

Poverty Ethnography: A Sociology of US Poverty Through an Ethnographic Lens
Instructor: Chris Herring, Department of Sociology

Email:

Office Hours: Thursday 2:30-3:30 & by appointment

Seminar Meetings

Office Location:

Overview

Since the turn of the millennium the polarization between rich and poor has widened, personal debt deepened, and job insecurity intensified to new heights across the US. At the same time, domestic policy has further shifted from public provisions of social welfare to privatized provisions of workfare and penalfare for the country's poorest citizens. How is this poverty being (re)produced, managed, resisted, and experienced? How does an ethnographic approach - studying through first-hand observation and/or participation - produce sociological knowledge, theory, and representations? Over the semester students will simultaneously explore these sociological and methodological questions through close engagement with contemporary ethnographies of poverty in the US.

After a brief introduction to the ethnographic treatments of poverty in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the seminar will focus on one recently published ethnographic works each week. We will relate key strands of the sociology of poverty, including its production (low-wage, informal, and illegal labor), reproduction (health, housing, neighborhoods, and education), management (welfare and criminal justice), and resistance (individual and collective) with broader sociological topics of class, race, gender, work, urbanization, politics, and culture. In spanning and connecting these studies the course aims to provide a "relational" understanding of poverty, that shifts thinking about "the poor" to thinking about relationships of power and privilege - treating poverty as a political, economic, and ideological effect of capitalist processes and state activities and making sense of poor people's responses to it.

We will also survey the key schools and traditions of the ethnographic method, evaluate genres of ethnographic writing, and grapple with the ethics of doing participant observation in poor communities and the politics of representation. Keeping the particular ethnographic methods of each study continually in our reflexive scope will not only provide an advanced literacy in one of the discipline's core modes of research, but also reveal the warrants and limits of other quantitative, survey, and interviewing methods. Furthermore, the methodological foci on ethnography will force us to continually contemplate the construction of poverty as a social problem and grapple with the inevitable contradictions and relations of power, privilege, and politics involved in the sociological process of "objectively objectifying," describing, and even "giving voice" to those in poverty.

Design & Grading

The course is designed to provide a relational understanding of poverty under late capitalism in the United States and an intermediate literacy in one of sociology's core, but perhaps most varied and controversial methods. As a capstone seminar of the sociology department, the course is not only more focused than a traditional lecture course, both topically and methodologically, it is also explicitly designed to cultivate a wider set of critical thinking skills including (a) reading analytically and critically, (b) generating novel questions, (c) relating and adjudicating between ideas and thinkers, (d) writing and discussing ideas clearly and constructively. We will workshop these skills through our weekly meetings, presentations, reading responses, and a final paper that you will develop throughout the course. After the seminar, you should walk away with a grasp of the empirical realities, key concepts, and theoretical and policy debates of contemporary poverty in US cities to competently and reflexively participate in graduate-level academic, policy, community-based, and professional research and practice addressing poverty.

Seminar Attendance, Participation, and Presentations (30%)

Attendance + Participation (15%) + Presentation (15%)

Seminars meet once a week and we will continuously be building comparisons and contrasts across the works covered. Therefore attendance is absolutely crucial. You are allowed one unexcused, no-questions asked absences. *For each additional unexcused absence, your attendance/participation grade will decrease by a full letter grade.* You must email me as far in advance as possible if you expect to miss a class and have a valid reason for doing so or a doctor's note. To get full credit for the course, you must contribute actively to section discussions.

Each student will be required to present once to the seminar. Students will choose a core issue of poverty covered in the week's text (eg informal labor, incarceration, welfare) and provide a brief summary of the latest available data, policy approaches, and/or struggles being waged by community organizations, think-tanks, companies, politicians, or other actors on the issue. These might be local cases like the controversy around San Francisco's criminalization of homelessness, national struggles, like Black Lives Matter or the Fight for 15, or global comparisons such as between the US criminal justice studied in the course and say the Swedish penal system. The presenter should use the week's text and other course readings as a lens to decipher these developments – deploying the conceptual tools to analyze, interpret, and form a position on the issue. The presentation should also reflect on how their case study either confirms or challenges the book's findings and theories. Students will provide a handout or create a PowerPoint for a 10-minute presentation and submit a 1,000 - 2,000 word paper.

Weekly Writing Responses (30%)

Each week you will receive a short assignment (250-500 words) **due by Wednesday 5pm** on BCourses. The purpose of these assignments is to guide your reading and prepare for our weekly discussion. We will engage collectively with these responses during our seminar and they will serve as key resources for your final paper. I will provide feedback on alternating weeks. On weeks of presentations, please submit a written essay of your presentation (approx. 2000 words) in place of the reading. You are allowed one skip week without penalty and one late submission.

Final Paper (40%)

Abstract/Outline **due May 23** + 15 minute meeting **by May 30** + Final Paper **due June 14** (40%)

Students will produce a 10-12 page critical book review essay or a critical policy essay.

