

What is Sociology?

The American Sociological Association [defines sociology](#) as follows:

“Sociology is the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. Sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organizations, and societies, and how people interact within these contexts. Since all human behavior is social, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to the hostile mob; from organized crime to religious cults; from the divisions of race, gender and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture; and from the sociology of work to the sociology of sports. In fact, few fields have such broad scope and relevance for research, theory, and application of knowledge.”

“Sociology provides many distinctive perspectives on the world, generating new ideas and critiquing the old. The field also offers a range of research techniques that can be applied to virtually any aspect of social life: street crime and delinquency, corporate downsizing, how people express emotions, welfare or education reform, how families differ and flourish, or problems of peace and war. Because sociology addresses the most challenging issues of our time, it is a rapidly expanding field whose potential is increasingly tapped by those who craft policies and create programs.”

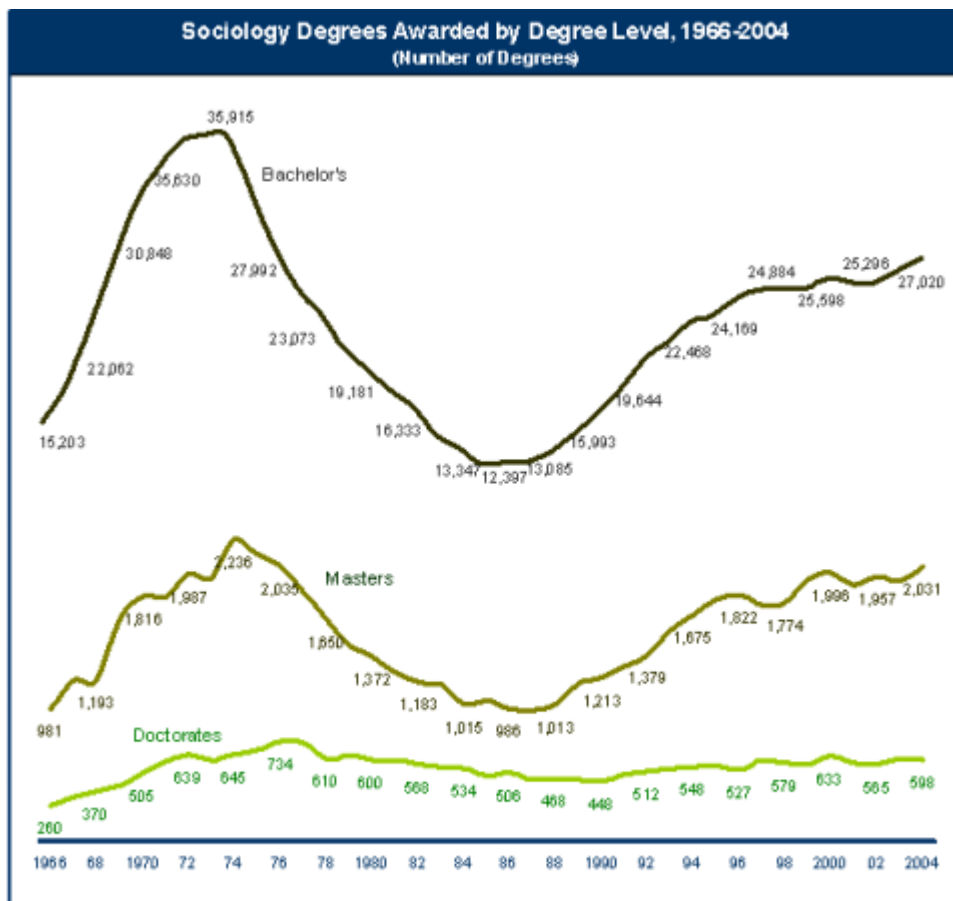
Like everything else, an [evolving definition](#) and somewhat quirky history of the field is available on Wikipedia.

Why Major in Sociology?

Sociology is a Broad and Fascinating Field

If you are unsure of whether to major in sociology, you should first determine whether you find the subject matter to be inherently interesting. The most obvious way to determine whether you find sociology rewarding as a potential course of study is to take a course that sounds appealing to you. However, you can learn a great deal about what sociology is by reading the webpages of the Cornell sociology faculty, downloading some of their research publications (and also by exploring the links on the [What is Sociology?](#) section of this website).

