Econ 517 Poverty, Inequality, and Wealth

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Syllabus

Course Description
In this course we will cover the various theoretical and empirical approaches to the measurement of economic well-being, poverty and inequality, both in the United States, as well as globally, touching on the most recent debates about poverty measurement and comparisons across countries, as well as measures developed at the Levy Institute. We will consider characteristics of the distribution of income, consumption and wealth, and their relative usefulness in terms of assessing the inequality of economic well-being. We will study the disparate experiences of poverty and inequality by race and gender both within and across global regions. In addition, we will examine the impact of economic structures, policy and development on poverty and inequality. Both mainstream and heterodox theoretical approaches to explaining and addressing poverty and inequality will be covered.

Purpose
You should finish this course with a familiarity of the various measures of poverty and inequality, as well as the ability to use these measures to assess changes over time or differences between countries. You should also be aware of theories attempting to explain poverty and inequality and trends in poverty and inequality both in the US and globally.

Reading
The main texts for the course are Poverty Comparisons, by Martin Ravallion [PC] and Income Distribution by Fred Campano and Dominick Salvatore [ID]. Both of these books as well as Alpha Chiang’s Fundamental Methods of Mathematical Economics, The Marx-Engels Reader, edited by Kenneth Tucker, and Capital in the Twenty-First Century, by Thomas Piketty can be found on reserve at the Bard Library. For purchases, I suggest Powell’s. If you go through their union’s website (http://ilwulocal5.com) a part of your purchase goes to supporting the local union at no extra cost to you. Other readings will be available for download on the moodle page for this course. Readings for each week will be posted there as of the beginning of the previous week’s class. Starred items are optional, further reading. A preliminary outline of topics and readings is outlined below, which is subject to change, since some of it will depend on your interests and progress.
Grading
Your grade will be based on the following: one final exam (25%), 4 one-page memos (25%), 3 problem sets (20%), and one project (30%). All work should be returned in MS Office, LibreOffice, Google Docs or LaTeX (with the TrackChanges package, see http://trackchanges.sourceforge.net/) format. You can use either STATA or R to do the problem sets (although if you have not learned STATA before, it is a valuable skill to add to your résumé), the research paper, and problems on the final exam. In all cases, provide the programs (*.do files for STATA, or *.R files for R) you wrote to do the analysis.

Problem Sets
The problem sets are due at the beginning of class as indicated in the course outline below.

Policy Memos
On weeks that you do not have a problem set due, you will write a policy memo on a question that I will assign. Details of the format are in the file “Policy Memo Description.docx”, available on the moodle page. In these memos you will attempt to tell me what I need to know about a specific issue and what needs to be done about it based on the information provided. The purpose of this exercise is to give you experience in writing clear, short issue briefs. I will assess them based on accuracy and clarity. I will return them to you edited closely with the purpose of improving your writing skills.

Research Paper
The purpose of the research paper is to engage you in applying what you have learned in the class. You should select a research question that is both related to the themes we discuss in the class and interesting to you, preferably one for which there is data available for you to analyze. The final product is a 15-minute in-class presentation of the results and a paper of no more 20 pages in length. Your grade on the project depends not just on the finished paper and presentation, but also upon timely completion of the intermediate stages. In the fourth class meeting you will give me a one paragraph description for what you would like to do for your final project, including the research question you want to answer and a discussion of how you will answer it. In the seventh week of class you will hand in an annotated bibliography of the references you will use for your project. You should have no fewer than ten references. The annotated bibliography should include a paragraph with each reference that describes what the reference is and how it helps you answer the question you are researching. A first draft is due on the ninth class day. The presentations will be on the last day of class and should include a slide show (power point, google slides, prezi or pdf is fine). The final paper will be due on the last day of finals week. Your grade for the final project will be based on the following: proposal 10%; annotated bibliography 10%; first draft 20%; final paper 40%; and presentation 20%. The whole project counts as 30% of your final grade.

Plagiarism is a serious breach of academic integrity and may result in failing the course. Repeated offenses will result in expulsion from the program. Plagiarism is the use of anyone else’s writing or ideas without identifying them as someone else’s.

I encourage you to work together on all aspects of this course, but the work you hand in must be your own.
Course Outline
This is a preview of the topics we will cover with the associated readings. It is subject to change, especially in terms of your own interests, which will partly determine the topics we will cover later in the class.

1. Introduction, some math and measurement questions
   b. [PC] pp. 1-28
2. Economic wellbeing and inequality measures
   c. Policy memorandum #1 due
3. Poverty measurement and time poverty
   c. Short 2013, *New York City Center for Economic Opportunity 2014
   e. Problem set #1, due
4. Income inequality
   c. *Vakulabharanam and Motiram 2012
   d. Policy memorandum #2 due
5. Earnings and Wealth inequality
   a. Piketty and Saez 2006, Piketty Chapters 8 & 9
   d. Proposal for project due
6. Poverty
   b. Zacharias, Antonopoulos, and Masterson 2012, A. B. Atkinson, Guio, and Marlier 2015,
   c. Ferreira and Ravallion 2008, Olinto et al. 2013
   d. Problem set #2, due
7. Explaining income inequality
   c. Annotated bibliography due
8. Explaining earnings inequality
b. Policy memorandum #3 due
9. Explaining wealth inequality
   b. Problem set #3 due
10. Explaining poverty
    c. Policy memorandum #4 due
11. Solutions to poverty and inequality
    c. Piketty 2014, Chapter *13, *14 & 15
d. First draft of final project paper due
12. Assessing solutions
    a. [PC] pp. 103 – 110, [ID] Ch. 12, Datt and Ravallion 1992, Jakobsson 1976,
c. Policy memorandum #5 due
13. Education
14. Environment
    b. Shue 1999; Swinton, Escobar, and Reardon 2003; Narain, Gupta, and van’t Veld 2008; Reardon and Vosti 1995; Duraiappah 1998; Scherr 2000
15. Randomized Control Trials
b. Final Project Presentations
16. Final Exam due
List of Readings


