

III. The Politics of Poverty and Welfare

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I. Course Introduction

This course is about poverty and welfare, and the controversies about them, in the United States. The subject has deep implications for politics and democracy. We will survey the nature of poverty and poverty politics, the development of antipoverty policies and programs, contending theories about the causes of poverty, recent welfare reforms, and current policy directions.

Antipoverty policy radically changed in the 1990s, when welfare was reformed to require adult recipients to work in return for aid. That policy was essentially conservative but had liberal aspects. It succeeded but was controversial and had clear shortcomings. Current policy directions are more liberal. That is partly because Democrats are in power in Washington but also because experts recognize the limitations of the recent changes. There is interest in how to help poor men, who were largely ignored in welfare reform.

The course focuses mainly on the national level, which has driven most recent policy changes. However, the states have often been laboratories for national policy. They largely determine what national programs come to mean “on the ground.” We will pay special attention to Wisconsin, a leading state in welfare reform.

These issues have been the main focus of my research. As an expert on work requirements in welfare, I have been an advisor on welfare reform in Washington, Wisconsin, New York City, and several foreign countries. I recently finished a project on how to raise work levels among poor men. This course states the issues more conservatively than usual in academe, but it is true to how the debate is framed in Washington.

However, the course will consider a wide range of viewpoints. I have assigned readings from my own writings, but also from other authors with different views. I encourage you to develop your own interpretation of poverty, which may well differ from mine. To do that is the main point of the course.

II. Readings

Students should purchase the following books. They are listed in rough order of assignment:

Sar A. Levitan, Garth L. Mangum, Stephen L. Mangum, and Andrew M. Sum, *Programs in Aid of the Poor*, 8th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

Lawrence M. Mead, *The New Politics of Poverty: The Nonworking Poor in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill, *Creating an Opportunity Society* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2009).

Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

Jason DeParle, *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and the Nation's Drive to End Welfare* (New York: Viking, 2004).

Lawrence M. Mead, *Government Matters: Welfare Reform in Wisconsin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

These additional readings will be assigned as shown in the course schedule below.

Peter Katel, "Straining the Safety Net," *CQ Researcher* 19, no. 27 (July 31, 2009): 645-67

Isabel V. Sawhill, "The Behavioral Aspects of Poverty," *The Public Interest*, no. 153 (Fall 2003): 79-93.

Isabel V. Sawhill, "The Underclass: An Overview," *The Public Interest*, no. 96 (Summer 1989): 3-15.

Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), chs. 4, 12, 17.

William Julius Wilson, "The Economic Plight of Inner-City Black Males," in *Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black, and Male*, ed. Elijah Anderson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), ch. 4.

Joleen Kirschenman and Kathryn M. Neckerman, "'We'd Love to Hire Them, But . . .': The Meaning of Race for Employers," in *The Urban Underclass*, ed. Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1991), pp. 203-32.

George J. Borjas, *Heaven's Door: Immigration Policy and the American Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), ch. 1.

Douglas S. Massey, "Immigration and Equal Opportunity," in *Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black, and Male*, ed. Elijah Anderson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), chap. 7.

Robert Cherry, *Welfare Transformed: Universalizing Family Policies That Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), chs. 1, 10.

Lawrence M. Mead, *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Free Press, 1986), chs. 1, 3.

Paul Starobin, "The Daddy State," *National Journal*, March 28, 1998, pp. 678-83.

Lawrence M. Mead, ed., *The New Paternalism: Supervisory Approaches to Poverty* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1997), ch. 1.

Dan Bloom, Alissa Gardenhire-Crooks, and Conrad Mandsager, *Reengaging High School Dropouts: Early Results of the National Guard ChallengE Program Evaluation* (New York: MDRC, February 2009), executive summary, ch. 3.

Lawrence M. Mead, "The Politics of Conservative Welfare Reform," in *The New World of Welfare: An Agenda for Reauthorization and Beyond*, ed. Rebecca M. Blank and Ron Haskins (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001), ch. 7.

Douglas J. Besharov, "Two Cheers for American Welfare Reform: Lessons Learned, Questions Raised, Next Steps," in *When Hassle Means Help: The International Lessons of Conditional Welfare*, ed. Lawrence Kay and Oliver Marc Hartwich (London: Policy Exchange, 2008), ch. 3.

David Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2008), ch. 2.

Elijah Anderson, "Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black, and Male," in *Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black, and Male*, ed. Elijah Anderson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). ch. 1.

Lawrence M. Mead, *Expanding Work Programs for Men*" (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, forthcoming).