If you decide to major in sociology, you should recognize that you are not alone and that your choice is an increasingly popular one in US higher education. As shown in the figure below, constructed by the [American Sociological Association](#) using data from the US Department of Education, sociology was an extremely popular major following the radicalism late 1960s and early 1970s. Thereafter, the numbers declined through the 1970s and early 1980s (partly for demographic reasons and partly because of shifting students interests). Since the mid-1980s, the major has experienced strong growth, and as of 2007 nearly 30,000 students receive bachelor's degrees in sociology each year in the US.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Completions, 1995-2004* (Washington, DC: NCES, 2006). Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/ipedscompletions/> (October 20, 2006).

The major retains some of the activist edge that made it popular in the 1960s and 1970s, and this may explain why it has again begun to become very popular in the new age of increasing global and domestic inequality that began in the 1980s. It is also possible (as the faculty hope is the case!) that the major has simply become better in the last two decades, having matured into a more rigorous field of study that provides a solid training experience for undergraduates considering a broad array of careers and postsecondary degrees.

If you determine that sociology is a major that interests you, it is natural to then wonder whether or not the major will position you well for the next stage of your career. Fortunately, you can put your mind at ease, as the Cornell sociology major has a strong track record of placing students in graduate schools and in rewarding jobs. Read on ...

Sociology Can Get You Into Graduate School

In part because sociology attracts strong students, but also because of the specific research training offered in the undergraduate program, the department has an excellent track record of placing students in law schools (such as Cornell University and the University of Pennsylvania) and medical schools (such as George Washington

University and Rutgers University). For students interested in academic careers, the sociology major also prepares students for graduate training in sociology and allied fields. Recent sociology students have gone on to top graduate programs in sociology at Princeton University, the University of Chicago, Stanford University, and Cornell's own [graduate program](#).

Sociology Can Get You A Job

The [Career Services](#) unit of the College of Arts and Sciences is the primary outlet for advice on getting a job. They also compile statistics every year on [careers of recent Cornell graduates](#), based on exit surveys of Cornell graduates.

Recent sociology majors have found jobs with a large range of employers, from those in business (Chase Manhattan Bank, Citco Fund Services, Goldman Sachs, Kraft Foods, Ryan Homes, The Vanguard Group, Wachovia Capital Markets) to education (Teach for America, Baltimore City Public Schools, Syracuse University, Wyoming Seminary), government (City of San Francisco, US Department of Justice), law (Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton; Hawkins, Delafield & Wood; Storch, Amini & Munves;), media (Conde Nast, The Excite Network, Newsweek), medicine (Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York Academy of Medicine, NYU School of Medicine, Northwest Association for Biomedical Research), public interest (Hispanic Congressional Congress Institute), and public service (Americorps, Teach for America).

As sociologists are fond of pointing out, the plural of "anecdote" is not "data." Here are some recent data from the U.S. Department of Education on the employment status of BA recipients by field. Sociology falls within the category of "social/behavioral sciences," which means that it has similar employment prospects as the life sciences and better prospects than the humanities. Bear in mind that these are national level data, and Cornell students tend to fare even better in the labor market than the typical student in the US.

Table III.1. Percentage distribution of 1999–2000 bachelor's degree recipients according to their employment status and the corresponding unemployment rate, by selected student and institution characteristics: 2001—Continued

