PART ONE

Creating the Context for Social Policy Analysis

The Social Problem and Judicial Contexts

A man said to the universe:
“Sir, I exist!”
“However,” replied the universe,
“That fact has not created in me
a sense of obligation.”

—Stephen Crane, War Is Kind

Introduction: The Problem of Policy for Practitioners

The objective of this book is to help readers develop skill in the critical analysis of modern social welfare policies and programs. The motive is to preserve the sanity and dedication of social practitioners who, on behalf of clients/consumers, must daily interpret, enforce, advocate, circumvent, or challenge those policies and programs. Much of the working life of professional practitioners is spent in the context of those policies and programs. If practitioners are not employed on the staff of an agency administering such programs, they serve clients/consumers whose lives are affected vitally and daily by those programs: the client/consumer whose child is detained in a local juvenile detention center or the client/consumer whose Social Security disability benefit is suspended because a judgment of work capacity has been changed. Without being concerned about such policies or being
prepared to analyze the nature of their strengths and shortcomings, no social worker can aspire to a professional calling.

Social work is unique for its simultaneous focus on the client/consumer and the social environment. Like family, community, psychological, and work factors, social policies and programs are a critical feature of the client/consumer surroundings and demand every bit as much care and attention from the working professional. For better or worse, the lives of all private citizens are subject to serious and widespread invasions by governmental social policy. For those whom social workers serve, it poses a special stress because it affects lives already burdened with fearsome and demoralizing social problems: hunger, illness, physical or mental disablement, violence, discrimination, or disease.

Stephen Crane’s lines at the beginning of this chapter are a moving rendition of the idea that immense forces are at work in the world, forces that have no concern for their effect on the fates of particular individuals. Crane means to call our attention to the idea that an earthquake or a volcano does not consider the suffering it causes to individuals in the cataclysmic changes it wreaks—changes begun long before those individuals were born, changes whose effects will outlive human memory.

Crane’s point can be extended to modern social welfare policies and programs. Public policies generally are not designed with the needs of individuals in mind; rather they are designed for groups of people who share a common social problem. It is of utmost importance for social work practitioners to understand that because of this feature, social policies and programs will fail some, perhaps many, individuals on some occasions. This fact of life is a pervasive problem and a prominent part of the work of most program administrators. It also identifies an important area of social work practice for those who work with individual clients/consumers: finding ways to meet clients’/consumers’ urgent and unique needs that cannot, at first glance, be met through existing programs. Examples are not difficult to find:

John Samuelson is a construction worker. Every year for the past five years he has received notice from the county attorney’s office that Mildred Singer has filed suit against him for nonsupport of a child she claims is theirs. Each time a suit is filed, John loses about five working days’ pay because of the time it takes to talk to his Legal Aid attorney, give depositions, and appear in court. Each year thus far, the local judge has dismissed the case for lack of evidence because John has denied paternity on the basis that the baby was born ten and one-half months after he left Mildred. Mildred has admitted that she lived with other men during the time her child could have been conceived but nevertheless has identified John as the father. John once received a letter from Mildred admitting that, contrary to her allegation, she believed another man to be the baby’s father, but John’s wife destroyed the letter in a fit of jealousy. John agreed to take a blood test that, with 97 percent accuracy, tells whether a specific man can be excluded as a child’s father. The test declared that John could very well be the father. The prevailing judicial policy is to consider the test accurate, within a 3 percent margin of error. John now must pay $200 per month in child support until the child is eighteen. In fact, Mildred (now the mother of three) does not wish to press nonsupport charges against John.
(now the father of four), but federal policy requires applicants for TANF (like Mildred) to press nonsupport charges as a condition for continuing to receive financial assistance.

Note that in this case, it would be a peculiar moral position to argue that it is somehow wrong to enforce a public policy that makes fathers financially responsible for their children, pursues fathers across state lines to do so, and makes an accurate paternity test available. The reason, in this instance, that these public policies come to grief is that they did not anticipate the incredible complexity that characterizes the lives of individual ordinary citizens. Legal procedures assume—reasonably in most instances—that people will present all evidence in which clearly it is in their self-interest to do so. A test that is 97 percent accurate makes very few mistakes indeed; the fact that it might have made a mistake in this instance must be viewed in the context of ninety-seven other cases. Most people would be willing to accept the possible injustice done to John. Here is another example:

Nancy Willard's arms were burned off below the elbow when she caught them in the corner of a plastic injection mold. (Hot plastic disintegrates flesh and bone instantly.) Nancy was a dependable and efficient worker who earned $12 per hour. The law in her state requires all employers of more than six people to carry Workers Compensation insurance to provide for just such accidents. Nancy is twenty-eight years old and the mother of two children. The plant she works in spends a lot of money to keep it accident-free and has a 99 percent success rate—only two other serious accidents in its ten-year history. State law specifies that Nancy must agree to a lump-sum settlement of $25,000 in compensation for the loss of both arms below the elbow. Nancy's average annual earnings were $25,000—$20,000 net after taxes. She also had $1,000 worth of fringe benefits per year (medical and life insurance, uniforms, and bonuses).

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the idea of worker-injury compensation or with public policy that requires lump-sum settlements. The problems here are with equity and adequacy that flow from the individual attributes of Nancy Willard. Were she sixty-four with one year to go before retirement, a $25,000 settlement would be adequate compensation for loss of one year's work. At the age of twenty-eight, however, she will lose most of thirty-seven years of wages earned at full working capacity, because with prostheses to replace her arms, she probably will work at only minimum wage. Furthermore, she will lose all her earnings for a one-to-two-year period—the time it will take for surgery, prosthetic fitting, and training. This period alone will cost her perhaps $20,000, or one year of net income. (Her employer's insurance company is required to pay her medical bills.) The $25,000 lump-sum settlement will replace only a small fraction of her long-term economic loss, and that settlement assumes that rehabilitation will be successful and that she can return to work.

It is clear from these examples that, despite a practitioner's best efforts and good policy and program design and administration, some clients' needs will go unmet. That knowledge will be the cause of much hard feeling, bad public relations, and personal distress on the part of the social worker. If a client goes hungry for a week, loses a child, or
loses a job that required months of effort to obtain, simply because public policy could not deal with the unique circumstances of his or her life, it cannot be easily forgotten or suffered willingly—nor should it be.

Neither are clients/consumers’ lives measurably improved by drawing sweeping conclusions that such instances are the result of the corruptness of the welfare system or its personnel. Although some features of some welfare systems can be shown (on certain moral assumptions) to be corrupt—and surely there is evidence that some personnel are corrupt—it is neither useful nor accurate to generalize along those lines. What is intended to be shown by the preceding illustrations is that there are natural limits to the effectiveness of social policies and programs. The more unique a citizen’s situation is, the less likely it is that policies and programs will meet his or her need.

Therefore, the question might arise, “If so much deprivation continues because social welfare programs and policies cannot take individual circumstances into account, then might it be better if all programs intended for groups of people were replaced with programs intended for, and consciously designed to meet, individual needs?” This solution might entail a social welfare system in which persons in need applied for any kind of assistance to one—and only one—social worker who had access to the resources of all available programs. If the client/consumer needed financial assistance, the social worker would decide not only whether but also how much to give. If the client/consumer needed medical care, the social worker would tell the client/consumer where to get it and would pay the bill. In fact, this vision might be sufficiently detailed to suggest that all monies from all current programs be put into one big pot and allocated to each social worker in proportion to the number of clients/consumers he or she served. The key constraint on largesse would be that the social worker must ensure that the pot lasts long enough. The vision might even anticipate that because each package of services and benefits would be individually tailored, no general standards of need would be necessary. Furthermore, no paperwork would be necessary because the social worker would be accountable only to the client/consumer (and to the fiscal officer, to ensure that all monies went to clients/consumers). The issue here is that this is a legitimate, even plausible, style for the delivery of social benefits. In fact, a widely used strategy called purchase-of-service contracting (POSC) bears some resemblance to the system envisioned.

