

Social Issue 1: Educational Underachievement



Research focus:

Why do some working-class students achieve lower grades than middle-class students?

Sociologists have long studied patterns in educational achievement and have found that social class is linked to differences in attainment. National data often shows that students from more disadvantaged backgrounds are, on average, less likely to gain top grades than students from wealthier families. Some sociologists explain this by focusing on material factors, such as income, housing, access to resources, private tutoring, and technology. Others focus on cultural factors, such as language use, parental support, attitudes to school, and whether schools reward middle-class ways of speaking and behaving. Interactionist sociologists may also look at processes inside school, such as labelling, streaming, and teacher expectations.

Your task is to debate what kind of empirical evidence would best investigate this issue. Would it be more useful to collect quantitative data (for example, exam results, attendance records, national statistics, or survey responses from large numbers of students)? Or would qualitative data be better (for example, interviews with students and teachers, classroom observations, or detailed case studies of school experience)? Think carefully about whether this topic requires evidence about patterns or meanings – or both.



Social Issue 2: Youth Crime and Deviance



Research focus:

Why do some young people become involved in criminal or deviant behaviour?

Youth crime is a major topic in sociology, but sociologists disagree about how best to explain it. Some focus on wider social structures, such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, exclusion from school, and lack of opportunities. Others focus on peer groups, identity, status, masculinity, and the search for belonging. Some sociologists also examine labelling and how being treated as “troublemakers” can affect young people’s self-image and future behaviour. Media representations may also shape public ideas about youth crime, sometimes making certain groups seem more dangerous than they really are.

This issue can be investigated in very different ways. A sociologist might use quantitative evidence, such as police statistics, victim surveys, school exclusion data, or questionnaires about attitudes to crime and risk-taking. This could help identify large-scale trends and patterns. Alternatively, a sociologist might use qualitative evidence, such as life-history interviews, observation of peer groups, or in-depth case studies, to understand motives, meanings, and lived experiences. Your role is to argue which type of evidence gives stronger support for sociological explanations of youth crime. Be ready to discuss ideas such as validity, reliability, objectivity, and whether official data tells the full story.



Social Issue 3: Social Media and Identity



Research focus:

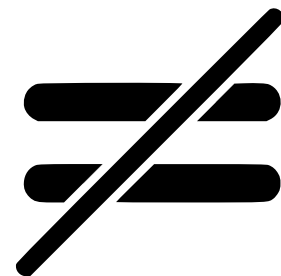
How does social media affect young people's identities?

Social media plays a major role in many young people's daily lives. Platforms allow people to present themselves, communicate with friends, follow trends, and join online communities. Sociologists are interested in how this shapes identity: does social media allow more freedom to experiment with identity, or does it create pressure to conform? Some may argue that social media increases self-expression and belonging, while others suggest it encourages comparison, performance, anxiety, and pressure to manage a "perfect" image. Identity may also differ by gender, class, ethnicity, and peer group.

This topic can be researched using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative evidence might include surveys on time spent online, platform use, self-esteem scales, or patterns in posting behaviour across large groups. This can help identify trends and correlations. Qualitative evidence might include interviews, online diaries, focus groups, or digital ethnography to explore how young people interpret their experiences and how they feel about self-presentation, likes, followers, and online judgement. In your debate, argue which type of evidence is better suited to this issue. Does this topic require measurable data about behaviour, or deeper insight into meanings and emotions? Can one type of evidence support sociological theories of identity more effectively than the other?



Social Issue 4: School Exclusions and Inequality



Research focus:

Why are some groups of students excluded from school more than others?

School exclusions are an important sociological issue because they raise questions about inequality, discipline, and power in education. In many societies, exclusion rates are not evenly distributed. Some groups of students may be excluded at much higher rates than others, which leads sociologists to ask why this pattern exists. Explanations may include school policies, behaviour systems, teacher expectations, institutional practices, labelling, social class inequalities, racialised assumptions, special educational needs, and wider pressures outside school such as family stress or poverty. Some sociologists may focus on structural inequality, while others focus on everyday interactions between staff and students.

A sociologist could investigate this issue using quantitative data, such as exclusion rates by gender, ethnicity, class background, school type, or region. This would show patterns and allow comparisons. However, others may argue that qualitative data is needed to understand what happens before exclusions occur: teacher decision-making, student experiences of discipline, feelings of unfairness, and how school rules are interpreted in practice. Interviews, observations, and case studies may reveal meanings hidden behind statistics. Your task is to debate which type of empirical evidence is better for supporting sociological explanations. Consider whether numbers alone can explain exclusion – or whether in-depth accounts are essential.



Social Issue 5: Mental Health and Exam Pressure



Research focus:

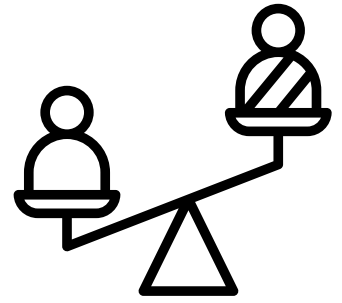
How does exam pressure affect sixth-form students?

Many students report stress during exam periods, but sociologists are interested in how exam pressure is experienced differently by different groups and in different contexts. Pressure may come from school expectations, family hopes, competition for university places, social media comparisons, or fear of failure. Some students may respond by working harder, while others may experience anxiety, sleep problems, burnout, or disengagement. Sociologists may also ask whether exam pressure reflects wider social values, such as achievement, individual competition, and meritocracy. Experiences may vary by class, gender, ethnicity, support networks, and school culture.

This issue can be researched in multiple ways. Quantitative evidence could include stress questionnaires, wellbeing scales, attendance data, sleep surveys, or large-sample comparisons during exam periods. This could show patterns and identify which groups report the highest levels of pressure. Qualitative evidence could include interviews, focus groups, or diary methods that explore how students describe pressure, coping strategies, and emotional experiences in their own words. In the silent debate, argue which type of evidence is better for investigating this topic. Is it more important to measure the scale of the issue, or to understand how students experience and interpret pressure? Think about validity, reliability, and sensitivity when researching this issue.



Social Issue 6: Racism and Student Experience in Education



Research focus:

How do experiences of racism affect students in school and college?

Sociologists study racism in education not only as individual prejudice, but also as a social issue linked to power, inequality, and institutional practices. Students may experience racism in different forms, including verbal abuse, stereotyping, lower teacher expectations, curriculum bias, peer exclusion, or discrimination in discipline. Some sociologists examine structural and institutional racism, while others focus on identity, resistance, and how students interpret and respond to their experiences. This is a complex issue because experiences may differ between schools, local areas, and social groups, and some forms of racism may be subtle or difficult to measure.

A sociologist could use quantitative evidence such as surveys, exclusion and attainment statistics by ethnicity, reports of racist incidents, or national datasets to identify patterns and inequalities. This may help show that experiences are not just isolated cases. However, qualitative evidence such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, classroom observation, or student narratives may be essential for understanding how racism is experienced, how it affects identity and belonging, and why some incidents go unreported. Your task is to debate which type of empirical evidence is more useful for supporting sociological explanations of racism in education. Consider the strengths and limitations of each approach, especially around validity, representation, and ethical sensitivity.

