

..... ENGAGING SOCIOLOGY

Being Clear About Causality

Sociology, as a science, tries to be very careful about language—more precise than we usually are in our everyday conversations. What do we really mean when we say that something *causes* something else? At the heart of the research process is the effort to find causal relationships (i.e., one variable causes another one to change). The following key terms are important in understanding how two variables (concepts that vary in frequency and can be measured) are related:

CORRELATION



Correlation refers to a relationship between variables (such as poverty and low levels of education), with change in one variable associated with change in another. The hypothesis stated earlier predicts that poverty and teenagers dropping out of school are related and vary together. That is, when the poverty level is high, dropping out of school is also high. If we claim that there is a correlation, however, that is only the first step. We have not yet established that change in one variable *causes* a change in the other.

CAUSE-AND-EFFECT VARIABLES

