

# Too Many or Too Few PhDs? Employment Opportunities in Academic Sociology

Jerry A. Jacobs and Roberta Spalter-Roth

Graduate students pursuing a doctoral degree in sociology are often anxious about what their employment opportunities will be when they complete their degree. Undergraduates considering graduate studies in sociology are similarly concerned about whether years devoted to graduate studies will be worth the effort. Directors of graduate programs in sociology often confront questions on the availability of jobs posed by advanced graduate students as well as prospective recruits.

## Jobs Available

The American Sociological Association (ASA) can provide information on the positions advertised for PhD-level sociologists through its Job Bank. The ASA Job Bank is an electronic data employment service designed to facilitate the search for positions requiring credentials in sociology. Most colleges and universities in the US that seek to hire sociology professors advertise with the Job Bank, and more than 8 out of 10 new PhDs consulted this employment service when job hunting (see *New Doctorates in Sociology* at <http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/RBDoctorates.pdf>). The Job Bank is less comprehensive with respect to positions outside of academia.

How many jobs are advertised for PhDs in sociology in one year? To answer this question we reviewed all of the entries in the Job Bank listed during the 2006 calendar year, 1653 listings overall. However, 536 of the listings were duplicate entries, mostly cases where the same school posted the same position more than once in the same academic year. In some other cases, more than one position was listed as a single advertisement. We adjusted the job postings to take these and other relevant considerations into account. The number of positions advertised for each rank can be seen in Table 1.

Positions for assistant professors are the most commonly posted position, and are

**Table 1: Jobs Advertised for PhD Sociologists, 2006**

Type of Position	N	% of Advertisements
Assistant Professors	610	56.2
Associate Professors	65	6.0
Full Professors	49	4.5
Instructors/Lecturers	64	5.9
Fellowships, Post-Docs	71	6.5
Academic/Other	138	12.7
Sociological Practice	89	8.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>1086</b>	<b>100</b>

roughly 10 times more common than postings for associate or full professor positions. The portal of entry for most academic careers remains the assistant professor position.

In spite of the concern about the growth of adjunct, part-time and temporary positions, the number of instructor positions advertised in the ASA Job Bank (64) was quite modest. It is probably the case that most of these positions are filled without being posted on the Job Bank and without a national search. According to the last survey of sociology departments *How Does Your Department Compare* (see [http://www.asanet.org/cs/root/leftnav/research\\_and\\_stats/department\\_survey\\_results\\_academic\\_year\\_2001/2002](http://www.asanet.org/cs/root/leftnav/research_and_stats/department_survey_results_academic_year_2001/2002)), an estimated 44 percent of temporary and part time faculty at Research I universities are graduate students in the departments that hired them. Post-doctoral postings and fellowships were slightly more common than were instructor positions (71 versus 64), although post-doctoral positions are not available in many specialty areas of the discipline.

The designation "Academic/Other" can refer to positions for center directors, deans, department heads, visiting professors and other targeted openings. However, about one quarter of these positions (37 of 138) were faculty positions with rank open or more than one rank listed. Thus, there are 37 positions open to assistant professors in addition to the 610 noted above, although these openings are not restricted to assistant professors.

A total of 89 advertisements for positions in sociological practice were advertised in the Job Bank. This is almost certainly an underestimate of the number of such positions. About one quarter of these positions were located in university settings. These were often positions such as project manager on a research study, a

research analyst or member of a research team. Other positions were at social-science research organizations such as the American Institutes for Research, Mathematica Policy Research, and the Public Policy Institute of California.

## **The Supply of New PhDs in Sociology**

How does the supply of advertised positions compare with the potential demand? According to data from the National Science Foundation's Survey of Earned Doctorates listed on the ASA website at [http://www.asanet.org/cs/root/leftnav/research\\_and\\_stats/department\\_survey\\_results\\_academic\\_year\\_2001/2002](http://www.asanet.org/cs/root/leftnav/research_and_stats/department_survey_results_academic_year_2001/2002) a total of 562 PhDs in sociology were granted in 2006, including 200 men and 362 women. This total was similar to the average for the period 2000-2006 (555), but was somewhat higher than was the case during the early 1990s, when the number of new sociology PhDs dropped below 500 per year.

A comparison between the number of positions advertised in the ASA Job Bank and the number of new PhDs in sociology suggests that there are more jobs than new PhDs or that demand exceeds supply. The number of new PhDs in sociology has averaged well under than 600 for the past two decades. In contrast, the number of assistant professor openings is now at least 600, and may be closer to 650 once open-rank positions are included. Adding post-doctoral positions and instructor positions yields a total of over 700 new positions even without taking non-academic positions into account.

