Overview:

Poverty is an essential component of a stratified capitalist society. However the facts of poverty and experiences of the poor have rarely been emphasized in contemporary public discourse. In recent years brief mentions of poverty have reflected either the hailing of the alleged “success” of welfare reform, or the emphasis on the growing disparities between the super-wealthy and working families. As the United States continues to experience economic struggle and skyrocketing costs of living, issues of poverty have come back to the public mind under the umbrella of “working-families” more generally. In this course we will look close up at the multi-faceted experiences of low-income families who struggle to make ends meet to understand the source of these arguments as well as what they leave out. This approach will emphasize both living experience and variations within that experience by issues of race, ethnicity, gender, income-level, immigration and other diverse statuses.

Course Goals:

- Students will develop an understanding of poverty as a multi-faceted experience and those who live within it as a diverse body of individuals who live a variety of experiences as shaped by variations such as race, ethnicity, nationality, language, parenting status, gender, age and other diverse qualities.
- Students will build an understanding of the way that poverty influences and affects their own lives and the society in which they live.
- Students will build an understanding of low-income people as fellow community members who share universal human needs. Students will explore and work through and beyond social stereotypes about the poor and views of low-income individuals/families as “other” or “less than” individuals/families who have higher incomes.

A Core Course:

As a core course in sociology this course will meet the following additional goals.
- a) Help students to ask, and answer "perennial questions"
- b) Cultural diversity
- c) Present an historical view of the subject
- d) Demonstrate the methodology of the discipline
- e) Writing component
- f) Challenge students to create a personal philosophy

In this class students will work to answer the perennial questions connecting the personal and familial experiences of poverty to larger social structures and forces including public policy, discourse, controlling images and stereotypes and capitalist market systems. Our approach to building this understanding will strongly emphasize the diversity of experiences of poverty as marked by differences in gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, language, parenting status, gender, age and other diverse qualities. We will build an understanding of contemporary poverty by developing a historic perspective examining how changing social forces over time have developed into present-day structures, policies, and attitudes that influence the situation of poverty today. Students will engage the topic through hands on research assignments to develop both a conceptual understanding of poverty, as well as a methodological understanding of social science research within the field of sociology. Finally throughout the course students will engage in multiple written assignments in order to demonstrate their development of a sociological understanding of poverty in America and a personal philosophy through which students will build an understanding of the way that poverty influences and affects their own lives and the society in which they live.
Assignments & Expectations:

As a student in this course you are expected to attend classes regularly and actively engage in class discussions. Class discussions, presentations and/or lectures are essential to building understanding and will be considered required and important course materials (Take Good Notes!) Please come to class prepared to discuss the assigned material for the day and make connections between the readings and any additional materials presented in class. EVERY STUDENT SHOULD COME PREPARED EACH CLASS WITH SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT THE TOPIC. This could be a question, a passage you appreciated, something you found confusing, or a comment related to the material. I understand that students have many different learning styles and there are many ways to demonstrate participation. In addition to in class participation, participation points can be earned outside class through visiting during office hours, e-mailing questions or additional thoughts after the discussion or sharing current events related to poverty in America at the beginning of class or through e-mail for me to announce.

Participation (10%)
Take Home Midterm Exam (20%) ~ Due Oct. 21st
Group Project (20%) ~ To be presented in class Oct. 28th, Oct. 30th, Nov. 4th, & Nov. 6th.
Research Paper (30%) ~ Due Nov. 27th
Final Exam Take Home (20%) ~ Due 3pm on date of scheduled final exam

Extra-Credit Opportunities

Extra Credit Opportunity:
If it is brought to my attention that there is a local event on or off-campus that directly relates to issues of Poverty in America, students can receive 2% extra credit for attending such an event, discussing it in class, and writing a one page summary and reflection on the event. A maximum of 3 such events may be used toward extra credit. Students who meet the three components of the task will receive full credit, or ½ credit equaling 1% or 2% extra credit towards the final grade accordingly. Students who do not personally attend the event will not receive any extra credit.

ANY EVENTS TO BE CONSIDERED FOR EXTRA CREDIT MUST BE BROUGHT TO MY ATTENTION AT LEAST ONE WEEK IN ADVANCE OF THE EVENT IN ORDER TO REVIEW & APPROVE THE EVENT AND ANNOUNCE THE OPPORTUNITY TO THE ENTIRE CLASS.

Grading procedures are implemented in order to provide a means for students to communicate, and teachers to evaluate, how successfully a student has engaged the course material. If you find that the proposed means of assessment does not meet your needs or allow you to best demonstrate your engagement of the course you are invited to propose an alternate means through which you will be evaluated. If you are interested in an alternate grading structure please write a written evaluation proposal and submit it to me no later than September 18th.

If I find that your proposal mutually meets the needs of all parties (student, professor, and university) I will approve your request, or discuss any necessary compromises in order to meet university and instructor requirements.

Required Readings:


Katherine Newman & Victor Chen, The Missing Class: Portraits of The Near Poor in America

Additional Readings Available on Online Course Reserves (Indicated by an asterisk)*
Course Calendar:

THEORY

September 2nd
Syllabus, Assignments, Required Readings, Etc.
Michelle Tea Introduction to Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class* (In Class)

September 4th
Patricia Hill Collins “Toward a New Vision: Race, Class & Gender as Categories of Analysis & Connection”*  
Gregory Mantsios, “Media Magic: Making Class Invisible”*

September 9th

WELFARE

September 11th: What is “Welfare”?  
Lucy A. Williams, “Race, Rat Bites & Unfit Mothers”*

September 16th
Linda Burnham “Welfare Reform, Family Hardship & Women of Color”* (optional)

Eileen Boris “When Work is Slavery”*  
Tanya Mitchell “If I survive it will be despite welfare reform”*  
Alejandra Marchevsky & Jeanne Thomas “The End of Welfare As We Know It”*  
Video: A Day’s Work, A Day’s Pay

September 23rd
Making Ends Meet Chapters 2 & 3

THE WORKING-POOR

September 25th
Beth Shulman “3 Workers”*  
David Shipler “Work Doesn’t Work”*  
Video: 30 Days “Minimum Wage”

September 30th
Making Ends Meet Chapters 4 & 5
October 2nd

Pierette Hondagleu-Sotelo, “Maid in LA”*

William Julius Wilson “The Meaning and Significance of Race: Employers and Inner-City Workers”*

Greg Halpern *Harvard Works Because We Do*  

* This book is primarily a photography collection with personal narratives interspersed with the photographs. The book will be on hard copy in-house reserve at the library. Please read at least 2 narratives and look at the pictures in the book.

October 7th

Making Ends Meet Chapters 6 & 8

October 9th

Lynn Fujiwara, Mothers without Citizenship: Asian Immigrant & Refugees Negotiating Poverty and Hunger in Post-Welfare Reform*

Inequality at the Margins: The Effects of Welfare, the minimum wage & tax credits on low-wage labor.*

THE NEAR POOR

October 14th

The Missing Class Chapters 1 & 2

October 16th

The Missing Class Chapter 3

October 21st

The Missing Class Chapters 4 & 5

MIDTERM ESSAY DUE

FAMILY ISSUES

October 23rd

Lisa Dodson & Ellen Bravo. “When there is no time or money: work family and community lives of low-income families”*


Ellen Bravo. “What if John Edwards Worked at Walmart?”*

October 28th

Ellen Scott, et al. “My Children Come First”. *

Lisa Dodson Wage Poor Mothers & Moral Economy*

GROUP PROJECT PRESENTATIONS
October 30th
Mark Greenberg, “Next Steps for Federal Child Care Policy”*

GROUP PROJECT PRESENTATIONS

November 4th
Christopher Jencks and Kathryn Newman, “Do Poor Women Have the Right to Bear Children?”*
Lisa Dodson “Choice & Motherhood in Poor America”*

GROUP PROJECT PRESENTATIONS

November 6th
Kevin Roy “Hey Dollar Bill”*

GROUP PROJECT PRESENTATIONS

November 11th
Annette Lareau, Unequal Childhoods *

COMMUNITIES, NEIGHBORHOODS, HOUSING

November 13th
Michael Patrick MacDonald All Souls: A Family Story from Southie chapters 1-3*
Video: Holding Ground: The Re-Birth of Dudley Street

November 18th
Shanta Pandey et al. Welfare Reform in Rural Missouri: The Experience of Families*
Video: Stranger with a Camera

November 20th
NO CLASS HAVE A GOOD BREAK!

November 25th
Housing/Homelessness
Joint Center for Housing Studies: Housing Challenges & Affordability Challenges*

Short Newspaper Articles
Scott S. Greenberger, “Report Rates Boston Most Expensive City”*
Robert Kuttner “The Housing Squeeze”*
Joe McGonegal “Tenants Cry Foul Over Housing Market Tactics”*
Tony Pugh “Nation’s Poor Hit By Housing Crunch”*

Video: Poverty Outlaw

Public Policy, Social Change & Upward Mobility

November 27th

The Missing Class Chapters 7 & 8

RESEARCH PAPERS DUE

December 2nd

Katherine S. Newman, “When the Working Poor are Poor No More” p 103-112.*


December 4th

Review/Wrap-Up

FINAL EXAM WILL BE DUE AT 3 PM ON THE DATE OF THE SCHEDULED FINAL EXAM.

INCOMPLETES OR EXTENSIONS WILL ONLY BE GIVEN IN THE CASE OF A DOCUMENTED ISSUE AND A LETTER FROM YOUR DEAN.