What sorts of interest groups are involved in addressing the problem, or in causing it?

**Interest Groups Defined**
Groups that form to promote the interests of its members. Groups are not a “bad” thing. When people express worry about the “power” of “special interest groups” they are often expressing concerns about the size of a group, or its influence over policy that may run counter to someone’s desires. For example, members of unions might complain about the “power” of “corporate interests,” while members of groups that promote economic development will often bemoan the influence of environmental groups.

For now, you need not be concerned with this normative and political question. Instead, it is best to simply understand who is out there, and what they say and believe in. It is worthwhile to think about what groups support in the way of policy change, but it’s not yet important to list all the alternatives they support. But certainly put that in your notes and set it aside for now.

**Types of interest groups**
Institutional interest groups are groups you belong to because you are part of an institution of some sort, and therefore share a set of common interests. For example, if you are a graduate student at NC State University, you are a member of an institutional interest group we might call “NC State Grad Students,” a member of “People at NC State,” or a member of “grad students” regardless of where you are.

Membership groups, on the other hand, are groups that you choose to join for any number of reasons. Such groups include the Sierra Club, the National Rifle Association

Professional groups are membership groups that seek to promote the interests of members of a profession, such as doctors (and the various subspecialties), lawyers, engineers, accountants, nurses, political scientists, etc.

People join interest groups for many reasons, including wanting to identify with a particular cause, position or lifestyle, to gain information that helps them become more effective professionals, or to add their voice to a group of people that are advocating for a cause. It is this last reason that I emphasize here.

**How do you know what groups are out there?**

**Printed reference works like**

**Encyclopedia of Associations**
The Encyclopedia of Associations is available in many libraries. Some libraries may subscribe via DIALOG or Lexis-Nexis. This is a paper directory used like most other directories of its sort.
Web Directories and descriptions

The following sites contain links to interest groups, professional groups, advocacy groups, political action committees (PACs), and similar organizations. Use this list to check out groups that also think that your problem is something that government should think about. Even if a group doesn’t agree on the types of solutions that should be employed, the types of problems

http://usgovinfo.about.com/blorgs.htm


Yahoo Directory of Interest Groups: http://dir.yahoo.com/Government/U_S__Government/Politics/Interest_Groups/ This list is worth a look, but it seriously incomplete.

Political Lobbying Groups: An amazing list compiled by folks at the Vancouver campus of Washington State University: http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/fac/kfountain/ Read the “about this site” link too—it’s excellent.

The following are Google Directory items that link to many interest groups. These are valuable resources. Some screen shots are shown to suggest what you will find at these sites.
**Using congressional hearings to understand group activism**

Congressional hearings are an important aspect of the legislative branch’s activities, although Congress does not always hold hearings just to make laws. A growing trend in Congress is the *oversight hearing*, at which members of Congress and witnesses gather to discuss whether a public program is performing well or poorly, or whether government should be doing something about a problem. Hearings are an important venue for advocacy, and are worth study for this reason alone.

How then might you use congressional hearings? First, you need to find them, of course. One of the best ways is to use Lexis Nexis Congressional. If you select this service, you will see this screen:
In this search, I narrowed down to “student achievement” which may be too narrow because, as you can see on the next screen, there are only six hearings. Of course, this is a good number for an entire session of Congress and the first few months of the next (note how I restricted the date range for the search). Here’s what I found:
You see six hearings, and one committee print. A committee print is a report about an issue, and often contains useful issue. You should retain this for future use if it is relevant. In this case, it’s a fairly technical item involving the use of the Annual Yearly Progress standard in schools run by the bureau of Indian Affairs, so it’s not important to review now.

Many of these hearings are lengthy. They are full of useful information, and you should read it to gather more factual evidence for your project. For now, we just want to see who shows up at hearings. Let’s look first at a hearing that’s more narrowly focused: item 3, “examining local perspectives on the No Child Left Behind Act.” If you click on it, the first page looks like this:
And next, you see the actual witnesses
In this case, four of the five witnesses are educators: two principals, a superintendent, a department chair, and the head of some sort of organization that you might investigate further. In this case, there’s no interest group representation, but you can certainly discern what type of witness appears here: school leaders broadly, divided into superintendents, principals, and department chairs (who are senior teachers). And, if you click on the “retrieve the full text of testimony link” and then retrieve Theodore Hershberg’s statement, you learn he is a political scientist and historian at the University of Pennsylvania. So now you learn that an important type of witness is “educator” and “researcher.”
Item one on the results list—the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965—is very long. But you can use it in the same way. There are in this hearing six different groups of witnesses with over thirty witnesses in total, from all kinds of different groups with different interests. They for the most part agree that the ESEA and NCLB should be reauthorized (that is, continued, with funding to be determined later) but may well disagree on what the best and parts of the law are.

The goal of understanding what interest groups are active in your problem area is to understand who your supporters and opponents will be in advocating for policy change. Part of that understanding includes knowing what kinds of groups are most active, what they generally tend to believe, and what groups might not support your ideas for change. The latter set of groups might divide into two broad categories: groups that have some ideas that you could partially adopt in spirit of compromise, groups that simply will not support your ideas no matter what. And there may be a range of positions between the two.