No one we know starts out life wanting to be a substance abuser or to be poor. Most of us want to be lucky, cool, rich, and successful. Some of us are, but many of us aren’t. Part of the reason for individual success and failure has to do with what we were given biologically in terms of intelligence and the ability to stick with projects and finish them. The other part of it has to do with the families we grow up in, the social and economic conditions of our lives, and the people who influence us including parents, teachers, and friends. Some parents do wonderful things for their children and provide safe and happy homes. Other parents fight, use substances, and sometimes abuse and neglect their children. It doesn’t take a genius to know that the child who grows up in a happy family has a better chance of being successful in life than the child growing up in a troubled family. Child abuse is everything it’s cracked up to be and so are poverty, abandonment, unsafe neighborhoods, and poorly functioning schools. Some of us start life out on the right track and some of us start out life on the wrong track. Often those people whose families function poorly overcome early life problems by the inner strength some people call resilience. But many children who grow up in difficult, unloving, and abusive homes suffer harm to the body and the spirit. It’s difficult for them to be as successful as many of us who grew up in healthier homes. People sometimes pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but sometimes they don’t, and in order to be more successful, they sometimes need professional help.

To help our most troubled families and the children who grow into adulthood having to cope with the burden of a great many early life
problems, we’ve developed social programs and social service organizations
to deliver those programs. We have organizations to help families when
they lose the ability to work and to earn an income. We have other orga-
nizations to help families when the loss of work leads to the loss of their
homes. We have organizations to help people who experience mental
illness or physical disabilities brought about by accidents, war, and health
problems. The organizations we have developed in America come from
our concern that all Americans should have an equal chance to succeed in
life. Sometimes our helping organizations work very well, but other times
they don’t. There’s no question that helping organizations reflect the con-
cerns of the society. When the concern is great, as it is when soldiers come
back wounded from war or when people are hurt in terrorist attacks, the
organizations often work extremely well. But when society is in a particu-
larly blaming mood as it sometimes is about homelessness and poverty,
then the organizations don’t work as well because they’ve lost the support
of citizens and funding is pulled back.

I’m not apologizing for organizations that don’t work well. They need
our help and support. Neither am I going to brag about our organizations
that work very well. I’m just going to clarify what they do, what they cost,
and how well they’re doing the intended job of helping to resolve the social
problems discussed in this book.

Social work is the profession originally developed to work with a
number of these social problems. But it’s not the only helping profession:
Psychiatry, psychology, and counseling are also helping professions work-
ing with people in difficulty. The difference is that social work is concerned
with the internal side of a person’s behavior (his or her emotional prob-
lems and problem-solving skills) as well as the external side of a person’s
life (the quality of family life, the school the child attends, the safety of the
neighborhoods, and the amount of money he or she has to live on). In a
sense, social work sees people from a total perspective and works to resolve
internal and external problems. But we use common sense. If a person is
chronically hungry, social workers try to eliminate his or her hunger while
at the same time resolving the reasons for this hunger. In this way, the
immediate need for food is met and the likelihood of repeated need for
food may be diminished as well.

I think all people who work in the helping professions are heroic
because we give of ourselves daily to help others. But I believe that social
workers are particularly heroic because we’re on the frontline of all of the
social problems that exist in our nation. We work with gangs, we care for
the terminally ill, we help children who are battered and abandoned by
parents and caretakers, we work with the homeless, and we provide help to
families who need to learn to communicate with each other more effec-
tively. We inspire, we cheerlead, and we advocate for millions of people
every day and, in the process, many people who would otherwise suffer
lives of quiet desperation and hopelessness have hope and succeed. We counsel people who want to end their lives far sooner than this should ever happen. We give hope to people facing a long struggle with terminal illness. We work with our political leaders to make our communities more livable and to offer opportunity where it didn’t exist before. We are neither liberal nor conservative but believe that what we do from the heart is paid back in the wonderful feeling that our lives have been dedicated to helping others. My daughter, Amy Glicken (Glicken, 2005), wrote a piece on volunteering that describes what social workers do.

What Are Social Problems?

A social problem is an issue within the society that makes it difficult for people to achieve their full potential. Poverty and malnutrition are examples of social problems. So are substandard housing, employment discrimination, and child abuse and neglect. Crime and substance abuse are
also examples of social problems. Not only do social problems affect many people directly, but they also affect all of us indirectly. The drug-abusing driver becomes the potential traffic accident that doesn’t choose its victims by race, color, or creed, but does so randomly. The child of abusive parents all too often becomes the victim or perpetrator of family violence as an adult.

