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Public Opinion on Social Issues -- 1975-2010
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Chapter 1
American Social Issues

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Social Issues in Twentieth Century America

As an introduction to the study of social issues, Skolnick and Currie's history of changes in the study of American social institutions¹ provides a useful background for student projects based on this data set.

At the end of the Nineteenth Century, American values and institutions emphasized individual hard work, thrift, and personal discipline. The challenge to American society was to maintain these distinctive American values despite industrialization and urbanization, which had been accompanied by immigration from other parts of the world. Social problems were believed to be caused by defective moral characteristics in individuals. Social scientists, politicians, and social reformers all sought ways to change these people into individuals who could compete and succeed in American society. The proposed solutions emphasized social control, such as prisons and mental institutions, and a few social welfare programs. Social scientists concentrated on the scientific study of the society to preserve its optimal functioning. Social problems were considered to be signs of problems in a particular segment of society. It was expected that social scientists, after objective study, would be able to make recommendations for change. The ideals and values of American society were accepted without question, especially the competitive, capitalistic economic system characterized by private property and individual competition.

World War I, the Depression, and World War II interrupted this, but the end of World War II brought political optimism and economic affluence for many Americans. The expanding economy produced jobs that paid men well enough that they could support families. The 'baby boom' was really a nuclear family boom in which Americans married at higher rates and younger ages and had more babies. Communism was considered to be the most serious threat to American culture and economic-political life. Social scientists supported existing social American institutions, considering a

¹ Summarized from Jerome H. Skolnick and Elliot Currie. 2000. *Crisis in American Institutions*, Eleventh Edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon pp. 1-13.

strong national defense and effective counterespionage intelligence to be necessary and desirable.

During the 1960s American perspectives shifted as the country became more aware of disadvantaged people both here and in so-called underdeveloped places elsewhere. The first response was to extend American technological and political resources to these less fortunate, especially encouraging social changes to help people help themselves toward democracy, development, and modernization. American society was considered to be the ideal economic and political system. (The only criticism was that not enough of the world, or even of our own people, benefited from it.) The early 60s were optimistic that this could be done, and social science concerned itself with identifying glitches in the system, still focusing on social problems as the result of deviant behavior of individuals or social disorganization in segments of society. It was assumed that scientists could recommend appropriate changes. Social analysis was assumed to be politically neutral. If the society operated less efficiently than it might, specific problems would be analyzed and then referred to the appropriate social institutions—education, political, military--for adjustments. The federal government began a variety of social programs to bring American reality closer to the ideal. These included legislation such as the War on Poverty, the Civil Rights Act, Medicare expanding the Social Security system, the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, Title IX of the Education Amendment to the Civil Rights Act.

Later in the 1970s, economic problems, persistent poverty, racial and ethnic cleavages, urban disorganization, increasing crime and violence led Americans to more pessimistic conclusions. Some concluded that the government had tried to do too much for people--maybe the programs were too generous and had negative consequences in the long term. Theories of racial inferiority and cultural inadequacy revived. Harsher sentences for those convicted of crimes were mandated, and some states reinstated the death penalty. Communities spent more money for prisons and less for education. By mid1990s, welfare reform legislation was designed to force the poor to work and limited the time their families could receive benefits. Cleavages within public opinion on social issues were taken more seriously, not only by public officials concerned with reelection, but also by social scientists and the general public. Public debate and controversy increased and became almost a phenomenon in its own right. Since problems such as poverty, crime, school failure continued despite government programs and social policies, the conclusion that these programs had failed or even contributed to ongoing problems seemed plausible. The idea that the disadvantages stemmed from deficiencies in individuals, families, communities, and/or subcultures reappeared and continued.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, American thinking about social issues seemed to have come full circle and now blamed school failure, poverty, delinquency, and welfare dependence on individuals or subcultures. At the same time, the gap between the have and have-nots increased, and

the American economic system was transformed by global economic competition and new technology. There seemed to be no consensus on solving the problems related to the increasingly complex and rapid changes that affected many American institutions.