Course Description

This is a course about contemporary poverty and welfare policy in America. From a public policy perspective, there is perhaps no more contentious question than how best to fight poverty. The 1996 overhaul of the welfare system (The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) has helped refocus our attention on America's poor and welfare dependent population. Welfare caseloads and poverty rates have dropped dramatically since the mid-1990s, but many Americans continue to suffer material hardships. Why is this the case? What can we do about it? Answer often depend on whether poverty is viewed mostly as an individual failing or as a result of larger structural forces, including economic restructuring, racial and gender discrimination, and social injustice.

A different poverty-related topic will be taken up each week in class. The format of the course will consist primarily of overview lectures (by the instructor) during the first class period of each week, followed by class discussion and student presentations during the second class period. This is not a technical course; the focus will primarily be on substantive policy issues. The overriding goal will be to expose students to current poverty and welfare policy debates and to the way that poverty researchers and policy analysts frame policy questions and analyses. The reading list will be eclectic from a disciplinary standpoint.

Background Readings


Almost all of the required class readings are available electronically as PDF’s in PROQUEST, JSTOR, INGENTA, PROJECT MUSE through the Cornell University library. Core readings will be made available by the instructor on Blackboard. Students will be responsible for downloading documents and printing a hardcopy to read.
Web Resources

Several excellent websites provide up-to-date information about poverty and welfare policy issues. The basic data about U.S. poverty is available on the Census Bureau's website at http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty.html. The Census Bureau has also recently released the official U.S. poverty figures for 2005, which is worth perusing at: http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p60-231.pdf. For international data on income and poverty, you should consult the Luxembourg Income Study at (http://www.lisproject.org/).

Information about poverty and welfare policy issues is also available on the websites of several university-based poverty centers, including the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan (http://www.npc.umich.edu/), Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (http://www.irp.wisc.edu/home.htm), and the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University (http://ncep.org/about.html). The Fragile Families Study at Princeton University (http://crcw.princeton.edu/) and the Three-Cities Welfare Reform Project at Johns Hopkins University (http://www.jhu.edu/~welfare/) also publish timely policy briefs and working papers on a variety of topics concerning welfare reform, poverty, and family well-being. They have also begun to release public use data for secondary analyses by scholars (and that includes you!).

The Urban Institute (http://www.urban.org/welfare/index.cfm), Brookings Institution (http://www.brookings.org/index/taxonomy.htm?taxonomy=Social%20Policy*Welfare%20reform), and Child Trends (http://www.childtrends.org/) also are nonpartisan "Think Tanks" that maintain informative websites about welfare reform and current public policy issues. Although these organizations have their own research staffs, they can also be viewed as "translators" of university-based research for public officials, legislative staffers, and the public policy community. Translators on the political "left" of center include, among others, the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (http://www.cbpp.org/) and the Center for Law and Social Policy (http://www.clasp.org/). On the right are the Heritage Foundation (http://www.heritage.org/) and CATO (http://www.cato.org/).

A number of prominent and highly-respected research organizations, such as Mathematica, Abt Associates, and Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) also do welfare evaluation research for states on a contract basis. These organizations provide dispassionate analysis and generally objective accounts of welfare success or failure at the state level.

Finally, the Economic Success Clearinghouse (http://www.financeproject.org/irc/win.asp) also provides up-to-date information on policy choices, promising practices, program and financial data, funding sources, federal and state legislation and plans, program and management tools, and technical assistance. You are encouraged to sign up for their listservs to stay abreast of new developments on welfare policy.

Course Requirements

Students will be graded on the basis of the following requirements:

1. Participation in classroom discussion and weekly comments on readings. Diverse points of view are welcome in this class. Your active participation contributes to a more stimulating and
interesting seminar. Class participation also provides evidence on whether the reading materials have been read, assimilated, and critiqued. Finally, the development of oral communication skills in the classroom is an important aspect of overall professional development.

To encourage participation and an open discussion, you are required to prepare in advance of class short written comments and/or discussion question or two on some aspect of the week's readings. Comments can vary in length, but should be no more than a short paragraph. You may draw on your own research, personal experiences and beliefs, and so forth, to develop a comment in reaction to a theme or key point made in the readings. These comments may support, refute, or otherwise elaborate on some key theme or point. They should not be a simple regurgitation of what the author says. In crafting your comments, keep in mind that the intent is to help us frame the issues from different disciplinary, political, or personal perspectives and to spark classroom discussion.

Your comments should be uploaded on Blackboard no later than 7 p.m. on the evening (usually Wednesday) before the class meets to discuss readings.

