

Private or Public? Public Goods and Services

Our Economic System

An economic system is the way in which people and societies organize economic life to answer three basic questions: *What* goods and services will be produced? *How* will they be produced? *For whom* will they be produced?

In many countries, most production decisions—what, how, and for whom to produce—are made in the marketplace through interactions of buyers and sellers. This is called the *private sector* of the economy. Other decisions are made by different levels of government. This is called the *public sector* of the economy. Many economic systems are called *mixed* systems since they produce a combination of private and public goods and services.

What Goods and Services Should Governments Provide?

While many goods and services can be provided by the private or the public sector, a few can be provided effectively only by governments. Generally, governments try to provide the goods and services that are necessary but that individual consumers might not purchase directly on their own. There are two criteria that can be used in judging whether something should be provided by governments: *nonexclusion* and *nonrivalrous* (*shared consumption*).

Nonexclusion

In some situations people cannot be excluded from the benefits of a good or service even if they do not pay for it. If only some of the people paid for national defense, for example, others could not be excluded from the benefits of national defense if it is provided. The nonpurchasers of national defense would be protected just as much as the purchasers. People who receive the benefit of a good but don't pay for it are called *free riders*.

Nonrivalrous (Shared Consumption or Joint Use)

In some situations one person's use or consumption of a good or service does not reduce its usefulness to others. The security one person receives from a street light is not diminished by a neighbor receiving the same security. The protection the street light provides is not reduced by additional people using it.

Private businesses will not produce things that people are not willing to buy, and individual consumers are reluctant to pay for goods and services from which others who do not pay will reap the benefits: "Why should I be the one to buy the street light if everyone else also is getting the benefits?" Governments therefore must provide some goods and services such as national defense, flood control, and judicial and legal systems that are characterized by shared consumption and are necessarily or should be nonexclusive. Public goods are goods that are provided by government and will not be provided by the private sector.

Private and Public Goods

Pure private goods are subject to exclusion and rivalry. Nonbuyers cannot consume the good, and if one person consumes a unit of the good, someone else cannot consume that unit. They are purchased directly in the marketplace. *Pure public goods* are subject to nonexclusion and shared consumption. They are purchased indirectly through tax dollars.

Some goods have elements of both private goods and public goods. Fishing in the ocean, for example, is generally not subject to exclusion; but once one person catches a fish, it is not available to others. Likewise, it is sometimes possible to exclude people from theaters, national parks, or even roads by charging admission fees or tolls. But one person camping in a park or driving on a highway usually does not reduce the usefulness of these places to others. Controversy often arises over how these *mixed goods*—sometimes called *common-pool resources* and *toll goods*—should be provided and who should pay for them. Some goods do not fall into neat boxes, but show degrees of nonexclusion and shared consumption.



Table 5-1.1

Combinations of Exclusion and Shared Consumption

		Shared consumption	
		No	Yes
Exclusion	Yes	Pure private goods: haircuts, bread, ice cream	Toll goods: theaters, cable TV, parks, toll roads
	No	Common-pool resources: fish taken from the ocean, irrigation water taken from a river, congested roads	Pure public goods: national defense, flood control, street lights, mosquito abatement, judicial and legal system

1. What is the difference between the private and public sectors of our economy?
2. What are the characteristics of a pure private good?
3. What are the characteristics of a pure public good?

4. Place each of the goods and services in the list below into one of the four boxes in Table 5-1.2.

Circle the box that contains pure private goods. Then draw two circles around the box that contains pure public goods.

- | | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (A) A college education | (G) Cable television | (L) Police and fire protection |
| (B) Electric power | (H) Canine rabies shots | (M) Health care |
| (C) A haircut | (I) Street lights | (N) National forest
campgrounds |
| (D) National defense | (J) The Panama Canal | (O) Potato chips |
| (E) A private amusement park | (K) Public toll roads and
bridges | (P) Auto airbags |
| (F) Spraying for mosquitoes | | |



Table 5-1.2

Determining Combinations of Exclusion and Shared Consumption

		Shared consumption	
		No	Yes
Exclusion	Yes		
	No		

5. What is a free rider? Select three goods from the list in Question 4 that could have free riders.

Externalities

A *market externality* refers to a situation where some of the costs or benefits from an activity fall on someone other than the people directly involved in the activity. Externalities may be either positive (the activity provides a benefit to someone else) or negative (the activity places a cost on someone else). Costs that fall on someone else are called *external costs*, and benefits that fall on someone else are called *external benefits*. These external effects of an activity are also called *social spillover costs* and *social spillover benefits*, or *third-party costs* and *third-party benefits*.

