

Introduction to Social Problems

SOC 20033 / HESB 30422

Section 01. Fall 2012

Class meeting schedule: MWF 12.50–1.40, O’Shaughnessy 242

Version 2.0 ^{1*}

Instructor: Brandon Vaidyanathan, Department of Sociology

Office hours: Tue 10:00–12:00, Wed 9:00–11:00, or by appointment. Flanner Hall 841

Contact: rvaidyan@nd.edu (preferred). 574–631–4585 (office). 574–286–6746 (emergency)

Course description

We live in a world beset by problems which in numerous ways and to varying degrees undermine the well-being of our societies. These social problems constitute a wide range of topics that feature prominently and unceasingly in the news and in political debates. These include poverty; unemployment; homelessness; discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation; consumerism; crime; violence; human rights violations; environmental degradation and climate change; and much more. What is it about such issues that makes them problematic? And to whom—why are certain issues especially problematic for some but not others? How do we identify the causes of these problems and think about them in ways that can lead to helpful solutions? This course addresses such questions from a sociological perspective. We will apply sociological insights and techniques not only to examine the causes and consequences of some of the most troubling social problems—both locally as well as around the world—but also to take a critical look at our own perceptions of these problems.

Course objectives

The primary goal of this course is to enable you to approach and analyze social problems from a sociological perspective. To that end, this course is designed to help you learn

* This document, particularly the reading schedule, may change during the course of the semester in order to better serve class needs and students’ learning experience. I will announce deviations or modifications in advance.

a number of perspectives, skills, and methods that have been developed in the social–scientific study of social problems. By the end of this course, therefore, you should be able to:

- demonstrate a working knowledge of prominent sociological approaches
- explain and critically evaluate studies on a number of pressing social problems
- collaborate more effectively in peer groups to conduct research and communicate ideas
- engage more productively in contentious discussions while respecting differences in perspectives and opinions
- cultivate a habit of reflecting upon and articulating your own engagement with the social world and grappling with causes and potential solutions to social problems
- develop and carry out a collaborative project based on empirical research in the local community.

Rationale

It may seem somewhat pretentious to take (or teach, for that matter) a course on social problems. The scope of the topic is seemingly endless. Even a reasonably delimited definition of social problems—“condition[s] that undermin[e] the well-being of some or all members of a society and [are] usually a matter of public controversy”²—can easily generate a list of concerns much broader than we can hope to cover in the span of one semester. So it is important to keep in mind that this course is meant to be an introduction—a way to get your feet wet—to how a limited selection of social problems are studied in the discipline of sociology. As a survey course, it will cover a range of topics from among key social problems that affect not only Americans but societies around the world. It is by no means an exhaustive list; many perhaps equally important topics have been left out. Further, each of the issues we will cover could itself quite easily constitute the subject matter for another entire course.

Given such a broad range of topics, I cannot in any honesty pretend to be an “expert”; nor, for that matter, can anyone. I also do not pretend to have “solutions” to these problems—at least, not in any conclusive or definitive sense. *So why is this course not a waste of time?* Mainly because several decades of sociological research have generated a substantial body of knowledge about factors that cause and sustain these social problems, as well as what are better or worse solutions. In other words, sociology as a discipline offers important ways of thinking about and studying these problems that have improved (and continue to improve) our

² Macionis, John J. 2011. *Social Problems*. 4th edition. Pearson. p.3

ability to work towards better solutions. Some of these findings and their interpretations are certainly debated, but there is much that is agreed upon as well. We need to be humble enough to acknowledge that there is a lot we do not yet adequately know, but also that there is much that we *do* know. *To ignore the evidence and insights of sociological research, thus, would mean to remain mired in incorrect and inadequate assumptions about the social world and its workings, which can be perilous to the well-being of our societies, and consequently, to each of us individually as we try to live our lives well.* My role as an instructor will be to guide you through some of this terrain, and to help you develop new ways of understanding, examining, and thinking about the social world.

Course content. Several factors have informed my selection of the topics and readings that we will examine in this course. First, I have attempted to strike some sort of *balance between breadth and depth*. We could have covered a distinct topic every class, but the consequence would be to learn precious little about any of them. The readings are therefore clustered into thematic sections, and we will spend on average a week on each. You will see (I hope) a core set of concepts and approaches that sustain some degree of thematic unity throughout the sections of the course. Some themes, such as health, do not have distinct sections but are woven into the existing sections. Overall we will see that all these themes are interrelated in many ways—in fact, the purpose of some of your assignments will be to unearth and put together these connections. The distinctions are primarily for the purpose of focus.

