From Poor Law to Working Poor: The world of low-income America
Sociology 591
Tuesday 12-2:30

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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 poor and low-income people and their families. We will also analyze how negative images of poor people as “takers” affect public policies. 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 perception and political debate. Against the current public attention about economic disparity in the US, we will draw connections between past and present responses to economic stratification and examine contending ideas of personal, public, and market responsibility for economic inequities. The course will encourage students to examine assumptions related to who is poor, why they are, whether it matters, and what should be done. Students will have opportunity to pursue specific interests related to American poverty. Your grade will be based on class preparation/participation, an informal poverty story, an end-of-term presentation, and 6 brief response papers.

Course texts are in the bookstore and may be available used online


All other readings are on BC library course reserve or on Course BlackBoard site (BB)
January 14th: Introduction to Poor Law to Working Poor

- Review student roster – brief introductions.
- Review syllabus, class participation, response papers, and presentation.
- Opening lecture Course themes: Poverty trends and contending views on poverty in the US.

General class format:

1. Each class will open with a time for announcements relative to poverty matters (this is not required). We will discuss this open forum in the first class.
2. **One or two students – based on a schedule -- will then lead a 10-15 minute poverty story.** These are informal and discussion-oriented; the schedule will be circulated on the first day. Your “story of poverty in America” can be based on media accounts, work that you are engaged in, personal history or experiences, or other sources that spark discussion. I will offer some examples of this activity. You do not have to do additional library research for this assignment unless you think that is needed. Most important, come to class having thought about your topic, perhaps already discussed it with others or sought other viewpoints. **You should have a carefully developed discussion question for the class.** Everyone in the class is expected to participate in the unscripted conversation much as you would in a group of your friends or acquaintances.
3. Led by reading responses or reflections (6 over the term) we will discuss the readings. **Reflection papers are due at 12 (noon) on Mondays, the day before class.** Note that your reflections and questions will be the basis for our weekly discussions so very important to the class and your grade.
4. Class activities will be integrated into some of the classes and possibly speakers from organizations that address poverty matters. In most cases there is no preparation—only participation -- required.
5. **During the last part of the term** – in lieu of a term paper -- you will be making a presentation with another student or possibly two. There are two ways to approach this term project. You can choose to do a “field research” project, i.e., gather information off campus through some activity, job, or network or through talking with/interviewing people and observing a program or service. Or, you may choose to do a conventional library-based presentation about a specific topic related to economic hardship in the US. We will discuss in more detail.

To summarize, this class requires a high degree of participation in various formats, seven reading/reflection papers, and a final in-depth presentation.
January 21st

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

- Announcements or news item (informal)
- Scheduled poverty stories
- Reading responses and comments
- Lecture on poor house as poverty policy
- In-class activity: Making rules for a contemporary Poor House

Readings:
1. Trattner, Chapters 1-4

January 28th

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

- Announcements or news item (informal)
- Scheduled poverty stories
- Reading questions and comments
- Lecture on racialization of poverty
- Last part of class: We will take some time to discuss term research/presentations

Readings:
1. Trattner, Chapter 5
3. Bullock, et al “Media Images of the Poor”

Optional reading for those interested in the early racialization of poverty:

February 4th

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

- Announcements or news item (informal)
- Scheduled poverty stories
- Reading questions and comments
- Orphan Train children
- Class activity— Regulating Child Labor: Privacy, children’s development and public cost
Readings:

2. Zelizer, Viviana “From Useful to Useless” and “From Child Labor to Child Work” Chapters 2 and 3 in Pricing the Priceless Child (1985)

**February 11th**
The 1935 Social Security Act: A new day of social responsibility or stifling dissent?

- Announcements or news item (informal)
- Scheduled poverty stories
- Reading questions and comments

Readings
1. Trattnor, Chapter 13: Depression and A New Deal
3. SS reading
4. Class activity: How should we change – should we change – Social Security?

**February 18th**
Post-war conservatism, “proper” families, and the shift to personal responsibility

- Announcements or news item (informal)
- Scheduled poverty stories
- Reading questions and comments
- Class activity: Debate on personal responsibility

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)

**February 25th**
Social policy as “deviancy” control: Teen pregnancy and poverty policy

- Announcements or news item (informal)
- Scheduled poverty stories
- Reading questions and comments

Readings:
3. Luker. *Why do they do it?*

**March 4th**

**NO CLASS**

**March 11th**

The Welfare debate: Regulation of poor women, “dependency” theory and welfare reform

- Announcements or news item (informal)
- Scheduled poverty stories
- Reading questions and comments

Readings:


Recommended for those interested in more detail about how welfare system operates to eliminate claims. *Unwanted Claims* by Joe Soss (2002)

**March 18th**

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

- Informal discussion
- Scheduled poverty stories
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments

Readings:


Collins and Mayer. Chapters 3-5 (to page 146).

**March 25th**

New targets of poverty stereotype: Immigrants and “Illegals”

- Informal discussion
- Scheduled poverty stories
- Discussion of your reading questions and comments

- Update on your presentations

Readings:

Marquardt, et al *Living Illegal:*
Introduction through Chapter 3 (through page 105)
April 1st  Speaker- To be announced when confirmed

- Informal discussion
- Scheduled poverty story

Readings:
Marquardt, et al Living Illegal: Chapter 4 – Conclusion (pages 106-204)

April 8th  No Class
Use this time to finish your presentations!

April 15th  Student presentations

Contemporary debates amidst growing class disparity
- Informal discussion
- First 30 minutes: Discussion of your reading questions and comments

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

April 22nd  Student presentations

- Informal discussion
- Student presentations

April 29th  Student presentations

Final comments

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!

1. Poverty story as described (20% of grade).

2. Weekly response papers (6) on readings and participation in class discussions and activities (40%).

   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. I am looking for maximum 3 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 spreadsheet of all response papers that are graded as a check (most papers are graded as checks), check minus, or check plus.

3. Final project/presentation (40%)

   Each student will do field and/or library research on a topic (listed below) that addresses an aspect of poverty in the contemporary US. You may choose to work with another student if you would prefer. The last three weeks of classes will be final presentations, approximately 15 minutes each (25-30 for two-student presentations). You will also submit an outline of the presentation and a bibliography of the references or sources that you used.

   Early in the term you should choose your topic and do some background research (by end of January); identify and contact an organization that works on this issue, locally (by 2nd week in February); go to the site and interview/talk with someone who is working in the organization and observe the ordinary routine of the anti-poverty organization (by end of February/first week of March); develop your presentation and then present to the class (mid-to late April). Possible topics are listed below but you may also choose an alternative – send me a description.

   Housing (access for low-income families or foreclosure effects).
   Teen parenting (program to serve or educational efforts to prevent or teen self-advocacy).
   Organizing around hunger and nutrition (WIC or SNAP program or food pantry).
   Healthcare for low-income families/people (access to particular services or Environmental issues (activities in low-income communities; efforts to address environmental racism, etc.)
   Immigrants and economic justice (current policy debate or immigrants’ perspectives)
   Single mother families and social mobility (public support for poor families; cross national comparison of aid; work & family hardships; etc.)
   Low-wage workers and sustainable jobs (minimum wage debate; access to jobs with career ladders; Union efforts; etc.)

   One of your choice! Send me your idea early in the term!