AQA
AS and A-level
Sociology

EXAM NOTES
The Complete Study and Revision Book

Education with Research Methods

Do brilliantly in your Sociology exam!

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About the Exam Notes

**Written with examination success in mind!**

- These exam notes have been written by Sociology examiners and experienced teachers, with only one purpose in mind—**exam success**. Using these exam notes will help students achieve the best possible grade in their Sociology exam.
- We have provided the depth of information required for your Sociology examinations, both in terms of knowledge and evaluation, which makes these exam notes more concise than general Sociology text books, and more comprehensive than standard revision guides (which often lack the depth of evaluation required to achieve an A grade).

**We have focused on the ‘evaluation’ part.**

- Contrary to popular belief, learning and memorising lots of facts and theories will not get you a grade A or B in your exam. The exam requires you to be able to ‘analyse’ and ‘evaluate’ sociological knowledge, this does not mean jotting down a few brief criticisms at the end of your essay. The analysis and evaluation that you make, needs to be expanded upon and explained in an effective manner. With this in mind, we have written a lot of the evaluation points using the three-step-rule: identify, expand and conclude. We have done this for you in this book to demonstrate what a ‘developed’ evaluation point looks like. Please try and remember this technique and demonstrate it in your exam.

**Exam questions**

- We have given you lots of exam questions at the end of each exam note to practise. We have covered most of the different types of questions you may be asked for each topic both at AS and at A Level. If you are taking the A level course, it is a good way of testing and practising both your knowledge and examination skills. You may realise some of the questions require the same answers, but are worded differently, this was deliberate, just so you are familiar with the different way the questions can be worded.
- Please visit [www.sociologyzone.co.uk](http://www.sociologyzone.co.uk) for exam notes, exam questions, mark schemes, model answers and much more.
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Section 2

Research Methods
(including Methods in Context)

AQA Specification

Research methods

Students must examine the following areas:

- quantitative and qualitative methods of research; research design
- sources of data, including questionnaires, interviews, participant and non-participant observation, experiments, documents and official statistics
- the distinction between primary and secondary data, and between quantitative and qualitative data
- the relationship between positivism, interpretivism and sociological methods; the nature of ‘social facts’.
- the theoretical, practical and ethical considerations influencing choice of topic, choice of method(s) and the conduct of research
Official Statistics

The exam requires that you are able to:
- Understand why sociologists use official statistics in sociological research.
- Evaluate the strengths and limitations of official statistics.
- Evaluate the strengths and limitations of using official statistics when investigating educational issues.

Official statistics

Statistical data collected by or on behalf of local and national government departments are referred to as official statistics. Official statistics are quantitative data and usually come from social surveys such as questionnaires and interviews. Official statistics examine a wide range of behaviour mainly related to population, social and economic issues. Official statistics are referred to as secondary data because the information has already been collected by the government. Sociologists ‘borrow’ the already collected data for their research purposes.

Examples of official statistics

- Examples of official statistics are facts and figures on birth, death, marriage, education, unemployment, health, migration and crime. One well-known example of a government survey is the Census of the whole UK population (every ten years since 1841), by means of a questionnaire provided to every household in the UK which collects information on population, families, education, occupation, transport and leisure. The data builds up socio-economic characteristics of the whole of the UK, which helps governments locate and provide resources more effectively and plan for housing, education, health and transport services for the future.

Accessibility of statistical publications

- Official statistics are available to the public through a range of publications such as Social Trends (http://data.gov.uk). This provides a summary of statistical information under specific headings such as Education, Employment or Crime taken from a wide range of government departments. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) (http://www.statistics.gov.uk) is the UK government’s main office for compiling and publishing all official government statistical data.

Strengths and limitation of using official statistics

Strengths of official statistics

On a theoretical level

✔ Positivists prefer them. Positivists find official statistics useful because they produce quantitative data. These are easier to analyse and interpret than qualitative data because they enable the sociologist to come to conclusions from information such as patterns, trends and causal relationships (cause-and-effect relationships).

✔ Reliability. Positivists argue that official statistics are a generally reliable source of information. For example, crime statistics provide reliable quantitative data on criminal activity and trends. This is
because criminal statistics are based on court convictions and crimes recorded by police officers, who all follow a uniform standardised set procedure, with the same categorising or coding used every time a crime is committed.

✔️ **Representativeness.** Official statistics are collected by research methods such as standardised questionnaires and interviews. These are generally conducted on very large samples of the population, which makes the information more representative, allowing generalisations to be made upon the population under investigation.

