Introduction

Fifty Years after President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the War on Poverty, America is still home to both abundant wealth and extreme deprivation. This course investigates poverty in America in historical and contemporary perspective. We will explore four central aspects of poverty: low-wage work and joblessness, housing and neighborhoods, crime and punishment, and survival and protest. Along the way, we will examine the cause and consequences of poverty; study the lived experience of severe deprivation and material hardship; evaluate large-scale anti-poverty programs with an eye toward what worked and what didn’t; and engage with normative debates about the right to housing, living wages, just punishment, and other matters pertaining to American life below the poverty line.

Since 2000, the U.S. poverty rate has increased and the poor have become poorer. Along with hardships brought on by the Great Recession, welfare reform, the prison boom, the rise of short-term and low-wage jobs, political decisions at the federal level, declines in union membership, and stubbornly high rates of joblessness in disadvantaged communities have all contributed to deepening poverty in America. If in recent decades conditions have become decidedly worse for many poor Americans, how do they endure conditions of severe economic deprivation? What is life like on the fringes of the economy? What are the coping mechanisms and survival strategies of families with very low incomes, and what are their consequences? Perhaps most important: Why are so many
people poor in one of the richest countries on earth—and what can be done about it?

**Activity-Based Learning & Guest Speakers**

It is one thing to read about the declining value of the minimum wage; it’s quite another to interface with someone trying to make ends meet on it. It is one thing to study the prison boom; it’s quite another to hear men recently released from prison talk about life on the outside. Accordingly, This course has a strong Activity-Based Learning (ABL) component. It is based around four (4) fieldwork assignments related to the four central aspects of poverty this course analyzes. Each assignment is designed to provide you with an intimate and memorable experience related to economic inequality in America. You may interview someone working for minimum wage, observe criminal court, or volunteer at a homeless shelter. My biggest lessons with respect to poverty have come, not from the classroom, but from being out in the field.

Relatedly, with the support of Course Innovation Funds from the Office of Undergraduate Education, this course will also host several guest speakers from the community. We will invite to class low-wage workers, tenants on the brink of eviction, men recently released from prison, police officers who patrol high-crime neighborhoods, policymakers working at various aspects of government, and Clint Smith, National Slam Poetry Champion. Each speaker will share her of his experiences with you and address questions you might have about their daily lives and challenges.

**Assignments**

Your final grade will be based on six requirements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section &amp; Lecture Attendance and Engagement</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Report 1</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Report 2</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Report 3</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Report 4</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Take Home Test</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) **Section & Lecture Attendance and Engagement**

Please come to the lecture and section each week prepared to discuss the readings and your field assignments. You will be evaluated on your engagement with the readings and classmate’s comments and projects as well as on your reporting what you are learning in the field. Periodically, you may be asked to complete short assignments for section—brief responses to the readings, for example—that will count toward your grade.

(2) **Field Reports**

Field reports are short papers (~5 pages) based on a fieldwork assignment. This assignment will likely involve you taking a trip into the wider Cambridge/Boston community to conduct interviews and/or carry out systematic observation of, and perhaps participate in, a particular setting. You will be able to choose from several possible assignments based around a similar theme. If you wish to conduct an assignment not listed among the choices but clearly relevant to the theme, you may do so with the approval of your teaching fellow.
Field reports should aim to provide a glimpse into the lived experience of inequality. To that end, your reports should (1) describe what you saw and heard during your fieldwork and (2) analyze your experience by placing it within a larger historical or structural context. C. Wright Mills famously remarked that the sociologist works to “make personal problems political problems.” Similarly, your field reports should detail the textures of everyday life as they relate to poverty while, at the same time, placing those details in a larger American story. You will conduct four (4) field reports, each one related to the four sections that organize this class.

There are two (equally acceptable) ways of conducting your field assignments. The first way is to conduct fieldwork/interviews at four different locations or with four different people. You might hang out in a McDonalds for your first fieldwork assignment, visit eviction court for your second, and speak with a parole officer for your third, for example. The second way is to conduct fieldwork/interviews at a single location or with a single group of people over the course of the semester, writing about different aspects for each assignment. This might especially appeal to those of you who regularly volunteer at Phillips Brooks House or other organizations. For example, if you tutor young students at a low-income school every week, you might interview a mother of the students for your first assignment, asking about her work, and write about the neighborhood in which the students live for the second assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field Report Assignment</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field Report 1: Jobs and Joblessness</td>
<td>September 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Report 2: Housing and Neighborhood</td>
<td>October 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Report 3: Crime and Punishment</td>
<td>November 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Report 4: Survival and Protest</td>
<td>November 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(3) Final Take Home Test

Your final take-home test will address a single question about poverty in America. It should not exceed 5 pages in length. It will be due on December 15 at 9:00 a.m.