We would qualify the conclusion in a number of ways, however, before asserting that demand outstrips supply. First, not all positions are filled. In their study of sociology faculty openings during the 1990s, Clawson and Holmes (1992)

found that about one quarter of junior faculty listings did not result in a candidate being hired. While the most common reason was the search was cancelled, in other cases departments do not reach a consensus and ultimately no appointment was made.

Second, many positions posted in the ASA Job Bank are not restricted to sociologists but may instead be filled by those with degrees in other areas. Thus, the 86 openings in criminology may be occupied by those who studied in a criminal justice program or those with credential in other fields rather than by a sociologist. Similarly, positions in business schools may be filled by economists or psychologists rather than by sociologists. Nonetheless, 610 new assistant professor openings plus 37 open-rank positions plus 70 post-doctoral fellowships plus 63 adjunct or instructor positions yields considerably more openings than new PhDs. For the moment, the number of openings for academic positions for sociologists should encourage those seeking to pursue a PhD degree.

### Skills Match

Another concern regarding employment is the degree of fit between the specialty area of an advertised opening and the candidate. Since academic sociologists and sociological positions are often quite specialized, it may be that most candidates are in a position to effectively compete effectively only for positions in their area of expertise. What can we learn about specialty areas from the ASA Job Bank? Of the fields specified, criminology was most commonly listed as the first field, (86) (see Table 2). Quantitative methods or statistics was a distant second at 29, with theory ranking third at 21. Urban and community would come in fourth with 19 entries, unless race and ethnicity, also at 19, is combined with race, class and gender (12), in which case this

**Table 2: Assistant Professor Positions by First Field of Experience in 2006**

Position Type	N
Field Open	227
Criminology/Delinquency	86
Quantitative Methods/Statistics	29
Theory	21
Urban/Community	19
Race and Ethnicity	19
Law and Society	15
Medical	13
Race, Class and Gender	12
Demography	11
Family	11
Social Psychology	11
Culture	10
Organizations/Economic	10
Stratification/Labor Markets	9
Policy Analysis/Public Policy	8
Education	7
Environment	7
Latino/Latina	7
Political/Social Movements	7
Aging/Social Gerontology	6
Applied Sociology/Evaluation Research	5
Social Welfare/Social Work	5
Other Fields	75
<b>Total</b>	<b>610</b>

combination would rank just above quantitative methods). With the exception of race and ethnicity, the most frequent specialty areas advertised in the Job Bank do not match the graduate student section memberships. The five most common student specialties include sociology of culture; sex and gender; organizations, occupations, and work; social movements; and race and ethnic minorities.

The data are more reassuring, however, than the mismatch between advertised specialties and student specialties would indicate. The most common position was open with respect to field of specialization: 227 of the 610 assistant professor positions did not list a field of expertise. And many of those positions which did specify a field indicated more than one area (unfortunately only two fields of expertise are recorded in the ASA Job Bank). Of the 383 positions specifying a field of expertise, about two-thirds (253) indicated a second field. Thus, the field is

either open or there are multiple fields listed for more than three-quarters of the assistant professor openings.

Overall, these findings suggest that the discipline is not producing too many PhDs for the jobs available. Although there may be some mismatch between areas of interest, as the findings show, the most common specialty in Job Bank advertisements is open.

These findings suggest a relatively good market for new sociology PhDs.

## References

Clawson, Dan and Kathleen Holmes. 1992. "The Job Market in Sociology." *Footnotes* 20(9) (November), p. 7.

*Jerry A. Jacobs, Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and former Editor of the American Sociological Review, has studied women's careers in a variety of settings. Roberta Spalter-Roth is Director of Research for the American Sociological Association and develops and disseminates information on sociologists' career trajectories from the post-baccalaureate through retirement.*



# Research Briefs

The following are links to research briefs and reports produced by the ASA's Department of Research and Development for dissemination in a variety of venues and concerning topics of interest to the discipline and profession. These briefs can be located at [http://www.asanet.org/cs/root/leftnav/research and stats/briefs and articles/briefs and articles](http://www.asanet.org/cs/root/leftnav/research%20and%20stats/briefs%20and%20articles/briefs%20and%20articles)



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What are they Doing With a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology?	2008	PDF
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