The demand curve for a good or service shows the *marginal private benefit (MPB)* to those individuals who are consuming the product. It shows how many units will be demanded by consumers at different prices. The demand curve also shows the highest prices consumers will pay for different quantities of the product. The supply curve of a good or service shows the *marginal private cost (MPC)* to those individuals who are producing the product. It shows how many units will be supplied by producers at different prices. The supply curve also shows the lowest prices producers will accept for different quantities of the product.

If there are no positive externalities associated with the activity, then the marginal private benefit from an additional unit will be equal to the *marginal social benefit (MSB)*. The marginal social benefit shows the benefit to society from an extra unit of the activity. If no one other than the person associated with the activity receives any benefit from the extra unit, then $MPB = MSB$.

If there are no negative externalities associated with the activity, then the marginal private cost from an additional unit will be equal to the *marginal social cost (MSC)*. The marginal social cost shows the cost to society from an extra unit of the activity. If no one other than the person associated with the activity incurs any cost from the extra unit, then $MPC = MSC$.

Consumers of a product buy according to their marginal private benefits as shown by the demand curve, and producers of the item produce according to their marginal private costs as shown by the supply curve. The equilibrium quantity of the product in a perfectly competitive market will be the quantity where $MPB = MPC$. This is where the market demand curve intersects the market supply curve. *If there are no externalities, the competitive market output is the socially optimal (efficient) quantity because it is where $MSB = MSC$.* Society feels the market is producing exactly the right amount of the product. Given the marginal benefit society is receiving from the last unit, it feels the correct amount of its scarce resources is being allocated to the provision of that unit.

The competitive market results in *market failures*, however, if there are positive or negative externalities associated with the consumption or production of the good or service. These spillover benefits or costs, if not corrected, will result in the market producing either too much or too little of the activity from society's perspective. The externalities drive a wedge between the MSB and the MPB, or between the MSC and the MPC. Because the market will produce the output where $MPB = MPC$, these differences yield a quantity of the product at which MSB is not equal to MSC. We often turn to the government to attempt to correct these market failures.

To understand how externalities can result in market failures, it is important that you know these relationships:

- $\text{Marginal Social Benefit} = \text{Marginal Private Benefit} + \text{Marginal External Benefit}$

$$\text{MSB} = \text{MPB} + \text{MEB}$$

- $\text{Marginal Social Cost} = \text{Marginal Private Cost} + \text{Marginal External Cost}$

$$\text{MSC} = \text{MPC} + \text{MEC}$$

Summary of key points:

- Society wants a market to produce the quantity where $\text{MSB} = \text{MSC}$.
- Private decision makers want to have the quantity where $\text{MPB} = \text{MPC}$.
- As long as MEB and MEC are zero (no externalities), the market quantity will be the socially optimal (efficient) quantity.
- If MEB or MEC is not zero, we will have a market failure.

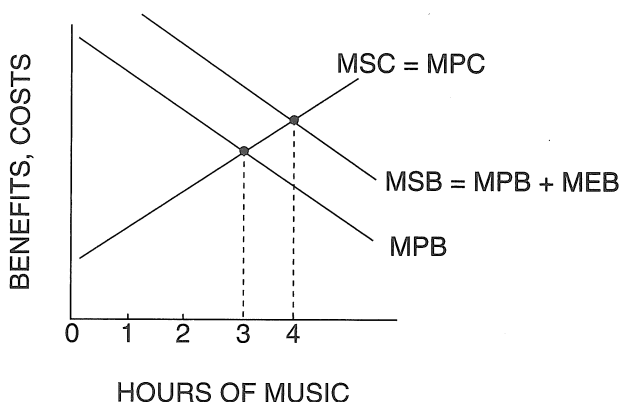
Student Alert: Some textbooks use slightly different approaches to the topic of externalities. While the end results with regard to the effects of externalities are the same, be sure you understand the approach and terminology that are being used.

Part A: How Much Music?



Figure 5-2.1

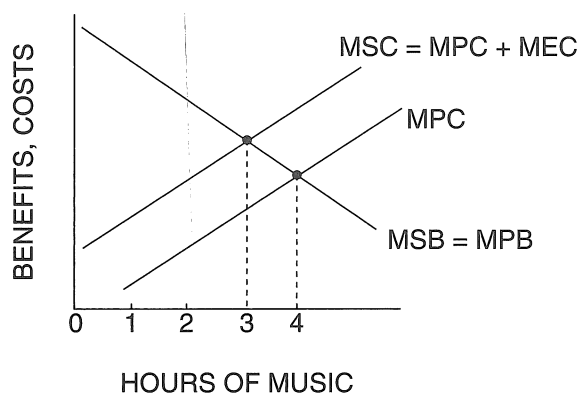
External Benefits



1. Margaret has Wendy as her roommate in a college residence hall. Wendy has brought an expensive stereo system to play in the room. Figure 5-2.1 shows Wendy's MPB and MPC curves for music played on the stereo system. Based on Figure 5-2.1, answer the following questions.
 - (A) If Wendy considers only the MPB and MPC from playing music, how many hours of music will be played? Label the number of hours in Figure 5-2.1 as Q_p to indicate the private market quantity.
 - (B) Assume that Wendy plays music only at times that do not disturb Margaret and plays only music that Margaret also enjoys. The " $MSB = MPB + MEB$ " curve in Figure 5-2.1 shows the MSB from the music, including the MEB to Margaret. If Wendy considers the MSB from playing music rather than only the MPB, what happens to the quantity of music played? Label the number of hours as Q_s in Figure 5-2.1 to indicate the socially optimal quantity.
 - (C) In Figure 5-2.1, what does the vertical gap between the MSB and MPB curves represent?
 - (D) Assuming there are no external costs from the music, when Wendy does not consider the MEB from playing music, the number of hours played is (*greater than / equal to / less than*) the socially efficient number of hours.



Figure 5-2.2
External Costs



2. Again, Wendy has a new stereo system and Margaret is her roommate.
 - (A) In Figure 5-2.2, assume Wendy only considers her MPB and MPC from music. How many hours of music will be played? Label the number of hours in Figure 5-2.2 as Q_p to indicate the private market quantity.
 - (B) Now assume that Wendy plays music only at times that Margaret is trying to study and plays only music that Margaret hates. In Figure 5-2.2, the " $MSC = MPC + MEC$ " curve shows the MSC from the music, including the MEC to Margaret. If Wendy considers the MSC from playing music rather than only the MPC, what happens to the quantity of music played? Label the number of hours as Q_s in Figure 5-2.2 to indicate the socially optimal quantity.
 - (C) In Figure 5-2.2, what does the vertical gap between the MSC and MPC curves represent?

- (D) Assuming there are no external benefits from the music, when Wendy does not consider the MEC from playing music, the number of hours played is (*greater than / equal to / less than*) the socially efficient number of hours.
3. How can government regulation (in this case, residence hall rules) assure the efficient quantity of music? Consider the circumstances under which prohibiting stereos or imposing daily “quiet hours” are efficient ways to regulate stereo use in the hall. Does economics suggest a more efficient approach to stereo regulation?

Part B: More Externalities Examples

4. For each of these activities, explain whether there is a positive or negative externality.

(A) Private high school education

(B) Smog from an electric power plant

(C) Your neighbor’s yappy dog

(D) Pre-kindergarten measles vaccinations

Part C: Applying Your Knowledge of Externalities

The Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) is considering awarding a new franchise to the city of Metropolis, but only if the team has a new arena in which to play. Proponents of the franchise argue that the team will generate new businesses, provide jobs, increase tax revenue, and promote tourism in Metropolis. Opponents argue that most of the money spent on basketball games will come from Metropolis-area residents who will simply reduce their spending on other activities. The opponents claim there will be few new jobs, little increase in tax revenue, and few new tourists coming

to Metropolis. They also say the new arena will cause property values to fall in the area and create traffic congestion and noise pollution.

Voters have the following three proposals before them:

Proposal #1: No city money should be used to construct the arena. Team owners should pay the full cost of building the facility and include that cost in the price of game tickets.

Proposal #2: The city should place a tax on each ticket sold to pay the full cost of the arena.

Proposal #3: The city should build the arena and lease the right to play there to the basketball club at a subsidized rate.

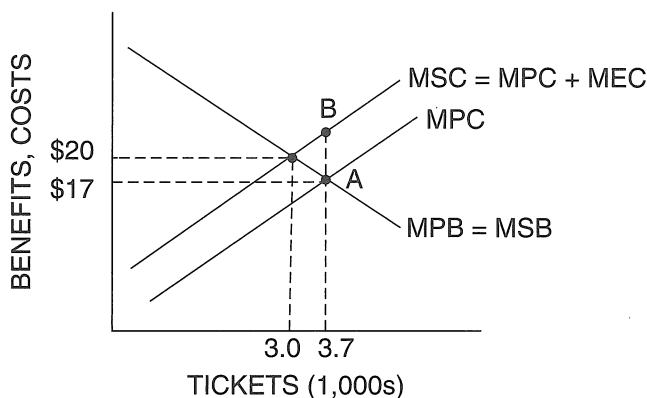
For the analysis that follows, assume the output of the team is the number of tickets sold.

5. What assumption does Proposal #1 make about external costs and external benefits associated with the new franchise?

Figure 5-2.3 can be used to illustrate the position of opponents to the franchise. Answer the following questions based on this graph.



Figure 5-2.3
Social Spillover Costs



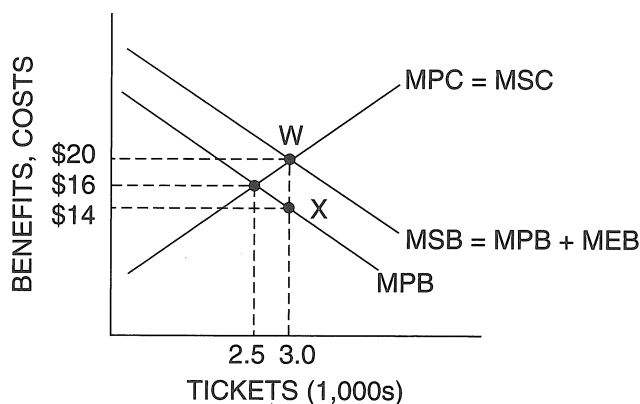
6. What assumption is made about social spillover benefits from the franchise? Explain.
7. What assumption is made about social spillover costs from the franchise? Explain.

8. How many tickets will be sold based on the MPB and MPC?
9. What is the socially optimal number of tickets?
10. What does the vertical gap "AB" represent?
11. What can the Metropolis city government do to make the market output be equal to the socially efficient output? Explain, using the graph to illustrate your answer.

Figure 5-2.4 can be used to illustrate the position of supporters of the franchise. Answer the following questions based on this graph.



Figure 5-2.4
Social Spillover Benefits



12. What assumption is made about social spillover benefits from the franchise? Explain.

13. What assumption is made about social spillover costs from the franchise? Explain.
14. How many tickets will be sold based on the MPB and MPC?
15. What is the socially optimal number of tickets?
16. What does the vertical gap “WX” represent?
17. What can the Metropolis city government do to make the market output be equal to the socially efficient output? Explain, using the graph to illustrate your answer.

Part D: Per Unit or Lump Sum? Which Type of Tax or Subsidy to Use?

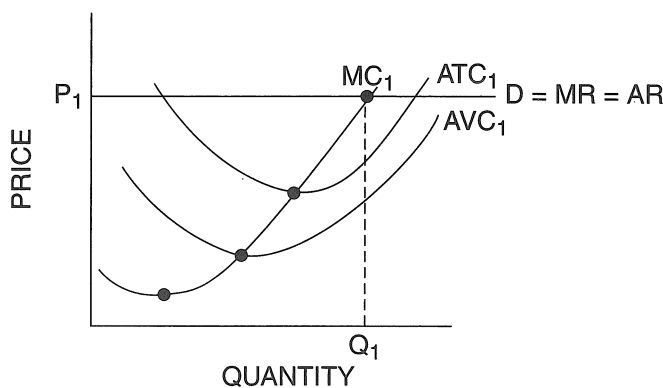
Student Alert: Which form of a tax or subsidy should the government use to correct the effects of an externality? Should it apply a per-unit or a lump-sum adjustment?

Figure 5-2.5 shows the average total cost (ATC), average variable cost (AVC), marginal cost (MC), demand (D), marginal revenue (MR), and average revenue (AR) functions of a perfectly competitive firm. The firm is producing Q_1 units because that is where $MR = MC$. Assume there is a negative externality associated with the firm's product and the government would like to have the firm reduce its output.



