

**Freshman Seminar : Social Science and American Social Problems**  
**Fall 2021**  
**Tuesdays 9:45 -11:45 AM**  
**William James 501**

**Professor Mary C. Waters**

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**Course Description**

This course will examine nine major social problems facing the United States today—income inequality, political polarization, race, immigration, poverty, education, incarceration, work and family, and climate change. We will read leading social science books and articles (from sociology, political science, economics, and psychology) that define the problems, discuss their causes and consequences, and propose solutions. Toward the end of the semester, the class will collectively decide on three other problems we should learn about and three teams of four students each will prepare a presentation and final project on the topic.

Requirements: Class participation, discussion posts reacting to class readings on the website, a final team presentation and project.

The course has three goals:

1. To understand and debate important social problems in the United States.
2. To become good consumers of social science research. To learn how to read social science research and to evaluate the use of evidence in those articles and books. To understand how the facts used in the debates are produced by social scientists (how do we measure poverty, income and wealth inequality, discrimination, public opinion etc.)
3. To examine how debates in government and the media use, or do not use, social science research. How does what we learn in the class help us to make sense of the debates swirling around us about the future of our country?

**Books:**

Robert Putnam. 2015. *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer. 2015. *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Ta-Nehisi Coates. 2015. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Random House.

(The remaining readings will be made available on the course website).

**Requirements:**

**Active Class Participation:** This is a seminar, come prepared to discuss the readings and to engage with your classmates.

**Paper 1**

**Due: Week 5 Friday October 8, 2021**

**(3-5 pages)**

Choose either income inequality, political polarization, poverty or race. Discuss the sources of evidence and the logic used by the authors we read and the discussions we had in class. Describe other kinds of evidence that would be useful to you in addressing this question. How would your new evidence better help you to diagnose and fix the social problem you have chosen?

**Discussion Posts**

**Due: November 12**

**Post your entry by Midnight, Sunday night**

Choose a topic we have covered so far in class and address how it is being debated in the media. Choose a topic that is covered on Fox News and on CNN or MSNBC. What are the assumptions about the causes and consequences of this problem? What is the nature of evidence used in news reports? How much overlap is there between how it is presented by the networks? Your discussion post should be about 1000 words and you can include charts and pictures.

Then you need to comment on at least two of your classmates' entries. Comments should be 300-500 words. What does their discussion post make you think about?

**Post at least two comments on classmates' posts by Midnight, November 14**

## **Final Project and Presentation:**

**Presentation is due in class during last three weeks. Project is due Monday December 13, 2021**

One thing we do not need to worry about in this class is running out of social problems to worry about. Even though we have covered nine, there are many more we have not had time to consider. Examples include terrorism, violence by and against the police, physical and mental health disparities, gun violence, drug addiction, homelessness, divorce and family dissolution, and many more that you can think of. We will divide into three teams of four students each and each team will select a social problem, decide on common readings for the class, and prepare a 30-minute PowerPoint on the topic covering cutting edge social science findings. The team will run the class discussion on the topic and then prepare a final project outlining the scope of the problem, the possible solutions, and the recommended course of action from the team. The final project can take the form of a paper, a short film, a podcast or something even more creative. If it is a final paper it should be about 10 pages long, and jointly produced. If there are differences of opinion among the team, all the better; you should outline those differences and the logic or evidence they are based on. We will meet to discuss the final project as the semester goes on.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **Week 1 September 7**

#### **Introduction to the Course**

Bring your computer to class. We will look at census data on each student's home census tract together using Social Explorer and get a baseline on income inequality, poverty, incarceration, educational outcomes, occupations, family type, race, and immigration status.

<http://www.socialexplorer.com/>

Raj Chetty and colleagues have a website where you can look up the census tract that you grew up in and whether it provides more or less opportunity than other tracts.

[opportunityatlas.org](http://opportunityatlas.org)

New York Times interactive based on Raj Chetty's work "The Best and Worst Places to Grow Up: How Your Area Compares."

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/03/upshot/the-best-and-worst-places-to-grow-up-how-your-area-compares.html>

## **Week 2 September 14**

### **Economic inequality**

Why did economic inequality start to grow in the 1970s and what is the shape of it now?

