

## Core Assessment

Each student enrolled in SOCI 1301 will complete the State-mandated core curriculum assessment.

Provide an in-depth sociological analysis of the article “A Lonely Road” and “Poverty Levels in the United States, 1959-2013” graph by developing an essay that addresses **each** of the following items.

**First**, identify and explain the key questions, problems, or issues the article addresses. This introductory paragraph should tell readers what the article is about and why the subject matter is important to society.

**Second**, describe and evaluate the evidence provided. What information (facts, data, experiences, etc.) is the author using to support his argument? Is this credible evidence? Why or why not?

**Next**, using information from both the article and graph, (numerically/arithmetically) describe how the number and percentage of people in poverty has changed since 1995. How does this compare with the poverty rate for single mothers in the Deep South like Lauren Scott?

**Then**, apply the sociological imagination to explain how the issues identified are both private troubles (related to and impacting individuals) and public issues (What kinds of social factors and institutions contribute to the issues presented? How does this issue impact larger society?)

**Finally**, provide your opinion about what should be done to resolve the issues identified. In this concluding paragraph you should provide recommendations, support your opinion with evidence, and consider any challenges to implementing this solution that may exist.

Essays will be scored on the basis of: (a) adherence to standard grammar, spelling, punctuation, formatting, and attribution conventions of formal academic writing; (b) appropriate application of relevant sociological terms and concepts from course content (including textbook and supplementary materials); (c) accuracy of calculations, descriptions, and explanations; (d) use of supporting evidence.

Students should consult with their individual instructor regarding due dates, word-count, and point values.

## **A Lonely Road**—Chico Harlan *Washington Post*, 28 December 2015

She set off on the latest day of job hunting wearing tiny star-shaped earrings that belonged to her 18-month-old daughter and frayed \$6 shoes from Walmart that were the more comfortable of her two pairs. In her backpack she had stashed a ham and cheese sandwich for lunch, hand sanitizer for the bus and pocket change for printing résumés at the public library. She carried a spiral notebook with a handwritten list of job openings that she'd titled her "Plan of Action for the Week."

It had been 20 months since Lauren Scott lost her apartment and six months since she lost her car and 10 weeks since she washed up at a homeless shelter in this suburb south of Atlanta with no money and no job. Her daughter, Za'Niyah, had already lived in seven places, and Scott feared that her child would soon grow old enough to permanently remember the chaos. So shortly after sunrise, she packed Za'Niyah into a day-care bus that picked up the shelter's children, walked to the closest bus station and used her phone to find directions to the first of the companies on her list, an industrial site that would have been 27 minutes away by car.

She squinted, with a light sigh, at the public transit curlicue she was about to make through Atlanta: Sixty-nine stops on a bus; a nine-minute train ride; an additional 49 stops on a bus; a quarter-mile walk.

"Off to the races," Scott, 28, said as she boarded the No. 55 bus, and this was a day much like the others, when the cost of destitution was a job hunt in which even the simplest task — placing an application — required four hours, round-trip, on a bus.

Scott just needed to get to her job interview, but she was finding around her the obstacles that have shaped this region's increasingly pervasive and isolating form of extreme poverty. In the metropolitan areas of the Deep South, government policies and rising real estate prices have pushed the poor out of urban centers and farther from jobs. Low-income people have, in turn, grown more reliant on public transit networks that are among the weakest of quality in the country. When they search for work, they step into a region where pay tends to be low and unemployment tends to be high. The share of residents in deep poverty — with incomes below \$10,045 for a parent and two children — in these Deep South metro areas has grown by 24 percent over the past decade, according to Census Bureau data.

But even as their ranks have grown, the deeply impoverished in the Deep South have also increasingly found that they are on their own: They are less likely to receive the help of a spouse — or the government. Five of the six states with the highest proportion of single parents are in the Deep South. Meanwhile, policymakers have dismantled the cash assistance programs that used to provide critical support for the jobless with children. Those like Scott not only have less access to jobs, but also less of a safety net when they are unemployed.

Scott was starting her latest week with a notebook full of bullet-by-bullet leads and a series of bus rides to follow up on them. *Apply to Randstad Staffing*, she had written in neat cursive; it was hiring for warehouse positions. *Apply to Walmart*, she had written just below. *Millwood Inc.*, she had written along with the company's address — her first stop of the week. Days earlier, she spotted Millwood's ad on a Facebook page for unemployed Georgians. The company wanted in-person applicants.

