COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

Description  This course examines the nature and extent of poverty primarily in the U.S. but with a comparative perspective (developed countries in Europe). It considers possible causes and consequences, and the antipoverty effects of existing and proposed policies.

In this course, we consider what is poverty – how do we measure it, what does it mean to be poor? Why is it so persistent, and so concentrated on particular groups? Is poverty passed on from one generation to the next? How do labor markets, family structure, and social organization come into play in shaping poverty? How successful have the array of anti poverty efforts been and which look most promising going forward?

Objectives  There are two primary goals of this course. First, on a content basis, this is a course about current issues in poverty and inequality, what we know, what we don’t, and potential anti-poverty policy interventions. The topics selected are heavily influenced by the pressing issues in U.S. poverty, although comparative readings are included for close to half the weeks. As such, the issue of race and ethnicity is fairly prominent in this course and the readings. By the end of the course students should be familiar with the major contemporary theories about the underlying mechanisms that may contribute to poverty, and the state of the evidence on theories, conjectured consequences, and selected policy interventions.

The second goal is to build on previous course work, and further develop critical analytical skills. This includes reading thoughtfully – assessing the arguments and evidence provided by the author; thinking carefully about one’s own beliefs and evidence, and communicating well articulated arguments (with evidence).

As such, the classroom needs to be interactive, seminar in ‘feel’ if not in size.

Overview  Section I of this course begins by framing the issues, what we mean by poverty and how we measure it, and why we care. This section also sets out some empirical ‘facts’ on levels,
trends, who are the poor, and how much mobility is there in and out of poverty, in a comparative setting. In Section II, we focus on a set of social science theories about the underlying causes of poverty, and possible consequences. The final section of the course considers six specific policy areas prominent in anti poverty efforts. These including income and family support policies, education, workforce development, and issues in the U.S. criminal justice system.

**PREQUISITES:** microeconomics (P11.1018), intro statistics (P11.1011), and intro to policy (P11.1022 or the equivalent, P11.2660).

**COURSE MATERIALS**

**Required Texts:** There are two books for this course, both available at the professional bookstore. *Aint no Makin’ it* (**3rd edition**, only) by Jay MacLeod is an ethnographic study that examines the social structure and aspirations of two sets of male youth, and re-connects with them every eight years until these men are in their forties. *Poverty in America* (**2nd edition**) by John Iceland provides an overview on current issues in the poverty field. These books are supplemented with additional readings each week. Note: the Iceland text is also available electronically via ‘ebrary’ at Bobst library.

**Readings** are coded by location:

- B: Blackboard
- T: Text
- I: Internet, link provided in syllabus (most also are located on Blackboard)
- E: E-brary (available through Bobst website via NYU Home.)

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

Students are responsible for all material and announcements covered in class; if you miss a class you should contact a fellow student for notes from that day. Any handouts for class will be posted on blackboard, if feasible.

**Class participation (and preparation)**

Students must complete the required readings in advance of class for the classroom experience to work. And you must actively engage, both with the material prior to class and in the classroom. To aid in this process, I have kept the required reading to a minimum, and in many cases have provided some direction on what to mull over when doing the reading. Class will be taught with the expectation that students have done – *and thought about* – the reading. Substantial class time will be spent in critically discussing the readings and topic, shaped by student questions and understanding of the material.
Responses to class readings

Five weeks during the semester, students must provide a very brief response to the readings (approximately 2 paragraphs) in advance of class. These responses can raise points from the reading that are particularly interesting/helpful, or raise an issue (or reading) that was unclear. These are required as part of participation, but will not be graded (although inadequate responses will be marked ‘incomplete’). These must be sent in advance of class, received no later than Monday noon. **The subject heading should be: “READING RESPONSE”**.

Students must submit at least one reading response for each of the three sections of the course.

In addition to class participation, students will write two analytical memos, one final research paper, and participate in a team-based policy debate on the final day (during exam week).

Analytical Memos

Assignment #1 Measurement Memo (3-4 pages)

The goal of this assignment is for students to apply data (and data analysis skills) to an area of poverty policy of their choice. The specific data is related to measuring poverty. The census has created an interactive data site that permits one to alter how poverty is measured using data from the Current Population Survey (CPS). Students will use this site to write a memo recommending and assessing the use of a particular definition (and measurement) of poverty.

Assignment #2 Readings Synthesis Memo (3-4 pages)

The objective of this assignment is to go a bit deeper into a particular topic/day, by reading literature beyond the required reading, critically assessing it, and relating this back to concepts covered in that particular class. Students will select a class from the second section of the course (weeks 4-8), read two of the optional readings, and write a memo that summarizes this work and connects it to the broader set of readings for the day. The day selected cannot also serve as a reading response day.