Second, I think these readings do a great job at *“showcasing” how sociology as a discipline is able to illuminate* some of these issues. In terms of methodology, the selections are weighted more towards qualitative and ethnographic approaches, since I think these are more easily accessible to non-sociologists, and also because I think these will be more useful to you as you begin to carry out your own research. But there is a good measure of other methodologies present as well, so you will get some sense of how different tools and approaches can be used in the discipline of sociology and in the social-scientific study of social problems.

Third, contrary to the bias evident in most textbooks, I think *there are things in other parts of the world outside the United States that are well worth studying*. So I have included studies about parts of the world that I know well and have researched and continue to study, namely, India and the Middle East. I think these cases will serve as interesting examples of how the theoretical and methodological tools of sociology can be helpful in understanding social problems around the globe. I hope they will also reveal that seemingly faraway problems are closer to home than we might at first think.

Fourth, as I will discuss on the first day of class, I have also taken into consideration your interests as reported on the survey that most of you filled out in the summer. *The main social problems that are of concern to you are, to a great extent, reflected in the topics chosen.* Finally, I have consulted with several instructors who have taught this course in the past, in *retaining readings and activities that their students found helpful and discarding those that they didn't.* So hopefully you will benefit from this cumulative wisdom.

Beyond readings. Beyond the texts we will be reading and discussing, a key component of this course involves *research in the local community.* This is very much intentional. Much of what is discussed in this course can seem abstract, remote, and possibly irrelevant if it is confined exclusively to the classroom. To overcome this problem, I have designed a very basic assignment in social research, which will involve a modest amount of interaction with an organization in the local community that addresses particular social problems. *The amount of work you will put into this project would be comparable to that you would ordinarily spend on a term paper.* I have selected and spoken with organizations in the community that are quite used to having students visit and conduct research—in fact, some of you are already volunteering at these organizations—and the Center for Social Concerns will help facilitate additional logistics.

This is not a public policy course. Nor is it an ethics course. Still, questions, debates, and topics pertaining to these subjects are unavoidable when dealing with such topics as we will cover in the course. Some of it we will address. A lot of it we will have to bracket. Part of my job will be to keep us focused, with the help of the readings and schedule. Given the nature of the course content, plus this being election year, the class also has the potential of becoming quite politically charged. But this need not be a bad thing. A crucial (though sorely lacking) part of university education is the ability to *communicate respectfully across such differences of opinion.* American society, consequently, suffers from an impoverished capacity for civil discourse. We will consider some tools and methods for critical thinking and discussion that have proven to be helpful for this, and the regular discussions throughout the course will serve as an opportunity to practice such skills.

Further, there will be a good bit of *group work* in this course, both in class discussions and assignments. If any of you have had bad experiences with this, you might anticipate a dreadful nightmare. But again we will look at ways of improving group process and anticipate and address potential difficulties. The rewards of cultivating these practices during your undergraduate education are not stressed enough. Let me simply point to a few: First, the ability to work effectively in groups and teams is an indispensable asset and even requirement in most

jobs today, whether in the for-profit, non-profit, or public sector. Second, an increasing amount of [research](#) is showing that collaborative projects are far superior to solo performances when it comes to innovation and impact. Relevant to the purposes of this course, if we are to learn how to tackle pressing social problems in our societies, we will need to, at the very minimum, learn how to better work together—and that means across differences and disagreements.

Let me warn you now: all of this is going to be difficult and potentially frustrating. Certainly the easier route would be to simply stick to textbooks and classroom lectures. But there would be simply too much irony to do so in this course while implicitly perpetuating the rampant problems of self-seeking individualism and careerism, passive consumerist mindsets, competition rather than collaboration, and disengagement from community, all the while discussing problems that are “out there”. I’m not going to pretend that we are going to be able to rid ourselves of these problems in this course, but I think this is at least one space in which it would behoove us to be mindful of these problems, and attempt at least in some small way to address them by cultivating practices and mindsets of collaboration and contribution. To do so will itself go a long way towards addressing pervasive social problems that we are ourselves enmeshed in and likely contributing to. I hope you will see the challenge as worthwhile.

Class format

Discussions. We will spend a good part of each class collectively discussing the readings as well as other media I will present. It is therefore imperative that you come prepared to each class by reading the assigned content for each class beforehand. Further, you will be expected to talk about the content you have read, either by commenting on it or asking meaningful questions about it. Two key principles will animate our discussions.

(1) Collaboration: Our goal will be to work together towards a collective understanding of the material and its implications. Toward this end, many of the discussions will be in the format of pairs or small groups. Each of you is expected, however, to come prepared. Free-riding on your part will weaken the effectiveness of the discussion for the group, the class as a whole, as well as for yourself.

