

From Poor Law to Working Poor: The world of low-income America
Sociology 591

Tuesday 4:30- 6:50 Room 415

Professor: Lisa Dodson

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Office hours are on Tuesdays before class (please email to set up a time)

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 effects on public and political debate. With the recent publicity and mobilization about economic disparity and class structure in the US, we will draw connections between current and past responses to economic stratification and examine contending ideas of personal, public, and market responsibility for economic inequities. The course will encourage students to examine their own assumptions about who is low income, 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 presentation, and 8 brief response papers.*

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

1. Trattner, William (1998). *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*. (6th. ed.). New York, NY: Free Press.
2. Dodson, Lisa (2010) *The Moral Underground: How Ordinary Americans Subvert an Immoral Economy* New York, NY: The New Press
3. Marquardt, M. F., Steigenga, T. J., Williams, P. J., & M. Vasquez. (2011). *Living “Illegal” : The Human Face of Unauthorized Immigration*.

All other readings are on BC library course reserve or on Course blackboard site (BB).

January 17th

- Review student roster – brief introductions
- Review syllabus, class participation, response papers, and presentation

General class format:

1. Each class will open with a time for an informal discussion on current issues related to poverty and economic disparity in the US. This is non-scripted but I will be expecting *each of you to participate at least once*. You should be listening to the news or seek other sources of current debates about poverty and related economic issues. This can include a personal observation or a real-world account (for a close-to-home example, in the past a student described how her roommate had to leave BC and drop out of school because a parent's job loss meant that she could not finish college). Come to class having thought about the topic (you do not need to do additional research on it) with questions or points you want to raise for discussion. Everyone is expected to participate.
 2. Reading responses/questions for class discussion – description at the end of this syllabus. This will be the basis for our weekly discussions so very important to the class and your grade.
 3. During the second half of the term – in lieu of a term paper -- you will be making a presentation (with another student or possibly two) based on off-campus inquiry related to people mobilizing on an issue related to poverty and economic disparity. Details are at the end of syllabus. There is an option for a 15-page term paper, if for some reason, you cannot do the off-campus assignment.
- Introductory lecture and discussion

No Readings

January 24th

Early poverty policies, public attitudes, and social integration of “the poor”: 1750-1850 - Colonial times

- Informal/open discussion
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments
- Last part of class: Discuss topics for off-campus research/presentation

Readings:

1. Trattner, Chapters 1- 4
2. Overview of historical poverty policy “A GUIDE TO STATISTICS ON HISTORICAL TRENDS IN INCOME INEQUALITY.” **On course BB site**

January 31st

History continued: 1850-1900 - Civil War to the Progressive Era and the “racialization” of poverty

- Informal discussion
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments
- Last part of class: Discuss topics for off-campus research/presentation

Readings:

1. Trattner, Chapter 5
2. Jones, “Bridge of Bent Backs and Laboring Muscles: The Rural South 1880-1915,” Chapter 3 in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (1985)
3. Gordon, ““Don’t Wait for Deliverers”” Chapter 5 in *Pitied But Not Entitled* (1994)
4. Bullock, et al “Media Images of the Poor”

Optional reading for those interested in the early racialization of poverty:
Lichtenstein, “That Disposition to Theft, With Which They Have Been Branded: Moral Economy, Slave Management and the Law” *Journal of Social History* (1988)

February 7th

The history of childhood in the US: Child laborer to priceless child and back again

- Informal discussion
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments
- Last part of class: Discuss topics for off-campus research/presentation

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 Adulthoodification in Economically Disadvantaged Families. *Family Relations*

Optional reading: Dodson. Girls’ Family Labor in Low-Income Households in *Journal of Marriage and Family* **BB course site**

February 14th

The 1935 Social Security Act: A new day of social responsibility or stifling dissent?

- Informal discussion
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments
- Discussion of off-campus research/presentation

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).

February 21st

Post-war conservatism, “proper” families, and the shift to personal responsibility

- Informal discussion
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments

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)
3. Jenks and Edin, “Do Poor Women Have a Right to Bear Children”? (1995)

February 28th

Social policy as “deviancy” control: Teen pregnancy and poverty policy

- Informal discussion
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments

Readings:

1. Luker, “Why do they do it?” Chapter 6 in *Dubious Conceptions* (1996)
2. National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy documents for analysis Promise Report or “Expecting Success” How policymakers and educators can help teen parents stay in school. **On course BB site**

March 6

NO CLASS

March 13th

The neoconservative regulation of poor women: “Dependency” and welfare reform

- Informal discussion
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments
- Student presentation

Readings:

Mead, “Welfare reform” in *New Politics of Poverty* (1992)
Kittay, Welfare, Dependency, and Public Ethic of Care. (Pages 189-213.)
Neubeck & Cazenave, Confronting welfare racism

Recommended for those interested in more detail about how welfare system operates to eliminate claims.

Unwanted Claims by Joe Soss (2002)

March 20th

The good worker or the good mother: Untenable choices for low income families

- Informal discussion
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments
- Student presentations

Readings:

Heymann, “Inequalities at Work and at Home” Chapter 4 in *Unfinished Work* (2005)

Dodson, Draft of Social Issues paper (forthcoming 2012) **On course BB site**

Taubman, “Free Riding on Families: Why the American Workplace Needs to Change and How to Do It” (2009) **On course BB site**

March 27th

New racial/class targets: Immigrants and “Illegals”

- Informal discussion
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments
- Student presentations

Readings:

Marquardt, et al *Living Illegal*: Introduction through (inclusive) Chapter 3

April 3rd

- Informal discussion
- Student presentations

We will be watching the film “Made in LA”

Readings:

Marquardt, et al *Living Illegal*: Chapter 4 - Conclusion

April 10th

Contemporary debates amidst growing class disparity

- Informal discussion
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments
- Student presentations

Readings:

Hacker, “Risking it All” Chapter 2 in *The Great Risk Shift* (2006)

Kuttner, “Assault on the Good Society” in *Squandering of America* (2007)

Dodson, *The Moral Underground* (2010) Introduction – Chapter 3

April 17th

The new working class: Doing critical work for unsustainable pay

- Informal discussion

Speaker

Becca Guttman

Lead organizer for Service Employees International Union, Homecare Workers.

Readings:

Dodson, Chapter 4-8

April 24th

Final comments: What kind of society do we want to live in?

- Informal discussion
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments
- Student presentations

Readings:

Dorgan, Byron L. Hogs at the trough: How companies cut their taxes by shipping jobs overseas

Dodson, Chapter 9-10 & addendum (Research as Democracy)

May 1st Professor Dodson will be speaking at a conference on “Pathways to Social Mobility” at Simmons College in Boston. You are most welcome but there is a charge to attend the conference.

Participation and grading

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

Leading an informal discussion and general participation on a current economic issue (20% of grade). This is non-scripted but I will be expecting *each of you to participate at least once*. You should be listening to the news or seek other sources of current debates about poverty and related economic issues. This can include a personal observation or a real-world account (for a close-to-home example, in the past a student described how her roommate had to leave BC and drop out of school because a parent's job loss meant that she could not finish college). Come to class having thought about the topic (you do not need to do additional research on it) with questions or points you want to raise for discussion. Everyone is expected to participate. There will be time for only 2, or at most 3, per week and each of you need to do this at least once. Don't put it off until the end!

Weekly response papers on readings and participation in class (50%)

This is a highly participatory class and most weeks the reading volume is moderate so that you will have time to really engage with and discuss the material. Each week, students are required to send a response to the week's readings, electronically, by 12 noon the day of class (for 8 of the 13 weeks of class, thus each RP with class participation is equivalent to approximately 6% of your grade). These response papers will be the basis for the class discussion thus critical reading of the material and thoughtful preparation of questions and critiques are required. I am looking for maximum 2 pages of analytical comments, challenges, and questions and not a reiteration of what you have read. *Note that you are expected to read weekly material so you can participate in class, whether or not you are passing in a paper.* I will keep a spread sheet of all response papers that are graded as a check (most papers are graded as checks), check minus, or check plus.

Final project - off campus research and presentation (30%)

The final presentation project requires that you and another student: Choose an issue and do some background research; Identify and contact an organization that works on this issue, locally; go to the site and interview someone who is working in the organization; write up your brief background and your interview "findings" to present to the class. Examples of possible topics:

- Occupy movement
- Housing foreclosure opposition
- Teen parents' advocacy efforts
- Organizing around hunger and nutrition
- Healthcare for low income families/people
- Sustainability/environmental issues related to class stratification
- Rights for unauthorized immigrants
- Single mother families and social mobility
- Low-wage workers and sustainable jobs
- One of your choice!

Some of the questions you will be addressing when you do the interview (we will develop this interview guide, in class):

Why did you (the person you are interviewing) get involved on this issue?

How did you become involved in the particular organization?

What is the organization or movement attempting to achieve?

Who is leading the organization (in terms of structure)?

What is the vision that leads this organization?

Do those involved think that more equity of economic change can be legislated -- or voted in -- or do they think that a deeper level of change is needed? If the latter, what might that entail?

Note: This assignment differs from visiting a PULSE or volunteering program and the goal of your interview is to look beyond individuals are “doing good.” You are searching for how people -- who are currently involved in a poverty/economic-justice work -- are conceptualizing anti-poverty or greater equity in the US today. We will talk more about this in class

Get started early! Each week for the first month of class (longer if need be) we will leave time to talk about your topics, about setting up the interview, for you to work on the interview questions to tailor it to the particular topic, and time for you to talk with your project partner. The final presentation includes a 5-page background piece (this must be prepared by both of you); an oral presentation you both contribute to; and a one page outline of what each of you did for the project. (*Note: In the past students have told me that not everyone has contributed equally to these projects so do get in touch with me if that is happening in your group.*)