

SAMPLE RESEARCH PAPER-1

TOPIC- SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

Social problems are relevant to all of us, and it is no coincidence that scholars from many different disciplines—including anthropology, sociology, psychology, and criminology—have systematically studied this area. Unlike natural scientists, social scientists often employ moral judgments during the course of their research. If, for example, an anthropologist wanted to study the effects of Hurricane Katrina, then he would face different obstacles than if a meteorologist were to study the same phenomenon. Most people would agree that it would be unethical for an anthropologist to passively sit by and take notes, rather than offer assistance to victims while conducting fieldwork in the aftermath of a devastating storm. A natural scientist, on the other hand, would probably not experience the moral dilemmas that would be faced by social scientists. Because anthropologists often are in the unique position of studying other human beings, the potential for bias is not surprising, and they may often face difficulties in remaining neutral and objective during the course of a particular study (Newman, 1999).

Because there is no broad consensus as to which type of social problems are the most worthy of our attention, social scientists may show their biases merely by the topics that they choose to study (Mooney, Knox, & Schacht, 2009). By choosing which issues are the most worthy of investigation, anthropologists are employing their own personal discretion. This makes the systematic study of social problems somewhat subjective. For example, one researcher may identify racism as the most important social problem plaguing society, whereas another researcher may avoid this issue altogether. Because anthropologists are humans studying other human beings, anthropology will never be as scientific as disciplines in the natural sciences. Nevertheless, in spite of this caveat, anthropologists can add much to the discussion of social problems. They employ a unique set of methodologies, such as ethnography, which provide valuable insights into various problems (Newman, 1999; Malinowski, 1941). Additionally, an anthropological perspective is important to our understanding of social problems because it examines factors, such as culture and power dynamics (Bodley, 2008). As it will later be shown, powerful institutions, including the media, have largely shaped and defined society's conception of what is and is not a social problem.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF NATURAL DISASTERS AND EROSION OF THE EARTH

There is no question that the 21st century has seen its share of natural disasters, especially when one considers that we have not been in this new millennium for even a decade. Perhaps, at least for Americans, the most recognizable instance of a recent natural disaster occurred in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina is considered to be one of the deadliest and costliest natural disasters in American history. It may have been responsible for taking the lives of as many as 1,836 people and causing upwards of \$81.2 billion worth of damage (Mooney et al., 2009). Hurricane Katrina shall be referred to periodically throughout this research paper because it represents numerous types of social problems in addition to being a problem associated with the environment. For example, Hurricane Katrina illustrates problems related to inequality, racism, and sexism. African Americans, Latinos, women, and children tended to be disproportionately affected by this natural disaster and were the most likely to be among the dead in the aftermath of the storm (Kornblum & Julian, 2009).

According to anthropologists, ethnocentrism is when an individual believes that her culture is superior to other cultures (Malinowski, 1941). When discussing these and other social problems, social scientists strive to adopt a global perspective, rather than to engage in ethnocentric thinking. It is particularly important, then, not to focus solely on natural disasters that have occurred in the United States. In addition to Hurricane Katrina, there have been other natural disasters that have occurred throughout other parts of the world during the 21st century. While there is no question that Hurricane Katrina may be one of the most frequently cited natural disasters, it pales in comparison with the destruction caused by the Asian tsunami of 2004. It is likely that this disaster claimed the lives of more than 150,000 people (Mooney et al., 2009). As in the case of Hurricane Katrina, most of the victims of the Asian tsunami were poor. These individuals had substandard homes that could not withstand any type of resistance force, and most did not have insurance policies or savings accounts to help them get on their feet in the aftermath of the disaster. It is safe to speculate that the poor are usually more vulnerable to natural disasters than other members of society.

