

# Contemporary Social Problems Midterm Project

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## *Initial Steps*

Step 1: Students will choose either an established social problem or an issue which they believe should be considered a social problem and examine the claims making process behind these issues. Students will exam why this issue is being presented as a social problem? Is it a matter of social harm? Is it a matter of morality? Is it a matter of fairness? Etc.

Students may also want to make a claim that an issue that is considered a social problem is not, in fact, problematic. In other words, they may choose to make a counter claim as to the validity of the social problem. Regardless, the process is very much the same.

Step 2: Students will collect examples from the mainstream media that addresses their selected issue. They will look for the following

- Which venues are presenting this issue as a problem?
- What claims are being made about this issue? How does the media portray the nature of the problem?
- Might there be other ways to think about this particular issue? *Hint: There are always other ways to think about issues.* What might be some alternative claims made about this social problem?
- There should be more than five distinct media examples from multiple media sources. Media sources can include video, audio and web-based sources, but should be pulled from the mainstream. More radical sources are suspect, but should not be ruled out. If the student finds that only one media source is focusing on this issue, this might be significant and worth studying. Students may ask themselves why is this particular group focusing on an issue that other sources do not yet recognize. For instance, something identified as a social problem by the *National Review* may actually be seen as a solution to a social problem by *The Nation*. The student will have to navigate these issues using their understanding of claims making and framing.

Step 3: Students will then collect the data on their particular issue. Using scholarly, academic and/or research based sources. Students should look for quantitative or qualitative research from credentialed, peer reviewed sources. They should have more than three such sources.

## **Application**

Step 4: Students will analyze the media presentation of the social problem as compared to the academic data. Are they different? If so, in what way? What might be some factors contributing to any differences in presentation?

Step 5: Students will analyze causes for their chosen social problems. Are these problems man-made? Structural? Natural? Or some combination of the three? Are the causes presented by the media confirmed by the research?

Step 6: What groups are impacted by these social problems and in what ways are they impacted? How do differences in such things as race, gender, social class, etc. impact this social problem? Are there groups that benefit from this social problem? If so, in what ways?

Step 7: Students will analyze potential solutions to their chosen social problems. What are some barriers to ending these social problems? How are different elements in society impacted by the proposed solutions? What solutions have already been tried? How effective were they?

Step 8: Based on the research, students will offer their own solutions to their chosen social problem and explain why they believe that their chosen solution is the best.

## **Parameters**

This is a college project. The questions that I've asked above are meant to be guidelines for the student. I am expecting students to elaborate on these topics, not go through and offer brief answers to the questions. I am looking for higher order thinking (thinking in the analytical, creative and evaluative domains of knowledge).

Students can present this project to me in any form they choose with one constraint. I do **NOT** want a research paper. It is my belief that social problems can be solved, but doing so requires thinking outside of the box, or free of the socially constructed assumptions that we have about the nature of our world. I want the student to try to free their minds of such constraints. Papers are great, but they are constraining. As college students, you know how to craft a satisfactory paper with very little thought at all. Use this project as an opportunity to explore vistas that you otherwise would have ignored. So no papers. No papers. No papers.

Many students see the word "present" above and assume that this means they are expected to present their findings to the class. This is not a requirement for this project. You will be doing plenty of presentations to the class this semester. However, if you want to present your project to the class, see me and I will find time for you to do so. Again, presenting to the class is not a requirement.

## **Advice**

Do not be afraid to take a risk. I will not allow you to fail. The worst case scenario for you is that you mess up. In which case I will help you fix the project. That's what I'm here for. One of the peculiar

imbecilities of our school system is that we have conditioned students to be afraid of failure rather than seeing inevitable failure as an opportunity to learn. That is not how I run my class. So do not be afraid to take a risk.

Come to class. Looking at social problems from the social constructionist perspective is an unusual and often confusing new skill. In class you will be practicing the elements of claims making and framing. Coming to class gives you the ability to ask me questions relevant to your issue and to get clarification on some of the more abstract concepts of sociology.

Start immediately. If you do a little bit of work on this project every day then this will not be a long and difficult process. If, however, you wait until the week before it is due, as college students are wont to do (as are some college professors) you are going to run into problems and you are not going to develop a quality project.

Address each step. If you have difficulties with any of the steps above, see me and I will help you through it. If, for some reason, you are unable to address one of the steps above, incorporate that fact into your project and try to explain why you couldn't satisfy that step. I need to know that you are not simply skipping over parts. However, I have never seen a project in which all of the steps above could not be addressed.

Ask questions. You can use me as a resource. You can ask questions during class. Chances are that there are other students in the class who have the same question as you and I don't have a problem using class time to answer your question. I also have no problem staying after class to talk to you and I always answer e-mails that are sent to me. In fact e-mail is a great way to get the explanations that you need as it is written down for you and you don't have to worry about forgetting.

Be open-minded. Oftentimes we choose issues in which we are emotionally invested. In this case, we often decide upon the nature of the problem based on our belief systems and knowledge that we have acquired from our experiences and the particular reference groups in which we belong. When confronted with research that contradicts our beliefs and what we "know to be true deep down in our hearts" we have a tendency to discard the evidence. This project, if done correctly, can enlighten you as to the nature of social problems work and can open avenues for you to participate in addressing social problems in a realistic and effective way. It can liberate you in dealing with issues that are near and dear to you. The single biggest barrier to solving social problems is closed mindedness.