Although it is intrinsically appealing, this custom-tailored approach to social policy is not without problems. For example, every social worker will likely have different standards for determining how much money, medical care, housing, and so on is needed. That would result in noticeable differences in benefits among people similarly situated. That would be a natural enough effect, for treating people individually was the basic idea behind this way of doing things. Consequently, we have a dilemma here: If we construct our social welfare system to be adequate in the sense that it meets unique needs and circumstances, it will be inevitable that some will need and, thus, will get more than others. But if we construct it so that it is exactly equitable (everybody gets the same benefit no matter what), it will always be inadequate for those who need more. Equity and adequacy are two criteria by which modern social welfare programs should be evaluated. A third criterion is efficiency.
No doubt there are ways in which these inherent conflicts among equity, adequacy, and efficiency could be overcome and still keep social programs sufficiently flexible to take unique client need into account. We would encourage the reader to think along those lines because that is the way better policy solutions are developed.

However, the search for better solutions also reveals the limits of social welfare program design and demonstrates an important principle about social policies and programs: Every policy or program that solves the social needs of one client/consumer or client/consumer group will create additional problems for another needy client/consumer or client/consumer group. Social policy and program solutions are inherently imperfect to some degree and are constantly in need of revision. Far from being the occasion for disillusionment, it is this very fact that creates the opportunity for service by dedicated professional practitioners to people in need. Social policies and programs left to their own devices are unguided missiles, guaranteed to harm the unwitting and unwary. That danger can be tempered only by frontline practitioners devoted to seeking humane and rational interpretations of social policies directed toward human needs. It is the practitioner’s responsibility to know the policy system well enough to do that, and it is to that end that the following chapters are directed.

NOTE

CHAPTER 1

Analyzing the Social Problem Background of Social Policies and Social Programs

The Nature of Social Problems

Earlier, the point was made that social welfare programs are solutions to social problems. Notice that not all “problems” are social problems and that they are not all equally important. Some argue that the “importance” of a social problem depends on two things: (1) the power and social status of those who are defining the problem and urging the expenditure of resources toward a solution and (2) the sheer number of people affected. Thus, the more people affected and the greater the social power and status of those urging a solution, the more important the social problem.

Examples of “big” and “little” social problems abound. Social problems often arise as a consequence of rare diseases with strong social effects—retinitis pigmentosa, for example. A relatively rare congenital defect that prevents those afflicted from seeing in the dark, retinitis pigmentosa is a medical problem surely, but it is also a social problem because it creates serious social consequences: For all practical purposes, the sufferer is blind during more than half the hours in a day. The disease is a small problem to most people because the number affected is comparatively small. To those so afflicted, however, it is a very big problem indeed, and they can cite persons of great social stature who have the defect. But, to date, no one with widespread credibility (power and status) has presented the problem to the public as a matter of concern, so that to the world at large, it will remain a minor problem until it either affects more people or is redefined as socially important by a public opinion maker.

Less exotic examples of “big” social problems include unemployment, because it affects so many people; health, because potentially it affects everyone; what used to be called mental retardation, because after Rose Kennedy (mother of a U.S. president) became a public advocate of the issue, federal appropriations for the problem increased magically.

Whereas not all problems are social problems, of course, many do have important social consequences: When someone loses a job, it is a personal problem only for
that individual and his or her immediate family; when a machine operator loses a job because of modern standards of worker safety or product quality, it is a technological problem; when there is a declining market for the things the machine produced, it is a business problem; when consumers no longer have money to buy what the machine produces, it is an economic problem. When, as a result of any or all of the foregoing problems, many people lose jobs and are unemployed, or when people of power, wealth, and social status become concerned about the effects of these problems, such concern becomes a social problem. Usually, an existing policy or program solution to the problem will remain in place at least until the personal, technological, business, or economic problem that created the social problem is solved. The social program may continue past that time; for example, social programs such as unemployment compensation were created to meet human social problems that are created by first-order economic, business, or technological problems.

In summary, social problems are those concerns about the quality of life for large groups of people where the concern is held as a consensus populationwide, and/or the concern is voiced by the socially powerful or the economically privileged. In general, it is these types of problems that spawn social policies and programs as corrective measures. Although this account of social problems is certainly not the only one, it is arguably the one most relevant to those who must understand social problems as a prerequisite of understanding social programs operated by the social welfare institution.

The purpose of this book is to help readers understand social policies and programs, and that understanding cannot be complete without the ability to analyze the social problem which the policy or program is intended to correct. This next section demonstrates how attention to four specific aspects of social problem viewpoints or statements will yield that basic understanding.

Social Problem Analysis

Understanding a social problem is not quite the same thing as understanding the truth of “how things really are.” It is not quite the same thing as understanding how highways are built or trees grow. To understand a social problem is to understand how and what another person (or group) thinks and believes about the social events being defined as a problem. When you do that, you are doing an analysis of a social problem. A central aspect of social problems is that, although the events that identify or define them may be the same no matter who views them, the way in which those events are interpreted is likely to vary considerably. That a family of four has, say, $12,000 annual (gross) income is, on the face of it, an unambiguous fact but one bound to be interpreted differently by different observers. Whether the fact is interpreted as a social problem depends on the value bias and ideology used to render that judgment. For example, a person might believe that beef, beer, alcohol, or tobacco is vital or that no child should share a bedroom. In that case, then, $12,000 per year is unlikely to provide for those minimum standards for four people, and the straightforward conclusion is that a $12,000 annual income is an indicator of the presence of a social problem called poverty. However, notice that these stan-
dards clearly are value-biased; they are founded on cultural preferences; most people outside North America survive on far less.¹

Note also how the reason for the existence of the social problem can vary with the viewer. Based on one kind of idea about how the economy and labor markets work, one person might say that this low income was the result of the skill this worker offered to an employer, the employer's need for it (how good business was), how good a worker the person was (productivity), and how many other people offered the same skill and effort (competition). Another person might say that the low income that creates this social problem is caused by the tradition among employers to pay workers according to the social status and prestige of the work they do and the families from which they come. The point in the initial stage of social problem analysis is not to decide whether the viewpoint presented is right, but to sort out what is being offered by way of explanation.

It should be clear from the preceding examples that the way social problems are understood is highly variable and depends on the viewer. On that account, there is no such thing as the "right" or the "only true" social problem viewpoint. Social problem viewpoints may be factual or not, clear or muddled, complete or incomplete, logical or illogical, or even useful or useless, but they are not right or wrong in some absolute sense. An unemployed person who has seen savings wither to nothing, while debts mount and children go hungry, will view the general problem of unemployment as excruciating, whereas those who believe they are paying high taxes so that the unemployed can loaf will not view it that way. Those who are outraged at a society that permits unemployment will view the problem differently from those for whom unemployment is merely a newspaper item. Unemployed persons stress food for children, whereas taxpayers stress the cost of that food and current events followers stress the difference between this year's and last year's unemployment figures. No one is wrong in any absolute sense here, and the basic issue for the person who wishes to understand social policies and programs is the viewpoint on which every social policy and program is based.

