Defining and Researching Social Problems

Possible points: 300 Due Date: Thursday, Feb 6th with group presentations on Feb 11th.

Each student should be in one of the following groups (if you were not in class Thursday January 23rd, you will be assigned to a remaining slot). Each group will work together to produce a collaborative product as well as an individual product. This handout outlines the project, which will be explained further in class.

1. **Group Task:** Each group should meet to discuss which problems will be addressed and how individual responsibilities will be distributed. The group can decide to focus on only one problem, or several related problems, and a general idea of how the problem or problems will be defined and the problem or aspect of the problem that each person in the group will tackle.

2. **Individual Task:** Each student will be responsible for a “definition” statement (see below) about the problem or aspect of the problem s/he has been assigned. Each student will also be responsible for locating and summarizing the six resources described below. The library session on Thursday, January 30th (in LIB112) should provide the opportunity to get most of your resources.

3. **Group Task:** On February 6th, each student should bring their definition statements and resource citations and summaries to class, ready to work in groups to consolidate your work for a coherent, comprehensive presentation in class on Tuesday, February 11th. Ideally, each group will have an outline of “the problem” or problems, and an integrated bibliography of resources.

**Definition Statement (1-page):**

- What is the problem, and why is it a social problem? [Some may be focused on one aspect of a larger problem.]
- What groups or social interests consider it a social problem? Do all analysts consider it a social problem for the same reason? How do the media tend to portray this issue?
- What are the presumed causes of this problem? What are the competing analyses of the causes of the problem? You are not conducting the research to determine the most likely causes or conditions that promote this problem now, but what do you think are the most probable or likely causes?
- Who benefits from this problem? Who suffers from it?
- What are potential value conflicts that are involved in addressing this problem?

In this assignment, you are exploring various resources to provide you with a more detailed understanding of your social problem and assistance in analyzing it from a sociological perspective. Those students who have chosen the research option can use this assignment as the basis for the analysis section of your Term Project. You will, of course, need to rewrite your reflections into a research paper format. [Guidelines forthcoming]

**Resources**

Each student needs to collect a minimum of 6 resources, from the following categories:
1. **Government statistical information:**
   **One resource of national data:**
   Each US government department has its statistical databases and conducts or sponsors research. An example would be the US Department of Education (www.ed.gov) and its National Center for Educational Statistics. Find a report or data resource relevant to your topic and write a one-paragraph analytical summary of the research. [An analytical summary is not just a description (This report is about school dropouts…), but rather a summary of the significant findings (This report concludes that Hispanic students are more likely to drop out of school because…)].

   **One resource of state or local data:**
   States, cities, and counties also conduct research. An example would be the State Department of Education (www.ode.state.or.us) that includes reports on school finance, student behavior and performance, school staffing, and other issues. From that site, you could also link to reports on local school districts. Cities and counties also have data on a range of social issues. Find at least one state or local resource and write a one-paragraph analytical summary of the research.

2. **Two resources from non-governmental research:**
   There are at least three categories of private, non-governmental research on social problems, including research institutes or issue advocacy organizations, research articles, and participant observation or other qualitative/quantitative research conducted by individual researchers or research teams, often connected to a university. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (www.aecf.org) publishes national reports on child well being, for example, and compiles state, county, and city data on a variety of issues concerning children, families, and education. Research articles can most easily be accessed through a search of EBSCOhost (which I will demonstrate in class on January 30th). Find at least two non-governmental research resources. Write a one-paragraph summary of the most important findings or conclusions of each resource.

3. **Critical reflection on a media resource:**
   Identify at least one popular media resource related to your topic. This could be a magazine article or a TV documentary or some comparable resource that attempts an “in depth” analysis of the issue. Such popular media articles or programs often reflect a major perspective on the public debate. They may also rely on the use of “bad statistics,” so you want to analyze them with Best’s Damned Lies… in mind.

4. **Your own field research or service-learning experience:**
   Students who are engaged in service learning can write a short reflection on insights about their social problem they have gained through their experience. Those who have chosen the research option need to contact at least one community resource to get first-hand information related to their issue. An example might be talking to a representative of a parent group that is concerned about poor achievement of minority children in schools to see how they identified the problem and how they are attempting to address it.

   **Guidelines for your report:**
   1. The first page is your problem statement.
   2. Number and cite each resource.
   3. Write a short descriptive summary of the contents of each resource.
   4. Write an analytical summary for each resource.