

CHAPTER 1

Taking a New Look at Social Problems

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Social problems are social conditions or patterns of behaviour that people believe warrant public concern and collective action to bring about change. An example of a social problem is **violence**—the use of physical force to cause pain, injury, or death, or damage to property and is relational. Social problems such as violence often involve significant discrepancies between the ideals of a society and their actual achievement. Sociologists study many types of social problems to determine their causes, effects, and possible solutions. **Sociology** is the academic and scholarly discipline that engages in systematic study of human society and social interactions. Using the **sociological imagination**, we can place seemingly personal problems into a larger context. Sociologists make connections between personal and public issues through **microlevel** (focused on small-group relations and social interaction among individuals) and **macrolevel** (focused on social processes occurring at the societal level) **analysis**. Sociologists use four primary theoretical perspectives to examine social life and social problems: (1) the **functionalist perspective**; (2) the **conflict perspective**; (3) the **interactionist perspective**; and, (4) **feminist perspectives**. Microlevel, mid-range and macrolevel attempts to solve social problems differ considerably. At the microlevel, the interactionist perspective focuses on how individuals operate within **primary groups** to try to remedy a problem that affects them, their family, or friends. Mid-range attempts focus on secondary groups and formal organizations, looking at how they can assist individuals in overcoming problems such as drug addiction or domestic violence. Macrolevel analysis of solutions to social problems focuses on how large-scale social institutions such as the government and the media may become involved in remedying social problems. **Collective behaviour**, **social movements**, and special interest groups are among the methods people use in their attempts to reduce social problems.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading Chapter 1, students should be able to:

1. State the sociological definition of a social problem and distinguish between subjective awareness and objective reality of social problems.
2. Distinguish between microlevel, mid-range and macrolevel analyses of social life.
3. Explain the functionalist perspective on society and state how functionalist theorists believe that social problems arise.
4. Explain the conflict perspective on society and state how conflict theorists (using different approaches under this perspective) believe that social problems arise.
5. Explain the interactionist perspective on society and state how interactionists believe that social problems arise.
6. Explain feminist perspectives on society and state how feminist theorists believe that social problems arise.

7. Discuss, and distinguish between, microlevel, mid-range and macrolevel attempts to reduce or solve social problems.
8. Describe how sociological theories can be used to analyse social problems such as violence.
9. Describe the part that primary groups and secondary groups play in reducing social problems.
10. Compare and contrast grassroots groups and special interest groups, and discuss how each seeks to bring about positive social change.
11. Describe ways in which collective behaviour may be used to address a perceived social problem.
12. Identify the five major categories of social movements and note the types of social problems that each is most likely to address.

KEY TERMS

capitalism	primary groups
civil disobedience	self-fulfilling prophecy
collective behaviour	situational approach
conflict perspective	social change
discrimination	social disorganization
dominant group	social movement
functionalist perspective	social problem
grassroots groups	society
hate crime	sociological imagination
industrialization	sociology
interactionist perspective	subordinate group
lifestyle-routine activity approach	theory
macrolevel analysis	urbanization
microlevel analysis	values
norms	violence
perspective	

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. WHAT IS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

- A. A **social problem** is a social condition or a pattern of behaviour that people believe warrants public concern and collective action to bring about change.
- B. Social conditions or patterns of behaviour such as **violence** become defined as social problems when they systematically disadvantage or harm a significant number of people or when they are seen as harmful by a number of “significant people” who wield power, wealth, and influence in a group or society.