The social problem analysis does not begin by judging whether something is right or wrong; rather it must await a clear understanding of the social problem viewpoint itself. The final thing to do in a social problem analysis is to make moral judgments about the argument; the first thing to do is to specify what the viewpoint is and how it differs from others. The reason for bearing down so hard on this idea is twofold: (1) Social problem analysis is a demanding task, and (2) at the end of the chapter, you will do analyses of the social problem viewpoints of other persons. In doing the exercises, another caution for the beginner is to be sure to hold your own views very much apart while doing each social problem analysis. Your own views are very important, but you will find that initially it takes some discipline to avoid letting them get in the way of the viewpoints of the writers whose materials you will analyze.

The remainder of this chapter is taken up with a discussion of the four dimensions to consider in doing a social problem analysis:

1. Identify the way the problem is defined.
2. Identify the cause(s) to which the problem is attributed (its antecedents) and its most serious consequences.
3. Identify the ideology—the values, that is—that makes the events of concern come to be defined as a problem.

4. Identify who benefits (gains) and who suffers (loses) from the existence of the problem.2

There are other aspects of social problems, of course (history and legal status, for example), and they will be discussed in later chapters.

Problem Definition

It is essential to begin a social problem analysis by determining its distinguishing marks or identifiers, that is, to state the concrete observable signs by which its existence is to be known. A social problem can be identified in a wide variety of ways. For example, one way to identify the problem of drug abuse is by noting the use, intentional exposure to, or ingestion of any illegal chemical substances in a nonmedical way (not prescribed by a physician). Thus, the nonmedically prescribed use of an illegal substance identifies this social problem. Another way is by defining drug abuse as an addiction; for example, defining drug abuse as occurring when most daily life affairs and social encounters are organized around the problems and pleasures of obtaining and using a chemical substance. Here the indicator of the existence of a social problem is determined not by the use or the legality of the chemical, but by its preeminence and the amount of time devoted to it in the user's life. The indicator here is an observer's judgment of the prominence of drug use in daily life.

Obviously, it makes an enormous difference whether the former or latter definition of the problem is chosen. For example, the first definition includes the occasional marijuana smoker and the long-haul trucker's use of amphetamines. The latter definition does not include such instances but does include all alcoholics and many tobacco smokers. Not only would conclusions about the qualitative nature and the number of people affected differ in each case, but also conclusions about what kinds of people comprise the social problem group would differ radically. Clearly, it can be seen how different social programs would be depending on which view of the social problem is adopted. Using the first definition, we are likely to see a law enforcement approach, for example, the “War on Drugs.” Adopting the second definition we would expect to see addiction prevention and treatment programs.

Even though social policies and programs are usually designed to solve social problems, sometimes (as noted earlier) the social policy or program creates social problems of its own. This fact immediately creates interesting complications for the analysis of social problems. Some examples follow. Long stays in mental hospitals are said by some to not only worsen the condition of a number of the mentally disabled but also create “insanity” in some patients who were never “insane” in the first place. Another example can be found in the case of no-fault divorce. The no-fault divorce policy was created to allow for an amicable divorce process and greater flexibility in the law for determination of alimony, child custody, child support, and allocation of property. It also makes divorce easier to get. It is the latter point that critics of the policy/practice believe has led to in-
creased rates of divorce in this country, and economic hardships for divorced women and their children. A third example, which we will consider in greater detail, is the federal minimum wage.

Hourly wages are subject to economic changes over time. When the economy grows at a healthy pace and wages rise, the working poor benefit (assuming decreased purchasing power does not cancel out wage gains). On the other hand, economic downturn and stagnation tend to be accompanied by wage erosion. Other factors being equal, wage erosion has very negative effects on the working poor, and we see poverty rates rise. Minimum wage policy is intended to reduce the burden of poverty for the working poor by requiring employers in covered employment to pay a minimum hourly wage. A federal minimum wage covers employees who work for certain businesses or organizations (“enterprises”) that have at least two employees and do at least $500,000 a year in business; or are hospitals, businesses providing medical or nursing care for residents, schools and preschools, and government agencies. Individual coverage when there is no enterprise coverage includes workers involved in “interstate commerce.” Domestic service workers (such as housekeepers, full-time baby-sitters, and cooks) are also normally covered. States and some U.S. territories have their own minimum wage laws as well and in some cases result in expanded coverage for workers and higher minimum wage rates.

The federal hourly minimum wage was first established by Congress in 1938, and it has been increased nineteen times since then. In 1997 the federal minimum wage was set by Congress at $5.15 an hour. Critics argue that the federal minimum wage creates unemployment. Walter E. Williams believes the federal minimum wage is a foolish and expensive undertaking. He presents his argument on this subject in the quoted material that follows.

**Minimum Wage—Maximum Folly**

Federal minimum wage laws represent a tragic irony. In the name of “preventing worker exploitation,” “providing a living wage,” and “reducing poverty,” these measures in fact impede the upward mobility and increase the dependence of the most disadvantaged among us. National leaders, including black leaders, fail to recognize that many economic problems faced by a large segment of the black population are the result of government-imposed restrictions on voluntary exchange.

*The Strange History of Unemployment for Black Youth*

Today's youth joblessness is unprecedented: nearly 40 percent among blacks and 16 percent among whites, nationally. Black youth unemployment in some major cities is estimated to be 70 percent. In dramatic contrast, black youth unemployment in 1948 was 9.4 percent and white youth unemployment was 10.2 percent. In further contrast to today, until 1954 blacks in every age group were at least as active in the labor market as whites were.

These facts demand that we challenge the official and popular explanations of current black youth joblessness. Employers have not become more discriminatory. Black youth of earlier times were not better skilled or educated than their white counterparts. Neither can we attribute the problem to slow economic growth. Even during the
relative prosperity of the sixties and seventies, black youth unemployment rose—both absolutely and in relation to white youth unemployment. The real explanation lies in the limitations of law itself. By increasing the minimum wage, Congress has caused a significant loss of job opportunities for young blacks. When employers are required to pay a minimum labor price of $5.15 an hour, they have no economic incentive to hire workers whose labor value, in the production of goods or delivery of services, may be only $4.00 an hour. Congress can legislate a higher wage, but it cannot legislate that workers be more productive. Because Congress has not yet seized complete control of personnel operations in private firms, the minimum wage law thus discriminates against the low-skilled.

Basic Economics and Practical Politics
A law that reduces opportunity for some almost always increases it for others. To see how the minimum wage law accomplishes this, recognize, as economists do, that low-skilled labor and high-skilled labor can often be substituted for each other.

Imagine an employer can build a particular fence by using three low-skilled workers each earning $42 a day ($126 total labor cost per day), or by using one high-skilled worker who earns $110 a day. To minimize labor costs, the employer hires the high-skilled worker.

But suppose the high-skilled worker suddenly demands $155 a day. The fence firm then hires the three low-skilled workers, and the high-skilled worker loses his job.

On the other hand, the high-skilled worker may understand politics and economics. He may now join with others like himself and lobby for a minimum wage law of $50 a day (claiming noble motivations like “prevention of worker exploitation” and “provision of a living wage”).