✔️ **Useful for governments.** Statistical data are very useful for governments as they can help them formulate social policies and intervention strategies. For example, the analysis of fertility rates has shown a rise in teenage pregnancies in economically deprived areas. This allows the allocation of funds and resources to tackle the problem of teenage pregnancies in such areas. It also allows governments to make predictions as to future behaviour, such as between the relationships of these two variables, teenage pregnancies and deprived areas, and act accordingly.

✔️ **Comparisons can be made.** Statistical data are good for making ‘before and after’ study comparisons. A sociologist can analyse statistical data to examine the effects in the changes that laws can have on human behaviour, for example, the amount of alcohol-related violent behaviour before and after the 24-hour drinking law was introduced. Statistical data can be used to make comparative studies between groups, for example, to compare the types of crimes that the middle class and working class may commit or a cross-cultural study comparing teenage pregnancies and abortion rates in different countries.

✔️ **Change over time.** Statistical data allow the sociologist to examine social trends in society and identify how they have changed over a period of time, for example, religious attendance or marriage trends: the average age of first marriage for females and males, or the changing number of marriages over a period of time.

**On a practical level**

✔️ **They are readily available.** The use of official statistics is much cheaper and less time-consuming than other research methods. This is because the researcher does not have to spend money (statistics publications are free to access from government websites) or time collecting their own information. This allows the analysis and interpretations of the data to be carried out relatively quickly.

**Ethical issues**

✔️ **Ethically sound.** Official statistics pose few ethical issues because they are secondary data that have been collected and compiled by official government agencies. The sociologist therefore does not have to worry about dealing with issues such as causing psychological harm, obtaining consent, confidentiality and anonymity as the information is already in the public domain.
Limitations of official statistics

On a theoretical level

✗ Validity is an issue. Interpretivists argue that official statistics are not a valid source of information and do not give a true picture of human behaviour. Statistics are the product of human processes (interpretation and decision-making) which are prone to errors, manipulation and mistakes which make them less valid than positivists claim. For example, crime statistics do not reflect a true picture of the level and nature of crimes in the UK. They only include crimes known to the police and ignore those which go unreported for reasons such as triviality, embarrassment, fear of reprisals or difficulties of detection (eg, tax evasion) or a police officer’s decision not to record them, which can be based on a number of factors (see criticism below under ‘unreliable’).

✗ Lacks depth. Interpretivists argue that statistics lack insight into human behaviour. They do not explain the ‘why questions’- why people act the way they do. For example, crime statistical patterns show that the most likely offenders are often young, working-class and male with a high proportion being black and poorly-educated. However, they fail to explain why (the cause) this group commits such crimes in the first place.

✗ Official statistics can be manipulated. Official statistics are compiled and published by the government, which makes them prone to political bias. A controversial example is the official ‘total unemployment’ statistics. It was noted that Conservative governments made more than 30 changes to the way unemployment was defined in the 1980s and 1990s. All these resulted in lower statistical figures (which made the government appear to be doing something about it). For example, during the 1980s, the definition of unemployment changed from those just registered as unemployed (but not claiming) to only those who claimed unemployment benefits (eg, income support and job seekers allowance). This excluded those who were unemployed but on government work-related training schemes, married women seeking work as their husbands’ incomes make them ineligible for income support, the under-18s and those ‘not actively seeking work’ (eg, single parents and disabled adults).

✗ Unreliability. Official statistics can be an unreliable as a source of data. For example, it will depend on the court of law and the discretion of the police officer as to whether individuals accused of committing crimes are cautioned, arrested, charged and convicted, all which can affect the criminal statistics recorded.

On a practical level

✗ Unavailable information. Depending on the aims and hypothesis of the sociological researcher, the required information may not be obtained from official statistics, which renders them useless as a research method.

Ethical issues

✗ Problem of interpretation. Published sociological research findings may reveal socially sensitive information (eg, ethnicity and crime). This could be misinterpreted by the public, which could lead to the group being negatively stigmatised.
Methods in context:

Using official statistics to investigate educational issues

Official statistics have been used to investigate a number of educational issues, including:

- Educational achievement (eg, class, gender and ethnicity).
- School performance (eg, league tables).
- School attendance (eg, truancy and school exclusions).

In context: strengths and limitations of using official statistics to investigate educational issues

Strengths of official statistics

On a theoretical level

✔ ✔ Reliability. Official statistics on education are generally reliable. This is because the government follows standardised procedures, definitions and categories when collecting educational statistical data. This standardised method can be replicated every year, and this allows comparisons to be made (eg, on truancy levels).