It is a cruel irony that while the poorest segments of society often suffer the worst from natural disasters, in many ways it is wealthy and privileged individuals who bear the most responsibility in destroying the earth. Corporate greed and consumption have led to global warming and climate change, which may contribute to an increase in natural disasters of a magnitude similar to that of Hurricane Katrina and the Asian tsunami in the future. Relative to its population, the United States emits the highest amount of carbons. For example, in 2005, less than 5% of the world's population lived in the United States, yet it still produced 21% of the world's carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels (Energy Information Administration, 2007). These gas pollutants from automobiles and factories produce a "greenhouse effect," which could have catastrophic consequences if this goes unchecked (Heiner, 2006). As the temperature increases, some areas of the world may experience heavier rains, and at the same time others may become drier (Bodley, 2008). A temperature increase of only a few degrees has the potential to drastically change life on this planet. In addition to emitting the highest carbons, citizens in the United States also generate a disproportionate amount of solid waste relative to other countries. For example, according to Cheeseman (2007), more than

380 billion plastic shopping bags are used in the United States every year. These bags are particularly bad for the environment and may take up to 1,000 years to decompose. Countries such as Taiwan, Singapore, South Africa, and Bangladesh have restricted or outright banned these harmful products, yet the United States refuses to follow this example (Cheeseman, 2007). In addition to this, a recent study conducted by the Environmental Protection Agency (2009) found that Americans dispose of approximately 4.54 pounds of garbage every day. Also, citizens in the United States and other industrialized countries are likely to dispose of large amounts of electronic equipment. This phenomenon, which has been referred to as “e-waste,” is very devastating to the environment (Mooney et al., 2009). When disposed of in a careless manner, electronic equipment has the potential to contaminate our water supply and soil.

Anthropologist Richard H. Robbins (1999) contends that capitalistic societies, such as the United States, are responsible for elevating human consumption levels which in turn leads to the depletion of natural resources and the destruction of the environment. He argues that our culture encourages laborers to accumulate wages, capitalists to accumulate profits, and consumers to hoard goods. Robbins also suggests that a handful of powerful elitists reap the benefits from being involved in a culture dedicated to consumption. In fact, these individuals often are responsible for using the media to create consumerism in order to advance their own interests. It is a well-known fact that capitalists in the United States rely heavily on advertising in order to sell commodities. Even when a commodity is frivolous, clever advertising often has the ability to present the product as a necessity and make consumers feel compelled to rush out to the stores. This has devastating consequences for the environment and often results in pollution, resource depletion, and waste.

Generally speaking, capitalists and corporations have been highly resistant to the idea of allowing the government to regulate businesses in order to preserve the environment. In fact, beginning in the late 1970s, U.S. businesses began spending billions of dollars a year to convince the American public that there was too much environmental regulation (Beder, 1997). This intense lobbying proved to be very effective because many environmental regulations that were passed in the seventies were either repealed or simply unenforced during the 1980s (Bodley, 2008). The fact that corporations have been so resistant to environmental regulation illustrates how a small number of powerful people are benefiting from the destruction and pillaging of the earth’s resources. The forces of capitalism not only have depleted valuable natural resources but also have produced a highly stratified and nonequalitarian social system. Social problems related to poverty and inequality are of considerable concern to anthropologists and shall be discussed in the following section.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF POVERTY, INEQUALITY, AND RACISM

In addition to exemplifying a recent and horrific natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina also represents social problems related to poverty and inequality. It is very plausible, for example, that before the storm hit New Orleans, wealthy residents and visitors were given priority over poorer residents and bused out first. In fact, one account suggests that 700 guests and employees of a Hyatt Hotel were given the first opportunity to leave, while lower-class individuals were relegated to the end of the evacuation line (Dowd, 2005). It is true that low-income African Americans were the most likely to remain in the city during Hurricane Katrina (Dyson, 2006; Elliot & Pais, 2006). It also may come as no

surprise that during the Asian tsunami of 2004, foreign tourists also received substantially more aid during the storm than the thousands of impoverished villagers who were more or less left to fend for themselves (Mooney et al., 2009).

Almost without exception, whenever a natural disaster strikes, those who are poor or are considered to be on the fringes of society tend to be victimized the most. It may be no coincidence that in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, women, children, and racial minorities were very likely to be among the dead that were found scattered throughout the streets of New Orleans. Dyson (2006) argues these groups were unable to evacuate the city prior to the storm due to financial constraints. Many low-income New Orleanians may have simply not had access to reliable transportation. Even if some of these individuals were fortunate enough to have personal vehicles, evacuating may have been seen as a considerable expense. Some residents may have opted instead to take their chances, only to realize later that they had made a monumental mistake.

While racial minorities were disproportionately the victims of Hurricane Katrina, the media also victimized them throughout this natural disaster (Brezina & Kaufman, 2008). During the storm, for example, there were media reports that grossly exaggerated the levels of violence among New Orleanians. According to Brezina (2008), many of these stories stereotyped the urban poor as prone to violence and extreme forms of criminal behaviour. Other scholars suggest that a few of the media depictions were outright racist. For example, Tierney and colleagues (2006) contend that the news media coverage following Hurricane Katrina portrayed New Orleans as a “snake pit of anarchy, a violent place where armed gangs of black men took advantage of the disaster not only to loot but also to commit capital crimes” (p. 68). Stories were also published with alleged incidents of child rape and mass murder among evacuees who were in the New Orleans Superdome.

It is astonishing that major news outlets published the bogus stories described here without any meaningful attempt to check for accuracy. It is even more disconcerting that most of the general public seemed willing to accept these stories without question. Perhaps for a few individuals, these horrific tales even confirmed a few privately held beliefs regarding the poor and people of color. Even in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, some white Americans still regard racial minorities as being culturally or intellectually inferior to themselves. It does not help that the media often exacerbate these misperceptions by frequently publishing stories that depict racial minorities, particularly members of the African American community, in a negative light. One does not have to look very hard to find stories that portray African Americans as either welfare recipients or criminals.

Fortunately, many anthropologists have dedicated their careers to speaking out against racial stereotypes. One relatively recent example is illustrated in the work of the late Eugenia Shanklin. In perhaps her best-known work, *Anthropology and Race*, Shanklin (1993) advances the notion that race is socially constructed. She also argues against the notion that race is a valid scientific concept. In many respects, Shanklin’s argument builds upon the classic work of renowned anthropologist Franz Boas. Boas wrote extensively about race during the beginning of the 20th century, and he too concluded that this was a social, rather than a biological, concept (as cited in Williams, 1996). In retrospect, his writings against the evils of racism were quite ahead of their time. This is especially

true when one considers that these were written during a period when social Darwinism and eugenics were at the height of their popularity (Williams, 1996).

In addition to writing about race, other scholars have also examined the processes by which members of racial minorities become disenfranchised. For example, in his classic article, "The Culture of Poverty," anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1966) argues that for some people poverty is a way of life. Often this may be due largely to structural barriers, such as a lack of jobs and inadequate educational systems. Lewis contends that at an early age, children living in urban slums begin to subscribe to a set of values and beliefs that are conducive to poverty. It is not uncommon for many of these children to be racial minorities. Children who are assimilated into this culture have problems deferring gratification and avoid participating in society's major institutions (Lewis, 1966). This culture is also characterized by a high concentration of single-parent households that are usually headed by females. Over time, children who are socialized in these environments begin to adopt self-defeating attitudes that can make them less competitive in the marketplace when they enter adulthood. Even today, more than 40 years since it was published, Lewis's study still has relevance. African Americans and Hispanics are among the poorest people in the nation. In fact, year after year, the rates of poverty among these minority groups are 2 to 3 times higher than the poverty found among Caucasians. Sadly, many of those who are impoverished in this country are children. For example, Conley (1999) writes that "over half of African American children under the age of 6 are living in poverty" (p. 10).

It can often be very challenging for individuals who are raised in poverty to overcome obstacles in order to obtain even the most menial types of employment. According to Princeton anthropologist Katherine S. Newman (1999), even minimum-wage jobs at fast-food restaurants are extremely competitive, and there are usually more applications than there are positions. She contends that often African Americans are excluded from these jobs, even if the restaurant is in a predominantly African American neighbourhood. Individuals who are fortunate enough to obtain jobs as "burger flippers" must still compete with other employees for hours and often suffer incivilities from supervisors and customers. During the course of her research, Newman (1999) conducted countless interviews with low-income fast-food workers and observed them in their natural environment. She argues that many of America's poor are working in dead-end jobs, such as the fast-food industry, with little hope of advancement.

While the United States certainly has problems of inequality and poverty, it is currently the richest and most powerful nation and does not suffer from the same level of poverty as many third-world and developing countries. As mentioned previously, it is important for anthropologists to adopt a global perspective when studying various problems. Regardless of where someone lives, we are all members of the human race, and therefore a problem experienced by one culture inevitably affects us all. Consider that throughout the world more than one fourth of the earth's population (roughly 2.5 billion people) subsist on less than \$2 a day, and approximately 1 billion people (or 1 in 6 individuals) live on less than \$1 a day (World Bank, 2007). The planet has more than enough resources, yet millions of people throughout the world currently lack access to food, durable shelter, and clean drinking water.

Anthropologists such as Bodley (2008) argue that these are the consequences of living in the contemporary commercial world. Unlike small tribal societies that were prevalent thousands of years ago, the contemporary commercial world prevents some individuals from obtaining basic necessities. Today, levels of global inequality are at an all-time high. As power elites race toward accumulating capital, this has produced enormous wealth and power differentials. Bodley (2008) writes:

The daily lives and future prospects of virtually all of the world's 6 billion people are shaped by the political and economic decisions made by a relative handful of people who command trillions of dollars in financial capital and overwhelmingly powerful armed forces. (p. 17)

Given this statement, it may come as no surprise that currently the wealthiest 10% of adults own 85% of the world's total wealth, while the poorest half of the adult global population holds slightly more than 1% of the world's wealth (Davies, Sandstrom, Sharrock's, & Wolff, 2006).

Clearly inequality, poverty, and racism are problems not only in this country but also throughout the world. Bodley (2008) contends that many of these problems stem from global competition. In the name of competition, corporate executives in the United States hold back wages from their employees and deny benefits that are standard in other industrialized countries (Gray, 2000). There is no question that workers in European nations enjoy far more rights than workers in America. In Western European countries, for example, it is much more difficult to fire an employee, and it is virtually unheard of for companies to "downsize" merely to add to the overall profit margin. Also, workers in France enjoy a shorter workweek and more paid time off compared with their United States counterparts (Heiner, 2006).

While it seems as though European nations have the most humane system, there is at least some indication that a few of these countries are beginning to imitate the U.S. model in order to gain a competitive edge (Heiner, 2006). Currently, the United States is considered to be the most capitalistic society in the world because it has the least amount of governmental regulations. This lack of regulations has resulted in gross disparities and outright discrimination (Bodley, 2008; Kornblum & Julian, 2009; Mooney et al., 2009). Global competition has also led to the exploitation of third-world countries. According to Heiner (2006), this has been going on for several hundred years. He contends that there is a long history of powerful nations establishing colonies throughout the third world in order to plunder and export valuable natural resources such as gold, silver, silks, and other items. Also, even though some corporations have recently relocated from the first world to the third world, Heiner (2006) suggests that poverty has actually been on the rise in underdeveloped countries since the arrival of these new companies. Standards of living have also been on the decline in the third world and are likely to continue (Mooney et al., 2009). It seems that extreme forms of capitalism exacerbate inequalities in poor countries just as they do in wealthy ones, such as the United States.

While it may seem obvious to many of us that unbridled economic pursuits have created enormous inequalities throughout the world, the media have done much to shape the way we think about capitalism. By and large, in the United States, capitalism is held as one of the highest virtues. This is in great part due to the media-constructed image of the “American Dream,” where anyone can achieve wealth and success with enough hard work (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2007). Even though extreme forms of capitalism have resulted in gross inequalities, Americans are socialized to believe that it is the best system. Ironically, this also applies to poor people. Newman (1999) suggests that even the poor tend to embrace the notion of the American Dream, in the hope that they may one day achieve success and accumulate wealth.

The media, owned in the United States by the power elite, bears a large responsibility in generating the idea that anyone can be successful in a capitalistic society (Heiner, 2006). This has dire consequences. When individuals in the United States fail to move from rags to riches, they often blame themselves. In this country, perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, there is a tendency to blame the poor whenever they fail to be successful or provide for their families. It is no surprise that in this country, in order to be considered successful and good providers, many workers are spending more time at the office and less time with their families. While some individuals have been able to accumulate more possessions and increase their purchasing power by working longer hours, sadly this has come at a considerable expense to their families (Mooney et al., 2009). In fact, one of the greatest social problems facing Americans today involves problems related to the family. This deserves a considerable amount of attention and shall be discussed in depth in the following section.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS RELATED TO THE FAMILY

In the United States and elsewhere throughout the world, there are many different varieties and types of families. The U.S. Census defines a family as a group of two or more people who are bonded by marriage, adoption, or blood. Mooney and colleagues (2009) contend that the above definition is somewhat restrictive because it does not take into account foster families and unmarried same-sex and opposite-sex couples. The official definition of a family also fails to consider those relationships that function and feel like a family. For example, college students living together and sharing expenses and household chores might be considered a family in the broadest sense of the word. As we begin to examine the various social problems that plague the family, it is necessary to understand that today's family knows virtually no bounds. In fact, the traditional conception of the family, with a father who is the breadwinner and a mother who stays at home with the children, is probably one of the least typical types of families in the United States.

According to Skolnick (1991), throughout history people have warned that the family was on the verge of becoming extinct. During political campaigns, social conservatives tend to be the most vocal about the decay of the traditional family unit. For instance, it is not uncommon for conservative candidates to attack liberals for their tolerance of gay marriage and single parenthood (Kornblum & Julian, 2009). It is also not unusual for some traditionalists to blame problems of the family on working mothers. Many social conservatives argue that in order to solve many of society's problems, families should return to the breadwinner-housewife model that was popular in the United States during the 1950s (Heiner, 2006; Hewlett & West, 1998). Some scholars claim, however, that these

are merely tactics to divert attention from the low levels of government funding given to families that are struggling financially.

Conservatives, who ardently favour independence and self-sufficiency, often fail to remember that their idealized conception of the 1950s family was possible only because of unprecedented amounts of governmental assistance, such as low-interest housing loans and educational subsidies (Hewlett & West, 1998). During the 1950s, the federal government spent billions of dollars on public transportation, sewage systems, parks, and other projects designed to help families (Hewlett & West, 1998; Kornblum & Julian, 2009). From past experience, it would seem that a similar use of public subsidies would be an effective way to help facilitate families in the new millennium. It is ironic, however, that many traditionalists tend to be against this idea. Of all the industrialized countries in the world, the United States has the fewest governmental policies and programs designed to support the family. Given this, perhaps it should come as no surprise that the United States also has one of the highest divorce rates and is willing to tolerate levels of child poverty that would be unconscionable in other countries. These are current issues that plague the family and will be discussed later in more detail.

In his classic ethnographic study of familial relations among natives of the Trobriand Islands, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1941) argues that even in the most primitive societies, there is an expectation that “every family must have a father,” and “a woman must marry before she may have children” (p. 202). Currently, while it is true that premarital pregnancy in the United States is frowned upon, unmarried mothers are generally not as stigmatized as they have been in past history (Kornblum & Julian, 2009). In fact, today approximately one out of three children in the United States is born out of wedlock (Mooney et al., 2009). While this may seem high to some people, it is important to note that countries such as Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and France have even higher rates of nonmarital births than the United States. In Iceland, as many as 2 out of 3 children are born out of wedlock, and in approximately half of the births in Norway and Sweden, the mother and father are not legally married (Mooney et al., 2009).

