

The Cambridge Handbook of Social Problems

The introduction of the Affordable Care Act in the United States, the increasing use of prescription drugs, and the alleged abuse of racial profiling by police are just some of the factors contributing to twenty-first-century social problems. *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Problems* offers a wide-ranging roster of the social problems currently pressing for attention and amelioration. Unlike other works in this area, it also gives great consideration to theoretical and methodological discussions. The *Handbook* will benefit both undergraduate and graduate students eager to understand the sociology of social problems. It is suitable for classes in social problems, current events, and social theory. Featuring the most current research, the *Handbook* is an especially useful resource for sociologists and graduate students conducting research.

A. Javier Treviño, Professor of Sociology at Wheaton College, is the author and editor of several books, including *The Social Thought of C. Wright Mills* (2012), *Investigating Social Problems*, second edition (2018), *The Development of Sociological Theory: Readings from the Enlightenment to the Present* (2017), and *C. Wright Mills and the Cuban Revolution: An Exercise in the Art of Sociological Imagination* (2017). He has served as president of the Justice Studies Association (2000–2002) and as president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (2010–2011). He was a visiting research Fellow at the University of Sussex, UK (2006), was a Fulbright scholar to the Republic of Moldova (2009), and, since 2014, has been a visiting professor in Social and Political Theory at the University of Innsbruck, Austria.

The Cambridge Handbook of Social Problems



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Edited by

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Contents

<i>About the Contributors</i>	page vii		
<i>Introduction</i>	xi		
PART I			
GENERAL CONCERNS AND ORIENTATIONS IN THE STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS			
1. The Challenges of Conceptualizing Social Problems <i>Joseph Schneider</i>	3	5. Social Problems in Global Perspective <i>Yvonne A. Braun and Michael C. Dreiling</i>	77
2. Research Methods <i>Amir Marvasti</i>	23	6. Bridging Social Movements and Social Problems <i>Jaime Kucinskas</i>	99
3. Participatory Action Research and Social Problems <i>Randy Stoecker</i>	39	7. Public Sociology and Social Problems <i>Joshua Meisel and Mary Virnoche</i>	119
4. Public Policy and Social Problems: Recent Trends in the Formal Control of Individual Behavior <i>Mark Peyrot and Stacy Lee Burns</i>	57	8. Service Sociology and Social Problems <i>A. Javier Treviño</i>	133
		9. Astrosociology: Social Problems on Earth and in Outer Space <i>Jim Pass</i>	149
		10. Prospects for the Sociological Study of Social Problems <i>Joel Best and Donileen R. Loseke</i>	169

PART II		20. Sexualities and Homophobia	363
HISTORICAL AND		<i>Catherine A. Gildae</i>	
THEORETICAL ISSUES IN THE		21. Poverty and Income Inequality:	
STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS		A Cross-National Perspective on	
11. Settlement Sociology	185	Social Citizenship	385
<i>Patricia Lengermann and</i>		<i>Eiko Strader and Joya Misra</i>	
<i>Gillian Niebrugge</i>		22. Housing Market Discrimination	409
12. Chicago School: City as a Social		<i>W. Dennis Keating</i>	
Laboratory	203	23. Hunger and Food Insecurity	423
<i>Roger Salerno</i>		<i>Stephen J. Scanlan</i>	
13. Luhmann's Sociological Systems		24. Ageism, Past and Present	441
Theory and the Study of Social		<i>W. Andrew Achenbaum</i>	
Problems	221	25. Disabilities	459
<i>Werner Schirmer and</i>		<i>Robyn Lewis Brown</i>	
<i>Dimitris Michailakis</i>		PART IV	
14. The Conflict Approach	241	PROBLEMS OF INSTITUTIONS	
<i>Steven E. Barkan</i>		26. Media and the Construction of	
15. Radical Interactionism and		Social Problems	477
the Symbolism of		<i>William Hoynes</i>	
Methamphetamine	259	27. Family Problems	497
<i>Michael A. Katovich</i>		<i>Donna Holland</i>	
16. Social Constructionism	279	28. Problems in Education	513
<i>Peter R. Ibarra and Michael Adorjan</i>		<i>Peter A. J. Stevens, Marios Vryonides,</i>	
PART III		<i>and A. Gary Dworkin</i>	
PROBLEMS OF		29. Problems of the Workplace and	
DISCRIMINATION AND		Workforce	531
INEQUALITY		<i>Héctor L. Delgado</i>	
17. Racism	303	30. Long-Term Unemployment in	
<i>Heather M. Dalmage</i>		the United States	551
18. Immigration	319	<i>Ofer Sharone, David L. Blustein, and</i>	
<i>Cecilia Menjivar and</i>		<i>Carl E. Van Horn</i>	
<i>Andrea Gómez Cervantes</i>		Index	567
19. Gender Inequality	339		
<i>William J. Scarborough and</i>			
<i>Barbara J. Risman</i>			