What Scott saw in Clayton County was a place ill-equipped for the influx of poverty. Just 10 miles south of the new condominiums in Atlanta, the county had no public housing and a few modest bus lines — a service that had started only this year, after a referendum passed. The main streets lacked sidewalks, and Scott often found herself tiptoeing alongside traffic.

"This place isn't meant for poor people," Scott said.

On the bus, Scott — sitting in one of the front rows — clutched her backpack and looked out the window. As the single-story homes and unkempt yards of Forest Park gave way to the Atlanta skyline, she checked to make sure her hair was in a neat bun.

Then it was time to move. A train took Scott to a transfer point at a concrete bus terminal. From there, the No. 73 bus brought her away from the city in a different direction, toward a four-lane road of hangarlike industrial buildings and 18-wheelers. At one of the last stops on the route, Scott and four others got out. They all looked like job-seekers, Scott thought — these men and women in their 20s and 30s wearing pullovers and worn dress shoes, pulling out their phones, trying to get their bearings. Scott gave them one last glance and tried to race ahead.

Before becoming a mother, Scott had no problem finding work. She'd prepared food for the elderly and stocked shelves and sold magazines over the phone. She'd collected debts and made fast-food burgers and, most recently, answered calls from Verizon customers. She had a small apartment, rented for \$495 per month, where black mold spread across the walls. But she was self-sufficient. She could afford food. "I was maybe one notch above poverty," Scott said.

Having a child pushed her well below the poverty line. There was another person to support, and there was less money to stash away, and suddenly there was no way to pay for a broken-down car, then there was no easy way to get to work. And then, as of last May, there was no work at all: The call center wanted Scott to take night shifts, and Za'Niyah was eligible only for subsidized daytime child care. Scott quit and tried to find something else, somewhere else.

With Za'Niyah in tow, traveling by bus, Scott briefly stayed in New Jersey with people who knew her sister. And then she spent a cramped week with a sickly relative in Tennessee. And then she lost her last \$3,500 in savings during a summer in Texas with a roommate who jacked up the rent and asked for help paying bills after getting bilked in a title loan deal. Then Scott returned to Atlanta, because, she said, "If I was going to be stranded in a city, it might as well be one I know." She wound up at the Calvary Refuge homeless shelter in Clayton County, given a brick-walled room that she decorated with pictures of her daughter and nobody else.

The others in Scott's life were largely out of touch. One of Scott's siblings had just gotten out of prison; another was in the military. Scott's old boyfriend — Za'Niyah's father — was who knows where, out of contact for a year and probably for good. Scott, who long ago lost contact with her mother, spent many years in the foster system and several more with her grandmother, sharing the home with 15 others.

Scott was penniless. "So few options," she said.

A generation earlier, even people in Scott's situation had advantages that she lacks. They tended to live in the middle of Atlanta, near the subway, and they received welfare, cash payments from the government that were available to nearly all in deep poverty, regardless of whether they had a job.

But over the past 20 years, the virtual elimination of that component of the safety net in Southern states has created a new kind of poverty, one in which people are left more to their own devices, with less access to cash in times of desperation. That shift amounts to a major change in the strategy for addressing the needs of the poor — a change that stems from the belief that entitlement programs failed to incentivize work and trapped people in poverty.

The dramatic overhaul took root in 1996 with reforms under President Bill Clinton, who had pledged to "transform a broken system" and end a "cycle of dependence." In doing so, he granted governors wide latitude — as they had requested — to draw up their own welfare programs. States would receive federal block grants, but they were under no obligation to give cash handouts. Instead, they could use the money in other ways — to educate job-hunters, encourage marriage or fund child-focused government agencies. The

federal government also expanded tax credits for low-income workers, creating another incentive for the poor to find jobs.

The legacy of the changes, on a national level, is mixed: The safety net has expanded for those who can hold down jobs, but it has shrunk for those who cannot. The Earned Income Tax Credit — a benefit for low-income workers — plays a far greater role than welfare in fighting poverty. But the system also creates vulnerabilities during times of economic distress, when the unemployment rate rises.

The Deep South most clearly shows the legislation's downsides, policy experts say. In a region that already had the greatest proportion of people living in deep poverty, governors have gone the furthest in reducing the availability of welfare, making it all but disappear as an option for the poor by narrowing income requirements and erecting high job-hunting expectations. At the same time, jobs remain hard to find: 43 of 46 metro areas in the Deep South have unemployment rates worse than the national average, according to government data.

"If you look at those who are simply unable to work or who are cycling through terrible-paying jobs in the South, when they cycle out, what you find is that nothing is left for them," said Joe Soss, a political scientist at the University of Minnesota who studies poverty and social policy.

Across the five states in the region — Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina — some 58 percent of impoverished families with children received welfare in the pre-Clinton years, according to data compiled by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Now, that percentage has tumbled below 10 percent. In Georgia, the state with the sharpest decline, only 7 percent of poor families with children receive welfare, compared with 98 percent in 1994.

State officials say some of the money that could have been used for cash handouts has instead been invested in programs to educate job-hunters. But critics say states have used the bulk of the money to plug general budget holes. This has been especially problematic for single mothers. Over the past 15 years, the poverty rate for single mothers in the Deep South has risen from 42 percent to 46 percent, according to Census Bureau data, a rate that is 5 to 10 percentage points higher than in other regions of the country. The region has female labor force participation rates that lag behind the national average, and the percentage of single moms with jobs hasn't budged in 20 years.

Food stamps, another key part of the safety net for the poor, remain widely used in all states but cover only a specific portion of expenses — amounting to several hundred dollars per month.

Other factors add to the difficulty of the poor finding work. Those who can't afford to live in city centers often must depend on walking, hitching rides or laborious public transportation commutes. A 2011 Brookings Institution report ranking public transit in the nation's 100 largest metro areas found that 15 of the weakest 20 systems — judged by coverage and job access — were in the South. They included systems in Birmingham, Ala.; Greenville, S.C.; Baton Rouge; and Atlanta — where, in earlier decades, majority-white suburbs voted against the expansion of a transit system they viewed as being primarily for black residents.

The lack of physical mobility feeds into the deeper but related problem of economic immobility: Areas throughout the South — and Atlanta in particular — provide among the lowest chances that someone born into poverty will move up the income ladder.

Over the past 20 years, Atlanta's wealthiest areas, spread along the north of the city, have changed little. But formerly middle-class suburbs to the south — areas of modest single-family homes — have been deluged by newcomers who lost homes as city officials dismantled dozens of housing projects in the hopes of reducing concentrated poverty. Experts who have studied Atlanta's economic geography say the change has been partly successful; class no longer changes so clearly between neighborhoods, but meanwhile, the

poor — given modest vouchers to help subsidize their housing costs — must head far from the city to find places they can afford.

“This city hasn’t built out its society,” said Deborah Scott, the executive director of an area nonprofit organization, Georgia Stand-Up, that focuses on low-income communities. “We’ve given the suburbs to the poorer people, but the opportunities aren’t here.”

For Scott and her daughter, Za’Niyah, time was running short to find an opportunity, because the homeless shelter allowed people to stay no longer than four months. So while searching for a job, Scott tried to fall back on the only other support she could think of and headed to Clayton County’s government family services center, a place on Battle Creek Road — 17 minutes away by car, 52 minutes away by bus — that offered orientation meetings for welfare applicants.

About 30 people had shown up, nearly all of them women, and the official leading the meeting said that Georgia gave out welfare only in specific cases. If you had a job, you needed to leave. Same if anybody at home received Social Security. Or if you got child support. Or if you were in a two-parent home. By the end, Scott later recalled, only six women were left.

Those who remained were asked to search for jobs at a rapid clip — at least 20 per week, with proof of contact for every one — and after Scott did this for two weeks, all part of the pre-application, she checked on the status of her welfare application with her smartphone and saw that she’d been denied. “Closure reason — you refused to cooperate with the application process,” the state website said. (A state spokeswoman said she could not discuss the case.)

“They want you to get a job, which is not all bad,” Scott said. “But the way they go about it is horrible.”

Scott called several times to inquire about what happened but reached only machines. Among more than 64,000 people living in poverty in Clayton County, 137 adults receive welfare, according to Georgia government data. Scott gave up on trying to become the 138th.

By the time Scott headed toward Millwood Inc., the first stop listed in her notebook, she’d become used to submitting applications and hearing nothing. She’d put in for jobs at Burger King and Smoothie King, Foot Action and Foot Locker, an Amazon.com warehouse and a Jewish nursing home — more than 50 places in total. She’d briefly found work at a Kroger supermarket, but it lasted only for several weeks; the company learned that she had a simple battery charge on her record, the result of a fight in 2008. (Scott says she is working with a local justice center to get the charge expunged.)

After getting fired, she resumed job-hunting the next day.

