

**SOCIOLOGY 112: SOCIAL PROBLEMS**  
**Mary Baldwin University**  
**Baldwin Online & Adult Program: Online Class**

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Sociologists assume that every group defines some element of its social life as “problematic”. Examples of social problems in our society include: crime / laws, sexual behaviors / sexual moralists, corporate greed / anti-capitalists, individualism / socialism, immorality / morality, environmental issues / environmentalists, etc. It should be obvious from this list that what constitutes a social problem depends on who you are talking to. There are perhaps some behaviors – homicide, for instance - that virtually everyone in a society considers a problem. However most social problems are issues of contention and have many dimensions.

In this course we will survey aspects of social life considered “problematic” in our world today. Each of us “knows” what these “problems” are, and we tend to think of these social behaviors, relationships, organizations, etc., as *inherently* problematic. In our everyday life we assume that anyone at anytime would agree with our assessment. At least, if someone disagrees, then *they* may be part of the problem themselves! Social problems have this “absolute” character in the way that we think of them and experience them. In sociology, however, social problems are considered as social creations; in social science there are no human behaviors, relationships, or organizations, etc., which are *inherently* problematic. What is a “problem” for one group at one time may not be a problem for another group at another time. What makes a behavior a social problem is not the behavior itself but the group who decides that such behavior is unacceptable.

Another primary focus will be the *structural* nature of social problems. These “problems” are by definition enduring social realities, persisting across generations and even countries. Social problems are durable because they are generated by institutional structures. In our everyday lives we are usually not aware that we make our choices within a narrowly defined set of possibilities, set by our social circumstances. However, it is these very circumstances – these “institutionally defined contexts” – that determine what we consider a social problem and that provide the conditions for problematic behavior. It is our primary task as students of sociology to become aware of this context and how it generates social problems. Such awareness is what is referred to as a “sociological perspective”.

One can also think of a “sociological perspective” as an enhanced ability to see the world through another’s eyes, to “put oneself in the shoes of another”. Achieving a greater measure of this “enhanced ability” is a second aspect of our primary goal for the semester.

The study of “social problems” is one of the oldest areas of inquiry in sociology and remains a mainstay of the discipline today. Sociologists have often approached their work with a sense that social life is not only intriguing but also problematic and in need of change in some way. An emphasis on social activism was stronger in sociology’s early years, but it still remains important for many sociologists today. It is the value of objective sociological knowledge for social policy, the ubiquity of social problems themselves, and the interest of sociologists that continually renews the study of “social problems”.

In this course we will focus on social problems in the U. S., but we will also compare the U. S. experience to that of other industrialized and industrializing nations. A reason for looking at the U.S. is that American social problems are a central part of each of our lives. A reason for comparing the U.S. experience to that of other nations is that our world is quickly becoming a “global” community and social problems are ever more likely to cross national boundaries. In fact, the international character of social problems is often at the heart of our national discussions.

## **CLASS STRUCTURE AND REQUIREMENTS:**

### **Required texts:**

Sullivan, Thomas J. 2012. *Introduction to Social Problems*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston MA: (Pearson Education) Allyn and Bacon. ISBN 13:978-0-205-84176-9

### **Grading formula:**

|             |     |                 |
|-------------|-----|-----------------|
| Exam # 1    | 20% | Due by Sept. 28 |
| Exam # 2    | 20% | Due by Nov. 2   |
| Final Exam  | 25% | Due by Dec. 7   |
| Paper       | 25% | Due by Nov. 25  |
| Discussions | 10% | Weekly          |

All work for the course must be submitted by the deadline for semester coursework. **Those students who wish for an “extension” of the course must have completed at least the first exam.**

This course is divided into three parts. In the **first portion** we will consider sociology's general approach to social problems. This is covered in the first chapter of the text. In many ways, this is the most important chapter you will read because you will be asked to apply these basic sociological principles to each of the social problems that you read about, as well as to the problem that you choose to write about. In this first part of the course we will apply these principles to understanding family relationships, crime, substance abuse, and sexual deviancy *as social problems*. The **first exam** covers this material.

In the **second portion** of the course we will focus on social problems related to healthcare, and social inequality. The second exam covers this material.

In the **concluding section** of the course, we will consider social problems that characterize globalization. There will be a final comprehensive exam, which focuses on material covered in this third section of the course, and also tests students on their understanding of the course as a whole.

We will use the **Discussions** on Canvas to create a learning community. Students should make a minimum of two relevant, substantive contributions to each of the discussion forums. Postings will take the form of one personal response to the readings and one thoughtful reply to another student's post which furthers the discussion.

During the semester students will organize their ideas and research on a particular social problem into a 2,400 words minimum (excluding references) **research paper**. The goal of your paper is to treat the social problem of your choice *as a social problem*, as this is discussed in Chapter One of the text. You should also, at some point in the paper, describe a *functionalist* or a *conflict* perspective on your “problem”. It is recommended that you write your topic ideas in the form of a paragraph or two and e-mail it to the instructor by the middle of the semester. **It is REQUIRED that you contact the instructor in order to obtain approval of your topic before you begin writing the paper.**

This paper must be based on at least five **sociology** books or articles that are NOT Internet sources; you may, in addition to these five, include Internet sources. **Sources used in the paper should be properly cited; please refer to the method used in the Sullivan text as your guide.** This means that you must include an abbreviated citation, *where appropriate*, **IN THE TEXT**, and the full citation in a concluding reference section. You will be graded for basic English, including your sources and referencing, although sociological content will be the primary factor in grading.

**Getting started:**

First obtain the text and explore the Canvas site. Let me know if you have any questions about either. Your next task is to read the chapters for the first exam while starting to think about a paper topic. Click on "Theories and concepts" to access the study questions, and answer them in writing – I always find that writing things down highlights areas of confusion! When you find questions that you wish to discuss, go straight to the discussion board and post your insights and questions. I look forward to working, and learning, with you throughout the semester.

**Contact with instructor:**

E-mail is the preferred and most dependable means of contacting the instructor and should be used whenever possible. The instructor will make contact with students via Canvas announcements and their Mary Baldwin University e-mail address; for this reason, check your MBU e-mail and Canvas regularly.