Figure 5-2.5

A Profit-Maximizing Perfectly Competitive Firm

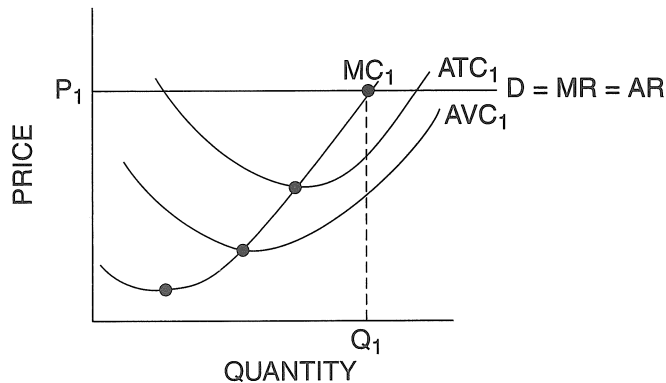


18. Suppose the government places a per-unit tax of “ t ” on the firm’s product. Which cost measures will be affected by this per-unit tax: ATC, AVC, average fixed cost (AFC), or MC? Show in Figure 5-2.6 how the cost curves will look after the tax is imposed. What happens to the output level the firm wants to produce? Was the per-unit tax successful in having the firm reduce its quantity?



Figure 5-2.6

The Government Levies a Per-Unit Tax of “ t ”

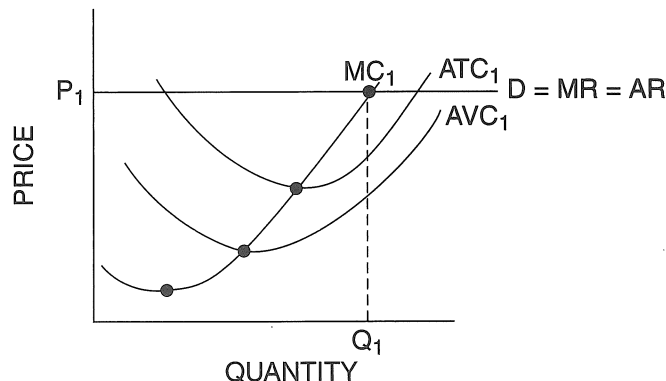


19. Suppose the government places a one-time, lump-sum tax of “ T ” on the firm’s product. Which of these cost measures will be affected by this lump-sum tax: ATC, AVC, AFC, or MC? Show in Figure 5-2.7 how the graph will look after the tax is imposed. What happens to the output level the firm wants to produce? Was the lump-sum tax successful in having the firm reduce its quantity?



Figure 5-2.7

The Government Levies a Lump-Sum Tax of “ T ”



20. Assume a firm produces a product for which there is a positive externality. As an incentive to the firm to produce more of its product, should the government give the firm a per-unit subsidy or a lump-sum subsidy? Explain.

Part E: Summary

21. When positive externalities are involved, private markets produce (*more than / exactly / less than*) the socially optimal amount of the product.
22. When negative externalities are involved, private markets produce (*more than / exactly / less than*) the socially optimal amount of the product.
23. Why do economists say the presence of an externality results in a market failure?
24. How can a tax be used to remedy a negative externality?
25. How can a subsidy mitigate an inefficient output level in the presence of a positive externality?

Private or Public? The Coase Theorem

When an activity results in a negative externality (external cost), the market outcome will not be efficient. In these cases, the government may choose to intervene in the market and impose some form of regulation, for example, a legal restriction or a tax. If the external cost the activity creates is borne by those who conduct the activity, the market outcome will be efficient.

For example, if a firm dumps its waste into a river, it pollutes the river and creates a negative externality (external cost) for those downstream. The government may intervene to restrict dumping in the river, or it may impose an effluent tax (a tax on each unit of pollution released into the river). If the firm is forced to pay for the pollution it releases into the river, it will dump less. A sufficiently high tax will lead to the optimal reduction in river pollution from the firm. Thus, the firm has internalized the externality.

However, in some situations, it may not be necessary to regulate a market to achieve an efficient outcome. It may be possible for the parties affected by an externality to negotiate an efficient outcome on their own. For example, if people who use the river downstream can negotiate with the polluting firm, they may be willing to pay the firm to stop polluting. This idea is embodied in the *Coase Theorem*, which states that if those who are affected by an externality can negotiate, they may arrive at an efficient solution to the externality problem.

Two firms are involved in a dispute. Grunge, Inc., a manufacturing firm, pollutes a nearby river. The pollution travels downstream past White Water Expeditions, a company that provides river rafting trips. Dumping its waste into the river cuts Grunge's waste-disposal costs, while decreasing the number of people who want to raft on the river. The total profits of the two firms (both with and without waste dumping) are shown in Table 5-3.1.