(2) Book Review. Obviously, during a short 14-week period, we cannot cover all of the many important recently-published books on the topic of poverty and its many dimensions. I am asking each student to read and prepare a 600-to-700-word review (modeled after the typical book reviews published in referred journals) on a book that has some relevance to the topics covered in this class and that bear on a particular substantive interests or disciplinary background.

Recommended books are listed below under each topical heading; alternative book selections must be approved by the instructor. For example, you may want to read something on comparative international poverty trends, rural poverty, racial and gender inequality, marriage promotion and single motherhood, the working poor, or one of the many ethnographies on “living below the poverty line.”

Book reviews should be distributed to your classmates in advance of a ten minute presentation of the major issues or themes raised in the book. These presentations will begin in the third week of class.

(3) Paper Project. Several paper options are available to students. If you are a Ph.D. student, you are expected to either: (a) develop a research problem for analysis with original empirical data (i.e., write a journal-like article), or (b) prepare a detailed research proposal in which the literature (on some topic) is reviewed, a research problem and hypotheses are formulated, and the study design, data sources, and analyses are clearly delineated. If you choose (a) above, working in tandem with one or two other students is encouraged.

Empirical papers should be in journal format and be of journal length (i.e., 20-30 pages total, including tables and references). I would like to see some publishable papers produced in this class. As a short-term intermediate goal, you might consider submitting your class paper to the annual meetings of the Association of Policy Analysis and Management (i.e., for the March 2007 submission deadline) or Population Association of America.
If you are a masters-level or undergraduate student, you have the option of choosing (a) or (b) above, or you may choose to (c) write a "survey" paper (i.e., review, criticize and synthesize the literature) on a topic of your choice on a poverty- or welfare-related topic.

All paper topics must be approved by February 28, 2007. The variety of potential topics is limited only by your imagination. Illustrative topics include: international comparisons of the causes and consequences of poverty; the effects of welfare on child development; homelessness; consumption patterns among the poor; chaos in poor children’s lives; differences in attitudes or values between the poor and nonpoor; welfare reform and well-being of immigrants; geographic mobility among the poor and welfare dependent; explanations for the race gap in poverty; and childbearing among unwed welfare mothers. I am happy to discuss topics with you and help you identify an appropriate and researchable topic for your paper.

Deferred or incomplete grades will be given only under unusual circumstances (e.g., illness).

**Tentative Schedule of Topics and Readings**

The topics covered in this course will follow the tentative weekly schedule below. Topics may change during the semester to better reflect student interests or the publication during the semester of particularly relevant articles or the emergence of new policy debates.

Everyone is required to read the assigned core readings (noted by *). The other readings are highly recommended or may form the basis for your "weekly comment." Read those that interest you most. I also may on occasion assign additional reading material – mostly short, non-technical policy briefs or reports – to augment the weekly core and supplemental readings below.

Each week, some of you will be assigned an additional paper from the reading list for presentation and discussion in class. The goal is stimulate and discuss policy questions. You may find it useful to prepare a one-page summary for distribution before or during the class period.

**Week 1 (January 23 & 25): Overview of Poverty Research and Welfare Legislation**


**Rejoinders:**


**Week 3 (February 6 & 8): Demographic Approaches: The Effects of Changing Population Composition**


**RECOMMENDED BOOKS:**


**Week 4 (February 13 & 15): Work, Welfare, and the Economy**


RECOMMENDED BOOKS:


Week 5 (February 20 & 22): Poverty and Welfare Dynamics: Intra- and Inter-Generational Dimensions of Economic Dependency


RECOMMENDED BOOKS
Week 6 (February 27 & March 1): Inequality and Changing Distribution of Income and Wealth: Poverty Amidst Affluence


RECOMMENDED BOOKS


**Week 7 (March 6 & 8): Poverty, Welfare, and Union Transitions: Is Marriage a Panacea?**


RECOMMENDED BOOKS


**Week 8 (March 13 & 15): Concentration of Poverty: The Urban Underclass Debate**


**RECOMMENDED BOOKS**


**Week 9 (March 20 & 22): Spring Break (NO CLASS)**

**Week 10 (March 27 & 29): Spatial Dimensions of Rural Poverty**


RECOMMENDED BOOKS


Week 11 (April 3 & 5): Beliefs about the Poor


RECOMMENDED BOOKS


Week 12 (April 10 & 12): Consequences of Poverty and Welfare Policy: Children’s Well-Being and Development


RECOMMENDED BOOKS


Week 13 (April 17 & 19): Consequences of Poverty and Welfare Policy: Health Outcomes


**Week 14 (April 24 & 25): Consequences of Poverty and Welfare Policy: Other Outcomes and Issues**


Week 15 (May 1 & 3): Class Presentations

Weeks 16 (May 11): Final Papers Due