In addition to the above countries, there are also parts of West Africa where unmarried women may have children without being ostracized or punished. This is especially true if the mother is not considered to be promiscuous. According to Kornblum and Julian (2009), as long as the identity of the child's father is known, an unwed mother will experience very little, if any, stigmatization. While some social conservatives have expressed moral outrage at the rise in the rate of nonmarital births, many children both in this country and in other cultures throughout the world have been able to find love and acceptance in family structures that may not be considered traditional by American standards. It is also important to mention that children who are raised in non-traditional families may be provided with a higher level of care and nurturing than those whose father is present but struggling with a problem such as substance abuse or unemployment (Kornblum & Julian, 2009).

The family is very important to our understanding of social problems because it is often identified as being either the solution to or the source of societal ills, such as alcoholism, crime, and poverty (Heiner, 2006). If children come from a “good” family, for example, then it is commonly believed

that they will avoid engaging in deviant or pathological behaviour. Most traditionalists assume that children who are adequately socialized will ultimately receive a good education, raise families of their own, pay taxes, and more or less be productive citizens. On the other hand, if a child is delinquent, turns to drugs, or has problems in school, the family is often singled out as being the source of the problem. Given the importance that we place on the family, it is no surprise that this has been an important research topic for many social scientists.

Recently, there have been numerous studies examining whether or not—and to what extent—financial problems plague the family. Most of the current literature indicates that a tough U.S. economy has led women to largely abandon the role of solely being a homemaker (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). Today, approximately 71% of women with children under the age of 18 are employed outside the home (U.S. Department of Labour, Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2007). Also, ever since the 1970s, both men and women have consistently been working longer hours. In the United States, it is not unusual for many individuals to work more than 50 hours a week (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). In fact, a recent study conducted by the Economic Policy Institute (as cited in Bernstein, Mishel, & Schmitt, 2000) found that, on average, married working couples with children spent 256 more hours at their jobs in 1997 than they did in 1989. This is roughly the equivalent of an extra month and a half of time spent at the office rather than at home.

Not surprisingly, family members today are more stressed out than ever before as they try to juggle domestic and work responsibilities. Sadly, children often have the most difficulty in adjusting to the pressures of living in a dual-income family. Occasionally, some may even become “latchkey children,” who are largely responsible for their own care, since both of their parents are working. If this is true in two-parent households, then it is especially the case for children who live in families with only one parent. In this country, 49% of non-Hispanic white single-mother households are due to divorce, in contrast to 62% of African American single-mother families, where the mother never married (Fields, 2004).

Currently, the United States has the highest rate of divorce among Western nations. According to Kimmel (2004), 40% of marriages in this country end in divorce.

The rate of divorce rate is even higher when one looks at couples who have already been married at least once. Also, children are involved in 60% of divorce cases. In other words, when a marriage dissolves, more often than not, children will be affected by this decision.

Divorce represents perhaps one of the most serious problems plaguing the family because it has the potential to result in many devastating consequences. First, divorce is likely to create significant economic hardships for mothers and their children. Many women, who might have been unpaid homemakers or part-time employees during their marriage, are not fully prepared to enter the workplace in the aftermath of a divorce (Amato, 2003). Usually, following a divorce, they must go back to school and at the same time find a way to increase their income. Often, this entails getting a job (or a second job), putting in more overtime, and finding other means to make money. At the

same time, they often have to take on new financial responsibilities, such as balancing the family budget. On top of this, women are disproportionately likely to assume many (if not all) of the child-rearing duties following a divorce (Amato, 2003). To make matters worse, it is not uncommon for fathers to offer little or no economic support.

In addition to the adverse economic impact that it has on families, divorce also places children at a higher risk of developing psychological and emotional problems. Some children with divorced parents may become extremely sensitive or overly aggressive and develop serious self-esteem issues. If this behaviour goes unchecked, it can lower a child's performance in school and have serious long-term effects on his or her future. Amato and Cheadle (2005) contend that the repercussions of divorce are so powerful that even future children, who have not even been born, have the potential to be affected. For example, a divorce that occurs in the first generation of a family may be associated with lower education, more divorce, and greater familial tensions in the second generation, which then may in turn contribute to similar problems in the third generation. While there are some situations where divorce may be the only option, there is no question that it can result in many negative consequences for a family's well-being.