III. Requirements

Students will take a midterm and final examinations, write a paper, and receive credit for participation in class. The exams will each count 25 percent of the final grade, the paper 30 percent, and participation 20 percent.

The midterm and final examinations will be two-part. The first half of each test will be to write six identifications of terms or concepts taken from the course, chosen out of 12. The second half will be to answer one broad essay question, chosen out of three. Each part of the test will count about half the grade. On the midterm, both halves of the exam will cover all material up to that point in the course. On the final, the identifications will be drawn from material after the midterm, but the essays will cover the whole course. Details about the paper are given below.

Participation grades will consider both attendance in class (1/3) and contributions to class discussion (2/3). For each lecture, an issue will be posed to which students should prepare responses, to be made orally. Discussion will seek, not only to contrast different positions, but also to identify the underlying assumptions that really divide them. These premises, I believe, often come down to what psychology one imputes to the poor versus the better off.

All these assessments will emphasize quality of argument. I encourage students to differ with my views, but your positions should appeal to hard evidence as well as your own preferences. Assessments will stress whether and how students make use of the assigned readings. You will not be able to do well in the course relying only on background knowledge or the lectures. Students are *strongly* advised to do the readings prior to the classes for which they are assigned, and to take notes on them. Handouts on this and other useful skills will be made available.

Final grades will be determined by ranking the class on the basis of average. About the top third of the class will receive A's, the next 40-50 percent B's, the rest C's or—in unusual cases—lower grades. Students should note that, because of this scaling procedure, final grades may not correspond precisely to what one might expect on the basis of average. Often, I give out more B's during the term than I want to do for the record. So in the final reckoning, some students with high B averages typically get A's; rarely, some with low B averages may get C's.

Extensions, makeups, or Incompletes will be given only for *unexpected* demands on your time, such as illness or family crises—not demands that can be foreseen, such as jobs or athletic events. Incompletes will be given only on the basis of consultation *out of class prior to the final exam*. To arrange extensions, makeups, or Incompletes, students must confer with me in my office during office hours or at other agreed times. So, if you are in difficulties, speak to me in good time. Students who fail to complete their work and disappear without explanation will simply fail the course.

IV. Course Schedule

The following is the schedule for class meetings, with reading assignments for each. Authors mentioned refer to the books or additional readings listed above. Readings should be completed in advance of class, to permit participation in discussion.

1. Introduction: Forecast of the course. Current poverty and welfare issues in Washington.

Peter Katel, "Straining the Safety Net," *CQ Researcher* 19, no. 27 (July 31, 2009): 645-68.

I Poverty

2. What is Poverty? The poor as understood in history, in the public understanding, and in the poverty measure used by government. *Issue: Should our definition of poverty consider only income? What about inequality? Lifestyle?*

Levitan et al., pp. 1-7; Sawhill, "Behavioral Aspects of Poverty."

2. Who Are the Poor? The composition of the poor population. Variations by demographic characteristics and other variables. The crucial role of employment. *Issue: Is the poverty debate about low income—or employment?*

Handout on poverty; Levitan et al., pp. 7-26; Mead, *New Politics*, pp. 48-57.

3. The Long-Term Poor: The distinction between the short-term poor and dependent and the long-term. The underclass, nonworking men, and the homeless. *Issue: Are the poor different from other people?*

Levitan et al., pp. 26-7; Sawhill, "Underclass."

4. Public attitudes toward poverty and welfare. Historic patterns of poverty politics. The influence of poverty on American politics. *Issue: Is poverty a partisan issue—or different?*

Mead, *New Politics*, pp. 1-24, 57-65, 210-39; Haskins and Sawhill, ch. 2.

II History

5. Poverty before 1960: The poverty problem up through the 1950s. The New Deal reforms and the postwar elimination of most working poverty. *Issue: In what sense, if any, was poverty an issue before 1960?*

Patterson, chs. 1-5.

6. The Liberal Era: Poverty becomes a political issue, and becomes less tractable. The 1960s and 1970s created a profusion of new social programs, most of them still operating. The welfare boom. *Issue: Did the Great Society succeed or fail?*

Great Society handout; Patterson, chs. 6, 8-12; Mead, *New Politics*, pp. 25-33.

7. The Conservative Era: After 1980, the Republicans attack abuses, curb dependency, and impose tougher work and child support requirements. A further rise, then fall in welfare. *Issue: Did conservative antipoverty policy succeed any better than liberal? In what sense?*

Patterson, chs. 14-16; Mead, *New Politics*, pp. 33-47.