- C. In **sociology**, examination of social problems primarily focuses on **society**.
- 1) Some social problems (e.g., violence and crime) are commonly viewed as conditions that affect all members of a population.
 - 2) Other social problems (e.g., racialized discrimination and sexual harassment) may be viewed (correctly or incorrectly) as conditions that affect some members of a population more than others.
- D. Social problems often involve significant discrepancies between the ideals of society and their actual achievement. One example is **discrimination** (actions or practice of **dominant group** members that have harmful effects on **subordinate group** members), which heightens existing inequalities along class, racialization, gender, and age lines. It may be directed against subordinate group members whose sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or other characteristics are devalued by those who discriminate against them. This type of discrimination, when acted out in the form of violence, is known as a **hate crime**.
- E. Why Study Social Problems?
- 1) Studying social problems helps us understand the social forces that shape our lives on both the personal and societal levels.
 - 2) We learn to take a sociological approach as opposed to a commonsense (“what everybody knows”) approach. Many commonsense notions are “myths” and may be widely and publicly accepted, even when erroneous.
 - 3) A sociological examination of social problems also enables us to gain new insights into ourselves and to develop an awareness of the connection between our own “world” and those of other people.
 - 4) A global perspective reveals that the lives of all people are closely intertwined, that and any one nation’s problems are part of a larger global problem.

II. THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

- A. Sociologists use systematic research techniques and report their findings to other social scientists for consideration. Sociologists strive to be *objective*, although complete objectivity may not be attainable or desirable.
- B. According to sociologist C. Wright Mills, the **sociological imagination** is the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society.
- 1) The sociological imagination enables us to connect personal troubles to public issues.
 - 2) *Personal troubles* are private problems of individuals and the networks of people with whom they associate regularly. For example, one person’s unemployment is a personal trouble facing the individual, other family members, and friends.
 - 3) *Public issues* are matters beyond a person’s control that originate at the regional or national level and can be resolved only by collective action.
 - 4) The sociological imagination helps us place seemingly personal troubles, such as being a victim of violence, into a larger social context and see how personal troubles may be related to public issues.
 - 5) A clearer understanding of our situations may allow us to develop more effective and better preventions and interventions.

- C. Sociologists make connections between personal and public issues in society through **microlevel** and **macrolevel analysis**. Using microlevel analysis, a sociologist might investigate how fear of unemployment affects workers and their immediate families. A macrolevel analysis might examine how globalization, and the attendant labour market restructuring, has impacted Canadian workers and their families.

III. SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS

A. How Sociologists View Society

- 1) Sociologists develop **theories** and conduct research to determine how social life is organized. Theories help us interpret social reality in a distinct way by giving us a framework for organizing our observations and may allow us to describe, explain or possibly even predict social events.
- 2) Sociologists refer to a theoretical framework as a **perspective**, an overall approach or viewpoint toward some subject.

B. The Functionalist Perspective

- 1) According to the **functionalist perspective**, society is a stable, orderly system composed of a number of interrelated parts, each of which performs a function that contributes to the overall stability of society.
- 2) These interrelated parts are social institutions (such as families, the economy, education, and the government) that a society develops to organize its main concerns and activities so that social needs are met. Each institution performs a unique function, the contribution that each part makes to the overall stability of society and the well-being of individuals.
- 3) Manifest and Latent Functions:
Social institutions perform two different types of societal functions: *manifest functions* (the intended and recognized consequences of an activity or social process) and *latent functions* (the unintended consequences of an activity or social process that are hidden and remain unacknowledged by participants).
- 4) Dysfunctions and Social Disorganization:
From the functionalist perspective, social problems arise when social institutions do not fulfill the functions they are supposed to perform or when *dysfunctions* (undesirable consequences of an activity or social process that inhibit a society's ability to adapt or adjust) occur.
 - a. According to functionalists, dysfunctions in social institutions create **social disorganization**, causing a breakdown in traditional **values** and **norms** that serve as the social control mechanisms that, under normal circumstances, keep people from engaging in nonconforming behaviour. Although values provide ideas about behaviour, they do not state explicitly how we should behave; norms *do* state explicit rules of behaviour or standards of conduct.
 - b. Social disorganization is intensified by rapid social change that disrupts the stability of society. Early sociologists examined the relationship between social problems and **industrialization** and **urbanization** in Britain, Western Europe, and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

- 5) Applying the Functionalist Perspective to Problems of Violence:
Functionalists provide several explanations for violence in societies. One approach believes that violence arises from a condition of anomie, in which many individuals have a feeling of helplessness, normlessness, or alienation. Another functionalist explanation of violence is the *lifestyle-routine activity approach*, in which the patterns and timing of people's daily movements and activities are the keys to understanding violent personal crimes as well as other types of crime.

