

**Freshman Seminar 70J: Social Science and American Social Problems**  
**Fall 2016**  
**Mondays 3-5 PM**  
**William James 450**

**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. Because there will be a presidential election occurring we will spend some time discussing how the candidates differ in positions on public policies addressing these problems. 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 paper on the topic.

Requirements: Class participation, a short paper on the readings (3-5 pages), a blog entry on a topic we are discussing in class and two comments on a classmate's blog, a final team presentation and paper.

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 the presidential campaign and in 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 to Purchase:**

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.

Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson. 2012. *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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:**

### **Paper 1**

**Due: Week 5**

**October 4, 2016**

**(3-5 pages)**

Choose either income inequality, political polarization, 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?

### **Blog Posts**

**Due: Week 9**

**Post your blog entry by Midnight, Sunday night October 30, 2016**

Choose a topic we have covered so far in class and address how it is being debated in the media and in the campaign. What policies are advocated by the Democratic and Republican candidates for President on the topic? What use do they make of social science research on the topic? What are their assumptions about the causes and consequences of this problem? Provide links to online commentary, debate, or news articles that illustrate different positions on your topic. Your blog 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' blog entries. Comments should be 300-500 words. What does their blog entry make you think about?

**Post at least two blog comments on classmates' blogs by Midnight, Tuesday night  
November 1, 2016**

### **Final Paper and Presentation:**

**Presentation is due in class during last three weeks. Paper is due Friday December 9, 2016**

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 10-page memo for the new president outlining the scope of the problem, the possible solutions, and the recommended course of action from the team. 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.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **Week 1**

**August 31, 2016**

#### **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/>

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 7, 2016**

### **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.

N. Gregory Mankiw. 2013. "Defending the One Percent." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27 (3): 21-34.

Christopher Jencks. 2002 "Does Inequality Matter?" *Daedalus* 131(1): 49-65.

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

### **Further Reading:**

Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez. 2014. "Inequality in the Long Run" *Science* May 23: 838-843.

David H. Autor. 2014. "Skills, Education and the Rise of Earnings Inequality Among the 'Other 99 Percent.'" *Science* May 23: 843-851.

Nicholas Fitz. 2015. "Income Inequality: It's Far Worse Than You Think." *Scientific American*, March 31: 1-8.

## **Week 3**

**September 12, 2016**

### **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.

Christopher Jencks. 2016. "Why the Very Poor Have Become Poorer." *The New York Review of Books*, June 9.

### **Further Reading:**

Liana Fox, Christopher Wimer, Irwin Garfinkel, Neeraj Kaushal, JaeHyun Nam, Jane Waldfogel. 2015. "Trends in Deep Poverty from 1968 to 2011: The Influence of Family Structure, Employment Patterns, and the Safety Net." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 1 (1): 14-34.

Matthew Desmond. 2012. "Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty." *American Journal of Sociology* 118 (1): 88-133.

## **Week 4**

**September 19, 2016**

### **Divided Politics**

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

Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson. 2012. *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Martin Gilens and Benjamin J. Page. 2014. "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics* 12(3): 564-581.

Page, Benjamin I., Larry M. Bartels, and Jason Seawright. 2013. "Democracy and the Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans." *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (1): 51-73.

### **Further Reading:**

<http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/inside-story/articles/2014/6/25/is-the-united-statesbecomingmorepartisan.html>

Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster. 2015. "All Politics is National: The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of US House and Senate Elections in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Presented at the Annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 16-19. [http://www.stevenwebster.com/research/all\\_politics\\_is\\_national.pdf](http://www.stevenwebster.com/research/all_politics_is_national.pdf).

## **Week 5**

**September 26, 2016**

## **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.

Hochschild JL, Weaver V, Burch T. 2011. "Destabilizing the American Racial Order." *Daedalus* 140(2): 151-165.

## **Week 6**

**October 3, 2016**

### **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.

### **Further Reading:**

Cecilia Menjívar. 2014. "Immigration Law Beyond Borders: Externalizing and Internalizing Border Controls in an Era of Securitization." *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 10: 353-369.

Cecilia Menjívar and Leisy J. Abrego. 2012. "Legal Violence: Immigration Law and the Lives of Central American Immigrants." *American Journal of Sociology* 117 (5): 1380-1421.

**NO CLASS OCTOBER 10, 2016 (Columbus Day)**

## **Week 7**

**October 17, 2016**

### **Education**

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

Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane. 2011. *Whither Opportunity: Rising Inequality, Schools and Children's Life Chances*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. (Selections)

Karl Alexander, Doris Entwistle, and L. S. Olson. 2014. *The Long Shadow: Family Background, Disadvantaged Urban Youth and the Transition to Adulthood*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. (Selections)

## **Week 8**

**October 24, 2016**

### **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.

### **Further Reading:**

Bruce Western. 2015. "Lifetimes of Violence in a Sample of Released Prisoners." RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences 1 (2): 14-30.

Marie Gottschalk. 2014. *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Selections)

## **Week 9**

**October 31, 2016**

### **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)

### **Further Reading:**

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.

Christopher Ruhm. 2011. "Policies to Assist Parents with Young Children." *The Future of Children* 21(2): 37-68.

## **Week 10**

**November 7, 2016**

### **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.

Theda Skocpol. 2013. "[Naming the Problem: What It Will Take to Counter Extremism and Engage Americans in the Fight Against Global Warming](#)." Report commissioned by the Rockefeller Family Fund, January 2013.

David Roberts. 2015. "[The GOP is the World's Only Major Climate-Denialist Party. But Why?](#)" *Vox*, December 2.

## **Week 11**

**November 14, 2016**

**Student Presentations**

**Week 12**

**November 21, 2016**

**Student Presentations**

**Week 13**

**November 28, 2016**

**Student Presentations**

**FINAL PAPER DUE FRIDAY DECEMBER 9, 2016**