

**Hostos Community College**  
**Behavioral and Social Sciences Department**  
**Sociology of Social Problems—Writing Intensive**  
**SOC 1234, 3 credits**

Professor: Marta Rivera

Office Hours: Tuesday 12:30-2:00  
Thursday 12:30-2:00

Spring 2008  
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**Description**

The student will analyze American society and the dynamics of its major social problems, including the functional and dysfunctional effects of these problems upon society. The student will show understanding of the major social problems affecting large cities and metropolitan areas.

At the end of this course, students should be able to answer the following questions:

- What is a social problem?
- What role do social movements play in the creation of new social problems?
- What are the sociological perspectives used to analyze social problems?
- What techniques do sociologists use to study social problems?
- How can citizens evaluate the claims made about social problems?

**Required Readings:**

Lauer, R.H. & Lauer, J.C. (2008). *Social Problems and the quality of life* (11<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.

Finsterbusch, K. (2008). *Taking sides: Clashing views on social issues* (14<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.

**Writing Intensive**

This course has been designated as a “Writing Intensive” (WI) course by Hostos Community College. The requirements include both formal (graded) and informal (non-graded) writing assignments. Both kinds of writing assignments must be completed. The majority of your grade in this course will be based on the completion and quality of these assignments, so please take them seriously and talk to me about anything you find confusing. These assignments are not intended to make your life as a student difficult. Instead, they should help you to better understand the course material, evaluate it in light of your own lived experiences, and help you to think more closely and deeply about social problems.

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**Informal Writing**

Informal writing assignments are open-ended questions intended to allow you to “think on paper” about various ideas that we will discuss in class and contend with in the readings. Each should be approximately one page in length and must be submitted on the due date. For these assignments, you do not need to worry about perfect grammar and/or spelling. I read them with the intention of understanding your thoughts on the course material and to guide our class discussions. They will not be graded, but their completion is worth 10% of your final grade.

**Formal Writing**

There are two formal writing assignments in this course. In the first, you will prepare an “executive report” for a commission created by the government to determine whether or not a social problem (of your choice) is significant and efforts to research and combat the social problem should continue to receive funding. You will imagine that you are an activist-expert about this social problem and are making a plea for support to the commission. This assignment, which will be completed in two stages (due at different points in the semester) will address (1) What the problem is; (2) the history of the movement; (3) current controversies and persons involved therein; (4) your argument for why the government should continue investigating and supporting this social problem. A model of this type of report will be provided early on in the semester.

In the second assignment, you will be provided two essays that provide contradictory positions on one of three controversial issues: Same sex marriage, affirmative action, and whether mothers should work or stay home with their children. You will be asked to summarize and evaluate both positions on the issue as they are discussed in Finsterbusch’s *Taking Sides*, as well as within a reference of your choice.

**Revision of Formal Writing**

Revision is an important part of the writing process and must be more than correcting writing errors. When you revise, you will deepen the connections you make between the course material, personal experiences, research materials, and the task at hand. Revision is required of both parts one and two of the first formal assignment (“Executive Report to the commission”) and an option for the second formal assignment (“Controversy paper”).

**Oral Presentations**

At the end of the semester, you will deliver a brief, ten-minute speech to the class, based on the formal “Executive Reports to the commission” that you have drafted. The class will play members of this commission and ultimately vote on whether your speech has convinced them to recommend continued support and recognition of your social

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problem. Do not attempt to simply read the entire report to the class. Instead, condense your report into their most important points, and be prepared to deliver them to the class. I recommend that you write a draft of this speech (although you do not need to submit it) while you are in the process of revising your report. Make sure that this speech includes a brief explication of the following:

- What is the social problem (define for the class)
- Brief discussion of its history (make sure to mention at least one of the four stages)
- Brief discussion of the debates around this social problem today.
- Explanation of what is at stake: Why is the recognition of this social problem vital both for the victims and larger society?

**Grades**

Your grade will be constituted in the following manner:

Executive Report (parts 1 and 2 combined): 40%

Controversy paper: 20%

Completion of informal writings: 10%

Oral presentation of “Executive Reports” to the commission: 10%

Midterm Exam: 20%

A= 93-100%; A- = 90-92%; B+ = 87-89%; B = 83-86%; B- = 80-82%; C+ = 77-79%; C= 70-76%; D = 60-69%; F= 59% or below.

**Required Library Workshops**

There are two required library workshops that you must attend early on during the semester. The first will be about finding sources and doing research. The second will be about plagiarism. One will be during class time and the other must be attended at your convenience. Please bring proof of your attendance.

**Plagiarism**

Cheating is defined as the purposeful misrepresentation of another’s work as one’s own. Faculty and students are responsible for upholding the integrity of this institution by not participating either directly or indirectly in acts of cheating and by discouraging others from doing so. Plagiarism is a form of cheating which occurs when persons, even if unintentionally, fail to acknowledge appropriately the sources for the ideas, language, concepts, and inventions referred to in their own work. See pages 158-162 of the 2006/2007 course catalog. If you have any questions about whether something you write constitutes plagiarism, check with me.

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**Class Schedule**

<b>DATE</b>	<b>TOPIC</b>	<b>READING ASSIGNMENTS DUE</b>	<b>WRITING ASSIGNMENTS DUE</b>
1/29 & 1/31	Introduction to course & Social Problems	Stark (1975) Social Problems & Social Movements, Chapt. 1 (Distributed in class).	
2/5 & 2/7	Sexual Problems & Addictions	Lauer & Lauer, Pp. 34-56 (due 2/5)	Informal Writing Assignment #1 due 2/5  Informal Writing Assignment #2 due 2/7
2/12	NO CLASS—CUNY IS CLOSED		
2/14 & 2/19	Alcohol & Other drugs	Lauer & Lauer, Pp. 56-90 (due 2/14)  Finsterbusch, <i>Should drug use be decriminalized?</i> Pp. 304-320. (due 2/19)	Informal Writing Assignment #3 due 2/14  Informal Writing Assignment #4 due 2/19
2/21 & 2/26	Crime & Delinquency	Lauer & Lauer, Pp. 92-124 (due 2/21)  Finsterbusch, <i>Is street crime more harmful than White-Collar crime?</i> Pp. 281-303. (due 2/26)	Informal Writing Assignment #5 due 2/21  First draft of “executive report to the commission” (Part I) due on 2/26
2/28 & 3/4	Violence	Lauer & Lauer, Pp. 124-155 (due 2/28)	Informal Writing Assignment #6 due 3/4
3/6 & 3/11	Social Inequality I: Poverty	Lauer & Lauer, Pp. 156-185 (due 3/6)  Finsterbusch, <i>Has welfare reform benefitted the poor?</i> Pp. 226-241. (due 3/11)	Informal Writing Assignment #7 due 3/6  Informal Writing Assignment #8 due 3/11

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3/13 & 3/18	Social Inequality II: Gender & Sexual Orientation	Lauer & Lauer, Pp. 186-219. (due 3/13)  Finsterbusch, <i>Should same-sex marriages be legally recognized?</i> Pp. 98-116. (due 3/18)	Informal Assignment #9 due 3/18
3/20 & 3/25	Social Inequality III: Race & Ethnicity	Lauer & Lauer, Pp. 220-251. (due 3/25)  Finsterbusch, <i>Has Affirmative Action outlived its usefulness?</i> Pp. 156-173. (due 3/25)	First draft of “Executive Report to the commission” (Part II) due 3/25
3/27 & 4/1	Family Problems	Lauer & Lauer, Pp. 342-373 (due 3/27)  Finsterbusch, <i>Is the decline of the traditional family a national crisis?</i> Pp. 61-79 (due 4/1)  Finsterbusch, <i>Should mothers stay home with their children?</i> Pp. 80-99. (due 4/1)	Informal Assignment #10 due 4/1
4/3 & 4/8	In-class Midterm Exam: Review (4/3) & Exam (4/8)	Study, study, study!	
4/10, 4/15	Abortion	Bishop, N. (1989). “Abortion: The controversial choice.” (To be distributed; due 4/10)	Informal Assignment #11 due 4/10  Informal Assignment #12 due 4/15
4/17	Return of first drafts of statements to the commission	In groups, we will read through the professor’s comments and begin the revision process.	Controversy Paper due today

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4/22 & 4/24	NO CLASS--- SPRING BREAK		
4/29 & 5/1	Rape & Sexual Harassment	Herman, D.F. (1989). "Rape Culture" (To be distributed; due 4/29)  Sheffield, C.J. (1984). "Sexual Terrorism" (To be distributed; due 5/1)	Informal Assignment #13 due 4/29  Informal Assignment # 14 due 5/1
5/6 & 5/8	War & Terrorism	Lauer & Lauer, Pp. 408-439 (due 5/6)  <i>Finsterbusch, Does the threat of terrorism warrant curtailment of civil liberties? Pp. 320-336.</i> (due 5/8)	Optional revision of controversy paper due on 5/8
5/13 & 5/15	Oral Presentations: Speeches to the commission		Mandatory revision of Executive Reports to the Commission due on 5/15

**Major dates to keep in mind:**

February 26: First draft of "Executive Reports to the Commission" (Part I) due.

March 25: First draft of "Executive Reports to the Commission" (Part II) due.

April 8: In-class midterm exam.

April 17: Controversy Paper due.

May 8: Optional revision of controversy paper due.

May 13 & 15: Oral presentations

May 15: Mandatory revision of Executive Reports to the Commission due

**Formal Writing Assignments**

- 1) Executive Report to the commission (Approximately ten pages total)

In this assignment, you will play the role of a social movement leader representing a social problem of your choice. You may choose any social problem that is of interest to you. Some possibilities include: AIDS, homelessness, immigration, crime, racism, sexism, homophobia. Your job is to convince a government-created commission that your social problem is a serious

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one. This commission is powerful and ultimately, will decide whether your group continues to receive appropriate recognition and government-based funding. As a leader, you have strong ideas about what will help victims of this social problem, but must use this report to convince the commission that your social problem is a valid and important one.

The commission wants to hear from you on the following: What are the main issues of the problem; how did it move through the “stages” from a condition to problem (i.e., historical roots); does the social problem really affect a significant number of persons? In the form of an “Executive Report” to the commission, you are attempting to increase legitimate recognition of your social condition and garner funding. Based on this report, the commission will decide whether or not to grant funding for the solution that you are suggesting. Models of this type of report will be provided in class. Keep in mind that members of competing groups will be giving testimony and arguing against the validity of your claims. Therefore, your claims must be clear and supported by data. Avoid emotional exaggerations and assumptions.

The goal of this assignment is to demonstrate that you know the stages of the social career of a social problem (e.g., agitation, legitimation, bureaucratization, and reemergence) and apply them to a real social problem. I hope that by the time you complete this paper, you will consider yourself an “expert” about a social problem that is important to you.

This executive report will be written in two stages (or sections), due at different points in the semester. In the first section, you will establish yourself as the “expert” by illustrating your knowledge of the social problem and its historical roots. In the second section, you will discuss the state of the problem currently and what you hope for its future. You will receive written feedback on both sections submissions, which must be revised by the final due-date (see schedule below).

Section 1: First draft due Feb. 26; revised paper due May 15 (Approximately five pages)

The goal of this section of your report is to describe your social problem and discuss its historical development through the four stages we discussed in class. As you trace the history of the social problem, please emphasize the high and low points, successes and set-backs in the movement. The following steps are a general guide for completing this section. Please submit these earlier, informal exercises as well as the formal writing assignment.

- 1) The first step is to find professional journal articles, books, and the newspaper archives (e.g., [newyorktimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)) that discuss your social problem. We will

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dedicate one class session to going to the library together and learning how to find good sources that discuss (1) the main issues surrounding your social problem; (2) an overall history of social problems; (3) writings about your social problem from specific times in history.

- 2) Using the strategies we practiced in the library, work with other students who are investigating the same social problem to find a number of books, journal articles, and newspaper articles that provide information on the history of your social problem. Feel free to read memoirs, social, and personal writings of activists living within different time periods.
- 3) Meet with other students who are researching the same social problem and share the different materials that you found. Each student should leave this meeting with **at least five sources** that will help you to define and trace the history of your social problem.
- 4) How does each of your sources help you to understand the development of your social problem through the four stages that we discussed? Not all of your references will refer directly to each stage. That is okay. Talk about how each source refers to whatever stages you can identify. Feel free to use direct quotes from your sources, but remember to put quotation marks around them and give the page number. Fill in the table below:

References Please write out the full reference using the APA style we discussed in class.	Stage 1: Agitation	Stage 2: Legitimation and Co-optation	Stage 3: Bureaucratization and Reaction	Stage 4: Reemergence of movement
Source 1:				

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Source 2:				
Source 3:				

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Source 4:				
Source 5:				

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- 5) Summarize some of the main points in your table. Can you identify particular high points (i.e., when a strategy worked) and low points (when a strategy failed or back-fired) in the movement of your social problem? Be clear about when these high and low points were and any historical circumstances that prompted them.
  
- 6) In the form of a report to the commission, write approximately five formal pages that provide a comprehensive definition of the social problem and its main issues and traces the historical development of your social problem. In your historical search, be very clear about how the social movement began, what persons prompted it, how it moved through the four stages, and the high and low points of the movement. Make sure to cite the sources of your information using the MLA style that we discussed in class. Even when you paraphrase, let us know the source of this information with the author's last name and the year of publication in parenthesis (e.g, Rivera, 2007). You may quote other persons' words directly, but make sure that you put quotes around them and give the author, year, and page number of that statement. At the end of this writing, make sure that you have an APA –style reference page for your sources. Remember that you already wrote these references out in your table and now need to simply alphabetize and move them to your reference page.

Section two: First draft due March 25; revised paper due May 15(Approximately five pages)

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The goal of this section is to look at the solutions, successes, and setbacks of your social problem in its current state. How is the problem being addressed now versus in the past? How are the advocates working with and/or against the competition and governmental agencies? Think about why strategies have changed. In addition, write about what the next steps should be in addressing this problem. What funding should the government be providing and why? Make sure to return to your original intention: Arguing to the commission that this problem is a serious one that needs further recognition and funding. The following steps are a general guide for completing this section. Please submit these earlier, informal exercises as well as the formal writing assignment.

- 1) You've done your historical look at this social problem. Now talk about it today. Begin by looking at current newspapers (e.g., NY Times, Wall Street Journal), magazines, and news programs to see what people are saying about this social problem. Make sure that you are citing at least three sources in this section.
- 2) Choose one article from your historical search (from section 2) and one article from your look at current writings on the issue (this section) and write about how people responded to the problem in both the historical and contemporary articles. Next, try to outline three similarities and three differences in the ways the people are responding to the problem.
- 3) What are the divergent perspectives of the advocates versus the competition? What are the advocates' central concerns? What about the competition? What motivates them to work against your cause? For example:
  - a. Are they concerned with a different (e.g., their own) social problem?
  - b. Do they have a moral issue with the cause?
  - c. Is the larger power base threatened by ameliorating this social problem?
- 4) Next, write about what is at stake and why it is so important for the government to recognize and provide funding for this social problem. What will the consequences be if we fail to address this problem in the future? Think about consequences not only for the victims, but also for society in general. What do you imagine as the positive social implications of remedying this social problem?
- 5) Continuing your formal report to the commission, write approximately five pages outlining the current state of your social problem, recent changes, and the different perspectives of the advocates versus the competition. Make a solid argument for why this social problem is a serious one and the sort of funding and

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recognition that your group needs. Discuss the potential benefits of making positive social change with regards to this problem, as well as the dangers of ignoring it. Make sure to conclude your report with at least a few take-home points for the commission to think about.

Controversy paper (Approximately seven pages)

Throughout the semester, we have been reading Finsterbusch's "Taking Sides," which has provided different positions on a variety of controversial issues. For this assignment, you will summarize and evaluate both positions on one of the following three issues:

- Same-sex marriage
- Affirmative action
- Whether mothers should work or stay home with their children

The goals of this assignment are the following: First, you will demonstrate an understanding of these controversies, as you have come to understand them through "Taking Sides," our class discussions, and one other source that you will draw on. In addition, you will analyze the strengths and drawbacks of both positions on the issue that you choose and make an argument about which position is more convincing.

The steps to completing this assignment are the following:

- 1) Using "Taking Sides," as well as our class discussion, provide a summary that explains both positions on the controversy you have chosen. What are the main points of each position? (Approximately two pages)
- 2) Find one other source that discusses this controversy. This other source could be a newspaper article, video, book, or journal article. Write a one page summary about what you have learned about this controversy from this source and what "data" or "evidence" have been provided. Be clear in your writing about whether this source promotes a particular perspective, or seems more neutral. In addition, write about what you have learned, beyond what was discussed in class and/or "Taking Sides." (Approximately one page)
- 3) Begin to evaluate the validity of these multiple positions along the following dimensions. Use the following prompts as a guideline for writing this section. (Approximately two pages)
  - What are the main differences across positions?
  - How does each side respond to the critiques/alternative positions of the other side?

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- Does one side pose an argument that the others have been unable to refute?
  - Are there any contradictions within a particular side's argument (i.e., they say one thing but then go ahead and contradict their own statement)? Or, do the data provided by one side contradict the data provided by another side?
- 4) Reflect on the evidence across positions and take a side yourself. Tell me what position you take on the issue and why. As evidence for your own position, think about which arguments (across your three sources) have been most persuasive to you and why. In addition, think about what ways your original position has changed since reading these pieces and completing this assignment. Finally, add at least one more piece of evidence in favor of your position that *has not been discussed* within your three sources (Approximately two pages).

Informal Writing Assignments

Assignment #1, due 1/31: What do you see as the main difference between a “social condition” and “social problem?” Can you give an example of each today? How did the social problem you mention gain the funding and attention that it has today?

Assignment #2, due 2/7: Write a few sentences thinking about the difference between a sexual-addiction and simply having a healthy, sexual appetite. Think about the woman who is concerned about her husband being a “porn addict.” What factors does she use to establish that his use of pornography is a true addiction?

Assignment #3, due 2/14: Write a brief statement explaining what social problem you will be writing your report to the commission about and why. What is your initial understanding of this problem and what do you hope to learn about it?

Assignment #4, due 2/19: After reading both positions on whether or not drug use should be legalized (Finsterbusch, Pp. 304-319), summarize three central arguments in favor of legalization and three central arguments against legalization. Which are most convincing to you and why?

Assignment #5, due 2/21: After reading about the distinction between “street-crime” and “white-collar crime,” scan the NY Times, NY Post, and Daily News. Which papers focus on “street crime” and which on “white-collar”? Any ideas on why there might be a difference between newspapers?

Assignment #6, due 3/4: What if a man argued that he should not be punished for abusing his wife because he learned it from television programs? The television producers, he argues, are at least as responsible as he is. Would you agree with him?

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Pretend you are either a defense or prosecuting lawyer. Then, give at least three arguments either in favor or opposing this man's argument.

Assignment #7, due 3/6: Imagine that you were hired to begin a new social movement that raises a new awareness about the problem of poverty in NYC. What resources would you need to succeed? How would you reach the public, corporations, and governmental organizations for support? What bureaucratic challenges do you envision? How would you attempt to overcome these challenges?

Assignment #8, due 3/11: By now, you should be in the thick of developing your second half of your report to the commission about the social problem of your choice. Reflect briefly on the NY Times articles that you have found thus far. What are you learning? What challenges have arisen? What suggestions would you make for improving this assignment in future semesters?

Assignment #9, due 3/18: What are the pros and cons of having outsiders help with a social problem related to gay and/or women's rights? For example, what are the benefits and drawbacks of men working for women's rights? What role do you imagine outsiders playing in a cause that is important to you?

Assignment #10, due 4/1: After reading both positions on whether mothers should stay home to raise their children, create a "triple entry journal." First, divide a sheet of paper into three columns. In the first column, copy verbatim one argument in favor of women staying home to raise their children (from "The case for staying home") and one argument against (from "The mommy myth"). In the second column, briefly paraphrase what each of these opposing arguments means. Finally, in the third column, write about what struck you about each of these arguments and whether you find each persuasive.

Assignment #11, due 4/10: How is the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment used to argue in favor of a woman's right to have an abortion, despite the fact that the word abortion is never mentioned? Which words and phrases within this Amendment have been most helpful to pro-choice advocates?

Assignment #12, due 4/15: Define abortion in terms of a public matter and discuss why it is not a "private issue" anymore. To what degree is abortion considered public and/or private in your own country of origin?

Assignment #13, due 4/29: In the article "Rape Culture" Herman critiques the legal definition of rape. What is her critique? What kinds of changes does Herman advocate? Taking Herman's concerns into account, how would you redefine rape?

Assignment #14, due 5/1: In "Sexual Terrorism" Sheffield argues that common views of manhood (via movies, news, and film) are linked with portrayals of violence and

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abuse. Further, Sheffield believes that these portrayals encourage men to behave violently in order to “prove” their manhood. Do you agree that perceptions of “manhood” are linked with (and often encourage) physical violence? If so, how might we begin to change these perceptions?