(2) Contribution: As I will discuss on the first day of class, it is important that you consciously try to counter the “consumer mindset” that is widely prevalent in university classrooms. You are not meant to be a passive consumer in class; each of you is fully capable of making a meaningful contribution to discussions—*even if you did not understand the readings for the day*. Be confident that the questions and comments you have to offer, as well as the

examples from your life–experience that may confirm or challenge the readings, can help us all learn better. For those of you who are prone to dominate discussions and conversation in class, I would urge you to contribute in a spirit of collaboration: be mindful of those who are less confident, and in the context of group discussions, aim to incorporate everyone’s points of view. For my part, I will provide you with tools and protocols to help this process.

Lectures. I will spend some of the class time going over the core theories and concepts in the material, as well as additional information that is relevant to better understanding the content of the readings. However, what I have to say will not make much sense to you unless you actually do the readings, since the lecture will rely on various examples and illustrations in the content that I will not repeat. The lectures are primarily meant to expand on and contextualize the readings. I will also try to make clear the most important points that you need to take away for each topic. Overall, *the lectures are meant to supplement the readings and discussion, not to substitute for them.*

Grading and Evaluation

Thematic syntheses x 3	1500 points	(13.64% of final grade)	A	93–100
Exams x 2	3000 points	(27.27% of final grade)	A–	90–92.9
Journal entries x 4	1000 points	(18.18% of final grade)	B+	87–89.9
Class Participation	1500 points	(13.64% of final grade)	B	83–86.9
Group project proposal	1000 points	(9.09% of final grade)	B–	80–82.9
Group project presentation	2000 points	(18.18% of final grade)	C+	77–79.9
			C	73–76.9
			C–	70–72.9
			D	60–69.9
			F	<60
Total	11,000 points	(100%)		

(1) **Short thematic syntheses** (3 x 500 points). These short writing assignments, each being 2–3 pages double–spaced in length, entail a synthesis and critique of the readings of a particular section. The goals of the assignment are to tie together in a concise way the different readings of that particular section, connect it to other sections of the course, and provide your own insights, appreciation, and critiques. You can choose to turn them in at any of the assigned

dates in the schedule (they usually fall on the last day of a particular section). The assignment needs to be turned in at or before the start of class on the day of submission or will not be accepted. *One of the three assignments has to be done as a group* and the other two individually. If you wish, you may choose to hand in up to a total of four assignments, and I will drop your lowest score.

(2) ***In-class exams*** (2 x 1500 points). You will be tested on your knowledge of key concepts in the course through two exams, the first being before the Fall break and the second on the final day of class. The second exam is not cumulative and will only cover the latter half of the course. We will review exam-related material in class during the week before the exams.

(3) ***Journal entries*** (4 x 500 points). You will also need to submit four journal entries reflecting on your personal experience of interacting with organizations that address social problems. These reflections on your fieldwork should be both descriptive and analytical. Describe key events and experiences that struck you and why. Include any connections relevant to material covered in class, as well as reflections on the group process. Each journal entry should be at least 3 pages double-spaced in length. You can hand in three of them in at any point in the course. The final one is to be handed in on the final day of the course and should summarize your experience of the course. *One of the four entries should be turned in as a group, reflecting on your collective experience of fieldwork and your group process.*

(4) ***Class participation*** (1500 points). Your grade for class participation will depend on two factors. First, your contribution to class participation through submitting questions and comments on Sakai, which will serve as fodder for discussion. Second, your actual participation in classroom discussion. Both will require that you study the readings for class in advance.

(5) ***Group project***. (3000 points). Your final assignment for the course is a group project based on your research in community organizations. The first milestone for the project for which you will be graded is a project proposal, based on your initial experience of the organization, outlining what you plan to do and why. The second milestone is a final in-class presentation of your project. I will go over details of the project in class.

Further details on these assignments will be communicated in class and through messages on Sakai.

Course policies

I do not grade on a curve. Your cumulative points will be weighted on the same scale of 100% for your final grade. Borderline grades falling within a tenth of the next level (e.g., 92.9) can be adjusted upwards if you have (1) no late penalties and (2) no more than one unexcused absence.

You are expected to be punctual to class. All assignments are to be handed in by the specified deadlines. Do not wait until the last minute. Late assignments will be penalized. If you expect for some reason that you will be unable to hand in an assignment on time, let me know well in advance of the due date (i.e., letting me know the day before is not acceptable).

Attendance also counts towards your class participation grade. You are allowed only one unexcused absence before I start lowering your participation grade. It is your responsibility to catch up on any material in class that you miss. As for excused absences, following University guidelines, only University-approved absences are permissible, which include personal illness, death in the family, and duties performed for the University.

In general I do not give make-up exams. Exceptions will be made *only* in the case of very serious issues (such as hospitalization or death in the family) or official permissions from university authorities (such as in the case of athletes).

You are expected to follow the University of Notre Dame's [honor code](#). Please review this especially for what counts as academic dishonesty. Cheating on exams or plagiarizing will result in serious consequences.

Cell phones must be turned off during class. Students who text or talk on the phone during class may be asked to leave. You may use laptop computers for taking notes or reading assigned pdfs, but if you use email, facebook, etc., you will be asked to leave class.

While disagreements are likely to arise in class, it is never acceptable to treat another student with disrespect. Discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age, or the like will not be tolerated.

Readings and Schedule

This course does not use a textbook or reader. Having reviewed several of these, and having spoken at length with instructors who taught this course previously, I have selected a number of full-length books as well as additional articles and chapters that are downloadable: some from the web (use hyperlinks on the .pdf version of this syllabus), some from [Sakai](#), and others from [electronic reserves](#). **You are expected to come prepared to discuss all assigned readings for each class.**

When you read, focus primarily on getting the big picture and the main themes and arguments in the readings and supporting evidence. If you do not understand the whole argument, or if there are sections that are difficult to get through, that is perfectly fine. *The amount of reading assigned is heavy. Do not be alarmed.* This is intentional, and is meant to cultivate a practice of reading more efficiently for central themes, evidence, and argumentation. You are not supposed to read every single word on every single page. Some readings you will need to read in more detail, others you are only supposed to skim. I will also let you know beforehand which sections of the readings to pay special attention to. But I expect you to generate additional comments and questions of your own, which will serve as fodder for discussion in class.

Required Texts

1. MacLeod, Jay. 2008. *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*. (3rd edition). Westview Press.
2. Erikson, Kai. 1976. *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*. Simon & Schuster.
3. Smith et al. 2011. *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. Oxford University Press.
4. Mahdavi, Pardis. 2011. *Gridlock: Labor, Migration, and Human Trafficking in Dubai*. Stanford University Press.
5. Brenneman, Robert. 2011. *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America*. Oxford University Press.

Schedule

Section 1. Introduction

Wednesday, Aug 22

Syllabus

Friday, Aug 24

Giddens, "What is sociology?" ([E-reserves](#))

Best, "Declaring War on Social Problems" ([E-reserves](#))

Optional background readings

Berger, "Sociology as an Individual Pastime" ([E-reserves](#))

Mills, "From the Sociological Imagination" ([E-reserves](#))

Monday, Aug 27

FHI, [In-depth interviews](#) (reference)

FHI, [Participant Observation](#) (reference)

NAIRSC, [Active listening tips](#) (reference)

Section 2. Social class and Inequality

Wednesday, Aug 29

GQ, [Amber waves of green](#).

Allen, "Social Class Matters" ([E-reserves](#))

Friday, Aug 31

MacLeod, Ch.1, Ch.3, Ch.4

Eitzen, "Upward Mobility through Sport?" ([E-reserves](#))

Monday, Sep 3

MacLeod, Chs 5-7

Finalize decisions about groups and organizations

Wednesday, Sep 5

MacLeod, *Ch.2 [skim]*, Ch.8.

Snell, "Spatial Segregation of Religious Youth Socialization", [Youth and Society](#).

Friday, Sep 7

Lareau, "Invisible Inequality". [American Sociological Review](#).

Lareau, "Unequal Childhoods and Unequal Adulthoods." ([E-reserves](#)) [skim]

Assignment due. Synthesis (optional)

Monday, Sep 10

Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater. *FieldWorking. Excerpts (Sakai)* [skim] (reference)

[Guest lecture]

Wednesday, Sep 12

Pickett and Wilkinson. The Spirit Level. Selections ([E-reserves](#))

Massey, *Categorically Unequal. Ch2.* ([E-reserves](#)) [skim last section]

Section 3. Poverty

Friday, Sep 14.

Iceland, Characteristics of the poverty population ([E-reserves](#))

Rodgers, Poverty in a New Era of Reform. Why are people poor in America? ([E-reserves](#))

Monday, Sep 17.