Once the $50 minimum wage is law, the high-skilled worker can demand and get his $110 a day—because it now costs $150 to build the fence using low-skilled labor. By law, the high-skilled worker’s competition is priced out of the market.

Williams argues that aside from causing unemployment for some, minimum wage policy has additional negative consequences. He believes the policy is an “incentive to discriminate.” “If an employer must pay a minimum of $5.15 an hour no matter whom he hires, he may as well hire someone whose color he likes.” Williams further indicates that the policy discriminates against young people because it discourages employment of low-skilled workers—and it is usually young workers who have the least skills.

If joblessness merely deprived young people of pocket money, we might shrug it off as another consequence of foolish government intervention. But early work experience produces more than money. It produces pride and self-respect. It lets a worker make mistakes when they are not terribly costly—when there are probably no dependents counting on the worker for continuous income. These labor market lessons are critical, particularly for minority youths who attend grossly inferior schools, where these lessons are not learned.

Williams adds that much of the crime and other antisocial behavior among many of today’s youth may be attributed to lack of job opportunities. And he attributes high unemployment among youth to minimum wage policy.
Note in this example how the focus is on unemployment. What is central for Williams in the material quoted here is that the minimum wage law by creating unemployment “impedes upward mobility and increases the dependency of the most disadvantaged.” Employment is important for Williams because it is the key element in upward mobility and economic independence. Thus, the central social problem defined here is unemployment, the immediate cause of which are certain features of the minimum wage law; the central values that are thought to be threatened here are upward mobility and economic independence. Note that Williams does not tell us exactly what he means by unemployment. It is clear that he is not as concerned about the level of pay as the number of available low-paying jobs. He believes that this is the major problem among black youth. Others might disagree. We should point out that subsequent to Williams’s report, the federal minimum wage law was amended in 1996 in a way that may have changed his analysis. The amendment established a subminimum wage of $4.25 an hour for employees under 20 years of age during their first 90 consecutive days of employment with an employer. The effect of this policy change on Williams’s argument would be a concern to the present-day policy analyst.

Social problem analysis should state the concrete measures and indicators of the social problem of concern more clearly than Williams does. Definitions that are specific, concrete, and measurable are useful in these respects:

1. Everyone then knows precisely to what he or she refers.
2. It is possible to construct comparable estimates of incidence and prevalence so that quantification, importance, and change over time can be judged.
3. It makes it possible to discuss causation. Unless the problem is clearly defined, it is fruitless to discuss causes: What is it that is being caused? It is also fruitless to speculate about “solutions” under these conditions.

Note that here a definition is not “good” or “bad” because you either agree or disagree with it. It is common to have serious disagreement about how a given social problem should be defined. For example, many people have disagreed violently with a definition of institutional racism (a serious social problem, surely) that refers to differential access to institutional resources on the basis of color. That definition implies that if people of color have lower-quality education (for whatever stated reason), it is first-order evidence of white racism. Such a definition is one of the central issues around which the whole school-busing-to-achieve-integration argument has revolved. Are blacks and Latinos the victims of white racism because, for example, their school districts have less taxable property yielding less tax revenue, which results in fewer resources for education in that district? Based on the preceding definition of racism, the example unequivocally constitutes racism. Following some other definitions of racism, particularly those that define racism as overt and intentional discrimination based on color, this would not be an example of racism because no “intentional” discrimination can be distinguished.

The point is that both definitions are “good” insofar as definitions go, regardless of which you think is the better. The criteria for definitions revolve around clarity, not “truth”; therefore, both definitions are satisfactorily clear. On ideological or value
grounds, we would argue that the first definition is preferable to the second, but that is a different issue than whether it is a clear definition.

Earlier, the statement was made that the importance of social problems—in fact their rise to public consciousness—depends not only on the social status of those who speak publicly about them but on the sheer number of those who are affected as well. Because of the latter factor, you should expect the problem-definition section of careful social problem analysis to give attention to a presentation of the quantitative dimensions—the sheer size—of the problem: estimates of the number of persons (or families), estimates of the percentage or proportion of the total population affected; estimates of the demographics of the problem (e.g., the numbers and percentages of the different ages, sexes, and geographic localities affected). In looking again at the Williams presentation of the social problem of minimum wage, you will see how carefully he has quantified the problem for us. He notes that in 1979, youth joblessness was nearly 40 percent for blacks and 16 percent among whites nationally. He adds demographic data showing that unemployment for black youths in particular cities is as high as 70 percent. He could have carried this kind of analysis even further (and did in other places where his work is published), as you might imagine. Quantifications such as these are often very important in judging the adequacy of social programs and policies to solve the social problem. Without such data, it is impossible to determine whether, for example, the eligibility rules or other features of the program are directing program benefits and services to the people who have the problem or are directing the most benefit or service to those who are affected the most. Furthermore, adequacy of funding for the program cannot be assessed without some idea of how many people are affected. Do not be misled by thinking that quantification is important only in regard to this example concerning minimum wage and youth unemployment; quantification is crucial in the analysis of any social problem. Child abuse, for example, cannot be properly understood without some idea of how widespread it is or the types of people and families in which it appears the most frequently.

Another way in which to deepen the understanding of social problems is to present common variations within the problem category itself. The author of a social problem presentation is very likely to refer to several subtypes of these and expend some effort at distinguishing among them. For example, in discussions about the social problem of crime, distinction is made among the legal subtypes of crime: premeditated homicide, felony murder, manslaughter, and assault. These are legal categories, but they also may serve the social problem presenter well in giving the opportunity to speak of different causes for different subcategories, to speak of different ideological issues, to speak of different prevalence data for each, and so on. In fact, it is not uncommon for the discussion to direct itself mainly to a single subtype, particularly where the broader problem is not well understood or is particularly complex. For example, you are most likely to read about sexual abuse apart from a discussion of child abuse in general. The task of social problem analysis is to track the subclassifications being used, that is, how much and in what regard a narrowing of focus has occurred. One reason for this careful tracking is to avoid being misled by later data that are presented about the problem. Sometimes, for example, social problem presentations will focus only on a subtopic but will present data on the whole social problem. Sometimes this is intentional mischief; other times presenters themselves are unaware of the error.
Causes and Consequences

Another factor to consider in doing a social problem analysis is what causal explanations are offered as to why a social problem has come to exist. But sometimes the focus is not on explanation at all, rather on predicting consequences that will follow from the social problem. Sorting out this pattern of attributed causes and consequences is at the core of analyzing a social problem viewpoint for causation. A primary goal of the analysis is to discover whether it is the causes (antecedents), the consequences (effects), or both that are of utmost importance to the particular social problem presentation being analyzed. One way to separate antecedents from consequences is to try to diagram, to capture what is being said by setting down on paper what appears to be the causal pattern the author is asserting.

Causal patterns can be described in many ways; one simple method is to describe what will be called causal chains. A causal chain consists of a set of events (or variables or factors) arranged in a time sequence that shows the social problem event that is to be explained—what comes before the event and, therefore, is said to “cause” it and what comes after the event and is said to be a consequence. Causal chains are to be read from left to right so that the “event-to-be-explained” is always some variable to the right of the center of the chain. If only antecedents are of concern, the social problem event-to-be-explained will always appear on the far right of the causal chain. Let us now focus only on such causal chains as these, for simplicity. Figure 1.1 presents a simple causal chain “explaining” high unemployment rates (follow the arrows).

It should be clear that this is neither the only, nor even a complete, explanation for unemployment, only one plausible explanation. Remember, the object here is to find

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**FIGURE 1.1** A simple causal chain “explaining” high unemployment.

the expressed belief about the causes of the social problem. This causal chain could also be used to explain poverty and economic deprivation because poverty can be a result of the fact that people are just not working and earning wages. However, another author concerned with poverty and economic deprivation might explain it on the basis of high prices rather than low wages. That causal chain might look something like the one in Figure 1.2.

Some causal chains or “explanations” can be very complicated. We can put both these diagrammed causal chains together and add some other features to generate a broader and more complex explanation of poverty. Thus, Figure 1.3 shows how both high prices and low earnings produce poverty; it also shows some of the reasons for high prices and low earnings.

Let us now return to Williams’s analysis of the minimum wage law and its relation to unemployment. Could we express Williams’s argument in the form of a causal chain? We would suggest the example in Figure 1.4 as appropriate to Williams’s line of reasoning.

Note that although Williams has not spoken explicitly of an employer’s profit motive, it is crucial to understanding his argument. Discussions of social problems do not always make explicit all the assumptions they make in presenting their explanations for the cause of a social problem. One of the reasons for making a special effort to understand an author’s explanation for a social problem is to uncover “hidden” assumptions.
FIGURE 1.3 A complex causal chain explaining poverty and economic deprivation.

Another crucial aspect of a social problem analysis is the identification of major ideological positions and value biases embedded in a description of a social problem. For our purposes here, by a value, we mean simply a conception of what is preferred. Values express a vision of how things "ought" to be. Note that value statements can be simple or complex, but in the end, they need no justification because they are personal or cultural preferences. For example, if poverty as a social problem is identified by a lack of minimum nutritional standards, a value stance is implied that prefers that no one be hungry. However, if poverty as a social problem is identified by some large difference between annual incomes of certain types of citizens, a value stance is implied that prefers that income be more equally distributed, without respect to the differing needs of individuals or any concept of how social merit should be rewarded.

Value statements are usually expressed in phrases using the words should, ought, or must. For example, the statements, “No one should be hungry” or “Employers should not refuse a job because of an applicant’s racial background” are value statements using should terms. Value statements are usually more numerous and more complex than can be stated in single sentences. On that account, and for our particular purposes, let us use the term ideology to refer to sets of value statements.

Sometimes it is difficult to disentangle value and knowledge statements. Ideology is built from value statements, and explanations and causal chains are built from sentences that describe what is the case about one thing or another. These latter sentences are “factual” statements, statements asserting what exists. Recall that value statements are sentences about what is to be preferred. So, it is one thing to say, “No human being should be hungry” (a value statement, a statement of preference), but it is another thing to say,
“From 12 to 15 percent of the U.S. population lives in conditions of poverty in which they are hungry some part of each week” (a statement of fact). The operating terms are italicized. Again, value and ideological statements feature verbs such as should, ought, or must; knowledge and factual statements feature verbs such as are and is. The reason it is sometimes difficult to disentangle value and knowledge statements is that they concern the same event; it is important to distinguish between the two statements because they are intended to deliver two very different messages. The correct reading of the message of the value statement gives the reader of a social problem description advance information about outcomes that the author will advocate. The correct reading of the message in the factual statements of the causation analysis will give the reader advance information about the kind of program interventions or policy or legislative changes the author will seek.

Let us now return to the Williams material on minimum wage just to search for examples of the difference between value and knowledge statements. Our conclusion was that Williams’s causal argument necessarily entailed a statement about employers’ profits. That is a factual statement as it stands—that is, we are saying that Williams implies that employers do consider the effect on their profit in making hiring decisions. Note that it would be a value statement if it involved some term such as should or ought: “Employers should consider profit..., and so on, in their hiring decisions.” The point is that his argument does not say that; all it says is that employers do consider that issue.

Unfortunately for us, the value statements in the Williams excerpt are not distinguished by the presence of the revealing verbs should and ought. Therefore, to identify his ideology, we must search for statements whose meaning is not substantially altered by transforming them into statements containing should and ought terms. For example, we cannot take such a statement as “Black youth unemployment in some major cities is estimated to be 70 percent” and transform it into the statement, “Black youth unemployment in some major cities should be 70 percent” and contend that we have not changed the meaning radically. However, we can take a sentence from the first paragraph of the excerpt and transform it into a value statement without altering its meaning. Thus: “Federal minimum wage laws represent a tragic irony....[T]hese measures in fact impede the upward mobility and increase the dependence of the most disadvantaged among us.” We can restate this sentence as a value statement as follows: “Impeding upward mobility and increasing the dependence of the most disadvantaged among us are effects of the minimum wage law that we should not allow.” What we have done is to take a cue from the phrase “tragic irony” and interpret it to be equivalent to saying that there are effects of the minimum wage law that should not occur.

Gainers and Losers

The focus of this aspect of social problem analysis is on three things: (1) who loses and gains, (2) what kind of gains and losses are involved, and (3) how much value is entailed. The reason to examine this angle is that it is not always obvious what losses and costs are of concern; different groups value different kinds of losses and costs. We do not trouble to take a stand about a social problem unless we are concerned about a loss of some kind, so in almost any social problem description, some attention is paid to the issue of losses and costs.
The first principle here is that social problem costs (losses) are seldom, if ever, shared equally among citizens. The first question is, “Who loses most?” In some ultimate sense, there is probably no citizen who is not affected in an indirect way by all social problems. The issue here is to identify those who pay the biggest costs. For example, it is quite clear that the group that pays the biggest cost of the very high rates of crime in inner cities is made up of the local inner-city residents themselves. It is they who are robbed, raped, mugged, and murdered. There are also indirect costs shared by all taxpayers, for example, emergency room costs of violent crime. On the other hand, by any measure, the most prominent victims of the “white-collar crime” of tax evasion are the middle-income classes, who pay the biggest share of the taxes collected by the U.S. Treasury. They bear most of the cost of the social problem because they must pay most of the extra tax needed to make up for the evaded taxes.

One of the important costs of the social problem of maintaining the health of the population is the dollar costs of medical care for the aged. Those costs are paid largely through Medicare, a Social Security subprogram financed by the Social Security health insurance withholding tax paid by those now in the workforce. The amount withheld from the preretirement wages of those now receiving medical care was always far less than present average costs, so current recipients cannot be said to have paid for the Medicare benefits they now receive. That is not necessarily because of their unwillingness to do so but simply because (1) many people retired before Medicare was enacted, (2) the costs of medical care have risen enormously in recent years, (3) wages were less inflated in earlier years and, therefore, (4) contributions for Medicare were less. In addition, no one foresaw the incredible advances in medical care now available—for example, the expensive medical technology developed mainly for the older population: bone and joint transplants and heart bypass procedures. The unpredicted costs here are paid from the contributions to Social Security by those who now work and pay withholding taxes. Note carefully that what has been said has not yet judged the way these charges are distributed; such judgment will evolve from the shoulds and oughts of the value and ideology analysis.

