Social Problems: 
A Human Rights Perspective

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Preface

The study of social problems is a longstanding, sizable, and lively sub-discipline within sociology. Students might find it funny to learn, however, that there is no agreement about what actually constitutes a “social problem” or not. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the study of social problems has been so successful as an academic enterprise; “social problems” can mean so many things to so many different people that anyone within the subfield can study or teach almost anything he or she wants. But this lack of a common agreement is debilitating as well. Injustices and suffering are real, but we sociologists often lack a common framework to distinguish these as legitimate social problems as opposed to the so called “epidemics,” crazes, and supposed “crime waves” that we are often told plague our society, but upon further inspection are not really so widespread or troublesome at all.

My primary goal in this book is to provide a new definition for what constitutes a social problem. I define it as the violation of a group’s human rights, which I describe as commonly upheld standards about what people deserve and should be protected from in life that have been codified by some widely recognized international body. I use the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is included in the appendix of this book, as a paradigmatic expression of shared standards about the treatment of persons in the contemporary world. I will argue that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be used as a tool to evaluate U.S. society.

However, I also recognize that human rights are defined and understood within the context of intersecting forms of social inequality and struggles for political power. Using human
rights to evaluate wellbeing can therefore never be part of a purely objective academic exercise. The approach that I advocate recognizes that there is no one single interpretation of what rights mean, and that different groups with differing interests are going to promote divergent views. Even so, I argue that some interpretations are better than others. Interpretations that recognize the worth of all persons, that seek to maximize wellbeing across society, and—where appropriate—that strike a balance between groups with conflicting interests are, in my view, the most useful.

The achievement of rights, as lived realities rather than idealized standards, involves building the grassroots movements necessary to change government policies. To this end, I offer several public policy alternatives intended to inspire student discussions and to help students consider ways that we in the United States can move towards fulfilling this objective. I describe various strategies U.S. social movements have used in the recent past to win important human rights victories. I hope that the perspective I provide in this book will give students the conceptual tools to look at U.S. society in new ways, and that some of the ideas expressed here will be useful in their lives that lay ahead.