Table 5-3.1

Total Profits per Month

	With dumping	Without dumping
Grunge, Inc.	\$2,300	\$2,000
White Water Expeditions	\$1,500	\$2,000

1. What are the total returns to both companies with and without dumping? Which situation (dumping or no dumping) is socially optimal—in other words, provides the highest combined returns?
2. If there is no government intervention in the market, and the two companies do not communicate, will Grunge dump waste into the river? Why or why not?

3. What is the cost to Grunge not to dump waste into the river?

4. What is the cost of the pollution to White Water each month? How much would White Water be willing to pay Grunge to stop dumping waste into the river?

5. If Grunge and White Water could negotiate, at no cost, could they come to an agreement that would eliminate the externality problem and result in the efficient outcome? If not, why not? If so, what would be the payment from White Water to Grunge?

6. Does it matter who has the property right: Grunge to dump or White Water to have clean water? Explain.

Economic Efficiency and the Optimum Amount of Pollution Cleanup

! Student Alert: Does it make sound economic sense to clean up all pollution?

The human and environmental damage caused by industrial pollution often arouses public attention. Although it might be nice to restore our environment to its pristine state, pollution cleanup is costly and dollars used for cleanup might be spent elsewhere. It seems, then, that some sort of balance must be struck between undesirable pollution and its costly cleanup. Let's apply marginal analysis to determine an optimal amount of pollution and environmental cleanup.

The marginal social benefit (MSB) of cleaning up pollution tends to decline as additional units of pollution are cleaned up. The marginal social cost (MSC) of cleaning up pollution tends to increase as additional units of pollution are cleaned up. If society has accurate information about the total social (public and private) benefits and costs of various amounts of cleanup, society should be able to get close to the most efficient, or optimum, level of cleanup (and/or pollution) where the marginal social benefits equal the marginal social costs ($MSB = MSC$).

Imagine a community in which two firms emit foul sludge into two local lakes (one for each firm). Natural processes gradually break down the sludge, rendering it harmless. But as long as emissions continue, a certain equilibrium level of harmful sludge remains in the lake. If emissions are lowered, this equilibrium level will be reduced. The opposite occurs if emissions are increased. Currently each firm emits five units of sludge each week.

Given the information in Tables 5-4.1 and 5-4.2, you should be able to determine the optimal level of emissions for this community. Fill in the blanks in the tables, and use this information to answer Questions 1 through 4. Assume that benefits obtained and costs incurred for cleanup at one lake have no impact on costs and benefits at the other lake.



Table 5-4.1

Firm 1

Reduction of foul sludge emissions	Total social benefit of cleanup	Marginal social benefit of cleanup	Total social cost of cleanup	Marginal social cost of cleanup
0	\$0	—	\$0	—
1	\$350	\$350	\$160	\$160
2	\$650		\$370	
3	\$900		\$630	
4	\$1,100		\$940	
5	\$1,250		\$1,300	

1. Using the data from Table 5-4.1, fill in the blanks or underline the correct words in parentheses.

(A) The marginal social benefit (MSB) of reducing emissions by the first unit of foul sludge is \$_____, and the marginal social cost (MSC) of reducing pollution emissions by the first unit is \$_____. The MSB is (*greater than / equal to / less than*) the MSC, so it (*would / would not*) be economically efficient from society's perspective to require Firm 1 to reduce pollution emission by the first unit.

(B) The MSB of eliminating the last (fifth) unit of foul sludge is \$_____, and the MSC of reducing pollution emissions by the last (fifth) unit is \$_____. The MSB is (*greater than / equal to / less than*) the MSC, so it (*would / would not*) be economically efficient from society's perspective to require Firm 1 to reduce pollution emission by the fifth unit.



Table 5-4.2

Firm 2

Reduction of foul sludge emissions	Total social benefit of cleanup	Marginal social benefit of cleanup	Total social cost of cleanup	Marginal social cost of cleanup
0	\$0	—	\$0	—
1	\$350	\$350	\$130	\$130
2	\$650		\$280	
3	\$900		\$450	
4	\$1,100		\$640	
5	\$1,250		\$850	

2. Using the data from Table 5-4.2, fill in the blanks or underline the correct words in parentheses.

(A) The MSB of eliminating the fourth unit of foul sludge is \$_____, and the MSC of reducing pollution emissions by this fourth unit is \$_____. The MSB is (*greater than / equal to / less than*) the MSC, so it (*would / would not*) be economically efficient from society's perspective to require Firm 2 to reduce pollution emissions by four units.

