

SEEING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

READINGS ON CONTEMPORARY
ISSUES IN THE UNITED STATES

Revised First Edition

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For our children, Adam, Sarah, and Nathan:
May you help to make our social world a better place.

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Preface

Sociology gives people the tools to observe, analyze, and make sense of the way that different groups of people think and act. Studying social problems is an integral part of sociology. Whether you have taken many sociology classes or none at all, learning more about social problems will give you a sense for what this vibrant and diverse discipline is all about. Our hope is that this book gives you insights to help you think critically about the many social problems in society and challenge ways that people's everyday behavior perpetuates such problems.

We are living in a very interesting time period. Immigration, global warming, the decriminalization of marijuana, and legalization of same-sex marriage are some of the many controversial issues that are affecting the country. The shifts from Barack Obama's presidency to Donald Trump's presidency reflect the diversity and tensions that have always existed in the United States. By looking at these and other issues historically through today, we can see who is most affected and how and consider the past and the present in devising ways to improve, both as people and as a nation.

There is no shortage of social problems. Although we cannot address all of them, we aim to provide an overview of some of the main ones, and to give you the tools to critically assess all of the social problems that impact your daily lives. This edition has been updated and expanded to include more current information on several important issues including race, gender, crime, health care, drug abuse, and pollution. For example, this edition examines recent developments concerning the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements, Obamacare, and environmental justice. A new reading concerning the opioid crisis has also been added. We have enjoyed putting this book together and working with the various authors who have contributed chapters, and we hope that you will benefit from learning more about these issues.

Brandon Lang

Molly Monahan Lang

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Introduction

Sociologists have been studying social problems, such as racism, sexism, and crime, for decades. In addition to wanting to understand these issues, sociologists generally have sought to lessen their negative effects. As discussed below, sociology is a progressive discipline whose practitioners are oriented toward egalitarianism and social change. An important first step in this process is to learn about the many social problems that impact our lives. This Introduction serves several purposes. First, the concept of a social problem is defined. Next, the differences between objective and subjective social problems are established. From there, the temporal and spatial variation of social problems is explained. Following this, the history of sociology, its main theories, levels of analysis, and two main types of research are examined. The Introduction concludes with a brief overview of the eight main sections of this book.

● WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

A social problem can be defined as an illegal act or a condition that negatively impacts a significant number of people in a physical, mental, or emotional manner. Alternatively, a social issue becomes a social problem when it meets one of several criteria. The first relates to criminal activity. When people engage in illegal behavior, that is a social problem. The next set of criteria relates to people's well-being. When lawful behavior inflicts physical harm, mental distress, or emotional suffering on others, that is also a social problem. Physical harm can occur in a variety of ways. For example, immediate physical harm could result from drinking water with lead in it or being beaten up on the playground. More long-term physical harm may arise from living near a pollution-emitting factory, or not being able to afford going to the doctor due to a lack of health insurance. It is important to consider that not all physical harm constitutes a social problem. Every day, numerous people get hurt playing sports, falling, or getting into car accidents. Car accidents do not constitute a social problem if drivers are obeying

speed limits and are not intoxicated while driving. Car accidents do become a social problem if people are driving aggressively or are under the influence of illegal drugs and/or alcohol.

Social problems can also result in mental distress. When people experience mental distress, including fear and intimidation, from discrimination or oppression based on such factors as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, physical abilities, or age, that constitutes a social problem. Similarly, emotional suffering is also associated with social problems. When people are belittled, humiliated, or shamed because of their position in society, that constitutes a social problem. All told, most forms of mental and emotional anguish that people experience at the hands of other people represent social problems.

● OBJECTIVE VERSUS SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Sociologists differentiate between objective and subjective social problems. An objective social problem is one that is incontrovertible; most people are in agreement that a particular social condition represents a social problem. Crime is an example of this. Most agree that crime, especially serious crime, is problematic. People may have different thoughts concerning misdemeanors such as marijuana possession, but are probably going to agree that rape, murder, and kidnapping are deleterious to society. On the other hand, sociologists have established that there are subjective social problems. A subjective social problem can be defined as a social issue that lacks consensus concerning its significance. Pornography, abortion, pollution, divorce, and inadequate medical coverage are all examples of this. Many people, for instance, have grave concerns about divorce, while others see it as a necessary option. Climate change is another good example. While some believe that people should lessen their carbon footprint in order to reduce global warming, others do not see this as a pressing issue. People can disagree on whether or not certain issues are social problems and can also disagree on the level of severity associated with them. Ultimately, most social problems are subjective in nature, meaning that they are, by definition, controversial.

The Temporal and Spatial Variation of Social Problems

Social problems are also socially constructed in that they exhibit temporal and spatial variation. In other words, they change over time and space. Just because a social condition was considered a social problem at one point in time does not mean that it will always be a social problem. In addition, new social problems emerge all the time. Social problems in one place are not always the same as social problems elsewhere. Many people, for example, consider pollution to be a social problem today, but that was not the case seventy years ago when less was known about the harmful effects of chemicals in the air. Similarly, cigarette smoking was not considered a social problem until the negative effects of smoking on the body were well-established. Another example pertains to family violence. In the past in America, men could physically harm their wives with impunity. This kind of violence was considered a private occurrence. More recently, domestic violence has become illegal; it is now widely viewed as a problem in society. Transgender discrimination is a new social problem in America, as the treatment of transgender people in society is being discussed more publicly, including in the legal realm.

Social problems also manifest themselves differently in different places. At the same point in time, a behavior can be considered a social problem in one location and not in another. It is currently a social problem when eighteen-year-olds drink beer in America or when a group of adults smokes marijuana in Turkey. But it is not considered a social problem when eighteen-year-olds drink beer in Germany, where the legal drinking age is sixteen, or when a group of adults smokes marijuana in Uruguay, where the use of marijuana is legal. Another example relates to college tuition. In America, student loan debt has become a social problem, as numerous people are graduating with unsustainable amounts of debt. In countries like Canada, where college is more affordable and more heavily subsidized, student loan debt is not considered a social problem.

● THE HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY

In order to better understand social problems, it is important to have familiarity with the academic discipline that established the concept. Sociology is the study of people. Using sociological perspectives, sociologists seek to understand why

people believe and behave the ways they do. Sociology as a discipline emerged in Europe in the mid-1800s. Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim were two pioneers of sociology who saw the need for a discipline that explains social behavior. Both Comte and Durkheim engaged in extensive social research that increased people's awareness and understanding of social integration, religion, suicide, and criminal behavior. In the late 1800s, the first sociology program in the United States was created at the University of Chicago. In the early 1900s, several other sociology programs were developed at a number of prestigious American colleges, including the University of Wisconsin and the University of California, Berkeley.

There were still only a small number of American universities that offered sociology degrees prior to World War II. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that sociology became a typical discipline offered in schools. Throughout the period following World War II, more and more schools began to offer sociology classes. Now, sociology classes are offered at most American universities, and tens of thousands of college students graduate with sociology degrees every year.

Sociology is known as a discipline that tends to challenge the status quo. American college campuses were hotbeds of social activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. College students, including many sociology majors, were active in the antiwar, civil rights, and women's rights movements of that era. Many sociology students were studying racial and gender inequality in their classes and were inspired by them to protest the war in Vietnam, segregation in the American South, and opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment. As a discipline, sociology tends to attract people who not only wish to learn more about social injustice, but also want to be agents of social change.

● THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

There are many types of explanations that help us understand people, such as neurological, psychological, and biological. Sociological explanations are unique in that they put people's lives in a broader context. Sociologists believe that people are better understood by considering their social worlds: their place in history and their demographic and cultural surroundings. These factors guide the questions sociologists ask, and the answers they find.

Sociology is a multi-paradigmatic academic discipline. This means that, instead of being guided by one distinct paradigm or theoretical framework like the natural sciences, it is guided by multiple competing paradigms. In sociology, there are four distinct paradigms: functionalist, conflict, symbolic interactionist, and feminist. Each of these has its own guiding assumptions, affecting what is observed and what is considered important in social life.

Functionalism was developed by Emile Durkheim in the late nineteenth century and posits that society is a social system consisting of an interdependent set of parts. Heavily influenced by the work of Herbert Spencer, functionalism borrows from the evolutionary sciences and sees social systems, large and small, consisting of a range of people whose skill sets and responsibilities complement each other. Functionalists use the metaphor of the human body to explain social life. The human body has different organs that serve disparate functions yet are essential to the overall functioning of the body. Similarly, in social systems, different parts (people) perform distinct, necessary functions for society. Some of the roles have high status while some have low, but they complement each other. Janitors, teachers, librarians, and students are interdependent in a school, just as administrative assistants, clients, and business executives are interdependent in a corporation.

Another functionalist theorist named Robert Merton developed the important concepts of manifest and latent functions. Some of the words he uses to help explain manifest functions are “intended,” “conscious,” and “anticipated” (Merton 1949/1968). These are the outcomes or reasons that people have in mind when they behave. Latent functions, on the other hand, are described as “not intended,” “below the surface,” or “not foreseen.” These are neither obvious nor anticipated. Laws and other rules have both manifest and latent functions. For example, increased sentences for drug offenses in the United States had the manifest function of deterring people from committing drug crimes. The latent functions have included prison overpopulation as well as increased numbers of children growing up with parents who have spent time in prison.

The father of conflict theory is Karl Marx. His critique of capitalism has been used by many sociologists to further understand the human condition. Marx theorized that within a capitalist framework people are pitted against each other and are therefore forced to prioritize their own interests. The essence of

conflict theory is that, within a capitalist setting, wealth equals power. Building on this, there are people with wealth and power who control society's resources, and people without money or power who are subject to the rules imposed on them by the ruling elite. Thus, great tensions emerge between the capitalists (the Haves) and the workers (the Have-nots) because the Have-nots want more power and the Haves want to do everything they can to preserve their power and privilege.

Symbolic interactionism is the most philosophical of the four schools of thought. Developed by the Chicago School after World War II and serving as the basis for microsociology (discussed below), this perspective establishes that ongoing interaction between people explains behavior. People use symbolic communication and interpretation, and these processes are central to our social selves and our behaviors. A central component of symbolic interactionism is what is referred to as the "definition of the situation." People do not sense their environment directly; instead, we continuously define the situation we are in, based on our interactions and internal dialogue. We may have physical responses to other people, but immediately we socially define that reality. With any situation we are in, we have to define it and continue to define it. Another important concept that exists with symbolic interactionism is social constructionism. Symbolic interactionists believe that race and gender, for example, are social constructs. They do not believe that there are essential differences between black and white people or between men and women. Rather, they believe that people perceive there to be differences between these groups, and that these perceptions have influenced people's senses of reality.

The final school of sociological thought addressed here is feminist theory. The main assumption of feminist theory is that men and women are not treated equally in American society. Feminist theory borrows heavily from conflict theory, but instead of the tension between groups being rooted in wealth, it is rooted in gender. According to this perspective, men are society's Haves and women are society's Have-nots. Men, in turn, do whatever they can to preserve their power and privilege, which ends up limiting opportunities for women. Feminist theorists contend that the underrepresentation of women in business and politics and the unequal pay for men and women for equal work are examples of gender inequality that should be addressed.

● LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

Sociologists can study social behavior using different levels of analysis, typically referred to as macro-level, micro-level, and meso-level. While using any one level of analysis it is important to keep the others in mind, as they are all significant in understanding social life. Macro-level analyses focus on the large-scale, looking at entire social systems at once. Using a macro perspective, sociologists can study democratic nation-states compared to socialist ones, or contrast countries where same-sex marriage is legal with countries where it is not. Macrosociologists could study the effects of technology on life expectancy or how civil wars affect migration.

At the micro-level, sociologists study interactions between people. Whereas macrosociologists may study technology and life expectancy at the national level, comparing countries as a whole to each other and attempting to explain the differences, microsociologists could talk with healthcare practitioners about the technology they use, or observe interactions between patients and their providers. While macrosociologists may be interested in the effects of civil wars on migratory patterns in general, microsociologists could interview refugees as they travel or observe the interactions between migrants and border guards. Sociologists using different levels of analysis may be interested in similar phenomena but look at them in different ways.

We can also discuss a third level of analysis referred to as meso-level. This sits between the interactional level and the national level. Meso-level analyses may focus on social institutions, such as the family, the economy, or the military. They may also look at organizations, such as hospitals or school boards. A meso-level focus allows us to see the influence of the large-scale on people's behaviors, while recognizing the actual people involved in the day-to-day operations of society. For example, a meso-level analysis may help us to better understand institutionalized behaviors. These are the accepted, expected, even required behaviors that have been in place for a long time in a society. Within the social institution of the family in the United States, for example, marriage is an institutionalized behavior. Within the social institutions of the economy and healthcare in the United States, the practice of connecting health insurance to employment is institutionalized. Thinking sociologically uncovers the human origins of such

practices, since people tend to forget those, and to behave as if it has “always” been that way.

Quantitative and Qualitative Sociological Research

Sociologists tend to conduct either quantitative or qualitative research. Quantitative research primarily uses surveys and survey data. Respondents are asked mainly closed-ended questions about aspects of themselves, such as their political ideology, belief about abortion, amount of education, or age. These observations are turned into numbers. Quantitative researchers conduct mathematical, statistical analyses of data. This research is mainly deductive, starting with a theory and hypotheses, and testing their accuracy. As implied above, quantitative analyses use a variable language, where people are described in terms of levels of various attributes. For example, amount of education can be said to be correlated with level of prejudice, in that as education increases, levels of prejudice go down. We have to remember that there are people associated with these variables.

Quantitative research in sociology is more common than qualitative research. This may be due in part to the larger sample sizes used in such research. Large-scale surveys can be conducted on thousands of people. There is also a widespread preference for generalizability, and this can be achieved if the sample is representative of the population. However, survey data are limited due to the relatively short length of surveys that respondents are likely to tolerate. Surveys are also better measures of values and beliefs than behaviors, due to validity concerns, but they are used for all of these. We can never be completely sure of the honesty or accuracy of responses, but efforts can help encourage more of both.

Qualitative research assumes that people can be understood only by studying their everyday lives in depth. Qualitative researchers tend to use very little, if any, statistical information. They mainly conduct observational studies and/or open-ended interviews. Due to the time-consuming nature of this research, a smaller number of people are studied. Qualitative researchers typically study dozens of people, up to perhaps a hundred at a time. However, they collect and analyze richer data, due to the length of time spent with each participant. Qualitative researchers often spend months or years with the people they study. Generalizability is not likely, but the development of concepts and/or theories can be useful elsewhere. As with quantitative research, the ultimate goal is to

understand more than just the people being studied. Though qualitative researchers cannot treat their samples as representative, they can use the rich data to develop important concepts, or enhance or clarify a theory to help us better understand human beings in their social environments. It may be helpful to note that qualitative research goes along with a microsociological approach, and is used by those with a symbolic interactionist perspective in particular.

● THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

This book is organized into eight sections. In Section 1, Socioeconomic Inequality and Poverty, the American class system is examined. There are readings on working poverty and the day-to-day lives of poor people in the era of welfare reform. Cumulative advantage and disadvantage are also discussed, particularly as they relate to the greater losses that those in the lower classes must endure. In addition, challenges in achieving upward mobility or the “American Dream” are addressed in this section.

The second section, Racial and Ethnic Inequality, has four chapters that show the extent to which racial and ethnic inequality exist in the United States. These chapters demonstrate that nativism (an opposition to new immigration) has been a persistent issue in America. They also reveal that people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds have disparate likelihoods of being questioned or detained by police officers. This section ends with a history of racial residential segregation in America and a discussion of the production and maintenance of racially integrated communities.

The third section, Gender Inequality and Homophobia, includes four chapters that document the many ways that women and people who do not exemplify the traditional and binary notion of gender experience discrimination and prejudice. This section makes clear that, in spite of many gains made in terms of gender over time, sexism and homophobia continue. In addition to chronicling the history of the feminist movement, the articles in this section explore different aspects of discrimination that many women, gay people, and transgender people experience. There is also a chapter that shows the intersections of race, gender, and social class in the use of homophobic slurs by adolescent boys.

Section 4, Crime, examines the social problems associated with a wide range of criminal activities. Though violent and property crime rates are down, drug-related crimes are increasing. The main way that the American system has responded to crime is with restitution, particularly imprisonment. This section consists of four chapters that examine mass incarceration and its consequences, the overrepresentation of minority youth in the criminal justice system, the use of capital punishment, and the prevalence and correlates of sexual assault.

The fifth section, Social Problems in Medicine and Health, considers a range of social problems that exist within the context of health and healthcare. As an affluent and advanced society, America is lauded for having one of the best healthcare systems in the world. However, not everyone is equally healthy or shares the same high-quality care. In this section, the first chapter examines why the Affordable Care Act (or “Obamacare”) is so controversial. The second examines the problem of depression among college students. The third focuses on opioids and their consequences, while the fourth examines the problem of unhealthy eating, its consequences, and ways it is being addressed.

Social Problems in Families is the sixth section of this book. This section provides a sense of how controversial some family issues are. Although a growing percentage of people are supportive of cohabitation, same-sex marriage, and divorce, these are divisive issues. This section consists of three chapters. The first examines how family structure differs according to social class. The second explores the gender gap in pay, and gives particular attention to a phenomenon known as the motherhood wage penalty. The last chapter examines the problem of domestic violence in this country and its consequences for mothers.

The book’s seventh section is entitled Social Problems in Education. There is no question that there are a number of high-quality schools at all levels in the United States. Like healthcare, however, not all groups have equal access to the same school experiences. This section includes three important chapters. The first relates to the problems associated with No Child Left Behind. The second examines bullying among adolescents and ways it can be addressed. The final chapter in this section examines challenges faced by African American college students who attend predominantly white schools.

The eighth and last section of the book is called Environmental Social Problems. In this section, three chapters consider aspects of environmental degradation and

consumerism. Global warming is a controversial issue that has divided the country. The first chapter in this section examines global climate change through a sociological lens, showing its effects on rural Americans in particular. The second chapter examines how Native Americans have disproportionately high rates of exposure to water and air pollution and other environmental hazards. The third chapter charts the growing rates of consumerism and debt in the United States over time, and their consequences.

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SECTION **ONE**

SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND POVERTY

In the United States, there is substantial income and wealth inequality. On one hand, there are Americans who hold billions of dollars in assets. This includes people such as Donald Trump and Bill Gates, who can afford to lead opulent lifestyles. On the other hand, there are millions of Americans who struggle financially and do not have the money to cover even their basic needs. As of this writing, 12.3% of Americans are officially poor, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (Fontenot, Semega, and Kollar, 2018). In addition, there are plenty of people in between these extremes who make up the middle classes, some of whom lead lives of privilege while others live precariously close to poverty themselves. The main purpose of this section is to examine the American class system and explain how socioeconomic inequality and poverty represent significant social problems in the United States.

● WHAT IS SOCIAL CLASS?

Social class is a fairly broad concept that relates to a person's status, social standing, and economic resources. Social class can be thought of as a combination of education, occupation, income, and wealth. Sociologists conceive of gradients that use these characteristics in combination. Education can range from less than high school to postgraduate degrees. Occupations can be blue collar, where people

work with their hands or bodies and are likely to be paid in wages, or white collar, where they do more mental than physical work and are likely to be paid by salary. Occupations also vary in terms of prestige, or how impressive they are perceived to be. Shoe shining is seen to be much less prestigious than being a physician, for example. Some people are impoverished in terms of income, while some earn salaries in the six figures, and a small percentage earn millions of dollars a year. Similarly, some are in great debt and others have billions in financial assets, while most are in between, with maybe a house and two cars representing their wealth.

Social class is inextricably intertwined with lifestyle. People of different social class groupings have been found to have, in aggregate, different favorite foods, décor, and hobbies. Social class can be thought of as a combination of factors that informs everything from the kinds of foods that people eat and the times that they eat meals to how they spend their free time, how they raise their kids, and the brand of car that they drive.

It is important to recognize that social class is not just about money. There are tens of thousands of people who are employed as mechanics, construction workers, and truck drivers who make more money than teachers, clergy, and even airplane pilots. Even though many blue-collar people make more money than some white-collar people, the two groups are likely going to have a distinct set of skills, credentials, and interests. Each group spends its money and time differently in spite of their financial standing. Bowling, for example, is generally a blue-collar activity, while reading is seen as more of a white-collar activity. Similarly, going to the theater or symphony is more of a white-collar activity, while attending a NASCAR race is generally a blue-collar activity.

● THE AMERICAN CLASS SYSTEM

Sociologists have established that people's characteristics can be combined to place everyone in a social class hierarchy. Known as social stratification, these qualities serve to order people according to their social class. The American class system can be seen as a ranking of five groups with a range of different attributes. The list of social class groupings includes upper class, upper-middle class, lower-middle (or middle) class, working class, and poor. Each of these social class

groupings is different based on the educational, social, and economic attributes of their members. Upper-class people, for example, have billions of dollars in wealth and can afford to live on the income generated from that wealth. Upper-middle-class people are distinguished by their high levels of education and professional occupations. Lower-middle-class people typically have some education beyond high school, whether an associate's or bachelor's degree, and earn around the median household income. Working-class and poor people typically work in blue-collar jobs and have a high school degree or less. Working-class people make more money than poor people, however, and tend to have more financial stability. Poor people range from those working full time to those with sporadic, often part-time work histories, to those who live on public assistance.

Poverty is a significant social problem in the United States. It includes the millions of Americans who struggle to meet their food, housing, healthcare, and clothing needs on a yearly basis. Contrary to what many people think, poverty includes people who are employed but still do not make enough money to cover their basic needs. Known as working poverty, people who work low-paying service jobs generally do not receive any benefits and have their hours capped so as not to be eligible for overtime. Although the national minimum wage has been increased and many cities have even higher minimum wages to help offset high costs of living, poverty still persists across the country.

In their piece, "Organizational Behavior and the Working Poor," Leana, Mittal, and Stiehl establish that the working poor—defined here as poor people working full time—experience three types of barriers that impact such things as their job attachment, work performance, and future career attainment. Categorical barriers, for example, relate to the unskilled and often physical characteristics of low-wage work that are stigmatizing for people in those jobs. Compositional barriers, meanwhile, result in low-wage employees not having much contact with those who earn higher wages, which impacts their capacity to be noticed and rewarded for doing good work. Lastly, relational barriers limit the capacity for blue-collar workers to get to know and feel supported by the white-collar workers who they work with or for. All told, these barriers can impact workers' self-efficacy, which in turn can affect job performance, attitude, stress levels, outlook on life, and social capital.

● CUMULATIVE ADVANTAGE AND DISADVANTAGE

Cumulative advantage and disadvantage are important sociological concepts that can serve to reinforce social class boundaries in the United States. Cumulative advantage relates to the manner in which many opportunities seem to build on themselves over time. A person whose parents attended an Ivy League college, for example, is likely going to have an advantage getting into that school over other similarly qualified applicants who are not legacies. From there, the person may have an edge getting into graduate school or finding a well-paying job upon graduation over someone who has graduated with the same degree from a less prestigious school. That job experience may then open up even more doors over time, resulting in such possibilities as promotions at work, sound financial planning and advice, and excellent retirement benefits.

Conversely, cumulative disadvantage describes how setbacks seem to also build on themselves over time. There are thousands of people all over the country who work as roofers, cooks, or delivery people who do not have adequate health insurance. If people get hurt on the job, this may result in them not only incurring debt from lacking health insurance but also forsaking the wages that they would have earned during the recovery period. Perhaps this forces them to sell their car, which will impact their ability to return to work. All told, many people who struggle financially are one step away from a veritable downward spiral of problems that have the potential to greatly impact their day-to-day lives.

In her chapter, “‘Death Always Seems to Be Around Me’: Loss Privilege and Loss in Abundance in Contemporary America,” Monahan Lang builds on the idea of cumulative advantage and disadvantage by explaining how people in the higher social classes tend to not only reap the financial benefits of their class privilege but also to experience fewer losses in their lives than those in the lower classes. This applies to a range of premature deaths, including infant mortality, child and youth mortality, and maternal mortality. Monahan Lang also establishes the connection between race/ethnicity, social class, and disease and other losses such as imprisonment. She finishes the chapter by citing numerous examples of both loss privilege and loss in abundance.

● SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

The United States is considered an open society, which means that there is a probability of social class mobility. There are numerous examples of people who grew up in poverty or in the working class and experienced upward mobility over the course of their lives. This characterizes the situations of celebrities like Oprah Winfrey, athletes like LeBron James, and numerous other businesspeople, political figures, doctors, and lawyers. Education, for example, is linked to upward mobility. Going to college and obtaining a degree creates opportunities for people to obtain different jobs than their parents and grandparents had.

When most people think about the American Dream, they associate it with a rags-to-riches story line: No matter your social class at birth, if you work hard, are goal oriented, and determined to succeed, you can achieve anything that you set your mind to. This perspective represents the optimistic view of the American Dream. The idea is that people who are hardworking and ambitious will experience success over the course of their lives. Clearly, there are numerous examples of this phenomenon. Even today, tens of thousands of people leave their families behind and enter the United States, legally and illegally, for the chance to get a foothold on the American Dream.

Not everyone is convinced, however, that hard work and ambition necessarily result in success. This perspective represents the pessimistic view of the American Dream and is summed up by the statement that “it is not what you know, it is who you know.” In the United States, there are also numerous examples of people getting jobs and promotions, acceptances to prestigious schools, and out of legal trouble because of their family name or social connections. Think of people such as Paris Hilton or Chelsea Clinton being given opportunities based on their family wealth and parents’ social connections. But it is not just upper-class people who benefit from their social networks. Upper-middle-class people are likely to receive help from others as well. The higher your social class at birth, the greater the likelihood of having friends or family contacts that can provide information or vouch for you.

As mentioned, higher education is often described as an important pathway to upward mobility for those born poor or working class. In their article “Why

Do First-Generation Students Fail?” Mehta, Newbold, and O’Rourke focus on college students whose parents did not graduate from college, whom they refer to as first-generation students. They discuss the challenges that first-generation students face in college, including working more hours and lacking social connections with other students. They also provide suggestions for ways that colleges and universities can help more first-generation students stay in school and succeed academically.

● PUBLIC ASSISTANCE AND WELFARE REFORM

As part of President Roosevelt’s New Deal, created during the Great Depression, a social safety net was created to assist people who had fallen on hard times. Programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Social Security, and unemployment insurance were created and implemented in this era. AFDC was intended to help children in low-income families who lacked one or both parents. In order to qualify to receive AFDC benefits, people had to meet indigence criteria. AFDC recipients would receive monthly checks to help them cover their rent, childcare, food, and other expenses over the course of the month. Although it was meant to be a short-term program, it became apparent in the 1970s and 1980s that many people who went on welfare ended up collecting benefits for long periods. Sociologists attribute this to the social stigma associated with being on welfare. Welfare recipients were labeled as lazy and unambitious, which made it more difficult to find gainful employment. Sociologists also identify the existence of the “welfare trap,” where people can make more money on welfare than working a minimum wage job, since earnings are offset by having to pay for childcare and transportation.

In 1996, the American welfare system was overhauled under President Clinton, who signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. This conservative welfare reform was popular because many people thought that public assistance was being overused. With this new law, AFDC was eliminated and replaced by the Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) program. Among other things, TANF limited the amount of time that someone could

be on welfare and replaced monthly checks with a voucher system mandating that people either work, go to school, or get job training. Supporters of this new legislation cite the declining number of people on welfare as evidence for success. Critics, on the other hand, are concerned that it perpetuates poverty and reinforces the growing class divide that has emerged in the United States.

In “The New Regime Through the Lens of the Old,” Halpern-Meekin, Edin, Tach, and Sykes discuss the working poor within the context of the American economic safety net. They describe how welfare reform occurred and discuss other programs for those with low incomes, such as the earned income tax credit, the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance program (formerly called food stamps), and Medicaid. They discuss the ongoing stigma associated with receiving welfare and the interactional work that low-income people do to manage that stigma. Their research shows a general agreement within American society that employment should be encouraged and rewarded and that handouts to those deemed undeserving should be avoided.

References

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