Sometimes, very small details designed into public programs make an important difference in who ends up paying the biggest share of the costs. Consider again the example of wage losses for workers permanently and totally work-injured who receive workers’ compensation benefits. Lost wages are the amount a person could be expected to earn (at present wage levels) from the date of injury to the date of retirement. It is a cost to the worker when not all of the loss is repaid by the workers’ compensation program. It is a cost to taxpayers when the workers’ compensation benefit is not paid at all or is so insufficient that some other public welfare benefits must be paid to keep the disabled worker and his or her family afloat. However, it is a different case when a company buys workers’ compensation insurance coverage that is sufficient to pay the worker’s full lost wages but increases the price of its product or service to pay for the insurance. Thus, it turns out that the consumer is actually paying for the worker’s injury. These examples show why it is important to take careful notice of who pays social problem costs; existing social program details can and often do make substantial alterations in what would appear to be the obvious pattern of cost bearing for social problems.
After considering who loses from a social problem, the next issue to consider is the type of loss involved. In the preceding examples, money (or income) was the prominent kind of loss of immediate concern. Other concerns—pain, discomfort, inconvenience, time, and geographic dislocation—are examples of other types of losses that sometimes are discussed in presenting social problems. One obvious example is found in discussions of the social problem of abortion. For some, the concern is the loss and costs of the extinction of human life; for others, the concern is each woman's loss of autonomy over her body and its products. Much of the argument here turns on precisely what type of loss is viewed as important. Similarly, the social cost of a brutal beating might be said to be pain, disablement, discomfort, injustice, shame, and terror—which could be said of most violent crimes, including rape. Although some of these social costs can be said to be subjective in some sense, none would argue that they are unimportant, incalculable, or uncompensable.

Sometimes, social problems incur costs that revolve around the loss of potential gains rather than immediate losses, monetary or otherwise. For example, one of the costs for the parents of a severely developmentally disabled child may be in what those parents are prevented from doing by way of their own future employment, further education, or professional advancement. They may have to choose among spending their future caring for such a child at home, working, or obtaining further business or professional credentials that would advance their incomes. To the extent that increased income and enhanced employment can increase social standing, the consequence of the social problem of having a child with developmental disabilities can certainly incur cost in status. Other social problems also can incur heavy status costs; for example, a cost of crime or mental illness to the families of those involved can be negative social labeling that results in losses in both social status and personal esteem.

Finally, consideration must be made of the magnitude of costs—how much (whether money or some other measurement). It is convenient to express social costs in dollar terms because that measurement is easily interpreted by a wide audience. There are widely accepted ways of translating almost any kind of loss into dollar terms. The value of life is translated daily into dollar terms when civil courts hand down judicial decisions—for example, whether a physician was guilty of malpractice in a patient's disablement or death or whether a certain dollar value relieved "pain and suffering." We will not discuss further exactly how these more subjective losses are translated into money losses, except to say that economists do it by imagining (or gathering data on) how much most people would be willing to pay either to get rid of the effects of particular pain or suffering or status loss or how much someone else would demand to take on the problem intentionally. One simple test is to ask yourself, for instance, how many dollars it would take to get you to take on the care of a severely intellectually disabled child in your own home or to have it generally known that a close family member is mentally ill or imprisoned for a serious crime. Estimating the magnitude of social costs of a social problem is an important process in understanding a social problem because doing so provides at least one standard by which a problem's "importance" can be measured both absolutely and relatively to other social problems.

If the first principle is that social problem costs are seldom shared equally among citizens, then the second principle is that some people and some social groups actually benefit...
from others’ social problems. It is quite possible that some social problems are not solvable in any important and immediate sense simply because they create benefits that others are reluctant to give up. The general—albeit unsavory—idea here is that indeed some people do profit from others’ misery. The extent to which this idea is true is debatable, but it does not seem wise to assume that such is never (or only seldom) the case. The most obvious evidence of this truth is the documented fact that a small number of people profit handsomely from others’ addictions (liquor, tobacco, pharmaceuticals, illegal narcotics, and such). Less obvious is how this principle operates in relation to other more controversial social problems like unemployment, physical disablement, and aging. For example, it is not merely cynical to observe that the lower the general level of employment, the more welfare recipients will be forced into the workforce and, therefore, the larger is the pool from which employers can draw low-wage employees. Employers of unskilled labor would certainly seem to profit from reduced welfare benefit levels and high unemployment. (It is Williams’s point that if minimum wages drop, unskilled teenagers will profit as well.)

It would be unfortunate to conclude that only employers benefit from the existence of social problems. One rather well-known line of social analysis views racial and ethnic prejudice and discrimination as one means of establishing an “underclass,” a scapegoated “bottom-of-the-social-ladder” group, against whom all other classes and types can be measured and positively valued. Theoretically then, wherever racial discrimination reduces competition from persons of color, whites must gain in terms of money and status. Some believe that the big gainers from the social unrest and racial tensions of the sixties and seventies were not working-class blacks but the black middle class, who achieved gains in income and increased their entrance at educational institutions and their starts up career ladders. Another commonly discussed example is the ability of the health corporations to profit from disease. And, in fact, all professional practitioners profit from social problems; if there were no social problems, there would be no need for social workers or human service personnel at all. But, be careful with that claim. Showing that a professional makes a profit isn’t enough to establish that professionals themselves contribute to continuing the existence of a social problem. Professional profit is not a serious issue unless it can also be shown that personal profit rather than benefits to clients/patients or consumers has first priority.

Understanding who profits from the existence of a social problem can reveal the forces that act against its elimination. It is very likely that where a shortage of good housing exists and profits are being made from existing stock, associations of rental property owners, in serving their own interests, will oppose the building of public housing. Similarly, it is unlikely that the American Medical Association will support the creation of a large number of medical schools—despite evidence that all citizens would get better medical care at reduced cost if the patient–physician ratio were decreased. It is equally unlikely that traditional craft unions (plumbing, carpentry, toolmakers) will admit minorities for fear they will become job and career competitors—especially in a stagnant economy in which the threat of competition willing to work for less wages is keenly felt. The point is that the social problems of unemployment, housing, health, and racism all have some built-in resistance to solution simply because they generate strong economic and status rewards for other citizen groups.
The next section shows how conclusions from a social problem analysis are used to shape the basic features of a social policy or program.

**Using the Conclusions of Social Problem Analysis to Design Social Policies and Programs and to Judge Their “Fit” to the Social Problem**

When political scientists, students of government, or sociologists study a social policy or program, their interest is centered on explaining it as a fact of social life, that is, how the policy or program came to be, what broad social function it serves, or why it appeared in one form and not another. The social practitioners for whom this book is intended have different questions in mind because their interest lies in how social policies and programs can be instrumental in solving, or helping to solve, social problems for their clients. How much difference does this program or policy make to those who suffer from the effects of the social problem? Qualitative judgments about the merit of a social program or policy cannot be made without reference to the original understanding of the social problem. The idea here is that social policies and programs should be judged against the needs and causal analysis implied in the conclusions of the study of the social problem. Social policies should not be designed in the abstract or in relation to more or less random ideas about the nature of the social problem toward which they are directed as a solution.

Table 1.1 contrasts the components of social problem analysis with the basic elements of social policies and programs. What is the relationship between the two?

Consider eligibility rules, in their most elementary sense, as policies that tell who should and should not get benefits or services. Then ask the question, “Does a problem definition influence how such a rule could be constructed?” The most straightforward answer is that ideally an eligibility rule should make services and benefits of the program available only to those who have the problem, a determination based on who meets the terms of the problem definition. Conversely, the rule should make it impossible for those who do not meet the terms of that definition to receive benefits and services. For example, if the social problem of concern is long-term hospitalization of the chronic psychotic, then an appropriate eligibility rule might be found in the current *American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR)*. Thus, the eligibility rule should restrict benefits and services to individuals with “Delusions, hallucinations, or . . . disturbances in the form of thought.”

