Sociology 497A: Sociology of Poverty

11:15-12:30 Tuesday/Thursday, 140 Fenske

Fall Semester 2009

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Office Hours: Monday 2-4 and by appointment.

Course Description and Goals
This class examines the nature and extent of poverty in the United States. Students will gain familiarity with poverty issues as we review topics such as people’s views of poverty, poverty measurement, the characteristics of the poverty population, international comparisons, underlying causes of poverty, and government programs and policies that address poverty.

The types of questions we focus on include the following: How have views of poverty evolved? What are the different methods people use to measure and understand poverty? Who are the poor? Why does poverty remain so pervasive? How do economic processes contribute to poverty? Are people from particular racial and ethnic backgrounds or family types inevitably more likely to be poor? What are the goals and purposes of social welfare programs? What are the limits of policy?

Students will write a paper on a poverty-related topic. Students will also be expected to come to class prepared to discuss the readings and participate in classroom discussion. A major objective of the course is to encourage students to gain analytic skills and use their abilities to think independently and critically.

Specific course goals (what you should be able to do on completion of the course) are to:
1. Describe and synthesize concepts, principles, and theories used to study poverty.
2. Analyze and discuss contemporary poverty issues and information.
3. Communicate the above effectively, both orally and in writing.

Reading Materials: There are two required books for this class that are available at the Penn State Book Store:


In addition, there are readings available on-line via the Penn State library course reserves. To access these, follow the “Course Reserves” link at the PSU library homepage: http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul.html
Course Requirements:
1. Midterm (October 1): 20%
2. Final exam (December, time and location to be announced): 25%
3. Research paper (~10-12 pages): 40%
   a. Proposal (September 24): 10%
   b. Final paper (December 1): 25%
   c. Paper presentations (December 8 and 10): 5%
4. Class participation: 15%

The purpose of the final paper is for students to gain experience writing a well-organized research paper that analyzes a poverty-related issue.

Class participation and discussion are a vital part of this class. Students will be expected to actively participate every week, as it is through the open exchange of ideas during class that important learning takes place.

Students should submit the research paper assignments on ANGEL at: https://cms.psu.edu/default.asp. Those who do not already have an ANGEL account should open one at the web address above.

All assignments are due on the date specified above. No late work will be accepted without penalty. Exceptions can be made if you are ill (with physician's certification), have a family emergency (also with written proof), or are excused beforehand due to an officially documented conflicting activity for which your presence is essential.

Accommodating students with disabilities: If you have a documented disability and wish to discuss accommodations, please contact me by the second class session.

Students requiring religious accommodation: If you need academic accommodation by virtue of your religion (e.g. missing a class, rescheduling an examination), please see me as soon as possible to discuss your needs.

Code of Academic Integrity
“Academic integrity is the pursuit of scholarly activity in an open, honest and responsible manner. Academic integrity is a basic guiding principle for all academic activity at The Pennsylvania State University, and all members of the University community are expected to act in accordance with this principle. Consistent with this expectation, the University's Code of Conduct states that all students should act with personal integrity, respect other students' dignity, rights and property, and help create and maintain an environment in which all can succeed through the fruits of their efforts.

Academic integrity includes a commitment not to engage in or tolerate acts of falsification, misrepresentation or deception. Such acts of dishonesty violate the fundamental ethical principles of the University community and compromise the worth of work completed by others.”
—From Penn State's University Faculty Senate Policy 49-20. For more information, please visit http://www.psu.edu/advising/integrit.htm
Class Outline

Week 1. August 25 and 27: Introduction and views of poverty in history
Week 2. September 1 and 3: Measurement and meaning of poverty
Week 3. September 8 and 10: Characteristics of the poor population and the dynamics of poverty
Week 4. September 15 and 17: Poverty in the international context
Week 5. September 22 and 24: Causes of poverty: economic processes
Week 6. September 29 and October 1: Focus on low-wage work and the economic crisis
Week 7. October 6 and 8: Causes of poverty: social stratification and race issues
Week 8. October 13 and 15: Gender issues
Week 9. October 20 and 22: Family structure and culture
Week 10. October 27 and 29: Immigration issues
Week 11. November 3 and 5: Past and current welfare programs
Week 12. November 10 and 12: Effects of welfare reform and anti-poverty policy
Week 14. December 1 and 3: Conclusion and review
Week 15. December 8 and 10: Paper presentations

Detailed Class Schedule (Tentative) and Readings

(B)= reading in a required text book
(R)= in course reserves (available on-line via Penn State library course reserves)
(I)= Internet address provided
(L)= link to the article via Penn State library holdings is provided.

Week 1. August 25 and 27: Introduction and views of poverty in history


Week 2. September 1 and 3: Measurement and meaning of poverty


**Week 3. September 8 and 10: Characteristics of the poor population and the dynamics of poverty**


**Week 4. September 15 and 17: Poverty in the international context**


Week 5. September 22 and 24: Causes of poverty: economic processes
Research proposal due September 24


Week 6. September 29 and October 1: Focus on low-wage work and the economic crisis
Midterm on October 1


Week 7. October 6 and 8: Social stratification and race issues


Week 8. October 13 and 15: Gender issues


CONSAD. 2009. An Analysis of Reasons for the Disparity in Wages Between Men and Women. CONSAD report prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor, January 12, read only the Foreword, pp. 1-2. (I)

Week 9. October 20 and 22: Family structure and culture

No class October 20!


Week 10. October 27 and 29: Immigration issues


Week 11. November 3 and 5: Past and current welfare programs in the U.S.
No class November 5!


Week 12. November 10 and 12: Effects of welfare reform and anti-poverty policy


Lindsey, Duncan. 2009. Child Poverty and Inequality: Securing a Better Future for America’s Children. New York: Oxford University Press, the rest of chapter 4: pp. 84-100. (B)


Week 14. December 1 and 3: Conclusion and review
Final paper due December 1


Week 15. December 8 and 10: Paper presentations
10 minute oral presentations

Final exam: time and location to be announced