Final paper: (12-15 pages)

The final paper is meant to be cumulative in that it builds on the skills demonstrated in the memos and course, applied to any of the six broad policy areas covered in the course. By the middle of the semester, students need to have selected a policy area in which they would like to write a research paper. The final paper should either propose a new policy intervention or assess an existing one, building off the course, and rely on existing literature.

Final Class policy debate

Rather than hold an exam during exam week, we will meet for a policy debate (class 14). Based on the topics selected for final papers, I will assign students to teams of 5-6 people. Each team will have 5 minutes to present the overarching biggest issues in the broad policy area, and its
importance for anti-poverty efforts. They will then field questions for 5 minutes before we move to the next team.

**Relative Weights of Requirements**

- Participation (including 5 Responses) 25%
- Memos (both) 20%
- Debate 5%
- Final Paper 50%

**BLACKBOARD**

You must have access to the class Blackboard site at [http://classes.nyu.edu/](http://classes.nyu.edu/)

All announcements and class related documents (required and optional readings, class handouts, assignments etc.) will be posted here. If you have not activated your NYU net account or have forgotten your password, you can activate or change your password at [http://start.nyu.edu](http://start.nyu.edu). Your account must be activated to access Blackboard.

Some class announcements will also be distributed via e-mail. Thus, it is important that you actively use your NYU e-mail account, or have appropriate forwarding set up on NYUHome [https://home.nyu.edu/](https://home.nyu.edu/)

**STATEMENT OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

As members of the NYU Wagner community, we are all expected to adhere to high standards of intellectual and academic integrity. An example of how NYU describes academic integrity is available at [http://www.nyu.edu/cas/map/integrity.pdf](http://www.nyu.edu/cas/map/integrity.pdf) This is a good resource for issues of academic honesty.

The email reading responses, memo assignments, and final paper are all meant to be individual products. No collaborative work is permitted. Specifically:

**Email Reading Responses:** This is a mechanism for my understanding your reaction to and understanding of the readings, so they must be done individually. If you wish to discuss the readings with another student, you need to send your email response prior to that discussion.

**Memo Assignments:** These are individual products – both the written work and the analysis behind it should be done individually.

**Paper:** The paper must be the sole work of the individual student, using appropriate documentation for materials relied on for research. It is completely appropriate to talk with others about your paper, including getting advice from other faculty. But the content of the paper needs to be solely authored by the student.

Violations of these standards will automatically result in all participating students failing the course and being remanded to the discipline committee for further action.
CLASS OUTLINE (*asterisk indicates some international readings/comparison included)

Section I. Laying the groundwork. What do we mean by poverty or inequality, and why do we care? How do we define and measure these concepts? What do they look like now—compared to historically, and comparative to other developed countries? How transitory are experiences with poverty, and what lasting effects does it have?

Week 1. Course Overview. What is poverty, how do we measure it?*
Unlike most developed countries, the U.S. relies on an absolute measure of poverty based on a methodology developed in the early 1960s. This absolute measure is the basis for eligibility for many means-tested programs aimed to alleviate hardship. The focus of this day is to understand how the current measure is calculated, what that means for what it can and can’t tell us about poverty in the U.S. today, and consider alternatives and what they would accomplish (such as those employed in Europe).

Required reading:


There is some overlap between the two readings. Iceland provides a broader assessment of approaches, Blank provides more details on the NAS approach, and the U.K’s social exclusion measure. Blank also provides a nice assessment of the political economy of changing the existing measure. What are the main strengths and weaknesses of the current U.S. poverty measure? What concept is it attempting to capture? Contrast this with OECD relative measures. Would moving to such a measure make sense for the U.S., or would you recommend adopting a version of the NAS measure, and why?

Optional:


B: Commentaries (rejoinders) 2005. Measurement vol 3(4) This is a series of responses to Iceland’s recommendation, a bit of a debate on a wide range of issues.

Week 2. Who is poor?**
Which demographic groups are more likely to be poor? How has that changed over time? How does the U.S. compare to other countries?

Required reading:


Ch 4 of Iceland provides an overview of trends in poverty and which groups are most affected, using multiple measures. Connect this to last week’s discussion as you read, and assess what is added with his broader measures. When reading Smeeding, specifically consider what the analysis on 78-82 tells us about U.S. policies.

Optional


Week 3 Economic Mobility and Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty*
Concern’s about inequality and poverty frequently are connected to whether it is a transient state, whether it has lasting effects specifically, whether disadvantages are handed down to the next generation. This week focuses on economic mobility --what does it look like in the U.S. and how does this compare to other developed countries? What might drive correlations over time, and specifically in the U.S?

Required reading:
T: MacLeod, Jay (2009). Ain’t No Makin It, Chapter 1. (Skim Chapter 3).


