

Sociology Comprehensive Examination in Inequalities, Summer, 2026

The questions below constitute the qualifying exam for **inequalities**. To complete the exam, you must answer one question from each of the three sections below in an essay format. Each answer should be a self-contained essay approximately 8–10 pages long (i.e., 2,000–2,500 words).

Although you must cite to referenced work in each essay, one comprehensive bibliography for all three questions will be sufficient. You may consult materials from the reading list you've been provided, as well as any other scholarly sources you've read during the exam period. This qualifying exam is to be completed in two weeks. The evaluation of the exam will take two weeks. You will be notified of your performance by email.

Make sure that the office has your up-to-date contact information. Please use the identifying student number that you have been assigned at the top of your exam. The exams are graded confidentially, and examinee's sequence numbers only will be used to identify the author of the exam. See the *Graduate Handbook* for any further details.

Answer one of the following:

1. Describe the trends of income inequality in the United States over the past half a century (from the 1970s to the present).
 - a. What role do race, ethnicity, and gender play in these trends of income inequality?
 - b. In your description, cite empirical research to illustrate each of these sources of inequality when discussing inequality dynamics.
 - c. Such inequality may not only impact one's susceptibility to Covid-19 infection and mortality but also have long-term ethnoracial ramifications. Discuss the impact and how one's race and ethnicity may further compound such impact during the Covid-19 pandemic and afterward (with new evidence if necessary).
2. When studying social inequality, two related concepts often come up, "stratification" and "mobility."
 - a. Define these concepts and discuss their relations to each other and to inequality.
 - b. Which concept is at the heart of the discussion of "the American Dream"? Discuss the contemporary trajectory of this dream in the U.S., distinguishing between absolute and relative mobility.
 - c. In 2020, then-Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin famously observed that "the American Dream" was structurally easier to achieve in Nordic social democracies than in the United States ([Washington Post](#) 2020). Utilizing comparative sociological frameworks and contemporary data, evaluate the empirical validity of this claim. In your discussion, address how specific institutional differences (e.g., healthcare, education access, tax structures) alter the mechanics of intergenerational mobility between the U.S. and Nordic nations.

Answer one of the following:

3. Can we study class inequalities by analyzing or focusing on class as a sole category of analysis? Why or why not?
 - a. Pick two readings from the reading list that primarily use one or two categories of analysis to understand class inequalities (it can pertain to any aspect of class inequalities: education, immigration, health, housing etc..), briefly describe the major contributions of the readings and how they can be strengthened by considering other categories of analysis?
 - b. Pick one more reading from the list that analyzes class as it intersects with multiple categories of analysis, briefly describe its major contributions and how it challenges the readings above.
4. A central debate in the sociology of inequality is whether stratification is best understood through categorical dynamics (such as race, gender, and class) or through the institutional arenas where these categories are sorted and rewarded.
 - a. From your readings, select two distinct institutional arenas (e.g., the labor market/occupations, the educational system, or the housing market) and discuss how they act as primary engines of inequality.
 - b. Choose one of these arenas and argue how a specific axis of categorical inequality (such as race or gender) is systematically reproduced within it.
 - c. Is inequality best tackled analytically by focusing on the macro-level categorical divides themselves, or on the meso-level organizational and institutional units that process them? Make a theoretically rigorous case for your position.

Answer one of the following:

5. Social institutions—such as schools, families, and workplaces—play a major role in creating and maintaining (and perhaps sometimes ameliorating) social inequalities. Choose at least 2 such social institutions (they need not be the ones listed above) and explain how they create and/or maintain inequalities and whether there is any evidence that they can lessen inequality. Use specific examples from the reading list to illustrate your argument.
6. Inequality may be driven by access (or lack thereof) to social, economic, and/or cultural resources, and these resources may also be deeply intertwined in creating and reinforcing inequalities of various kinds. Using specific examples from the readings, explain how each type of resource is tied to unequal outcomes. You may choose to focus on one form of inequality and how social, cultural, and economic resources drive one particular kind of inequality, or you may focus on inequalities across multiple social domains.