

Soc 3: Social Problems Research Paper

Prof. Finnigan

A major portion of this course is the cumulative paper assignment. Ultimately, the paper will analyze a social problem of your choosing, and evaluate an organized response to that problem. The assignment represents one of the major goals of the course: critical evaluation of a social issue with an evidence-based approach. *This is also a skill employers value in all fields!*

Great papers clearly articulate their focus, thoroughly document relevant evidence, and address all points below. The paper should be eight to ten double-spaced pages. There should also be a comprehensive reference list, which does not count toward the page limit.

1. Topic and Reference List (due Thursday, January 26)

First, select the ‘problem’ you’d like to analyze, and an existing policy or organized response designed to resolve it. The response could be an existing law, a corporate/university policy, a media campaign or social movement. *You should not select a proposed policy/law that does not yet exist, or propose your own solution.*

To pick a topic that will work well for the paper’s requirements, it may be helpful to work backwards. For example, a very new social issue like “online bullying” may be very interesting and important. It may be so new, however, that there is little research-based evidence on a relevant policy or organized response to stop it. Meanwhile, media campaigns may help increase public awareness of an issue, but can be difficult to evaluate with research. This exercise is designed to help you figure that out early.

Next, compile a list of at least 12 potentially useful references. *Please use the ASA citation format, described at the end of the document.* Also, briefly describe each with three or four sentences about how it’s relevant to your topic. The references should contain at least three references from each of three categories: news articles, research reports, and academic studies. *Proper categorization of the references is an important part of the grade for this assignment.* **Please see the example reference list on Canvas, and suggested sources at the end of this document.**

Do not feel committed to using these references later on! As you write the paper, you may find some of them are no longer relevant. You will also very likely need additional references. This exercise is just a starting point.

2. Research Paper, Part 1 (due Thursday, February 18)

Building on the previous part of the assignment, write a **four to five page research paper** (not including the reference list) analyzing the social problem you chose. The paper should address these central questions:

- What is the social problem? Who claims it is a problem, and why?
- How well does existing empirical evidence support these claims?
- What does the evidence tell us about who is affected by the issue? What are the issue's causes and/or consequences?

If these questions seem to line up with the general structure of course lectures, you're on the right track. *Remember, the goal is not to make your own argument that the issue you selected is a social problem.* The paper should identify and evaluate prominent claims about the issue being a problem.

In general, the clearest papers focus on a narrow set of points with strong evidence. Papers that try to include as much information as possible can easily seem disorganized. Begin with an introductory paragraph, and include a thesis statement. The [Student Academic Success Center](#) and [Online Writing Lab](#) (through Purdue University) are great resources for help organizing your papers.

3. Research Paper, Part 2 (due Tuesday, March 14)

The second paper adds directly to the first, which *you should revise and improve based on your grader's comments.* The two combined parts should read like a single, uninterrupted paper. The total paper (part one + part two) should be **eight to ten double-spaced pages long**, not including the reference list. The second part of your paper should address the following questions:

What is the response to this problem?

What changes does the response require? Who is enacting this response, and what is their reasoning behind it? What is its goal? You may discuss multiple responses that are significantly related in some way, but your paper will likely be stronger if it focuses on only one.

What are the effects of this response?

Most of the second paper should describe the impact of the response, and evaluate how well it does or does not work. Does the response improve the negative consequences of the social

problem? What limitations are there? Does it make other social problems worse? This evaluation should be based on strong and clear evidence.

Submission

All portions of the assignment should be double spaced in 12-point Times New Roman font, and with one-inch margins on all sides. Please submit a paper copy at the beginning of class on the due date, and a pdf copy to Canvas. Word documents can easily be saved/exported as pdf files. Free software online, like Google Docs, is also able to convert documents to pdf easily. *Requests for extensions must be made at least 48 hours in advance. Late assignments will be penalized 10% each day late.*

Before submitting your paper, please check the following:

- All of the main questions above are answered in your paper.
- The main parts of your paper are all supported with references.
- You have a clear and complete reference list.
- Your paper has used spell/grammar check.
- The digital copy is in pdf format.
- Your name and the name of your discussion instructor are at the top of the paper.

Guidelines for Evaluation.

A	An “A” is reserved for truly excellent papers. The paper addresses all key questions in the prompt in an original and insightful way. The paper’s claims are well supported with appropriate, varied, and properly cited evidence. The paper is also well written, and the proper length.
B	Relative to an “A” paper, any of the following apply: The paper’s argument is either somewhat unclear, or is less original (but still addresses all of the key questions in the prompt). The paper’s claims are not completely supported with appropriate evidence, the range of evidence is somewhat limited, or the evidence is not properly cited. The overall clarity or grammar/spelling needs some improvement.
C	Relative to an “A” paper, some combination of the above, or any of the following apply: The paper’s argument is unclear and/or very unoriginal. The argument does not address all the key questions in the prompt. The paper’s

	evidence is limited or inappropriate. The overall writing quality needs significant improvement.
D	The paper needs significant improvement in multiple/most dimensions.
F	The paper fails to meet almost all criteria.

I strongly advise you to begin with detailed outline of your argument based on the main questions above. You should also plan to revise the first draft of your paper before submission, perhaps multiple times. For more help with paper writing, I encourage you to make an appointment with the [Student Academic Success Center](#). I also recommend consulting the [Online Writing Lab](#) (through Purdue University).

All parts of the paper should include references, cited clearly in the text. Be sure that your sources are relevant to the point at hand, and make this connection clear. For many arguments, most of your potential reference material will not contain the exact points you might wish to make. The use of these sources will require an extra logical step to be relevant to the paper topics. You should clearly explain these logical steps in your paper. *No Wikipedia, please.*

Your essay should use the citation format of the American Sociological Association (consult handouts [here](#) and [here](#)). This includes both in-text citations, and a reference list for all cited works at the end of the essay. For example, an in-text citation should look like, “Restrictive covenants institutionalized segregation by preventing many Black families from buying or renting homes in predominantly White neighborhoods (Pattillo 2007).” If you are quoting from the source, insert a colon behind the year and include the page number after it (Pattillo 2007:34). The reference list would then contain:

Pattillo, Mary. 2007. *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

In-text references to lecture material should contain the date of the lecture (Finnigan, Lecture 10/10/2015). The lecture material does not need to be included in the reference list.

Potentially Useful Sources

The following list of links includes sources I frequently use, or that past students have found useful. They are certainly not the only sources you can or should use. You should have access to most or all of these on the campus network, through [VPN](#), or the [main library](#). Most of these sources have fairly useful search functions, and the sources for research reports often have “themes” tabs. I also recommend the library, which has many *books* (the kind made with paper).

News Sources:

[National Public Radio \(NPR\)](#)

[The New York Times](#)

[The Washington Post](#)

[The LA Times](#)

[The Sacramento Bee](#)

[The Atlantic](#)

[Reuters](#) (good for international news)

Research Reports:

[Census Bureau](#)

[Pew Research](#)

[Urban Institute](#)

[Brookings](#)

[Economic Policy Institute](#)

[Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)

[UC Davis Center for Poverty Research](#)

[Council on American-Islamic Relations \(CAIR\)](#)

Academic Studies:

[Sociology Compass*](#)

[Contexts*](#)

[Annual Review of Sociology](#)

[American Sociological Review](#)

[Social Forces](#)

[Social Problems](#)

[Sociological Perspectives](#)

[Ethnic and Racial Studies](#)

[The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science](#)

* These sources provide mostly non-technical descriptions of sociological research. Contexts also publishes interviews and other non-research-based articles; be careful not to cite articles that do not describe empirical research as academic studies..