| Student and institution characteristics | Employment status | | | | | | Unemployment rate ¹ |
|---|-------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Total | Working | | Unem- ployed | Laid off | Out of labor force | |
| | | Full time | Part time | | | | |
| Undergraduate major | | | | | | | |
| Business/management | 91.0 | 84.3 | 6.7 | 4.9 | 0.7 | 3.5 | 5.7 |
| Education | 94.4 | 84.8 | 9.6 | 1.2 | 0.8 | 3.6 | 2.1 |
| Engineering | 93.3 | 85.5 | 7.8 | 3.7 | 0.5 | 2.5 | 4.2 |
| Health | 87.8 | 74.1 | 13.7 | 3.6 | 1.7 | 6.9 | 5.7 |
| Other technical/professional | 87.9 | 79.5 | 8.4 | 6.2 | 1.1 | 4.9 | 7.7 |
| Social/behavioral sciences | 83.2 | 69.6 | 13.6 | 6.7 | 1.0 | 9.1 | 8.5 |
| Humanities | 84.5 | 69.0 | 15.5 | 7.4 | 1.5 | 6.7 | 9.5 |
| Life sciences | 75.1 | 59.9 | 15.2 | 5.1 | 1.6 | 18.3 | 8.2 |
| Physical sciences | 84.6 | 74.3 | 10.2 | 1.5 | # | 13.9 | 1.8 |
| Mathematics | 86.7 | 75.1 | 11.6 | 5.7 | # | 7.6 | 6.1 |
| Computer/information science | 91.2 | 86.7 | 4.5 | 5.0 | 0.4 | 3.4 | 5.5 |
| Vocational/technical | 95.2 | 90.7 | 4.5 | 2.8 | 0.8 | 1.3 | 3.6 |
| Degree-granting institution type | | | | | | | |
| Public | 88.0 | 76.8 | 11.1 | 4.9 | 1.1 | 6.1 | 6.4 |
| Nondoctorate-granting | 88.8 | 78.6 | 10.2 | 6.1 | 0.6 | 4.6 | 7.0 |
| Doctorate-granting | 87.6 | 76.1 | 11.5 | 4.4 | 1.3 | 6.7 | 6.1 |
| Private not-for-profit | 86.3 | 75.5 | 10.9 | 5.5 | 0.9 | 7.2 | 7.0 |
| Nondoctorate-granting | 89.5 | 79.4 | 10.1 | 4.6 | 0.9 | 5.0 | 5.8 |
| Doctorate-granting | 81.9 | 70.0 | 12.0 | 6.9 | 1.0 | 10.3 | 8.7 |
| Private for-profit | 90.1 | 85.7 | 4.4 | 5.6 | 0.3 | 4.0 | 6.2 |
| Total undergraduate debt | | | | | | | |
| Did not borrow | 85.5 | 73.6 | 12.0 | 5.4 | 0.8 | 8.3 | 6.8 |
| \$5,000 or less | 89.1 | 78.1 | 11.0 | 5.0 | 1.0 | 5.0 | 6.2 |
| \$5,001–10,000 | 88.6 | 78.1 | 10.5 | 5.0 | 1.2 | 5.2 | 6.6 |
| \$10,001–20,000 | 89.2 | 78.7 | 10.6 | 4.6 | 0.9 | 5.3 | 5.8 |
| \$20,001–30,000 | 89.7 | 78.9 | 10.8 | 5.7 | 1.5 | 3.1 | 7.4 |
| More than \$30,000 | 88.0 | 78.7 | 9.3 | 7.3 | 1.1 | 3.7 | 8.7 |
| Current enrollment status | | | | | | | |
| Not currently enrolled | 90.7 | 84.3 | 6.4 | 4.9 | 1.1 | 3.4 | 0.0 |
| Enrolled part time | 93.1 | 84.2 | 8.9 | 2.6 | 0.7 | 3.7 | 0.0 |
| Enrolled full time | 67.5 | 30.8 | 36.7 | 7.9 | 0.7 | 23.9 | 100.0 |

#Rounds to zero.

†Reporting standards not met.

¹The unemployment rate is constructed to approximate the definition of the unemployment rate used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In this table, the rate is calculated as the number of people who are not working but looking for work, or who are laid off/waiting to report to work, divided by all those who are in the labor force (the two groups mentioned, plus those who are working; respondents who are out of the labor force are excluded from the calculation). See the glossary for more information.

²Respondents identified themselves as belonging to another race. See the glossary for details.

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2001 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B:2000/01).

Based on national surveys of job placement, recent sociology graduates have received jobs of the following type:

Business: Actuary, administrative assistant, advertising officer, computer analyst, data entry manager, human resource manager, insurance agent, journalist, labor relations officer, market analyst, merchandiser/purchaser, production manager, project manager, public relations officer, publishing officer, quality control manager, real estate agent, sales manager, sales representative

Government: Affirmative action worker, community affairs officer, environmental planner and researcher, foreign affairs service officer, human resource officer, human rights officer, legislative aide, personnel coordinator, planning officer, project manager, public health service worker, researcher, urban/regional planner,

Research: Census officer/analyst, consumer researcher, data analyst, demographer/population analyst, market researcher, social research specialist, survey researcher, systems analyst

Teaching: Academic evaluator, academic administrator, college placement worker, librarian, public health educator, public school teachers, school admissions officer, undergraduate and graduate educator and researcher

Community Affairs: Career counselor, case worker, child development technician, community development officer, community organizer, cultural and environmental resource management officer, forensic analysis specialist, fund raising director, homeless/housing worker, housing coordinator, hospital administrator, legal representative, occupational counselor, public administrator, public health administrator, public health outreach worker, rehabilitation program worker, resident planning aide, rural health outreach worker, social assistance advocate, youth outreach worker