III Programs

8. Social Insurance vs. Welfare: Large middle-class programs like Social Security and Medicare are costly but popular. Welfare programs like AFDC/TANF are much cheaper yet more controversial. *Issue: Is the sharp distinction we make between social insurance and welfare justified?*

Levitan et al., pp. 43-99, 105-9, 112-22; DeParle, ch. 5.

9. Other Programs: Training, education, and social service programs have only small effects on poverty but are still controversial. *Issue: Do these programs matter for overcoming poverty, or not?*
Levitan et al., pp. 122-7, 130-54, 167-90, 211-38, 247-50.

10. Midterm Examination

IV Theories of Poverty

11. Conservatives, and some liberals, think poverty is due to the disincentives to marry and work set up by the welfare system and other benefit programs. Should we believe this? Can incentives to work be improved? *Issue: Does welfare really cause poverty?*

Murray, *Losing Ground*, chs. 4, 12, 17; Mead, *New Politics*, pp. 115-18.

12. Labor Market: Liberals commonly blame poverty on low wages, growing inequality, or a lack of jobs. Is this plausible? *Issue: Is the labor market good enough to allow people to escape poverty on their own? Even today, with unemployment close to 10 percent?*

Wilson, "Economic Plight of Inner-City Black Males"; Haskins and Sawhill, ch. 3; Mead, *New Politics*, chs. 4-5.

13. Racism: Liberals say that racial discrimination blocks integration and employment for the poor, many of whom are nonwhite. Conservatives deny this. *Issue: Are poverty and other social problems really due to race?*

Kirschenman and Neckerman, "'We'd Love to Hire Them, But . . .'"; Mead, *New Politics*, pp. 111-15.

14. Single Parents: Nonmarriage as a cause of poverty. Why do poor parents typically have children without marrying and working regularly? Child-care and the child support system. *Issue: Is the breakdown of the family the real cause of poverty and welfare?*

Edin and Kefalas, chs. 1-3; Levitan et al., pp. 154-62.

15. Immigration: Historically, immigrants overcame poverty, but today some believe immigration is increasing poverty. *Issue: Is today's immigration like that of the past—or different?*

Borjas, *Heaven's Door*, ch. 1; Massey, "Immigration and Equal Opportunity."

16. Culture: Some conservatives say that poverty is due mainly to a "culture of poverty" or the ethnic background of the poor. *Issue: Do the poor have a different psychology from the better off?*

Haskins and Sawhill, ch. 6; Mead, *New Politics*, ch. 7.

V Policy Approaches

17. Improving Opportunities: Liberals usually seek to reduce poverty by raising wages and taking other steps to "make work pay," rather than strictly requiring work. Some also favor expanding benefits that cover the middle class as well as the poor. *Issue: To solve poverty, is it enough to improve opportunities?*

Cherry, *Welfare Transformed*, chs. 1, 10.

18. Enforcement: Some conservatives blame poverty on permissive public policies. They seek to enforce work and other good behaviors as a condition of aid. Welfare reform was one such policy; others include tougher law enforcement and higher school standards. *Issue: To overcome poverty, is it enough to demand good behavior?*

Mead, *Beyond Entitlement*, chs. 1, 3; Starobin, "The Daddy State."

19. Paternalism: The close supervision of clients as an approach to antipoverty policy. Seen in other areas of social policy besides welfare. *Issue: Do the poor just need better oversight to better themselves?*

Mead, *New Paternalism*, ch. 1; Bloom et al., *Reengaging High School Dropouts*, executive summary, ch. 3.

20. Marriage: Conservative proposals to promote marriage as a solution to poverty. Policy and political challenges faced by this approach. *Issue: Can marriage be the key to overcoming poverty?*

Edin and Kefalas, conclusion; Haskins and Sawhill, ch. 10.

VI Welfare Reform

21. PRWORA: Politics and Policy: Origins and politics of the radical 1996 welfare reform. *Issue: After decades of stalemate or incremental change, why was PRWORA so radical?*

DeParle, chs. 6-7; Mead, "Politics of Conservative Welfare Reform."
Papers due in class.

22. PRWORA: Implementation and Effects: The implementation of TANF and its largely-good effects. *Issue: On balance, did welfare reform succeed? In what sense?*

DeParle, ch. 12; Besharov, "Two Cheers for American Welfare Reform."
Papers due in class.

23. Wisconsin: Politics: The programs and politics behind the nation's most dramatic state-level reform. *Issue: What was unusual about welfare reform in the Badger State?*

DeParle, ch. 9; Mead, *Government Matters*, chs. 2-3, 6.

24. Wisconsin: Implementation and Effects: The administrative statecraft behind the Wisconsin reform, and its largely-favorable effects. *Issue: Is good government the real secret to overcoming poverty?*

DeParle, chs. 14, 17-18; Mead, *Government Matters*, chs. 5, 10-11.

VII New Directions

25. Education: Recent developments suggest that schools can do more to help overcome poverty. *Issue: Are authoritative schools the real solution to poverty?*

Haskins and Sawhill, ch. 8; Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff*, ch. 2.

26. Problem and Causes: The problem of nonwork among low-income men and its likely causes. *Issue: Why do poor men fail to work consistently?*

Anderson, "Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black, and Male"; Mead, *Expanding Work Programs for Men*, chaps. 1-3

27. Programs: How to expand work programs for low-income men. *Issue: Can we put poor men to work, as we did welfare mothers?*

Mead, *Expanding Work Programs for Men*, chaps. 4-5, 8-9.

28. Final exam.

V. Paper Assignment

Question: *If you had to choose just one, which of the various theories of poverty considered in the fourth section of the course do you find the most persuasive, and why?* Note that in answering this question you must choose *only one* theory and defend it against the others. You may discuss several

theories and perhaps rank them, but you must clearly favor one as best. Note also that your task is not primarily to *describe* your preferred theory. It is to *justify* it in preference to the others. Beware of simply adopting a position like my own. I will expect students who agree with me to set out additional arguments, beyond those I provide. I expect to see use of the assigned readings, not only lectures, in documenting your positions.

Due: Class 21. Papers handed in after this class will be accepted but penalized –5 points if handed in within a week of the original due date. –10 points if handed in later than this but prior to the time grades are submitted. Be aware that delays due to commuting, the subway, or computer or printer problems are the student's responsibility. Extensions or Incompletes will be given according to the rules specified above under “Requirements.”

Submission: Papers may be handed to me in class on or before the deadline, or they may be left in my box prior to when I leave for the class when the paper is due. Papers may be mailed to my office, but must arrive prior to the class when papers are due. Papers may not be submitted by fax or e-mail. *Keep a copy of your paper, in hard copy or on disk, in case it should become lost.*

Format: Papers should observe the following guidelines. Papers infringing the rules will incur a penalty of 4 points off per infraction, but not more than 8 points total:

- *The question to be answered must be written out on the cover page.* This is to make sure that you focus on it. *Students often forget to do this!*
- Cover page: must include name, local address, and all possible phone numbers. Please place this information in the upper left-hand corner, to make it easier to locate your paper in a stack.
- Length: 10-12 pages, exclusive of cover page and bibliography, if any. In figuring length, footnotes or endnotes will be counted and half the length of any tables or figures will be added to the text.
- Papers must be typed or written on a computer.
- Spacing: double-spaced, with 22-5 lines to the page.
- Margins: 1-1.5" on the left and top of pages, .75-1" on the right and bottom.
- Type size: close to the size used for this assignment.
- Pages must be numbered, starting with the first page of text. Numbers may be handwritten.
- Binders—avoid. Instead, papers should be stapled at upper left-hand corner.
- All citations must be to material either assigned in the course or allowed under “Sources” below.

Sources: The paper may be written entirely from the readings assigned for the course. Other materials may be cited provided they were regularly published, such as books or newspaper or journal articles. This is to assure that they have faced some sort of external review for accuracy. Materials from web sites may be consulted but may not be cited unless they were also regularly published. Two exceptions: You may cite government reports and news stories from reputable news organizations off web sites; but cite these in published form if possible.

Originality: Students may discuss the assignment with other students but must write their papers individually, without collaboration with others. Students may seek help with their writing in general, but the writing they hand in should be entirely their own, not edited by others.

Plagiarism: Do not use ideas or language drawn from readings without giving the source. Also, do not use an author's actual language as if it were your own, even if you give the source. *Always enclose borrowed language within quotation marks to make clear that someone else is talking.* It is plagiarism not to cite a source *and also* to use an author's words as if they were your own--*even if you do cite the source.* Do not copy material out of books into your paper. Quote from the books only when the author really says it better than you can, and then make clear that someone else is

speaking. At the same time, do not be self-consciously "academic." The paper is intended to test your own thought and expression. Don't feel you have to have a citation on every sentence. There is no need to document facts that are commonly known to your audience.