Syllabus

From “warning off paupers” to welfare reform to unsustainable wages, this course offers an overview of poverty in the US. The class examines historical and contemporary attitudes towards and policies for poor/low-income people and families. Readings uncover the relationship between poverty and race, gender, child-raising, immigration and the expansion of a low-wage job market. We will consider past and contemporary images and language describing “the poor” and their effects on public and political debate. Throughout the term we will examine contending ideas of personal, social, and market responsibility for poverty. The course will encourage students to examine their own assumptions about who is poor, why they are, whether it matters and what should be done. Students will have the opportunity to pursue specific interests related to American poverty. Your grade will be based on class preparation & participation, a paper, and work in a student-led group presentation (see last pages for details).

Course texts are in the bookstore and may be available used, @ online bookstores:


All other readings are on course reserve or available as indicated.
January 20th

Every class will start with an open forum for a few minutes as an opportunity for you to raise topics related to people living poor in the US. This is also a time to bring up anything you want from the previous class, in the news, a personal experience or observation related to poverty and inequality. You are also encouraged to bring up any event, announcement or activities in which you are involved related to our topics. This is voluntary but I encourage everyone to participate.

- Review Student Roster – brief introductions
- Review syllabus, class participation & expectations and final paper
- **Sign up for student-led discussions**

On the first day of class we will go over the topics together and sign you all up. We need to cover ten classes so some compromise will be needed but I would like everyone to be working on a topic that interests you. There will be three students per topic but some may be two people only. During the last half hour of the first class you will all get together in your groups for an initial conversation.

*Note:* If any of the groups decides that they want to modify the topic or take a particular angle on it just send me an email about what you’d like to do and I will get back to you.

Introductory lecture

No Readings

*Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me*

January 27th

History of poor America: 1750-1850 - Colonial times, poor houses and slavery
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
1. Trattner, Chapters 1-4

*Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me*

February 3rd

History Continued: 1850-1900 - Civil War to the Progressive Era
- Discussion of readings
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
1. Trattner, Chapter 5

Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me

February 10th
The history of childhood: Child laborer and to priceless and back again

- Discussion of readings
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
1. Zelizer, Viviana “From Useful to Useless” and “From Child Labor to Child Work” Chapters 2 and 3 in Pricing the Priceless Child (1985)
2. Trattner, Chapter 6: Child Welfare
3. Burton, Childhood Adultification in Economically Disadvantaged Families. Family Relations

Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me

February 17th
The 1935 Social Security Act: Social insurance or stifling dissent?

Documents
1. Trattnor, Chapter 13: Depression and A New Deal
2. Piven and Cloward, Chapter 3 “The New Deal and Relief” in Regulating the Poor (1993)

February 24th
Family structure and personal responsibility

- Discussion of readings
- Student-led discussion
- For those who want it – We will save some time to discuss your papers

Readings:
1. Trattnor, Chapter 14: From World War to the Great Society
2. Coontz, Chapters 2 and 4: “Leave it to Beaver” and “We Have Always Stood on Our Own Two Feet” in The Way We Never Were (1992)
Recommended: Williams, “Race, Rat Bites and Unfit Mothers” (Students who have taken the class “Poverty in America” have read this but worth a reread)

March 3rd No Class

March 10th
Teen pregnancy and poverty policy

Readings:
Dodson, Don’t Call Us Out of Name (1999) Introduction – Chapter 3

March 17th
Welfare Debates: “Dependency,” poor women’s lives and welfare reform

- Discussion of readings
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
Dodson, Chapters 4 - Afterword

Recommended for those interested in more detail about the welfare system: Unwanted Claims by Joe Soss (2002)

Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me

March 24th
The marriage solution


Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me

March 31st
Forced to choose: The good worker or the good mother

- Discussion of readings
- Student-led discussion
Readings:
1. “Surprising Results in Welfare-to-Work Studies” www.nytimes.com (Go online for article)

Next week’s student group should stay to meet with me

April 7th
Working hard and working poor

1. Shulman, The Betrayal of Work Chapters 1-5

• Discussion of readings
• Student-led discussion

April 14th No Class

April 21st
An immoral economy and social responsibility

1. Dodson, The Moral Underground Introduction – Chapter 6

• Discussion of readings
• Student-led discussion

Note: Class, please Google <FESS Resources> and then go to The Self Sufficiency Standards Report for Massachusetts (FESS means Family Economic Self Sufficiency) and skim, for our discussion. If you are interested in additional estimate of a “family budget” check out Economic Policy Institute website: Look at family budget and living wage “briefs”

April 28th

Dodson, Chapter 7-10 & addendum (Research as Democracy)

• Student-led discussion
• Hand in papers
• Final comments
Participation and grading

This is an upper (mixed) level class and I expect graduate students to perform at an advanced level in terms of thoughtful reading of the material, active participation in class, and carefully developed written work.

Participation is a third of your grade

This is a highly participatory class. I have reduced the reading volume significantly so that you will have time to really engage with and discuss the material. I will be calling on people who do not volunteer but if you have a very difficult time speaking in class; talk with me about this. Each week we will go around the room and take some of your (prepared) comments and questions from the readings to put up on the board for class discussion. Come to class with written questions. If it becomes necessary I will require that the class submit written questions each week.

If you are going to be absent, please make sure you email me in advance of class – I will be taking attendance!

Paper is a third of your grade – we will discuss the paper in class.

You have one paper (maximum 15 -- graduate students, 20 -- pages double-spaced, 12pt font, plus footnotes that are no more than a page, single space) and it will be assigned many weeks in advance so there should be no problem getting it in on time. All late papers will lose credit. The paper will be turned in as hard copy on the last day of class. On or by March 10th you need to submit an abstract of the paper summarizing your approach (a thesis statement, sources of research, and outline of your argument).

For this assignment, you will choose from the 3 topics below. Please note that you are free to choose a particular angle or approach to the topic. For example, some students have examined their topic in terms of historical and national policy, or have analyzed a legal debate, or gathered “lived experience” to delve more deeply into the topic, or they have done a comparative (other countries) analysis. Based on your chosen approach, you may use an array of resources (library, newspapers, policy institutes, interviews, specific court case(s), getting in touch with people who are actively involved on the issue, etc.). Regardless of your approach, you will be expected to frame the major issues, briefly, and in your own words. Don’t take too much space reciting case law or public policy; rather summarize what is going on in these debates and then turn to your own ideas, critiques, or alternatives (or a combination). Remember the underlying focus of this class is on poverty, class, and the American experience so keep this frame central to your thinking. We’ll put aside some class time before your abstract is due -- on March 10th – so you can discuss your progress with me. Below you will find the three topics and possible questions but you do some initial reading and raise the points in which you are interested.
Paper topics

1. Work First as the government policy that replaced a combination of education and social welfare.

Possible questions to pursue: What was/is this policy? Why did it prove so successful during the years of welfare reform? How did the rhetoric of work-first and work ethic diverge from the reality of low-wage jobs and employment, particularly in single parent families? What might be a better policy approach?

2. US policy for child care for low-wage families.

Possible questions: What kind of investment has been made relative to need, what are the underlying assumptions embedded and what is the rhetoric, what is the status of childcare for low-income children, what kinds of attitudes towards the poor are reflected, etc.

3. American business or the market responsibility for US workers and their families.

Possible approaches: How does the market function relative to wages, what are the consequences, does the government intervene adequately (and should it), how should this change, etc.

Student led discussion is a third of your grade

Student led discussions introduce current issues related to poverty and inequality from the start of the course. Thus, we spend about half of each class discussing readings on history and policy antecedents -- about 60 minutes -- and the other half staying abreast of current debates many of which reflect the history of American attitudes about poverty and working class people.

On the first day of class everyone will sign on for a student coordinated/led discussion on a contemporary issue related to poverty or economic inequality. We have 13 classes and of those 10 will include a student-led discussion (based on 30 students registered at present) 3 students for each discussion. You are expected to share in the effort equally – estimate about 50 minutes – half for a presentation or activity and half for open class discussion.

Note: Each group should meet with me the week before you lead your discussion. By our meeting you should have already met together and outlined an approach that we will review.

The student-led groups will be expected to:

- Briefly set the stage for your topic: Provide a quick backstory in language that the class can grasp quickly (definitely not lengthy descriptions of history, clinical issues, federal policy arguments or state statutes) 3-4 minutes.
- Frame a debate or activity: Raise questions that will pull your classmates in. You can be as creative as you wish with this. For example students have come in with a very brief but provocative video segment (5 minutes) on immigrant workers to spark a discussion. Others presented a proposal to build affordable
housing, that turns out to be right next to “your” family home that led to a debate about public and private rights and responsibilities. Another group outlined a Supreme Court case on getting rid of race/class based college admissions – passing out a 1-2 page background brief – and then “testified” before class with everyone free to challenge. Prepare some pointed questions to get people talking.

- **Facilitate** – but please do not dominate the discussion!
- **Hand in to me** an outline of who did what on the project so that I know there was equal distribution of effort.

**Topics & Dates**

1. January 27th: Cost of college, college preparation, and social implications
2. February 3rd:
3. February 10th: “High stakes testing” in public schools and social implications
4. February 17th: Protecting or privatizing Social Security
5. February 24th: Bail outs for banks as government policy: Why does it happen and what are the arguments?
6. March 10th: Current rise in teen pregnancy (after years of decline): What has been/ is going on?
7. March 17th: Public services (health care, education, etc.) for undocumented people: arguments for and against.
8. March 24th: Marriage promotion programs: What was behind this policy and do the data tell us about the success of this approach?
9. March 31st: Family Responsibility Discrimination (This is a new effort that legal scholars and courts are using to argue that working mothers are being discriminated against at work because they respond to family needs)
10. April 7th: What do we consider a livable income? Examine minimum wage, poverty line, and self sufficiency.
11. April 21st: Redistribution of wealth – Pros and Cons