C. The Conflict Perspective

- 1) The *conflict perspective* is based on the assumption that groups in society are engaged in a continuous power struggle for control of scarce resources.
- 2) According to conflict theorists, certain groups of people are privileged while others are disadvantaged through the unjust use of political, economic, or social power. This perspective consists of a variety of related approaches that hold differing views regarding the most important form of conflict.
- 3) The Value Conflict Perspective:
According to *value conflict* theorists, social problems are conditions incompatible with group values.
 - a. Value clashes are ordinary occurrences in families, communities, and the larger society, where people commonly hold many divergent values. Although individuals may share certain core values, they do not share all values or a common culture (the knowledge, language, values, customs, and material objects that are passed from person to person and from one generation to the next in a human group or society).
 - b. Discrepancies between *ideal* (the values and beliefs people claim they hold) and *real* culture (the values and beliefs they actually follow) are a source of social problems in all societies.
- 4) Critical-Conflict Perspective:
According to *critical-conflict* theorists, social problems arise out of major contradictions inherent in the way societies are organized.
 - a. Some of these approaches focus on class inequalities resulting from *capitalism*, while others focus on inequalities based on racialization/ethnicity or gender.
 - b. According to early German economist Karl Marx, members of the *capitalist class* (the *bourgeoisie*) control the means of production (e.g., the land, tools, factories, and money for investment) and are at the top of a system of social stratification that affords them different lifestyles and life chances from the members of the *working class* (the *proletariat*), who must sell their labour power (ability to work) to capitalists. In the process, the capitalists derive excessive profit from the workers' labour.
 - c. Marx believed that capitalism led workers to experience increased levels of poverty and *alienation*, feelings of powerlessness and estrangement from other people and from oneself. He predicted the workers would eventually overthrow the capitalist economic system.
- 5) Some critical-conflict approaches focus on racialized and gendered subordination instead of on class-based inequalities. Theorists who emphasize discrimination and inequality based on racialization or ethnicity note that many social problems

are rooted in the continuing exploitation and subordination of people of colour and Indigenous people by White people and White-dominant systems.

- 6) Applying the Conflict Perspective to Problems of Violence:
Critical conflict theorists believe that in capitalist societies the wealthy may engage in some forms of violence to further their economic interests (e.g., the abuse of police or military power to protect property) whereas people living in poverty may engage in other forms of violence as a reaction against the unjust social and economic conditions they experience daily.

D. The Interactionist Perspective

- 1) The ***interactionist perspective*** focuses on a microlevel analysis of how people act toward one another and make sense of their daily lives, viewing society as the sum of the interactions of individuals and groups.
- 2) Most interactionists study social problems by analyzing the process whereby certain behaviour is defined as a social problem and how individuals and groups come to engage in activities that a significant number of people view as a major social concern.
- 3) A founder of the interactionist approach, German sociologist Georg Simmel, investigated the impact of industrialization and urbanization on people's values and behaviour within small social units. He noted that rapid changes in technology and dramatic growth of cities produced new social problems by breaking up the "geometry of social life."
- 4) According to Simmel, alienation is brought about by a decline in personal and emotional contacts. How people *interpret* subjective messages they receive from others, as well as the situations they encounter in their daily life, strongly influences their behaviour and their perceptions of what constitutes a social problem.
- 5) Labelling Theory and the Social Construction of Reality:
Other interactionists examine how people impose meanings on others. According to sociologist Howard Becker, *moral entrepreneurs* are persons who use their own views of right and wrong to establish rules and *label* others as deviant.
 - a. *Labelling theory* suggests that deviants are people who have been successfully labelled as such by others.
 - b. It raises questions about why some individuals and types of behaviour are labelled deviant but others are not.
 - c. According to some interaction theorists, many social problems can be linked to the *social construction of reality*, or the process by which people's perception of reality and their subsequent reaction, if any, is shaped largely by the subjective meaning that they give to an experience.
 - d. A related approach that some interactionists favour is the *definition of the situation approach*, often called the *Thomas Theorum* after sociologists Dorothy S. Thomas and William I. Thomas. The Thomas Theroum suggests that how people define a situation determines their reaction to it. If a situation is perceived as real, it *is* real in its consequences.
 - e. Sociologist Robert Merton has suggested that when people view a situation in a certain way and act according to their perceptions, the end result may be a ***self-fulfilling prophecy***.