Extensions. Sometimes life gets in the way of your timely completion of college assignments. If extenuating circumstances prevent you from completing an assignment on time, please email me as soon as possible. Please cc your resident dean on all extension requests; this is a requirement.

Plagiarism. Don’t cheat. You are expected to read and comply with Harvard’s plagiarism policy. Evidence of plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty will be dealt with immediately and severely. Lying in your assignments about your fieldwork will be treated as a form of academic dishonesty on par with plagiarism. Both your professor and your teaching fellows have extensive experience conducting fieldwork and interviews. We will know if you are making stuff up; so don’t.

Disability accommodations. If you need academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability, please present your Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and contact me about this by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in my inability to respond in a timely manner.
**Required Books**

The following books are available at The Harvard Coop. However, please note that all readings will be posted on the course website. Buying these books is optional.


PART 1: BAD JOBS & NO JOBS

Wednesday, September 2: Severe Deprivation in America

Monday, September 7: No Class (Labor Day)

Wednesday, September 9: Working Poverty

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickled and Dimed*, Introduction, chapter 1


Monday, September 14: Joblessness in the Inner City

William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, chapter 2

Wednesday, September 16: The Lived Experience of Wage Work

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickled and Dimed*, Evaluation


Monday, September 21: The Decline of Unions and the Rise of Bad Jobs

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickled and Dimed*, chapter 3

Bruce Western and Jake Rosenfeld, “Union Decline and Rising U.S. Wage Inequality,” *Scholars Strategy Network*, March 2012

Arne Kalleberg, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs*, chapter 2

Wednesday, September 23: From Welfare to Work

Janet Currie, *The Invisible Safety Net*, chapter 1

Kathryn Edin and H. Luke Shaefer, *$2.00 a Day*, chapter 1

Monday, September 28: The Death of Welfare and the Rebirth of Extreme Poverty in America

Kathryn Edin and H. Luke Shaefer, *$2.00 a Day*, Introduction, chapters 2, 4
PART 2: THE HOUSE & THE HOOD

Wednesday, September 30: American Affordable Housing Crisis

Monday, October 5: Racial Segregation and Concentrated Disadvantage
Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, American Apartheid, chapter 5
Alex Kotlowitz, There Are No Children Here, Preface – chapter 8

Wednesday, October 7: The Lived Experience of Tenancy in an Expensive City
Alex Kotlowitz, There Are No Children Here, chapters 9 – 15

Monday, October 12: No class (Columbus Day)

Wednesday, October 14: Exploiting the Inner City
Erik Olin Wright, Interrogating Inequality, chapter 2
Gary Rivlin, Broke, USA, chapter 1

Monday, October 19: Moving People, Moving Poverty
Alex Schwartz, Housing Policy in the United States, pp. 45-48, 125-142, 177-208
Alexandra Murphy, The Diversity of Suburban Poverty (Washington, D.C.: Gulen Institute, 2014)

Wednesday, October 21: Rural Poverty
PART 3: CRIME & PUNISHMENT

Monday, October 26: The New Undocumented Underclass?

Seth Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, chapters 1-2, 4


Wednesday, October 28: Immigration and Poverty

Seth Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, chapters 6-7


Monday, November 2: The Prison as Poverty Institution

Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America*, preface, introduction, chapter 1

Wednesday, November 4: The Underground Economy & Gang Life

Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*, chapter 4

Laurence Ralph, *Renegade Dreams*, Introduction, chapter 1

Monday, November 9: Gang Violence & Police Violence

Laurence Ralph, *Renegade Dreams*, chapters 3 & 4

PART 4: SURVIVAL & PROTEST

Wednesday, November 11: Survival Networks

Carol Stack, *All Our Kin*, Introduction, chapters 1, 3 & 6


Monday, November 16: A Poor Education

Kathryn Neckerman, *Schools Betrayed*, Introduction & Conclusion

Bowen Paulle, *Toxic Schools*, chapter 6

Wednesday, November 18: Did Poverty Win? Federal Anti-Poverty Efforts

Peter Edelman, *So Rich, So Poor*, chapters 2-3


Monday, November 23: The Good Society

Robert Sampson, *Great American City*, chapters 7 & 9

Wednesday, November 25: No class (Thanksgiving Break)

Monday, November 30: Poor People's Politics

Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, chapters 1 & 2

Wednesday, December 2: The De- and Re-Politicization of the Urban Poor

Michael Katz, *Why Don't American Cities Burn?* chapters 3-4