B: Roemer, J. Equal Opportunity and Intergenerational Mobility: Going Beyond Intergenerational Transition Matrices, in Generational Income Mobility in North America. This is a pretty conceptual piece, try to focus on the intuition of possible mechanisms of income correlation across generations, which raise the biggest concerns in terms of equal opportunity?

Optional:


B: Emily Beller and Michael Hout, 2006. “Intergenerational Social Mobility: the US in a comparative Perspective” The Future of Children 16:19-36. This article focuses on occupational mobility (rather than income), which is more commonly examined by sociologists.

Section II. Poverty Theories
This section reviews beliefs and research about what is behind these levels and trends. Understanding what we know –and don’t know—about underlying mechanisms and causes is critical to designing and implementing effective anti-poverty policies.

Week 4 Social Stratification, Race and Ethnicity
In the U.S. social stratification is intricately related to race and ethnicity. This day lays out some current thinking in sociology on how stratification occurs, and how races and ethnicity overlay this process.

Required reading:

This chapter is conceptually dense, and might require two reads.

I: Implicit Association Test: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/ Prior to class, log on to this website and participate in two on line ‘tests,’ race and a category of your choice.


Optional:
**Week 5  The Role of Social and Cultural Capital**

The role of social and cultural capital in shaping life outcomes. There is a particular focus here on how these potentially intersect with educational systems and lay the foundation for labor market outcomes.

**Required reading:**


B: Coleman, James 1988. Social Capital in the creation of Human Capital. American Journal of Sociology, S95-S120. This is a classic. Introduces the concept of social capital


**Optional:**

E: Larue, Annette (2003). Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life. University of CA press. *This book is an ethnographic study of a set of families (middle-class, working class, and poor) and how they differ in child development patterns that affect social and cultural capital, particularly with respect to schools. Read: section 1(pp1-14) and either Part II (Language Use), chapters 6 and 7, OR, Part III (families and institutions) chapters 8 and 11.*


**Week 6  Economic processes: the low wage labor market and poverty**

**Required reading:**


There are numerous connections to issues raised by the participants in MacLeod and Holzer’s description of barriers to employment. When reading, focus on making those connections more explicit.

Optional:


**Week 7 Economic processes (cont’d): Earnings inequality, growth models and wage inequality**

Over the past several decades, earnings inequality has increased. This has occurred during times of expansion, which historically has resulted in declines in inequality (and a belief that all benefit from growth). What is behind this increase? What has it meant for those who are poor and near poor?

Required reading:

and basic empirical findings. What do we know about the underlying mechanisms? What does this suggest for policy directions?


Optional


I: *Bardhan, P 2005.Globalization, Inequality and Poverty: An overview. Working paper, University of California, Berkeley. [link](http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/macarthur/inequality/papers/BardhanGlobalOverview.pdf) **This reading considers inequality across nations, and the potential role of globalization. It is long, but for students interested in the developing world, this provides a great overview of the issue and attempts to add data.**

Section III: Specific policy arenas

This section of the course now moves to anti-poverty policies, in six policy arenas that are particularly relevant for anti-poverty efforts in the U.S.

Week 8  Family Structure and Culture

Some of the trends in poverty and inequality over the past decades is attributed to the formation of single (female) headed households, with potential implications for rates of child poverty. This day considers what may be behind patterns of household formation, its implications for children, and for policy.

Required readings:

B: Ludwig, J. ands Mayer (2006) “Culture” and the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty: The Prevention Paradox. Future of Children 16(2). *Theories of the culture of poverty are behind some recent policy emphasis aimed at changing particular aspects of behaviors of the poor, particularly female headed households. This piece assesses selective evidence, and connects this to the potential effect such policies might have on poverty.*

T: MacLeod, Jay (2009). Ain’t No Makin It. Chapter 4 and Chapter 8 (p 140-146, focusing on 143-145).


**Optional**


**Week 9  Income Support Policies: Welfare Reform* and the Earned Income Tax Credit program (EITC)**

Two of the primary mechanisms in the U.S. and Europe for intervening in earnings are means-tested support programs (‘welfare’) and wage supports (minimum wages, the EITC). This week considers how these have changed over the past 15 years, and with what consequences.

**Required reading:**


Week 10 Human Capital: Training and Workforce Development

The large (and increasing) role of human capital in determining labor market outcomes and poverty makes it the natural starting place for anti-poverty policies. Yet a large segment of such policies – those aimed at workers post high-school, are playing a decreasing role in federal anti-poverty efforts. Is this wise or are we missing an important opportunity?

Required reading:
Nice overview piece on the trends and what we know. Focus particularly on which approaches appear to hold promise. Where should we go from here.


T: MacLeod, chapters TBD.