(B) The MSB of eliminating the fifth (last) unit of foul sludge is \$_____, and the MSC of reducing pollution emissions by this fifth (last) unit is \$_____. The MSB is (*greater than / equal to / less than*) the MSC, so it (*would / would not*) be economically efficient from society's perspective to require Firm 2 to reduce pollution emissions by five units.

3. If this community decides to adopt a pollution control ordinance aimed at maximizing economic efficiency, how should it evaluate each of the following three proposals, all of which are based on the data presented above? Write a brief economic evaluation in the space provided after each of the proposals. Be sure to use the concepts of marginal social benefit and marginal social cost in your analysis.

Proposal A. "Foul sludge emissions should be reduced (by five units) to zero for each firm because we should eliminate all pollution from our lakes regardless of the cost."

This proposal (*would / would not*) maximize economic efficiency.

Proposal B. "Firm 2 should be forced to reduce emissions from five units to zero because the total social benefit of cleanup (\$1,250) exceeds the total social cost of cleaning up (\$850). But Firm 1 should not be forced to clean up at all, because the total social benefit of cleanup (\$1,250) is less than the total social cost of reducing emissions to zero (\$1,300)."

This proposal (*would / would not*) maximize economic efficiency.

Proposal C. "In the interest of equal treatment for all, each firm should be forced to clean up (reduce emissions) by three units."

This proposal (*would / would not*) maximize economic efficiency.

4. Using the data presented above, what do you think is the socially optimal level of emissions reduction for each firm? Explain why you chose these numbers.

Firm 1: _____ units

Firm 2: _____ units

5. What would you say to someone who makes the following statement? "Society should do all it can to eliminate all pollution."

What Is a Fair Tax?

Almost everyone is concerned about how much we pay in taxes. The best way to determine how much tax you pay is to state your tax as an *effective tax rate*. An effective tax rate is the percentage of your income you pay in taxes. This differs from a *nominal tax rate* or *legal tax rate*. For example, a sales tax rate may be 5 percent (the nominal rate), but this does not mean that all people pay 5 percent of their income in sales taxes. Outlays for rent, insurance, and medical bills, among other things, may not be subject to sales taxes. Neither, of course, are savings.

Let's look at the effective tax rate of Joanne Walters. If she made \$30,000 a year and paid \$6,000 in taxes, her effective tax rate would be 20 percent. You can figure this by dividing \$6,000 by \$30,000:

$$\frac{\$ 6,000}{\$30,000} = 20\%.$$

There are three kinds of effective tax rates. If a tax is *progressive*, the effective tax rate increases as a person's income goes up. For example, a person who makes \$30,000 a year may have an effective tax rate of 10 percent, while a person who makes \$45,000 a year may have an effective rate of 18 percent.

If a tax is *proportional*, the effective tax rate stays the same regardless of income. In this case, a person making \$30,000 a year and a person making \$45,000 a year would both be taxed at an effective rate of, say, 10 percent. Of course, the person making \$45,000 a year would pay more total dollars in taxes. A proportional tax is sometimes called a *flat tax*.

If a tax is *regressive*, the effective tax rate decreases as income goes up. For example, a person making \$30,000 a year might pay an effective tax rate of 10 percent, while a person who makes \$45,000 a year might pay an effective tax rate of 8 percent.

Now answer these questions to see if you understand progressive, proportional, and regressive tax rates.

1. A tax that requires each person to pay 3 percent of income regardless of the level of income is a _____ tax.
2. A tax levied at 1 percent on the first \$1,000 of income, 2 percent on the next \$1,000, and so on is a _____ tax.
3. A tax levied at 15 percent on the first \$1,000 of income, 12 percent on the next \$1,000, and so on is a _____ tax.

