

SOCIOLOGY 11.01: CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Spring 2003: TuTh 9:10-10:25a.m. Rm W10.311 (Social Sciences Building, Room 311)

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Hours: Tu 10:30-11:30a.m. *or* by appointment at any other time

SYLLABUS

Description. This course surveys different approaches to the study of social problems and social trends in contemporary American society. The course features a comparative analysis of social problems across historical periods, nations, and social groups by gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and culture. The course emphasizes research issues, especially how and to what degree the understanding of social problems is a direct result of the inductive processes used to define social problems and the research methods and procedures used to investigate them.

We focus on three general classes of social problems:

problems of **deviant behavior**, including

- drug and alcohol use and abuse
- mental illness
- crime and violence
- sexuality-related problems

problems of **social inequality and conflict**, including

- aging, the elderly, and ageism
- racial and ethnic relations
- the sexes and gender inequality
- poverty and economic inequality
- homelessness

problems of **human progress and social change**, including

- changes in the economy and the workplace

In each case, we will study what is known: (1) about the problem and recent trends therein, (2) its causes and consequences, and (3) individual and societal responses to the phenomenon.

Aims of the Course. The general objective of the course is to give students a broad overview of contemporary American social problems. More specifically, the course is designed:

- to give students some understanding of *how social problems come to be defined* in the larger society and how sociologists and related social scientists conceptualize and study social problems;
- to provide students with an overview of the *latest knowledge of the extent, causes, consequences and responses to social problems* sufficient for a better understanding of current events as described daily and weekly in the print and electronic media; and
- to give students some appreciation of the *life cycle of public attention to social problems*.

The course can be taken as *an elective option* by students who wish to gain some appreciation of problems in the society in which they live but who will not have the flexibility in their schedules for more specialized and advanced departmental courses in a particular social problem topical area. It can also be taken as *a convenient entry point* from which students may define and follow their interests into one or more such specialized and advanced Sociology courses (at an appropriate point later in the semester, the instructor will describe specific advanced Sociology courses that are devoted to a more intensive examination of a particular social problem or process than can be managed in the present survey course).

Course Materials. Two books (identified below) are required. The first is a standard textbook survey of social problems. The second is a book of readings on perspectives on social problems from an array of ideological points of view, conservative and liberal. After materials on particular social problems (from the text and elsewhere) have been described in the classroom by the instructor, students (or groups of students) will be assigned readings from the latter book as a point of departure for classroom discussion and debate of the problems.

Organization of the Course. The course will combine elements of the lecture-discussion and seminar formats. During approximately the first 20% of the course, most of the classroom work will be take the form of lectures by the instructor (opportunities for questions and discussion will be provided). After presentation of material on approaches to the study of social problems and on what is known about some specific problems, small groups of students will be assigned points of view (not

necessarily their own) from the book of perspectives on social problems to defend in classroom debates on particular social problems. These debates will be interspersed with continuing lectures by the instructor on the remaining topics of the course during the remaining 80% of the course

Requirements. As indicated, students will be expected to participate in classroom debates on particular social problems. In addition, there will be two exams: *a midterm and a (comprehensive) final examination*. Students will be asked to hand in one or two sample exam questions for each topic covered prior to the respective exam. The instructor then will attempt to use a selection of these sample questions in constructing the exam. As an incentive to take this assignment seriously, 3 points per question used (up to 6 points) will be added to the total exam score of a contributing student. A *short (5-10 pages) term paper* that takes the form of a *readings journal* that describes 2 to 3 research journal articles relevant to a particular social problems topic (chosen in consultation with the instructor) will be due at the end of the semester.

Grading. The midterm and final examinations and the term paper each count 1/3 towards a preliminary semester grade. After this preliminary grade is computed, class participations (in the classroom debates described above) are used to adjust the grade up by a fraction of a letter grade.

Level of the Course. This course is designed *as an introductory, survey course* and is targeted at lower-division-level (first-year and sophomore) students. Upper-division students (juniors and seniors), especially those who already have had three or more introductory and/or advanced courses in the social sciences, are advised to consider other courses more appropriate to their levels of experience. In particular, *seniors must obtain the instructor's permission* to remain enrolled in the course.

Recommended for Purchase: (at the Duke Bookstore or Durham Book Exchange or online)

Author	Title
Kornblum, William and Joseph Julian	<i>Social Problems</i> , 10th Edition (2001), Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall
Finsterbusch, Kurt	<i>Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Social Issues</i> , 12th Edition (2002), Guilford, CT: Dushkin/McGraw-Hill

Course Schedule. Topics covered in the course will proceed more or less according to the major groupings stated earlier. The course will seek to maintain the following schedule of materials and topics, although some deviations may be expected as the semester proceeds.

Week of:

January 9

- Introduction to the course and picture day.

PART I. Problems of Deviant Behavior.

January 14, 16

- Definition and Overview of Social Problems; Doing Research on Social Problems. (Kornblum and Julian, Chapter 1)
- Alcohol and Other Drugs, Part 1. (Kornblum and Julian, Chapter 5)

January 21, 23

- Alcohol and Other Drugs, Part 2.
- Mental Illness, Part 1. (Kornblum and Julian, Chapter 3)

January 28, 30

- Mental Illness, Part 2.
- **First Classroom Debate:** Should Drug Use Be Decriminalized? (Finsterbusch, Issue 17)
- Crime and Violence, Part 1. (Kornblum and Julian, Chapters 6 and 7)

February 4, 6

- Crime and Violence, Part 2.
- Sexual Behavior and Sexuality-Related Problems, Part 1. (Kornblum and Julian, Chapter 4)
- **Second Classroom Debate:** Is Capital Punishment Justified? (Finsterbusch, Issue 18)

February 11, 13

- Sexual Behavior and Sexuality-Related Problems, Part 2.
- **Third Classroom Debate:** Should Same-Sex Marriages Be Legally Recognized? (Finsterbusch, Issue 6)

February 18

- **Midterm Examination, Tuesday, February 18th, at class time.**

PART II. Problems of Social Inequality and Conflict.

February 20

- Aging, the Elderly, and Ageism. (Kornblum and Julian, Chapter 11)
- **Term Paper/Readings Journal Assignment Details Given.**

February 25, 27

- Racial and Ethnic Relations, Prejudice and Discrimination. (Kornblum and Julian, Chapter 9)
- **Fourth Classroom Debate:** Has Affirmative Action Outlived Its Usefulness? (Finsterbusch, Issue 10)

March 4, 6

- The Sexes and Gender Inequality, Parts 1 and 2. (Kornblum and Julian, Chapter 10)

March 7 (Friday) through March 16 (Sunday) -- **Spring Break.**

March 18, 20

- Gender Inequality.
- **Fifth Classroom Debate:** Sex Roles and Male-Female Communication Problems. (Finsterbusch, Issues 4 and 5)
- Poverty and Economic Inequality, Part 1. (Kornblum and Julian, Chapter 8)

March 25, 27

- Poverty and Economic Inequality, Part 2.
- **No class on Thursday, March 27th.**

April 1, 3

- Poverty and Economic Inequality, Part 3.
- **Sixth Classroom Debate:** Economic Inequality and the Underclass. (Finsterbusch, Issues 8 and 9)

April 8

- Homelessness

PART III. Problems of Human Progress and Social Change.

April 10

- The Economy and the Workplace, Part 1. (Kornblum and Julian, Chapter 14)

April 15, 17

- The Economy and the Workplace, Part 2.
- **Seventh Classroom Debate:** Is Globalization Good for Mankind? Is Third World Immigration a Threat to America's Way of Life? (Finsterbusch, Issues 19 and 3)

April 22

- Last Thoughts on Social Problems.
- **Student term papers due on Tuesday, April 22nd.**

April 28 – May 3

- Final Exams Week.