Robert Putnam. 2015. *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Raj Chetty et al. “[Executive Summary: The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility](#)” (opens pdf), January 2020

Anshu Siripurapu “The U.S. Inequality Debate” Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-inequality-debate>

Watch this infographic on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM>

## **Week 3 September 21**

### **Poverty**

How do we measure poverty and how many people are in deep poverty? What kind of support is available for people who are desperately poor?

Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer. 2015. *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Listen to this Interview with Writer Jason DeParle on child poverty

<https://www.npr.org/2021/04/01/983431731/tackling-child-poverty-through-covid-relief>

## **Week 4 September 28**

### **Divided Politics**

Why does America seem so divided on political issues? Who votes and what kinds of difference does it make?

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2016. "I Spent 5 Years With Some of Trump's Biggest Fans. Here's What They Won't Tell You." <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-white-blue-collar-supporters>.

Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson. *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Era of Extreme Inequality* NY: WW Norton 2020

## **Week 5 October 5**

### **Race Relations and Discrimination**

Are conditions getting better or worse for African Americans? Are we forever divided by race or moving towards a postracial society?

Ta-Nehisi Coates. 2015. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Random House.

William Julius Wilson. 2015. "New Perspectives on The Declining Significance of Race: A Rejoinder." *Ethnic and Racial Studies Review* 38 (8): 1278-1284.

Jennifer L. Hochschild, Vesla Weaver, and Traci Burch. 2011. "Destabilizing the American Racial Order." *Daedalus* 140(2): 151-165.

## **Week 6 October 12**

**NO CLASS THIS WEEK**

## **Week 7 October 19**

### **Immigration**

Are immigrants and their children integrating into American society? How did we come to have 11 million undocumented people and what should we do about it?

Mary C. Waters and Marisa Gerstein Pineau, eds. 2016. *The Integration of Immigrants into American Society*. Washington DC: National Academies Press. (Selections)

Douglas S. Massey. 2013. "America's Immigration Policy Fiasco: Learning from Past Mistakes." *Daedalus* 142(3): 5-15.

Roberto G. Gonzales. 2011. "Learning to be Illegal: Undocumented Youth and Shifting Legal Contexts in the Transition to Adulthood." *American Sociological Review* 76(4): 602-19.

Mary C. Waters and Phillip Kasinitz 2021 "Race, Legal Status and Mobility" *Daedalus* vol 150, no. 2 pp. 120-134.

## **Week 8 October 26**

### **Education**

Are American schools failing? How can we improve our education system?

PBS Eyes on the Prize: The Keys to the Kingdom

Podcast This American Life Three Miles

<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/550/three-miles>

Diane Ravitch 2021 "The Dark History of School Choice" *The New York Review*

<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2021/01/14/the-dark-history-of-school-choice/>

January 14, 2021.

## **Week 9 November 2**

### **Incarceration**

Why does the US incarcerate more people than any other country on earth? What are conditions like in prisons and what happens to people when they get out?

Michele Alexander. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press. (Selections)

Bruce Western and Christopher Muller. 2013. "Mass Incarceration, Macrosociology, and the Poor." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 647 (1): 166-189.

## **Week 10 November 9**

### **Work and Family**

How can men and women both have careers and raise children? What kinds of personal tradeoffs and policy supports are necessary to support families in the US?

Anne-Marie Slaughter. 2012. "Why Women Still Can't Have it All." *The Atlantic*, July/August.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>

Kathleen Gerson. 2010. *The Unfinished Revolution: Coming of Age in a New Era of Gender, Work and Family*. New York: Oxford University Press. (Selections)

Alison Earle, Zitha Mokomane, and Jody Heymann. 2011. "International Perspectives on Work-Family Policies: Lessons from the World's Most Competitive Economies." *The Future of Children* 21(2): 191-210.

## **Week 11 November 16**

### **Climate Change**

Why do so many Americans doubt climate change? Are we going to survive this major challenge and if so, how?

Naomi Klein. 2014. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Justin Farrell 2016 "Corporate funding and ideological polarization about climate change" *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* volume 133 no. 1 pp. 92-97 January 5, 2016.

Justin Farrell, Kathryn McConnell and Robert Brulle "Evidence Based strategies to combat scientific misinformation" *Nature Climate Change* 2019

**Week 12 November 23**

**Student Presentations**

**Week 12 November 30**

**Student Presentations**

**FINAL PAPER DUE MONDAY DECEMBER 13, 2021**