- 6) Applying Interactionist Perspectives to Problems of Violence:
 - a. To analyze the problem of violence, interactionists focus on social interaction, and note that human behaviour is learned through interaction. For interactionists, violence is a learned response, not an inherent characteristic.
 - b. Interactionists also look at the types of social interactions that commonly lead to violence. The *situational approach* suggests that violence results from a specific interaction process, termed a “situational transaction.”
 - c. According to interactionists, reducing violence requires changing those societal values that encourage excessive competition and violence.
- E. Feminist Perspectives
 - 1) Feminist theorists begin their analysis by pointing out that mainstream sociological thought and theory is both *androcentric* and *Eurocentric*, in that most sociological theory is based on the experiences, ideas, and issues of concern for males, particularly those males of European/Western extraction.
 - 2) There are no “feminist issues” *per se* since every issue is a feminist issue. When feminist theorists engage in analysis, they “gender” the issues under study by looking at the differential impacts of social phenomena for men and women, and more recently for transgendered and/or non-gendered people as well.
 - 3) Feminist theories typically examine dynamics of power in relationships between individuals, roles, and structures. This focus on power differentials is shared with conflict and Marxist theories, but feminist theories add a focus on gendered power and patriarchy. These theories generally begin an analysis from a particular “standpoint” by examining social life from the situated vantage points of the individuals and/or groups involved.
 - 4) A classification system that categorizes various feminist theories includes:
 - a. theories of difference (men and women experience different realities);
 - b. theories of inequality (women’s experiences are less privileged or are disadvantaged relative to men’s); and
 - c. or, theories of oppression (women are actively subordinated and kept disadvantaged, both by patriarchal structures and individuals reinforcing sexist socialization and ideologies).
 - 5) Modern-day feminist theories, if they are reflexive, turn the lenses back upon themselves. Many contemporary feminists spend a good deal of time deconstructing the theories they favour, the underlying assumptions, the exclusions, the inclusiveness, the intersections and the impacts of the analysis.
 - 6) Applying Feminist Perspectives to Problems of Violence:
 - a. Feminist perspectives of violence highlight issues of dominance and power, and suggest that inequalities between groups result in violence. They conclude that people who enjoy power and privilege likely commit as many acts of violence as those who are disenfranchised, and that main difference between groups is that those without power are disproportionately targeted as the perpetrators or viewed as bringing it on themselves.
 - b. One feminist perspective suggests that violence against women is a means of reinforcing patriarchy. Gender stratification is reinforced by powerful

physical, psychological, and social mechanisms of control, including force or the threat of force. Fear of violence forces women to adapt their ways of being in and navigating the social world in order to ensure they are not in a position to be victimized by men.

IV. SOCIAL CHANGE AND REDUCING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

- A. The concept of ***social change*** is important to our discussion of reducing social problems. Social change often occurs over time. Some efforts to deal with social problems are *short-term* strategies, whereas others are *middle-term* remedies, and still others constitute *long-term* efforts to alleviate the root causes of a social problem. For example, efforts to alleviate individual unemployment or reduce unemployment rates in a community have a different temporal dimension than long-term efforts to change the political economy in such a manner that high levels of employment and greater wage equity are brought about throughout a nation or nations. Some discussions of social change sound idealistic or utopian; however, for most social problems, a combination of strategies will be required to reduce them (for example, unemployment would need multi-level strategies to effectively prevent it).

V. MICROLEVEL ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE SOCIAL PROBLEMS

- A. Seeking Individual Solutions to Personal Problems
- 1) Microlevel analysis of solutions to social problems focuses on how individuals operate within small groups to try to remedy a problem that affects them, their family, or friends. In this case, most people turn to their ***primary groups***. Primary groups include one's family, close friends, and other peers with whom one routinely shares the more personal experiences in life (such as school- or work-related peer groups).
 - 2) According to sociologists, members of our primary groups are usually there to support us even when others are not. Consequently, many people turn first to family members and friends. For example, some analysts believe that we have many more people who are without a domicile (who are technically "homeless") than current statistics indicate: whenever possible, homeless individuals may live with relatives or friends, many of whom may already live in overcrowded and sometimes substandard housing. When people seek such short-term solutions to personal troubles, most believe the situation will be temporary. However, problems that are widespread or embedded in the larger society may stretch into months or years without resolution. At best, individualized efforts to reduce a problem are short-term measures, which some critics refer as the "band-aid approach" because such efforts most often do not eliminate the causes of the problem.

- 3) Some microlevel approaches to reducing social problems focus on how individuals can do something about the problems they face. For example, a person who is unemployed or among the “working poor” because of low wages, seasonal employment, or other factors may be urged to get more education or training and work experience in order to find a “better” job and have the opportunity for upward mobility.

VI. MID-RANGE ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE SOCIAL PROBLEMS

A. Groups That Help People Cope With Their Problems

- 1) Groups that attempt to reduce a social problem by helping individuals cope with it, or to eliminate it from their own lives, are commonplace in our society (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous or “AA”). The basic assumption of most mid-range approaches to reducing social problems is that prevention and intervention are most effective at the personal and community levels.
- 2) Typically, self-help groups bring together individuals who have experienced the same problem and have the same goals- quitting the problematic behaviour. An underlying assumption of this approach is that some social problems can best be reduced by reaching one person at a time. Volunteers who have had similar problems (and believe they are on the road to overcoming them) often act as role models for newer members.
- 3) Mid-range approaches may bring changes in the individual’s life; however, such groups typically do not systematically address the larger structural factors (such as unemployment, work-related stress, and aggressive advertising campaigns) that may contribute to the problems. As a result, larger, societal intervention is necessary to reduce the underlying problems that contribute to individual behaviour. For example, AA typically does not lobby for more stringent laws pertaining to drunk driving or the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages.

B. Grassroots Groups That Work for Community-Based Change

- 1) Some **grassroots groups** focus on bringing about a change that may reduce or eliminate a social problem in a specific community or region. From this approach, people learn how to empower themselves against local, provincial, territorial, and national government officials; corporate executives; and media figures who determine what constitutes the “news” in their area.
- 2) Social analysts suggest that more community dialogue is needed on social issues, and more people need to become involved in grassroots social movements. Because **social movements** have not become institutionalized and are outside the political mainstream, they empower outsiders by offering them an opportunity to have their voices heard.
- 3) Grassroots organizations and other local structures are crucial to national social movements because these movements must recruit members and gain the economic resources necessary for nationwide or global social activism. Numerous studies have shown that the local level constitutes a necessary micro-foundation for larger-scale social movement activism.

- 4) Some social movements participate in what has been defined as counter-hegemonic practice by Canadian sociologist William K. Carroll. Counter-hegemonic practice refers to creating true alternatives to hegemony, although counter-hegemonic social movements need to be aware of the movement's potential to create new injustices by defining its own issues as "the" issues.

VII. MACROLEVEL ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE SOCIAL PROBLEMS

A. Working Through Special Interest Groups for Political Change

- 1) Examples of special interest groups include the Canadian Labour Congress, the Reform Party, and REAL Women. They are often referred to as *pressure groups* or *lobbies*, and may be categorized on the basis of four factors:
- 2) *Issues*. Some groups focus on *single issues* (such as abortion, gun control, or teaching acceptance for family diversity in Canadian schools); others focus on *multiple issues* (such as equal access to education, employment, and health care).
- 3) *View of the present system of wealth and power*. Some groups make *radical demands* that would involve the end of patriarchy, capitalism, governmental bureaucracy, or other existing power structures; others do not attack the legitimacy of the present system of wealth and power but insist on specific social reforms.
- 4) *Beliefs about elites*. Some groups want to *influence* elites (or incorporate movement leaders into the elite); others want to *replace* the existing elites with persons whom they believe share their own interests and concerns.
- 5) *Type of Political Action*. There are often many different groups, all of whom do not entirely agree on the nature or extent of the problems or proposed solutions, who may try to gain recognition from elected officials or bureaucrats for their agendas.

B. Working through National Social Movements to Reduce Problems

- 1) **Collective behavior** and national social movements are significant ways in which people seek to resolve social problems. Examples of collective behavior include public demonstrations and riots.
- 2) Beginning with the 1919 Egyptian revolution against British occupation, an increasingly popular form of public demonstration is **civil disobedience**. People often seek to bring about change through actions such as sit-ins, marches, boycotts, and strikes. When people refuse to abide by a policy or law and challenge authorities to do something about it, they are demanding social change with some sense of urgency. Sometimes referred to as *protest crowds*, these groups engage in activities that they hope will achieve specific political goals.
- 3) National social movements are divided into five major categories:
 - a. *Reform movements* seek to improve society by changing some specific aspect of the social structure. Environmental groups and disability rights groups are examples of groups of people who seek to bring about a change that they perceive will benefit themselves and others. Activists in reform movements typically seek to bring about change by working within the existing organizational structures of society.

- b. *Revolutionary movements* seek to bring about a total change in society. Examples include utopian groups and radical terrorists who use fear tactics to intimidate and—at least briefly—gain concessions from those with whom they disagree ideologically. Some radical terrorists may kill people in their pursuit of a society that more closely conforms to their own worldview.
- c. *Religious movements* (also referred to as *expressive movements*) seek to renovate or renew people through inner change. For this reason, religious movements are often linked to local and regional organizations that seek to bring about changes in the individual’s life. National religious movements often seek to persuade political officials to enact laws that will replace or eliminate what they perceive to be social problems.
- d. *Alternative movements* seek limited change in some aspects of people’s behaviour and currently include a variety of “New Age” movements which emphasize such things as the development of a new national spiritual consciousness.
- e. *Resistance movements* seek to prevent change or undo change that has already occurred. In public debates over social policies, most social movements advocating change will face resistance from the members of reactive movements that hold opposing viewpoints and want social policy to reflect their own beliefs and values. Examples of resistance movements include those which oppose same sex marriage, anti-abortion groups, such as “Operation Rescue,” which seek to close clinics which provide abortions and to recriminalize abortion; and anti-immigrant groups seeking to close Canadian borders to outsiders or to place harsher demands on immigrant workers.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTIVE LEARNING

Professor Kathleen McKinney, one of the recipients of the Hans O. Mauksch Award for distinguished contributions to undergraduate sociology, is an advocate of active learning and has provided outstanding suggestions for classroom techniques to encourage students to do more than simply listen to a lecture. According to McKinney, active learning techniques are most likely to succeed when instructors prepare students in advance by providing specific objectives for the activities and explaining how using active learning techniques will benefit them. It is important to solicit student feedback afterwards in order to improve the activity in the future. Four of McKinney’s suggestions are summarized here because they are incorporated into teaching suggestions throughout this manual:

1. **Think-Pair-Share:** After giving students a question or problem to solve, give them a few minutes to think about the problem alone. Then have them discuss their ideas with the person sitting next to them. Finally, have student pairs share their ideas with the whole class or a larger group. This can be done in any size class, including those meeting in lecture halls with permanently fixed seating.