Critical policy essay: This paper should take up a contemporary policy or policy proposal and provide an analysis and position of it, drawing on the ethnographic findings, perspectives, and theories covered across the course. After a brief summary of the poverty-related issue and policy treatment students should provide a critical analysis and interpretation of the issue drawing on two or more works. This paper may build or be an extension of the seminar presentation.

Critical Book Review: Unlike a traditional book review that summarizes a work and notes its merits and limits, a joint critical book review presents the critic's own argument about a given topic or its representation in ethnographic work, by drawing comparisons and contrasts across two or more works. The essay must draw on two to four books covered in the course, and may also (though not required) engage with other scholarship beyond the course. The essay should focus on a specific topic of poverty (i.e. illegal/informal work, housing/homelessness, criminalization, welfare, etc.) a sociological theme (race, gender, culture, the state, exploitation, social control, etc.), or a methodological or representational issue (ethics of research, immersive vs. observational, character vs. institutional ethnography, etc.).

Required Texts: All course materials will be available as downloadable PDFs on bCourses (bcourses.berkeley.edu).

Part I: Concepts and History

Prologue

Ananya Roy. ["In Defense of Poverty."](#) (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site. *Items*. SSRC. 2016.

Alice O'Connor. 2001. [Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth-Century US History](#). Introduction. pp3-22 (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site..

Week 1: US Origins of Poverty Ethnography: the Atlanta and Chicago Schools

W.E.B DuBois. 1899. [The Philadelphia Negro](#). (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site. Ch. 1, "The Scope of this Study" (pp1-4), Ch. 2 "The Negro Problem" (5-9) and a passage on Method (62-63), Ch. 9 "The Occupation of Negroes" (97-141). Ch. 15 sec. 44 "The Environment of the Negro: Houses and Rent" (283-299) + Preceding Passage on "The Causes of Crime and Poverty, Ch. 16, "The Contact of the Races: Color Prejudice" (322-355). Chapter XVIII "A Final Word" (385-397).

Harvey Zorbaugh. 1929. [The Gold Coast and the Slum](#) (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site. Ch 7, "The Slum" (pp127-159).

Week 2: Culture Wars and "The Negro Family"

Elliot Liebow. 1967. *Tally's Corner*. Ch. 1 "Introduction" (1- 17). Ch. 2 "Men and Jobs" (19-47). Ch. 4 "Husbands and Wives" (67-89). Ch 7. "Conclusion" and Methodological Appendix (135-166).

Part II: Producing Poverty: Working on the Margins

Week 3: Precarious Low-Wage Work

Katherine S. Newman. 1999. *No Shame in My Game*. Ch. 1 – 4 (3 -122) "Working Lives," "The Invisible Poor," "Getting a Job in the Inner City," "No Shame in this Game."

Week 4: Illegal/Informal Work

Phillipe Bourgois. 1996. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. "Introduction" selections (11-18); Chpt. 2 "A Street History of El Barrio" (48-76); Chpt. 4 " 'Goin' Legit': Disrespect and Resistance at Work" (114 – 173); "Conclusion" (318 – 327).

Part III: Reproducing Poverty

Week 5: Housing Precarity

Mathew Desmond. ["Eviction and the reproduction of urban poverty."](#) Links to an external site. *American Journal of Sociology* 118.1 (2012): 88-133.

Mathew Desmond. 2016. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. Ch. 9 (111-133) and Ch. 11 "The 'Hood is Good" (144-157).

Week 6: Health and Addiction

Kelly Ray Knight. 2015. *Addicted. Pregnant. Poor*. Introduction (selection: 21-32); Ch 1 "Consumption and Insecurity" (33-67); Ch 5 "Stratified Reproduction and Kin of Last Resort" (151-177); Conclusion (206-219).

Week 7: Youth and Violence

Nikki Jones. 2010. *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner City Violence*. Introduction (1-19), Ch. 1 Selection (28-36), Ch. 2 (46-73) "'It's Not Where You Live, It's How You Live': When Good Girls Fight," Ch. 3 (74-106). Then Chose ONE of the following: Conclusion (151-162) "The Other Side of the Crisis" OR Appendix (163-181) "A Reflection on Fieldwork and the Politics of Representation."

Part IV: Managing Poverty

Week 8: Welfare / Workfare

Sharon Hays. 2003. *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform*. Ch 1 "Money and Morality" (3-32), Ch 2 "Enforcing the Work Ethic" (33-62), Ch 3 "Promoting Family Values (63-95).

Week 9: Policing / Homelessness

Chris Herring. Selections from *Cruel Survival: Criminalizing Homelessness in the Progressive City*. Selections from Manuscript in Progress with UC Press.

Week 10: Policing / Organized Resistance

Q&A W/ Special Guest from LA CAN

Forrest Stuart. 2016. *Down Out & Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row*. Ch 5 "Policing the Police" (205-249)