The “fit” with which we are so concerned here is not just a matter of its being logically “neat,” because the lack of fit has serious consequences. For example, a program can either overlook needful citizens (underinclusion) or is more expensive than it should be (produces overwhelming cost) because program benefits or services are wasted on those who do not have the problem and do not need the benefits. Furthermore, without a clear eligibility rule in place, it is impossible to determine whether a program or policy had an impact on the problem and, thus, whether the causal explanations in the analysis were right. Data on the results of the program are useless if contaminated by (1) inclusion of those whose problems the program was never intended to solve or (2) data from
an ill-formed eligibility rule that excludes either too many or the wrong people. In the example of long-term hospitalization of psychotics, no one would be able to tell whether people with a chronic psychosis and a history of long hospitalization could be helped by a programmed intervention that involved their living outside an institution independently if, for example, nonpsychotic chronically delinquent youngsters and the senile elderly were accepted into the program by an ill-fitting or misapplied eligibility rule. Not only might important resources be misdirected and, therefore, unavailable to those for whom they were originally intended, but also the chance to learn something about the validity of the ideas in the social problem analysis would be lost.

A few eligibility rules are not constructed out of their relationship to the social problem. The fact that any honorably discharged veteran is entitled to free hospitalization in any Veterans Administration hospital is clearly a welfare benefit according to the generally accepted definition (a material gain resulting from the direct or indirect redistribution of someone else’s income). This is not to say that the benefit is undeserved, but only to make the point that the eligibility rule is not based on the conclusions from
a social problem analysis. Rather, the basis for this eligibility rule is society’s desire to reward those who in serving their country risked their own lives.

The problem-definition aspect of social problem analysis also prescribes the terms in which the program goals and objectives must be stated. For example, a city’s summer recreation program that was originally intended simply to provide adult supervision for out-of-school children transforms its goal into a grand statement about “providing for the child’s total well-being during the summer period.” There is nothing wrong with concern about children’s “total well-being” (although strange that it is only “during the summer period”), but in this instance, the goal is misguided because it is unfaithful to the original conception of the problem.

Before leaving our consideration of how qualitative standards for policy and program design can be derived from problem definitions, recall that there is a subsection of the problem-identification aspect called subtypes, which allows for variability within the social problem to be noted and reviewed; for example, there are key differences between sexual abuse, neglect, and physical abuse within the larger social problem category of child abuse. Once a subclass is declared, there should also be some awareness of its numerical—that is, its quantitative—importance. These issues from social problem analysis should guide judgments about whether the goals of the policy or program are directed toward the whole social problem or only one of its parts; if the concern is with a subtype, analysis should help determine whether its size warrants priority relative to other subtypes. Size is not the only determiner of priorities, but it is important to understand that magnitude provides the basis for a claim on public resources.

Now let us pay some attention to the relationship between causal explanation and the types of services or benefits delivered. Earlier, we showed how the most powerful kind of causal analysis proceeds by identifying the factors (variables) believed to be the crucial determiners of the problem. Where that is the case, it should be obvious that the types of benefits or services should be those that are powerful in reducing the influence of those determiners. For example, if the social problem of concern is the physical abuse of children and the causal analysis identifies severe economic stress as the major determinant of abuse, then among the benefits provided by the policy and program must be money, goods, or their equivalent to relieve economic stress. If the causal analysis identifies as the key cause of maternal child abuse, the presence of a nonnurturing, abusive mother who never shows her daughters how to rear children without physical abuse, then the program or policy design simply must provide the substitute parent model that abusing mothers did not get in their own homes.

Even though it would seem that no rational policy or program designer would violate this simple, straightforward, and obvious idea, that is just not the case. Some programs, despite their objective to alleviate child abuse based on an understanding of the problem as described in the preceding theory, in fact only teach about child-development stages. As uplifting (even useful) as that might be, such a program must be judged to be a bad fit and an irrational policy. Even the casual observer of social policy and programs does not have to look hard to find bad examples along this line: One program design is based on a causal analysis that identifies (reasonably enough) the major factor in poor social adjustment of some developmentally disabled children as their isolation from ordinary children in ordinary classrooms. However, this same program develops a policy to
scatter special-education classrooms for these children throughout ordinary neighbor-
hood schools—but it staggers and limits the daily schedule of the special-education
classrooms so that disabled pupils have no chance to associate with mainstream school-
children either in the classroom or elsewhere. The fit between the causal analysis and
the policy solution is lost because the type of benefit intended as a solution consistent
with the causal analysis turns out not to be the one implemented.

Another possibility is that the causal analysis may direct the program or policy to
employ only certain types of personnel to deliver benefits or services; that is, the causal
analysis creates certain standards for the administrative service-delivery system. As will
be discussed in Chapter 5, personnel specifications are an important feature in benefits
and services. A common example is a causal analysis that explains that some subgroups
of certain ethnic or racial minorities do not apply for important health or school-based
services because of the cultural and language barriers created by nonethnic or nonmi-
nority personnel. When that causal view is taken, a heavy obligation is laid on the per-
sonnel policies of the delivery system: Sufficient ethnic or minority personnel must be
online if the services are to be delivered effectively. Here the issue is not an affirmative-
action agenda or a concern with elimination of racially or ethnically biased hiring prac-
tices. After all, causal analysis can dictate personnel criteria other than cultural or ethnic
features; for example, special expertise, education, or experience.

The analysis of major gainers and losers as a result of social problems is also a
source of rational expectations for social policies and programs. These conclusions are
particularly relevant for specifying methods of financing. When the loss involved is a tan-
gible material or financial loss, one obvious method of financing is implied: The gainers
should repay the losers. In fact, that is exactly what is behind the “victim restitution” pro-
grams operated in relation to the social problem of crimes against property (e.g., theft,
larceny, and misdemeanors). The causal explanation usually invoked by these programs
is that offenders repeat such crimes because (1) doing so costs the offenders nothing out
of their own pockets and (2) offenders never have to encounter their victims face to face
in terms of being held accountable for their criminal acts. Victim restitution programs,
both the direct program cost and the cost arising from the adverse effect(s) of the crime,
ideally should be paid for by the offenders themselves. This financing feature is entirely
consistent with the causal analysis. Another example is the workers’ compensation pro-
gram, the goal of which is to compensate workers injured on their jobs so that their
income will not suffer irremediable damage. Workers’ compensation legislation charac-
teristically assumes that the cause of the income loss is the workplace incident (even
though the personal blame for that accident is not assigned and its determination is not
made a part of the program or policy—a no-fault system). Because the workplace
“caused” an income loss, the policy pursued in legislation is to place responsibility on the
employer to provide insurance payments to pay the cost of replacing the injured em-
ployee’s lost income. Table 1.1 shows examples of these expectations.

Summary

Chapter 1 discussed the central importance of social policy in the professional practice of
social work and other human services. Social policies both create and constrain the pos-
sibilities of any social practice. Central to that understanding is an ability to ferret out the view of the social problem taken by legislative bodies, policy and program designers, political critics, and program and policy administrators. An analytic framework—that is, a set of concepts by which the fundamental dimensions of any view of a social problem can be understood—was presented. This framework takes into consideration four activities:

1. Identify the way the problem is defined.
2. Identify the cause(s) to which the problem is attributed and its most serious consequences.
3. Identify the ideology and the values that make the events of concern come to be defined as a problem.
4. Identify major gainers and losers with respect to the problem.