Social problems tend to develop when we become neglectful and fail to see that serious problems are developing. Between 1988 and 1993, for example, the United States saw a phenomenal increase in youth violence. In my book about children who commit violent acts (Glicken, 2004), I documented that children younger than age 12 cause one-third of all fires resulting in death, and that the average age of children who sexually abuse other children is younger than age 10. According to Osofsky and Osofsky (2001), “The homicide rate among males 15–24 years old in the United States is 10 times higher than in Canada, 15 times higher than in Australia, and 28 times higher than in France or Germany” (p. 287). These are troubling examples of social problems that affect all of us.

Could these problems have been prevented if our social institutions had been working well? I think so, but this is where political philosophies are important to understand. Some people believe that the government should be very involved in providing services to people most at risk. I don’t know if the labels liberal and conservative have much meaning anymore, but in times past, we might have called these folks liberals. Liberals believe that where our usual institutions fail, the government and the private sector should help out. Conservatives believe that intruding in people’s lives often leads to a weakening of social institutions and the values that have served us well in the past. Conservatives might say that what we should be doing to reduce juvenile crime is to promote good family values and look to our traditional institutions (e.g., religious organizations and schools) to help prevent social problems from developing. They also believe that the more government has become involved in people’s lives in the past, the more serious our social problems have become. And finally, although this is true of liberals as well, conservatives believe in the concept of social capital: “the good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit” (Hanifan, 1916, p. 130). The tension between political philosophies is often the underlying reason why we respond to or neglect social problems.

Mahoney (2003) believes that several conditions must exist before an issue or situation is considered a social problem. They are as follows:

The condition or situation must be publicly seen as a social problem because of a public outcry. The conditions in New Orleans after the dikes broke and the city was flooded began a public outcry that focused on the slow response to the crisis by government, concerns about people in
poverty who were left in the city to fend for themselves, concerns about the lack of law and order during the crisis, and, certainly, concerns about racism and feelings that that the federal government had acted slowly because most of the people remaining in New Orleans after the flood were poor and black.

The condition must be at odds with the values of the larger society. Although people have varying degrees of concern about the poor, there was universal anger and grief at what happened to poor people in New Orleans and a growing recognition that government was potentially incapable of helping them if they found themselves in a similar crisis.

Most people must be in agreement that a problem exists. During a 10-year period from 1983 to 1993, America saw astronomical increases in juvenile crime. People were aware and concerned at the same time because their personal safety was at issue.

There must be a solution to a social problem. In the case of New Orleans and future disasters, most people must believe that government is capable of handling large-scale disasters, whether man-made or terrorist. If people don't believe this, they fall into apathy; and while the problem may still exist, they don't believe anything can be done about it.

Mahoney also notes that the more influential or powerful people are who might be affected by a social problem, the more likely there is to be a recognition of the problem and a response. The mass media also play a role in the recognition of social problems because it highlights problems in such a graphic way that many people are touched by it. I wonder how many people believed John Edwards when he spoke of two Americas during the 2004 presidential campaign. We are an affluent country, and many people have done very well. People who never thought they could afford a decent house now see initial investments of $100,000 worth many times that. It's hard to think about poverty when your net worth is skyrocketing. But pictures of poor people struggling to survive during the New Orleans flood had a devastating impact on the perceptions people had, after the flood, about poverty. The media were responsibility for informing us that, much as we might like to think that poverty is nonexistent in America, it does exist and its negative impact is substantial. But the media are not always unbiased or objective in the way they report the news. During the New Orleans' floods, for example, some networks focused on crime and violence whereas others focused on the plight of poor people and the slow and befuddled response by the government. There are many people who believe that the media reflect a liberal bias, and also many who think that the media are controlled by their corporate owners who, some think, skew the news to reflect a more conservative orientation.
My Political Philosophy

What is my political philosophy? I like some liberal philosophies, yet I also like some conservative philosophies. Does this make me wishy-washy or, in the jargon of the 2004 presidential campaign, a flip-flopper? Maybe it does, but most of us in America are politically moderate and our beliefs don’t neatly fit most labels. I grew up in a blue-collar, working-class family. My father was involved in the labor movement. I agree with Andrew Stern, president of the Service Employees Union, that “the idea that the rich get richer and wealth is going to trickle down is a bankrupt economic and moral theory” (“10 Questions,” 2005, p. 6). Perhaps because of my early life experiences with the fight for fair wages and benefits for working people, I believe in many government programs that protect working people. Like what? Well, I believe in unemployment compensation for workers who have lost their jobs because of a poor economy. I believe in workman’s compensation to protect workers who are injured on the job. I believe in Social Security and Medicare because they provide a safety net for older

InfoTable 1.2 Media Bias: Two Views

A Liberal View of the Media

Each year it is more likely that the American citizen who turns to any medium . . . will receive [80% of their] information, ideas, or entertainment controlled by the same handful of 5 corporations, whether it is daily news, a cable entertainment program, or a textbook . . . One of the dangers in all this is that the new corporate ethic is so single-minded about extreme fast profits and expanded control over the media business that it is willing to convert American news into a service for the affluent customers wanted by the media’s advertisers instead of a source of information significant for the whole of society. The rewards of money profit through market control by themselves and their advertisers have blinded media owners to the damage they are doing to an institution central to the American democracy. (Bagdikian, 2005, p. 1)

A Conservative View of the Media

Conservatives believe the mass media, predominantly television news programs, slant reports in favor of the liberal position on issues. Members of the media argue while personally liberal, they are professionally neutral. They argued their opinions do not matter because as professional journalists, they report what they observe without letting their opinions affect their judgment. But being a journalist is not like being a surveillance camera at an ATM, faithfully recording every scene for future playback. Journalists make subjective decisions every minute of their professional lives. They choose what to cover and what not to cover, which sources are credible and which are not, which quotes to use in a story and which to toss out.

Liberal bias in the news media is a reality. It is not the result of a vast left-wing conspiracy; journalists do not meet secretly to plot how to slant their news reports. But every day pack journalism often creates an unconscious “groupthink” mentality that taints news coverage and allows only one side of a debate to receive a fair hearing. When that happens, the truth suffers. (Media Bias Basics, 2005, p. 1)
Americans who would like to spend their later years enjoying the fruits of their hard labor. And I believe in public education, which means that all Americans, regardless of age, race, or gender, should have the opportunity to learn and benefit from a free, or reasonably inexpensive, but very high-quality educational system. Coming from a poor family, the quality of education I received helped me succeed in my life and was paid back many times in the work I’ve done, in the taxes I’ve paid, and in the mentoring I’ve done for a number of students who, like me, came from poor backgrounds and needed someone to cheerlead and offer a guiding hand.

On the other hand, I think that people who practice their religious beliefs are often better off because of it. I also think that capitalism is a great economic system, but that its more predatory impulses need to be regulated and that people who are not competitive in our economic system because of physical or mental health reasons need to have alternative avenues of work. When they can’t work, I think it’s only humane that we help them by offering economic security.

I worry about what John Edwards called the “Two Americas” during the 2004 presidential campaign: one America for the wealthy and privileged and the other America for the rest of us. This book will continually return to the concern about two Americas and the belief that government needs to be the advocate for the majority of us who, after all, desire and deserve the same quality of health care, education, safety, and healthy environments as our more affluent fellow Americans.

This isn’t to say that I’m not critical of our social institutions. That is not the case. This is an introduction to social problems and the institutions that guide us to the solution of those problems. I’m afraid that we have a long way to go before we can feel very happy about our ability to resolve many social problems. Money is often the issue. Even though we spend more money on health care than any other nation, the health of many Americans is not nearly as good as it is in many other countries. Part of the reason is that more than half of all Americans live in or near communities with substandard air quality, which dramatically increases the rates of asthma, emphysema, and lung cancer, particularly in very

### InfoTable 1.3  Religion and Spirituality

According to George, Larson, Koenig, and McCullough (2000), a growing body of research points to the positive health benefits of religious involvement. Religious involvement was found to reduce the likelihood of disease and disability in 78% of the studies attempting to determine the existence of a relationship between religion and health. The positive health benefits of religion were particularly noted with certain medical conditions including coronary disease and heart attacks, emphysema, cirrhosis and other varieties of liver disease, hypertension, and disability. The authors also point to a relationship between religious observance and longevity, noting that “multiple dimensions of religion are associated with longevity, but attendance at religious services is the most strongly related to longevity” (p. 108).
young children. Another reason is that many Americans either lack health insurance completely or have limited coverage. While we spend vast amounts of money on public safety, I’d venture a guess that most of you would not feel safe in many parts of urban America during the evenings or even in many parts of some communities during daylight hours. While we discuss family violence and child abuse and develop public education approaches to inform our citizens about the impact of family violence, it remains a serious problem affecting all too many American homes. You can legislate social change and develop organizations to reduce social problems, but you can’t necessarily change people’s behavior.

What Is Social Work?

This is where social workers come in. Social work has a long and glorious history, much of which is outlined in Professor Dan Huff’s website found in Chapter 2. Professor Huff describes the early history of social work and explains our roots in charitable organizations that flourished in the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries. Out of this impulse to help people in need, the profession of social work developed with its unique emphasis on directly helping people as well as their environments. Social work is the only helping profession that deals with the internal aspects of the human condition (values, beliefs, emotions, and problem-solving capacities of people) and the external aspects of the human condition (the neighborhoods, schools, working conditions, social welfare systems, and political systems that affect us). By working with the internal and external aspects of the human condition, social work is able to provide a uniquely encompassing service to people in need. And by networking with other professionals, social work is able to help our clients receive needed medical, financial, and educational services that improve their physical, financial, and emotional lives. Because social workers act as advocates by helping our clients access services they may be unable to by themselves, we empower our clients. Our goal is to help make people self-sufficient by only doing for people what they may be unable to do for themselves.

We work in the organizations that help people with social and emotional problems. I think we’re pretty terrific people because we work at demanding jobs with great conviction and dedication; and although we’re paid well, nobody gets rich being a social worker! Like most Americans, social workers represent a range of political and religious beliefs. We come from different social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. We have differences of opinions about how best to help people, and we can be as stubborn as any group of professionals in our beliefs. However, our core values have developed over the years and are apparent in all the work we do to help clients. The complete social work code of ethics is found in the appendix. These core values have been developed over the years by social
workers through their experience and practice and are now part of the code of ethics of our professional organization, the National Association of Social Work (1996).

Core Social Work Values

The following broad ethical principles are based on social work’s core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. These principles set forth ideals to which all social workers should aspire.

I. SERVICE

Ethical Principle: A social worker’s primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.

Social workers elevate service to others above self-interest. Social workers draw on their knowledge, values, and skills to help people in need and to address social problems. Social workers are encouraged to volunteer some portion of their professional skills with no expectation of significant financial return (pro bono service).

II. SOCIAL JUSTICE

Ethical Principle: Social workers challenge social injustice.

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers’ social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

III. THE DIGNITY AND WORTH OF THE PERSON

Ethical Principle: Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.

Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social
workers promote clients’ socially responsible self-determination. Social workers seek to enhance clients’ capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs. Social workers are cognizant of their dual responsibility to clients and to the broader society. They seek to resolve conflicts between clients’ interests and the broader society’s interests in a socially responsible manner consistent with the values, ethical principles, and ethical standards of the profession.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

**Ethical Principle:** Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships.

Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change. Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities.

V. INTEGRITY

**Ethical Principle:** Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.

Social workers are continually aware of the profession’s mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them. Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

VI. COMPETENCE

**Ethical Principle:** Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.

Social workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice. Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

What Social Workers Do

The U.S. Department of Labor (2004) defines the functions of social workers as follows:
Social work is a profession for those with a strong desire to help improve people’s lives. Social workers help people function the best way they can in their environment, deal with their relationships, and solve personal and family problems. Social workers often see clients who face a life-threatening disease or a social problem. These problems may include inadequate housing, unemployment, serious illness, disability, or substance abuse. Social workers also assist families that have serious domestic conflicts, including those involving child or spousal abuse.

Social workers often provide social services in health-related settings that now are governed by managed care organizations. To contain costs, these organizations are emphasizing short-term intervention, ambulatory and community-based care, and greater decentralization of services.

Most social workers specialize. Although some conduct research or are involved in planning or policy development, most social workers prefer an area of practice in which they interact with clients. For example, child, family, and school social workers provide social services and assistance to improve the social and psychological functioning of children and their families and to maximize the family well-being and academic functioning of children. Some social workers assist single parents, arrange adoptions, and help find foster homes for neglected, abandoned, or abused children. In schools, they address such problems as teenage pregnancy, misbehavior, and truancy. They also advise teachers on how to cope with problem students. Some social workers may specialize in services for senior citizens. They run support groups for family caregivers or for the adult children of aging parents. Some advise elderly people or family members about choices in areas such as housing, transportation, and long-term care; they also coordinate and monitor services. Through employee-assistance programs, they may help workers cope with job-related pressures or with personal problems that affect the quality of their work. Child, family, and school social workers typically work in individual and family services agencies, schools, or state or local governments. These social workers may be known as child welfare social workers, family services social workers, child protective services social workers, occupational social workers, or gerontology social workers.