Optional: TBD


Week 11 Human capital development earlier on –education and early childhood interventions

Required reading:
Additional readings TBD

**Week 12 The criminal justice system.**
This week considers the impact of the U.S. criminal justice system on affected populations. We begin by looking at the large increase in incarceration in the U.S. over the past few decades, and its disparate impact by race and class, then link this to possible implications for labor markets. We end with a quick assessment of some policy options.

**Required reading:**
  
  This piece provides a great summary of recent trends and literature. Focus on the intuition of the technical section. Critically assess what this means for less educated and minority men.


- B: MacLeod, Chapter 12, Steve (p 311-316), Stoney (p 317-327), Chris (328-324).

**Optional TBD:**
- B: Bloom, D. 2006 Employment focused programs for ex-prisoners: What have we learned, what are we learning, and where should we go from here? MDRC.

**Week 13 The role of assets and wealth, and policy levers.**
While much of the discussion on inequality focuses on income, wealth disparities are larger, and may play a particularly important role in intra and inter-generational transmission of advantage. What drives differences in wealth in the U.S? How might those differences matter for economic and social mobility? This day focuses on what those mechanisms might be, and existing policy attempts at increasing assets among low income households. Our primary policy focus will be housing. To what degree is homeownership a promising strategy, and what concerns does it raise?

**Required reading:**

MA: Blackwell Publishing, **Chapter 8.** “Being

B: Bostic and Lee “Homeownership: America’s Dream?” in Insufficient Funds (TENTATIVE)

**Optional (TENTATIVE):**

B: Helfin and Pattillo, Kin Effects on Black–White Account and Home Ownership


## Class Schedule

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<th>Week</th>
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<td><strong>Paper topic and description due</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Last ‘class’. Papers due</strong> <strong>Friday May 7th</strong></td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td><strong>Wrap-up Debate</strong></td>
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RESEARCH RESOURCES
*Google Scholar is an extremely good starting point for finding literature. It also permits you to find articles that reference the original piece.

Relevant Websites:

Institutes & Policy Centers
- Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison - http://www.irp.wisc.edu/
- Joint Center for Poverty Research – http://www.jcpr.org/
- National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan - http://npc.umich.edu/
- MRDC (Manpower Demonstration Research Corp) - http://www.mdrc.org/
- Poverty Action Lab - http://www.povertyactionlab.org/
- Center on Budget and Policy Priorities - http://www.cbpp.org
- Heritage Foundation - http://www.heritage.org

Families & Children
- Fragile Families Study – http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu
- Future of Children - http://www.futureofchildren.com

Law
- Center for Law and Social Policy - http://www.clasp.org
- Welfare Law Center - http://www.welfarelaw.org

Welfare
- Welfare Law Center - http://www.welfarelaw.org
GRADING CRITERIA

Grades will be assigned according to the following criteria:

A  **Excellent:** Exceptional work for a graduate student. Work at this level is unusually thorough, well reasoned, creative, methodologically sophisticated, and well written. Work is of exceptional, professional quality.

A-  **Very Good:** Very strong work for a graduate student. Work at this level shows signs of creativity, is thorough and well-reasoned, indicates strong understanding of appropriate methodological or analytical approaches, and meets professional standards.

B+  **Good:** Sound work for a graduate student; well-reasoned and thorough, methodologically sound. This is the graduate student grade that indicates the student has fully accomplished the basic objectives of the course.

B  **Adequate:** Competent work for a graduate student even though some weaknesses are evident. Demonstrates competency in the key course objectives but shows some indication that understanding of some important issues is less than complete. Methodological or analytical approaches used are adequate but student has not been thorough or has shown other weaknesses or limitations.

B-  **Borderline:** Weak work for a graduate student; meets the minimal expectations for a graduate student in the course. Understanding of salient issues is somewhat incomplete. Methodological or analytical work performed in the course is minimally adequate. Overall performance, if consistent in graduate courses, would not suffice to sustain graduate status in “good standing.”

C/-+/  **Deficient:** Inadequate work for a graduate student; does not meet the minimal expectations for a graduate student in the course. Work is inadequately developed or flawed by numerous errors and misunderstanding of important issues. Methodological or analytical work performed is weak and fails to demonstrate knowledge or technical competence expected of graduate students.

F  **Fail:** Work fails to meet even minimal expectations for course credit for a graduate student. Performance has been consistently weak in methodology and understanding, with serious limits in many areas. Weaknesses or limits are pervasive.
Student Information Sheet

Student Name: _______________________________________________

Circle appropriate categories:

Program: MUP  MPA-Health  MPA

Specialization (if PNP): Policy  Management  Finance  International

Part-time  Full time

Course work:

Stats II: completed  concurrent

Program Evaluation (2171): completed  concurrent

Particular interest in field/course: