for people of color to resist *white supremacy* and thrive despite economic and social inequality. Yosso's model is a powerful critique of previous models of *social capital*. If you'd like to read her work directly, please see: Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth.

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Patterns of Family Problems

On this page we discuss a variety of social problems related to the institution of family, including the impact of divorce, multiple forms of family violence, gendered disparities in domestic work, and the lack of belonging. The latter two problems particularly reflect larger social inequalities, though there are ways that divorce and violence also connect to social inequalities such as how women are disproportionately impacted financially by divorce and disproportionately victimized in intimate partner violence. Use your *sociological imagination* as you read, keeping in mind the larger social forces that shape people's experiences within families. Below we discuss consequences of these problems within each section rather than all together as in prior chapters.

Divorce

Much research exists on the effects of divorce on spouses and their children, and scholars often disagree on what these effects are. Divorce can be considered problematic because of the negative effects it has on adults, children, and society. Divorce plunges some women into poverty or near-poverty (Arendell 2023; Gadalla 2008; Wilcox 2010). Among heterosexual families, divorce removes their husband's economic support. Women working full-time may have trouble making ends meet, because many are in low-paying jobs. One-parent families headed by women are poorer ($35,400 in 2016 median annual income) than those headed by a man ($55,580 in 2016 median annual income). Meanwhile, the median income of married-couple families is much higher ($85,300 in 2016). Almost 32% of all single-parent families headed by women are officially poor, compared to only about 16% of single-parent families headed by men and six percent of married-couple families (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith 2011).

Although the economic consequences of divorce seem clear, what are the psychological consequences for spouses and their children? Are they better off if a divorce occurs, worse off, or about the same? The research evidence for spouses is 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).

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, to engage in riskier sexual behavior, to exhibit other behavioral problems, and to experience emotional distress and other psychological problems (D'Onofrio & Emery 2019; Wilcox 2010). The experience of parental divorce and the difficulties that single parents encounter in caring for 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). In general, research that indicates that marital separation is beneficial to the well-being of children include that children from divorced homes become more mature, have more self-esteem, and more empathy (Brooks Conway et al. 2003). As one researcher summarizes this 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: 174). Commenting on divorces from highly contentious marriages, sociologist Virginia E. Rutter (2010: 169) bluntly concludes, "There are times and situations when divorce is beneficial to the people who divorce and to their children."

Caution

We discuss family violence next.

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 three types: Violence against intimates (spouses, cohabiting partners, non-cohabiting partners), violence against children, and violence against elders.

Violence against Intimate Partners

Intimate partners commit violence against each other in many ways, both physical (e.g., hitting, throwing objects at, or pushing a partner or date) and emotional (e.g., intimidating, threatening, or insulting a partner or date). When all these acts and others are combined, we find that much **intimate partner violence** (IPV) occurs. While we can never be certain of the exact number of IPV incidents, the US Department of Justice estimates from its 2023 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) that there were 629,820 incidents of intimate partner violence, and 1,165,890 incidents of domestic violence overall (Tapp & Cohen 2024). Research also indicates that 80% of these crimes are committed by men against women (Truman 2011). Another national survey found that 22% 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. A national survey of Canadian women found that 29% 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.

Some observers claim that men are as likely as women to be beaten by a spouse or partner or that there is evidence that men experience an act of violence from their women partners about as often as the reverse. Yet this "gender equivalence" argument has been roundly criticized. Although women do commit violence against men partners, women's violence is often in self-defense to the men's violence and is less harsh (e.g., a slap compared to a punch) – though the lesser severity in no way negates the violence. Additionally, studies find more violence committed by men partners than by women partners (Fanslow et al. 2023; Johnson 2006). It's important to note that although women are more likely to be victimized, people of any gender could be victimized by intimate partner violence.

Why are people, particularly men, violent toward their partners? As with sexual assault (see the Crime chapter), 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. Intimate violence is more common in poor families, and economic inequality thus may lead men to take out their frustration over their poverty or low status on their partners (Martin, Vieraitis, & Britto 2006). Culturally, boys are often socialized into **hegemonic masculinity**, a form of masculinity that emphasizes dominance and aggression, and is the most praised and normalized form of masculinity in US culture. Boys and men are taught to 'man up' and be tough, never show emotion (except anger), and prove their physical dominance and (hetero)sexual prowess. This form of masculinity has an array of adverse consequences for boys and men, though it targets girls and women, dehumanizing them and normalizing violence against them.

Cultural myths also help explain gendered partner violence (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. Viewing their wives in this way is thought to cognitively (but not in reality) justify the violence. In another myth, people ask why women do not leave home if the abuse they suffer is really that bad; the implication is that the violence 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 men partners and puts the women more at risk for being abused, or they do not leave home because they have nowhere to go (Kim & Gray 2008). Women's shelters are few in number in relation to the need and likely cannot accommodate a woman and her children for the time needed. Many survivors also have little money of their own and simply cannot afford to leave home. The belief that violence cannot be that bad if women abused by their partners do not leave home ignores all these factors.

People Making a Difference

The Founder of the First "Battered Women's Shelter"

Sandra Ramos 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 abused 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

Violence against Children

Child abuse takes many forms, including physical violence, sexual assault, emotional abuse, and 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.

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 one

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 US who were physically abused as children (Moore 1994). Some studies estimate that about 25% of girls and 10% 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% 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% 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 okay 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."

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: 147).

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).

Violence against Elders

Some seniors are victimized by relatives who commit **elder abuse** against them. Such abuse may involve physical or sexual violence, emotional abuse, neglect of care, or financial exploitation (Novak 2012). Accurate data are hard to come by since few elders report their abuse, but estimates say that at least 10% of older Americans have suffered at least one form of abuse, amounting to hundreds of thousands of cases annually. However, few of these cases come to the attention of the police or other authorities (National Center on Elder Abuse 2010).

Although we may never know the actual extent of elder abuse, it poses a serious health problem for the elders who are physically, sexually, and/or psychologically abused or neglected, and it may even raise their chances of dying. One study of more than 2,800 elders found that those who were abused or neglected were three times more likely than those who were not mistreated to die during the next 13 years. This difference was found even after injury and chronic illness were taken into account (Horn 1998).

A major reason for elder abuse seems to be stress. The adult children and other relatives who care for elders often find it an exhausting, emotionally trying experience, especially if the person they are helping needs extensive help with daily activities. Faced with this stress, elders’ caregivers can easily snap and take out their frustrations with physical violence, emotional abuse, or neglect of care. This highlights the need for more support for adults who care for aging parents and stronger protections for the elderly.

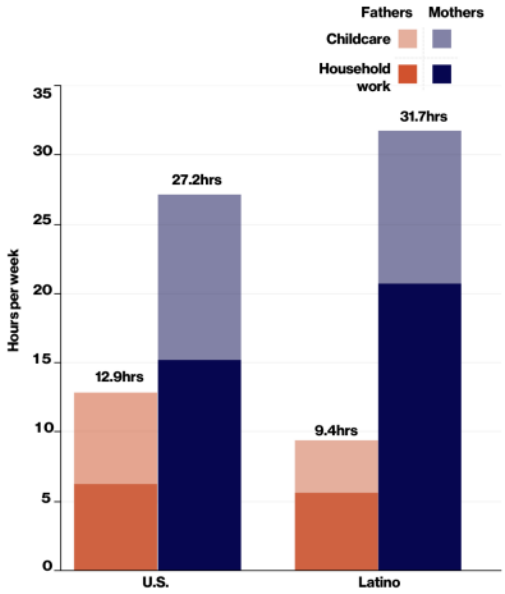
Domestic Work

Gender inequality is present within the institution of family, particularly in heterosexual families. One significant dimension of gender-based household inequality is domestic work. Housework and childcare are necessary to family life, and women spend more time in both. It takes many hours a week to clean, cook, shop at the grocery store, plan birthday parties, send out holiday cards, pack kids' lunches, and everything else that needs to be done related to the household and family.

Research consistently 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 gender divide in domestic work is called the **gendered division of labor**, or the disparity between women and men in time in domestic work. This disparity holds true even when women work outside the home, leading sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1989) to observe in a widely cited book that women engage in a **second shift** of unpaid work when they come home from a shift of their paid work.

Using data from the 2022 American Time Use Survey, the Gender Equity Policy Institute (GEPI 2024) found that "women consistently spend more time than men taking care of children and doing household work like cooking, laundry, and cleaning." Among their key findings are that women overall and working women spend twice as much time as men overall and working men on domestic work, on average, married women spent far more time than married men even when they weren't raising children, and among Latinx families mothers spend 3.4 times as much time as fathers engaging in domestic work. The image below visualizes this last point, that the gendered disparity is largest in Latinx families with children.

Figure 2: Weekly Hours Spent on Childcare and Household Work by Gender Among all Parents and Latino Parents 2022



Note: Parents are defined as having at least one child under 18 in the household. Labels represent weekly hours spent on combined childcare and household work. See appendix for a comprehensive description of the tasks included.

Source: Gender Equity Policy Institute Analysis of ATUS 2022.

Recent analysis of the American Time Use Survey, which measures time in domestic work, found that women spend far more hours than men in domestic work but that the gender gap is more pronounced in Latinx families.

Source: Gender Equity Policy Institute 2024

Even though women still do the majority of childcare and housework, men are increasing their participation in these tasks, and women are doing less than they were before entering the workforce en masse, which helped narrow the gender gap. However, the mild increase in men's domestic work and substantial decline in women's domestic work from the 1960s-1980s stalled out, leading Hochschild (1989) to name this phenomenon the *stalled revolution*. In other words, the gender revolution occurring within the institution of family was never fully realized, as men never caught up with women for time in domestic work.

However, men today are doing much more domestic work than half a century ago. For instance, as of 2016 dads were 16% of all stay-at-home parents (Livingston and Parker 2019). Recent research found that the gender gap has closed more in recent years, suggesting that we may be moving beyond the 'stalled' period. Milkie and colleagues (2025) found that among married persons the "shrinking of the gender gap was concentrated in traditionally feminine core housework (decreasing by 40 percent, from 4.2:1 to 2.5:1), particularly housecleaning and laundry," suggesting that "with men taking on more female-typed domestic activities, the gendered norms associated with different forms of unpaid labor may be becoming redefined." The change in involvement partially depends on individual families making daily choices about how to do the work of a family, including men being more comfortable with or more willing to take on 'feminine' tasks, and reflects that most heterosexual couples have *egalitarian* ideals, that is they believe that domestic work should be somewhat equal. However, the gendered division of labor remains even after these shifts toward more egalitarian practices.

Why does this matter, apart from that it reveals continued gender inequality? When women engage in more domestic work than men, they conversely have less free time than men, which means less time to relax and recharge and to engage in enjoyable activities. The GEPI (2024) study mentioned above also found "a free-time gender gap; women across almost every group studied have less free time than men to socialize, relax, and pursue their interests and hobbies." More specifically, the data analysis revealed that women had 13% less free time than men, on average, and young women (18-24) had 20% less free time than

men their age. Additionally, having a gendered division of labor in heterosexual families can lead to stress, resentment, and relationship strain, particularly when women have egalitarian views (Hochschild 1989).

The gendered division of labor illustrates how something so seemingly personal and private as family is in fact tied to social inequalities. Gender inequality is not only present in public institutions such as work or media (as we will see in upcoming chapters), but also characterizes the institution of family.

Belonging

Where do you come from? Where do you belong? On the surface, these questions may sound simple. You might answer that your family comes from Ireland, and you belong right here, in your hometown. Or your answers may be much more complicated. Your parents are from Honduras, but you are American. Your family was here before the United States was formed, either because your family is Indigenous or descended from the Spanish and Portuguese that colonized in the 1500s and 1600s. These answers are as complex and nuanced as each one of us is different; however, how you belong depends on how you are treated by others, including by the institution of the state.

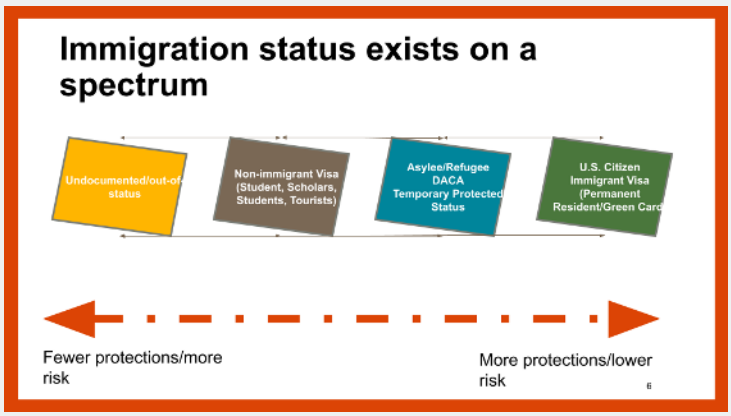
As defined on the Overview page, **belonging** is a feeling of deep connection. Belonging connects to larger social inequalities such as *nativism*, *xenophobia*, *heterosexism*, and *homophobia*, as these systems of power can interfere with our ability to develop or maintain a sense of belonging. As we covered in the last chapter, immigrants experience *stereotyping*, mistreatment, and *racialized social control*. These experiences may cause immigrant families to feel that they are unwelcome and do not belong. We explore this issue further below.

Immigrant Families

Politicians today have politicized the topic of immigration in ways that relate to cultural, national, and individuals ideas of belonging. Most Latinx people who live in the US are citizens and most Latinx immigrants to the US immigrate legally, despite what some politicians claim. More specifically, as of 2019 two-thirds of all Latinx people were born in the US and have citizenship, and only one-third of the Latinx population are immigrants.

Undocumented people are anyone residing in a given country without legal documentation. It includes people who entered the US without inspection and proper permission from the government and those who entered with a legal visa that is no longer valid (Immigrants Rising 2023). Only approximately 12% of Latinx people in the US are undocumented. This is a much smaller number than some politicians would have you believe.

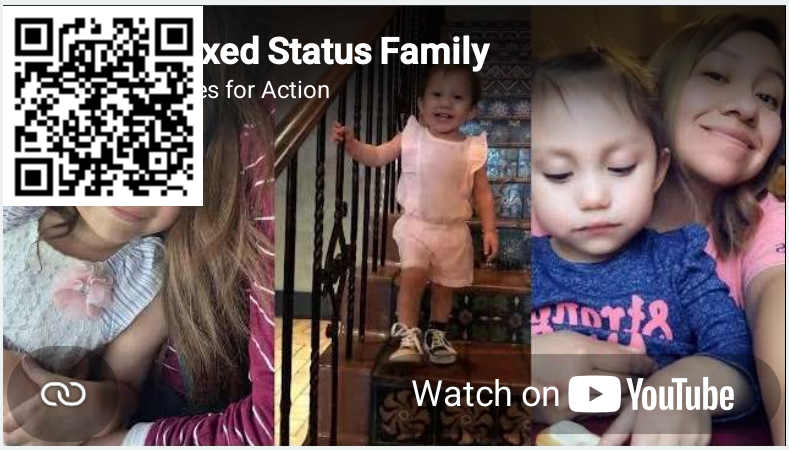
The binary of documented/undocumented hides a more complicated truth. Immigration exists on a spectrum. Many families are mixed-status families, as illustrated in the infographic below.



This infographic describes possible immigration statuses from undocumented to full citizenship. The amount of protection and risk change as you move through this spectrum. Some families are completely undocumented, others are completely permanent residents or citizens, and others fall in the middle.

"Immigration Status Exists on a Spectrum" by Monica Olvera from Open Education for Equity (slide 30) is licensed under CC BY 4.0

A *mixed-status family* is a family whose members include people with different citizenship or immigration statuses. Please take a few minutes to learn about the experiences of mixed-status families by watching the video below. One example of a mixed-status family is one in which the parents are undocumented, and the children are US-born citizens. The number of mixed-status families is growing. Between 2010 and 2019, the number of children aged 17 and under with immigrant parents grew by 5%. As of 2019, more than a quarter of young children in the US were children of immigrants, and nearly 90% of these children were US citizens (National Immigration Law Center 2022).

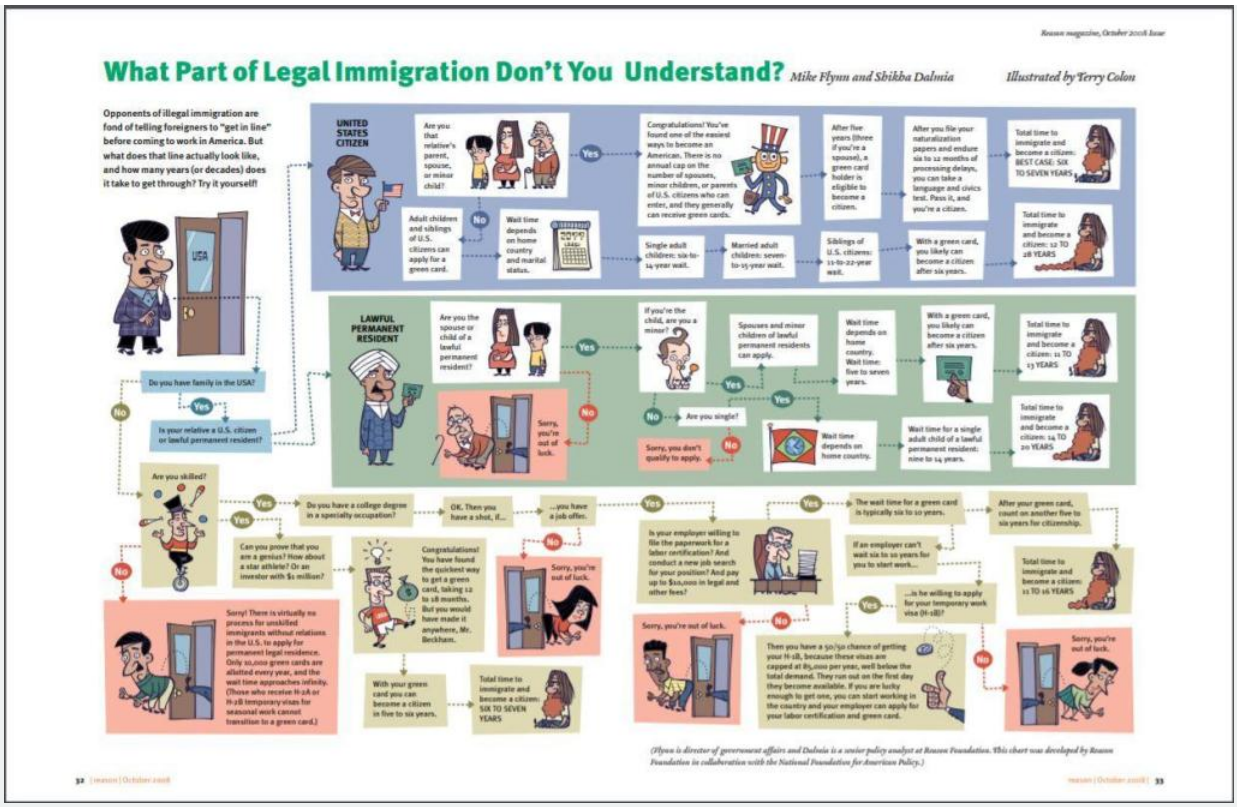


This video on mixed-status families describes what the experience is like. Is life the same for your family? Or does everyone in your family experience the privilege of citizenship?

"Mixed Status Family" by Cities for Action is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

Mixed-status families experience social, economic, legal, and health challenges unique to their family configuration. These families are often multigenerational extended families with grandparents, parents, and children in the same house.

"Just come here legally," is a misleading comment because the process to do so is not as easy as the general public thinks, as shown the figure below. Immigrants, just like everyone else, move because where they currently are isn't providing them what is needed to succeed, or because they are being subject to persecution, violence, hunger, war, or other factors.



The process for immigrant families to obtain legal citizenship is complicated and long. Feel free to see this this larger, more readable version.

"The Legal Process" © Terry Colon, Mike Flynn, Shikha Dalmia, Reason Magazine is included under fair use

Some people have the time and money needed to try and apply for a visa or have a family member who is a United States citizen or legal permanent resident (LPR) sponsor them to become an LPR and can come to the United States that way. This could take anywhere from six to 28 years and will cost anywhere from $750 to $1,225 per person (US Citizenship and Immigration Services 2022), so it's obvious that there could be a lack of money needed to take this route. It is even worse for others if their current situation might be more urgent and they don't have the time to wait, such as in the case of persecution or violence in their home nation. If legal immigration was easy, accessible, and fast, it's very unlikely that people wouldn't risk their lives entering and living in the United States without documentation.

Government *social control* of immigrant families goes beyond courts and laws. It also includes breaking families apart. Under the first Trump Administration, the US government forcibly separated 5,000 children from their families, in two years alone (2017-2018). In the application of this "zero-tolerance" policy, undocumented parents were deported. Because children can't be imprisoned, they were handed over to the Department of Health and Human Services. These children were cared for in refugee resettlement shelters. However, 'cared for' aren't the right words. They were held in cages. Some caretakers raped or assaulted the children. Some children died because of illness and neglect. President Trump rescinded the zero tolerance policy in June 2018, but separations continue to occur. As of late 2021 – more than three years after the policy was rescinded –most children had not been reunited with their families (Southern Poverty Law Center 2022). Resistance to this action is shown in the figure below.



Some people equate immigrants and asylum seekers with 'criminals.' This connection is false. Why do you think this is part of our political rhetoric?

"Two children sit on ground holding placards" by Samantha Sophia is licensed under the Unsplash License

As of 2025, the work of reuniting families continues. Some sources estimate that 1,000 children still need to be reconnected with their families. Some children haven't seen their families in well over five years. The trauma that families experienced their home countries and the trauma they experienced during forced separation continues. Unsurprisingly, a recent study finds that parents and children who have been separated need significant mental health support even after family reunification occurs (Hampton et al. 2021).

These challenges to immigration and the political rhetoric that supports limiting immigration is based on a particular kind of prejudice known as nativism. **Nativism** is an intense opposition to an internal minority that is seen as a national threat on the grounds of its foreignness (Kešić and Duyvendak 2019: 445). Nativism is an underlying cause of the inequality that immigrant families face.

✔ Personal Profile

My mom came to the United States accompanied by her aunt and uncle at the age of 14. She and her parents (my grandparents) decided that it would be best for her to leave Mexico because she was no longer attending school, as they could not afford it, and she was more than likely going to be stuck working at my grandpa's small farm for the rest of her life.

Once in the United States, she was able to return to school and soon became the first in the family to graduate from high school. She found it impossible to further her education as there were no scholarships or loans available to undocumented folks at the time, so she went to work. She worked at a potato factory, met my dad, and had kids, including me. Right around this time, DACA* came around, which was huge. She applied for DACA, was approved, and soon after was able to quit her factory job for a much better-paying job.

Now that myself and my siblings are a little older, she is considering going back to school and even buying a house, but she finds herself constantly second-guessing that decision as her future here in the United States is uncertain.

*See the supporting information below that explains what DACA is.

—

Carla Mendel is a Latinx woman and daughter of immigrants. She was a community college student when she wrote the information below, about DACA and Dreamers, as an open pedagogy project for Open Oregon. This information has been updated slightly to include more current data.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a policy created under the Obama administration on June 15, 2012. Key criteria for DACA eligibility are:

- are under 31 years of age as of June 15, 2012
- came to the US while under the age of 16
- have continuously resided in the US from June 15, 2007, to the present
- More criteria are listed at the US Citizenship and Immigration DACA Website.

An applicant granted DACA is not considered to have legal status but will not be deemed to be accruing unlawful presence in the US during the time period when their DACA is in effect. DACA allows individuals to live in the US without fear of deportation and with work authorization. DACA is temporary. Every two years the individual will need to reapply, which means submitting an application, getting biometrics done, and paying a fee of $495.

At its peak, there were up to about 800,000 DACA recipients, but those numbers dramatically declined during the first Trump Administration due to fear of what would happen to the DACA program. The number of people on DACA as of 2023 is closer to 600,000.

DACA is being legally contested. Read about the status of DACA from the National Immigration Law Center.

The Dream Act, which would make DACA permanent and would give DREAMers an opportunity to obtain legal status if they meet the requirements. The US House has passed this bill, but not the Senate. President Joe Biden has promised to sign it if it passes Congress (Gogol 2023).

The DREAM Act would create a conditional permanent resident status valid for up to eight years for young undocumented immigrants. It would protect them from deportation, allow them to work legally in the United States, and permit them to travel outside the country. It would also allow them to become permanent lawful residents. Having a clear path to lawful resident status allows DREAMers to belong.

Read more about what the DREAM Act would do from the American Immigration Council.

Sources: “Another Immigrant Story: My Mom” from "Governmental Influences on Union Formation” by Anonymous and “DACA, Dreamers, and Immigration” adapted from “Real Laws, Real Families” by Carla Medel, Contemporary Families in the U.S.: An Equity Lens 2e, are licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Immigrant families face unique challenges in the US that may result in the lack of belonging. Queer families are another example of families that face a set of challenges that may interfere with belonging. Below we discuss these families and the larger social systems that constrain them.

Queer Families

As discussed in the chapter Overview, *queer* has been reclaimed by LGBTQ+ people as an empowering identity. But queer can also be used as a word that conveys hate, as it did in mid-century America. When used as an insult, queer is a word that wounds. Using this word as a threat may be grounded in **homophobia**, the irrational fear of or prejudice against individuals who are or are

perceived to be LGBQ+. Importantly, it maintains **heteronormativity**, the assumption that heterosexuality is the standard for defining 'normal' sexual and family behavior and that binary gender differences and roles are the natural and immutable essentials in human relations (APA 2023). Heteronormativity is more than an assumption, however, it organizes our lives and interactions and positions the practices and ideals valued by heterosexual culture as the superior way to organize one's life. These practices and ideals include dating monogamously, getting legally married, having a couple biological children (or children who look biologically-related), living in a nuclear family household, and engaging in traditional gender roles.

Despite that queer families generally fare similarly to heterosexual cisgender families, queer families do experience homophobia. This stress provides unique challenges for queer families compared with their heterosexual cisgender counterparts. Queer partners may have to navigate judgment or rejection from their *family of origin*, the family into which one is born. They also may face prejudice from other social institutions like religion, medicine, media, and work, which manifests as *institutional discrimination*. Apart from its psychological or emotional toll, discrimination can interfere with queer families' sense of belonging in US society.

Queer families' lives are shaped by the powerful social forces of **heterosexism** and **cissexism**, the systemic institutionalized oppression of LGBQ+ and trans/nonbinary people, respectively. Laws and policies related to adoption rights and foster care may allow discrimination against queer parents. As of 2023, 28 states ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity for foster and adoptive parents, and an additional four states ban discrimination based on sexual orientation alone. In contrast, 13 states explicitly allow child welfare agencies to refuse services to queer families if it conflicts with their religious beliefs and the remaining 18 states are silent on the topic, opening up a range of treatment toward queer families, from active discrimination based on the law to indifference (Movement Advancement Project 2023). The lack of nondiscrimination laws and policies at the hands of federal and state governments helps fuel ideas that queer families don't belong.

In addition, queer parents may experience discrimination in child custody cases. Heterosexual cisgender parents are often favored in custody disputes with queer parents (Haney-Caron and Heilbrun 2014). Prejudicial attitudes and stereotypes describing 'unfit lesbian moms' and 'irresponsible gay dads' have historically been used in custody cases to justify punitive court decisions. However, psychologist Charlotte Patterson studies the health of children parented in same-gender couples. She finds that it's not the sexuality of the parents that matter. Instead, the quality of the family relationships is the most important predictor of healthy children (Patterson 2009). Research suggests that children of same-gender parents fare similarly overall to children of opposite-gender parents, though there are measures in which children of two women fare better than those of opposite-gender parents (Biblarz & Stacey 2010). Many queer parents experience discrimination despite the overwhelming evidence that being raised in a queer family is not inherently harmful or destructive to children (Goldberg 2010; Golombok and Badger 2010; Pawelski et al. 2006).



This video, Who Belongs? Family Stories of Immigration tells the story of two families, starting at 3:33 minutes in. In one family, a student immigrated as a child without documentation. She experienced racism and ongoing fear of deportation. In the other, two men were able to form a family because same-gender partnerships became legal in the US, and immigration worked for them. As you watch, consider the question: Who decides who belongs?

> *"Who Belongs?: Family Stories of Immigration" by Kimberly Puttman, Kevin Acosta, Omar Ruiz Garcia and Samantha Kuk, Open Oregon Educational Resources, is licensed under CC BY-ND 4.0*

Immigrant and queer families share similar experiences in that the institution of the state influences cultural ideas about who belongs in US society, and who doesn't. Recent political attacks on both of these family forms have exacerbated harmful stereotypes and discrimination. They both experience cultural and institutional systems of oppression – *nativism* and *heterosexism* and/or *cissexism*. Thus, solutions to the family problem of belonging must consider how these systems of power are present within both the culture and various social institutions, including the state.

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- **7.3: Inequality in Belonging** by Kimberly Puttman is licensed CC BY 4.0. Original source: https://openoregon.pressbooks.pub/socproblems1e/.

Strategies to Address Family Problems

The family is both a social institution central to society and something many of us hold dear. Social problems related to the family occur on multiple levels; within families such as the gendered division of labor and between families such as social hierarchies of which families belong. Sociological theory and research, along with other social science research, have important implications for how our society should address family problems, both within families and in society.

Laws, Policies, and Programs

To lessen the impact of divorce or separation on adults and children, we may consider programs that improve relationship communication, reduce parental stress, or help families navigate divorce. For instance, mediation is the process in which neutral third parties help separating parents resolve conflict and negotiate belongings and custody. These programs have been shown to be effective, though we need more research (D'Onofrio & Emery 2019). Similarly, to ease the difficult experience of family violence, we could strengthen programs that house and care for victims. However, we could also consider programs and policies that address other, underlying social problems.

One idea concerns the many children and families living in poverty or who are otherwise low-income. The programs and policies outlined in the chapter on Poverty and Economic Inequality are certainly relevant for any efforts to help people experiencing hardships associated with being a divorced or separated family and adults or children experiencing family violence. These efforts include, but are not limited to, increased government financial support, subsidies for child care, vocational training and financial aid for schooling, early childhood visitation and intervention programs, and increases in programs providing nutrition and medical care to poor women and their children (Cherlin 2009).

To the extent that much violence against intimate partners and children is rooted in the frustration and stress accompanying poverty, efforts that reduce poverty will also reduce family violence. For instance, because child abuse seems more common among low-income families, efforts that reduce the stressors of poverty should also reduce child abuse. To the extent that gender inequality helps explain disproportionate family violence against women, continuing and strengthening laws, policies, and programs to reduce gender inequality should also reduce family violence. Regarding divorce, 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. To the extent that marital conflict partly arises from financial difficulties, once again government efforts that help reduce poverty should also help preserve marriages, reducing the negative consequences of divorce.

In all these efforts, the US has much to learn from the nations of Western Europe.

✔ 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

Cultural Ideas and Ideals

Not all social change comes from policies and laws. Another important mechanism is changing cultural ideas and ideals. For instance, if cultural constructions of *hegemonic masculinity* – the expectation for men to be aggressive, powerful, and dominant – help explain the violence men commit against their women partners, as many scholars believe, then efforts to change boys' and mens' *gender socialization* should also help. Similarly, shifting *heteronormative* ideals and combating *xenophobic* stereotyping of immigrants would increase belonging for queer and immigrant families.

However, changing cultural ideas and ideals is a massive task. A meaningful shift must take efforts at all levels and within social institutions. In the institution of family, parents/guardians themselves could engage in socialization practices that minimize hegemonic masculinity. Within the institution of education, teachers and sports coaches could do the same and be intolerant of heterosexist or cissexist behavior in school. Within the institution of media, directors and writers could offer better models of masculinity, less heteronormative storylines, and portray the benefits that immigrant families offer to society. And so on.



Coaches often socialize boys into *hegemonic masculinity*; however, they can choose to instead offer another model of masculinity that does not center on dominance and aggression.

A Coach Teaching Children at a Soccer Field by *Kampus Production via Pexels is licensed under an undeclared CC license*

These efforts involve individual agency and organizational change. For instance, some fathers have chosen to raise their sons with an emphasis on expressing and sharing their emotions, and school and prison staff have implemented programs to help boys and incarcerated men learn to process their emotions and identify the harms of hegemonic masculinity and violence (Siebel Newsom 2015).

Individual Agency and Collective Action

Changes in belonging and other family problems depend on both individual agency and collective action. For example if you are in a heterosexual cohabitation, you may negotiate with your partner an equitable *division of labor*, which is a choice that your family is making to disrupt gender inequality in the family. For another example, early activism for gay and lesbian rights focused on recognizing and valuing all of the forms of family that queer people might experience. Because gay and lesbian people could not marry, adopt children, nor make medical decisions for each other, activists marched in the streets to say that "All Families Matter" whether they were legally recognized or not. In 1996, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which limited marriage to one man and one woman. Activism and legal challenges at the state level slowly won the right for same-gender couples to have civil unions and to marry (Goldberg 2015). On June 26, 2015, in the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court ruled that the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples. This combination of social movement pressure and legal action fundamentally changed the definition of marriage in the US.

One group of activists draws our attention: Queer Dreamers, sometimes called "undocu-queers" (undocumented and queer). These young people started organizing in early 2000 to advance immigrant and queer rights and support immigrant and queer families. Undocuqueer leaders have been visible in the immigrant rights movement in recent years. They have been at the forefront of many of the major protests and actions for the DREAM Act. One activist says, "I believe they have played a critical role in making sure that the public becomes aware of our situation and how we are fighting for our rights in this country (Terriquez 2015:344)."



These UndocuQueers (queer undocumented people) are marching in the Washington DC Pride Parade. How do you think that their work being intersectional helps their causes?

"Photo of UndocuQueers marching in DC" by Tim Evanson is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

Sociologist Veronica Terriquez (pictured below) was interested in finding out more about the relationship between coming out as queer and undocumented. She also wanted to find out if the two social movements – immigrant's rights and queer rights – supported each other or remained separate movements. Movement activists worked to pass the DREAM Act and DACA, described earlier in the chapter. The social movement work involved in passing DACA was widespread, particularly in California, the state with the largest undocumented youth population (Terriquez 2015).



Veronica Terriquez, pictured here, is a sociologist and the director of the Chicano Research Studies Center at UCLA.

"Photo of Veronica Terriquez" by Ernesto Chavez, UCLA is included under fair use

Some young people organized a "Coming Out of Shadows" campaign (Sirriyeh 2018). This campaign encouraged undocumented people to talk about their undocumented status. The strategy was inspired by the queer process of 'coming out' – telling people you were queer/LGBTQ+. By going public with their undocumented identity, organizers hoped to break the social stigma of being undocumented and gain popular support for DACA. By borrowing an effective social movement technique, immigration organizers became more effective, which is collective action at work.

However, as sociologists, we want to understand more about the sequence of events to begin sorting out correlation and causation. More specifically, Teriquez (2015) wanted to know whether undocumented queer youth came out as queer first and then were brave enough to share their undocumented status or the opposite. She found that although many youth came out with both statuses simultaneously, most youth came out as undocumented first and then as queer. She cites two reasons for this directionality.

First, people who are undocumented have to rely on family support to survive in their new country. Family support is crucial to their survival because they aren't legally allowed to work and, for the most part, don't have access to insurance or other social safety net programs. The challenges to coming out are both physical and cultural. Teriquez provides this detail from Samir, a 24-year-old activist:

> "We can't [legally] have jobs, so we already have these financial issues. Once you come out to your family—and if they don't respond very well—then there is that chance of losing your bed, a place to sleep. There's a lot more you can lose because you can't really take care of yourself financially when you're undocumented" (Samir in Terriquez 2015:252).

Coming out as queer can be a significant emotional and economic risk for immigrant youth. These words from Alberto, a 26-year-old activist from Mexico, highlight the cultural barriers to coming out in a conservative Catholic immigrant family:

> "My dad belonged to one of the most conservative organizations within the Catholic Church, and he was very vocal about his distaste for certain things, including homosexuality. So, I thought it was wrong to be gay because I grew up in that environment" (Alberto in Terriquez 2015:251).

Second, Terriquez finds that the experience of organizing for immigrant rights and coming out of the shadows empowers youth. As they experience the support they need to be more visible in their undocumented identity, they are more willing to share their queer identity. Terriquez writes, "As Ixchel, a prominent and openly bisexual leader explained, being open about one's legal status 'is a transition that helps queer folks come out; they experience the acceptance of coming out as undocumented, so it helps people come out as queer" (Terriquez 2015:253).

However, this order of coming out is not just about individual agency. It is also supported by the conscious choice of some immigrant rights organizations, particularly at universities and colleges, to engage in intersectional analysis. These organizations were deliberately welcoming to people with multiple oppressed identities. "Contributing to the intersectional mobilization of undocumented LGBTQ activists, this multi-identity work included deliberate efforts by leaders to combat homophobia as well as organizational practices that validated the experiences of LGBTQ members" (Terriquez 2015:354). In other words, some youth Dreamer organizations recognized that in addition to being undocumented, many of their members experienced oppression as women, queer or trans, or poor people. They understood the intersectionality of the oppression they were collectively facing and leveraged their diversity as a strength of their movement.

Some queer dreamers were not supported by wider immigrant rights organizations because they were queer. Some queer dreamers did not get support from campus LGBTQ+ organizations because they were Black, Brown, or Indigenous. In many cases, they formed their own social movement organizations to be their whole selves and access the political power that brought them. They created belonging in their own *chosen families* – families comprised of individuals one chooses such as close friends, coworkers, or some members of families of origin. They called their chosen families 'families from the heart,' or 'familias de corazón.'

They also use art as a form of protest and power. Julio Salgado, featured in the video below, is a Latinx artist who creates art to illustrate his life and the lives of other undocumented queers.



In this video, a queer undocumented man describes how art can be used to convey issues of oppression and pride. How else have advocates used art to help further their causes?

" How Julio Salgado Utilizes Art to Express Life As a Queer, Undocumented Man" by NowThis is licensed under the Standard YouTube License

By coming out as queer and undocumented, these youth are fighting for social justice for themselves and their families.

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Review of Family Problems

Summary

1. Many types of families exist now and have existed in the past. Although the **nuclear family** has been the ideal in many societies, in practice it has been less common than some might think. Many societies have favored *extended families*, and in early times children could expect to live at least some part of their childhood with only one parent.
2. Marriage has been declining over the past several decades, though it is still valued by many Americans and most young people report that they hope to marry one day. Cohabitation and multigenerational households have increased, whereas divorce has declined.
3. Family forms vary by social location such as social class, race, and sexuality. For instance, lower-income and lower-educated families are less likely to be married than higher-income/educated families, Black children are more likely than other racial groups to live in mother-headed homes and homes with other relatives, and same-gender families are less likely to be raising children than opposite-gender families though their rates of cohabiting and married households are steadily increasing.
4. Structural functionalism emphasizes functions that families serve for society, including the socialization of children and the economic and practical support of family members, which can break down if families aren't supported by other social institutions such as the state. Conflict theory emphasizes the ways in which nuclear families and state policies contribute to ongoing social inequalities. Social interactionist approaches examine family communication and expectations to make sense of family life, and consider how families 'do' gender. Other perspectives weigh in on family problems. For instance, queer theorists remind us that families come in all shapes and sizes but some are constrained by **heteropatriarchy**.
5. Studies find that divorce itself may not have dire consequences for children that many observers assume. The low income of divorced or single-parent households seems to account for many of the problems that children in such households experience. Women and children seem to fare better when a highly contentious marriage ends.
6. Family violence affects millions of adults and children yearly. Structural and cultural factors help account for the high amount of **intimate partner violence** and **child abuse**. Evidence indicates that women are much more at risk than men for violence by spouses and partners, though any gender may be victimized by this violence.
7. Gender inequality is seen in the gendered **division of labor** in which women continue to engage in more domestic work than men, which results in less free time to relax and recoup, especially after a shift of paid work. Instead, they're more likely to take on the **second shift** of family labor after their shift of paid labor.
8. Laws, policies, and practices impact who gets recognized and who is valued as a family, impacting experiences of **belonging**. These structural differences result from differences in values related to family. Because of this, some families experience privilege, and others experience oppression. Mixed-status immigrant families and queer families have less power than other families.
9. Laws and policies can help alleviate some of the consequences of family problem, particularly those that focus on poverty and supporting low-income families. Broad cultural shifts are necessary to reduce family problems tied to cultural expectations and social inequalities. Individual agency and collective action such as those of queer dreamers challenge existing harmful policies and advance social justice.

Questions

1. How would you describe the disadvantages of the *breadwinner/homemaker nuclear family*?
2. Do you favor the views and assumptions of functionalist theory, conflict theory, or social interactionist theory to frame or explain family problems, and why?
3. Think of someone you know (yourself, a relative, or friend) whose parents are divorced – how would you describe how the divorce affected this person?
4. How are problems of the consequences of divorce, family violence, the division of labor, and belonging tied to larger social inequalities?
5. Why do you think that the US lags behind other Western democracies in efforts to help families?
6. What issues have you seen in the news lately about the experiences of immigrant or queer families?
7. What do you think are the most important policies or actions we should take to help America’s families?

Action Steps

1. Use your sociological imagination: Think of how the practices you engage in in your own family are tied to larger social inequalities (or think of those your parents/guardians, grandparents, or other family members have engaged in).
2. Support nonprofits and similar organizations: Volunteer at a family violence shelter or an organization that supports mixed-status or undocumented families.
3. Use your individual agency: When you hear someone claim that same-gender families are harmful to children, question why they have those beliefs and point them to the body of research that consistently indicates that children of same-gender families and of opposite-gender families fare similarly.
4. Engage in collective action: Research organizations that are engaging in action to support marginalized families or advance women's equality, select one, and find out how to get involved in their efforts.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Work and Economy

- Overview of Work and Economy Problems
- Theoretical Perspectives on Work and Economy Problems
- Patterns of Work and Economy Problems
- Strategies to Address Work and Economy Problems
- Review of Work and Economy Problems
- References for Work and Economy

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Overview of Work and Economy Problems

Learning Objectives

- Describe economy and the labor force.
- Distinguish between major economic systems and identify their strengths and weaknesses and how they may overlap.
- Summarize the three sociological theoretical perspectives on work and economy problems.
- Describe various forms of employment discrimination, particularly related to gender, race, and age.
- Outline recent trends in jobs, wages, and unions.
- List adverse effects of unemployment.
- Describe forms of workplace crime, violence, and injury.
- Identify several types of approaches to improving problems of work and economy.

When we hear the term *economy*, it's often in the context of how the economy "is doing": Is the economy growing or shrinking? Is inflation soaring or under control? 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, we all interact with this institution, as well all use society's goods and services.

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, information technology services, and so on.



Clerical work and other occupations that provide services rather than products constitute the tertiary sector in the economy.

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All societies have to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services, in one way or another. How this happens depends on which sectors of the economy are most important. In some societies the primary sector is most important, and in others the tertiary sector is most important. As Western societies like the US developed economically over the centuries, the primary sector became less important and the tertiary sector became more important. The primary sector was the only sector in hunting-and-gathering societies, while the tertiary sector dominates much of the economy in today's wealthiest democracies.

The social institution in which we produce and distribute goods and services is called the institution of **work**. In this institution, societal members of working age and ability are assigned jobs based on their knowledge, skills, education level, and experience. In societies like the US, individuals' and families' ability to survive and thrive typically depends their job, as they provide income and other benefits such as healthcare insurance and retirement savings. This institution involves all levels of employers – from large corporations and state or federal governments that employ thousands of people to small businesses than employ only a few people.

The work we engage in in part defines our *social class*, which is based on occupation and income (as well as on education and wealth).

In this chapter, we cover examples of social problems related to the institution of work in the US, which is connected to the type of economy we have. First, we introduce two types of economies – capitalism and socialism – providing examples of their strengths and weaknesses, and noting how they can be combined. We then turn attention to the institution of work, focusing on the US labor force.

Types of Economic Systems

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 existing on a continuum. Economies often 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 US has a capitalist economy, 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. During the New Deal era, the US has also had a form of capitalism that offered socialist policies, to help distribute wealth more evenly across the population and supports its poor – *welfare capitalism*, which overlaps with *democratic socialism*, discussed below. We'll now define and discuss the main differences between capitalism and socialism.

Capitalism

Capitalism is an economic system in which the means of production are privately owned. By *means of production*, we mean everything that is needed to produce goods and services such as land, tools, technology, and so on. 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.

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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 sometimes referred to as *laissez-faire* (French for “leave alone”), and terms to describe this type of capitalism include the *free-enterprise system* and *free market capitalism*.

The hallmarks of capitalism 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 quite different from those for capitalism, and were spelled out most famously by Karl Marx (of sociology's *conflict theory*). **Socialism** is an economic system in which the means of production are collectively owned rather than privately owned. Whereas the US has several airlines that are owned by 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 may control the economy.

The ideal outcome of socialism, said Marx, would be a truly classless society – one without a social class hierarchy. In such a society all members are equal, and stratification does not exist. (Imagine a society not only without the extreme economic inequality we have today, but without a social class hierarchy at all!) Marx imagined this to be a *communist* society, in which the government owns and controls all goods and services. Marx’s vision of a communist society was never fulfilled, and nations that called themselves 'communist' departed drastically from his vision of communism.

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 many drawbacks. There is far 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. Recall our discussion of the extreme *economic inequality* we see today from the Poverty and Economic Inequality chapter.

Another possible drawback rests on the tension between competition or cooperation. Values of US culture include competition and individualism, both of which arguably reflect this nation’s capitalist system. Children in the US 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 any 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: Attempts to maximize profit come at the expense of others. In competition, someone has to lose. A company’s ultimate aim is to maximize its profits, which can involve exploiting its workers or driving another company out of the market altogether. For instance, small family-owned (often called 'mom and pop') grocery stores, drugstores, and hardware stores are almost a thing of the past, as large corporations (often called '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 summarized these problems of capitalism:

> "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).

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 childcare and universal healthcare, that are free or heavily subsidized. To support this 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 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

Democratic Socialism

Some nations combine elements of capitalism and socialism, which is called **democratic socialism** (those societies are sometimes and are called *social democracies*). 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 that it is possible to combine the best features of capitalism and socialism while avoiding their faults (Russell 2011).

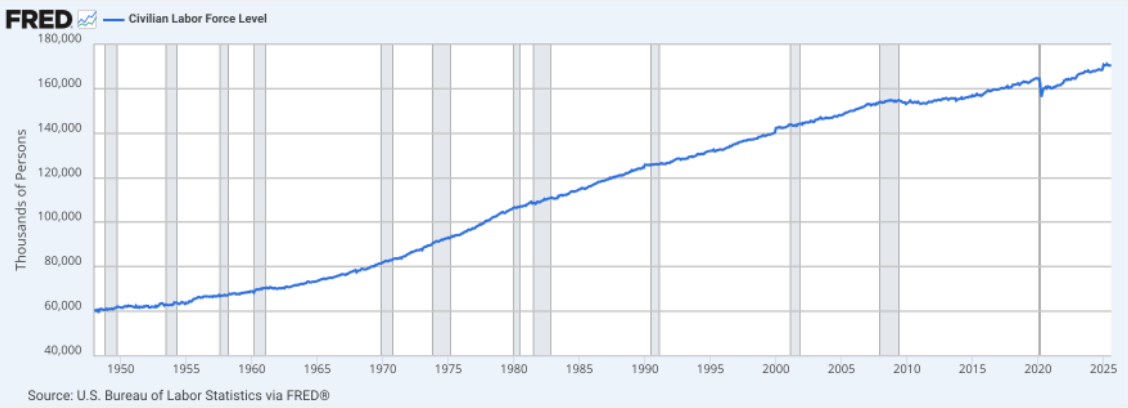


The economies of Denmark (pictured here) and several other Western European nations feature a combination of capitalism and socialism that is called *democratic socialism*. In these economies, the government owns important industries, but private property and political freedom remain widespread.

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The Institution of Work

We now turn from a general discussion of economic systems to some basic facts on the labor force in the US, which is a capitalist society. The **civilian labor force** in the US 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 170 million people, slightly under two-thirds of the population (62.5%) as of summer 2025 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025a; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2025a).



This chart displays the civilian labor force level, in thousands of persons and seasonally adjusted, from 1948 to 2025, with recessions noted in gray. What was occurring when the level dipped so dramatically in 2020?

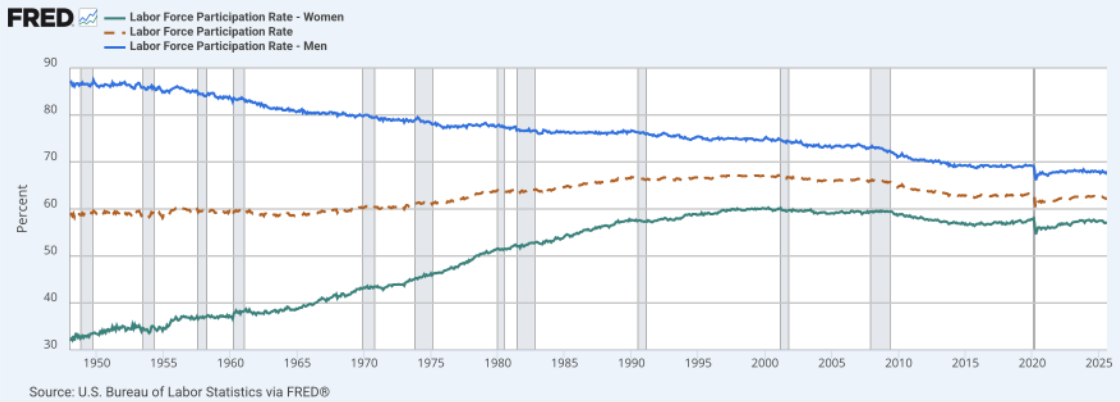
Source: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (FRED) 2025a

Of those in the workforce, about 134.5 million work full time, just over 29 million work part time, and over 7 million are *unemployed*, meaning that they are actively looking for paid work. We will discuss unemployment as a social problem on the Patterns of Work and Economy page. Women are far more likely to work part time, whereas men are more likely to work full

time (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025c). Nearly 103 million people are not in the labor force – those not working nor looking for work. Of those, approximately 94% do not currently want a job, whereas the others are unavailable to work currently due to responsibilities such as family or school or a concern such as health or disability (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025d). Many who do work struggle with balancing those responsibilities or their health with work expectations, a phenomenon called *work-life conflict*.

Recall that economies are comprised of primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. In the US today, the tertiary sector has become central to the institution of work, as more and more people are employed in services rather than in the production of goods. This trend is expected to continue, with healthcare and social assistance services estimated to experience the fastest growth followed by professional, scientific, and technical services, then information services (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025b). Within the tertiary sector, there has also been a rise of service positions that are unstable and low-wage, contributing to the high degree of economic inequality we have in the US today, as discussed in the Poverty and Economic Inequality chapter.

Women's labor force participation soared in the second half of the twentieth century. In summer 1950, approximately one-third of women (33.6%) were working or actively working for work. Half a century later in early 2000, the figure rose to 60%, before leveling off and falling somewhat after. In summer 2025, slightly over 57% of women were in the labor force, compared with nearly 68% of men (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2025b).



This chart displays labor force participation rates, the proportion of the civilian noninstitutionalized population that is either working or actively looking for work. What cultural changes coincided with women's increased labor force participation rate?

Source: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (FRED) 2025b

Despite women's presence in the labor force today, they continue to experience a unique set of challenges including obstacles to promotion, lower pay, and other forms of discrimination, in comparison to men. As we will see, however, women are not the only group to face these challenges, as people in other marginalized groups also face systemic workplace discrimination. Before turning to problems such as these within the institution of work, we summarize how the three classical sociological paradigms frame problems of work and economy.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Work and Economy Problems

Each of the three classical sociological perspectives offers a different take on work and economy. As described in early chapters of this textbook and below, conflict theory was inspired by Karl Marx, who along with his colleague Friedrich Engels wrote about the social class conflict between workers and employers after Industrialization, in which the exploited *proletariat* (workers) would rise up against the *bourgeoisie* (owners of the means of production), causing capitalism to fall in favor of socialism and eventually communism. Thus, conflict theory has a long history of emphasizing work and economy. However, structural functionalism and symbolic interactionism have also offered important insights, particularly in terms of the functions and dysfunctions of the institution of work and social interactions within workplaces. The Snapshot table below summarizes these perspectives.

Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Structural 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.

Structural 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 an 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.

The institution of work itself has an important function in capitalist societies: Helping its members survive and thrive. Most people work for pay once they reach adulthood, and sometimes earlier. 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, an important function that most people derive from working is their income. Simply put, work provides the paycheck 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 in the US consider their job part of their identity. We may identify ourselves as accountant, claims adjuster, day care worker, construction worker, elementary school teacher, banker, financial consultant, garage door installer, and so forth. The career we have helps provide us with a sense of who we are, or, to put it another way, a sense of our identity. This phenomenon is more prominent in US society than other wealthy democracies, in part due to the *Protestant Work Ethic* that was dominant in the early years of the nation's development. This ideology positioned work as a defining feature of an individual's worth. Today, Americans likely ask, "What do you do?" as the first question they pose after meeting someone new, whereas Europeans may ask, "What are your hobbies?"

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. Similarly, work provides 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.



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

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 2024 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?" Of respondents who answered the question (with continue to work, stop working, or don't know), nearly two-thirds (65%) replied that they would indeed continue working (GSS 2025).

While some structural functionalists focus on how the institution of work offers benefits for individuals, others would focus on its dysfunctions. For instance, in periods of high unemployment, the institution may be critiqued for failing to provide jobs to the people who need them. Functionalists also focus on how institutions are interconnected. The institution of education may be seen as dysfunctional if it fails to prepare students for the workforce, the institutions of family and work may be seen as not functioning harmoniously when workers are not offered family-friendly policies that allow them to balance family and work life, and the institution of the state may be critiqued for lacking regulations for employers regarding paid leave, vacation time, and holidays.

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. Marx and Engels sharply criticized capitalism as an economic system that inherently oppresses workers. In their view, the *bourgeoisie*, or ruling class who own the means of production, oppresses the *proletariat*, or working class. The bourgeoisie uses its wealth, power, and influence to exploit the proletariat, with labor practices and the spread of *ideologies* such as the myth of meritocracy.

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 2024 GSS, the great majority (84.6%) of respondents said they are "very" or "moderately" satisfied with the work that they do, and only 14.5% said that they were "a little" or "very" dissatisfied (GSS 2025). This latter figure is probably much lower than Marx would have predicted for a capitalist society like the US, though he might not have envisioned the shift toward the tertiary (service) sector described on the last page. 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.

However, being satisfied with one's work overall does not mean that the job is stress-free, that workers have achieved *life-work balance*, or that there aren't other serious problems related to work and economy. Conflict theorists today may also be interested in how employers overwork their employees, leading to conflict between paid work and other life responsibilities and goals. In addition, conflict theory would argue that capitalism drives continued social class inequality, as well as inequalities along the lines of race, gender, nationality, age, and disability. In fact, as we will see on the following page, researchers have documented systemic discrimination in the institution of work against people in marginalized groups. Conflict theorists may claim that corporations engage in discriminatory, and sometimes inhumane, practices that harm oppressed groups and perpetuate social injustice. 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. Conflict and feminist theorists also point out that the workplace is a setting for sexual harassment. 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 workers, particularly women, who are sexually harassed every year. Thus, although today's conflict theorists are not necessarily Marxists, they nonetheless criticize many aspects of capitalism.

Symbolic Interactionism

Recall that symbolic interactionism focuses on the interaction of individuals and on how they interpret their interaction. In line with this microsociological 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, attorneys, nurses and physicians, sex workers, 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 patients' reproductive organs, they have to ensure that their patients do not think their doctor is behaving in a sexual manner. For this to happen, Emerson wrote, (men) gynecologists take effort to appear as medical professionals rather than as men sexually interested in or aroused by the patient. In this way, they "define the situation" as a professional encounter rather than as a sexual encounter.

Men gynecologists use several strategies to appear professional, according to Emerson. For example, they try to have a woman nurse present during the exam to help the patient feel comfortable. These 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: 78). In these

ways, gynecological exams are defined only as medical encounters, and patients are helped to feel as comfortable as possible under rather uncomfortable circumstances. However, research indicates that a gender preference still exists, as women visiting obstetrics and gynecology (OBGYN) clinics are more comfortable with women doctors and find it easier to discuss medical issues with women doctors, and those with less education or who are married prefer a woman OBGYN (Riaz et al. 2021).

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 men officers 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: 105). Officers learn to record dispatchers' information promptly and accurately, and they avoid remarks that question the competence of other officers. This raises questions about gender expectations, as *hegemonic masculinity* (discussed in the prior chapter) dictates that men never show weakness nor incompetence.

As discussed in earlier chapters, symbolic interactionism is also interested in how *stereotypes* and biases shape social interactions and individuals' sense of self. Though conflict theory has a stronger focus on *institutionalized discrimination* of marginalized groups in workplaces, symbolic interactionism would explore how biases and stereotypes result in *interpersonal discrimination*, such as between white doctors working with patients of color, employers interviewing disabled applicants, or managers supervising elderly workers. As we will see next, employers have been found to systematically discriminate against workers in marginalized groups, and as we will see in a future chapter, bias in medicine contributes to racial disparities in health outcomes and quality of healthcare.

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Patterns of Work and Economy Problems

Though work and economy have benefits such as providing the goods and services we need and offering meaning and purpose in our lives, they also give rise to many kinds of problems that affect millions of Americans. This section examines some of these problems, starting with employment discrimination then shifting to a variety of other problems such as those related to wages, unemployment, and workplace violence.

Employment Discrimination

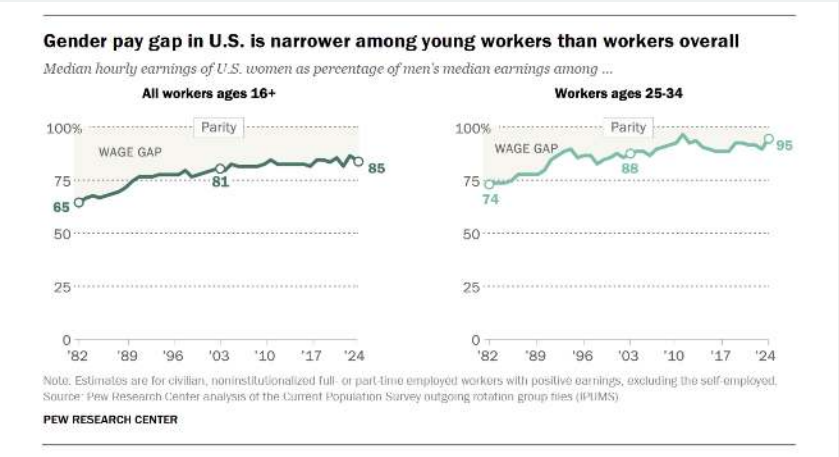
Employment discrimination occurs in a variety of ways, including in hiring (e.g., not hiring people of color), wages (e.g., paying women less than men), promotions (e.g., promoting white men faster than others), and more (e.g., making sexist remarks in the workplace). Here we will discuss a few examples of workplace discrimination related to different areas of social location – gender, race, and age – though people experience employment discrimination for other areas as well such as sexuality, disability, and nationality or immigrant status. It's also important to keep in mind an *intersectional* perspective: Some people experience double discrimination such as women of color who may experience the intersection of racism and sexism in the workplace.

Gender Discrimination

As we saw on the Overview page, over the last half century women have entered the workplace in increasing numbers (particularly white women, as many women of color were already working to sustain their working-class families). This was partly out of economic necessity as men's pay could no longer sustain a family and partly out of desire for the sense of self-worth and other fulfillment that comes with work. Women's labor force participation continues to lag behind men's, however, largely due to gendered expectations of domestic responsibilities. Despite the workplace gains that women have made, problems persist.

One problem is the **gender pay gap**. Women have earned less money than men ever since records started being kept (Reskin & Padavic 2002). In the US in the early 1800s, full-time women workers in agriculture and manufacturing earned less than 38% of what men earned. By 1885, they were earning about 50% of what men earned in manufacturing jobs. As the 1980s began, full-time women workers' median weekly earnings were about 65% of men's.

The gender gap in earnings has narrowed since: Women's earnings in 2024 were 84% percent of men's, on average, for full-time and part-time workers (Fry & Aragão 2025). This means that for every $10,000 men earn, women earn only about $8,400. This gap amounts to hundreds of thousands of dollars over a lifetime of working. Additionally, though the gap narrowed over the twentieth century, there has been less movement over the twenty-first century. In fact, the gap for full-time year-round workers increased for two consecutive years for the first time in history, falling from 82.7% in 2023 to 80.9% in 2024 (Census 2025).



The chart on the left shows that the gender pay gap had narrowed from the 1980s to the 2000s, but largely leveled off after 2003. The chart on the right points out that the pay gap is smallest among

younger workers, aged 25-34, with women workers in that age group earning 95% of what men earned.

Source: Fry & Aragão 2025, Pew Research Center

What accounts for the gender gap in earnings? One reason is gendered **occupational segregation**, the sorting of women and men into different jobs. Gender expectations and socialization influence occupational segregation, as women are expected to take and socialized to be interested in lower-paying jobs such as those in childcare or domestic work, whereas men become interested in higher-paying jobs such as in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math). Additionally, employers may either consciously or subconsciously refuse to hire someone who is the 'wrong' gender for the job or have job requirements (e.g., height requirements among police officers) and workplace rules (e.g., nighttime work when women are expected to care for children) that make it more difficult for women to qualify for certain jobs. Although such practices and requirements are now illegal, they continue.

Moreover, occupations dominated by women tend to have lower wages and salaries, and because women are concentrated in low-paying jobs, their earnings on average are lower than men's (Reskin & Padavic 2002). This fact raises an important question: Why do jobs dominated by women pay less than those dominated by men? Is it because "women's jobs" are not important and require few skills? Evidence indicates otherwise: Women's work is devalued precisely because it is "women's work," and occupations dominated by women thus pay less than those dominated by men (Magnusson 2009).



Women have earned less money than men ever since records started being kept. Women now earn about 84% of what men earn on average overall, or 84 cents for every dollar men earn. Occupational segregation accounts for some of the pay disparity, but the disparity remains when examining pay within the same occupations.

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Occupational segregation is important in explaining gender pay gap, but it does not explain it away, so what else explains the gap? *Human capital theory* argues that capital accrued such as education and labor-market experience may explain the gap, particularly how women have less overall experience due to expectations that they engage in more unpaid family labor, yet research indicates that this explains little of the gender wage gap today. Another research finding is that there is a *motherhood penalty* for women with children whose average pay decreases with the birth of a child, in contrast to the *marriage premium* that boosts men's pay. The remaining gap suggests that employment discrimination is at play. As researchers Blau and Kahn (2017: 854) explain, "The persistence of an unexplained gender wage gap suggests, though it does not prove, that labor-market discrimination continues to contribute to the gender wage gap." In other words, it is likely that the gap is explained in part by sexist discrimination.

One form of gender discrimination in employment is the **glass ceiling**, in which women encounter an invisible (glass) ceiling beyond which they cannot get promoted. In the largest US corporations in the 2010s, women constituted only about 16% of top executives, and women executives were paid much less than their male counterparts (Jenner & Ferguson 2009). For more recent figures, women held only 10.4% of leadership positions at Fortune 500 companies in 2023, and only 35% of senior leadership

positions in 2022 (Lindahl 2024). Although these disparities stem partly from the fact that women joined the corporate ranks 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 often ride a *glass escalator* to the top, particularly in occupations dominated by women. An example is seen in elementary school teaching, where men principals typically rise from the ranks of teachers. Although men have constituted only about 16% of all public elementary school teachers, they have accounted for about 41% of all elementary school principals (Aud et al. 2011).



Women constitute a fraction of the top executives in the largest US corporations. This disparity reflects a *glass ceiling* that limits women's opportunities for promotion.

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To return to the *intersectional* perspective we mention above, women of color in the workplace may experience double discrimination for being both a woman and a person of color. More specifically, the gender pay gap widens substantially when examining pay for Latina, Native American, and Black women compared to white men. The Institute for Women's Policy Research (2024: 1) notes, "In 2023, for every dollar earned by a White man, a typical Latina woman working full-time year-round earned 57.8 cents per dollar, adding up to $32,070 less per year." Moreover, less than 1% of CEOs at Fortune 500 corporations are women of color (Lindahl 2024).

Race Discrimination

Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned racial discrimination in employment, including hiring, wages, and firing. However, Black, Latino, and Native American workers still have lower earnings than white workers. Several factors explain this disparity, including the various structural obstacles discussed in our prior chapter on 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 or implicit prejudice on the part of potential employers, but it is racial discrimination nonetheless and occurs in patterned ways, meaning that it is *institutionalized discrimination* in the institution of work.

A classic field experiment documented such discrimination. Sociologist Devah Pager (2003) had young white and Black 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, Black applicants *without* a criminal record were less likely to be hired as white applicants *with* a criminal record.

Another classic study also found evidence of institutionalized racial discrimination in employment. Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) posed the question: "Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal?" The answer was yes. To conduct this field experiment, they sent out resumes to hiring employers that had white-sounding names and Black-sounding names, but were otherwise similar in terms of education, work experience, and so on. The researchers found that white-sounding names received 50% more callbacks for interviews than Black-sounding names, and the disparity was consistent across occupations and industries.

A 2023 Pew survey found that a large proportion of Black workers report having experienced racial discrimination in the workplace. They explain, "41% of Black workers say that at some point they have experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly by an employer in hiring, pay or promotions because of their race or ethnicity (though not necessarily by their current employer). This compares with 8% of White workers, 20% of Hispanic workers and 25% of Asian workers" (Horowitz & Parker 2023).

Age Discrimination

Some elders may wish to work but are retired or unemployed because several obstacles make it difficult for them to find jobs. First, many workplaces do not permit the part-time working arrangements that many seniors favor or require. Second, the rise in high-tech jobs means that older workers would need to be retrained for many of today's jobs, and few retraining programs exist. Third, although federal law prohibits age discrimination in employment, it exists anyway, as employers do not think older people are 'up to the job,' even though the evidence indicates they are good, productive workers (Berger, 2009; Roscigno 2010). Finally, earnings above a certain level reduce Social Security benefits before full retirement age, leading some older people to avoid working at all or to at least limit their hours. All these obstacles lead some seniors to drop out of the labor force or to remain unemployed (Gallo, Brand, Teng, Leo-Summers, & Byers 2009).

However, older people are increasingly working, including in full-time positions. The employment of older workers (defined as age 65 and older) grew by 117% over a 20-year period. One cause of this increase is called *population aging*, which refers to the increasing proportion of older people in the nation, particularly as 'Baby Boomers' age (CDC 2024a).

Survey evidence suggests that more than half of older workers have experienced or observed age discrimination in the workplace, and more than 80% of older workers have experienced or observed jokes, disrespect, or other prejudicial comments about old age (Roscigno 2010). Workplace *ageism* receives little news media attention and has also been neglected by social scientists. This is so despite the related facts that ageism in the workplace is common and that the older people who experience this discrimination suffer financial loss and emotional problems. Roscigno (2010: 17) wrote after interviewing several victims of age discrimination:

> "Many conveyed fear of defaulting on mortgages or being unable to pay for their children's college after being pushed out of their jobs. Others expressed anger and insecurity over the loss of affordable health insurance or pension benefits… Just as prevalent and somewhat surprising to me in these discussions were the less-tangible, yet deeper social-psychological and emotional costs that social science research has established for racial discrimination or sexual harassment, for instance, but are only now being considered in relation to older workers."

One of the people Roscigno interviewed was a maintenance worker who was laid off after more than two decades of working for his employer. This worker was both hurt and angry. "They now don't want to pay me my pension," he said. "I was a good worker for them and always did everything they asked. I went out of my way to help train people and make everything run smoothly, so everybody was happy and it was a good place to work. And now this is what I get, like I never really mattered to them. It's just not right" (2010: 17). The loss of a pension is deep, as it it intended to sustain older people in retirement.

Returning once again to *intersectionality*, ageism in the workplace can intersect with other systems of oppression such as sexism or racism, or both. For instance, research indicates that older women are far more likely to experience age employment discrimination than older men (Neumark et al. 2016). Moreover, one study found that age discrimination is highest among Black older women (Drydakis, Paraskevopoulou, & Bozani 2023), who experience triple discrimination.

Job Sectors, Wages, and Unions

Certain ominous trends in the US economy have been evident for many decades. These trends involved a general loss of jobs in many sectors of the American economy and stagnating wages. They partly reflected the fact that the US 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 and technology skills are prerequisites for postindustrial jobs.

This move to a postindustrial economy has been a mixed blessing for many Americans. The information age has benefits of course, 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, which is called **offshoring** but sometimes referred to as *capital flight* when the focus is on the shifting of

money and resources out of one country into another. These trends helped fuel a loss of 5.5 million manufacturing jobs from the US economy in the 2010s (Hall 2011).

A related problem is **outsourcing**, in which US companies hire workers overseas for customer relations, 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. Many call centers have employed workers in India, you might very well talk with a worker there when calling customer service.

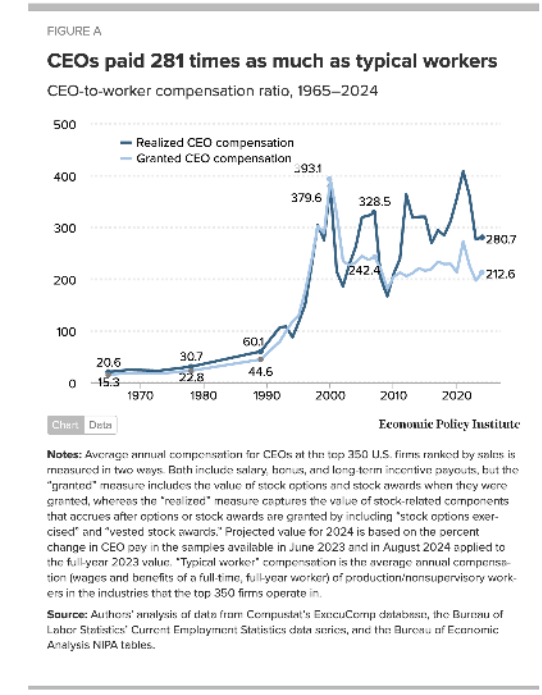


This image portrays a job ad for a call center in India. Many US jobs have been lost because of outsourcing to other countries.

Paul Keller – wanted – CC BY 2.0

All these concerns reflect a more general shift in the US from goods-producing jobs to service jobs. Although some of these service jobs are high paying, such as many in the financial and computer industries, many are 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 for US workers (excluding managers and supervisors) rose by only one dollar from $17.46 to $18.63 in the 30-year period from 1979 to 2009 (in 2009 dollars). This change represented an increase of just 0.2% per year during that three-decade span, as workers' wages essentially stagnated (Economic Policy Institute 2012).

Wage changes also depend on what social class someone is in, with those at the top of the hierarchy seeing more gains in income. While the average compensation of chief executive officers (CEOs) of large corporations grew by 167% from 1989 to 2007, the average compensation of the typical worker grew by only 10% (Mishel, Bernstein, & Shierholz 2009). Another way of understanding this disparity is perhaps more striking. In 1965, the average compensation of CEOs was 24 times greater than that of the typical worker; however, in 2009, their compensation was 185 times greater than that of the typical worker (Economic Policy Institute 2012), and reached 281 times in 2024 (Gould, Bivens, & Kandra 2025).



This graph from the Economic Policy Institute displays the CEO-to-average-worker ratio, which reached a high of 380:1 in the year 2000 and was 281:1 in 2024.

Source: Gould, Bivens, & Kandra 2025, Economic Policy Institute

These figures reflect growing *economic inequality* in the US that we discussed in the Poverty and Economic Inequality chapter. We covered some causes of increasing economic inequality in that chapter, and will elaborate on another contributing factor here: **Deunionization**, the weakening of labor unions.

One of the most important developments accompanying industrialization in the nineteenth century was the rise of labor unions and their negotiation with management over wages and working conditions (Dubofsky & Dulles 2010). Beforehand, 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.

DonkeyHotey – 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, Michigan. 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 US workers may now take for granted.

Despite these significant wins for workers, today labor unions have lost some of their influence, especially as postindustrialization has supplanted the industrial economy and as the US has lost much of its manufacturing base. Half a century ago, about one-fourth of all private-sector nonagricultural workers belonged to labor unions. By 1985 this figure had dropped to 14.6%, and it stands for lower today (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 concerns are allowed to continue.

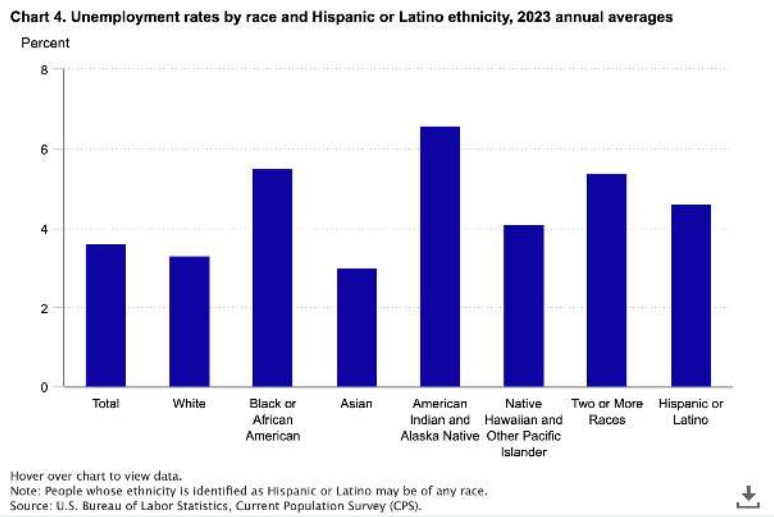
Just as the growth of unions during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries helped to raise workers' wages, the decline of unions has lowered wages. Two reasons explain this decline. First, union workers earn about 14% more than nonunion workers (controlling for experience, education, occupation, and other factors), a phenomenon known as the *union wage premium*. Because fewer workers are now in unions, 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 (Mishel et al. 2009).

Because the union wage premium is greater for Black and Latino workers than for white workers, the wage decline caused by the decline of unions has probably been steeper for those two groups than for white workers. 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 refers to the state of not currently having a job but looking for a job, which differs from not being in the labor force at all. Unemployment is a fact of life, as there are people who are 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.

Unemployment rates rise and fall with the economy. Unemployment was relatively low at 4.1% at the end of 2024, amounting to 6.9 million people (BLS 2025e). In contrast, it was as high as 10.2% in fall 2009 amid the Great Recession (BLS 2012) and hit a high of 13% in the second quarter of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic (BLS 2021). Whether unemployment is high or low, it always varies by race, with Native American, Black, and Latino unemployment rates higher than the white and Asian rates. In 2023 when the overall employment rate was 3.6%, the highest rate was for American Indian and Alaska Native at 6.6% and lowest for Asian at 3.0%.



This chart displays unemployment rates in 2023 by race. The rate was highest for American Indian and Alaska Native at 6.6%, followed by Black at 5.5%, Latino at 4.6%, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander at 4.1%, White at 3.3%, and Asian at 3.0%. People of two or more races also had a high rate at 5.4%.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) 2024

Unemployment figures are misleading in an important respect, as they do not include people who are *underemployed*. **Underemployment** includes those who are working part-time but who want to work full-time – the so-called *marginally attached*, those who are working jobs that they are far overqualified for and don't match their skill set, and 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, when the unemployment rate was 8.5% and 13 million people were officially unemployed in 2011, the underemployment rate was 15.2%, equal to 23.8 million people (Shierholz 2012). These figures are almost twice as high as the official unemployment figures. Considering the racial disparity in unemployment, 24.4% of Black workers and 22.3% of Latino workers were underemployed, compared to only 12.5% 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).

We have seen that unemployment rises when the economy falters and that race affects the probability of being unemployed. These two facts support the importance of the *sociological imagination*. 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 and when there is such striking evidence of higher unemployment rates among the groups of color who face the most obstacles to education and job training needed to obtain and keep a job, it is evident that high unemployment rates reflect a public issue, or a social problem.

Applying Social Research

Race and Employment

People of color are typically more likely than white people to be unemployed or underemployed, with the exception of Asian people. While structural obstacles to education help 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. We recounted a study by sociologist Devah Pager (2003), who had young white and Black 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, Black 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, Black, and Latino 'testers,' all of them "well-spoken, clean-cut young men," 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%) of white testers received a call back or job offer, compared to only 25.2% of Latino testers and 15.2% of Black 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" (2009: 794).

Racial differences in access to the informal networks that are often so important in finding a job also contribute to the racial disparity in employment. In a study using data from a nationwide survey of a random sample of Americans, sociologist Steve McDonald and colleagues (2009) found that people of color and women are less likely than white men to receive informal word of vacant, high-level supervisory positions.

As these and other 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 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.

Consequences of 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. Survey data provide harsh evidence of the social and psychological effects of being unemployed. The Pew Research Center issued a report based on a survey of 810 adults who were currently unemployed or had been unemployed during the Great Recession 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.



Long-term unemployment often causes various social and psychological difficulties.

Image courtesy of Michael Raphael at the Federal Emergency Management Agency, www.photolibrary.fema.gov/photolibrary/photo_details.do?id=29783

Of those who had been unemployed for at least six months (*long-term unemployment*), 44% said that the recession had caused "major changes" in their lives, versus only 20% 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% said that their family relations had been strained and that they had lost contact with close friends. In another finding, 38% said they had "lost some self-respect" from being unemployed.

One-third said that they were finding it difficult to pay their rent or mortgage, compared to only 16% of those who had never been unemployed during the recession. Half had borrowed money from family or friends to pay bills, versus only 18% of the never unemployed. Of all the people who had been unemployed, almost half had experienced sleep difficulties, and 5% had experienced drug or alcohol problems. All these numbers paint a distressing picture of the social and psychological impact of unemployment.

Unemployment also has a significant impact on children with unemployed parents. The box below 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% 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

Crime, Violence, and Injury in the Workplace

An unfortunate fact about work in the US is that it involves crime, violence, and injury, which are the last problems of work and economy that we will examine. We will discuss a few examples of these, though we have already discussed some in the Crime chapter such as *white-collar crime* and *violent crime*.

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: 539). It is estimated that about 75% of employees steal at least once from their employers (National Retail Federation 2007) and that the cost of employee theft is $18 billion annually (Purdy 2021).

Employee theft occurs for many reasons, but a common reason is worker dissatisfaction with various aspects of their job. They may feel that their wages or salaries are too low (and they very well may be), 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 okay to steal inexpensive objects (depending on the workplace) such as 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 $18 billion in conventional employee theft.

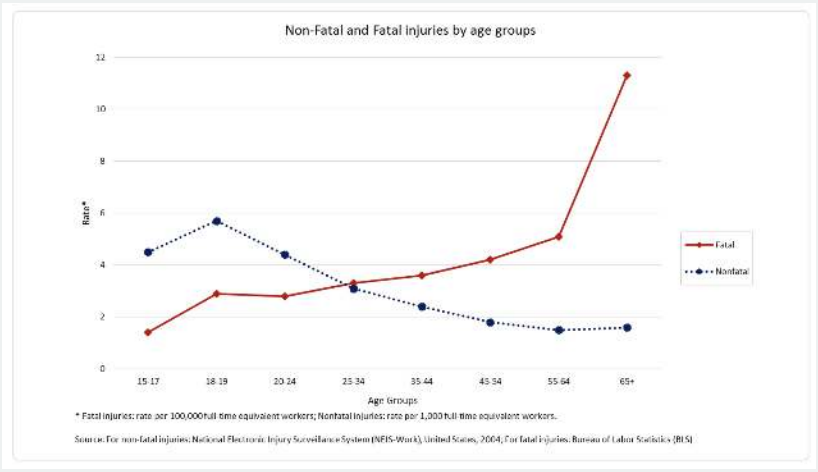
Workplace Violence and Injury

Violence and injury in the workplace are also concerns. 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).

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). More recently, 392 US workers died from workplace homicide in 2020, and 20,050 workers in private industries experienced trauma from nonfatal workplace violence that year (CDC 2024b).

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 women partner or ex-partner 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).

Additionally, there were 2,569,000 nonfatal injuries and illnesses in private industry in 2023, and 5,283 fatal work-related injuries in all sectors (BLS n.d.). Though all workers could experience workplace injury, older workers are more likely to have the injury result in death. Although older workers face fewer injuries overall than younger workers, the injuries they do experience are far more likely to be fatal.



This chart from the CDC displays how older workers are more likely to be victims of fatal workplace injuries despite being less likely to experience workplace injuries overall.

Source: CDC 2024a

Certain types of work such as **sweatshop labor**, which is characterized by unsafe working conditions, long hours, low wages, and few protections, have a high risk of nonfatal and fatal injury. Injuries from this form of labor include being maimed by heavy machinery in factories or on agricultural farms. In fact, children working in factories have been severely injured from operating or cleaning machinery (Dreier 2023). When children perform labor such as this that disrupts their cognitive or physical development or educational trajectory, it is called **child labor**. Sweatshop labor involves other health concerns such as exposure to toxic chemicals or extreme heat.

Finally, workplace accidents may result in large-scale injury and fatalities, numbering casualties in the dozens or hundreds. Though they haven't updated the list since 2011, the program American Experience of PBS published a list of the deadliest workplace accidents, dating back to 1860.

Social problems of work and economy are many, and we cannot cover them all here. Rather, the problems discussed above related to employment discrimination; jobs, wages, and unions; unemployment; and workplace crime, violence, and injury are examples of problems related to work and economy. The good news is that many of these problems may be addressed with stronger laws or policies, better employer and government decisions, and the continuation of individual agency and collective action particulalry in the form of social movements such as the labor movement. We turn to examples of these strategies next.

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Strategies to Address Work and Economy Problems

Critics of capitalism say that many problems of work and economy arise from the nature of capitalism. According to this way of thinking, capitalism as an economic system emphasizes competition and a 'winner takes all' mentality. In this kind of system, there are many losers (in contrast to the few winners), and there is also unbridled greed for greater wealth. In the US system, 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, exploits their workers, and causes other social ills. Thus, stronger protections for workers, small businesses, and the environment may alleviate some of the harms of capitalism, from this perspective.

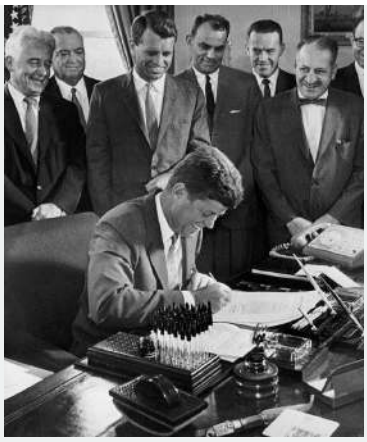
Any improvement in work and economy must stem from social reforms based on sound social research. This chapter’s discussion points to several social problems that must be addressed. One problem is discrimination in hiring and employment. Several kinds of studies, but especially field experiments involving job applicants who are similar except for their race or gender, 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 bias in employment and for public education campaigns to alert workers to signs of this type of discrimination. One set of policies has focused on reducing discrimination against people of color and women in employment, as well as in education. We turn to that set of policies next before shifting attention to other policies and practices that may help address social problems of work and economy.

Affirmative Action

Affirmative action refers to a set of policies and practices designed to promote equal opportunity. It involves special consideration for people of color and women in the institutions of work and education to compensate for the centuries of discrimination and lack of opportunities that they've experienced. Affirmative action programs began in the 1960s to provide Black people and later other people of color and women access to jobs and schooling 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 as a category 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. We discuss some of the Supreme Court cases in the Education chapter, as many of them have involved colleges and universities. For instance, cases involving the University of California, the University of Michigan, Harvard University, and the University of North Carolina weakened affirmative action.

Though Supreme Court cases have reduced affirmative Action in the institution of education, fewer cases have involved the institution of work. However, these policies have been targeted by the Trump presidential administration. Strengthening the initial Executive Order in 1961, another Executive Order (11246) was issued in 1965 requiring employers contracted with the government to document their affirmative action programs including their policies, practices, and programs as well as demographic statistics. However, the second Trump administration in January 2025 revoked that Order in favor of "Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity" (Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School 2025). Thus, federal contractors are no longer required to report on their affirmative action plan for people of color and women.



John F. Kennedy signed an Executive Order in 1961 which ordered federal contractors to "take affirmative action" in treating applicants and workers in nondiscriminatory ways.

John F. Kennedy Signs Bills 1961 by the Associated Press is in the public domain

Despite its curtailment, affirmative action continues to spark controversy, with scholars, members of the public, and elected officials all holding strong views on the issue. 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. They claim that people benefiting from affirmative action are less qualified than many of the white men with whom they compete for employment and college admissions. Opponents also say, perhaps contradictorily, that affirmative action implies that the people benefiting from it need extra help and thus are indeed less qualified.

In response, proponents of affirmative action give several reasons for favoring it (Connors 2009). Many say that it is needed to make up not only for past discrimination and a lack of opportunities for people of color and women but also for ongoing discrimination and a lack of opportunity. For example, because of their social networks, white job-seekers are better able than people of color to find out about and to get jobs (Reskin 1998). If phenomena such as this occur, people of color are 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 college, which strengthens innovation among other benefits. 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 donations, 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 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, that individuals benefiting from affirmative action have generally fared well in the workplace or on campus, and that consideration of people of color and women has not resulted in their being advantaged over white men. For instance, scholars argue that people of color and women have improved access to public employment and would be worse off without these policies in regard to employment status (Harris 2009; Tsang & Dietz 2001), and even white employees may benefit from affirmative action as companies with these polices (that employ over 100 employees) raise wages for white workers (Pincus 2003).

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 considerations that affirmative action programs give people of color and women, the *institutionalized discrimination* and other challenges they face in work and education are likely to continue.

Other Policies and Practices

The *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission* (EEOC) was established under President Johnson's Executive Order 11246, described above. It is a federal agency responsible for enforcing anti-discrimination law in the institution of work, with the goal of

ending employment discrimination. According to the EEOC (n.d.), they are:

> "responsible for enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person's race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, childbirth, or related conditions, transgender status, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information. ... The laws apply to all types of work situations, including hiring, firing, promotions, harassment, training, wages, and benefits."

They enforce Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits employment discrimination on the characteristics named above, though the first iteration included only race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. In practice, the EEOC investigates claims of discrimination against employers who are covered by the law, and most employers with 15 or more employees are covered. The EEOC received over 88,000 charges of discrimination in (fiscal year) 2024, which represented an increase of over 9% from the prior year. Race discrimination is one of the most frequent charges that they receive, with 38% of cases involving race (32.7%) or color (5.3%) (EEOC 2020).

It's 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 US from the worldwide recession in the late 2000s (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

The federal government could implement a job guarantee program to address the problem of unemployment, which have been helpful in the past. For instance, the government instituted programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to boost employment levels during the Great Depression. The institution of the state (whether the federal government or state governments) could also strengthen policies that help individuals, particularly from underrepresented groups, access higher education and occupational training programs, to help them become qualified job applicants or meet minimum educational requirements. The consequences of unemployment sometimes seem forgotten in national debates over whether to extend unemployment insurance benefits, which state governments have the agency to decide.

✔ Lessons from Other Societies

Women in Nordic Nations

The United Nations Development Programme ranked 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 ranked first, followed by Norway, Finland, and Denmark. The remaining Nordic nation, Iceland, ranked eighth. The other nations in the top ten were the Netherlands, Belgium, Australia, Germany, and New Zealand. Canada ranked twelfth, and the United States ranked only eighteenth. In trying to understand why the US

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 ranked 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 two 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: 565). Of course, this does not address the unjust gender expectation that women be disproportionately responsible for unpaid domestic labor, though it does help alleviate the burden of that role.

The lesson for the US 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 US 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.

Employers themselves can write their own policy related to nondiscrimination, to protect workers in marginalized groups from harassment, pay gaps, and other forms of discrimination. They may also choose to engage in fairer wage practices, raising wages and reducing the CEO-to-average-worker-pay ratio in large corporations. To address the concern of alienation and boost worker morale, employers may offer programs to strengthen community in the workplace, such as 'affinity groups' that connect people with similar backgrounds, identities, or interests. If coworker friendships or connections are central to workers' satisfaction with their jobs and general well-being, employers could make special efforts to promote these ties.

Individual Agency and Collective Action

In addition to employer agency, individual workers can engage in efforts to improve work conditions and wages as well as nondiscrimination policies and practices in their own workplaces and the institution of work more broadly. For instance, in 2001 women came together in a class-action lawsuit against Walmart for sex discrimination after learning that they were systematically paid less than men employees. The claim also charged that women received fewer opportunities for promotion and faced sexual harassment. Unfortunately, 10 years later the Supreme Court's interpretation of 'women' as not a 'class' resulted in the case being blocked from moving forward, despite that sex discrimination had been recognized. Nevertheless, the case brought attention to gendered workplace discrimination and sparked more national conversation on workplace policies. In a quite different example, in 1996 members of the National Committee on Pay Equity (NCPE) established Equal Pay Day, which is intended to raise awareness about the gender pay gap, including how it varies by race. In 2025 Equal Pay Day was on March 25, which represents that women workers would have to work nearly three additional months to catch up with what men earned the year prior.

One of the most successful efforts to create social change in the institution of work came from the *Labor Movement* of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This movement involved organized strikes and protests, the formation of labor unions, and other forms of pressure for the government to enact stronger laws to protect workers in terms of labor conditions, hours, and wages, as well as to promote changes in employer practices that would drive competition in ways beneficial to workers (e.g., if one company in town increases their wages, requires fewer hours, and provides protective equipment, others often follow suit). The National Park Service (2025) offers an extensive list of some of these efforts on their page 200 Years of Labor History.



Though many women were locked out of the labor force in the 1800s and early-to-mid 1900s, others were working toward fairer workplace practices such as in agricultural work. In 1908, Amanda Bates became the first woman president of a Farmers Union in the US (Kansas Farmer's Union n.d.). Women also organized and participated in labor strikes and other collective action to force social change in the institution of work.

Farm Labor Union, Galena, Kansas by Arthur Rothstein via the George Eastman House Collection is in the public domain

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Review of Work and Economy Problems

Summary

1. Capitalism and socialism are 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. The **labor force** involves about 170 million people in the US, who work full-time, part-time, or are looking for work but unemployed. These millions of people face a variety of social problems in the institution of work.
3. According to functionalism, the economy makes society possible by providing essential goods and services while work gives people income and self-fulfillment, but institutions can fail to prepare people for the workforce or fail to provide jobs. According to conflict theory, work is alienating and the economic elite uses its control of the economy and methods of exploitation to maintain their elite position. Symbolic interactionism focuses on social interaction in the workplace and how workers perceive the work that they do, as well as how stereotypes and other biases come into the workplace.
4. Gender inequality in the workplace is manifested through the **gender pay gap** and the **glass ceiling**. Women earn only about 82-84% of what men earn on average. Several reasons account for this gap, including gendered **occupational segregation** in the workplace, differing levels of job experience due to gendered expectations of family labor, the devaluing of women's work, and sexist discrimination by employers.
5. Other forms of institutionalized employment discrimination have been well-documented, including race discrimination and age discrimination. From an *intersectional* perspective, racism and sexism can come together to create double discrimination for women of color, and can also involve triple discrimination when ageism is at play.
6. Work and economy problems also include concerns such as stagnated and low wages, postindustrialization and practices such as **offshoring** and **outsourcing**, and the decline of labor unions that protect workers from harm and exploitation at the hands of employers.
7. **Unemployment** is the state of looking for work but not having work, and has an array of adverse consequences including reduced economic, social, and emotional well-being. **Underemployment** is often overlooked, though many people experience it in the form of being far overqualified or working part-time when they prefer a full-time job.
8. Examples of workplace crime include **employee theft**, which in part overlaps with *white-collar crime*, and violence such as shootings in the workplace. Certain workplaces may be characterized as **sweatshops** if they have harsh working conditions and few protections. These and other types of workplaces such as factories and farms involve a high degree of injury and fatalities, including accidents that leave up to hundreds of workers injured or dead.
9. Policies, programs, and practices of the institutions of the state and work can help address problems of work and economy. **Affirmative action** and the *EEOC* are intended to protect workers from employment discrimination and catch up women and people of color who have experienced centuries of it. The government, employers, individuals, and groups may use their agency in improving work and economy problems such as implementing stronger programs to support the unemployed and engaging in collective action to force social change such as with the *Labor Movement*.

Questions

1. In what ways is capitalism a better economic system than socialism, and in what ways is socialism a better economic system than capitalism?
2. What do you think are the values aligned with capitalism and with socialism, and what might their implications be for workers?
3. To what extent do you think that capitalism is to blame for problems in work and economy, and why?
4. Which of the three sociological perspectives on work and economy do you most prefer, and why?
5. On a scale of 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied), how satisfied are/were you with your current or most recent job, why do you think that you ranked it at that level, and what might conflict theory have to say about this?
6. How could you use a symbolic interactionist approach to understand some aspect of a job you have held or hold now?
7. Do you think that it's a good or bad development that fewer workers belong to labor unions now than a few decades ago, and why?
8. What do you think are the most important strategies for improving work and economy problems?

Action Steps

1. Use your sociological imagination: Think of how a coworker or family member struggling with their job may have been impacted by larger social forces such as employment discrimination, alienation, or harmful work conditions.
2. Support unions, nonprofits, and similar organizations: Volunteer or work at a local labor union or another organization engaging in efforts to improve workplace conditions, wages, benefits, or policies.
3. Use your individual agency: Start or join a group that tries to educate the public about the gender pay gap, harmful workplace conditions, the pitfalls of capitalism, and so on.
4. Engage in collective action: Research local or national groups that are engaged in organized action around work and economy problems, select one, and figure out how to get involved in their efforts.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Education

- Overview of Education Problems
- Theoretical Perspectives on Education Problems
- Patterns of Education Problems
- Strategies to Address Education Problems
- Review of Education Problems
- References for Education

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Overview of Education Problems

Learning Objectives

- Explain why compulsory education arose during the nineteenth century.
- Describe differences in educational attainment by various areas of social location.
- Summarize how the major theoretical perspectives explain or frame education problems.
- Explain the history of educational inequality including the difference between de jure and de facto segregation.
- Consider the school choice debate including whether it perpetuates educational inequalities.
- Describe the extent of school bullying and violence, and the controversy over zero-tolerance policies.
- List laws, policies, and practices that may improve educational inequalities.
- Explore individual and collective actions that use liberatory education to advance social justice.

Sociologists define **education** as a social institution that teaches individuals academic knowledge, skills, and norms, in order to become productive members of society. On the one hand, the institution is essential. In modern societies, people need the ability to read, write, and think to succeed in their societies. As this definition also makes clear, education is an important part of *socialization*. On the other hand, not everyone can attain their educational goals. In this case, because not everyone has access to the education that they need to succeed, there are negative consequences for individuals, families, communities, and society.

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 or guardians 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 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% of colonial children went to school, usually the wealthiest, 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. By the mid-1800s, a call for free and compulsory (mandated) 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 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 will see.

An important theme emerges from this brief history: Until very recently in the record of history, formal schooling was restricted to wealthy white boys and men. This means that many people were excluded from formal education. For instance, girls' education was supposed to take place informally at home. Today, race, class, and gender continue to affect both educational achievement, learning, and experiences within schools.



In colonial America, only about 10% of children went to school, and these children tended to come from wealthy families. Other children would remain in the home and be taught via informal education.

Wikimedia Commons – public domain

Education in the United States today is a massive social institution involving millions of people and billions of dollars. In the Fall of 2022, more than 75 million people, almost one-fourth of the US population, attend school at all levels. The great majority (nearly 50 million) were enrolled in public K-12 schools, and a smaller group (5.5 million) were enrolled in private K-12 schools. Over 18 million were enrolled in college, the postsecondary level (National Center for Education Statistics 2025).

The story of modern education is a story of a significant social shift. Most people across the globe can read and write, something that wasn't true even a hundred years ago. Although men and boys historically have had more chances to go to school than women and girls, the gender gap in education is closing around the world (Roser & Ortiz-Espinosa 2016). Over the past few decades, women have become more and more likely to attend and complete college in the US than men (Hurst 2024), despite having been locked out of the institution historically. Equal access to education doesn't tell the whole story, though.

Like every social problem, our *social locations* play a significant role in the kind of education available to us. They also influence how much school we can finish. When sociologists study education, they find that race, class, gender, and other areas of social location as well as geographic location have a role in predicting a particular group's likelihood of succeeding in school.

Educational Disparities

Our social locations greatly impact our chances of graduating from high school, going to college, and achieving a college degree. **Educational attainment** – how far one gets in school – depends heavily on family social class and race (Tavernise 2012), as well as other areas of social location such as disability.

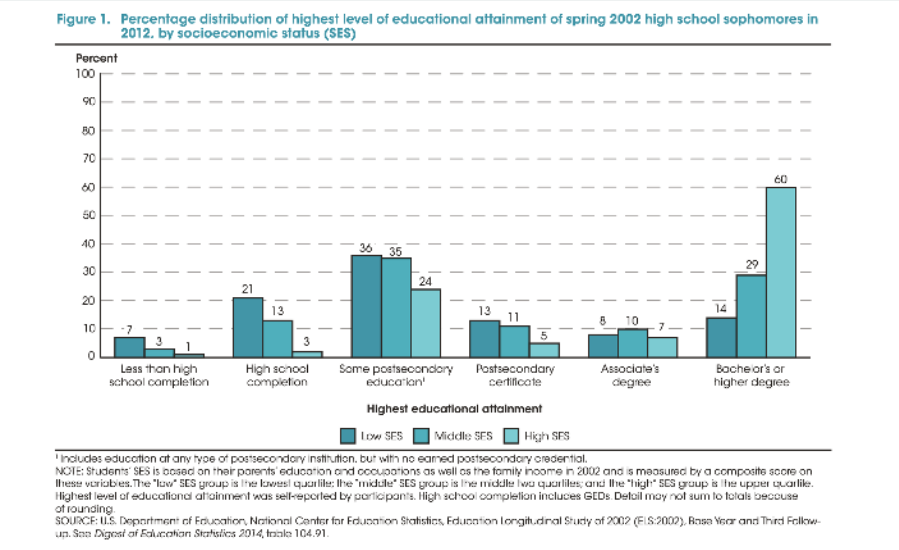
When we examine how students perform in school, we see a difference between those who are affluent white boys or men and those who are not. We may examine whether students can read, write, reason critically, or use computers or whether they graduate from high school or attend college or graduate school. The **achievement gap** refers to any significant and persistent disparity in academic performance or educational attainment between different groups of students, such as white students and students of color, for example, or students from higher-income and lower-income households (Great Schools Partnership 2013).

In some good news, the gender achievement gap is closing. Colleges in the US enroll at least as many women as men and more women than men appear to be graduating (Parker 2021). (Note that reliable data are rarely available for nonbinary students.) However, differences in educational outcomes persist when you examine the trends using race and class, and girls and women experience unique challenges in education such as marginalization and harassment. Additionally, when you apply *intersectional* analysis to education, such as examining outcomes and experiences of disabled students of color, the differences in outcomes become even more pronounced.

Below we will provide a few examples of differences in educational attainment, or achievement gaps. We discuss these in the Overview page to offer a sense of the depth of educational disparities that exist in the US today, before turning to other issues of educational inequality in the Patterns page.

Social Class

Family income, as a measure of social class, makes a much larger difference in educational attainment than it did half a century ago. Data show the effects of family income on educational attainment. Let's look at how family income affects the likelihood of graduating from high school, attending college, and earning a 4-year degree or higher. The figure below shows that low-income students are more likely to have not completed high school, are far more likely to have only a high school diploma, and are far less likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher than students from middle- and high-income families (National Center for Education Statistics 2015). This *income gap* in college entry has become larger in recent decades (Bailey & Dynarski 2011).

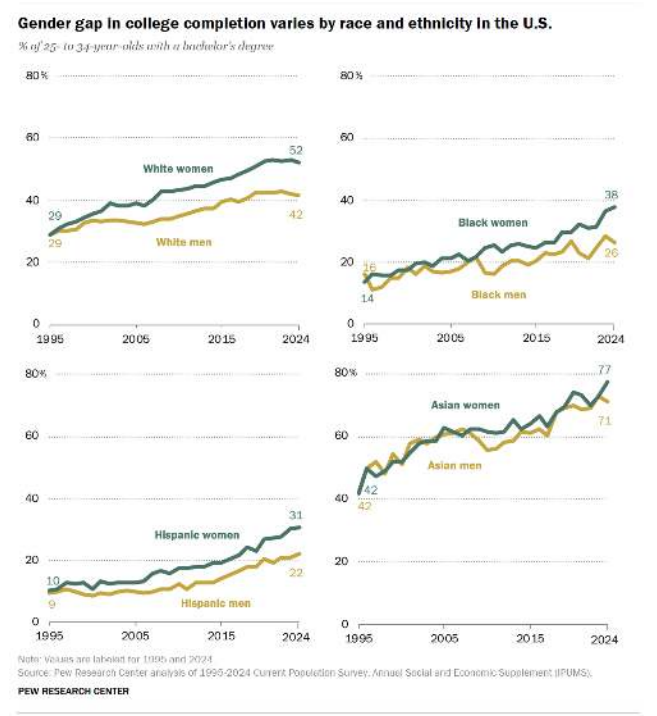


This chart displays educational attainment of students who were high school sophomores in 2002, measuring outcomes ten years later in 2012. We can see a clear pattern for social class and educational outcomes.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics 2015

Race

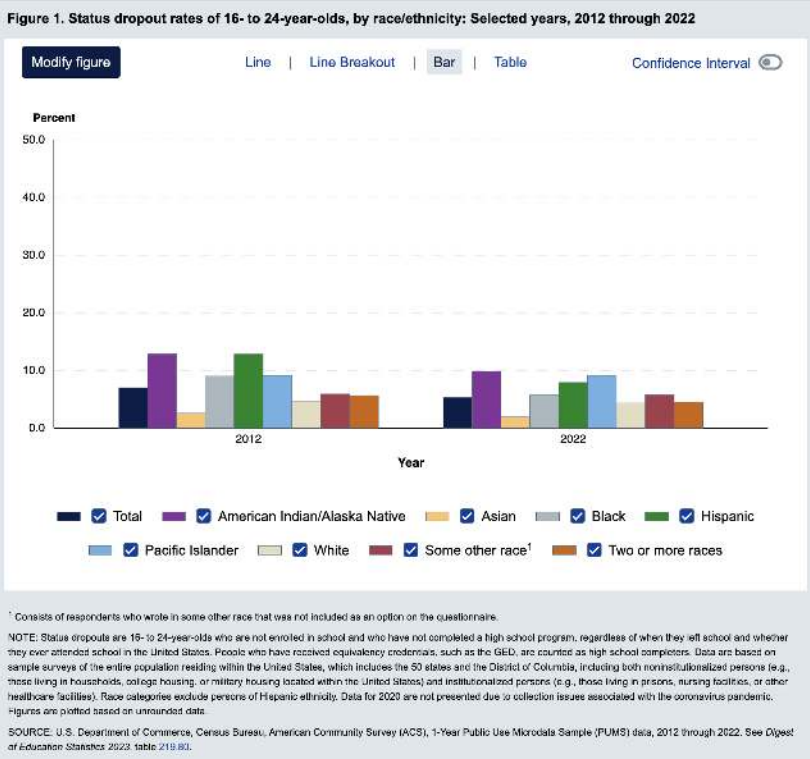
Let's also examine how race affects the likelihood of obtaining a college degree, a benchmark of educational attainment. The racial group with the highest proportion of college graduates is Asian, followed by white, Black, and Latino. College completion rates have been increasing for all of these groups, though the differences persist (Census 2023). The figure below displays this increase, as well as gender differences for each racial category included.



College completion rates have increased overall and for all racial groups; however, women are now earning more college degrees than men for all groups.

Source: Hurst, Pew Research Center 2024

Let's now look at how race is connected to the likelihood of dropping out of high school, yet another benchmark of educational attainment. In 2022, there were 2.1 million individuals between the ages of 16–24 who had dropped out of high school (National Center for Education Statistics 2024). The figure below shows the percentage of people in that age group who were not enrolled in school and who had not received a high school degree, by race. Though most groups saw a decline in high school dropout rates from 2012 to 2022, some groups did not improve on this measure and racial differences remain.



Though high school dropout rates have declined, racial disparities remain, with American Indian/Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, and Latino youth having the highest rates.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics 2024

Why do some racial groups have lower educational attainment? Four factors are commonly cited:

1. The higher poverty rates of their families and lower education of their parents that may leave children ill-prepared for school even before they enter kindergarten.
2. The fact that Native American, Black, and Latino families are more likely to live in low-income neighborhoods.
3. The underfunded and otherwise inadequate schools that children in these groups often attend.
4. Racial discrimination (Ballantine & Hammack 2012; Yeung & Pfeiffer 2009).

Racial discrimination and residence in high-poverty neighborhoods may need additional explanation. At least three forms of racial discrimination impair educational attainment (Mickelson 2003). The first form involves **tracking**, the sorting of students into different programs according to perceived abilities and intelligence. 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. Black and Latino students 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 Black and Latino students.

The third form involves teachers' expectations of students. As our discussion of the symbolic interactionist perspective on education examined, teachers' expectations of students affect how much students learn. Research finds that teachers have lower expectations for their Black 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 have dropped out of high school or are unemployed, children in these neighborhoods lack adult role models for educational attainment. Second, poor

neighborhoods tend to be racially segregated. Latino children in these neighborhoods are less likely to speak English 'well' because they lack native English-speaking friends, and Black children are more likely to speak Black English (aka, African American Vernacular English or AAVE) than conventional English, which interferes with school success because teachers hold them to the standard of conventional English.

Additionally, poor neighborhoods have higher rates of violence and crime 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, which may lead to asthma and other health problems among children (as well as adults), and 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." 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: 731, 733).

Disability

Disability status also impacts educational outcomes. Before proceeding, however, we should clarify disability-related language. Some people prefer to focus on the ability or disability, whereas others focus on the person. Some of them also reclaim the use of language in new ways.

For instance, some people say that they are "people who use wheelchairs" or "people who are neurodiverse." They use people first language. *Person first language* is a way to emphasize the person and view the disorder, disease, condition, or disability as only one part of the whole person (NIH 2022). It focuses on the human being first and the difference second. This language developed in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the language of the time. Before person first language, it was common to hear "a victim of epilepsy" or "that poor blind kid," phrases which denied the humanity of the person experiencing the condition or illness. In this example, the organization People with AIDS focused on the agency of people with AIDS: "We condemn attempts to label us as 'victims,' a term that implies defeat, and we are only occasionally 'patients,' a term that implies passivity, helplessness, and dependence upon the care of others. We are 'People With AIDS'" (The Advisory Committee of People with AIDS 1983).

Some people will say that they are d/Deaf (some capitalize the term to denote an identity), autistic, or neurodivergent. This is an example of identity first language. *Identity first language* focuses on an inherent part of someone's identity, such as deafness or neurodiversity. It is a response to person first language (Brown 2012). Lydia Brown, an Autistic activist, writes: "In the autism community, many self-advocates and their allies prefer terminology such as 'Autistic,' 'Autistic person,' or Autistic individual' because we understand autism as an inherent part of an individual's identity" (Brown 2011).

Similarly, d/Deaf people often use identity first language to emphasize that being deaf isn't just a physical condition that indicates a lack of hearing. d/Deaf is also a community and culture with its own language and social norms.

Another group of activists is using the word 'crip,' derived from the word 'cripple,' to describe themselves. They fiercely reclaim this word to describe the physical challenges they experience: "Like queer, crip(ple) is a slur that has been reclaimed by many physically disabled people, especially those who also identify as queer. There are a lot of reasons that people identify as crip(ple)s, but like queer, one reason is to have a word that is yours… It is based in the radical idea that disabled people can be openly disabled and still be deserving of respect" (Strauss 2018). Crips claim that name as a source of their power.

Getting back to the data, disability impacts educational outcomes. For instance, d/Deaf students have lower levels of educational achievement than hearing students. The table below considers disability and race, addressing the overall educational attainment for Black Deaf, Black Hearing, White Deaf, and White Hearing students. We see that hearing people have higher educational attainments than d/Deaf people overall. However, for the PhD, JD, and MD levels, Black hearing and white d/Deaf people comprise only 0.7% of each population attained that level of education. Black d/Deaf people had the lowest level of educational achievement of any category.

Figure 12
OVERALL EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



	HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA / GED	SOME COLLEGE	ASSOCIATE'S DEGREE	BACHELOR'S DEGREE	MASTER'S DEGREE	PH.D., J.D. OR M.D.
BLACK DEAF	77.9%	43.9%	19.1%	12.0%	4.2%	0.4%
BLACK HEARING	88.5%	58.2%	31.7%	22.6%	8.1%	0.7%
WHITE DEAF	86.9%	53.9%	29.2%	19.9%	7.2%	0.7%
WHITE HEARING	94.1%	68.8%	47.3%	37.3%	13.5%	1.4%

This figure displays educational attainment for Black d/Deaf, Black hearing, white d/Deaf, and white hearing students. White hearing students have the highest educational attainment in all categories. Black d/Deaf students have the lowest educational attainment.

"Overall Educational Attainment" from Postsecondary Achievement of Black Deaf People in the United States (p.12) by Carrie Lou Garberoglio, Lissa D. Stapleton, Jeffrey Levi Palmer, Laurene Simms, Stephanie Cawthon, and Adam Sale, National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes, is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Dr. Stapleton and her colleagues explore why college graduation rates for d/Deaf women of color are particularly low. As of 2017, Only 13.7% of d/Deaf Black women get a bachelor's degree. In comparison, 26.5% of Black hearing women graduate college (Garberoglio et al 2019). You may recall that many social problems are *intersectional* – people experience them differently based on their various social locations. In this case, Dr. Stapleton looks at how gender, race, and disability intersect to understand these students' unique experiences. She explains that part of the difficulty for these students is related to being able to be d/Deaf, a woman, and a person of color.

Audism is one factor in explaining the suffering in these students' stories and the different outcomes of d/Deaf students. **Audism** is "the notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in a manner of one who hears" (Humphries 1977:12). Students who are d/Deaf experience discrimination because others assume hearing people are superior. They design the experience of education with hearing people in mind. Audism is one specific form of **ableism**, the systemic, institutionalized oppression of disabled people. Another factor in the experience of these students is *racism*. As we see in the stories of the d/Deaf students, people who disabled and of color can experience prejudice based on the constellation of their social locations – the intersection of ableism and racism.

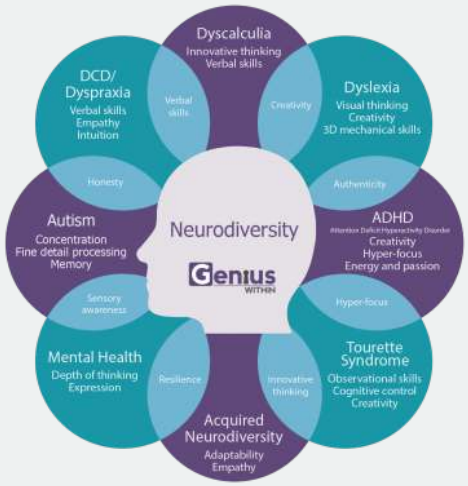
Dr. Stapleton (2015) shares stories and quotes about and from students she interviewed as part of her qualitative research. In the following quote, she describes the experience of a d/Deaf Asian student:

> "I have had several one-on-one interactions with Amy over her two years at the institution. She struggled with shifting identities between her life at home and school. At home, her family treated her like a hearing person; she spoke her ethnic language, participated in all her ethnic cultural practices, and used hearing aids. When she came to school, she only signed and did not interact with other Asian students, as most of the d/Deaf students on campus were White. She did not feel hearing, Asian, or d/Deaf enough to fit into the residential or campus community. She struggled. Because of cultural taboos, she was afraid to tell her parents that she needed counseling and was unable to find a counselor to meet her communication needs (simultaneously signing and speaking), so she started to shut down. ... The lack of congruency and peace she felt affected her schoolwork, her friendship circles, and now her ability to stay at school because her behavior had become unpredictable and distant."

The remaining quotes are directly from d/Deaf students themselves:

> "Society assumes and exerts superiority over their capabilities of hearings. In Deaf schools, deaf youths are [likely] to experience being discriminated against based on their deafness because the culture is too deep-rooted with the belief that deaf people can do what hearing people do, only that they can't hear."
>
> "In mainstream schools, I know this because I experienced this more than often. Sometimes I have teachers or interpreters who think I need some assistance with what to say. They think they know our needs. Sometimes we will have someone jump in to 'help' us communicate. It is very embarrassing when speaking to a hearing student, especially if we are attracted to them and always have interpreters jump in act like we need their help to talk."
>
> "Hearing people misunderstood our facial, body and gesture expressions and avoided us; even told us to 'dial down.'"

Disability can impact educational outcomes in other ways. For instance, people experience different and overlapping learning differences as part of being neurodivergent. Researcher David Pollack provides a model of neurodivergence in the figure below.



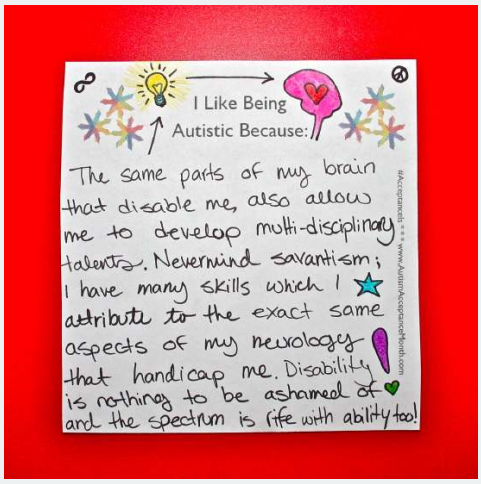
Neurodiversity is complicated. Often neurodiversity brings particular strengths and challenges. Why do you think that this model focuses on strengths rather than challenges?

"Neurodiversity is complicated" © Genius Within CIC, Dr Nancy Doyle, based on the highly original work of Mary Colley; all rights reserved and included with permission

In education, disability is often framed in terms of a *deficit model*: That disabled students are lacking in skills or abilities to succeed. In contrast, the model above focuses on strengths of neurodivergent people. We see similar tensions in how people understand and explain disabilities such as neurodiversity. On one hand, we have a **medical model of disability**, based on individual pathology or abnormality (Walker and Raymaker 2021). In this model, differences in reading, calculating, writing, or interacting with others is considered a problem, something to be treated or cured.

In the 1990s, adults with these labels began to push back against these categorizations. Their claim was that these conditions should be considered normal human neurology *variants*. Patient-centered care advocate Valerie Billingham (1998) coined the phrase, "Nothing about me, without me." She was talking about the need to include the patient at the center of decision-making around patient health and treatment choices. This phrase is used widely today by autism awareness activists, who have expanded the meaning to include the idea that people who are neurodivergent should be the ones describing their own experiences. The letter in

the figure below provides one example of this. People with autism are the ones who should make choices about what they need in order to fully participate in school and in life. They should propose the laws, policies, and practices that make their participation possible.



This sticky note describes one positive experience of neurodiversity. How does the phrase, “I Like Being Autistic” challenge your ideas about neurodiversity?

“Photo” by walkinred is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

In response to the medical model that pathologizes disability, advocates and social scientists have described a **social model of disability**. Some experts see neurodiversity itself is a civil rights challenge. They argue that society privileges people who are considered neurotypical. Not only are neurodiverse people stigmatized with a label that implies disease, symptom, or medical problem, but social institutions themselves are unequal. They propose that we strive for "*neuro-equality* (understood to require equal opportunities, treatment and regard for those who are neurologically different)" (Fenton and Krahn 2007: 1). Likewise, Nick Walker (2001), a queer, transgender, and autistic scholar, encourages us to see beyond the medical model. She writes,

> "The neurodiversity paradigm starts from the understanding that neurodiversity is an axis of human diversity, like ethnic diversity or diversity of gender and sexual orientation, and is subject to the same sorts of social dynamics as those other forms of diversity – including the dynamics of social power inequalities, privilege, and oppression."

Reframing Achievement Gaps

Gloria Lasdon-Billings (pictured below) is an educator and an educational researcher. As the president of American Educational Research Association (AERA), she gave the presidential address in 2006. She examines the 'achievement gap' and explores what makes the most effective teacher, particularly those teachers who can close the achievement gap for Black students. If you would like to learn more about her, read this article: Gloria Ladson-Billings: Daring to Dream in Public.



This image is of Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, educator and educational researcher. She argues that we need to examine *educational debt*, rather than focusing on the achievement gap.

"Image of Gloria Ladson-Billings" by Marcus Miles from "Gloria Ladson-Billings: Daring to dream in public" by Käri Knutson, University of Wisconsin-Madison is included under fair use

In her 2006 presidential address, Ladson-Billings argues that sociologists should study 'educational debt' rather than the 'achievement gap.' **Educational debt** is the cumulative impact of fewer resources and other harm directed at students of color, including economic, sociopolitical, and moral characteristics.

Economically, educational debt consists of unequal spending in education over centuries. Segregation supported economic inequality in education. Today, because schools are funded based on population and property tax revenues, schools in rich neighborhoods, which are more likely to be white, spend more on each individual child's education.

Sociopolitically, we see the exclusion of Black and Brown people from voting. They are also excluded from decision-making in school districts, state houses, and the federal government. For example, in 2018, 78% of school board members were white, even though 50% of all public school students are of color (Bland 2022; National School Boards Association 2018). Families of color are excluded from power in education.

Morally, Ladson-Billings writes, "A moral debt reflects the disparity between what we know and what we actually do" (Ladson-Billings 2006:8). She further asks:

> "What is it that we might owe to citizens who historically have been excluded from social benefits and opportunities? Randall Robinson (2000) states: No nation can enslave a race of people for hundreds of years, set them free bedraggled and penniless, pit them, without assistance in a hostile environment, against privileged victimizers, and then reasonably expect the gap between the heirs of the two groups to narrow. Lines begun parallel and left alone, can never touch" (Ladson-Billings 2006: 8).

In the end, she argues that the achievement gap is a result of educational debt. Further, educational debt is caused by the wider social forces of systemic racism, poverty, and health inequities. If you want to learn more about the experience of educational debt, please watch How America's Public Schools Keep Kids in Poverty.

The Impact of Education

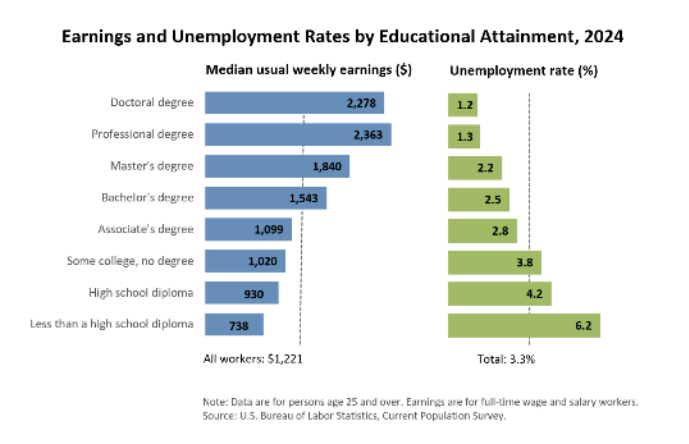
Have you ever applied for a job that required a high school degree? Are you going to college in part because you realize you will need a college degree for a higher-paying job? As these questions imply, the US is a **credential society** (Collins 1979). This means at least two things. First, a high school diploma 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, a college degree today is a virtual requirement for many decent-paying jobs. The ante has been upped considerably over the years: In earlier generations, a high school degree (if 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 on the job market. Today's society increasingly requires skills and knowledge that only a college education brings.



On the average, college graduates have much higher annual earnings than high school graduates. How much does this outcome affect why you decided to go to college?

© *Thinkstock*

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, as the figure below illustrates. Individuals aged 25 and older with a bachelor's degree earned $1,543 per week on average in 2024, whereas those with a high school diploma earned only $930 per week. Considering the extremes, those with a professional or doctoral degree earned far more than $2,000 weekly, whereas those with no high school diploma earned only $738 weekly (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025). Gender and race affect the payoff we get from our education, but education itself still makes a huge difference for our incomes.



This chart show the average (median) weekly earnings for workers 25 years of age or older by educational attainment. It also shows unemployment rates by educational attainment. There are large differences in earnings between those with a bachelor's degree or higher and those without, and in unemployment between those with an Associate's degree or higher and those without.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics 2025

Education affects other outcomes beyond income, such as health outcomes. For instance, education may impact the 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 to eat healthy diets. Second, they have better access to high-quality health care. Thus, education (as well as other measures of social class) is protective of our health.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Education Problems

Structural functionalist, conflict theorist, and symbolic interactionist approaches to education problems differ yet all make important points regarding the significance of the institution of education including its impact on individuals, social groups, and society at large. The Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot table below summarizes what these approaches focus on.

Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Structural functionalism	Education serves several functions for society such as socialization, innovation, childcare, and more. 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 practices such as tracking, standardized testing, and the hidden curriculum. Schools differ widely in their funding and learning conditions, which to learning disparities that reinforce social inequalities.
Symbolic interactionism	Social interactions in the classroom, on the playground, and in other school venues affects the development of gender roles and students' understandings of their identities. Teacher biases and assumptions impact student learning.

Structural Functionalism

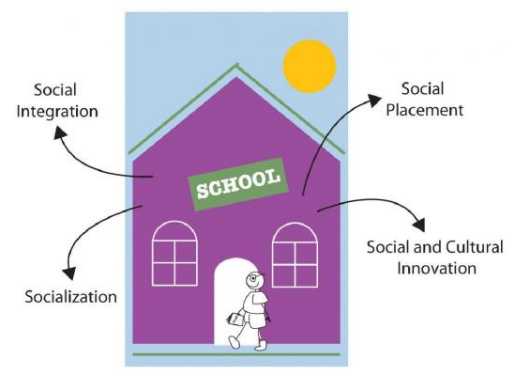
Functionalist theory stresses the functions that education serves in fulfilling a society's various needs. The institution of education is responsible for imparting knowledge and skills required for individuals to successfully contribute to society; however, education involves several other *manifest* and *latent functions*.

Another 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) but they also teach cultural norms and values. In the United States, these include respect for authority, patriotism (remember the Pledge of Allegiance?), punctuality, and competition (such as for grades and sports victories).

Another function of education is social integration. For a society to work, functionalists say, people must subscribe to a common set of beliefs and values. The development of common views was a goal of the system of free compulsory education that developed in the nineteenth century. Thousands of immigrant children in the US today are learning English, US history, and other subjects to integrate them into American life.

Yet another 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 may be 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 remains a question, and we explore it further when we discuss school tracking later in this chapter.

Social and cultural innovation is another 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.



The functions of education include socialization, the development of social skills, and foundations to facilitate future innovations.

No photo credit provided

Childcare is a latent function of education. Once a child starts kindergarten and especially 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*, which keeps the unemployment rate lower than it would be if they were in the labor force.

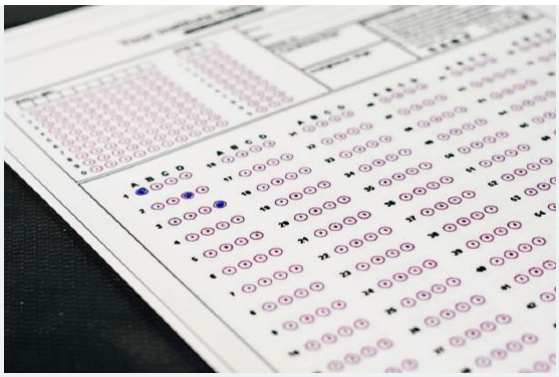
Because education serves so many manifest and latent functions for society, problems in schooling ultimately harm society. For education to serve its many functions, various kinds of reforms are needed to make our schools and the process of education as effective as possible.

Conflict Theory

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. **Tracking** theoretically involves the process of sorting students by their perceived abilities into different educational programs. Students thought by their teachers to be bright are placed in the faster tracks (especially in reading and math), while the slower students are placed in the slower tracks. In high school, three common tracks are the college, vocational, and general track.

Some may argue that tracking does have advantages, helping ensure that bright students learn as much as their abilities allow them and that slower students are not taught at too quick of a pace. 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 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 (Ansalone 2010).

Additionally, conflict theorists argue that standardized tests are culturally biased and thus also perpetuate social inequalities (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.



Standardized testing has been criticized for reproducing social inequalities as questions are often written from a white, middle-class perspective and thus disadvantage other students.

Standardized test exams form with answers bubbled by Aktuelle Vorschläge via CCNull is licensed under CC BY 2.0 DE

A third critique involves the quality of schools. As we will see later in this chapter, US schools differ tremendously 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 existing social hierarchies (Booher-Jennings 2008). Although most school districts or teachers don't necessary plot this behind closed doors, our schoolchildren learn patriotic values, respect for authority, gender roles, family expectations, and other lessons from the books they read at school, various classroom activities, and interactions with teachers and staff.

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 *ethnocentric* (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 the upper/capitalist class much more than it served the interests of workers.

Symbolic Interactionism

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 socialization*.

For instance, girls learn to play more cooperative games while boys play more competitive sports (Thorne 1993). Many studies find that teachers call on and praise boys more often (Jones & Dindia 2004). Teachers do not necessarily do this consciously, but their behavior also sends an implicit message to girls that they are not suited to do well in math or science and later in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). 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).

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.



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

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 has negative consequences for children. Symbolic interactionists are also interested in the mechanisms through which the hidden curriculum occurs, such as through teacher-student interactions that normalize the nuclear family ("tell your moms and dads") or perpetuate gender stereotyping ("I need a strong boy to carry this for me"). Thus, there are commonalities between the classical theoretical perspectives. Though they take a different approach, including a macro or micro perspective, they may have interest in the same problems.

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Patterns of Education Problems

We have already discussed several examples of achievement gaps for various measures of educational attainment. Here will will focus primarily on other issues regarding grade school (elementary and secondary education). We include both historical and contemporary problems, as historical social problems continue to impact individuals and communities today.

Educational Inequality

The *elementary* (K–8) and *secondary* (9–12) education system today faces many issues 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 several.

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 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 were poor and almost all were Black, schools had to shut down once because of sewage backups. The high school's science labs were 30-50 years out of date when Kozol visited them. The biology lab had no dissecting kits. A history teacher had 110 students but only 26 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.



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

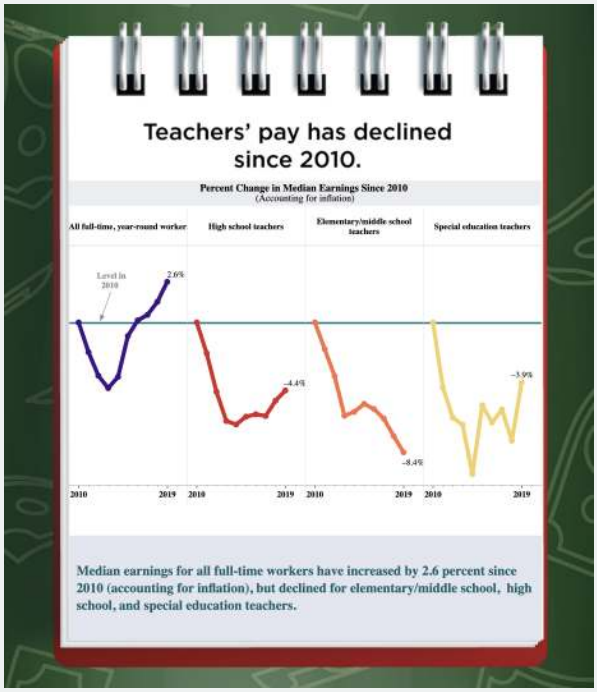
From his observations, Kozol concluded that the US is shortchanging its children in poor rural and urban areas. Children from low-income families start out in life with many strikes against them. The schools they attend compound their problems and help ensure that the American ideal of equal opportunity for all remains just that – an ideal – rather than a reality. As Kozol (1991: 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 a few decades ago, ample evidence shows these conditions persist today. One news report discussed public schools in Washington, DC: More than 75% of the schools in the city had a leaking roof at the time the report was published, and 87% had electrical problems, some of which involved shocks or sparks. Most of the schools' cafeterias (85%) 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, whereas in nearby suburban Lower Merion Township it was $21,110, or 95% 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 less experienced teachers just out of college or are burdened with large classes and few resources. Thus, they are less likely than their counterparts at wealthier schools to be effective teachers, in part due to structural issues. In fact, teachers are underpaid in general given their higher levels of education than most workers, and teacher pay overall declined in the 2010s, according to the US Census (see below).



In this graphic from the US Census that uses data from the 2010 to 2019 American Community Survey, we see that pay for high school, elementary and middle school, and special education

> teachers declined from 2010 to 2019, though some began to rebound. See an interactive visualization of teacher pay on this Census site.
>
> *Source*: US Census 2024

School Segregation

A related issue to school inequality is school racial segregation. To make informed decisions, people need the ability to read and write. A literate populace was fundamental to establishing a strong democracy. Access to education expanded in 1800s; however, despite this intention, we haven't yet achieved *universal access to education*, which is people's equal ability to participate in an education system.

Early education systems in the US were segregated. **Segregation** refers to the physical separation of two groups, particularly in residence, but also in workplace and social functions. Schools were segregated by gender, race, ability/disability, and class. Educator and researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006: 5) summarizes the history of segregation in education in the US:

> "In the case of African Americans, education was initially forbidden during the period of enslavement. After emancipation, we saw the development of freedmen's schools whose purpose was the maintenance of the servant class. During the long period of legal apartheid, African Americans attended schools where they received cast off textbooks and materials from White school... Black students in the south did not receive universal secondary education until 1968."

As discussed later in this chapter, US federal government policies required that Indigenous children stay in residential schools just for them. Additionally, d/Deaf students, when they could access education, received that education in segregated facilities, usually in state boarding schools. In these schools, students were often taught to lip read and speak, preparing them only to interact in a hearing world rather than also respecting d/Deaf culture. Additionally, Mexican and other Spanish-speaking children experienced segregation. In Texas and California, 80% of the school districts were legally segregated (Arce 2021). Other states practiced informal segregation that was no less harmful.

Even when education was legal for many marginalized groups, it was provided in separate, segregated facilities that often (but not always) provided lower-quality education. This history of inequality is the deep roots of unequal educational outcomes.

Focusing more specifically on race, schools in the South were racially segregated by law before 1954, practice referred to as **de jure segregation** – segregation 'by law.' Communities and states had laws that dictated which schools white children attended and which schools Black children attended. Schools were either all white or all Black, and, inevitably, white schools were much better funded than Black schools.

The educational goal for many families was to end legal segregation. For example, in 1931, a Californian Hispanic family sued that school district because students were segregated based on having Hispanic-sounding last names. This was the first case where educational segregation was declared illegal in a federal court (Arce 2021). Segregation became more widely illegal in the United States with the US Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The Brown decision declared that separating children based on race in school was illegal. This change in federal law launched passionate and often violent conflicts to integrate schools. Southern school districts fought this decision with violence and 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. In addition to the stories you may already know, desegregation also occurred with Latinx students. If you'd like to learn more, feel free to watch this video, Austin Revealed: Chicano Civil Rights "Desegregation & Education", in which students talk about their experiences with segregation and desegregation.

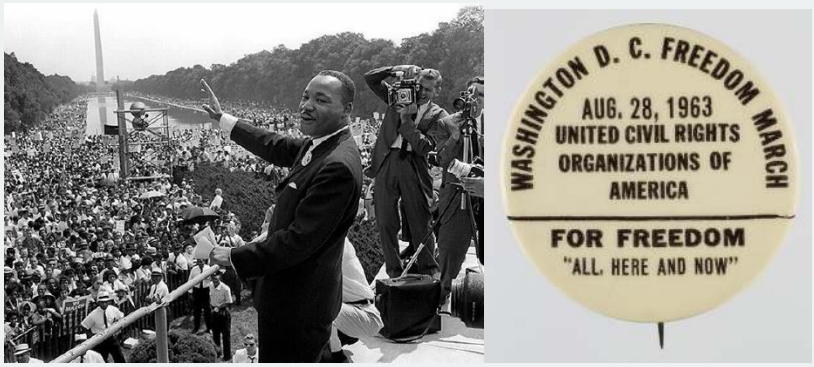
Meanwhile, northern schools were also segregated, and decades after the *Brown* decision, they became even more segregated. School segregation in the North stemmed, both then and now, not from the law but from neighborhood residential patterns – recall the concept of *racial residential segregation* that we discussed in the chapter on Neighborhoods and Housing. Because children usually go to schools near their homes, if adjacent neighborhoods are all white or all Black, then the schools for these neighborhoods will also be all white or all Black, or mostly so. This type of segregation is called **de facto segregation** – segregation 'by fact' rather than by law. In other words, one reason for this segregation is that we tend to live in neighborhoods that are also segregated. Rich people, who are more often white, tend to live with other rich people. Because children commonly attend schools in their own neighborhoods, the schools mirror the lack of integration in neighborhood communities. However, recall that residential segregation is in part due to a history of *redlining*, which was a state-sanctioned form of racial discrimination.



Many children today attend schools that are racially segregated because of racial residential segregation.

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Since 1954, many laws that move from segregated to integrated education have been passed. In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act which prohibited discrimination based on race, color, ethnicity, and national origin. Title IV of this act prohibits segregation in schools. Title VI of this act prohibits discrimination based on race, color, ethnicity, and national origin for any programs that receive federal funds, including schools and colleges. The educators at Learning for Justice describe Title VI as “one of the biggest victories of the civil rights movement” (Collins 2019). These legal changes resulted from fierce activism by Black, Brown, and white people. You can see leaders, activists, and a button from the related Freedom March in the emphasis box below. Also, you have the option of exploring Learning for Justice more if you wish.

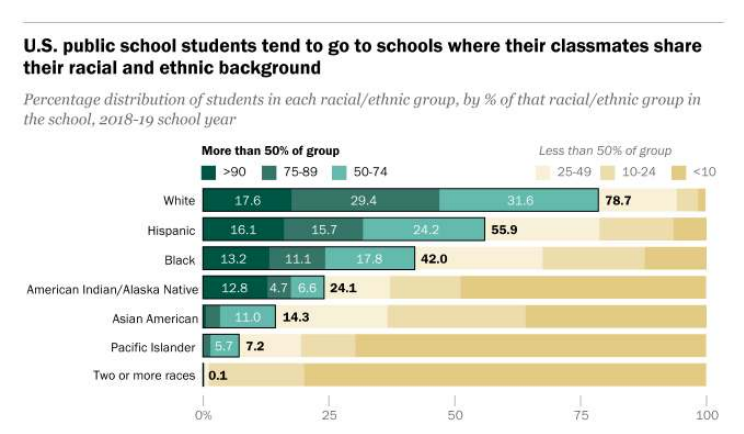


These images portray Martin Luther King Jr. at the Washington DC Freedom March of 1963 (left) and a button from the march (right). Activists marched to expand protections to prohibit discrimination.

“Martin Luther King Jr. at the Freedom March” by the National Parks Service is licensed under CC BY 2.0; “Button from Washington DC Freedom March” from the Smithsonian National Museum is included under fair use

In separate legislation, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 stated, "No person in the United States shall, based on sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (United States Congress 1972).

Educational segregation is illegal today, but many schools and school districts are de facto segregated. In a recent analysis of US Department of Education data, Pew Research reports that most students attend schools that serve other students of their race and ethnicity (see the figure below). In other words, white students are likely to attend schools where half or more of the other students are also white. Hispanic students are also likely to attend schools where at least half of the other students are Hispanic. For other racial groups, the proportions are slightly smaller, partially because the numbers of people who make up those groups are smaller as well.



This chart shows that educational segregation still exists, even though it is illegal. Most white children go to school with white children. Most Hispanic children go to school with Hispanic children.

"US public school students tend to go to schools where their classmates share their racial and ethnic" from "US public school students often go to schools where at least half of their peers are the same race or ethnicity" by Katherine Schaeffer © Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. is licensed under the Center's Terms of Use

During the 1960s and 1970s, states, municipalities, and federal courts tried to reduce de facto segregation by *busing* urban Black children to suburban white schools and, less often, by busing white suburban children to Black 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. Black 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 Black and Latinx students to gain admission.

In addition to prohibiting segregation based on race, ethnicity, color, and gender, federal law requires that students labeled as disabled receive equitable education and educational support. Discrimination against differently-abled people became illegal with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. To ensure equitable education, schools began to integrate classrooms. This practice, known as *inclusion*, moves disabled students from residential schools and separate classrooms into inclusive classrooms. Inclusion is also commonly called *mainstreaming*, a unique type of integration.

In one example of inclusion supported by law, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHC) of 1975 included deafness as one of the categories under which children with disabilities may be eligible for special education and related services. This law required public schools to provide educational services to disabled children ages three to twenty one. This law included d/Deaf students as disabled under the law, expanding the services available to them and increasing integration.

Indian Boarding Schools

In discussing school segregation and broader inequalities within the institution of education, we must describe the ongoing impact of Indian boarding schools on Indigenous communities across North America.

Colonizers saw the very existence of Indigenous people as a problem because the Indigenous people inhabited land that the colonizers wanted. They established mandatory residential boarding schools for Indigenous children, a part of a strategy of

genocide. **Genocide** is the systematic and widespread extermination of a cultural, ethnic, political, racial, or religious group. Many Indigenous children died in residential schools (National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition N.d.). The Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report, released in May 2022, documents the recent findings that at least 500 children were buried in 53 burial sites on residential school properties (Newland 2022). Researchers expect to find even more burials. Recent discoveries in Canada indicate that up to 6,000 First Nations (the preferred term) children died in Canadian residential boarding schools (AP News 2021). You can read the full Investigative Report if you wish.

The federal report details some of the basic facts. The US established 408 federal boarding schools between 1891 and 1969. Congress established laws that required Indigenous parents to send their children to these boarding schools. Government records document, "[i]f it be admitted that education affords the true solution to the Indian problem, then it must be admitted that the boarding school is the very key to the situation" (Newland 2022:38).

Colonists attempted to erase Indigenous people and cultures by requiring students to learn English and agriculture, and punishing the children, sometimes with beatings, if they spoke their Indigenous languages or practiced their own religious and spiritual practices. However, Indigenous people survived, reclaimed their cultures, and revived their practices over time. We will return to this historical problem in the chapter on Conflict, War, and Terrorism, including a discussion of how Indian boarding schools were part of the process of genocide in North America.

If you would like to learn more about residential schools from those who experienced them, you could watch How the US Stole Thousands of Native American Children.

Personal Profile

Deb Haaland (pictured below), US Secretary of the Interior in the Biden Administration, discussed her family's experience with Indian boarding schools:

> "My great grandfather was taken to Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. Its founder coined the phrase 'kill the Indian, and save the man,' which genuinely reflects the influences that framed the policies at that time."

She describes the history of Indian boarding schools in the following way:

> "Beginning with the Indian Civilization Act of 1819, the United States enacted laws and implemented policies establishing and supporting Indian boarding schools across the nation. The purpose of Indian boarding schools was to culturally assimilate indigenous children by forcibly relocating them from their families and communities to distant residential facilities where their American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian identities, languages and beliefs were to be forcibly suppressed. For over 150 years, hundreds of thousands of indigenous children were taken from their communities" (Haaland 2021).



Deb Haaland was the first Native American to serve as a cabinet secretary. She is a registered member of the Laguna Puebla tribe.

"Deb Haaland" by the U.S. House Office of Photography is in the Public Domain

However, genocide, loss and suffering is not the whole story. Indigenous people use education to heal generational harm. We can see this healing power in efforts to restore and strengthen Indigenous languages. In the following quote, Indigenous biologist, activist, and citizen of the Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, links language, culture, and healing, writing that as language is restored, wholeness is also restored:

> "And so it has come to pass that all over Indian Country there is movement for revitalization of language and culture growing from the dedicated work of individuals who have the courage to breathe life into ceremonies, gather speakers to reteach the language, plant old seed varieties, restore native landscapes, bring the youth back to the land. The people of the Seventh Fire walk among us. They are using the fire stick of the original teachings to restore health to the people, to help them bloom again and bear fruit" (2013: 368).

This revitalization of language and culture demonstrates the resistance and resilience of Indigenous people. It also reclaims the power of education to support educational equity and justice:

> "Dorothy Lazore, a teacher of immersion Mohawk at Akwesasne, describing a basic paradigm shift in how Indigenous children view schooling: 'For Native people, after so much pain and tragedy connected with their experience of school, we finally now see Native children, their teachers and their families, happy and engaged in the joy of learning and growing and being themselves in the immersion setting'" (Johansen 2004: 569).

The genocide of people and culture that occurred when colonists established Indian residential schools created wounds that remain unhealed today. At the same time, Indigenous people are reclaiming the bones of their children, their languages and ceremonies, and even sometimes the schools themselves in order to create a more just world.

The Debate Over School Choice

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.

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).

Some studies find small improvements with school choice policies, but methodological problems make conclusions difficult (DeLuca & Dayton 2009). Other research has found a negative impact. For instance, school choice has been found to

deepen racial educational disparities rather than to improve them (French 2025). In a review of four studies, The Brookings Institute reports that private school choice programs do not improve test scores, but rather lower them:

> "Four recent studies, four different programs, different research approaches, but the same general finding—using vouchers to attend private schools leads to lower math scores and, in one study, lower reading scores too. ... If the four studies suggest anything, it's that private schools have no secret key that unlocks educational potential." (Dynarski & Nichols 2017).

In the book *The Choice We Face: How Segregation, Race, and Power Have Shaped America's Most Controversial Education Reform Movement*, Jon Hale (2021) links school choice and voucher programs to educational inequalities as well as to the privatization of schooling, which was founded on racist and elitist ideas.

Moreover, in Milwaukee, 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).

About 5,000 charter schools operate across the nation, with about 3% of US 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% of charter schools had better scores than public schools, 46% had scores similar to those of public schools, and 37% 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 (whose parents are immigrants) and students with disabilities who also face obstacles in education. This is yet another possible reason that a small number of charter schools outperform public schools.

Though the research is somewhat mixed, there is evidence that school choice perpetuates educational inequalities, thus being a problem of education itself.

Caution

We discuss school bullying and violence next.

School Bullying and Violence

Bullying is another social 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.

Bullying has been defined as, "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*, which involves the use of the Internet or digital technologies to bully others (e.g., rumors can be spread via Facebook).

Bullying is a serious problem for at multiple reasons. First, bullying is a common occurrence. Between one-fifth and one-third of students report being victimized by some form of bullying during the school year (National Center for Education Statistics 2025b; 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 school performance (grades, attendance, and participation in school activities) may also decline. Since bullying now occurs in online spaces that are less monitored by adults but frequented by teens, cyberbullying has become a concern among adolescents. In 2011, Jamey Rodemeyer died by suicide after being bullied by classmates on social media because he was gay. 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). In addition, bullying victims sometimes respond by lashing out in violence – many of the mass school shootings of the 1990s were committed by boys who had been bullied.

The issue of school violence was a frequent headline 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).



Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, depicted here, killed thirteen people at Columbine High School in 1999 before dying by suicide. 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.

Image courtesy of Columbine High School, http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Eric_harris_dylan_klebold.jpg

More recently, school shootings at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas and Annunciation Catholic School in Minneapolis, Minnesota sorrowed the nation. There were 39 school shootings in 2024 alone and 2022 witnessed a record high of 51 school shootings (Lieberman & Kim 2024). School shootings are of course not the only form of school violence, though they can be the most devastating as children lose their lives within seconds.

School Discipline and Discrimination

To reduce school violence and bullying, many school districts adopted strict policies that specify harsh punishments. A common policy involves *zero-tolerance* for weapons or even for minor infractions. This type of policy calls for automatic suspension or expulsion of a student who has anything resembling a weapon for any reason, including toy guns. 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 45 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).

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, research 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: 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, Black students with weapons or "near weapons" (such as a small penknife) are more likely than white students with the same (near) weapons to be punished in this manner. However, a growing body of research finds that Black and Latino students are still more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled for similar misbehaviors such as having a weapon, fighting, cursing a teacher, and so on, even in school districts with very strict disciplinary policies (Welch & Payne 2010; Lewin 2012). Harsh school discipline as a solution to the problem of school violence is often racially discriminatory, and thus a problem itself rather than a true solution.

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Strategies to Address Education Problems

As we consider how to improve the nation's education system, and especially how to improve outcomes for low-income students, students of color, and students in other marginalized groups, 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 (Chetty et al. 2011). However, a body of research demonstrates that students' family and neighborhood backgrounds may matter 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 disadvantages that students have before they enter kindergarten and the problems they continue to experience thereafter, particularly for low-income students and students of color. 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).

In the sections that follow, we discuss some of the reform strategies including a proposed school reform agenda, which must be paired with other strategies discussed in prior chapters such as those to alleviate poverty. We also review examples of policy and practices that seek to improve education problems. We also take a unique approach, considering how an *equity mindset* can help address educational debt for marginalized students, as well as how *liberation education* advances social justice.

Reform Strategies

Reform strategies include both school reform and social reform. Below we briefly review the work of education experts who collectively offer a school reform agenda to improve education across the nation. Next we discuss social reform, that which occurs in society more broadly.

School Reform

Low-funded schools in low-income neighborhoods with decaying buildings, overworked teachers, and other concerns cannot be expected to produce students with adequate levels of academic achievement. It is thus critical, says poverty expert Mark Robert Rank, 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" (2004: 208).

Education experts and organizations urge several measures to improve the nation's schools and the education of children (García & Weiss 2017; Madland & Bunker 2011; Othering and Belonging Institute 2025; Rokosa 2011; Rothstein 2010; Smerdon & Borman 2009). These measures include the following:

- Provide more funding for schools, especially those in low-income neighborhoods
- Increase teachers' pay to attract more highly qualified applicants
- Offer stronger professional development programing for teachers and staff
- Have smaller schools and smaller classrooms
- Repair decaying school buildings
- Invest more strongly and expand early childhood (pre-K) programs
- Provide comprehensive support (e.g., academic, health, nutrition, emotional) throughout children's schooling.

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. In other words, prioritizing education in the national budget will improve society and reduce costs.

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

One creative reform solution involves transitioning from our public school system to community schools. According to the Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools at the Brookings Institute (2021), "Community schools integrate, rather than silo, the services that children and families need, thus ensuring that funding for health, mental health, expanded learning time, and social services is well spent and effective" and in these schools "every family and community member is a partner in the effort to build on students’ strengths, engage them as learners, and enable them to reach their full potential." The four core pillars of community schooling include:

- Expanded and enriched learning time (such as after-school or summer programs and culturally relevant, real-world learning opportunities)
- Integrated student supports (such as for health care, nutrition, and housing)
- Active family and community engagement
- Collaborative leadership and practices (Brookings Institute 2021; Oakes, Maier, & Daniel 2017).

Another reform considers teacher evaluations. The 'No Child Left Behind' reform movement, begun by the federal government, uses students’ scores on standardized tests to assess the quality of their schooling. Perhaps inevitably, teachers’ performance ratings became increasingly tied to their students’ standardized test scores. However, because students’ test scores reflect their socioeconomic backgrounds and other non-school factors 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).

Thus, other measures of learning and teacher evaluations should be implemented rather than relying on problematic standardized testing scores.

In short, good schools and good teachers 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 higher college attendance rates and higher salaries in adulthood (Lowrey 2012).

✔ 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. 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

Social Reform

Students' family and neighborhood contexts have a significant implication for educational attainment. To improve low-income students' school performance, the nation must address the problems of poverty and social 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 & Gibbs 2012: 85).

Family and parenting contexts must be improved to enhance the educational performance and attainment of low-income students (Roksa & Potter 2011). Low-income parents are less likely to read and talk with their young children, often due to structural

constraints such as the need to work multiple jobs, and this problem may impair 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. However, structural issues require structural solutions. For instance, increasing minimum wages, offering job skills training programs, and enhancing access to higher education would help low-income parents avoid having to work multiple jobs such that they could spend more time at home with their children engaging in the activities that would better prepare them for schooling.

Additionally, because the roots of school violence are also similar to the roots of youth violence outside of schools, measures that reduce youth violence should also reduce school violence. 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.

Thus, social reform must occur alongside school reform. Other chapters have discussed strategies to reduce poverty and social inequality; these strategies would also help improve the school performance of students in marginalized groups.

✔ 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. More recently, Finnish students ranked at the top in international testing, and low-income students did almost as well as wealthy students.

Finland's education system ranks so highly 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 US, 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% of their class, and only 5–15% 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 US, 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 US 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

Laws, Policies, and Practices

In addition to a general school reform agenda paired with other social reforms, specific laws and policies can reduce educational inequities and enhance student learning. Here we review one such law, outlined in a prior chapter, focusing on how that strategy has been weakened over the past several decades. We also consider examples of school programs that may be developed in practice and required in policy to address problems of education. Finally, we consider the practice of implementing an equity mindset to help reduce educational disparities.

Affirmative Action

As discussed in the Work and Economy chapter, *affirmative action* refers to consideration of people of color and of women in the institutions of work and education to compensate for the centuries of discrimination and lack of opportunities that they've experienced. However, court rulings, state legislation, and other efforts have weakened the strength of these considerations.

One of the major court rulings was the US Supreme Court's decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (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 16 seats in its entering class of 100 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 both times 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 in order to make up for current underrepresentation and past discrimination, 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 a college 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* (2003) regarding the university's undergraduate admissions, and *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) regarding 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.

Even more recently, in the case *Students for Fair Admissions v. President & Fellows of Harvard College and SFFA* and *v. University of North Carolina* (2023), involving the oldest private and public universities in the nation (respectively), the Supreme Court effectively ended race-conscious admission programs at colleges, ruling that they may not consider race as one of many factors in deciding which of the qualified applicants is to be admitted.

Affirmative action was successful in expanding educational and workplace opportunities for people of color and women. For instance, research finds that Black students graduating from selective US colleges and universities after being admitted under affirmative action guidelines were as likely than their white counterparts to obtain professional degrees and to become involved in civic affairs (Bowen & Bok 1998). Additionally, today women comprise nearly 58% of students enrolled at the college level (The Chronicle of Higher Education 2025). The weakening of these considerations disrupts the institution of education's ability to serve individuals from underrepresented groups, and appears to have resulted in reduced college enrollment among Black and Latino people (Bhatia et al. 2025). If affirmative action cannot be used to help create *equity* in the institution of education (discussed further below), alternatives to these considerations must be developed, particularly to address racial disparities in higher education.

School Programs

Turning to grade school from higher education, one practice to better support students is to attend to the emotional and physical health needs of students, particularly low-income and otherwise marginalized children (Lowe 2011). Because of the obstacles children experience in their families and neighborhoods, including alcohol and drug misuse, hunger, psychological abuse, crime, and violence, their emotional and physical health may suffer. They cannot be expected to do well in school unless they are in good health. 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, sometimes 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.

One example of a solution to school violence and bullying is antibullying programs, which include regular parent meetings, strengthened playground supervision, and appropriate (proportionate and limited) discipline when warranted. Research indicates that these programs reduce bullying by 20–23% on average (Farrington & Ttofi 2009). Reductions in bullying may in turn help reduce the likelihood of school shootings such as with Columbine and Uvalde, because many of the students committing these acts of violence had been humiliated and bullied by other students (which in no way justifies these heinous acts, but points to the need to reduce school bullying). This reality also supports the prior strategy discussed, that students gain access to mental health agencies in their schools.

Other grade school programs such as the one described in the People Making a Difference box below have been found to improve educational outcomes.

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.”

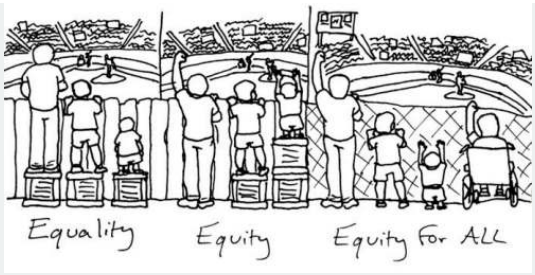
In 2011, ODI was one of three organizations that received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Mentoring. Several ODI officials and students traveled to the White House to take part in various events and accept the award from President Obama. As this award attests, 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.

Source: Ocean Discovery Institute 2011

At the level of higher education, our discussion highlights the fact that social inequality in the larger society also plays out in colleges. The higher incompletion rates for students in marginalized groups in turn contribute to more social inequality. Admitting underrepresented students is the first step, but they must be supported while in as they may face many obstacles that students from more advantaged backgrounds are less likely to encounter. Programs such as TRIO (which assists low-income, first-generation, and disabled students in the transition to college), free mental health counseling, and school clubs for students of marginalized identities may improve retention and increase graduation rates.

Equity Mindset

Although generational *educational debt* cannot be solved by simple answers, applying an equity mindset rather than an equality mindset is a practice that can be part of an effective response. **Equity** is defined as everyone having what they need, even if it means that some need to be given more than others to have the same outcome. The drawing below illustrates the difference. You may have seen different variations of this concept as memes on social media. In other renditions, the final pane (on the right) is labeled 'Social Justice,' as it removes the barrier entirely. If you’d like to read more about it, this blog has a good explanation.



This drawing illustrates the differences between *equality* (everyone receives the same treatment), *equity* (everyone receives what they need), and *social justice* (the barrier to inequality is dismantled).

"Equality, Equity, Equity for All" by Katie Niemeyer from "Equity, Equality, and Fairness" by Elizabeth B. Pearce, Contemporary Families: An Equity Lens 1e is licensed under CC BY 4.0

The drawing explores what it takes to give each person what they need to enjoy the game. In the first panel of the drawing, they do not all get to have an equal experience despite being given the same supports. In the second drawing, all participants can have the viewing experience because the boxes have been *equitably* distributed. The third panel removes the structure that limits equitable access so that all participants can view the game without additional supports. The viewers get what they need easily – they have *social justice*. Removing all barriers to education is a lofty task; however, educators and school systems can approach education with an equity mindset.

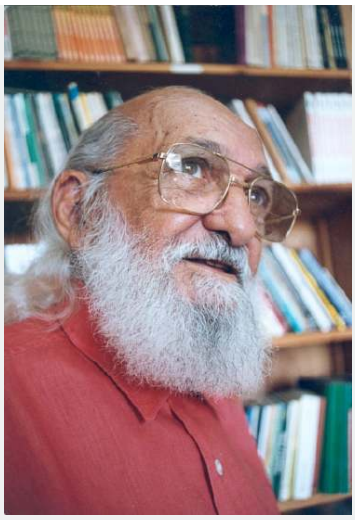
Training school teachers, staff, and administrators to apply an equity mindset to all that they do could help close achievement gaps and address educational debt, by offering students what they need to succeed and centering students in marginalized groups in curriculum development and other school policies and processes.

Individual Agency and Collective Action

Education can reinforce social patterns of structural racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other discriminatory practices. However, education can also serve the purpose of liberation. *Liberation education*, that which is transformative for students and educators alike, is an approach to education that has been developed by individuals using their own agency and engaging in collective action to seek social justice in the institution. When people can read, write, and reason, they can ask critical questions about their lives. This power to question and engage in critical thinking is a door that opens to equity and justice.

Although we discuss liberation education as a strategy to address social problems within the institution of education, this section is of particular interest to anyone who may be an educator in the future. If you plan to go into teaching or training, listen up, this one is particularly pertinent to you!

To explore this approach, we turn to Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and educators and activists of the Open Oregon Project. Paulo Freire (pictured below) was an activist and educator in Brazil and internationally from 1940 to his death in 1997. He founded and ran adult literacy programs in the slums of northeast Brazil. When he taught reading and writing, he used everyday words and concepts that his students needed to know to live well, such as terms for cooking, childcare, or construction.



Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator. Although he wasn't a sociologist, his theories and methods transformed how some sociologists think about the transformational possibilities of education, including the authors of this textbook.

"Photo" by novohorizonte de Economia Solidaria is in the Public Domain

Freire's most famous book is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Pedagogy is the art, science, or profession of teaching. Freire looks at how teaching itself can empower oppressed people. In his book, he condemns the 'banking model' of education, which he defines as "the concept of education in which knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire 1970). He argues that the banking model is the most common but least useful form of education. He writes:

> "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat… [Students] do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system" (Freire 1970: 72).

In contrast, Freire's education model emphasizes dialogue, action, and reflection. In dialogue, the students and the teachers discuss what they are learning and how they see things working in the world. Each person contributes from their own experience and knowledge. He writes:

> "To enter into dialogue presupposes equality amongst participants. Each must trust the others; there must be mutual respect and love (care and commitment). Each one must question what he or she knows and realize that through dialogue existing thoughts will change and new knowledge will be created."

This dialogue is essential for learning and transformation but is insufficient as a social force. He argues that teaching and learning also require action and reflection. Engaging in the world and reflecting on what you learned, or *praxis*, is the true goal of education, creating a more equitable society by taking conscious action. As such, he notes:

> "It is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must act together upon their environment in order critically to reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection" (Freire 1970).

His institute still influences educators and thinkers worldwide about how to use education to promote social justice. If you'd like to learn more about how Freire's social location influenced his theories, watch the video Paolo Freire and the Development of Critical Pedagogy.

Black feminist author and educator bell hooks (pictured below) built on the work of Paulo Freire, feminist theorists, and her own experiences as a Black woman to expand on this vision of the radical transformative power of education.



bell hooks (whose name is intentionally lower case) is a Black author, educator, and activist who also argues that education can transform.

"bell hooks" by Kevin Andre Elliot is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks writes:

> "For black folks teaching – educating – was fundamentally political because it was rooted in antiracist struggle. Indeed, my all black grade schools became the location where I experienced learning as revolution. ... Almost all our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women. They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers – black folks who used our 'minds.' We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization. Though they did not define or articulate these practices in theoretical terms, my teachers were enacting a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anticolonial" (1994:2).

She asserts that education can be revolutionary in its approach and outcomes, because students learn in community. Social transformation occurs within the context of an engaged classroom of learners. Thus, educators and those who write education policy may view the classroom as a "communal place" which leads to "collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community" (hooks 1994: 8). Like Freire, she argues that a classroom is a community and that teaching and learning transform the wider world. In this video, bell hooks talks about working with Paolo Freire: bell hooks on Freire.

These scholars and activists argue that education itself, when done in a transformational way, will create change in the student, teacher, classroom, and wider world. With this approach, we see that education becomes a tool for addressing social problems.

In a final example, we explore the project from which part of this *Open Educational Resource* (OER) textbook arose as an exercise in transformation in learning. The Open Oregon Educational Resources organization (logo pictured below), is a group of educators funded by the state of Oregon to create high-quality educational resources for students and make course materials more affordable and accessible for many students. Through this organization, the textbook *Inequality and Interdependence: Social Problems and Social Justice* was developed, which was then incorporated into the textbook that you're reading now.

> Open Oregon Educational Resources is a project dedicated to increasing student success in college by producing high-quality, free textbooks and courses for students in Oregon and beyond.
>
> *"Open Oregon Educational Resources Logo" by Open Oregon Educational Resources is licensed under CC BY 4.0*

The project allows people normally excluded from research and textbook creation to be included in the process. They are a collective of students, teachers, researchers, activists, and artists weaving their stories into books and courses that reflect and explain their social lives. In their equity statement, they emphasize reducing barriers to course material access, centering equity in the selection, adaptation, or creation of course materials, and maintaining a commitment to:

1. Ensuring diversity of representation within our team and the materials we distribute.
2. Publishing materials that use accessible, clear language for our target audience.
3. Sharing course materials that directly address and interrogate systems of oppression, equipping students and educators with the knowledge to do the same (Blicher et al. 2023).

Open Oregon's approach is revolutionary, putting the power to create and share knowledge in the hands of ordinary people. This is education for liberation. These practices can dramatically reform the institution of education, reducing educational disparities and inequities and benefiting society at large by helping all individuals achieve their full potential.

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Review of Education Problems

Summary

1. In the early nineteenth century in the US, a movement for free compulsory education began for reasons such as 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.
2. Social location affects educational attainment, and thus **achievement gaps**. As we can see from the experiences of low-income students, Black, Brown, and Indigenous students, and d/Deaf and neurodivergent, access to education and educational outcomes depend on your race, class, gender, and ability, and the *intersection* of those identities. However, we must also examine the wider social and historical forces that cause **educational debt.**
3. Functionalism stresses the functions that education serves for society and notes that social problems within the institution disrupt societal harmony and inhibit innovation. Conflict theory stresses that education reinforces existing social inequalities for several reasons, including the use of **tracking**, funding between rich and poor communities, and the **hidden curriculum**. 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.
4. Many schools are decrepit and lack sufficient books and equipment, and many are also segregated by race and social class. Historical **de jure segregation** has been outlawed, but **de facto segregation** persists. The history Indian boarding schools as a practice of **genocide** continues to impact Indigenous communities today.
5. 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. Research suggests that this practice may fuel educational inequalities.
6. School violence is an issue of continuing concern though **bullying** is more common. In the past several decades, school violence has taken the form of school shootings in which children, teachers, and staff have been injured or killed en masse.
7. Reform strategies to address education problems include school reforms and social reforms, which must go hand-in-hand. Other laws, policies, and practices can help such as affirmative action in college admissions to ensure fair representation of Black and Brown students, programs within schools to support students' mental health and material needs, and applying an equity mindset to teaching practices and policies. Some people have used their individual agency and collective action to make education more liberatory and equitable for all.

Questions

1. Do you think that the government should take steps to try to reduce racial disparities in education or do you think it should take a hands-off approach, and why so?
2. Which of the three theoretical approaches to education problems do you most prefer, and why?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of school choice or vouchers, and based on those do you think that we should use them?
4. How would you outline what a school’s superintendent might do to improve the learning of the school district’s elementary school students?
5. If you were the director of admissions at a university, what steps would you take to increase the number of applications and graduations from low-income students?
6. How would you describe what you see as the two most pressing specific problems of educational inequality, and what do you think are the best strategies to address them?
7. Why do you think that the US has not more vigorously pursued the school reform agenda outlined in the Strategies page?
8. How have you experienced teachers teaching from the 'banking model' of education (e.g., lecturing the whole class and giving only multiple-choice quizzes or exams as assessments) and/or from the liberation education model, and what was your experience with those models?

Action Steps

1. Use your sociological imagination: When you hear someone claiming that educational disparities are a product of individual lack of motivation, intelligence, or skill, explain the history of educational inequality and contemporary problems that fuel it.

2. Support nonprofits and similar organizations: Volunteer to tutor low-income students at a local school or after-school program or donate to programs that help address educational inequalities such as Black Girls Code.
3. Use your individual agency: Investigate your own local school board (by Googling) and answer: Who is on it? What kind of actions have they taken recently? Do you think that your school board is making decisions that meet the needs of your community? If not, take action to help ensure that they will such as attending meetings or contacting them via email.
4. Engage in collective action: Research local or national groups that are engaged in organized action around education problems, select one, and figure out how to get involved in their efforts.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Media

Overview of Media Problems
Theoretical Perspectives on Media Problems
Patterns of Media Problems
Strategies to Address Media Problems
Review of Media Problems
References for Media

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Overview of Media Problems

Learning Objectives

- Describe the institution of media and the various forms of media today.
- Summarize how the three classical theoretical perspectives frame problems of media.
- Define concepts relevant to technological and media inequality.
- Describe problems of online and technological privacy, security, control, and obsolescence.
- Identify problematic advertising practices and portrayals.
- Describe how media fuels fragmentation, particularly as it relates to political ideologies.
- Connect the institution of media to the phenomenon of globalization and related problems.
- List examples of strategies to address problems of media.

When a celebrity announces that they're quitting social media, it's big news (especially on social media). Depending on the star's status and their reason for leaving, the decision is met with a blend of astonishment, dismay, concern for the individual or others they affect, and discussion about social problems like bullying or online harassment. Why do they quit? Their reasons vary, and many eventually return. Selena Gomez has had a complicated relationship with social media, having announced several times of quitting and going through periods of downtime. Gomez explained, "I sort of freaked out. It had become so consuming to me. It's what I woke up to and went to sleep to. I was an addict, and it felt like I was seeing things I didn't want to see, like it was putting things in my head that I didn't want to care about" (Haskell 2017). Lizzo left Twitter (now X) after claiming there were "too many trolls." Lorde indicated that the stress of continual updates, "having front-row seats to the hellfire" necessitated a break (Kirkpatrick 2020). Rhianna took a six month hiatus; Justin Bieber, Adele, and Coldplay also went without for some time.

These experiences reflect our contentious relationship with social media, which like other forms of media has both positive and negative consequences. For instance, it can give individuals a sense of community, provide information that users otherwise would not encounter, help fuel national and international social movements, and more. However, as this is a social problems course, our focus will be on problems connected to the institution of media, which are many.

Media is the social institution that produces and distributes information and entertainment to the population through several mediums (channels of communication). It is typically synonymous with *mass media*, that is channels of information or entertainment distributed to the masses. The institution of media is vast because it involves so many mediums: Social media, TV shows, books, newspapers, movies, radio, internet, music videos, magazines, video games, blogs, and so on. Advertising is also part of this institution, as most of these mediums involve ads. Media is also an *agent of socialization*, as we learn about cultural expectations and norms through the media that we're exposed to such as children's books or shows, social media posts, movies, and magazine ads. Media also shapes our values and belief systems, sometimes in manipulating ways.

In this chapter we will cover a variety of social problems related to the institution of media. Below we provide an introduction to some of the major types of media, though this Overview page is shorter than most because media problems are varied and difficult to write a singular introduction for. We spend more time on the Patterns page discussing examples of these varied media problems. We also include points about technology in this chapter, since media and technology are inherently intertwined.

Types of Media

Media and technology have evolved hand in hand, from early print to modern publications, from radio to television to social media. New media emerge constantly, such as we see in the online world and with the recent rise of AI.

Newspaper

Early forms of print media in ancient Rome were hand-copied onto boards and carried around to keep the citizenry informed. With the invention of the printing press, the way that people shared ideas changed, as information could be mass produced and stored. For the first time, there was a way to spread knowledge and information more efficiently. The invention of the telegraph, in the mid-1800s, changed print media almost as much as the printing press. Suddenly information could be transmitted in minutes. As the nineteenth century became the twentieth, publishers redefined the world of print media and wielded an enormous amount of

power to socially construct national and world events, such as with the media empires of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. However, as those were growing, print media also allowed for the dissemination of countercultural or revolutionary materials. For instance, internationally, Vladimir Lenin's *Irksa* (*The Spark*) newspaper was published in 1900 and played a role in Russia's growing communist movement (World Association of Newspapers 2004).

With the invention and widespread use of television in the mid-twentieth century, newspaper circulation steadily dropped off, and in the twenty-first century, circulation has dropped further as more people turn to internet news sites and other forms of new media to stay informed. This shift away from newspapers as a source of information has profound effects on societies. When the news is given to a large diverse conglomerate of people, it must maintain some level of broad-based reporting and balance in order to appeal to a broad audience and keep them subscribing. As newspapers decline, news sources become more fractured, so each segment of the audience can choose specifically what it wants to hear and what it wants to avoid.

Radio and Television

Radio programming obviously preceded television, but both shaped people's lives in much the same way. In both cases, information and entertainment could be enjoyed at home, with a kind of immediacy and community that newspapers could not offer. For instance, many people in the US remember when they saw on television or heard on the radio that the Twin Towers in New York City had been attacked in 2001 or when the Queen of England passed away in 2022. Media allowed people to share these moments in real time even though they were not physically together. This same kind of separate-but-communal approach occurred with entertainment too. For instance, youth chat about recent viral social media posts and office workers discuss a show that aired the previous night.



Television control rooms feature feeds from many other networks, so that producers and reporters can see different perspectives on the same events and be alerted to new developments around the world

Anthony Quintano/flickr

Through the 1970s, US television was dominated by three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) that competed for ratings and advertising dollars. The networks also exerted a lot of control over what people watched. Public television, in contrast, offered an educational nonprofit alternative to the sensationalization of news spurred by the network competition for viewers and advertising dollars. Those sources such as PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), the BBC (British Broadcasting Company), and CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Company) garnered a worldwide reputation for high-quality programming and a global perspective. Al Jazeera, the Arabic independent news station, has joined this group as a similar media force that broadcasts to people worldwide.

The impact of television on US society is hard to overstate. By the late 1990s, 98% of homes in the nation had at least one television set and the average person watched between 2.5 and 5 hours of television daily. Television has a powerful socializing effect, reinforcing social norms, values, and beliefs.

Film

The film industry took off in the 1930s, when sound and eventually color were first integrated into feature films. Like television, early films were unifying for society: As people gathered in theaters to watch new releases, they may laugh, cry, and be scared together. Movies also act as time capsules or cultural touchstones for society. From Westerns starring the tough-talking Clint Eastwood to the biopic of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, movies illustrate society's dreams, fears, and experiences. While

many consider Hollywood the epicenter of moviemaking, India's Bollywood actually produces more films per year, speaking to the cultural aspirations and norms of Indian society.

The film industry, like other mediums, has gone through substantial change as a result of streaming services and the new competition for people's entertainment dollars. Because the mainstream movie industry has been so reliant on ticket sales at live theaters, the COVID-19 pandemic affected it more dramatically than most other media categories. Highly anticipated movies slated for 2020 and 2021 releases were delayed or shifted to streaming distribution, reducing revenue. And some companies made lasting decisions regarding their future offerings. Today, some films are released on streaming channels at the same time as in theaters. However, the film industry remains strong as people continue to value movies as a form of entertainment.



Netflix is the nation's leading streaming platform, offering hundreds of films and TV shows to subscribers at the click of a button. Streaming services dramatically changed the way that we consume these mediums.

Netflix image by Quote Catalog via Flickr is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

New Media

New media encompasses all interactive forms of information exchange. These include social media sites, blogs, podcasts, wikis, and virtual worlds. Many are not 'new' in the sense that they were developed in the past few years (in fact several of these may be older than you), but they are newer than the media mentioned above, and they rely on types of technologies that were not available until about a few decades ago. New media develops rapidly and frequently. In fact, the immediacy of new media coupled with the lack of oversight means that we must be careful to ensure that we're making good decisions about the accuracy, ethics, and cultural responsiveness of these formats. Think of the debates around AI regulation that have taken place over the past few years, and the current lack of governmental regulations to ensure its ethical use.

In our discussion of media social problems, we will focus primarily (though not exclusively) on new media. Before we turn to those problems, we will summarize how the three classical theoretical perspectives in sociology frame the institution of media and its problems.

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Theoretical Perspectives on Media Problems

It is difficult to conceive of any one theoretical perspective to explain the variety of problems with media, including the TV shows you watch, the ads wrapping the bus you take to work or school, or the magazines you flip through in a dentist's waiting room, not to mention all the forms of new media, including TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and the like. Is the institution of media critical to societal advancement? It it a pernicious capitalist tools that lead to the exploitation of workers worldwide? It it the tool that the world has been waiting for to level the playing field and raise the world's poor out of extreme poverty? Choose any view and you will find studies and scholars who agree with you, as well as those who disagree. The ideas of the three major sociological perspectives are summarized in the Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot table below.

Theoretical Perspectives Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Structural functionalism	The institution of media has positive and negative functions for society. Manifest functions include entertainment, information dissemination, and socialization. Latent functions include harmful impacts on our mental or physical health. Other social institutions may fuel problems of media such as decisions made by government within the institution of the state.
Conflict theory	Powerful elites control the media in part through gatekeeping, perpetuating ideologies and inequalities that serve to reinforce their powerful positions. Media and technology are also mechanisms of social control, via increasing surveillance of the population.
Symbolic interactionism	Media shape our understandings of our self and of the social world. It is part of the social construction of reality, serves as reference groups of which we compare ourselves to others, and can involve harmful processes or behaviors such as online harassment.

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism focuses on how the institution of media contributes to the smooth functioning of society. Media have functions for socialization, commercial purposes, entertainment, and more. Some of these are intended and obvious, while others are accidental or hard to recognize. A **manifest function** is a primary function, one that is intentional and discernable or easy to recognize. For instance, manifest functions of the institution of education include how schools impart knowledge required for successful participation in society and to socialize children into national values. A **latent function**, by contrast, is an unintended function or outcome that is at times less obvious and sometimes not ideal. Latent functions of education include free childcare for parents/guardians (a positive latent function) and of reproducing social hierarchies along the lines of social class, gender, race, and other areas of social location (a negative latent function).

An obvious manifest function of media is its entertainment value. Most people when asked why they watch TV or go to the movies would answer that they enjoy it. Even while the media is selling us goods and entertaining us, it also serves to socialize us, teaching and reinforcing social norms, values, and beliefs. In fact, we are socialized and resocialized by media throughout our whole lives. All forms of media teach us what is good and desirable, how we should speak, how we should behave, how we should react to events, and other norms, values, and beliefs.



TV commercials can carry significant cultural currency. For some, the ads during the Super Bowl are more water cooler-worthy than the game itself.

Dennis Yang/flickr

An example of a latent function of media is related to health – exposure to or extended time with media can negatively impact our mental or physical health. For instance, some studies suggest the rising obesity rate is correlated with the decrease in physical activity caused by an increase in use of some forms of technology (Kautiainen et al. 2011). In this and other cases of negative consequences, functionalists may focus on how the institution of media involves *dysfunctions*, which impair societal harmony. In fact, the downside of ongoing information flow in media is the near impossibility of disconnecting. Such a fast-paced dynamic is not always to our benefit. Some sociologists assert that this level of media exposure leads to narcotizing dysfunction, a result in which people are too overwhelmed with media input to really care about the issue, so their involvement becomes defined by awareness instead of by action (Lazerfeld and Merton 1948).

Functionalists may also be concerned with how other social institutions interact with the institution of media. For example, some media problems are allowed to persist due to the government's lack of intervention or regulation of them, such as the lack of regulation for sexual 'deepfakes.' In this view, the institution of the state is failing to protect victims of deepfakes and to reduce future victimization. As we will see, governmental regulation (or lack thereof) is connected to several media social problems.

Conflict Theory

In contrast to the functionalist perspective, the conflict perspective focuses on the reproduction of inequality. When we take this perspective, one major focus is the differential access to media and technology embodied in the *digital divide*, discussed further in the next page. Conflict theorists also look at who controls the media, and how media promotes the norms of middle-class white people while minimizing the presence of the working-class and people of color.

Powerful individuals and social institutions have a great deal of influence over which forms of technology are released, when and where they are released, and what kind of media is available for our consumption, which is a form of gatekeeping. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) define media **gatekeeping** as the sorting process by which thousands of possible messages are shaped into a media-appropriate form and reduced to a manageable amount. In other words, the people in charge of the media decide what the public is exposed to, which, as sociologist C. Wright Mills (1956) famously noted, is the heart of media's power. Take a moment to think of the way new media evolve and replace traditional forms of hegemonic media. With **hegemonic media**, a diverse society can be dominated by one race, gender, or class that manipulates the media to impose its *worldview* as a societal norm. New media weakens the gatekeeper role in information distribution. Popular sites such as YouTube and Instagram not only allow more people to freely share information but also engage in a form of self-policing. Users are encouraged to report inappropriate behavior that moderators will then address. However, new media have brought on other problems even as they have helped reduce gatekeeping.

Some conflict theorists suggest that the way US media are generated results in an unbalanced political arena. Those with the most money can buy the most media exposure, run smear campaigns against their competitors, and maximize their visual presence.

According to the Federal Election Commission (2025), candidates of the 2024 presidential election raised $2 billion and spent about $1.8 billion in that year's election cycle. Some argue that the *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Committee* is a major contributing factor to our unbalanced political arena. In *Citizens United*, the Supreme Court affirmed the right of outside groups, including Super Political Action Committees (Super PACs) with undisclosed donor lists, to spend unlimited amounts of money on political ads as long as they don't coordinate with the candidate's campaign or specifically advocate for a candidate. What do you think a conflict perspective theorist would suggest about the potential for the non-rich to be heard in politics, especially when Super PACs ensure that the richest groups have the most say?

From a conflict perspective, media is also a mechanism of *social control*. Social scientists take the idea of the 'surveillance society' so seriously that there is an entire journal devoted to its study, *Surveillance and Society*. The panoptic surveillance envisioned by Jeremy Bentham, depicted in the form of an all-powerful, all-seeing government by George Orwell in *1984* and later analyzed by Michel Foucault (1975) is increasingly realized in the form of technology used to monitor our every move. This surveillance was imagined as a form of constant monitoring in which the observation posts are decentralized and the observed is never communicated with directly. Today, digital security cameras capture our movements, observers can track us through our cell phones, and police forces around the world use facial-recognition software.

From a feminist perspective, let's take a look at popular TV shows, advertising campaigns, and online game sites. In most, women are portrayed in a particular set of parameters and tend to have a uniform look that society recognizes as 'attractive.' Most are thin, white or light-skinned, beautiful, and young. Why does this matter? Feminist theorists believe this idealized image is crucial in creating and reinforcing *gender stereotypes*. For example, Fox and Bailenson (2009) found that online female avatars conforming to gender stereotypes reinforce negative attitudes toward women, and Brasted (2010) found that media (advertising in particular) promotes gender stereotypes. As early as 1990, *Ms.* magazine instituted a policy to publish without any commercial advertising. Press coverage in the media also reinforces stereotypes that subordinate women; it gives airtime to looks over skills, and coverage disparages women who defy accepted norms.



Many people argue that women's portrayal in the media remains misleadingly narrow. The advent of influencer culture may provide more agency to women, who can control their own portrayal, though many influencers have reinforced or even exaggerated gender stereotypes.

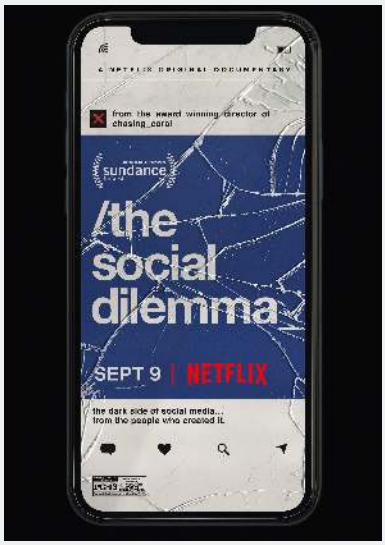
Nenad Stojkovic/flickr

Symbolic Interactionism

Media is ridden with symbols and ideas that shape our perceptions of ourselves and others, our thoughts about material needs (consumerism), and our understanding of reality.

Media create and spread symbols that become the basis for our shared understanding of society. Theorists working in the interactionist perspective focus on this *social construction of reality*, an ongoing process in which people subjectively create and understand reality, as discussed in the Sociology chapter. Media constructs our reality in a number of ways. For instance, people portrayed in media become **reference groups**: Groups that influence individual, to which individuals compares themselves, and by which we judge our successes and failures.

While social media apps like Instagram and Facebook encourage us to check in and provide details of our day through online social networks, corporations can just as easily promote their products on these sites. Even supposedly crowd-sourced sites like Yelp (which aggregates local reviews) are not immune to corporate shenanigans. That is, we think we are reading objective observations when in reality we may be buying into one more form of advertising, which influences our behavior and understanding of ourself. Facebook started as a free social network for college students, but became a monetized business, selling its users goods and services in subtle ways and securing that users are constantly engaged and shown ads through algorithms. Chances are that you don't think of Facebook as one big online advertisement. What started out as a symbol of coolness and insider status, unavailable to parents and corporations, now promotes consumerism in the form of endless ads, games, and fandom. For example, think of all the money spent to upgrade popular Facebook games like Candy Crush. And notice that whenever you become a 'fan,' you likely receive product updates and special deals that promote online and real-world consumerism. It is unlikely that millions of parents want to be 'friends' with Pampers. But if it means a weekly coupon for diapers, they will in essence rent out space on their Facebook pages for Pampers to appear.



The Netflix documentary The Social Dilemma (2020) exposes some of the harmful consequences of social media algorithms. How do you think that exposure to social media has shaped your beliefs, values, or sense of self?

Untitled courtesy of Exposure Labs/Netflix via IMDb

Social interactionists may also examine how we interact with each other via media, such as on social media or when gaming with peers. Both allow for a high degree of anonymity, which can fuel harsh or even harmful behaviors. For instance, a 2022 Pew Research Center Study found that nearly half (46%) of US teens aged 13 to 17 – youth who are still developing and vulnerable – reported experiencing at least one of several types of online harassment and 28% had experienced multiple types. Interactionists would be interested not only in these interactions but also in the impact they have on individuals' sense of self, in other words, how these experiences are internalized. Thus, social interactionists may agree with theorists of the other two perspectives that the nation should more strongly regulate harmful online behavior.

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Patterns of Media Problems

Particularly from a functionalist perspective, the institution of media has myriad benefits for members of society today. Media can strengthen our sense of community and belonging, expose us to global news events, make us more informed voters, allow us to locate information with a few clicks, entertain us endlessly, connect us with people across the world, and so on. Though, with media and technological developments we have witnessed new social problems that impact us as individuals, as whole social groups, and as society at large. For instance, our individual privacy and security can be violated, social inequalities for different areas of social location such as class and gender are reproduced, and violence and fragmentation are normalized. We cover these and other problems below. We cannot cover every specific problem related to the institution of media, though we do discuss several examples on this page.

Technological Inequality

With the development of media and technology, as with any improvement to human society, not everyone has equal access. For the past few decades, social science researchers have tried to bring attention to the **digital divide**, the uneven access to media and technology among different social groups such as by class, race, and geographic location. The digital divide involves access to computers, smartphones, and free or low-cost stable internet as well as *digital literacy*. We see the impact of the digital divide locally and internationally. If you would like to learn about the experiences of other students, watch: The Digital Divide: How does it affect young people in London?, which describes the intersection of poverty and technology.

The first known usage of 'digital divide' was in the mid-1990s. This was the point when personal computer use shifted dramatically, from 300,000 users in 1991 to more than 10 million users by 1996 (Rappaport 2009). In part, the issue of the digital divide had to do with communities that received infrastructure upgrades that enabled high-speed Internet access, upgrades that largely went to affluent urban and suburban areas, leaving out large swaths of the country.

This digital divide has led to the second concern: A *knowledge gap*, which is an ongoing and increasing gap in information for those who have less access to media and technology. Simply put, students in well-funded schools receive more exposure to quality media and technology than students in poorly funded schools. Those students with more exposure gain more proficiency, which makes them far more marketable in an increasingly technology-based job market and leaves our society divided into those with technological knowledge and those without.

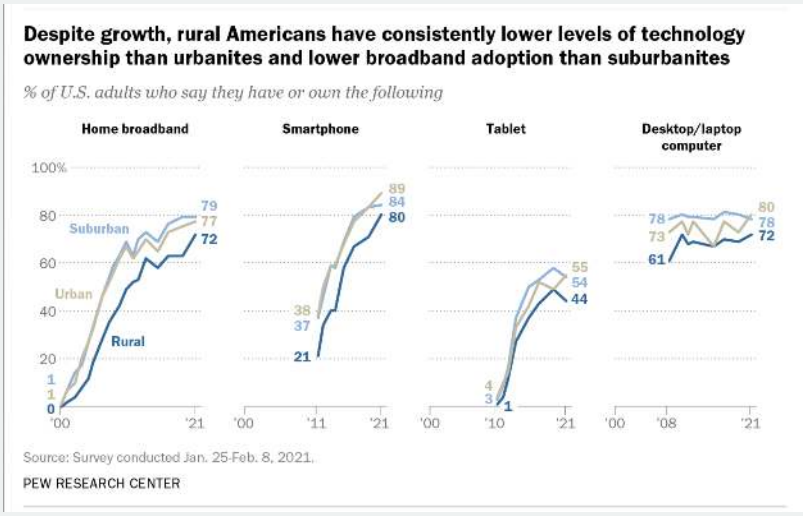


Augmented reality devices, robotics and 3D printing labs, and creator spaces can significantly improve education. But due to their expense, they can also increase learning inequities.

No photo credit provided

The Pew Research Center reported that nearly one in five students couldn't finish their homework because they couldn't access the internet (Anderson and Perrin 2018). As mentioned above, social location is a strong predictor of who has access to technology and who doesn't. For example, people in rural areas still own less technology than those living in cities or suburbs (see the figure below). Similarly, Census data released in 2018 showed that in the study period of 2013 to 2017, 78% of US households had Internet access, but that homes in rural and low-income areas were below that national average by 13%. The data were collected by

county, and showed that "mostly urban" counties significantly outpaced "mostly rural" counties. "Completely rural" lower-income counties had the lowest rates of home Internet adoption, at about 60% (Martin 2019).



Despite growth, rural Americans have consistently lower levels of technology. This chart shows home broadband, smartphone, tablet, and computer ownership in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The dark blue bars indicate that rural Americans have less access to Internet and devices.

"% of US Adults Who Say They Have or Own the Following" from "Some digital divides persist between rural, urban and suburban America" © Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. is licensed under the Center's Terms of Use

Data from the Pew Research Center (Perrin 2019) suggests the emergence of yet another divide. Larger percentages of groups such as Latino and Black Americans use their phones rather than traditional computers to connect to the Internet and undertake media activities. Roughly eight in ten white people reported owning computers, in contrast to roughly six in ten Black and Latino people own them. White people are also more likely to have broadband (high-speed Internet) in their homes. But approximately one in four Black and Latino people reported being smartphone-only Internet users, a number that far outpaces white people's reliance on the devices. While it might seem that the Internet is the Internet, regardless of how you get there, there's a notable difference. Tasks like updating a resume or filling out a job application are much harder on a smartphone than on a large-screen computer in the home. As a result, the digital divide might mean no access to computers or the Internet, but could mean access to the kind of online technology that allows for empowerment, not just entertainment (Washington 2011).

The issue of **net neutrality**, the principle that all Internet data should be treated equally by Internet service providers, is part of the national debate about the digital divide and Internet access. On one side of this debate is the belief that those who provide Internet service, like those who provide electricity and water, should be treated as common carriers, legally prohibited from discriminating based on the customer or nature of the goods. Supporters of net neutrality suggest that without such legal protections, the Internet could be divided into "fast" and "slow" lanes. A conflict perspective theorist might suggest that this discrimination would allow bigger corporations, such as Amazon, to pay Internet providers a premium for faster service, which could lead to gaining an advantage that would drive small, local competitors out of business. The other side of the debate holds the belief that designating Internet service providers as common carriers would constitute an unreasonable regulatory burden and limit the ability of telecommunication companies to operate profitably. A functional perspective theorist might point out that, without profits, companies would not invest in making improvements to their Internet service or expanding those services to underserved areas.

The final decision rests with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the federal government, which must decide how to fairly regulate broadband providers, and from a sociological perspective, without dividing the Internet into haves and have-nots. As Scientific American explains, in early 2025 a federal appeals court decided that the FCC "cannot classify Internet service providers, or ISPs, in a way that would prevent them from favoring certain content over others. Without net neutrality, providers would be able to slow down, or throttle, traffic to competitors' websites. Or ISPs could demand payment for speedy connections to

specific Internet destinations" (Guarino 2025). However, regulations may still be passed through Congress and individual states have their own net neutrality laws.

Online Privacy, Security, and Control

As we increase our footprints on the web by going online more often to connect socially, share material, conduct business, and store information, we also increase our vulnerability to those with negative intent. Most Americans seem to accept that increased usage of online and related tools brings risks, but their perceptions of those risks are evolving. For example, people have different viewpoints on risks associated with individuals, companies, and the government. The Pew Research Center conducts frequent surveys on these topics. A recent publication indicated the following:

- 81% of respondents felt that they had little control over the data collected by companies, and 84% felt they had little control over data collected by the government
- 62% and 63% felt that it was not possible to go through the day without having data collected about them by companies and by the government (respectively)
- 79% and 64% were concerned about data use by companies and by the government (respectively)

Other elements of the research demonstrate that older Americans felt more concern than younger ones, and that Black and Latino people were more likely than white people to believe the government was tracking them (Auxier 2019). Moreover, Pew found that concern is increasing, especially among Republicans. In a 2023 study, 71% were 'very' or 'somewhat' concerned about how the government uses data collected about them, with 77% of Republicans having concern (Faverio 2023).

These attitudes may be revealed by practices or attitudes toward privacy efforts and safeguards. One person may read every word of the agreement and carefully deliberate over whether to proceed. Another person may be annoyed every time a privacy notice interrupts them, and they may simply sign the statement without thinking much about it. In fact, over half of Americans (56%) always or almost always skip reading privacy policies and instead simply click 'agree' (Faverio 2023).

Online privacy concerns also extend from individuals to their dependents. In accordance with the Child Online Privacy Protection Act, school districts must consider and control certain elements of privacy on behalf of students, meaning they cannot require or encourage students under age thirteen to provide personal information. Likewise, online platforms such as Instagram do not let children under the age of thirteen register for their sites (by policy, at least). And where children are registered by their parents, sites like YouTube and, more recently, TikTok issue controls to prevent inappropriate portrayals by children or inappropriate behavior by other members. For example, YouTube often disables comments on videos produced by children (Moreno 2020). TikTok added privacy and protection methods in 2020, but shortly after was hit with allegations of violating child safety and privacy guidelines.

Although schools and companies are required to take steps to lower risks to children, parents and guardians are free to make their own choices on behalf of their children. Some parents/guardians avoid showing their children on social media; they do not post pictures, and ask family members to refrain from doing so (Levy 2019). On the other end of the spectrum, some parents/guardians run social media accounts for their children. Sometimes referred to as "sharents," they may share entertaining videos, promote products through demos or try-ons, or post professionally produced photos on behalf of clothing companies or equipment makers. A child's (even a toddler's) role as an influencer can be financially lucrative, and companies making everything from helmets to dancewear have taken notice (Allchin 2012).

✔ Lessons from Other Societies

Governmental Authority and the Internet

In the United States, the Internet is used to access illegal gambling and pornography sites, as well as to research stocks, crowd-source what car to buy, or keep in touch with childhood friends. Can we allow one or more of those activities, while restricting the rest? And who decides what needs restricting? In a country with democratic principles and an underlying belief in free-market capitalism, the answer is decided in the court system. But globally, the questions – and the governments' responses – are very different.

Other countries take a far more restrictive and directive approach to Internet regulation. China, which is a country with a tight rein on the dissemination of information, has long worked to suppress what it calls “harmful information,” including dissent concerning government politics, dialogue about China’s relationship with Hong Kong, or criticism of the government’s handling of events. With sites like X, Facebook, and YouTube blocked in China, the nation’s Internet users turn to local media companies for their needs. Even so, the country exerts strong control by identifying and prosecuting some violators of the bans, and undertaking more far-reaching tactics. The nation blocks the use of certain terms, such as “human rights,” and passes new laws that require people to register with their real names and make it more dangerous to criticize government actions.

In early 2021, Myanmar's military launched a coup against its government. Elected leader Ang San Suu Kyi was arrested, and other top officials were detained or pushed from power. (Suu Kyi had previously spent years under house arrest.) Immediately, citizens launched widespread and persistent protests against the coup. Myanmar's military took immediate steps to quell the protests, including firing at and killing dozens of protesters and storming colleges and hospitals. But first, the government banned Twitter (now X), Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp in an effort to reduce coordination among protesters and restrain news about the crackdown. The government also arrested reporters, including foreign nationals, who were accused of violating a public order law. Social media companies replied in what ways they could, such as deactivating the accounts of Myanmar's military so that they couldn't share their own messages.

How should the US government balance the need for Internet regulations that protect its users with the risk of overreaching restrictions that could be understood as a form of repression and *social control* at the hands of the state?

Planned Obsolescence

Have you ever had an iPhone stop working properly after a few years? Chances are that the corporations supplying the devices you use to access media – your cell company, laptop makers, and other device makers – are all counting on their products to fail. Not too quickly or consumers wouldn't stand for it, but frequently enough that you might find that it costs far more to fix a device than to replace it with a newer model. Or you find the cell company e-mails you saying that you’re eligible for a free new smartphone, because yours is a whopping two years old. This strategy is called **planned obsolescence**, the business practice of planning for a product to eventually be obsolete or unusable. In other words, the devices that allow us to access media are built to crash.



> Many people are incredibly reliant on their devices, and a failing smartphone or computer can have impacts on customers and revenues.
>
> *Rawpixel Ltd/flickr*

To some extent, planned obsolescence is a natural extension of new and emerging technologies. After all, who is going to cling to an enormous and slow desktop computer from 2000 when a few hundred dollars can buy one that is significantly faster and better? But the practice is not always so benign. The classic example of planned obsolescence is the nylon stocking. Women's stockings – once an everyday staple of women's lives – get 'runs' or 'ladders' after only a few wearings. This requires the stockings to be discarded and new ones purchased. Not surprisingly, the garment industry did not invest heavily in finding a rip-proof fabric; it was in manufacturers' best interest that their product be regularly replaced.

Those who use Microsoft Windows might feel that like the women who purchased endless pairs of stockings, they are victims of planned obsolescence. Every time Windows releases a new operating system, there are typically not many innovations in it that consumers feel they must have. However, the software programs are upwardly compatible only. This means that while the new versions can read older files, the old version cannot read the newer ones. In short order, those who have not upgraded right away find themselves unable to open files sent by colleagues or friends, and they usually wind up upgrading as well.

Planned obsolescence is not always done ethically, and some companies can dictate the obsolescence after the user makes a purchase. Apple users took to social media to confirm that their older iPhones suddenly began losing power or were slowing down considerably. Many users bought new phones at high prices, and later learned that the slow downs were intended by the phone maker. Customers filed dozens of class action lawsuits, which are suits where a very large group of people can band together. Apple was found to have intentionally and improperly altered its phones through a software update in order to hide battery problems. While it never admitted guilt, Apple's $500 million settlement paid benefits to iPhone 6 and iPhone 7 users who had been affected, and a later $113 agreement with state attorneys general included provisions to behave more ethically and transparently (CNBC 2020).

The Impact of Advertising

Corporations also make decisions about what ads we're exposed to, and consequently, how we feel about ourselves and how we understand cultural expectations. The impact that media can have on us is heavy. *Perpetual discontent* is a two-pronged advertising theme which emphasizes: 1) how broken and flawed we are and 2) how we can buy hope in the form of a product being sold. Women in the US are bombarded with advertising images that point out their flaws, such as that they are too fat, wrinkled, dull, saggy, old, and so on.

Women's and men's magazines reinforce gendered images and ideals (Hesse-Biber 2007; Milillo 2008). Most of the magazines intended for teenage girls and adult women are filled with pictures of thin models considered beautiful by cultural standards, advice on dieting, cosmetics ads, and articles on how to win or please your man. Conversely, magazines intended for teenage boys and men are more often filled with ads and articles on cars and sports, advice on how to succeed in careers and other endeavors, and pictures of thin beautiful women. This pattern in magazine images again suggests that women's chief goals should be to look good and to please men and that men's chief goals should be to succeed, win over women, and live life in the fast lane.

A recent meta-study by Dai, Zhu, and Guo (2025) systematically analyzed 95 existing studies published between 2000-2023 that examined the influence of advertising on adult women's self-perception, body image, or attitudes toward gender roles. The research team found that "traditional advertising, which often features idealized and stereotypical portrayals of femininity, continues to be associated with negative psychological outcomes such as increased body dissatisfaction and self-objectification" and that this appears to be "intensifying in digital contexts, where exposure is more frequent and pervasive." More specifically, studies consistently find that exposure to ads involving idealized depictions of women were associated with body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, an internalization of the ideal to be thin, lower self-esteem, and appearance-related anxiety. The researchers also report that exposure to ads portraying women in stereotyped roles (such as sexualized objects or as homemakers) has been correlated with stronger likelihood traditional gender roles and sexist attitudes.

Some scholars argue that this has lead not only to discontent with our body images, but also discontent with every aspect of our spending life (products, house, cars, computers, clothes, etc). Every year, millions pay vast sums of money to acquire surgical beauty enhancements. Cosmetic surgeries have been on the rise over the past few decades, and have been found to be influenced by

the advent of social media sites such as Instagram (Thawanyarat et al. 2023), on which cosmetic surgical centers have their own accounts, influencers have pushed an unrealistic beauty standard, and ads for beauty products bombard users. According to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, this trend appears to be global, with a steady increase in aesthetic procedures over the decade prior to 2024 and an overall increase of 40% between 2020-2024 (Triana et al. 2024).



Women's magazines reinforce the view that women need to be young, thin, light-skinned, able-bodied, and wear many cosmetics in order to be considered beautiful.

© *Thinkstock*

Companies use advertising to sell to us, but the way they reach us is changing. Naomi Klein identified the destructive impact of corporate branding her 1999 text, *No Logo*, an anti-globalization treatise that focused on sweatshops, corporate power, and anti-consumerist social movements. In the post-millennial society, synergistic advertising practices ensure you are receiving the same message from a variety of sources and on a variety of platforms. For example, you may see billboards for Miller beer on your way to a stadium, sit down to watch a game preceded by a Miller commercial on the big screen, and watch a halftime ad in which people are shown holding up the trademark bottles. Chances are you can guess which brand of beer is for sale at the concession stand.

Advertising has changed, as technology and media have allowed consumers to bypass traditional advertising venues. From the invention of the remote control, which allows us to skip television advertising without leaving our seats, to recording devices that let us watch programs but skip the ads, conventional television advertising is on the wane. And print media is no different. Advertising revenue in newspapers and on television has fallen significantly, which shows that companies need new ways of getting their messages to consumers.

Brand ambassadorships today can be powerful tools for advertisers. For example, companies hire college students to be their on-campus representatives, and they may target for students engaged in high-profile activities like sports, fraternities, and music. (This practice is slightly different from sponsorships, and note that some students, particularly athletes, need to follow strict guidelines about accepting money or products.) The marketing team is betting that if we buy perfume because Beyoncé tells us to, we'll also choose our workout gear, clothing, or make-up brand if an ambassador encourages that choice. Tens of thousands of brand ambassadors or brand evangelists work on college campuses, and such marketing approaches are seen as highly effective investments for companies. The numbers make it clear: Ambassador-referred customers provide 16% higher value to companies than other customers, and over 90% of people indicate that people trust referrals from people they know (On-Campus Advertising 2017).

Social media has made such influencer and ambassador marketing a near constant. Some formal ambassadors are sponsored by companies to show or use their products. In some cases, compensation arrives only in the form of the free products and whatever monetization the ambassador receives from the site, such as YouTube. Influencers are usually less formally engaged with companies than are ambassadors, relying mostly on site revenue to reward their efforts. Some influencers may overstate their

popularity in order to get free products or services. For example, luxury hotels report that they are barraged by influencers (some with very few followers, and therefore questionable influence) who expect free stays in exchange for creating posts promoting the location (Locker 2019). Nevertheless, influences and brand ambassadors who have much influence are shaping many of our lives with the products we buy and how we feel about ourselves in response to their social media posts and ads.

Media Violence

A glance through popular video game and movie titles geared toward children and teens shows the vast spectrum of violence that is displayed, condoned, and acted out. As a way to guide parents in their programming choices, the motion picture industry put a rating system in place in the 1960s. But new media – video games in particular –proved to be uncharted territory. In 1994, the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ERSB) set a ratings system for games that addressed issues of violence, sexuality, drug use, and the like. California took it a step further by making it illegal to sell video games to underage buyers. The case led to a heated debate about personal freedoms and child protection, and in 2011, the Supreme Court ruled against the California law, stating it violated freedom of speech (ProCon 2012).

Children's in-person play has often involved games of aggression – think cops and robbers or fake sword fights. Many articles report on the controversy surrounding the suggested link between violent video games and violent behavior. Is the link real? Psychologists Anderson and Bushman (2001) reviewed forty-plus years of research on the subject and determined that there are causal links between violent video game use and aggression. They found that children who had just played a violent video game demonstrated an immediate increase in hostile or aggressive thoughts, an increase in aggressive emotions, and physiological effects that increased the chances of acting out aggressive behavior (Anderson 2003). In another meta-study (a study on existing studies), other researchers found that violent video games do increase aggression and related variables and that they decrease prosocial outcomes (Greitemeyer & Mügge 2014).

The American Psychological Association and other researchers have also found an increase in aggressive tendencies based on video game play, though other studies indicated less evidence that violent video games cause either physical violence or criminal behavior. Researchers have found correlations between those behaviors, indicating that violent people may be more likely to play violent video games, but that does not necessarily mean that video games cause violence. Nevertheless, violence itself is present within many video games.

More recent research has found a "contagious impact" of violent gaming on aggression: Playing violent video games increases aggression not only the individual themself but also among those with whom the player is connected – their gaming friends. This was a longitudinal study that captured multiple points in time, which helps identify causality. The researcher concluded,

> "In particular, participants who do not play violent video games reported to be more aggressive the more their friends play violent video games ... Importantly, the impact of the participant's amount of violent video game play was controlled for, indicating that the relationship between friends' amount of violent video game play and the participant's aggression is *not* due to the friends being similar to the participants" (Greitemeyer 2019).



One of the most popular video games, Grand Theft Auto, has frequently been at the center of debate about gratuitous violence in the gaming world.

Meddy Garnet/flickr

Debate still exists over the extent and impact of broader media socialization and violence. A meta-analysis study covering four decades of research could not establish a definitive link between viewing media violence and committing criminal violence (Savage 2003). However, other research has found links. One study demonstrated that violent media content does have a desensitizing affect (i.e., it densensitizes us to violence) and is correlated with aggressive thoughts (Krahe et al. 2011). Another study concluded that watching violent TV in childhood predicts aggressive behavior in adulthood (Huesmann et al. 2003). Another group of scholars (Gentile, Mathieson, and Crick 2011) found that among children exposure to media violence led to an increase in both physical and relational aggression. Yet other researchers found that exposure to media violence among adolescents leads to *cyberbullying*, bullying that occurs electronically (Fanti, Demetriou, & Hawa 2012).

Fragmentation and Worldviews

Despite the variety of media at hand, the mainstream news and entertainment *homogenized*, meaning that they became uniform. Research by McManus (1995) suggests that the major news outlets often told the same stories and used the same sources, resulting in the same message, presented with only slight variations. Thus, the coverage of national events like a major court case or political issue was likely near identical. However, the opposite process appears to be occurring today, which is increasing political divides in the US.

With so many news media choices, people increasingly customize their news experience, minimizing their opportunity to encounter information that does not jive with their worldview (Prior 2005). For instance, those who are staunchly Republican can avoid centrist or liberal-leaning news outlets that may show Democrats in a favorable light. They know to seek out Fox News over MSNBC, just as Democrats know to do the opposite. Thus, our news experience has *fragmented*, separating off from each other. Further, people who want to avoid politics completely can choose to view media that deal only with entertainment or that will keep them up to date on sports scores, which is a far departure from the few cable channels that provided nightly news in the past. They now have an easy way to avoid information that they do not wish to hear.

The fragmentation of the news has led to an increased amount of digital tribalism. *Tribalism* in this sense is the state or tendency to gather and reinforce ideas belonging to a group, and to do so out of a sense of strong loyalty. **Digital tribalism** is the tendency to do so online, and also to forge new tribes purely based on online personas or ideologies. Instead of basing these groups on the classic bonds of, say, ethnic culture or religious ideologies, they are based on politics, emotions, lifestyles, or even brands (Taute & Sierra 2014).

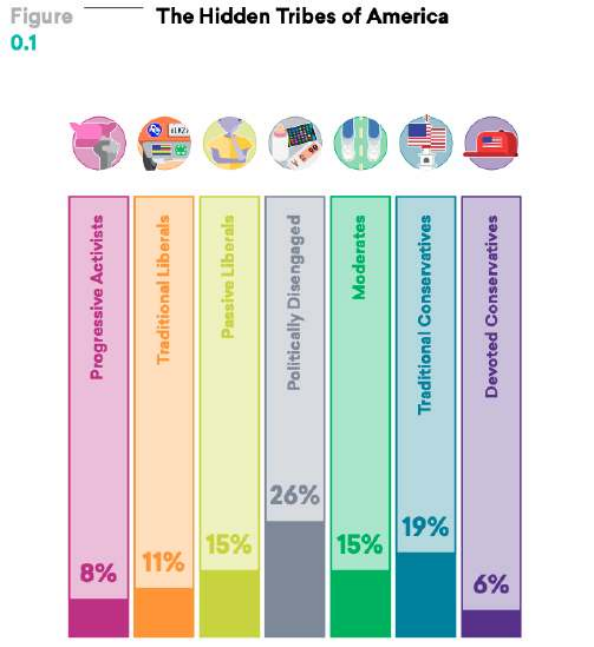
In addition to news media, television and other mediums can influence our how we view the world. For instance, Communications Professor George Gerbner (1994) developed *cultivation theory*, which claims that the types of TV we watch accumulate within us and impact our *worldview*. In other words, if we only watch crime, detective, and forensic shows we would have the additive effect of these shows on our perception of how the world really is. The types of TV we watch passively yet persistently shape our worldview. In fact, the *mean world syndrome* is the tendency to view society as being meaner and more violent than it really is because of violent and harsh media watched over the years. Gerbner would claim that that a person

preoccupied with watching 'reality TV' or soap operas would have a world focus that overemphasized melodramatic themes. The same could be said of anyone who watches mostly other genres such as police shows or high school dramas.

Other research has demonstrated the concept of digital tribalism. In a report for a special interest group, Hawkins and colleagues (2018) argued that "the findings of a large-scale national survey of Americans about the current state of civic life in the United States ... provides substantial evidence of deep polarization and growing tribalism. It shows that this polarization is rooted in something deeper than political opinions and disagreements over policy" (2018: 5). They identify several segments of society, listed from 'left' to 'right' political ideology:

- Progressive Activists: younger, highly engaged, secular, cosmopolitan, angry
- Traditional Liberals: older, retired, open to compromise, rational, cautious
- Passive Liberals: unhappy, insecure, distrustful, disillusioned
- Politically Disengaged: young, low income, distrustful, detached, patriotic, conspiratorial
- Moderates: engaged, civic-minded, middle-of-the-road, pessimistic, Protestant
- Traditional Conservatives: religious, middle class, patriotic, moralistic
- Devoted Conservatives: white, retired, highly engaged, uncompromising, patriotic (p. 7).

Hawkins and colleagues found that 'tribe' membership is reliable in predicting differing views across various political topics such as immigration, sexual harassment, feminism, and police brutality. The proportion of survey respondents falling into each of these segments is represented in the image below, presented in the report.



This image illustrates various segments of society identified from a large-scale survey on national civic life. Can you identify people in your own life that fit into these categories?

Source: Hawkins et al. 2018

Digital 'tribes' can lead people to a greater sense of belonging as individuals interacting with media locate and bond with others of similar experiences, values, and belief systems, but they can also fuel division in society. The researchers of the study above found that the majority of survey respondents selected, "The people I agree with politically need to be willing to listen to others and compromise" over "People I agree with politically need to stick to their beliefs and fight," particularly for those in the middle of the list above who are "more ideologically flexible" (Hawkins et al. 2018: 12). This ideal of compromise may seem hopeful, though ideals are often not realized in practice.

Media Globalization

Lyons (2005) suggests that multinational corporations are the primary vehicle of media *globalization*, and these corporations control global mass-media content and distribution (Compaine 2005). **Globalization** is the increasing political, economic, and social interconnectedness of the world. It is true, when looking at who controls which media outlets, that there are fewer independent news sources as larger and larger conglomerates develop. In the early 2000s, there were about 1,500 newspapers, 6,000 magazines, and a whopping 10,000 radio outlets (Bagdikian 2004). By the end of the 2010s, the number of book publishers and radio outlets generally remained static and the number of magazines increased, but there had been a dramatic reduction in newspapers with only 1,000 newspapers remaining (BBC 2019).

On the surface, there is endless opportunity to find diverse media outlets. But the numbers are misleading. **Media consolidation** is a process in which fewer and fewer owners control the majority of media outlets. This creates an *oligopoly* in which a few firms dominate the media marketplace. In 1983, a mere 50 corporations owned the bulk of mass-media outlets. Even more recently, just five companies controlled 90% of media outlets (McChesney 1999). In 2023, the world's largest media companies included (in order of assets): Comcast Corporation, Walt Disney Company, Charter Communications, and Warner Bros. Discovery (Dellatto 2023). What impact does this consolidation have on the type of information to which the U.S. public is exposed? Does media consolidation deprive the public of multiple viewpoints and limit its discourse to the information and opinions shared by a few sources? Why does it matter?

Oligopolies (and monopolies, where only one firm controls the market) matter because less competition typically means consumers are less well served since dissenting opinions or diverse viewpoints are less likely to be found. Media consolidation may result in the following dysfunctions: First, consolidated media owes more to its stockholders than to the public. Publicly-traded Fortune 500 companies pay more attention to their profitability and to government regulators than to the public's right to knowledge. The few companies that control most of the media, because they are owned by the *power elite*, represent the political and social interests of only a small minority. In an oligopoly there are fewer incentives to innovate, improve services, or decrease prices. While some social scientists predicted that the increase in media forms would create a global village (McLuhan 1964), current research suggests that the public sphere accessing the global village will tend to be rich, white, and English-speaking (Jan 2009).

Similarly, someone using a conflict theorist approach might focus on technological growth. In theory, technological innovations are ideology-free; a fiber optic cable is the same in a Muslim country as a secular one, a communist country or a capitalist one. But those who bring technology to less-developed nations usually have an agenda, whether they are nongovernment organizations, businesses, or governments. With this reality and the control that the power elite and other powerful figures have over media, globalized media carries the risk of **cultural imperialism**, the loss of local culture as the dominant culture imposes their own values, ideologies, traditions, and styles on less powerful cultures.

Other problems come with the benefits of a more interconnected globe. One risk is the potential for censoring by national governments that let in only the information and media they feel serve their message, as is occurring in China. In addition, core nations such as the US risk the use of international media by criminals to circumvent local laws against socially deviant and dangerous behaviors such as gambling, child pornography, and the sex trade. Offshore or international websites allow US citizens (and others) to seek out whatever illegal or illicit information they want, from 24-hour online gambling sites that do not require proof of age to sites that sell child pornography. These examples illustrate the societal risks of unfettered global information flow.

The media is perhaps one of the most underestimated of the social institutions. At the personal level, people think of it in terms of convenience and entertainment rather than political influence, power, and control. The media is mostly controlled by wealthy people and at the national and world level is tightly controlled in terms of political ideologies of those who decide what we get to watch, hear, and read. The owners and managers seek profits while promoting their own political agenda, selecting and shaping advertisement, and for providing exposure to political and special interests groups they favor.

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Strategies to Address Media Problems

Media problems are difficult to address, as they vary so widely and as US culture and law value weaker regulations on businesses than do other rich democracies (see the GDPR example below, for instance). Laws and policies could be implemented, expanded, or strengthened to protect media users at all levels – the federal government, state governments, media industries, and individual companies. We provide some examples of existing and potentia laws and policies below. Additionally, we may use our individual agency and engage in collective action around media problems, to raise awareness, push companies to change their practices or policies, and create social change more broadly. Below we also discuss some examples of individual agency and collective action as they relate to social problems of media.

Laws and Policies

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), established in 1934 via the Communications Act, reviews violations of law or policy regarding specific mediums including television, cable, and radio. Per the FCC website (n.d.), as "an independent U.S. government agency overseen by Congress, the commission is the United States' primary authority for communications law, regulation and technological innovation." Though the intent was to regulate these forms of media, an amendment via the 1996 Telecommunications Act minimized several protections included in the original act, allowing for more collaboration between media conglomerates, despite that it was perceived as a way to bolster competition. Reversing the new act or proposing other law to regulate these media giants may address concerns of media consolidation and cultural imperialism.

The US has a patchwork of other laws intended to protect privacy and security. For instance, the 1998 Children's Online Privacy Protection Act protects child data. This law "imposes certain requirements on operators of websites or online services directed to children under 13 years of age, and on operators of other websites or online services that have actual knowledge that they are collecting personal information online from a child under 13 years of age" (Federal Trade Commission n.d.). Others include the Financial Services Modernization Act of 1999 (a.k.a., the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act) that protects against the sale of financial information, the Protecting Americans Data from Foreign Adversaries Act of 2024 that concerns data being distributed to foreign adversaries, and the Electronic Communications Privacy Act of 1986 to protect against federal wiretapping and eavesdropping.

The US lacks a singular protective law regarding online user data privacy; however, there is a model that could inspire a US law. The European Union (EU) established the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), fully implemented in 2018, which is described as "the toughest privacy and security law in the world" (GDPR 2025). Its data protection and accountability principles include:

- Lawfulness, fairness and transparency — Processing must be lawful, fair, and transparent to the data subject.
- Purpose limitation — You must process data for the legitimate purposes specified explicitly to the data subject when you collected it.
- Data minimization — You should collect and process only as much data as absolutely necessary for the purposes specified.
- Accuracy — You must keep personal data accurate and up to date.
- Storage limitation — You may only store personally identifying data for as long as necessary for the specified purpose.
- Integrity and confidentiality — Processing must be done in such a way as to ensure appropriate security, integrity, and confidentiality (e.g. by using encryption).
- Accountability — The data controller is responsible for being able to demonstrate GDPR compliance with all of these principles (GDPR 2025).

The regulation imposes obligations onto data-collecting organizations anywhere in the world, if they collect data on people in the EU, having far-reaching implications that transgress national borders.



Today there are many social media apps developed by companies that all have their own privacy policies and practices. Social media users must learn to navigate all of these varying policies and practices to try to protect their privacy and security.

Social media collection 2020s by Ibrahim.ID via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Individual states have also implemented laws to protect media users. For instance, the 2020 California Consumer Privacy Act is a privacy rights law intended to offer users more control over their personal information. The original Act an a voter-approved amendment enacted in 2023 include:

- The right to know about the personal information a business collects about them and how it is used and shared.
- The right to delete personal information collected from them (with some exceptions).
- The right to opt-out of the sale or sharing of their personal information including via the GPC.
- The right to non-discrimination for exercising their CCPA rights.
- The right to correct inaccurate personal information that a business has about them.
- The right to limit the use and disclosure of sensitive personal information collected about them (California DOJ 2025).

Soon after California's act, other states established protections such as the 2021 Virginia Consumer Data Protection Act or the 2021 Colorado Privacy Act that provide digital privacy rights including control over how data is handled.

Other policies may be strengthened by corporations themselves, such as default settings on social media accounts that allow users to opt-in to data sharing or tracking rather than to manually opt-out after being automatically enrolled. One ethical question is whether paid ambassadors – company-sponsored social media influencers – should be required to disclose their relationship with a company. Social media platforms could also develop policies requiring that a social media post or ad formally include sponsorship information and that ambassadors list partners or sponsors on their profiles. In the new age of AI, company policy could dictate that any AI-generated media be marked as such, including advertisements that portray unreachable beauty ideals or otherwise problematic portrayals of girls and women.

Companies and industries may also offer stronger parental controls to help reduce children's exposure to media violence. Movie maturity ratings took various forms from the 1960s and TV parental guidelines were established in the 1990s to help parents and guardians make more informed decisions about what their children watch, offering maturity ratings based on characteristics such as violence, sexuality, and language. However, maturity ratings for online content is far more difficult to manage. Regarding media violence, an editorial for the The Lancet Regional Health journal explains:

> "Parental control might not be enough to tackle this highly complex problem that could require interventions at multiple levels. It is likely that screen violence will be more difficult to deal with than other trade issues, such as tobacco and alcohol, because screen content can reach continents within seconds, with virtually no barriers or time to filter content" (Lancet Regional Health 2023).

Individual Agency and Collective Action

At age 14, magazine-reader Julia Bluhm launched a petition to Seventeen magazine requesting that they limit their use of Photoshop on women in advertisements. Her petition gained 20,000 signatures in a short time, and is reported to have reached 84,000 signatures that year. She and her friends protested outside of the company's New York office and engaged in a mock photo

shoot of real young women. Her efforts paid off. She secured a meeting with the Editor-in-Chief and the magazine pledged to portray real girls and women, as they are (Botelho 2012; CNN 2012). Anyone can use their individual agency to engage in efforts such as Julia's.

Since this time, other magazines and advertising companies have followed suit, such as the lifestyle magazine Verily and the Aerie line of American Eagle. Some ad campaigns focus specifically on bodily diversity and representations of 'real' beauty, such as Dove's Real Beauty campaign. Though the motive behind such campaigns may be questionable (i.e., are they genuinely to help reduce the impact of problematic ads or are they to raise profit?), the result at least portrays more accurate representations of girls and women.



Magazine images of girls and women often often undergo many cycles of 'Photoshopping' and other editing, creating an unrealistic understanding of what girls and women should look like. We can use our individual agency, like Julia Bluhm did, to push for companies to change these problematic practices.

Seventeen Magazine is an obsession by missamyykins via Flickr is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Individuals and organizations have also used agency and collective action to help close the *digital divide*, which was a priority during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three components – devices, access, and effective skills – are called the 'three-legged stool' needed to close the digital divide. Individuals need a computer (or smartphone) that they know how to use effectively, sufficient quality internet service, and literacy in navigating the digital world to participate effectively. For example, the federal government implemented broadband programs allowing families to get internet services at free or low cost. State governments funded internet access for schools and libraries. Local schools purchased computers and hotspots. But technology was only part of the solution.

Nonprofit social service providers highlight digital skills as a support to stabilizing families. Goodwill, for example, offers a digital learning platform called GFCLearnfree.org, which hosts educational content that helps people learn to use their computers, search for jobs online, and manage their money more effectively. Explore GFCLearnfree.org if you would like to learn more. However, access alone does not help people learn effectively. Some nonprofits are taking a much more integrated approach, such as the one described in the People Making a Difference box below.

People Making a Difference

EveryoneOn is a US-based nonprofit that helps create social and economic opportunities in under-resourced communities by providing access to low-cost internet and devices. They also deliver digital skills training. Founded in 2012 to meet the federal government's challenge to connect everyone digitally, the organization has helped connect over 1,000,000 people to affordable internet offers, distributed over 6,000 devices, and trained thousands of people in digital skills. EveryoneOn is

known for its Offer Locator Tool where people can search for low-cost internet service and computers in their area.

To reach more people, EveryoneOn partners across sectors with government, local and national nonprofits, corporations, and internet service providers to connect more people and build digital literacy. Partnerships with technology companies allow EveryoneOn to provide devices to program participants at low or no cost. They also partner with community-based organizations to deliver digital skills training. EveryoneOn primarily works in communities of color and provides services in Spanish and English.

In response to the pandemic, EveryoneOn developed a hybrid model in which clients got initial support for their new computers in person from EveryoneOn. They completed their classes online. By providing equipment, access and education, EveryoneOn narrowed the digital divide in many communities of color.



This image is of students learning digital literacy skills at EveryoneOn during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Photo of students learning digital literacy skills at EveryoneOn, during the COVID-19 pandemic" © EveryoneOn is all rights reserved and used with permission

One potential outcome of reduced home Internet and computer access can be the relatively low representation of certain populations in computing courses, computing majors, and computing careers. Some school districts, often with the help of government grants or corporate sponsorships, aim to address this aspect of the digital divide by providing computers to those who need them, either at a low cost or at no charge. A number of organizations, such as Code.org, Black Girls Code, and Black Boys Code, work to overcome the disparity by offering computer science education programs and camps, collaborative instruction programs with local school districts, and (perhaps most impactful in the long term) teacher training programs. As a result, the number of Black and Latinx students in courses like Advanced Placement Computer Science has increased dramatically in recent years, as has the number of college majors from the same populations.

Although we still have work to do, the response of educators, businesses, nonprofits, and government is adding even more people to the digital superhighway. The digital divide is far from closed, though the interconnected responses of individuals working together with social institutions makes a difference.

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Review of Media Problems

Summary

1. The institution of **media** produces and distributes information and entertainment, particularly through *mass media*, channels of communication available to the masses.
2. *Mediums* that comprise mass media include newspapers, radio, television, film, magazines, books, video games, music records, the internet, and more. *New media* involves interactive forms of communication such as social media, blogs, podcasts, and virtual worlds.
3. Functionalists see that media has **manifest functions** such as disseminating knowledge to the masses but also **latent functions** such as its negative impact on population health. Conflict theorists are more concerned with how media and technology reinforce social inequalities, both within and among nations. They also look at how media typically gives voice to the most powerful in **hegemonic media**. Symbolic interactionists are concerned with how media shapes the social construction of reality, including how we use **reference groups** on media, particulalry social media, to undersatnd ourselves.
4. The gap in unequal access to media and technology has been termed the **digital divide**. The *knowledge gap* refers to an effect of the digital divide: The lack of knowledge or information that keeps those who were not exposed to technology from gaining marketable skills. This is a form of social inequality that disproportionately impacts lower-income people and people of color.
5. Companies have leeway in how they use our data. Most media users feel that they have little control over their privacy and how data collected on them are being used. Though media users frequently receive privacy notices, they tend to skip reading them and instead simply agree. Companies also engage in practices regarding the devices we use to access media, such as **planned obsolescence**, intentionally planning for a product to become obsolete.
6. Advertisements play on our insecurities, portray harmful gendered images, and shape our understandings of ourselves. Though ads have a long history in media, they have recently adapted to the rise of social media, with a constant bombardment of ads on social media apps and ambassador or influencer marketing.
7. Though research is not definitive, it suggests that media violence increases aggression, even including among the friends of violent video game players. Exposure to media violence in childhood has also been found to increase the risk of *cyberbullying* and to predict aggression in adulthood.
8. News media has become fragmented and fueled **digital tribalism**, the tendency to reinforce loyalty to and ideas of a group, such as by political ideology.
9. With media **globalization**, opportunity clusters in advantaged areas of the globe and media giants **consolidate** the media, which may fuel **cultural imperialism** as dominant cultures spread their values, ideologies, and traditions to strongly as to smother local cultures across the world.
10. Laws such as the Communications Act in the US or the General Data Protection Regulation in the EU help address concerns of privacy and security. Governments, industries, and companies can write policy or law to strengthen media user protections. One response to the global COVID-19 pandemic was to increase funding that would narrow the digital divide. This collective action relied on federal and local governments, non-profits, school districts, and individuals like you.

Questions

1. Keep a log of how often you engage with all forms of media over the course of a day – were you surprised at how often you were interacting with media, and what impact do you think that has on you?
2. Which sociological theoretical perspective most resonates with you regarding media problems, and why does it?
3. How does the digital divide relate to broader social inequalities?
4. How does net neutrality connect to media social problems, and do you support or oppose it?
5. What practices do you engage in to protect your privacy and security online, or if you don't do much now, what could you do?
6. Have you ever had a smartphone stop working after 5 or so years despite keeping it in good condition, and if so, what rights do you feel that you had to address that planned obsolescence?
7. *CW: body image* If you're able, think back to how you felt about your body as a younger teen and consider how much of any negative attitudes you had about your body could be attributed to Photoshopped ads and images of people like you.
8. How have you witnessed or participated in digital tribalism in your own life, and how do you think that has impacted you and the people around you?

9. Concerns around media consolidation and culteral imperialism might seem more reflective of conflict theory – what would structural functionalism and symbolic interactionism have to say about these concerns?
10. Do you think that a law such as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation would ever be passed in the US, and why or why not? What can we do to help pass those protections for media users?

Action Steps

1. Use your sociological imagination: Consider how the way that you understand who you are as a person, your political beliefs, and/or your feelings about your body have been shaped by media practices and policies.
2. Support alternative media: Reduce your time with traditional media such as on the major social media apps in favor of interacting with community-based media such as your local film organization, local NPR station, or local zine distributor and donate to those organizations, which often need stronger funding.
3. Use your individual agency: Take inspiration from youth like Julia Bluhm and start a petition or take other action to push for healthier media practices such as showing real people in ads or reducing violence in video games.
4. Engage in collective action: Research local or national groups that are engaged in organized action around media problems, select one, and figure out how to get involved in their efforts.

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Sample Word 1 | Sample Definition 1

Puttman OER Acknowledgements and About the Authors

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Kathryn Burrows got her Ph.D. in sociology from Portland State University. She specializes in the sociology of health, medicine, medical technology, and mental health. She teaches the sociology of gender and mental health and the sociology of disability and has taught the sociology of sexuality and several theory courses, as well as teaching the sociology of deviance and Introduction to Sociology. She has published in diverse areas of sociological study, including the advertising of medical technology, diversity in teaching, health literacy, mental illness, dating behavior, and parental decision-making about childhood health issues. She teaches at Portland State University and Newlane University and works as a qualitative researcher at InsideOut Insights. She also owns a small consulting company where she works with junior scholars on their first major projects. She lives in Oregon City with her puppy Castro.

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Nora Karena (she/her), who identifies as white, is an antiracist educator, researcher, consultant, and writer with expertise in non-profit service delivery, gender-based violence, homelessness, and child welfare. In her research, Nora interrogates white racial formation and white supremacy. In her classroom, she points her students in the direction of BIPOC scholars and scholarship as she engages in questions of identity, power, and meaning. As a consultant and trainer, she champions the operationalization of antiracist policies and ideas that prioritize the well-being of people most impacted by systems of oppression. She has a B.A. in Social and Behavioral Sciences from Linfield College and an M.A. in Cultural Studies (MACS) from the University of Washington Bothell.

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Avery (they/she/he) is a queer, Indigenous community organizer. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Globalization, Environment, & Policy, where she researched Indigenous resistance and the ongoing effects of colonization on our climate. He also has over four years of experience in public speaking, event planning, and a lifetime of love for exploring the natural world. As an abolitionist and anti-capitalist, Avery firmly believes that moving with militant joyfulness and a deep reverence for life is vital in all pursuits. When they are not writing, you can find them sharing food with their friends, reading science fiction, foraging, curating art spaces, and swimming.

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Puttman OER About this Book

This page combines the About this Book and Manuscript Development Process back matter pages from the Puttman et al. OER textbook.

About this Book

Accessibility Statement

This book was created in good faith to ensure that it will meet accessibility standards wherever possible, and to highlight areas where we know there is work to do. It is our hope that by being transparent in this way, we can begin the process of making sure accessibility is top of mind for all authors, adopters, students and contributors of all kinds on open textbook projects.

If you encounter an accessibility issue, please let your instructor know right away.

Equity Lens

The Open Oregon Educational Resources Targeted Pathways Project seeks to dismantle structures of power and oppression entrenched in barriers to course material access. We provide tools and resources to make diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) primary considerations when faculty choose, adapt, and create course materials. In promoting DEI, our project is committed to:

1. Ensuring diversity of representation within our team and the materials we distribute
2. Publishing materials that use accessible, clear language for our target audience
3. Sharing course materials that directly address and interrogate systems of oppression, equipping students and educators with the knowledge to do the same

Designing and piloting openly licensed, intersectional, and antiracist course materials is one starting point among many when addressing inequities in higher education. Our project invites students and educators to engage with us in this work, and we value spaces where learning communities can grow and engage together.

We welcome being held accountable to this statement and will respond to feedback submitted via our contact page.

Teaching and Learning Approach

The authors of this book embraced an equity-minded design for structure, scope, and sequence of chapters and chapter content. They sought to honor the needs and experiences of students who are often underserved in higher education in Oregon. Authors considered Transparency in Teaching and Learning (TILT), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and Culturally Responsive Teaching to design meaningful learning pathways for you. You will find rich images and multimedia in addition to written content. You will also find provocative discussion questions that align with learning outcomes and objectives.

Instructors, please see the Instructor Resources section in the Back Matter for an overview of curriculum design as well as openly licensed course packs and teaching tools.

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Manuscript Development Process

This book went through an extensive pre-production process before it was launched in order to be accountable to the project's equity lens; revise drafts for quality; and incorporate feedback from scholars, practitioners, and students in the discipline.

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- Carlos Lopez, Sociology Instructor, Chemeketa Community College
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Puttman OER Image Descriptions

Image Description for Figure 1.5

A line chart shows moderate or severe food insecurity for both women and men in different regions of the world from 2015 to 2020. The lines are often close, but women are always more food insecure than men. Throughout the world, food insecurity has risen for both women and men (from around 20% in 2015 to over 30% for women in 2020). The two lines diverge the most for Latin America and the Caribbean, where food insecurity went from approximately 25% in 2015 to over 40% in 2020. Food insecurity rates for both men and women are highest in Africa (almost 60% for both men and women in 2020) and lowest in North America (between 10 and 15% in 2020).

Data source: State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021, prepared by FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO.

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Return to Figure 1.5

Image Description for Figure 1.14

The six steps of claimsmaking defined and organized in a circle: 1) Claimsmaking: People make claims that there is a social problem, with certain characteristics, causes, and solutions. 2) Media Coverage: Media…report on claimsmakers so that news of the claims reaches a broader audience. 3) Public Reaction: Public opinion focuses on the social problem identified by the claimsmakers. 4) Policymaking: Lawmakers and others with the power to set policies to create new ways to address the problem. 5) Social Problems Work: Agencies implement the new policies, including calls for further changes. 6) Policy Outcomes: There are various responses to the new arrangements.

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Image Description for Figure 1.15

Leaders marching from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial. In the front row, from left are: Whitney M. Young, Jr., Executive Director of the National Urban League; Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; A. Philip Randolph, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, American Federation of Labor (AFL), and a former vice president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO); Walter P. Reuther, President, United Auto Workers Union; and Arnold Aronson, Secretary of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. Aug. 28, 1963.

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Image Description for Figure 2.3

The social identity wheel has common characteristics in the middle that remain stable including, national origin, race/ethnicity, mental/physical ability, sexual orientation, age, gender, gender identity or expression. The characteristics on the outside can change over time like, work experience, education, appearance, religion, income, language and communication skills, organizational role, family, and political belief.

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Image Description for Figure 2.10

Six disabled people of color smile and pose in front of a concrete wall. Five people stand in the back, with the Black woman in the center holding up a chalkboard sign reading “disabled and here.” A South Asian person in a wheelchair sits in front.

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Image Description for Figure 2.11

Overview

A multicolored wheel that visualizes an individual's or group's relationship to power and privilege. From a center that says power, two intersecting lines with arrows at each end point outwards and are labeled *marginalization*. There are 16 slices or segments in the wheel. Each segment represents categories of identities or social locations. Social locations near the center of the wheel experience more power. Social locations near the edge of the wheel experience more oppression and are more marginalized. Gray words outside the circle indicate forms of oppression and discrimination directed at people with those social identities.

Please keep in mind that as we try to describe the relationships between socially constructed power and identity, the categories we use can be imprecise, overlapping, and unstable.

Category descriptions and social identities/locations

- Race/Ethnicity: Black and Indigenous People of Color are the most marginalized identities, white passing is in the middle, and white is closest to the center of power. Racism is a form of oppression marginalized people in this category experience.
- Skin color: Dark is the most marginalized identity, medium shades in the middle, and white closest to the center of power. Colorism is a form of oppression marginalized people in this category experience.
- Indigeneity: Indigenous is the most marginalized identity, and Settlers are closest to the center of power. Colonialism is a form of oppression marginalized people in this category experience.
- Citizenship: Undocumented is the most marginalized, documented non-citizen is in the middle, and citizen is closest to the center of power. Nativism is a form of oppression marginalized people in this category experience.
- Language: Non-English speaking is the most marginalized identity, English speaking is in the middle, and native English is closest to the center of power. Xenophobia is a form of oppression marginalized people in this category experience.
- Geography: Rural/inner city is the most marginalized identity, suburb is in the middle, and city is closest to the center of power. Classism is a form of oppression marginalized people in this category experience.
- Social class: Poor/working poor is the most marginalized identity, middle class is in the middle, and wealthy is closest to the center of power. Classism also affects people in this category.
- Housing status: Houseless is the most marginalized identity, sheltered/renting is in the middle, and property owner is closest to the center of power. Classism also affects people in this category.
- Education: Elementary education is the most marginalized identity, high school is in the middle, and college or university is closest to the center of power. Credentialism is a form of oppression marginalized people in this category experience.
- Neurodiversity: Significant neurodivergence is the most marginalized identity, some neurodivergence is in the middle, and neurotypical is closest to the center of power. Ableism is a form of oppression marginalized people in this category experience.
- Physical and mental health: Vulnerable is the most marginalized identity, mostly stable is in the middle, and robust is closest to the center of power. Ableism also affects people in this category.
- Ability: Severe disability is the most marginalized identity, mild disability is in the middle, and able-bodied is closest to the center of power. Ableism also affects people in this category.
- Body size: Overweight or obese is the most marginalized identity, average is in the middle, and slim is closest to the center of power. Sizeism is a form of oppression marginalized people in this category experience.
- Gender identity: Trans/intersex/nonbinary is the most marginalized, cisgender women are in the middle, and cisgender men are closest to the center of power. Sexism and cisgenderism are forms of oppression marginalized people in this category experience.
- Sexual orientation: Lesbian, bi, pan/asexual are the most marginalized identities, gay men are in the middle, and straight is closest to the center of power. Heterosexism is a form of oppression marginalized people in this category experience.
- Marital Status: Single/nonmonogamous are the most marginalized identities, engaged/partnered are in the middle, and married is closest to the center of power. Heterosexism is a form of oppression marginalized people in this category experience.

Attribution

Based on the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Allan Johnson, and the visual images of Sylvia Duckworth and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. This version designed by Kimberly Puttman, Michaela Willi Hooper, and Lauren Antrosiglio, Open Oregon Educational Resources, CC BY 4.0.

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Image Description for Figure 2.16

A flower-like visualization with a semi-opaque circle in the middle. Rainbow-colored ovals radiate from the middle like petals. These overlap with the oval on either side and with the circle in the middle. Each oval has one of the following social identities

written in it:

- Nationality
- First Language
- Religion
- Ability
- Neurodiversity
- Health
- Body size
- Age
- Sex
- Gender
- Sexuality
- Race
- Culture
- Ethnicity
- Socioeconomic Status (SES)
- Geography

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Image Description for Figure 3.7

A drawing comparing a medium-skinned Mexican American woman and white woman wearing the same clothes and makeup, but being described very differently. A tear is rolling down the Mexican American woman's cheek. Words and phrases used to describe the Mexican American woman include: From the hood, too Mexican, trashy, ghetto, broke, thug, ugly, rachet. Words and phrases used to describe the white woman dressed in the same way include: Pretty, nice, lovely, stylish, neat, fire, cute, fashion, adorable.

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Image Description for Figure 3.12

The center line includes events and movements such as the invention of the printing press (1440), the first steam engine patent (1698), the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840), the Civil War (1861-1865), the invention of the telephone (1876), the launch of the Ford Model T (1908), World War I (1914-1918), the 19th amendment (1920), and the Great Depression (1929-1939). On either side are boxes with information about the thinkers, some of whom have headshots next to their information. Harriet Martineau [a woman with light skin, brown hair, and a half smile] lived from 1802-1867 and was British. She developed sociological methods, studied the status of women, and wrote the book *Society in America* (1837). Karl Marx [in a black and white photo with a large white beard] lived from 1818-1883 and was German. He developed the idea of class consciousness and wrote *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 with Frederich Engels. Emile Durkheim lived from 1858-1917 and was French. He developed the ideas of anomie and collective consciousness and wrote *Le Suicide* in 1897. Anna Julia Cooper [a woman with dark skin and hair looking directly at the camera] lived from 1858-1963 and was American. She is considered the founder of black feminism and wrote *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* (1892). Jane Addams [a painting of a serious woman with light skin and a dark bun] lived from 1860-1935 and was an American social reformer. She founded Hull House and wrote *Hull House Papers and Maps* (1893). Ida B. Wells [a smiling woman with dark skin and coiffed dark hair] lived from 1862-1931 and was American. She exposed lynching as white supremacy and wrote *Southern Horrors: Lynching Law in All Its Phases (1892)*. Max Weber lived from 1864 to 1920 and was German. He studied bureaucracy and the impact of values. He wrote *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). W.E.B. Du Bois lived from 1868-1963 and was American. He developed the ideas of double consciousness and the veil. He wrote the *Souls of Black Folks* in 1903. Eugene Kinckle Jones [shown as a young man with medium skin and a mustache] lived from 1885-1954 and was American. He was a leader of the national urban league, an advocate for black communities, and an anti-segregation activist.

Attribution

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Return to Figure 3.12

Image Description for Figure 3.14

The infographic, titled “The Proportion of Freemen and Slaves Among American Negroes” shows the percentage of free slaves from 1790 to 1870: 1790, 8%; 1800, 11%; 1810, 13.5%; 1820, 13%; 1830, 14%; 1840, 13%; 1850, 12%; 1860, 11%; 1870, 100%.

Return to Figure 3.14

Image Description for Figure 3.15

The center line includes events and movements such as World War II (1939-1945), the Civil Rights Movement (1945-1968), the Vietnam War (1955-1975), the Stonewall Riots (1969), Personal Computers (1977), Second Wave Feminism (1960s-1980s), September 11, 2001 attacks, #MeToo (2006), and #BlackLivesMatter (2013).

On either side are boxes with information about the thinkers, some of whom have headshots next to their information.

Peter Bergman (1929-2017) and Thomas Luckmann (1927-2016) developed the idea of social constructivism and wrote *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966).

C Wright Mills (1916-1962) is pictured as a serious man with light skin and glasses looking down. His key idea was the sociological imagination, and he wrote *The Power Elite* (1956).

Joe Feagin’s (1938-) key idea is systemic racism. He wrote *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (2006). He has light skin, wears glasses, has white hair, and smiles.

Angela Davis was born in 1944. She is pictured as a smiling woman with light curly hair and dark skin. She studied the prison industrial complex and queer rights. She wrote *Women, Race, and Class* (1981) and was part of the abolitionist feminist movement.

Gloria E. Anzaldua (a smiling woman with medium skin, dark, short hair and large earrings) lived from 1942-2004. She developed the ideas of la frontera and new tribalism. She wrote *Borderlands* (1987).

Patricia Hill Collins was born in 1948. She is pictured as a woman with dark skin and curly, short, white hair speaking passionately into a microphone. She developed the concepts of interlocking oppressions and the matrix of domination. She wrote *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) and was part of the intersectionality movement.

Judith Butler was born in 1956. They are pictured as a person with short, light hair and skin staring directly at the camera. They developed the ideas that gender is socially constructed and queer theory. They wrote *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

Gregory Cajete (1952-) stands in front of red rock and has dark skin. He wrote *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (2000).

Attribution

At the bottom of the image are attributions for the photos that were used. The infographic was compiled by Kimberly Puttman and is All Rights Reserved at the request of one of the copyright holders.

Return to Figure 3.15

Image Description for Figure 3.23

A person’s lifespan is represented by an arrow with a child at one end and a gravestone at the other. In the middle of several concentric circles is a family welcoming a new baby. Extended family interactions are represented by an older person talking to an adult, and an adult talking to a teenager. In the next set of circles, there are other interpersonal interactions, such as between a boss and employee and a teacher and student. In the outer circle are symbols representing major religions. Arrows indicate that these circles interact with one another.

Return to Figure 3.23

Image Description for Figure 4.2

A circle of arrows around the words Scientific Process.

The top arrow says Identify a Social Issue or Find a Research Topic and Ask a Question. This points to the next arrow, which says review existing literature and sources. Build a broad understanding of work previously conducted, identify gaps in understanding of the topic, and position your own research to build on prior knowledge. The next arrow says Formulate a Hypothesis: What are the

general causes of the phenomenon you're wondering about? The next arrow says Select a Research Method and Design a Study: Select a research method appropriate to answer your question. Typically, your research question influences the method you will use. The next arrow says Collect data: Collect information on the topic using the research design. The next arrow says Analyze data: Organize and analyze the data after it is collected. If the analysis does or does not support the hypothesis, discuss implications for theory or policy. From here there is an arrow that goes back to Select a Research Method that says Based on findings, what new questions do you have? How can these new questions help develop future projects? Another arrow from Analyze Data continues the circle and says Report Findings: Share results at conferences and in academic journals. Before the conclusions of a study are widely accepted, the studies are often repeated. New research questions may emerge to inspire more research projects. This arrow points back to the top arrow where we started.

Attribution

There is also an attribution statement saying this image is CC BY 4.0 and created by Jennifer Puentes and Michaela Willi Hooper.

Return to Figure 4.2

Image Description for Figure 4.5

The infographic shows six colored boxes on top of an arrow that guides through the steps outlined in the boxes. The boxes are:

1) Find a topic: What do you want to learn more about?

2) Design study: What do you ask? Who do you ask?

3) Collect data: What themes emerge? How should the interviews change?

4) Code data: How can the information best be categorized?

5) Analyze literature: How do other scientists understand or explain the social behavior?

6) Evaluate theory: Does it effectively explain or predict the social behavior?

Return to Figure 4.5

Image Description for Figure 4.11

A line chart shows moderate or severe food insecurity for both women and men in different regions of the world from 2015 to 2020. The lines are often close, but women are always more food insecure than men. Throughout the world, food insecurity has risen for both women and men (from around 20% in 2015 to over 30% for women in 2020). The two lines diverge the most for Latin America and the Caribbean, where food insecurity went from approximately 25% in 2015 to over 40% in 2020. Food insecurity rates for both men and women are highest in Africa (almost 60% for both men and women in 2020) and lowest in North America (between 10 and 15% in 2020).

Data source: State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021, prepared by FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO.

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Image Description for Figure 4.12

Overview

A line chart shows the share of individuals in global regions that have daily food intake that is insufficient to provide the amount of dietary energy required to maintain a normal, active, and healthy life. Between 2001 and 2020, all regions started high, dipped down between 2013 and 2019, and then rose in recent years.

- Sub-Saharan Africa consistently had the highest percentage of people who are undernourished. It was over 25% in 2001, dipped below 20% between 2010 and 2019, and is just over 20% in 2020.
- The South Asia line is just below Sub-Saharan Africa. It peaked just above 20% in 2004, declined to under 15%, and then spiked back up over 20% in 2018.
- The World line is below South Asia. It began just below 15% and in 2021 sat just below 10%.
- Latin America and the Caribbean was just above 10% in 2001. It dipped to almost 5% in 2014 and then began to steadily rise.

Access full data

Our World in Data provides a sortable table with data for all countries and regions, including the prevalence of undernourishment (% of the population) in 2001 and 2020, the absolute change, and the relative change.

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Image Description for Figure 5.4

In a crowded kitchen, three people are signing to each other. Someone with glasses and a pierced right ear has their back to the camera. A woman with long hair is holding a red cup in the center, looking at a man to her left who has a short beard and glasses. All of their hands are blurred, suggesting they are moving their fingers very quickly.

Return to Figure 5.4

Image Description for Figure 5.5

A chart lists the percentages that Black Deaf, Black Hearing, White Deaf, and White Hearing people attain a high school diploma/GED, some college, an Associates Degree, a Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, and a PH.D., J.D. or M.D. The overall educational attainment is highest by those who are white and hearing. The lowest attainment is by those who are Black and deaf. The differences between attainment among White deaf and Black hearing people is minimal.

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Image Description for Figure 5.8

Categories of neurodiversity often overlap with each other including these examples, 1) Dyscalculia: innovative thinking and verbal skills shares creativity with, 2) Dyslexia: visual thinking, 3D mechanic skills shares authenticity with, 3) ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder): creativity, energy and passion shares hyper-focus with, 4) Tourette Syndrome: observational skills, cognitive control, creativity and shares innovative thinking with, 5) Acquired Neurodiversity: adaptability, empathy and shares resilience with, 6) Mental Health: depth of thinking, expression and shares sensory awareness with, 7) Autism: concentration, fine detail processing and shares memory with, 8) DCD/Dyspraxia: empathy, intuition and shares verbal skills with Dyscalculia.

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Image Description for Figure 5.9

A heading on a note reads, "I like being Autistic because:" and is surrounded by brightly colored doodles of a yellow light bulb and a pink brain with a red heart inside. The next part of the note reads, " The same parts of my brain that disable me, also allow me to develop multi-disciplinary talents. Nevermind savantism; I have many skills which I attribute to the exact same aspects of my neurology that handicap me. Disability is nothing to be ashamed of and the spectrum is rife with ability too!"

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Image Description for Figure 5.16

Overview

The chart shows the percentage distribution of students in each racial/ethnic group by % of that racial/ethnic group in the school, 2018-19 school year. The overwhelming majority of students who tend to share racial/ethnic background with their classmates are White and the least majority is those of two or more races, Pacific Islander, Asian American, and American Indian/Native American.

Data table

Percentage distribution of students in each racial/ethnic group, by % of that racial/ethnic group in the school, 2018-19 school year

	More than 90%	75-85%	50-74%	More than 50%
White	17.6	29.4	31.6	78.7
Hispanic	16.1	15.7	24.2	55.9
Black	13.2	11.1	17.8	42.0

	More than 90%	75-85%	50-74%	More than 50%
American Indian/ Alaska Native	12.8	4.7	6.6	24.1
Asian American	n/a	Not shown	11.0	14.3
Pacific Islander	n/a	Not shown	5.7	7.2
Two or more races	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.1

Return to Figure 5.16

Image Description for Figure 5.18

The illustration presents three similar but different images. The first is “Equality” and shows 3 people of different heights, each standing on the same size box in an attempt to look over a fence to view a baseball game. Only 2 of the people can see over the fence. The second image is “Equity” and shows the same 3 people, only this time the tall person has no box to stand on but can still see over the fence, the person of medium height is standing on one box and can see over the fence. The shortest person is standing on 2 boxes and can finally see over the fence. The third image is “Equity for all” and adds a fourth person to the group sitting in a wheelchair. This time the solid wood fence has been swapped out for a chain link fence and all four of the people can see the game.

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Image Description for Figure 5.19

A graph compares employment for people with various levels of education. Overall, educational attainment correlates with less unemployment and higher hourly earnings. That is, the more education people tend to have, the less likely they are to be unemployed and the more money they are likely to make in their jobs. 9.2% of people without a high school diploma are unemployed, and when employed, their average hourly earnings are $15.52. 7% of people with a high school diploma are unemployed, and when employed, their average hourly earnings are $19.74. 6.3% of people with come college (but no degree) are unemployed, and when employed, their average hourly earnings are $21.93. 5.2% of people with a two-year college degree are unemployed, and when employed, their average hourly earnings are $23.45. 3.5% of people with a four-year degree or higher are unemployed, and when employed, their average hourly earnings are $35.89.

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Image Description for Figure 5.20

A flow chart shows how individual characteristics relate to income, financial decision-making, and ultimately wealth. The individual characteristics include cognitive ability, non-cognitive traits (“grit”), socio-economic status, education itself, and education by-products (educated spouse, inventive to become financially savvy).

Return to Figure 5.20

Image Description for Figure 5.25

A detailed graph compares access to technology between rural, suburban, and urban Americans by comparing the percentage of U.S. adults who say they have or own different types of technology.

A set of four line graphs display percentages represented by light blue lines for suburban respondents, gray lines for urban respondents, and dark blue lines for rural respondents. Above each graph, dark text shows a different item U.S. adults claim to own.

According to the graphs, the following percentages own home broadband: 79 percent of suburban respondents, 77 percent of urban respondents, and 72 percent of rural respondents.

The following percentages own a smartphone: 84 percent of suburban respondents, 89 percent of urban respondents, and 80 percent of rural respondents.

The following percentages own a tablet: 54 percent of suburban respondents, 55 percent of urban respondents, and 44 percent of rural respondents.

The following percentages own a desktop/laptop computer: 78 percent of suburban respondents, 80 percent of urban respondents, and 72 percent of rural respondents.

Return to Figure 5.25

Image Description for Figure 5.26

The interdependent solution includes federal and state government

Return to Figure 5.26

Image Description for Figure 6.3

This resource is a graphic novel, which looks like a comic book. Each page has images and text with a cartoonish background.

Page 1: Homelessness: Grace Wins Haven, a Case Study by Harris.

Page 2: 9 photos show a brown and white dog resting outside; piles of folded clothes and blankets; people moving amongst racks of clothes; a refinished bathroom; two smiling adults; a row of lockers with signs posted on them; a woman smiling at desk doing paperwork; shelves of boxed food; and people standing outside a building with a couch for resting.

Page 3: A Q&A with Traci Flowers, Executive Director of Grace Wins Haven.

Harris: Where did you get the idea to start a day resource shelter?

Traci: I applied for a position at the Portland Rescue Mission and was one of the two finalists. I had life experience and the other applicant had a college degree. I didn't want the position if I wasn't the clear choice, so I took myself out of the running for the job. I felt that God told me," I didn't give you part of Portland, I gave you all of Newport." I then proceeded to open Grace wins Haven Day Resource Center, which serves clients ranging from toddlers all the way to people in their 80's and 90's.

Harris: What is your vision for Grace Wins Haven?

Traci: My Visions for Grace wins Haven is to offer compassion, love and a hand up to facilitate change in the lives of the houseless. I would like to start either a shelter or a tiny house program where people can live while working on goals.

Harris: How did you start Grace Wins Haven?

Traci: My mother owned the House of Bargains Thrift store, and when it closed, the building was available for Grace Wins Haven. I started fund raising, a Facebook page, and talked with churches and the community about the shelter.

Harris: What services does Grace Wins Haven provide clients?

Traci: Currently we help our clients obtain a job, sign up for disability services, get their record expunged, and create goals to promote a more successful future. We offer our clients a smile and provide showers, laundry facilities, food, and connections to other agencies. We take the time to converse with our clients about their lives. We want our clients to feel safe and valued.

Harris: What are your main challenges?

Traci: Our main challenge is not enough funding. On an average, we feed 50 individuals daily, (about 100 different individuals a week) costing around $1,000 a week to supply food for our clients.

Page 4: A photo collage under the heading, "Houselessness goes beyond the individual."

A person in a leather jacket and a hooded sweatshirt sits outside on a sidewalk, bent forward, head down, beside a travel bag with a pink scarf folded on top. A white car parked in an alley has belongings across the dashboard. Two tents on an urban sidewalk are covered in tarps. A set of tarps along a sidewalk provide shelter in front of a travel trailer.

Page 5: Q&A with Traci Flowers, Executive Director of Grace Wins Haven, continued.

Harris: How do you see houselessness going beyond the individual?

Traci: Our street is lined with cars that provide shelter to many people. The scene is familiar with ones in other cities, along with tents under bridges and along the road, and campers parked along the street with belongings spilling out of them. Due to the Camping Ordinance (Ordinance No. 2198), that the Newport, Oregon, City Council adopted on October 3rd, 2022 (Lipp, 2022), businesses may start seeing people or even entire camps outside doors, which makes both the businesses and unhoused individuals uncomfortable.

Harris: What emotional toll does houselessness have you seen on clients?

Traci: During the Covid pandemic, we saw a lot of paranoia and anxiety. Clients wondered who would take care of them if they became sick, which created overwhelming panic. The emotional impact of the Covid pandemic is still impacting our clients. Our clients exhibit anger, anxiety, hurt and sadness. We have a service dog, Tank, who provides comfort for our clients. I have witnessed clients who are near manic calm down and regulate after spending time with Tank.

Page 6: Homelessness results from a conflict of values: City council, government, neighbors, and businesses.

Page 7: Q&A with Traci Flowers, Executive Director of Grace Wins Haven, continued.

Harris: How do you see houselessness as a conflict of values?

Traci: Grace wins Haven is near the high school, an industrial and business area and private residence. Some of our neighbors and nearby businesses don't want the shelter or houseless individuals in their neighborhood

The new Camping Ordinance is an example of a conflict in values. The City Council is made up of a wide range of representation and the basis of the Camping Ordinance is fair. However, the city had to include parameters that many of the council members did not agree with but were legally bound by the government to include. Some members of City Council went against their own values in passing the Camping Ordinance.

It is common for houseless individuals who are female, to go against their morals just to survive. They feel that they need to have a male in their life to provide safety, which leads sex trafficking (exchanging sex for someone to watch out for them) and a focus on finding a male to be in relationship with.

Page 7: Inequalities in regards to houselessness: Social location. A person with a hat, beard, and suspenders sits in the driver seat of a car with the windows down. The person is using an electric oxygen tank and reading a book. A thought bubble above the person asks, "Where am I going to plug my oxygen tank at night?"

Page 8: Q&A with Traci Flowers, Executive Director of Grace Wins Haven, continued.

Harris: Previously mentioned the Camping Ordinance (Ordinance No. 2198) that the Newport, Oregon, City Council adopted on October 3rd 2022. What inequality have arisen due to the Camping Ordinance?

Traci: There is language in the new Camping Ordinance that refers to walking distance of service, but in that term, lies inequality. The walking difference varies depending on the social location of ability, whether one is in a wheelchair or walker or has trouble walking. The new Camping Ordinance prohibits people from camping within 200 feet of houseless services, which is a life-or-death problem for one of our clients, a 76 year old gentleman, (the picture on the previous page), who plugs his oxygen tank into Grace Wins Haven at night. Due to his need to plug his oxygen in at night, he is more impacted by houselessness than other populations and unfortunately, his disability does not hit a high enough mark to qualify for Senior Services.

Harris: What other inequalities in regards to intersectionality, have you witnessed?

Traci: Clients with past felony records, existing health issues and families with children who have disabilities, also face inequality in regards to being houseless. An 89 year old client is going to be evicted, even though she has lived in her house for over 20 years. The person she was renting from passed away and the house is being sold. Even though there are many organizations and programs available, including the Turn Key program (a Lincoln City shelter program), applicants have to fall within certain categories to be eligible for services. Unfortunately, our 89-year-old client does not qualify for any of the services.

Our clients face many inequalities and jobs are difficult to obtain without identification, an address, clean clothes, a shower, a place to store their belongings, or transportation. For example:

- A client is living in a tent in woods and the nearest services or programs are located in Salem, Albany, or Corvallis. The client does not have a car for transportation.
- One youth, who was in his 20s, found employment at a local fast food restaurant. Since he did not have a place to store his belongings, he stashed them in the bushes, where they were stolen while he was working. He ended up missing work while he was trying to find his items, resulting in termination of employment.
- One client, who lived in her house for 40 years, became houseless when her spouse died and she was not able to afford housing.
- A mom and her son, who has autism, have unstable housing. The son was bullied in school due to his disability, so his mother unenrolled him from school.
- A gentleman, who was a felon 25 years ago, cannot secure housing even though he has not had any more marks on his record.

Some of our clients experience poverty, substance abuse disorder, poor mental health and have medical conditions. It is difficult for individuals after they have a heart attack or stroke, to pay rent and keep current on bills. A lack of education makes it difficult for them to fill out medical paperwork, causing a barrier to obtaining medical help.

Page 9: Houselessness is socially constructed but real in its consequences: rent expenses, low wages, competitive housing market, and inflation.

Page 10: Q&A with Traci Flowers, Executive Director of Grace Wins Haven, continued.

Harris: How do you see houselessness as socially constructed, but real in its consequences?

Traci: Many of our clients are unhoused due to an increase in rent, or even a small increase in income, causing them to no longer qualifying for Section 8, resulting in a lack of housing in their price range. Many rentals require the applicant to earn three times their rent and deposits on utilities, which could add up to $6,000, just to move into a rental, which is not possible on a limited income.

Low-paying jobs, inflation and a competitive housing market also add to the difficulty in securing housing.

Page 11: What can be done: Interdependence. A college of 9 images includes a series of resources working together to help the houseless meet basic needs. A building titled Newport Head Start Center; A logo for Safe Families for Children, A Program of Hearts with a Mission; the exterior of an apartment building; Grocery Outlet; a sticker for Grace Wins Haven; the outside of a storage facility; logo for Samaritan House; City Hall; Community Services Consortium: Helping People, Changing Live.

Page 11: Q&A with Traci Flowers, Executive Director of Grace Wins Haven, continued.

Harris: How do you see organizations working together to wrap around our houseless population?

Traci: In proximity to Grace Wins Haven is Head Start, the Food Bank, and the Avery Building, which houses unemployment services, food stamps, Community Services Consortium and vocational rehab. The organizations collaborate with each other to create a safety net for Newport's unhoused population. Due to the close proximity of the organizations, an able-bodied unhoused person is able to walk between the support services. We connect clients with services at the Avery building, the Food Bank, and Head Start if they have children who meet the Head Start requirements. If unhoused people initially go to the other organizations, the organizations connect the unhoused individuals with Grace Wins Haven. The Samaritan House Shelter, Safe Families, Grocery Outlet, the City of Newport, LCSD Help Program, churches and other organizations work together to provide support for the houseless population in Lincoln City.

Harris: How can people donate to the shelter?

Traci: We accept checks, donations through Facebook, and our website, Gracewinshaven.org has a place for PayPal donations.

Page 12: Bibliography

Newport adopts camping ordinance (website)

Flowers, Traci. Interview. Conducted by harris. October 20, 2022.

Attribution

Pictures taken at Grace Wins Haven are used in this project with permission.

Return to Figure 6.3

Image Description for Figure 6.7

A seven-column table is shown. The column on the left lists five categories of students in a study: No needs ("Secure"); Food insecure, housing insecure, or homeless ("Insecure"); Food and housing insecure; Housing insecure and homeless; Food insecure and housing. According to the next two columns, at a two-year college, 14,965 or 30 percent of students fit in the first category; 34,111 or 70 percent fit in the second category; 19,021 or 39 percent fit in the third category; 7,846 or 16 percent fit in the fourth category; and 6,485 or 13 percent fit in the fifth category. At a four-year college, 10,179 students or 39 percent fit in the first category; 15,861 or 61 percent fit in the second; 7,723 or 30 percent fit in the third; 2,917 or 11 percent fit in the fourth; and 2,394 or 9 percent fit in the fifth. Overall, 25,144 students in the study, or 33 percent, are "Secure." 49,972 students, or 67 percent, are "Insecure." 26,744 students, or 36 percent overall, are food and housing insecure; 10,763 or 14 percent are food insecure and homeless; and 8,879 or 12 percent are "food insecure and housing."

Return to Figure 6.7

Image Description for Figure 6.11

A line graph is shown. The header reads “Share of aggregate income held by U.S. middle class has plunged since 1970.” The subheading reads: “% of aggregate household income held by lower-, middle-, and upper-income households.” On a line graph, a tan line representing middle income households, descends from 62% in 1970 to 42% in 2020. A dark green line representing upper income households ascends from 29% in 1970 to 50% in 2020. A light blue line representing lower income households descends slightly from 10% in 1970 to 8% in 2020.

Return to Figure 6.11

Image Description for Figure 6.18

The chart of 3 columns contains 3 categories: 1) Racist policies (laws and policies), 2) racial inequities (impact and consequences, 3) Racist ideas (rationalization). To demonstrate that racist policies and ideas sustain racial inequities, arrows are used across the columns to show what components reinforce this racist system.

- Slavery policies are legal from the 1600s to 1863, leading to enslavement of generations of Black people, which leads to ideas including, savage culture, pagan values, immoral souls, intellectually less, aesthetically inferior, needing direction and saving, shiftless and aimless, unworthy
- Those same racist ideas lead to policies including, de facto policies of segregation of free Black people in the North during the 1830s
- The de facto policies lead to impoverished conditions, drop in property values in impoverished segregated neighborhoods, leading to racist ideas that “black people make property rates go down” which inspires de facto policies, i.e. block busting as creatively shown in the film Raisin in the Sun, wrong side of town
- These racist ideas lead to racist policies like 1930s federally sanctioned redlining, racist conditions, covenants, and restrictions (CC&R’s), exploitive credit and lending policies
- These racist policies lead to lower home values, reduced services, increased poverty, lost generational wealth which leads to racist ideas, driving, walking, or jogging “while Black,” unconditional compliance with police expectation, and preconceived notion about criminality
- These racist ideas lead to racist policies like, racial profiling, increased policing, gentrification
- These racist policies lead to Black people over-represented in housing insecurity statistics, and criminal justice system and Black people have less access to capital to build generational wealth leading back to racist ideas

Return to Figure 6.18

Image Description for Figure 6.20

A black and white photograph shows two male-presenting, dark skin-toned people sitting on the stoop of the National Association of Real Estate Boards holding protest signs. A third male-presenting person with a lighter skin tone stands talking to a police officer.

Return to Figure 6.20

Image Description for Figure 7.2

Line chart from the US Census Bureau shows age at first marriage.This dipped down from 26 for men and 22 for women in 1890 to about 20 for women and 22 for men in the 1950s and ‘60s. The lines then rise quickly to 2020, when there is again a slight dip downwards. In 2022, the median age of first marriage was about 30 for men and 28 for women.

Source: US Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 1890-1940, and Current Population Survey, Annual Economics Supplements, 1947-2022. Note: Starting in 2019, estimates for marriage now include same-sex married couples.

Return to Figure 7.2

Image Description for Figure 7.3

A color-coded map of the world shows the availability of marriage for same-sex partners in 2023. Same-sex marriage is legal in North America, Brazil, Australia, South America, New Zealand, Chile, Argentina, several other Latin American countries, and

Western Europe. Civil unions or other partnerships are recognized in China, Bolivia, Italy, Greece, and several smaller Eastern European countries. Only foreign same-sex marriages are recognized in Namibia, Nepal, Israel, and several small eastern European countries. Unrecognized cohabitation is available in Poland, India, and Slovakia. In Japan and Cambodia, recognition varies by region. Same-sex relationships are unrecognized in North Korea, much of the Caribbean and Pacific islands, Central America, Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. They are banned or not legal in Russia, Indonesia, and throughout much of Africa, the Near and Middle East, and some small Latin American countries.

If you would like to see specific data for any country, please refer to the Same Sex Marriage Country Table at Our World in Data.

Return to Figure 7.3

Image Description for Figure 7.5

A bar chart shows that the number of people living in multigenerational households (represented in millions) increased steadily from around 15 million in 1971 to 60 million in 2021.

Notes

Data are represented in ten year intervals. Multigenerational households include at least two generations of adults mainly 25 and older or grandparents and grandchildren younger than 25.

Data source

“Financial Issues Top the List of Reasons U.S. Adults Live in Multigenerational Homes,” Pew Research Center analysis of Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) data files for 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011, and 2021(IPUMS).

Attribution

Design by Michaela Willi Hooper and Elizabeth Pearce, Open Oregon Educational Resources, CC BY 4.0.

Return to Figure 7.5

Image Description for Figure 7.6

Bar chart visualizing the data in the following table:

Family Structure	1960	1980	2014
Two parents, first marriage	73%	61%	46%
Two parents remarried	14%	16%	15%
Single parent	9%	19%	26%
No parent	4%	4%	5%
Cohabiting parent	N/A	N/A	7%

Notes: Data regarding cohabitation are not available for 1960 and 1980. In those years, children with cohabiting parents are included under “single parent.”

Data source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1960 and 1980 Decennial Census and 2014 American Community Survey (IPUMS). https://www.pewresearch.org/social-t...-family-today/

Attribution

Designed by Elizabeth Pearce and Michaela Willi Hooper, Open Oregon Educational Resources, CC BY 4.0.

Return to Figure 7.6

Image Description for Figure 7.14

Summary

Latino is the term for people whose ancestors came from Latin America, including Central and South America, Brazil, and some of the Caribbean islands. It is represented by an image of the western hemisphere with Latin America highlighted (see next section for details).

Hispanic is the term for Native speakers of Spanish, which includes people from Spain but not people from countries like Brazil.

Countries that are Latino, Hispanic, or Both

Only Latino

- Brazil
- French Guiana
- Guadeloupe
- Martinique
- Saint Barthélemy
- Saint Martin

Only Hispanic

- Spain

Both Latino and Hispanic

- Argentina
- Bolivia
- Chile
- Colombia
- Costa Rica
- Cuba
- Dominican Republic
- Ecuador
- El Salvador
- Guatemala
- Honduras
- Mexico
- Nicaragua
- Panama
- Paraguay
- Peru
- Puerto Rico
- Uruguay
- Venezuela

Attribution

Latino vs. Hispanic Infographic by Kim Puttman and Michaela Willi Hooper is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. Map image: “Latin America (orthographic projection)” by Heraldry is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

Return to Figure 7.14

Image Description for Figure 7.15

This infographic shows the immigration statuses that a mixed-status family can experience.

In order from left to right the boxes are:

- Undocumented/out of status
- Non-Immigrant Visa (Student, Scholars, Students, Tourists)
- Asylee/Refugee DACA Temporary Protected Status
- US Citizen Immigrant Visa (Permanent Resident/Green Card)

Below the boxes is a continuum arrow.

People move from Fewer Protections/More Risk to More Protections/Lower Risk

Return to Figure 7.15

Image Description for Figure 7.17

Opponents of illegal immigration are fond of telling foreigners to “get in line” before coming to work in America. But what does that line actually look like, and how many years (or decades) does it take to get through? Try it yourself with this text description of the flowchart!

Start: A person stands at a door that says USA and looks confused.

Do you have family in the U.S.?

- If yes, proceed to Is your family a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident?
- If no, proceed to Are you skilled?

Is your relative a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident?

- If your relative is a U.S. citizen, proceed to If your relative is a United States citizen.
- If your relative is a lawful permanent resident, proceed to If your relative is a lawful permanent resident.

Are you skilled, which is visualized by a cartoon person on a unicycle juggling.

- If yes, proceed to Do you have a college degree of specialty occupation?
- If yes, proceed to Can you prove that you’re a genius? How about a star athlete? Or an investor with $1 million dollars? Question is visualized by a soccer player kicking a bag of money.
- If no, you end at Sorry! There is virtually no process for unskilled immigrants without relations in the U.S. to apply for permanent legal residence. Only 10,000 green cards are allotted every year, and the wait time approaches infinity. (Those who receive H-2A or H-2B temporary visas for seasonal work cannot transition to a green card). When the flow chart reaches one of these points, people of different ages and genders are shown being kicked out of a door.

Do you have a college degree of specialty occupation? Okay, then you have a shot! Do you have a job offer?

- If yes, proceed to Is your employer willing to file paperwork for labor certification? And conduct a new job search for your position? And pay up to $10,000 in legal and other fees?
- If no, you end at Sorry, you’re out of luck.

Can you prove that you’re a genius? How about a star athlete? Or an investor with $1 million dollars?

- If yes, end at Congratulations! You have found the quickest way to get a green card, taking 12 to 18 months. But you would have made it anywhere, Mr. Beckham.
- With your green card you can become a citizen in 5-6 years. Total time to immigrate and become a citizen: 6 to 7 years. People reaching this point in the flowchart are represented by a bedraggled, tired person with a long beard.

Is your employer willing to file paperwork for labor certification? And conduct a new job search for your position? And pay up to $10,000 in legal and other fees?

- If yes, the wait time for a green card is typically 6-10 years. Proceed to Can your employer wait 6 to 10 years for you to start work?
- If no, you end at Sorry, you’re out of luck.

Can your employer wait 6 to 10 years for you to start work?

- If yes, after your green card, count on another five to six years for citizenship. Total time to immigrate and become a citizen: 10 to 16 years.
- If no, proceed to Is your employer willing to apply for your temporary work visa (H-1B)?

Is your employer willing to apply for your temporary work visa (H-1B)?

- If yes, end at Then you have a 50/50 chance of getting your H-1B, because these visas are capped at 85,000 per year, well below the total demand. They run out on the first day they become available. If you are lucky enough to get one, you can start working in the country and your employer can apply for your labor certification and green card. This is visualized by someone flipping a coin.

- If no, end at Sorry, you're out of luck.

If your relative is a United States citizen, which is visualized by a person waving an American flag.

The only path here is from Is your family a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident? Are you that relative's parent, spouse, or minor child?

- If yes, Congratulations! You've found one of the easiest ways to become an American.
- There is no annual cap on the number of spouses, minor children, or parents of U.S. citizens who can enter, and they generally can receive green cards.
- After you file your naturalization papers and endure 6 to 12 months of processing delays, you can take a language and civics test. Pass it, and you're a citizen.
- End at Total time to immigrate and become a citizen: best case: 6 to 7 years.
- If no, adult children and siblings of U.S. citizens can apply for a green card.
- Wait time depends on country and marital status.
- Single adult children: 6 to 14 year wait.
- Married adult children: 7 to 15 year wait.
- Siblings of U.S. citizens: 11 to 22 year wait.
- With a green card, you can likely become a citizen after six years.
- End at Total time to immigrate and become a citizen: 12 to 28 years.

If your family is a lawful permanent resident

Are you the spouse or child of a lawful permanent resident?

- If yes, proceed to If you're a child, are you a minor?
- If no, end at Sorry, you're out of luck.

If you're a child, are you a minor?

- If yes, Spouses and minor children of lawful permanent residents can apply.
- Wait time depends on home country. Wait time: 5 to 7 years.
- With a green card you can likely become a citizen after 6 years.
- End at Total time to immigrate and become a citizen:11 to 13 years
- If no, proceed to Are you single?

Are you single?

- If yes, wait time depends on home country.
- Wait time for a single adult of a lawful permanent resident: 9 to 14 years.
- End at total time to immigrate and become a citizen: 14 to 20 years.
- If no, Sorry, you don't qualify to apply.

Attribution

What Part of Legal Immigration Don't You Understand by Mike Flynn and Shikha Dalmia. Illustrated by Terry Colon. Flynn is director of government affairs and Dalmia is a senior policy analyst at Reason Foundation. This chart was developed by Reason Foundation in collaboration with the National Foundation for American Policy.

This text description was created for accessibility with permission from Reason Magazine.

Return to Figure 7.17

Image Description for Figure 7.20

The illustration separates each letter of LGBTQIA+ into a colorful circle which is connected to the next letter showing how they are all connected. Above and below the letters are brief definitions of the terms:

- Lesbian: Women who are attracted to women

- Gay: People who like people of the same sex. Often used for men who are attracted to men. It is a concept valid for all genders.
- Bisexual: People who experience attraction to people of multiple genders.
- Transgender: People who identify with the sex opposite to the one they were assigned at birth. This has no relation to sexual preferences.
- Queer: People whose sexuality goes beyond the heteronormative and what is accepted by society.
- Intersex: People who were born with genital organs of both sexes (male and female). It is a genetic condition.
- Asexual: People uncomfortable with sexual contact with anyone. They have no interest in relating sexually with their partners.
- More

Return to Figure 7.20

Image Description for Figure 7.27

Two circles at the top of the images are connected with a reciprocal arrow.

The first circle says “Income: The dollars received from salaries, wages, and payments.”

The second circle says, “Wealth: The total extent of an individual’s accumulated assets and resources.”

The bottom half of the graphic shows Community Cultural Wealth in the center. All the arrows of the smaller circles converge on the central circle, Community Cultural Wealth.

The smaller circles include:

- Cultural Capital
- Aspirational Capital
- Familial Capital
- Social Capital
- Navigational Capital
- Resistant Capital
- Linguistic Capital

Return to Figure 7.27

Image Description for Figure 8.3

A line chart shows that C02 levels have historically been below 300 parts per million for 800,000 years before 1950. C02 did go up and down over time, but beginning in 1950 it rose precipitously to over 420 parts per million.

Attribution

The data source was reconstructed from ice cores and the chart is credited to NOAA.

Return to Figure 8.3

Image Description for Figure 8.5

A world map shows the vulnerability of certain countries to climate change. Countries with very low vulnerability are shaded yellow; those with low vulnerability are tan; moderate vulnerability is represented with brown; and countries with high vulnerability are red. According to this legend, the United States, Australia, parts of Western Europe, and the southern part of South America experience low vulnerability. Russia, most of Africa and Asia, and most of South America experience moderate or high vulnerability. Data is sourced from the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative.

Return to Figure 8.5

Image Description for Figure 8.6

A bar chart showing the countries with the highest annual per-capita C02 emissions (in tons).

Data table:

Qatar	37.0
Mongolia	27.0

Kuwait	20.8
Saudi Arabia	18.0
Kazakhstan	15.5
Australia	15.3
UAE	15.2
U.S.	14.3

Only includes countries with 2 million inhabitants or more, 2020 figures, latest available.

Attribution

Sources: UNFCCC/CDIAC/BP via Global Carbon Project, World Bank. Statista, CC BY-ND.

Return to Figure 8.6

Image Description for Figure 8.7

Nigeria is on the West Coast of Africa. It is surrounded by Benin, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and the Atlantic Ocean.

Other countries in the region of West Africa include:

- Burkina Faso
- Cabo Verde (Cape Verde)
- Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast)
- The Gambia
- Ghana
- Guinea
- Guinea-Bissau
- Liberia
- Mali
- Mauritania
- Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha
- Senegal
- Sierra Leone
- Togo

Return to Figure 8.7

Image Description for Figure 8.9

The culture wheel is a visual representation of a specific culture's beliefs, actions, and backgrounds. This wheel wants you to consider these categories: 1) values, 2) greater community, 3) knowledge and stories, 4) language, 5) traditions and rituals, 6) techniques and skills, 7) tools and objects, 8) the arts, and 9) food and drink.

Return to Figure 8.9

Image Description for Figure 8.13

Two triangles next to each other.

The first triangle represents the western perspective. From bottom to top, the levels are:

- Physiological
- Safety
- Belongingness/Love
- Esteem
- Know/Understand
- Aesthetic

- Self-actualization
- Transcendence

The second triangle represents the First Nations' perspective. From bottom to top, the levels are:

- Self actualization
- Community actualization
- Cultural perpetuity

Return to Figure 8.13

Image Description for Figure 8.25

A line chart shows that historical greenhouse gas emissions rose until 2020. In the future, emissions will rise or fall based on different paths:

- The path to 1.5 degrees celsius goal leads to the lowest emissions, falling below 0 gigatons of C02 a year by 2080
- The path to 2 degrees celsius goal is next lowest, almost reaching 0 by 2100
- With ambitious net zero pledges (2.1 degrees celsius) emissions will fall to between 10 and 20 gigatons by 2100
- With current pledges (2.6 degrees celsius) emissions will fall below 30 gigatons by 2100.
- With current policies (2.7 degrees celsius to 3.1 degrees celsius) emissions will be somewhere between 30 and 50 gigatons by 2100.

Return to Figure 8.25

Image Description for Figure 9.6

Not just pathological behavior on the part of a few extreme people but…

A timeline shows the following events:

- Slave codes (1702-1805). Example: "All Negro, mulatto and Indian slaves within this domain…shall be held to be real estate. If any slave resist his master…correcting such slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction…the master shall be free of all punishment…as if such accident had never happened." (Virginia Slave Codes, 1705)
- Emancipation Proclamation ends slavery Jan 1, 1863.
- Black Codes (1865-1877). Example: Black people who broke labor contracts were subject to arrest, beating and forced labor… Passed by a political system in which Black people effectively had no voice, the black codes were enforced by all-white police and state militia forces…across the south. (Black Codes, History.com).
- Jim Crow Laws (1877-1968). Example: Those who attempt to defy Jim Crow laws often faced arrest, fines, jail sentences, violence and death.

Return to Figure 9.6

Image Description for Figure 9.10

Cyclic path graphic consisting of three black arrows. In the center of the graph in large black text is the text "Implicit Bias" with a small dotted arrow pointing to the phrase, "Structural Racism" with another small dotted arrow pointing to "Implicit Bias." The top left arrow is titled "Priming, Associations, Assumptions." The top right arrow is titled "History, Policies, Practices."

To the left of the arrow are bullet points that state the following:

- Voting Rights
- FHA Loans
- Residential segregation
- Access to education, green space, resources, safety, healthcare, etc.
- Jobs, hiring, and advancement

The bottom arrow is titled, "Inequitable Outcomes & Racial Disparities."

Return to Figure 9.10

Image Description for Figure 9.11

A map of Oregon shows that the following counties have passed ballots to join Greater Idaho:

- Sherman
- Morrow
- Wheeler
- Union
- Wallowa
- Jefferson
- Grant
- Baker
- Klamath
- Lake
- Harney
- Malheur

Crook County is voting in 2024, and all the other Oregon counties have either rejected a ballot measure or never voted on one.

Data are from Ballotpedia and current as of October 2023.

Return to Figure 9.11

Image Description for Figure 9.12

1. Emergence: People become aware of an issue and leaders emerge.
2. Coalescence: People join together, organize, and take action.
3. Institutionalization: The movement becomes an established organization.
4. Decline: The relevance of the movement declines over time.

Return to Figure 9.12

Image Description for Figure 10.2

Rate rations compared to White, Non-Hispanic Persons	American Indian or Alaskan Native, Non-Hispanic Persons	Asian, Non-Hispanic Persons	Black or African American, Non Hispanic Persons	Hispanic or Latino Persons
Cases	1.5x	0.8x	1.1x	1.5x
Hospitalization	2.8x	0.8x	2.2x	2.1x
Death	2.1x	0.8x	1.7x	1.8x

Return to Figure 10.2

Image Description for Figure 10.6

Social determinants of health surround the individual including: 1) health care access and quality, 2) neighborhood and built environment, 3) social and community context, 4) economic stability, 5) education access and quality.

Return to Figure 10.6

Image Description for Figure 10.7

ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) potentially impact health outcomes later in life.

A layered pyramid is shown, starting with dark blue layers at the foundation and getting lighter toward the top. An identically-colored bar to the right shows a gradient from “Conception” at the bottom to “Death” at the top. On the pyramid, the layers read as follows from the bottom up:

1. Generational Embodiment/Historical Trauma
2. Social Conditions/Local Context

3. Adverse Childhood Experiences
4. Disrupted Neurodevelopment
5. Social, Emotional, & Cognitive Impairment
6. Adoption of Health Risk Behavior
7. Disease, Disability, & Social Problems
8. Early Death

Return to Figure 10.7

Image Description for Figure 10.8

Rate per 1,000 live births; 1) Non-hispanic Black, 10.8, 2) Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 9.4, 3) American Indian or Alaskan Native, 8.2, 4) Hispanic, 4.9, 5) Non-Hispanic White, 4.6, 6) Asian, 3.6.

Return to Figure 10.8

Image Description for Figure 10.9

A horizontal bar graph is shown. Text at the top reads: “Number of Global COVID-19 Deaths Where the Sex is Known, January 2021 – November 2021.” Four bars represent the months of January, June, October, and November in 2021. A blue section of each bar represents male deaths, a purple section represents female deaths, and a gray section represents deaths of unknown sex. According to the graph:

Month	Male Deaths	Female Deaths	Deaths of Unknown Sex
January 2021	777,033	578,239	633,058
June 2021	1,612,922	1,227,759	971,336
October 2021	2,002,122	1,535,558	1,370,019
November 2021	2,080,293	1,586,676	1,438,464

Return to Figure 10.9

Image Description for Figure 10.11

Compared with people who are heterosexual, people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual have higher rates of health conditions associated with serious COVID-19 illness including: Asthma, Chronic Obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), stroke, kidney disease, cancer, heart disease.

Return to Figure 10.11

Image Description for Figure 10.16

A line graph shows a declining percentage over time. The graph is titled “People Living in the U.S. Who Are Uninsured: 2008-2021.” The percentage begins at 15.2% in 2008, as shown by the percentages on the y-axis and years on the x-axis, and then declines to 8.6% in 2021, with two slight bumps upward in 2010 and 2019.

Return to Figure 10.16

Image Description for Figure 11.2

The opioid crisis is represented by four concentric ovals.

The first (innermost) oval is individual. Phrases in this oval include:

- Socio-demographic factors
- Stress and trauma exposure
- Physical and mental health
- Other substance and polysubstance misuse
- Biological and genetic susceptibility
- Pain

- Risk perception
- Withdrawal symptoms
- Self-determination
- Self-stigma

The second oval is interpersonal. Phrases in this oval include:

- Family history of substance abuse
- Opioid access via family, friends, and co-workers
- Influence of family, friends, and coworkers

The third oval is community. Phrases in this oval include:

- Prescribers' perception of risk
- Types of Rx opioids
- Over-prescription
- Access to legal and illegal opioids
- Geographic variations
- Workplace and school
- Community norms
- Drug disposal facilities
- Treatment availability and access
- Quality care

The fourth (outermost) oval is society. Phrases in this oval include:

- Media and social networks
- Social stigma
- Discrimination and prejudice
- Legal & illegal advertising campaigns
- Economic conditions and employment rate
- Opioid supply and price
- Government programs and regulations
- Insurance coverage and payer policies
- Educational campaigns
- Law enforcement and policing

Return to Figure 11.2

Image Description for Figure 11.5

Demographic groups are represented by people icons to show the likelihood of incarceration for that group.

- All men: 1 in 9
- White men: 1 in 17
- Black men: 1 in 3
- Latinx men: 1 in 6
- All women: 1 in 56
- White women: 1 in 111
- Black women: 1 in 18
- Latinx women: 1 in 45

Source: The Sentencing Project

Return to Figure 11.5

Image Description for Figure 11.7

Three lines on a line chart represent Black, Hispanic, or White prisoners per 100,000 adults, ages 18 and older in each group from 2006 to 2018.

- Black people are imprisoned at the highest rates, starting at 2,261 in 2006 and dropping steadily to 1,501 in 2018.
- Hispanic people have the next highest rate of imprisonment, starting at 1,073 in 2006 and dropping to 797 in 2018.
- White people have the lowest rate of imprisonment, beginning at 324 in 2006 and dropping slightly to 268 in 2018.

Note: Blacks and whites include those who report being only one race and are non-Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. Prisoners are those sentenced to more than a year in state or federal prison.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics/Pew Research Center.

Return to Figure 11.7

Image Description for Figure 11.8

White people are underrepresented in prisons and jails while Black, Native, and Latino people are overrepresented. This is visualized by lines going from the percent of the US population of the group to the percent incarcerated.

- White people are 60% of the population and 38% of the incarcerated population (line goes down steeply).
- Black people are 13% of the population and 38% of the incarcerated population (line goes up steeply).
- Latino people are 18% of the population and 21% of the incarcerated population (line goes up slightly).
- Native people are 0.9% of the population and 2% of the incarcerated population (line goes up).

Source: Prison Policy Initiative. US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2019. Tables B02001 and DP05. For category definition and selection details, see www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2022#methodology

Return to Figure 11.8

Image Description for Figure 11.10

A line chart represents deaths per 100,000 for the three different types of opioids as well as for any opioids. All rose between 1999 and 2020. Synthetic opioids have risen at a far greater rate than other forms of opioids beginning in 2013.

Wave 1: Rise in Prescription Opioid Overdose Deaths (Natural and Semi-Synthetic Opioids and Methadone)

Deaths are shown beginning in 1999 at about 2 per 100,000. Deaths then rose steadily until they were about 4 per 100,000 in 2011. They then dip and go up slightly a few times after that, most recently dipping in 2019 and rising in 2020.

Wave 2: Rise in Heroin Overdose Deaths (Started in 2010)

Heroin deaths are below 1 per 100,000 until 2010 when they begin to rise steeply, peaking around 2016 around 4 per 100,000. Since then rates have declined slightly but are still above 2 per 100,000.

Wave 3: Rise in Synthetic Opioid Overdose Deaths (Started in 2013; e.g., Tramadol or Fentany, prescribed or illicitly manufactured)

Deaths are below 1 per 100,000 until 2013, when they begin to rise steeply, especially since 2019. In 2020 deaths peaked at around 18 per 100,000.

Any Opioid

Deaths increased gradually from around 3 per 100,000 until 2013, when they sat around 6 per 100,000. They then increased steeply to about 14 per 100,000 in 2016. They then dipped slightly and then increased at a higher rate to around 20 per 100,000.

Source: National Vital Statistics System Mortality File

Return to Figure 11.10

Image Description for Figure 11.14

Needles represent HIV and Hepatitis C.

Myth 1: SEPs only give out needles

- SPES safely dispose of used needles
- Tests and treats for HIV and Hepatitis C
- Offers referrals to medical, mental health, and social services
- Abscess and wound care

Myth 2: SEPs increase injection drug use

- Offers referrals to substance use disorder (SUD) treatment
- SEP participants are 5x more likely to enter treatment for SUD
- In Seattle, intravenous drug users who had used SEPs reported a 75% decrease in injection drug use

Source: amfAR.org

Return to Figure 11.14

Image Description for Figure 12.2

The graphic displays the four stages in the Mental Health and Well-being Continuum in the form of 2 intersecting lines. At the top of the vertical line is optimal mental well-being which leads down to minimal mental well-being. The left side of the horizontal line is maximum mental illness which leads to the right and minimum mental illness. The intersection of lines creates four squares that contain examples. From top left to right, the examples are: 1) a person who experiences a high level of mental well-being despite being diagnosed with a mental illness and 2) a person who has a high level of mental well-being and who has no mental illness. From bottom left to right, 3) a person experiencing mental illness who has a low level of mental well-being and 4) a person who has no diagnosable mental illness who has a low level of mental well-being.

Return to Figure 12.2

Image Description for Figure 12.3

- In 2020, there were an estimated 52.9 million adults aged 18 or older in the United States with AMI. This number represented 21 percent of all U.S. adults.
- The prevalence of AMI was higher among females (25.8 percent) than males (15.8 percent).
- Young adults aged 18–25 years had the highest prevalence of AMI (30.6 percent) compared to adults aged 26–49 years (25.3 percent) and aged 50 and older (14.5 percent).
- The prevalence of AMI was highest among the adults reporting two or more races (35.8 percent), followed by White adults (22.6 percent). The prevalence of AMI was lowest among Asian adults (13.9 percent).

Return to Figure 12.3

Image Description for Figure 12.6

- In 2020, there were an estimated 14.2 million adults aged 18 or older in the United States with SMI. This number represented 5.6% of all U.S. adults.
- The prevalence of SMI was higher among females (7.0%) than males (4.2%).
- Young adults aged 18-25 years had the highest prevalence of SMI (9.7%) compared to adults aged 26-49 years (6.9%) and aged 50 and older (3.4%).
- The prevalence of SMI was highest among the adults reporting two or more races (9.9%), followed by American Indian / Alaskan Native (AI/AN) adults (6.6%). The prevalence of SMI was lowest among Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander (NH/OPI) adults (1.2%).

Return to Figure 12.6

Image Description for Figure 12.7

A column chart shows the lifetime prevalence of any mental disorder among U.S. adolescents aged 13-18 from 2001-2004.

Population group	Percent
Overall	49.5
With severe impairment	22.2
Female	51.0
Male	48.1
Ages 13-14	45.3

Population group	Percent
Overall	49.5
Ages 15-16	49.3
Ages 17-18	56.7

The chart is based on data from the National Comorbidity Survey Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A).

- Based on diagnostic interview data from the National Comorbidity Survey Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A), Figure 5 shows the lifetime prevalence of any mental disorder among U.S. adolescents aged 13-18.1
- An estimated 49.5% of adolescents had any mental disorder.
- Of adolescents with any mental disorder, an estimated 22.2% had severe impairment. DSM-IV-based criteria were used to determine impairment level.

Return to Figure 12.7

Image Description for Figure 12.9

A large infographic is shown, with a title at the top reading “Equity and Mental Health.” A subheading reads, “Understanding the Links: Equity Issues in Mental Health Significantly Impact Ontario.” The rest of the infographic is split into three sections.

The first, titled “Equity Matters for Mental Health,” is colored dark green on the left and gray on the right. A small image on the green background shows a figure pushing a globe up a slope. Underneath the image, white text says, “Lowest income Canadians report significantly poorer mental health.” On the gray background, a feminine silhouette sits in a circle next to green text that says, “Women are twice as likely to have depression as men.” Below, smaller green text says, “LGBT youth face approximately 4 times the risk of suicide than their heterosexual peers.” To the right of this text is an exclamation mark inside a pink triangle.

In the second section, on a white background, the text at the top says, “Mental Health Matters for Equity.” A large green circle contains the text, “People with lived experience of mental health issues can experience discrimination & social exclusion.” Five gray lines shoot out of the circle, connecting to smaller gray circles that say “Stigma,” “Food insecurity,” “Poverty,” “Barriers to housing,” and “Employment barriers.”

The third section is titled, “Equity and Mental Health Intersect.” It shows a Venn diagram between a green and a blue circle. The green circle says, “Experience of mental health issues.” The blue circle says, “Experience of inequities.” The space where they overlap says, “Both.”

The fine print at the bottom of the infographic cites a number of sources. A small logo on the bottom right says, “Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario.”

Return to Figure 12.9

Image Description for Figure 12.11

A vertical bar chart shows four colored bars for each of the following categories, indicated on the x-axis: White, Black or African American, Two or More Races, and Hispanic or Latino. Along the y-axis, text reads: “Annual Average Percentages and 95% Confidence Intervals.” In each category, a light blue bar represents people aged 18-25; a red bar indicates 26-34; a green bar indicates 35-49; and a dark blue bar represents people 50 and older. According to the chart, among white people with serious mental illness, 59.1% of 18 to 25-year-olds have used mental health services in the past year. Percentages are at 65.2% for 26 to 34-year-olds, 72% for 35 to 49-year-olds, and 76% for those 50 and older. Among Black people with mental illness, 43.1% in the youngest age bracket have used mental health services, with percentages at 48.7% for the next age bracket, 60% for the next, and 65% for the oldest age group. Among people of two or more races who have a mental illness, 57.8% of those in the 18-25 group have used services; 44.3% of the 26-34 group; and 74.8% of the 35-49 group. No data is represented for the 50+ group in this category. Among Hispanic or Latino respondents, 45.5% of the 18-25 group have used services; 53.1% of the 26-34 group; 64.1% of the 35-49 group; and 66.2% of the 50+ age group.

Return to Figure 12.11

Image Description for Figure 12.14

A diagonal line goes down to the left of the image, pointing to a clipboard with checkboxes for “intersex,” “male,” and “female.” This image is labeled, “Sex Assigned at Birth: What the medical community labels you.” To the right, a third image is connected to the other two with black lines, creating a triangle. This image shows a figure with dotted lines coming out of its head. Below, the label says, “Gender Expression: How you want to display your gender.” In the middle of the triangle is a picture of a brain above the words, “Gender Identity: How you identify (see yourself).”

Return to Figure 12.14

Image Description for Figure 12.16

A tree with arrows pointing at different parts.

Roots: Core Principles

A man icon stands next to this text:

- Obsession with Control
- Male Domination
- Male Identification
- Male Centeredness

Mental health example: Women are stereotyped as emotionally unstable when they are having their period.

Trunk: Institutions

Icons illustrate each of the following institutions:

- Health Care Systems
- Family
- Government
- Economy

Mental health example: Mental health services are not well-funded, especially for oppressed people.

Branches: Social Interactions

An icon of people talking to each other represents hospitals, schools, mental health clinics, families, communities, groups, and teams. Mental health example: Simon Biles didn’t compete on gymnastics team due to mental health issues.

Leaves: Individual Behavior

An icon of two people shaking hands represents the individual who participates in systems. Mental health example: Trans women experience more mental health challenges than cis women.

Attribution

Based on the idea of the patriarchal tree by R. Roosevelt Thomas Jr., developed by Esther L. Danielson and Allan G. Johnson in The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy (Temple University Press, 1997). All images are public domain/CC0. Mental health examples by Kimberly Puttman and Kathryn Burrows are licensed under CC BY 4.0.

Return to Figure 12.16

Image Description for Figure 12.24

Intersecting forms of oppression are 1) Heterosexism: system of oppression that produces inequities on the basis of sexual orientation, 2) Cissexism: system of oppression that produces inequities on the basis of gender identity, 3) Classism: system of oppression that produces inequities on the basis of class, 4) Sexism: system of oppression that produces inequities on the basis of sex and/or gender, 5) Racism: system of oppression that produces inequities on the basis of race, 6) Immigration Status: inequities can also be produced as a result of citizenship and/or immigration status, 7) Colonialism: system or practices of domination involving subjugation of a people (e.g. Indigenous people in Canada), 8) Religion: oppression on the basis of religious beliefs, practices and/or affiliations (e.g. Islamophobia, Antisemitism), 9) Ageism: system of oppression that produces inequities on the basis of age, 10) Ableism: system of oppression that produces inequities on the basis of dis/ability.

Return to Figure 12.24

Image Description for Figure 13.3

The global map displays reported deaths from COVID-19. Many continents have a rate of nearly 25,000 deaths per 100,000 people, including North and South America, Europe, Asia, as well as countries in Africa.

Return to Figure 13.3

Image Description for Figure 13.5

A vertical bar graph shows death rates in different demographics compared side-by-side from 2019 to 2020, with 2019 deaths represented by a dark blue bar and 2020 deaths represented by a gray bar. From left to right, the chart shows deaths per 100,000 people over the total U.S. population, among Hispanic men and women, among Black men and women, and among White men and women. Deaths increase in every demographic from 2019 to 2020, but not by the same amount. The smallest increase shown is among White females, a demographic in which only 75.7 more people died per 100,000 in 2020 compared to 2019. The largest increase occurs in Black men, who also show the highest overall death rate in both years. According to the chart, 1,399 Black men in 100,000 died in 2020, compared to 1,092.8 in 2019, an increase of 306.2. Smaller but still significant increases are shown in Hispanic men and women (an increase of 270.6 male deaths per 100,000 and 139.4 female deaths per 100,000), in Black women (an increase of 180.3), and in White men (an increase of 116.2).

Return to Figure 13.5

Image Description for Figure 13.10

A header reads “Health Trajectory & Functional Status.” The image below shows a human figure traveling from left to right along a chart with an x-axis representing time. To the left, a human figure stands in the middle of a series of concentric circles, separated by color: the white circle where the figure stands, followed by orange, blue, light green, light blue, gray, and pink. Starting from the inside and going outward, text in each circle reads: “Interpersonal & Social Network,” “Living Conditions,” “Neighborhoods & Communities,” “Environment,” “Institutions,” and “Social & Economic Policies.” Starting in the inner circle and cutting across the others, text reading “Genetics & Epigenetics,” accompanied by a DNA strand, creates a bridge from the human figure to the word “Exposome,” which forms the y-axis of the ensuing chart. Points along the x-axis are labeled “In-utero,” “Infancy,” “Childhood,” “Early adulthood,” “Middle age,” “Advanced age,” and “Elderly (>90 yrs).” The figure is shown at each point as, respectively, a fetus inside a mother’s womb, a baby, a child, an adult, an adult walking with a briefcase, an adult with a hat and cane, and a person using a walker with the assistance of another person. A subheading placed over the first four stages of life reads “Critical Time Windows.” Above it, another subheading reads “Phenotypic Plasticity.” From the top of the chart, a series of red, purple, and blue arrows arc down towards certain life stages. Text reading “Unfolding” points to the arcs with a black arrow. A red arrow, labeled “Suboptimal Life Course,” ends at early adulthood. The purple and blue arrows, collectively labeled “Average Life Course,” point at the middle age and elderly stages, respectively. A green arrow, labeled “Ideal Life Course,” points to another human figure at the top of the chart. This figure is larger than the others, is raising its arms, and has a halo of lines sprouting from its head. On the right side of the chart, the top half of the y-axis is labeled “Health” in green letters, and the lower half is labeled “Morbidity” in red letters. Below the chart, an image of a see-saw shows a pile of blue triangles on one side, labeled “Resilience & Reserve,” and a red triangle on the other side, labeled “Allostatic Load.” A red horizontal bar that extends to the “middle age” stage on the chart is labeled “Premature Death/Limited Healthspan & Lifespan.” Below it, a blue bar extends to the “elderly” stage, and is labeled “Average to Ideal Healthspan & Lifespan.”

Return to Figure 13.10

Image Description for Figure 13.16

An African-American person with long hair is shown wearing a t-shirt with the image of another Black person with short hair and a hat. Text on the shirt reads, “We Love and Miss You…Chill August 17, 1989–November 8, 2017.” Below the image, text reads, “The day after Willie’s funeral, cousin Candice Taylor posted this picture with the following message: Wasn’t able to make it to see you one last time, but took you to church this morning with my heart filled with joy!! The hardest part is healing but you will always be in our hearts! I love you cuzzo”

Return to Figure 13.16

Image Description for Figure 13.20

Thanatology is at the center of the diagram overlapping with these disciplines, 1) Philosophical, 2) Biological, 3) Anthropological, 4) Psychological, 5) Sociological.

Return to Figure 13.20

Image Description for Figure 14.6

A is a bar graph showing the population of Lincoln County, Oregon. Blue bars represent the male population and gray bars represent the female population. The y-axis shows age groups in 4-year increments, starting with “under 5 years” and going up to “85 years or older,” while the x-axis shows percentages of the population (from 1% to 6%). The graph shows a population that skews older and female, with the largest percentage of the population (by a whole percentage point) being made up of females aged 65-69 years old, and the second largest (at a bit less than 5%) being males aged 65-69. B isa nearly identical bar graph showing the population of Oregon as a whole. This time, red bars represent the male population and pink bars represent the female population. It shows a more even distribution of ages (though females still slightly outnumber males), with most age groups making up about 3% of the population. Starting at 70 years old, the older age demographics decline to below 2%.

Return to Figure 14.6

Image Description for Figure 14.10

Flyer publicizing free, somos bilingues The Art of Healing, Relax, Breathe and Play for Echo Mountain Fire Survivors, 1) May 12, The art of stories, 2) May 19, The art of mandalas, 3) May 26th, the art of visions.

Return to Figure 14.10

Image Description for Figure 14.16

A series of arrows form two concentric rings around a central circle. The outer circle is made up of two blue arrows pointing clockwise. Yellow text on the shorter arrow says “Search & Rescue” and “Emergency Relief.” The larger arrow says, in clockwise order, “Rehabilitation,” “Reconstruction,” “Prevention,” and “Early Warning.” The inner circle is made up of four thicker arrows, also pointing clockwise, broken up by a jagged pink bubble labeled “Disaster.” The first arrow, colored pink, says “Response” in white letters. The second, which is purple, says “Recovery.” The third, which is darker purple, says, “Mitigation.” The fourth arrow, which is blue, says, “Preparedness.” The gray circle at the center of the graphic says, “Disaster Management Cycle.”

Return to Figure 14.16

Image Description for Figure 14.17

A line graph shows the mental health of disaster survivors over time following the disaster. The y-axis shows the spectrum from “Emotional Lows” at the bottom to “Emotional Heights” at the top, and the x-axis shows the progression of time broken by “Up To One Year” and “After Anniversary.” The line’s first decline, labeled “Pre-Disaster,” is marked by the words “Warning” and “Threat.” A sharper decline is labeled “Impact,” followed by a steep ascent to emotional heights, which is marked by the word “Heroic,” and then, at the top, “Honeymoon (Community Cohesion).” This is followed by a descent to the lowest point on the chart, labeled “Disillusionment.” Two slight bumps at the bottom are labeled “Trigger Events.” A two-sided arrow labeled “Inventory” connects this low point to the “Impact.” After the Trigger Events, the line begins to go up, dipping again at a vertical dotted line labeled “Anniversary Reactions.” In the “After Anniversary” section, a double-sided arrow points to the line and past the edge of the chart, and is labeled “Working Through Grief (Coming to Terms).” A small dip near the top of the slope is labeled “Setback.” At the line’s highest point since the “Honeymoon” phase, a label reads “Reconstruction (A New Beginning).”

Return to Figure 14.17

Image Description for Figure 14.20

Three text boxes are connected vertically by arrows. The first box, colored blue, is labeled “Phase 1: Climate Demolition.” Two lower sections of the box, colored lighter shades of blue, read, respectively: “The disaster destroys homes and other infrastructure” and “People have to move temporarily or permanently.” The second box, which is green, is labeled “Phase 2: Recovery Policy and Planning.” The lighter-colored sections of this box read, respectively: “Governments change building requirements to make homes and infrastructure more resilient” and “Because people are often disbursed (sic), they lack power to resist the new laws.” The third

box, colored yellow, is labeled “Phase 3: Resilience Gentrification.” Its lighter-colored sections read, respectively: “Building homes and infrastructure costs more and property taxes increase” and “Only wealthy people–the sustainability class–can afford to live in redeveloped property.”

Return to Figure 14.20

Image Description for Figure 14.21

Echo Mountain Fire Survivors are shown in the center with arrows connecting them to the following organizations, which are also connected to one another.

State and Federal Nonprofits

- The Red Cross
- Oregon Food Bank
- Faith Based Organizations

Government

- State of Oregon Disaster Case Management
- Lincoln County – Health Department and Others
- FEMA

Local Nonprofits

- Echo Mountain Fire Relief
- The Salmon River Grange
- Cascade Relief Team
- Latino Outreach/ Conexion Felix
- Local Community Members
- Landscaping with Love

Return to Figure 14.21

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