Finally, there is some relatively new literature indicating that natural disasters can affect a family's well-being. While these events can result in the loss of lives and financial ruin, it appears that events such as floods, hurricanes, and tornados can also impact families. In one recent study, for example, it was estimated that approximately 1 in 4 (22%) of New Orleanians indicated that they had experienced marital discord as a result of Hurricane Katrina (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2007). In this study, 10% of the subjects even admitted to throwing things at their partner, yelling, and losing control. Other studies have confirmed the above finding that natural disasters, such as Katrina, can lead to domestic violence and various other forms of familial abuse (Brezina & Kaufman, 2008; Enarson, 1999). While domestic violence clearly is an issue that is related to the family, it is also one of many social problems that are related to crime. Problems related to crime shall be discussed in more detail in the following section.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS RELATED TO CRIME

Of all the various social problems, perhaps those related to crime tend to receive the most attention. According to Mooney and colleagues (2009), a crime is considered to be an act or omission of an act that is punishable by either federal, state, or local law. In other words, in order for there to be a crime, the state must be able to impose a punishment. Also, someone who commits a crime must be acting wilfully and voluntarily. An action is also likely to be seen as a crime if there is no legitimate excuse as to why the actor engaged in a particular proscribed act (Mooney et al., 2009).

Interestingly, in spite of clear-cut legal definitions of crime, the popular media have influenced our conception of crime and criminals. Television shows such as CSI, COPS, and Law & Order, for example, have provided distortions about the criminal justice system. The media, then, often take an active role in shaping and defining the types of acts that we as a society should consider to be crimes, as well as the types of people who are likely to be perceived as criminals.

In order to illustrate the above point, one only needs to tune in to an episode of COPS, a reality television show that enables viewers to follow police officers during the course of their 8-hour shifts. The viewer, from the comfort of home, sees life from the inside of a patrol car. One of the more controversial aspects of this program is that it features a distorted view of criminals. For example, usually, but not always, the perpetrator on the show is a minority male. The suspect is often intoxicated and portrayed as a burden to society. The officers, on the other hand, are seen as the heroes who quell the disturbance and dispense justice within the confines of the law. Almost always, the officers are depicted as being fair, calm, and highly professional. They are very seldom, if ever, shown to be aggressive, hostile, or downright abusive. While some television viewers may find crime shows such as COPS to be extremely entertaining, these programs nevertheless have the potential to be very misleading and can even generate negative stereotypes about racial minorities. As Heiner (2006) argues, much of the reality of crime is edited out of "reality-based" crime shows. In writing about these shows, he contends that they "depend upon the cooperation of the authorities, and their producers must keep in mind that if the police are not presented in a positive light, then they will not get their cooperation for future broadcasts" (Heiner, 2006, p. 115).

As a result of being exposed to a heavy regimen of cop and reality crime shows, some members of the public may be left with an impression that most racial minorities use drugs and are an overall menace to society (Heiner, 2006).

These shows rarely, if ever, portray offenses that are committed by law enforcement agents, though certainly these do exist. Also, they say very little about white-collar offenses, though these have the potential to be much more costly to society than traditional street crimes (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2007).

The images of crime that are perpetuated by the media also have a high likelihood to create a sense of fear and anxiety. Every year, Americans spend billions of dollars on safes and home-security devices. One can only wonder how many of these expenditures are related to the distorted images that are routinely shown on reality cop shows and the nightly news (Beirne & Messerschmidt, 2000). Many television programs are notorious for portraying criminals as disproportionately likely to be members of racial minorities who offend against Caucasians. Sadly, this does little to further race relations in this country.

Even though there is absolutely no evidence that members of racial minorities are more likely to be criminal by nature, African American and Hispanic males are disproportionately overrepresented at virtually every stage in the criminal justice system (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006; Steffensmeier & Demuth, 2000). This may be due in large part to an institutional bias against minorities. Police officers, for example, may engage in racial profiling where they target suspects solely based on their race. This practice amounts to little more than outright discrimination and may be just one example of the racial bias that is inherent in the criminal justice system. African American males are particularly likely to be the recipients of institutional racism. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2006), it is estimated that 12% of all African American males in their late 20s are in some type of correctional facility compared with only 1.7% of white males in this same age range. African

American males are also more than 8 times as likely as Caucasians to be sent to prison for drug offenses (Mooney et al., 2009). In fact, 1 out of every 8 African American males can be found serving time in some type of correctional facility on any given day (Kornblum & Julian, 2009). It would be naive to think that members of racial minorities are not discriminated against at every checkpoint on the criminal justice assembly line.

Perhaps one of the greatest problems plaguing the criminal justice system today is the current incarceration binge in the United States. As of this writing, the United States has one of the highest rates of incarceration in the world, with approximately 702 out of every 100,000 of its citizens incarcerated (International Centre for Prison Studies, 2005). Also, Americans are more likely to be incarcerated than individuals living in less democratic countries, such as Russia or South Africa. The United States, without question, has the highest incarceration rate of all other industrialized democracies. Yet many Americans tend to believe that we are "soft" on crime (Mooney et al., 2009). This is in spite of the fact that between 1975 and 2002, the prison population increased from 204,593 to 2,033,331 (Heiner, 2006). In other words, in slightly over 25 years, it increased almost tenfold.

The costs of America's obsession with punishment should be enough to scare any fiscal conservative, yet often these are the very individuals who are lobbying to build more prisons. Perhaps the most frightening fact of all is that this recent preoccupation with imprisonment has not corresponded with an increase in crime. In other words, even as the crime rate in the United States has decreased, the incarceration rate has nevertheless continued to increase (Kornblum & Julian, 2009). Again, it cannot be understated that the current incarceration binge is extremely expensive. Today, American taxpayers spend approximately \$60 billion a year to maintain the prison system. This is quite astounding when one considers that the cost was \$9 billion only two decades ago. Perhaps if the United States was not so preoccupied with punishment, this money could be utilized for education, health care, and public transportation. Society's response to crime has in and of itself become an enormous social problem and is currently depleting valuable tax dollars.

CONCLUSION

One does not need to look very far to see that there are numerous social problems currently plaguing the world. Though this research paper has discussed a variety of different types of problems, this in no way implies that the list is exhaustive. In addition to the social problems mentioned in this paper, anthropologists also study problems related to health and the health care system, population and immigration, alcohol and drug use, gender and sexuality, mental illness, and terrorism. Unfortunately, there are a variety of problems that the world is currently facing. It would be beyond the scope of this research paper and quite impossible to discuss them all.

One major theme of this research paper is that the media play a vital role in defining and constructing various types of problems. Often, the information that the media present has the potential to be biased. Contrary to popular opinion, most news organizations are a far cry from being radical, left-wing institutions. Instead, many tend to be tainted by corporate influences and

sponsors who buy advertisements (Heiner, 2006). This inevitably affects the way we as a society view social problems. To make matters worse, many citizens in the United States seldom go to the polls to cast their votes. If policymakers perceive the public as being largely apathetic and uninformed, then there is a high likelihood that little action will be taken to alleviate social problems. Therefore, it is crucial for Americans not only to vote but also to stay informed.

Admittedly, it can be difficult to keep abreast of the latest news, given that many media outlets have been co-opted by powerful corporations. Nevertheless, there are at least a few Web sites that provide insights into different social problems throughout the world. Heiner (2006), for example, points to the following sites: factcheck.org, truthout.org, altnet.org, corpwatch.org, and projectcensored.org (a site that is maintained by students). Perhaps through open communication and the dissemination of information, individuals can work together and begin to find ways to solve today's problems. Anthropologists and other social scientists have a special responsibility to educate and empower the people of the world. Though there is undoubtedly a great deal of work to be done, this is not an undertaking that is altogether impossible. In order to be successful, everyone must do their part to make the world a better place. This can start on a small, individual level and can include activities such as volunteering and recycling. If everyone is willing to contribute, there is great hope.

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