4. If it is true that a person with an income of \$20,000 a year typically buys 10 gallons of gasoline per week and a person with an income of \$40,000 typically buys 15 gallons of gasoline per week, this suggests that an excise tax of 40 cents per gallon would be a _____ tax. Explain.
5. Rick Morales has an income of \$50,000 but spends only \$40,000 on taxable goods. Chet Burton has an income of \$25,000 and spends it all on taxable goods. Assuming an 8 percent sales tax, Mr. Morales will pay \$_____ in sales taxes, which is _____ percent of his total income. On the other hand, Mr. Burton will pay \$_____ in sales taxes, which is _____ percent of his total income. Therefore, we can conclude that the sales tax is (*progressive / proportional / regressive*).
6. Since the sales tax has the same nominal or legal rate based on sales, why is it regressive? What steps could be taken to make it less regressive?
7. Suppose that the government runs a pension fund to which all workers must contribute. The employee contribution rate is 6.2 percent on the first \$84,900 of income. All income in excess of \$84,900 is not taxed for pension purposes.
- (A) What is the effective pension tax rate for a person earning \$20,000 a year? _____
- (B) What is the effective pension tax rate for a person earning \$84,900? _____
- (C) What is the effective pension tax rate for a person earning \$169,800? _____
- (D) Therefore, the pension tax is a (*progressive / proportional / regressive*) tax up to \$84,900 of income. For incomes above \$_____, the tax is (*progressive / proportional / regressive*).
- (E) In addition to the pension tax, assume people must pay 1.45 percent of their income for medical benefits. There is no income limit on the medical care tax. Does this make the total tax for pension and medical care more or less regressive? Why?

Who Pays the Income Tax?

Who actually pays the income tax? Do “the rich” escape paying their “fair” share of taxes? Is most of the income tax paid by middle-income people? Who are the rich? These questions are important for several reasons:

- Taxes can redistribute income. Like Robin Hood, government can tax the rich and redistribute this money to the poor. Instead of money, most tax revenue is redistributed in the form of college scholarships, food stamps, medical care, housing assistance, and other services for lower-income families. While the merits of these programs can be debated, almost no one would agree that a “Robin Hood in reverse” policy would be beneficial: taxing the poor and redistributing tax revenue to the wealthy.
- Some people think taxes should have *vertical equity*, that is, the tax burden should be distributed fairly across people according to their ability to pay. This argument for progressive taxation maintains that the rich have more ability to pay taxes, and therefore should bear a larger tax burden than low-income families.
- Some people think that income should be distributed more equally than it is today.

Part A: Examining the Tax Data

Tables 5-6.1 and 5-6.2 contain information regarding shares of income, taxes, and tax rates for federal income tax returns for 1997 and 2009. Use the tables to answer the questions that follow.



Table 5-6.1

Federal Income Tax Return Data: 2009

Percent of all taxpayers	Income range	Group's share of total income (adjusted gross income)	Group's share of total income taxes	Group's average tax rate
Top 1%	Above \$343,927	16.9%	36.7%	24.0%
Top 5%	Above \$154,643	31.7%	58.7%	20.5%
Top 10%	Above \$112,124	43.2%	70.5%	18.1%
Top 25%	Above \$66,193	65.8%	87.3%	14.7%
Top 50%	Above \$32,396	86.5%	97.7%	12.5%
Bottom 50%	Below \$32,396	13.5%	2.3%	1.8%
All taxpayers		100.0%	100.0%	11.1%

Source: Tax Foundation



Table 5-6.2

Federal Income Tax Return Data: 1997

Percent of all taxpayers	Income range	Group's share of total income (adjusted gross income)	Group's share of total income taxes	Group's average tax rate
Top 1%	Above \$250,736	17.4%	33.2%	27.6%
Top 5%	Above \$108,048	31.8%	51.9%	23.6%
Top 10%	Above \$79,212	42.8%	63.2%	21.4%
Top 25%	Above \$48,173	65.0%	81.7%	18.2%
Top 50%	Above \$24,393	86.2%	95.7%	16.1%
Bottom 50%	Below \$24,393	13.8%	4.3%	4.5%
All taxpayers		100.0%	100.0%	14.5%

Source: Tax Foundation

1. Suppose you define "the rich" as the top 10 percent of all income earners. In 2009, what was the minimum income you had to earn to be "rich"?
2. What percentage of total income taxes did the top 1 percent of income earners pay in 2009?
3. In 2009, what percentage of total income taxes was paid by the bottom half of all income earners?
4. In 2009, the average U.S. taxpayer paid 11.1 percent of his/her income in taxes. Based on the information in the table, would you classify the U.S. income tax system as progressive, proportional, or regressive? Why?

5. Compare 1997 with 2009. What is the best description of what happened to the income tax burden in the United States over this 12-year period?

Part B: Equity Questions

Many people are concerned that “the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.” Using the income tax data from Tables 5-6.1 and 5-6.2, answer the following questions.

6. Is there evidence that the rich got richer and the poor got poorer between 1997 and 2009? Explain.
7. Some politicians argue that the wealthy are not paying their “fair” share of taxes. Based on the data in the two tables, do you agree or disagree? Explain.
8. Would you argue that the U.S. income tax system promotes or hinders greater income equality? Why?