Rank, One Nation Underprivileged. Selections ([E-reserves](#))

Assignment due. Group proposal

Wednesday, Sep 19

Shipler, David. 2004. The Working Poor. Selections ([E-reserves](#))

Brooks, "[The Poor give more](#)"

Section 4. Homelessness and Urban ethnography

Friday, Sep 21

Duneier, Sidewalk. Selections. ([E-reserves](#))

Anderson, [The Code of the Streets](#)

Monday, Sep 24

Wacquant, "[Scrutinizing the Street](#)," American Journal of Sociology (relevant sections)

Duneier, "[What kind of combat sport is sociology?](#)" American Journal of Sociology

Wednesday, Sep 26

Lee et al., "[Are the Homeless to Blame? A Test of Two Theories](#)," *Soc Quarterly* [skim]

McNaughton, "Agency, Transgression and Causation of Homelessness", *Eur J of Housing Policy* ([Sakai](#))

Snow et al., "[The Myth of Pervasive Mental Illness among the Homeless](#)," *Social Problems* [skim, for synthesis]

Assignment due. Synthesis (optional)

Section 5. Structural violence

Friday, Sep 28

Farmer, "[On Suffering and Structural Violence](#)", *Daedalus*

Erikson, Introduction, Part 1.

Monday, Oct 1

Erikson: [*The Mountain Ethos, Looking for Scars* : skim], Individual Trauma (focus)

Wednesday, Oct 3

Erikson, Collective Trauma, Conclusion

Friday, Oct 5

Midterm exam

Monday, Oct 8

Sayer, "Dignity" ([E-reserves](#))

Interview with Jean Vanier, [ABC Radio National](#). (30 min audio)

Section 6. Race and Disadvantage

Wednesday, Oct 10

McIntosh, [White Privilege](#)

Pager, "[Blacks and Ex-cons Need Not Apply](#)". Contexts

Massey and Sampson, *Annals of the AAPSS* 2009 ([Sakai](#))

Friday, Oct 12

Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (selections) ([Sakai](#))

Tyson et al., *Not a Black Thing*, [American Sociological Review](#) (Results) [skim]

Grant, "There are no bad schools in Raleigh". ([E-reserves](#)) [Ch4, for synthesis]

Assignment due. Synthesis (optional)

FALL BREAK

Section 7. Transition to adulthood

Monday, Oct 22

Smith et al., Introduction and Ch.1

Wednesday, Oct 24

Smith et al., Ch.2,3

Abbey, "[Alcohol-related sexual assault](#)" [skim]

Friday, Oct 26

Smith et al., Ch.4

Boswell and Spade, "[Fraternities and collegiate rape culture](#)" [skim]

Monday, Oct 29

Smith et al., Ch.5, conclusion

Assignment due. Synthesis (optional)

Section 9. Work

Wednesday, Oct 31

MacLeod, Part Three (*Skim Chs. 12, 13. Focus on 14*)

Friday, Nov 2

Ehrenreich, Nickel and Dimed. Selections ([E-reserves](#))

Correll, "Is there a motherhood penalty?" [American Journal of Sociology](#) [skim]

Monday, Nov 5

Patel, Working the Night Shift. Selections ([E-reserves](#))

Rudrappa, "[India's Reproductive Assembly Line.](#)" *Contexts* [skim]

Wednesday, Nov 7

Nadeem, "The uses and abuses of time" ([E-reserves](#))

Vaidyanathan, "Professionalism from below" ([Sakai](#))

Perucci and Wysong, "The global economy and the privileged class" ([E-reserves](#)) [optional]

Assignment due. Synthesis (optional)

Friday, Nov 9

[Group Work]

Section 10: Globalization, Gender, and Human Rights

Monday, Nov 12

Ali, "[Permanent Impermanence](#)". Contexts

Mahdavi, Prologue, *Ch.1 [skim]*

Wednesday, Nov 14

Mahdavi, Ch.2, 3

Ehrenreich and Hochschild, Global Woman ([E-reserves](#)) [skim]

Friday, Nov 16

Mahdavi, Ch.4-5

Monday, Nov 19

Mahdavi, Ch.6-8

Assignment due. Synthesis (optional)

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Section 11: Violence and Religion

Monday, Nov 26

Brenneman, Intro, Ch1, Appendix A

Wednesday, Nov 28

Brenneman, *Ch2 [skim]*, Ch3

Ferreira, [Prison Diaries](#). *Open Magazine* [skim]

Friday, Nov 30

Brenneman, Ch 4, 5

Western and Pettit, ["Prisons and Inequality"](#). *Contexts*. [skim]

Monday, Dec 3

Brenneman, Ch 6, Conclusion

Assignment due: Synthesis (optional)

Conclusion

Wednesday, Dec 5

Final exam

Monday, Dec 10

Group presentations