

Chapter 15

Population and the Environment

1. Sociological Perspectives on Population and the Environment

- Understand the perspectives that functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism offer on population and the environment.

Section Outline

- **Functionalism:** Functionalism considers population growth and its various components (birth, death, and migration) as normal and essential processes for any society. A society certainly cannot survive if it loses members, but it can thrive only if it grows so that it can meet future challenges.
- **Conflict Theory:** Conflict theory does not consider population growth to be a serious problem. Instead, it assumes that the earth has enough food and other resources to meet the needs of its growing population. To the extent that food shortages and other problems meeting these needs exist, these problems reflect decisions by economic and political elites in poor nations to deprive their peoples of food and other resources.
- **Symbolic Interactionism:** In order to address population growth and environmental problems, it is important to understand why people become involved, or fail to become involved, in various activities related to these problems. To the extent that public attitudes play a key role in the persistence of these problems, it is important to know the reasons for public views on these problems so that efforts to address the problems

may be better focused.

Key Takeaways

- Functionalism recognizes the problems arising from population growth that is too rapid, but disagrees on the extent to which overpopulation is a serious problem.
- Conflict theory attributes world hunger to inequalities in the distribution of food rather than to overpopulation.
- Symbolic interactionism considers people's perceptions and activities regarding population (e.g., contraception) and the environment.

For Your Review

1. Which of the three major perspectives—functionalism, conflict theory, or symbolic interactionism—seems to have the best approach in how it understands population and environmental issues? Explain your answer.

2. Population

- Describe the central concepts of the study of demography.
- Understand demographic transition theory and how it compares with the views of Thomas Malthus.
- Explain why some experts feel that world hunger does not result from overpopulation.
- Provide examples of how U.S. history is marked by anti-immigrant prejudice.

Section Outline

- **The Study of Population:** The study of population is so significant that it occupies a special sub field within sociology called **demography**. To be more precise, demography is the study of changes in the size and

composition of population. It encompasses several concepts: fertility and birth rates, mortality and death rates, and migration.

- **Population Growth and Decline:** The U.S. natural growth rate is about 0.6 percent (or 6 per 1,000 people) per year. When immigration is also taken into account, the total population growth rate has been almost 1.0 percent per year. Many African nations are growing by at least 3 percent per year or more, while most European nations are growing by much less than 1 percent or are even losing population, as discussed earlier. Overall, the world population is growing by about 80 million people annually.
- **Views of Population Growth:** During the 1970s, population growth became a major issue in the United States and some other nations. *Zero population growth*, or ZPG, was a slogan often heard. There was much concern over the rapidly growing population in the United States and, especially, around the world, and there was fear that our “small planet” could not support massive increases in the number of people. Some of the most dire predictions of the time warned of serious food shortages by the end of the century.
- **Two Other Problems Related to Population Growth:** One of these problems concerns the *environment*. Population growth in both wealthy and poor nations has damaged the environment in many ways. Another problem is *interpersonal conflict* in general and *armed conflict* in particular. As populations grow, they need more and more food, water, and other resources.

- **Immigration:** Immigration is also a source of great controversy in the United States and in many other countries. This controversy is perhaps almost inevitable, as increasing numbers of immigrants can affect many aspects of a society: crowding in its cities, increasing enrollments in its schools, having enough jobs for everyone who wants to work, and so forth.

Key Takeaways

- To understand changes in the size and composition of population, demographers use several concepts, including fertility and birth rates, mortality and death rates, and migration.
- Although overpopulation remains a serious concern, many experts say the world's food supply is sufficient providing that it is distributed efficiently and equitably.
- Although illegal immigration to the United States has dwindled and immigrants are faring well overall, many Americans are concerned about immigration, and several states have passed very restrictive laws concerning immigration.

For Your Review

1. How concerned are you about population growth and overpopulation? Explain your answer in a brief essay.
2. Before you began reading this chapter, did you think that food scarcity was the major reason for world hunger today? Why do you think a belief in food scarcity is so common among

Americans?

3. Do you think nations with low birth rates should provide incentives for women to have more babies? Why or why not?
4. If immigrants seem to be faring fairly well in the United States, as the text explains, why do you think so many Americans have negative attitudes about immigration and immigrants? Explain your answer.

Key Terms

- **Demography** -- The study of population growth and changes in population composition.
- **Fertility** -- The number of live births.
- **Crude Birth Rate** -- The number of live births for every 1,000 people in a population in a given year.
- **General Fertility Rate** -- The number of live births per 1,000 women aged 15–44 years.
- **Total Fertility Rate** -- The number of children an average woman is expected to have in her lifetime, sometimes expressed as the number of children an average 1,000 women are expected to have in their lifetimes.
- **Mortality** -- The number of deaths.
- **Crude Death Rate** -- The number of deaths for every 1,000 people in a population in a given year.

- **Migration** -- The movement of people into or out of specific regions.
- **Natural Growth Rate** -- The difference between the crude birth rate and the crude death rate.
- **Demographic Transition Theory** -- A theory that links population growth to the level of technological development across three stages of social evolution.
- **Pronatalist** -- Referring to policies that encourage women to have children.

3. The Environment

- List two reasons that make the environment an appropriate topic for sociologists to study.
- Describe two of the environmental problems facing the world today.
- Describe what is meant by the assertion that environmental problems are human problems.
- Explain the concepts of environmental inequality and environmental racism.
- Understand the various environmental problems that exist today.

Section Outline

- **Environmental Sociology:** A subfield in sociology is called **environmental sociology**, which refers simply to the sociological study of the environment. More specifically, environmental sociology is the study of the interaction between human behavior and the natural and physical environment.
- **Environmental Inequality and Environmental Racism:** **Environmental inequality** (also called *environmental injustice*) refers to

the fact that low-income people and people of color are disproportionately likely to experience various environmental problems, while *environmental racism* refers just to the greater likelihood of people of color to experience these problems.

- **Global Climate Change:** The burning of fossil fuels also contributes to *global climate change*, often called *global warming*, thanks to the oft-discussed *greenhouse effect* caused by the trapping of gases in the atmosphere that is turning the earth warmer, with a rise of almost 1°C during the past century. In addition to affecting the ecology of the earth's polar regions and ocean levels throughout the planet, climate change threatens to produce a host of other problems, including increased disease transmitted via food and water, malnutrition resulting from decreased agricultural production and drought, a higher incidence of hurricanes and other weather disasters, and extinction of several species.
- **Nuclear Power:** Nuclear power has been an environmental controversy at least since the 1970s. Proponents of nuclear power say it is a cleaner energy than fossil fuels such as oil and coal and does not contribute to global warming. Opponents of nuclear power counter that nuclear waste is highly dangerous no matter how it is disposed, and they fear meltdowns that can result if nuclear power plant cores overheat and release large amounts of radioactive gases into the atmosphere.
- **Ground Pollution and Hazardous Waste:** Pollution of the air and water is an environmental danger, as we saw earlier, but so is pollution of the

ground from hazardous waste. *Hazardous wastes* are unwanted materials or byproducts that are potentially toxic. If discarded improperly, they enter the ground and/or bodies of water and eventually make their way into the bodies of humans and other animals and/or harm natural vegetation.

Key Takeaways

- Environmental problems are largely the result of human behavior and human decision making. Changes in human activity and decision making are thus necessary to improve the environment.
- Environmental inequality and environmental racism are significant issues. Within the United States and around the world, environmental problems are more often found where poor people and people of color reside.
- Air pollution, global climate change, water pollution and inadequate sanitation, and hazardous waste are major environmental problems that threaten the planet.

For Your Review

1. Pretend you are on a debate team and that your team is asked to argue in favor of the following resolution: Be it resolved, that air and water pollution is primarily the result of reckless human behavior rather than natural environmental changes. Using evidence from the text, write a two-minute speech (about three hundred words) in favor of the resolution.
2. How much of the environmental racism that exists do you think is intentional? Explain your answer.

3. List one thing you did yesterday that was good for the environment and one thing that was bad for the environment.

Key Terms

- **Environmental Sociology** -- The study of the interaction between human behavior and the natural and physical environment.
- **Environmental Inequality** -- The disproportionate exposure of low-income people and people of color to various environmental problems.
- **Environmental Racism** -- The disproportionate exposure of people of color to various environmental problems.
- **Environmental Justice** -- Scholarship on environmental inequality and racism, and public policy efforts and activism aimed at reducing these forms of inequality and racism.

4. Addressing Population Problems and Improving the Environment

- Outline sociological-based strategies that should help address population issues.
- List sociological-based strategies and other efforts that should help improve environmental problems.

Section Outline

- **Population:** Population growth in poor nations has slowed but remains a significant problem. Their poverty, low educational levels, and rural settings all contribute to high birth rates. More effective contraception is needed to reduce their population growth. But contraceptive efforts will not be sufficient by themselves. Rather, it is also necessary to raise these nations' economic circumstances and educational levels, as birth rates are

lower in nations that are wealthier and more educated.

- **The Environment:** Environmental problems cannot be fully understood without appreciating their social context. In this regard, we discussed two major emphases of environmental sociology. First, environmental problems are largely the result of human decision making and activity and thus preventable. Second, environmental problems disproportionately affect the poor and people of color.

Key Takeaways

- Efforts to address population issues should focus on the various inequalities that lead to both overpopulation and food scarcity.
- Efforts to improve the environment should keep in mind the greater environmental harm that the poor and people of color suffer.

For Your Review

1. If you had a million dollars to spend to address one population problem, would you use it to provide contraception, or would you use it to improve the distribution of food? Explain your answer.
2. Which one of the environmental problems discussed in the text concerns you the most? Why?