From Poor Law to Working Poor: Poverty matters in the US
Sociology 591
6-8:30 Carney 009

Professor: Lisa Dodson
lisa.dodson@bc.edu
Office hours: 3-5 Wednesdays or by appointment in 408 McGuinn

Syllabus

In the US today, economic inequality is higher than ever before and poverty – particularly among children -- has grown dramatically over the last decade. One third of our working families cannot earn a sustainable income. The middle class has lost significant economic ground (particularly in housing, college access, and retirement options) while the wealthiest 1% of Americans gained an ever-larger share of the nation’s wealth. Today the economic inequality in the US is equivalent to such developing countries such as Ivory Coast, Jamaica, and Malaysia.

How did we get here? What are the historical antecedents of contemporary poverty and inequality? From “warning off paupers” to poor wages and the contemporary winner-take-all economy, this course examines national trends, public attitudes, and social policies related to American poverty. Throughout the term we will examine contending explanations for poverty including individual behavior, culture, and economic structure. Underlying most of our discussion is the question, “What does it matter if an increasing proportion of our people live poor – so long as ‘we’ aren’t among them?”

The course will encourage you to uncover and examine your beliefs about class, meritocracy, fairness, and the distribution of wealth. You will be encouraged to pursue a specific topic of personal interest (for example marriage and poverty, homelessness, teen parenting, immigration, foreclosure society, bail outs, sustainable wages, etc.)

Your grade will be based on class preparation and participation, one 8-10 page paper and 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 online through course reserve
January 19th

Every class will start with an open forum. This is 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.

- Review Student Roster – brief introductions
- Review syllabus, class participation,* expectations, and paper
- Explanation and sign up for student-led discussions
- Introductory lecture

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 2-3 students per topic. 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.

No Readings

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

January 26th
History of poor America: 1750-1850 - Colonial times, poor houses and slavery

- Discussion of your reading questions and comments* (see participation expectations, below)
- Class exercise: Designing a poor law
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
1. Trattner, Chapters 1- 4

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

February 2nd
History Continued: 1850-1900 - Civil War to the Progressive Era

- Discussion of your reading questions
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
1. Trattner, Chapter 5

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

**February 9th**
Child laborer and to priceless child and back again

- Discussion of your reading questions
- Student-led discussion
- Distribute paper topic

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. Burton, Linda. Childhood Adultification in Economically Disadvantaged Families. Family Relations

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

**February 16th**
The 1935 Social Security Act: Social insurance or stifling dissent?

- Discussion of your reading questions
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
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)

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

**February 23rd**
Family structure and personal responsibility

- Discussion of your reading questions
- Student-led discussion

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)

**Student group for March 16th should stay to meet with me**

**March 2nd**
Teen pregnancy and poverty policy

Our speaker is Patricia Quinn, Executive Director of Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy. She will talk about the teen sexuality, pregnancy, and parenting and social attitudes that affect programs for teen parents. She will also be talking about her work and the role of non-governmental organizations that are working on major social issues, both trying to serve vulnerable people and influence public policy toward affecting social change.

Please raise questions and comments after her talk. Usually the Alliance is looking for student volunteers so do ask her about that too, if you are interested.

Readings:
2. Dodson, L. Don’t Call Us Out of Name (1999) Chapters 1 & 2

Discussion with speaker.

March 9th – Spring Break

March 16th
Welfare Debates: “Dependency,” poor women’s lives and welfare reform
- Discussion of your reading questions
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
4. The Bitter Fruit of Welfare Reform (On BB Vista)

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

March 23rd Hand in paper

Personal Responsibility
- Discussion of your readings questions
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
2. Folbre and Coontz, “Marriage, Poverty and Public Policy” (On BB Vista)
3. Chaudry, A. “Introduction: Children’s care in an age of personal responsibility” Chapter 1 in Putting Children First

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

March 30th
The work solution
- Discussion of your readings questions
- Student-led discussion

Readings:
3. Dodson, Lisa and Ellen Bravo. Chapter 5 in *Unfinished Work* “When there is no time or money: Work, family, and community lives of low-income families” (Note: Make sure you read the paper with this title – the co-authorship was confused with another paper)

April 6th

Working hard and living poor

Our speaker is Jaimie McNeil, Organizer for Local 26 and Unite Here (that represented the Hyatt 100) will be speaking in our class. Jaimie will talk about labor unions, their role in working for just wages and workers’ right, and how unions are viewed in the US today. Accompanying Jamie will be one of the “Hyatt 100,” the group of Boston Hyatt workers who were fired (some, after more than 20 years of service) and replaced with lower paid workers. They will talk about the importance of unions and union allies/alliances to build greater social justice.


Discussion with speakers

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

April 13th

Inequality and personal responsibility

1. Dodson, L. *The Moral Underground* Pages 73-132
   - Discussion of your reading questions
   - Student-led discussion

*Student group for April 27th should stay to meet with me*

April 20th   Easter Break

April 27th

Inequality and personal responsibility continued
Finish *The Moral Underground* Pages 133-211
- Discussion of your reading questions
- Student-led discussion

**May 4**<sup>th</sup> (We will meet if we need a make up class)

---

**Participation and grading**

This is an upper level class and I expect students to read the material carefully and prepare questions for class, participate in discussions, and put thought and research into your short papers and class presentation. Each of the follow represent a third of your grade.

*Participation (34% of grade)*

This is a highly participatory class so attendance and engagement is essential to doing well in the class. **Each week we will go around the room and take some of your comments/questions from the readings.** 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.** If you do not get in touch with me or speak in class it will be reflected in your grade. If no one is talking I will require 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!

**One short paper (33% of grade)** We will discuss the paper in class. This will be a short paper (8-10 pages -- *pages double-spaced, 12pt font, plus limited footnotes*) that will be based on the readings and due after midterm.

**Student led discussion (33% of 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 students registered at present) 2- 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 brief backdrop – the basic history of the issue or debate -- based on research that you will do to set the stage. Present this background in language that the class can grasp quickly (*definitely not* lengthy descriptions of history, clinical issues, or state statutes) about 5-8 minutes.

- **Direct the activity and discussion:** Create a scenario or activity that will pull your classmates and be as creative as you wish. 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. Make sure you come with 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. If anyone feels strongly that the distribution was not fairly equitable, you should email me.

**Topics for Student-led Discussions**

1. January 26: Inequality and post-secondary education (consider quality of high schools, and/or college prep., and/or cost of college)
2. February 2: Reparations? Should there be a policy for redressing ongoing effects of slavery? (Consider affirmative action or other options and pros and cons)
3. February 9th: Child workers in the US today: Who are they now and what (if anything) should be done?
4. February 16th: Social Security: Is there really a crisis? What are the arguments and what should be done?
5. February 23rd: Marriage promotion as public policy: What is it and what do we think about it?
6. March 16th: Public services for undocumented immigrant families: Why or why not?
7. March 23rd: Regulating (and punishing) parents or providing aid (childcare, healthcare, income supplements, etc)? These are two core approaches to the risks/harms experienced by low income children. What are the contending sides and what do we think?
8. March 30th: A Living Wage: What is it and what are the pros and cons?
9. April 13th: Educating low income children – given the current level of inequality, what should be done? (You need to narrow this topic – may want to use current education reform).
10. April 27th: Providing healthcare to low-income families – given the current level of inequality, what should be done (you might want to use current status of healthcare reform).