These activities were discussed and examples were given so that readers can learn to analyze social problems. The chapter closed with a discussion of how to use the results of the problem analysis to make judgments of the merit of the program and to design programs anew.

**EXERCISES**

1. Reread Williams on the minimum wage, pages 11 and 12, and the causal chain drawn for it on Figure 1.3, page 17. Add “maximizing employer’s profit” as an explanatory factor (antecedent) to the diagram. Then think how it would affect the total diagram and Williams’s causal argument overall.

2. There are both direct and indirect costs paid by those who lose and gain from the existence of a social problem. Pick a social problem and show both its direct and indirect costs.

3. Social problem costs, when they seem to involve things that cannot be priced in a handy marketplace (physical pain, for example, or fear of street violence or a neighboring district full of prostitutes and drug dealers, perhaps), can be estimated by imagining that there is such a market where you can pay (expressed in dollar terms) as much as you would be willing to pay to have it disappear (and assuming you had the money). Identify a social problem that annoys you and your friends and estimate what you personally would be willing to pay to be rid of it. Then present the scenario to friends, and collect their “price.”

4. Do an analysis of the social problem viewpoint expressed in the following historical document. Use the four social problem analysis categories discussed in this chapter.

*Dangers in Half-Dime Novels and Story Papers, 1883*

Satan stirred up certain of his willing tools on earth by the promise of a few paltry dollars to improve greatly on the death-dealing quality of the weekly death traps, and forthwith came a series of new snares of fascinating construction, small and tempting in price, and baited with high-sounding names. These sure-ruin traps comprise a large variety of half-dime novels, five- and ten-cent story papers, and low-priced pamphlets for boys and girls.

Again, these stories breed vulgarity, profanity, loose ideas of life, impurity of thought and deed. They render the imagination unclean, destroy domestic peace, desolate homes,
cheapen woman's virtue, and make foul-mouthed bullies, cheats, vagabonds, thieves, desperadoes, and libertines. They disparage honest toil and make real life a drudge and burden. What young man will serve an apprenticeship, working early and late, if his mind is filled with the idea that sudden wealth may be acquired by following the hero of the story? In real life, to begin at the foot of the ladder and work up, step by step, is the rule; but in these stories, inexperienced youth, with no moral character, take the foremost positions, and by trick and device, knife and revolver, bribery and corruption, carry everything before them, lifting themselves in a few short weeks to positions of ease and affluence. Moral courage with such is a thing to be sneered at and despised in many of these stories. If one is asked to drink and refuses, he is set up and twitted till he yields or is compelled to by force. The idea of doing anything from principle is ridiculous in the extreme. As well fill a kerosene-oil lamp with water and expect a brilliant light. And so, in addition to all else, there is early inculcated a distaste for the good, and the piercing blast of ridicule is turned upon the reader to destroy effectually all moral character.

Satan is more interested in the child than many parents are. Parents do not stop to think or look for their children in these matters, while the archenemy is thinking, watching, and plotting continually to effect their ruin.

Thoughtless parents, heedless guardians, negligent teachers, you are each of you just the kind that old Satan delights to see placed over each child. He sets his base traps right in your very presence, captures and ruins your children, and you are each of you criminally responsible.

Take further instances of the effect of this class of publications, and then say if my language is too strong. Does it startle and offend? To startle, to awaken, to put you on your guard, to arouse you to your duty over your own children, is my purpose. Your child is in danger of having its pure mind cursed for life.

From infancy to maturity the pathway of the child is beset with peculiar temptations to do evil. Youth has to contend against great odds. Inherited tendencies to wrong-doing render the young oftentimes open to ever-present seductions. Inherited appetites and passions are secretly fed by artificial means, until they exert a well-nigh irresistible mastery over their victim. The weeds of sin, thus planted in weak human nature, are forced to a rapid growth, choking virtue and truth, and stunting all the higher and holier instincts. Thus, many a child of dissolute parents is born with natural desires for strong drink, and early becomes intemperate. In his thoughtful moments he loathes drink, and yet there comes upon him a force he is powerless to resist. So, too, the incontinence of parents brings into the world children inheriting morbidly susceptible natures—natures set like the hair trigger to a rifle—ready to fall into shame at the slightest temptation.

We speak of youth as the plastic state—the period of all others when the human soul is most easily molded and character formed. Youth is the seed-time. Maturity gathers in the crop. Youth is the fountain from which the waters of life flow. If parents do not train and instruct their children, the devil will. Whether parents deem it important to watch the child or no, there is one who deems it so important that he keeps a constant watch. The devil stations a sentry to observe and take advantage of every point open to an evil influence. He attacks the sensitive parts of our nature. He would destroy the finest and most magnificent portion of our being. The thoughts, imagination, and affections he is most anxious to corrupt, pervert, and destroy.
I unhesitatingly declare, there is at present no more active agent employed by Satan in civilized communities to ruin the human family and subject the nations to himself than evil reading.

If gambling saloons, concert dives, lottery and policy shops, poolrooms, low theaters, and rumholes are allowed to be kept open; if obscene books and pictures, foul papers, and criminal stories for the young are allowed to go broadcast, then must state prisons, penitentiaries, workhouses, jails, reformatories, etc., be erected and supported. Expensive courts and high-salaried officials must be employed at the taxpayer's expense, to care for those youths who are ruined, or to protect society against them.

Parents do not permit their children to make a playhouse of a sewer, nor to breathe its poisoned gasses. It is not popular to set diseased meat before the public in any of our numerous hotels or restaurants. Infected clothing may not be offered for sale, much less hawked about the streets. Yet worse evils than these are tolerated and encouraged, even while they are scattering moral death and physical suffering among those whom it is the especial duty of every civilized government to shield and protect—the young.

NOTES


2. These broad analytic categories were put together by David Harcastle, a professor at the School of Social Work, University of Maryland-Baltimore, from the work of a variety of sociologists and other students of social problems. We have expanded them and added the details in the material that follows, creating substantial alterations to 1 and 4.


6. From Walter E. Williams, The SmithKline Forum for a Healthier America, 1(6) (September 1979): 1–6. Dollar amounts have been adjusted to reflect inflation. Reprinted by permission of the author and VanSant Dugdale Advertising, Baltimore, MD.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Of course, we must understand that Williams was writing for ordinary readers here and in the space allowed could not develop the complete analysis he would have done in an academic journal.

10. The reader may notice that these examples all concern individuals and, thus, may be concerned that this contradicts earlier statements that social problems concern groups and not individuals. That problem can be resolved by remembering that all the individuals here are assumed to be members of a larger group in which all suffer from the same problem.

11. Notice that this criterion for judging a policy or program is not entirely practical from the viewpoint of the government or society because the standard concerns what the policy or program does for those in need. Unfortunately, in any view, the interests of the state do not always coincide with the interests of those in need, with those who suffer from a social problem. For instance, it may be easiest, and certainly the least costly, for society at large and a government to ignore the sick, the disabled, and the
poverty stricken. The focus on the interests of those in need is a bias here and is consistent with the value positions of the social work profession. The profession takes as one of its goals the elimination of “barriers to human realization.” Social problems of concern to the profession are those believed to be major barriers to many people. See “The Working Definition of Social Work Practice,” Social Work, 3(2) (April 1958): 5–9.

