

# NCSA 2024 Presidential Address: Sociologists' Role in Building a Better North Carolina

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## Introduction

I want to thank everyone again for taking the time to be here today to connect, share ideas, and encourage community and growth within the state of North Carolina. As an NC native, as well as a graduate of both UNC Greensboro and NC State University, it feels incredibly meaningful to look around this room and see so many wonderful people who mentored me in my own academic journey, people who continue to mentor me in my role as junior faculty, and people who I have had the joy of guiding and mentoring on their student journeys. These meetings remind me, not just of my passion for and commitment to the field of sociology, but my passion and commitment to this state. And the address I want to give today is rooted in both those passions and commitments.

While I have a strong love for this beautiful state, I also recognize that we live in darker and uncertain times. In just the past year, we have seen legislation that limits transgender youth's and women's access to medical care and bodily autonomy. At the same time, we have legislation rolling back state environmental protections and reducing transparency in public records. Finally, we see a multi-pronged attack on public education, restricting discussions of race, gender, and sexuality in K-12 classrooms, reducing public school funding, and more.

And these uncertain times have also crept into higher education, as we face changes in state funding and program evaluation. We also see the lived reality here and the possibility elsewhere of program elimination.

Each of these things is part of larger national trends and trends that directly involve sociology- as we can see through the state of Florida's removal of sociology courses from the general education curriculum. These few examples are part of a larger movement, both nationally and globally. and are going to be compounded by the crises of global capitalism, forced migration, genocide, and environmental catastrophe.

I often think about what my role is in addressing these injustices- my role not just as an activist, NC resident, or conscientious human but also as a sociologist. I believe that sociology gives me the tools to understand the social problems at hand, the root causes of these problems, and the possible pathways to address them. As a sociologist, I strongly believe that it is my responsibility to use these tools to create a more equitable world. I believe there are multiple ways that we can do this.

First, sociology gives us the evidence to refute the bad faith claims that promote these unjust systems. I believe it is my duty to use that evidence to push back against inflammatory, harmful rhetoric and legislation. For example, sociology teaches us a more nuanced understanding of gender diversity, recognizing gender as a social construction, a series of spectrums, an organizing structure, and a system of stratification. Through this lens, we can see through the moral panics attacking transgender people's access to bodily autonomy, self-determination, and life-saving medical care- seeing it for what it really is: a fear of a collapsing gender structure and a desperate attempt to

preserve cisnormativity and heteropatriarchy (Barbee and Hull 2024).

While North Carolina's most recent abortion restrictions were passed under false claims to protect life, sociological research shows us that the true way to protect life is comprehensive sex education which prevents unintended pregnancies (Goldfarb and Lieberman 2021). It is the expansion of social support and financial resources that gives people the means to grow their families without descending into poverty. It is the dismantling of an economic system built on exploitation that fosters poverty, housing insecurity, inaccessible medical care, and more. To protect life, also means to affirm LGBTQ youth- who, sociological data tells us, have disproportionality high rates of victimization, homelessness, and suicidality- reminding them that they are loved and supported rather than shamed and stigmatized (Barbee and Hull 2024; Fulginiti et al. 2021). Furthermore, sociology reminds us that these abortion restrictions do not impact all people equally, but will disproportionality affect poor women and women of color (Treder, Amutah-Onukagha, and White 2023).

Through our discipline we are armed with the knowledge to recognize social problems, calling them out and highlighting the ways they are merely a symptom of an inequitable and unjust structure.

Because of this, I often find that as a sociological, I am also considered a major buzzkill.

Breaking free from neoliberal ideology, rugged individualism, and misleading progress narratives, we scrutinize the structures that subjugate us and highlight the root causes of our current problems. Often these root causes trace back to the colonization of the land now known as the United States, the genocide and displacement of Native Americans, and the kidnapping, enslavement, and torture of Africans. For many, this can feel overwhelming. Applying a band-aid through volunteer work, donations, voting, and policy changes built on reform feels tangible, easy, and doable. Creating true systemic change can feel daunting and impossible. I encounter many students who find learning these problems to be hopeless. Hence, why we're the buzzkill. Or maybe I'm just the buzzkill!

But when I look at the world, I see something different. I find a critical, intersectional, sociological lens, allows me to see hope and possibility. Ultimately, I see the generative potentials of an abolitionist future.

But what is abolition? I've spent a lot of time reflecting on this word. The writer, Brea Baker, described abolition as "an ongoing process of assessing and replacing any system that doesn't serve all of us." As sociologists, we have spent a lot of time assessing systems, and exploring the inequalities within various social institutions, and I'd argue that it is pretty clear that none of these systems serve all of us. But what really gets me about this quote is not the assessment part but the replacement part. Similarly, Ruth Wilson Gilmore said, "Abolition is about presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions." Abolition isn't just about assessing, thinking, or researching. It's about putting that assessment into action. Abolition is generative, creative, and visionary- daring to dream of what a world could look like without these inequitable systems and envisioning what will replace them. Abolition is a long journey as these systems will not be dismantled overnight, but it is the daring to dream and the courage to work towards making that dream a reality. Abolition is praxis- putting our theories, our concepts, into action.

Harney and Moten said in their book *The Undercommons*, "What is, so to speak, the object of abolition? Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society."

And again, this brings me to sociology. It leaves me to wonder how can we, as sociologists, engage in that visionary quest- that praxis? How can we, as sociologists in North Carolina, use our training, our knowledge, our research, and our teaching to build a better future? To stand strong in the face of these countless attacks against our discipline, our lives, and our communities and dare to construct an alternative? Founding a new society. What is the NCSA's role in this movement building?

I certainly don't have all of these answers, nor do I think that I, as a singular person at my own unique intersections of privilege and oppression, can build a perfect answer. Instead, as President of NCSA, my vision is to invite all of us to dream together. To use our own positions, skill sets, and knowledge bases to imagine these alternatives. To build coalitions with community organizations actively engaged in that work. And to use this coalition building, this imagining, plus our teaching and our research, for public good- to be an organization of praxis. I think this conference demonstrates that all of us have so much to offer each other, and with that, I also believe

that we have so much to offer our community. I, personally, would love for NCSA to be a space to do just that.

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## Author Biographies

**Victoria A. Kurdyla, PhD.** (she/they) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. As an instructor, Dr. Kurdyla uses a queer and intersectional lens to foster critical thinking and engagement amongst student. Her research explores experiences of intimate partner violence and barriers to help seeking for survivors that hold multiple marginalized identities. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, the *Journal of Homosexuality*, and the *American Behavioral Scientist*. As a scholar-activist, she is deeply committed to addressing systemic injustice.