2. **Collaborative Learning Groups:** Students work in groups to fulfill a task. Each group chooses a leader and someone to take notes, and the group presents a response or a paper to the entire class. This requires flexibility in classroom space or having some other location or time when students can confer with each other.
3. **Analysis or reaction to videos:** Before showing a video, prepare students with questions or ideas on which to focus. After the video, ask them to answer the questions or write a review or reaction, applying sociological concepts and perspectives. Have the students present their ideas to the class.
4. **Student debates:** Having students prepare for and present debates on the social issues discussed in the text and in class provides an outstanding opportunity to expose them to more than one viewpoint. Students should be given advance assignments, suggested resources, and a game plan for how to approach the debates so they can take a position, gather data, and support their viewpoints.

Kathleen McKinney, Sociology, Illinois State University, Normal, IL, kmckinne@ilstu.edu

ACCESSING THE REAL WORLD: ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH PROBLEMS RELATED TO VIOLENCE

Focus on Community Action

Have a class discussion about prevention and intervention strategies for reducing youth violence and gang participation in your community. Although people have initially laughed at ideas such as midnight basketball, bowling, or dances, some social analysts believe that activities such as this keep some young people out of trouble. What other types of activities and training might be useful in reducing youth-related violence in the community?

Separate students in to small groups and have students investigate the current programs in place to deter youth from engaging in violence. Have these programs or initiatives been effective in their communities? Why or why not? Next, have them develop a set of suggestions for programs that might provide other opportunities for young people or activities that might help youth make better life choices. What resources would be necessary to bring such programs into being? How would the costs of these programs compare with the cost of processing people through the justice system and following up with young offenders? Each group should prepare a small report on their findings and share it with the rest of the class.

Focus on Theoretical Analysis

Based on Chapter One or other information you might wish to provide to students, have the class decide on a social problem (such as youth violence) they would like to analyze during the next class meeting. Set up four collaborative learning groups and determine which group will be the “experts” on each of the major theoretical perspectives. Students should bring notes to turn in to their note-taker on the following: (1) key factors involved in the theoretical perspective, (2) how that approach might explain the social problem under consideration, (3) how that approach might

suggest resolving the problem, and (4) major strengths and weaknesses of the theoretical perspective as applied to that problem.

Have students meet in their collaborative learning groups for about 20-30 minutes (depending on the length of your class) to compile their notes and prepare a presentation for the entire class. Then, ask group leaders to appoint other people in their group to do various aspects of the presentation, so that other members do not become dependent on the leader doing most of the group's work and talking.

Focus on Media Engagement

Ask students to do a content analysis of television programs such as Saturday morning cartoons, prime-time police and hospital shows, college and professional sporting events, and Internet websites which are likely to depict violent acts. Also have students go to web sites such as Media Watch (<http://www.mediawatch.com>) and Media Awareness Network (www.media-awareness.ca) to get the latest "Television and Internet Statistics" on how many hours children spend watching television and surfing the Internet and what perceptions they have about violence in media. For example, a 2005 Canadian study found this in regard to children and Internet usage:

- Almost one-third of the 50 favourite Web sites listed by kids incorporate material that is violent (28 percent) or highly sexualized (32 percent). Kids in Grades 8 and 9 include these sites in their list of favourites most frequently visited.
- Two sites that appear in the top four most popular sites with students in Grades 8 to 11 – *Newgrounds* and *eBaumsworld* – contain mature content. These sites also appear on the list of favourites for Grade 6 and 7 students.

Students should take note of the frequency of violent acts on television programs and the Internet. As well, they should write about the gendered, racialized and class dimensions of each violent act depicted. Were they surprised with their findings? Why or why not? Have students bring their notes on what they observed on the television and Internet so they can share information with the rest of the class.

APPLYING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH DISCUSSION

1. How can the sociological imagination help us as we deal with social problems that affect us personally? What kinds of insights might advanced sociological training provide for a person who wants to engage in problem solving in politics, government, education, the military, or other social organizations and institutions?
2. Has Canada's adoption of harsher penalties for people convicted of hate crimes had any impact for victims or perpetrators? What, if any, impacts might these penalties have had so far?

3. Some critical-conflict theorists believe that social problems arise from the major contradictions inherent in capitalist economies. What roles does violence play in a capitalist economy?
4. How might labelling theory work with the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy to increase or decrease the life chances of a youth who is suspected of committing a deviant act?
5. Some feminist theorists suggest that the use of violence against women is one way that men use to maintain and reinforce patriarchal oppression throughout society. Construct arguments that support and/or refute this position.
6. Suppose that you were given the economic resources and political clout to reduce a major social problem. Which problem would you choose? What steps would you take to alleviate the problem? How would you measure your success or failure in reducing or eliminating the problem?
7. Do governments at all levels in Canada listen to their constituents about social issues? What evidence can you find to support that they do or do not? Why is the situation the way it is?

AUDIO-VISUAL MEDIA FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

African Canadian Issues Collection—This 5-part collection of NFB titles illustrates that there is a life beyond the streets for inner city youth. A gritty focus on the serious problems of poverty, drug abuse, violence and street gangs. 2006. Varying clip lengths. National Film Board of Canada, www.nfb.ca.

Charting New Waters: Responding to Violence against Women with Disabilities—This is a video and a study guide about violence against women with disabilities. 1996. 38 mins. National Film Board of Canada, www.nfb.ca.

Cheating Death—This documentary tells the story of a young Toronto man and the little understood world of guns, gangs and drugs. 2004. 24 mins. National Film Board of Canada, www.nfb.ca.

Cultivating Peace in the 21st Century—The four films in *Cultivating Peace in the 21st Century* provide teachers with tools to engage students to search for a “culture of peace” in our homes, schools, neighbourhoods and global communities. 2002. 100 mins. National Film Board of Canada, www.nfb.ca.

Exiles in Lotusland—This video is gritty look a the life of Canadian youth living on the edge, suicide and “street kid” culture. 2005. 71 mins. National Film Board of Canada, www.nfb.ca.

It's a Girl's World—This film looks at bullying and social power in a clique of 10 year old girls. 2004. 54 mins. National Film Board of Canada, www.nfb.ca.

Kids in Jail—This partially animated documentary shares the experiences of several incarcerated youths as they reflect upon their lives, on what led to incarceration and on their futures. 2008. 57 mins. National Film Board of Canada, www.nfb.ca.

Still Longshots —This documentary follows four “at-risk” young people through a weekend long video making workshop. 2007. 52 mins. National Film Board of Canada, www.nfb.ca.

The Line— A young woman is raped when a one-night stand far from home goes terribly wrong. In the aftermath, as she struggles to make sense of what happened, she decides to make a film about the relationship between her own experience and the tangle of political, legal, and cultural questions that surround issues of sex and consent. 2010. 24 mins. Media Education Foundation, www.mediaed.org.

Tough Guise: Violence, Media, & the Crisis in Masculinity—While the social construction of femininity has been widely examined, the dominant role of masculinity has until recently remained largely invisible. *Tough Guise* is the first educational video geared toward systematically examining the relationship between pop-cultural imagery and the social construction of masculine identities in the U.S. at the dawn of the 21st century. 1999. 82 mins. Media Education Foundation. www.mediaed.org.

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