✔ ✔ Representativeness. Educational statistics are funded and collected by government organisations. This means that large funds make it possible to collect information on every pupil in the country. For example, all schools must complete a school census three times a year. It would not be feasible for sociologists to collect such a large quantity of data, let alone sift and analyse the information! This makes educational statistics highly representative and allows generalisations to be made.

On a practical level

✔ Easy to analyse. Positivists tend to favour the use of educational statistics because they can be easily analysed for changes over time and between groups, and to see if patterns, trends and correlations exist (eg, analysing exam performance by gender, class or ethnic group).

✔ Cheaper and quicker. Official educational statistics are easy to obtain as they have already been collected by the government and are accessible to everyone by downloading the relevant file from a government website. This means a sociological researcher can use the information freely without having to spend a large amount of money or time, unlike many other research methods such as observations or unstructured interviews.

Limitations of official statistics

On a theoretical level

✘ Validity. Interpretivists are critical of educational statistical data. This is because they are created by people, which means they can be deliberately manipulated in order to be presented in a more positive light. For example, schools may manipulate records of absences or truancy. They may also...
refrain from entering some pupils in GCSE exams (asking some pupils to drop a subject) in order to improve their position in the league table.

❌ Cannot explain the ‘why’ question. Educational statistics are useful to show patterns, trends and comparisons, such as between gender and educational achievement. However, they cannot explain, for example why boys underachieve at GCSE level, but only give a frequency or percentage of how many fall short of the 5 A*-C. Therefore, the researcher cannot identify if home background or school life are among the reasons for boys’ under-achievement.

❌ Official statistics have limited use. Educational statistics have limited use in investigating certain educational issues. For example, a sociologist cannot use statistical data to find out about labelling, gender and classroom behaviour, pupil subcultures, hidden curriculum, etc. For such educational issues, observations and interviews are better research methods.

Practical issues

❌ Official statistics have limited use. Educational statistics have limited use in investigating certain educational issues. For example, a sociologist cannot use statistical data to find out about labelling, gender and classroom behaviour, pupil subcultures, hidden curriculum, etc. For such educational issues, observations and interviews are better research methods.

❌ Collected for non-sociological reasons. Educational statistics are collected for government purposes rather than sociological research. Even when educational statistics may be of interest to the sociologist (such as those regarding social class and education), the concepts and definitions applied by government may be different to those applied by sociologists. For example, the government’s official definition of ‘social class’ is based on those students who are eligible for free school meals whereas sociologists may define it in terms of cultural values, property ownership, etc. This means that the sociologist may find the definition unsuitable or use the government’s definition with reluctance.

Ethical issues

❌ Problem of interpretation. There are no real ethical issues. However, information on a particular ethnic group or class on educational matters such as exam performance or truancy could be misinterpreted by the public, which could lead to the group or class being negatively stigmatised.

Practice exam questions

AS level exam questions

Paper 1 – methods in context

Item B – Investigating truancy from school

Truancy – unauthorised absence from school – is closely linked to educational under-achievement. Pupils doing badly at school are more likely to truant, and persistent truants tend to leave school with few qualifications. Truancy is also linked to juvenile delinquency.
Some sociologists may use official statistics to study truancy. The government collects statistics from every school, and these show national trends and patterns, such as that truancy peaks in year 11 and is more common among pupils receiving free school meals. Truancy statistics can also be used to discover the effect on pupils of factors such as changes in educational policies.

1. Applying material from Item B and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using official statistics for investigating truancy from school. [20 marks]

**Paper 2**

1. Outline two advantages of using statistics in sociological research. [4 marks]

2. Outline two disadvantages of using statistics in sociological research. [4 marks]

3. Evaluate the practical and theoretical issues involved in using statistics in studying society. [16 marks]

4. Evaluate the use and limitations of official statistics in sociological research. [16 marks]

5. Evaluate the advantages of using official statistics in sociological research. [16 marks]

6. Evaluate the disadvantages of using official statistics in sociological research. [16 marks]

**A level exam questions**

**Paper 1 – methods in context**

1. The ‘methods in context’ question is set at both AS and A level (see above AS level exam question, paper 1).

**Paper 1 and 3**

2. Outline and explain two advantages of using official statistics in sociological research. [10 marks]

**Paper 3**

3. Applying material from Item (...) and your knowledge, evaluate the usefulness of using official statistics in sociological research. [20 marks]