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Introduction

Social problems – those conditions, events, or behaviors that occur locally, nationally, or globally and cause or threaten to cause harm to all or some segment of the population – tend to be regarded as enduring and entrenched. Two thousand years ago, Jesus told his followers that the poor will always be among them, indicating to some readers of the New Testament that poverty would be a persistent phenomenon (Mark 14:7). In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, first published in 1895, Emile Durkheim noted that crime was not only universal but also unavoidable (Durkheim 1938, 67–72). In 1932, Sigmund Freud, in partial response to Albert Einstein’s query about the inevitability of war, maintained that humans are instinctually inclined toward aggression and destruction (Einstein 1968, 198). At first blush, these exemplifications seem to suggest that some of the towering minds in history have regarded social problems – poverty, crime, war – as intractable. And yet, these three personages were neither pessimistic nor complacent about such adverse circumstances. Indeed, in the very next phrase, Jesus invited his disciples to help the poor.

Durkheim, a few pages later, noted that the behaviors of criminals can have transformative benefits for society. And Freud, for his part, proposed the establishment of an international judicial court with unquestioned centralized authority to resolve conflicts before they escalate into armed violence.

This is all well and good, but the fact is that poverty, crime, and war, to say nothing of racism, sexism, unemployment, drug abuse, and numerous other social problems, continue to be pervasive in many societies – a circumstance that seems to naturally, and perhaps exasperatedly, evoke Tolstoy’s imperative inquiry, “What then must we do?” Clearly, action must be taken to address and rectify social catastrophe, injustice and oppression demand reform, and societal ills cry out for alleviation. But it is also important that sociologists and students of sociology *understand* social problems: their histories and trajectories, their causes and consequences, their incidence and prevalence.

The Cambridge Handbook of Social Problems provides analyses of a large variety

of social problems. The sixty chapters that compose this two-volume work were prepared by distinguished (and soon-to-become-distinguished) scholars – primarily from the United States, but also from several other countries – all of them experts in the topics on which they have written.

This is a handbook, implying that it is to be used as a basic reference – in this case, as a reference to the broad, amorphous, and unwieldy field commonly known as the sociology of social problems. But it is also intended as a compendium that provides an inventory of today's most pressing troublesome issues. Of course, not every such issue could be included, and the reader will be certain to note the absence of this or that social problem. But every effort has been made to make every chapter included in the collection to be as comprehensive and current as possible.

The first volume of the handbook is organized into four parts. Part I consists of chapters having to do with “General Concerns and Orientations in the Study of Social Problems.” Part II focuses on “Historical and Theoretical Issues in the Study of Social Problems,” and Part III considers specific social problems, namely, those having to

do with “Problems of Discrimination and Inequality,” including sexualities and homophobia, housing market discrimination, and hunger and food insecurity. Part IV looks at social “Problems of Institutions,” including media, family, education, and work.

The second volume consists of three parts. The chapters here continue an analysis of specific social problems, in this case in relation to “Problems Related to Health, Safety, and Security,” the subject of Part I, and “Problems Related to Crime and Violence,” the subject of Part II. The volume ends with the chapters in Part III that discuss “Problems of Global Impact.”

The object of *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Problems* is to inform, guide, and inspire academics and activists, practitioners, and students in better understanding their social world – in all its troublesome variety.

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