Medical and public health social workers provide people, families, or vulnerable populations with the psychosocial support needed to cope with chronic, acute, or terminal illnesses such as Alzheimer’s disease, cancer, or AIDS. They also advise family caregivers, counsel patients, and help plan for patients’ needs after discharge by arranging for at-home services—from meals-on-wheels to oxygen equipment. Some work on interdisciplinary teams that evaluate certain kinds of patients (e.g., geriatric or organ transplant patients). Medical and public health social workers may work for hospitals, nursing and personal care facilities, individual and family services agencies, or local governments.
Mental health and substance abuse social workers assess and treat individuals with mental illness or substance abuse problems, including abuse of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. Such services include individual and group therapy, outreach, crisis intervention, social rehabilitation, and training in skills of everyday living. They may also help plan for supportive services to ease patients’ return to the community. Mental health and substance abuse social workers are likely to work in hospitals, substance abuse treatment centers, individual and family services agencies, or local governments. These social workers may be known as clinical social workers.

Other types of social workers include social work planners and policy-makers, who develop programs to address such issues as child abuse, homelessness, substance abuse, poverty, and violence. These workers research and analyze policies, programs, and regulations. They identify social problems and suggest legislative and other solutions. They may help raise funds or write grants to support these programs.

The Following Chapters

In the following chapters, I will discuss a number of social problems facing America. Many social problems, such as youth violence, child abuse, domestic violence, poverty, and racism, are of such a serious nature that they affect the way all Americans live. Social work organizations and social workers are on the front line of serious social problems. To show you what we do, most chapters will contain an actual case study demonstrating what social workers do in practice. To help you develop a sense of what you would do if you were a social worker, many chapters have a section that offers a short case vignette and then asks what you would do if you were the social worker. The websites you will find at the end of each chapter contain information that will add to your knowledge base. Some websites are government reports, some are articles written by authors for journals, and some provide historical overviews of the development of social programs.

I’ve tried, where possible, to give you many sides of each issue; but when it comes right down to it, I believe in helping people, and the side I’ve chosen is the side that seems humane, positive, and morally right. I believe that helping people always has a large payoff for society. It’s what defines us as a caring nation. We are caring people in America, and social workers are highly caring professionals.

If, after reading this book, you absolutely want to be a social worker, I’ll be very happy for you and feel that I’ve written it for the best possible reasons. If you think that helping people is a wonderful thing but that you’d do better as a volunteer, I’ll also be very happy. And even if I simply move your attitudes and opinions a bit, that’s equally wonderful. That’s what I hope you’ll do with this book. Give it a chance, think about the issues, talk
Many people believe that America is a divided nation and that this sharp division can be defined by political ideologies. Perhaps half the people are conservative and believe that government should have a limited role in people’s lives. Many conservatives also believe that government should permit more religious observance in public settings, including schools, and that prayer in school should be permissible just as gay marriages should not. The other half have a more liberal ideology and believe that there is a significant role for government in people’s life: the role of protecting and offering succor and relief when help is needed. They point to the failure of government to function well and its consequences in Hurricane Katrina as an example of what happens when government becomes weakened. You are about to embark on a voyage into the world of social problems and the helping profession of social work. Given your current beliefs, please answer the following questions about your current ideological preferences.

1. Do you believe that prayer in school should not only be permissible but that it has a positive impact on children? A corollary might be whether you find it objectionable to mention “God” in the Pledge of Allegiance or whether you believe it begins a child’s day with a strong sense of moral grounding.

2. Do you believe that most poor people are responsible for their situation and that if they worked harder or had more motivation, they’d be fine? Or is it more likely that most poor people are poor because they lack motivation and willpower?
3. Do you believe that those who have the most income should pay the most taxes, or does it reduce incentive to work hard and have much of your earned income go to pay for taxes?

4. Do you believe that most helping functions should be done by family, religious organizations, and other private charitable organizations, or do you believe that when people need help, it’s good to have government there to provide it when needed?

5. Good citizens, whether they are liberal or conservative, take their vote seriously and vote in elections. Will you vote in the next election if eligible and, if not, why not?

6. Social workers believe that all people should be treated with dignity. We have imprisoned many terrorists, some of whom have done awful things. Do you believe that they should be treated with dignity?

7. Conservatives believe that in a country with high crime, high drug rates, dangerous sexual practices that sometimes lead to rape and unwanted pregnancy and then an astonishing number of abortions, that what we need in America is a moral rebirth through more religious involvement. What do you think?

8. Liberals believe that poverty is increasing and that people often live lives of quiet desperation because we’ve become such an uncaring society. What do you believe?

9. As you face your future, what excites you most? The amount of money you will make and accumulate, or the value of the work you do for yourself and others?

10. What would you do, if you had the power, to recognize our differences but help us become less divided and contentious as a nation?

Summary

This chapter explains the content of the book and provides an introductory discussion of the importance of one’s own political philosophy in viewing social problems and their solution. Future chapters will discuss social problems in more detail, and the role of social service and helping organizations will be discussed as well as the function of social work within those organizations.