The opportunity at Millwood was one of the best that she had tried for. It paid \$15 an hour — more than she had ever made — and provided on-the-job training, according to the help-wanted flier. Scott hopped off the bus after a 124-minute commute and gazed at the wide road, where the buildings tended to be long and unmarked. She straddled the gravel fringe of the road and felt the force of the 18-wheelers as they whizzed by, heading east on Fulton Industrial Boulevard. She arrived 10 minutes later at a gas station and realized that she was walking in the wrong direction. She turned around and tap-danced along the gravel on the other side of the road.

Two hours and 26 minutes after she left Calvary Refuge, Scott was at Millwood, a company that repairs warehouse pallets. It was a hulking facility where trucks parked in even lines in front of dock doors and where, at the end of the property, employee cars were clustered in front of a small office. Scott neared, dabbing a little sweat from her face, and saw applicants all around the parking lot, some bent over the hoods of vehicles filling out applications.

“Look at that,” Scott whispered. “That scares me.”

She walked into the office and 15 more people stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the entrance foyer. The main office door was locked with a key code and the one window was shuttered. A plastic bin for blank applications was already empty, and those in the foyer idled for five minutes until a human resources staffer opened the door a crack and handed out 15 more.

“Take only one,” the employee said. “We’re already overrun. Take one, fill it out, and put it in the bin.”

Scott crouched in a corner of the foyer and spent three minutes filling in the blanks. Somebody else crouched next to her and asked to borrow a pen. Others held their applications against the wall while filling them out.

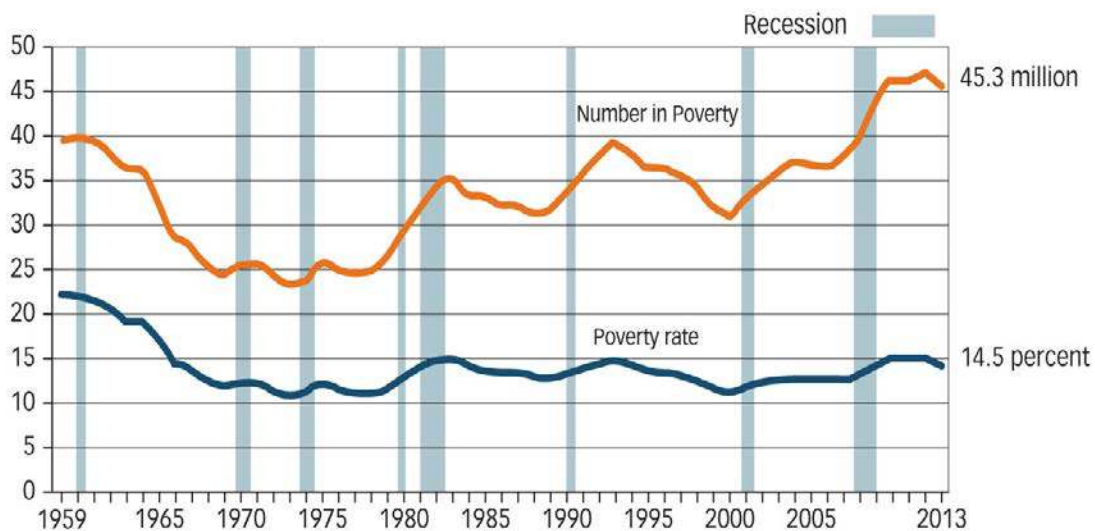
“Horrible,” Scott said on the way out. “I was thinking, ‘Forget this, I should just leave.’ But no, I’ll gamble like everyone else.”

It was nearly noon and Scott was already thinking about how much more she could fit into her day before Za’Niyah returned from day care. There was still more to do. She needed to take a bus to the public library. She needed to search for jobs online. She needed to print more résumés. But then, she got a call from a place to which she’d applied weeks earlier — a home for the elderly that wanted a dietary aide. Could Scott come in for an interview tomorrow? Of course, Scott said.

So back on the bus, Scott pulled out her phone and punched in a new address, just to see what the commute would be like. The facility was in a wealthier section of Atlanta, in a neighborhood called Virginia-Highland, and Scott tried not to get too ahead of herself, but this time she was thinking about a journey she’d make not just once, but perhaps every day.

Google Maps said the commute was 1 hour and 28 minutes. Scott made a sour face for a half-second, then shrugged. “I’ve traveled farther,” she said.

**FIGURE 7.9** Poverty Levels in the United States, 1959–2013



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau. (2012). Historical Poverty Tables—People. Poverty; Bishaw, A. (2013). Poverty: 2000 to 2012. American Community Survey Briefs. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau