

Sociology 450: Social Inequality

Lane Kenworthy
Fall 2005
Tu Th 9:30–10:45

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Course Description

Although themes of opportunity and prosperity dominate American culture, more than one in ten Americans is poor according to the official government measure, inequality has increased markedly over the past generation, and the United States is more unequal than any other affluent country. This course explores poverty and inequality in the contemporary U.S. We will investigate questions relating both to how much poverty and inequality there is and to how particular individuals end up in various positions in the distribution of earnings, income, and wealth. In the last part of the course we will consider institutions aimed at reducing poverty and inequality. Throughout we will pay particular attention to changes over time and to similarities and differences between the United States and other affluent nations.

Requirements

Readings. The required readings for the course are listed in the schedule below. The articles and book chapters are available via E-reserve at eres.library.arizona.edu. The password is *soc450*. The two books — *Nickel and Dimed* and *Ain't No Makin' It* — are available at the campus bookstore and on reserve at the main library (or, if you prefer, through various online bookstores).

Lecture Guide. During lecture I will show you a large number of charts and tables. I will make these available for downloading or printing on my webpage at www.u.arizona.edu/~lkenwor (click on "Lecture Guide").

Grading. Your grade will be based on five exams, each of which will count for 20% of the total. The exam dates are listed in the schedule below. Make-ups will be permitted only in extreme circumstances. If something happens that forces you to miss an exam, you must notify me — either in person, by e-mail, or by voice mail — within 2 hours of the scheduled exam start time and provide documented proof of the circumstances. If I don't deem it a reasonable excuse, you will receive a zero for the exam. The grading scale for the course is: A = 90 and above; B = 80-89; C = 70-79; D = 60-69; F = 59 and below. There will be no extra-credit projects or assignments of any kind.

Disabilities. If you have or acquire any sort of condition that may require special accommodations, please inform me as soon as possible (not on the day of an exam) so that we may make the appropriate arrangements. Proper documentation from the Disability Resource Center will be required. Contact their office for information on available services and accommodations as well as documentation requirements: 621-3268, drc.arizona.edu.

Schedule

Introduction

Class dates

- August 23

Readings (these two are optional)

- Best, Joel. 2001. *Damned Lies and Statistics*. University of California Press. Chapters 1, 4, 6.
- Best, Joel. 2004. *More Damned Lies and Statistics*. University of California Press. Chapters 2, 6.

Poverty I

Class dates

- August 25, 30; September 6, 13 (no class September 1, 8)

Questions

- What is poverty?
- Are the poor truly deprived?
- Are low-income Americans better off than their counterparts in other affluent countries?
- Is most poverty only temporary?

Readings

- Shulman, Beth. 2003. Pp. 3-100 in *The Betrayal of Work: How Low-Wage Jobs Fail 30 Million Americans*. New Press.
- Rector, Robert E. and Kirk A. Johnson. 2004. "Understanding Poverty in America." Backgrounder 1713. Heritage Foundation.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. 2001. *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. Henry Holt and Co.
- Scott, Janny. 2005. "Life at the Top in America Isn't Just Better; It's Longer." *New York Times*, May 16.
- Kenworthy, Lane. 2004. "Comparing Levels of Real Income." Pp. 118-123 in *Egalitarian Capitalism*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Rank, Mark. 2004. "The Length and Frequency of Poverty" and "The Likelihood of Poverty." Pp. 28-30 and 92-95 in *One Nation, Underprivileged*. Oxford University Press.

Exam 1 — Thursday, September 15

Poverty II

Class dates

- September 20, 22, 27, 29; October 4

Questions

- Is poverty mainly a product of lack of employment, of low wages, or of low government benefits?
- Why is the poverty rate still high?
- Have we made no progress in reducing poverty in the past generation?
- How much of a hindrance is growing up poor?

Readings

- Murray, Charles. 1984. Pp. 56-68, 154-166, 205-218 in *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*. Basic Books.
- Rank, Mark. 2004. "Poverty as a Structural Failing." Pp. 49-82 in *One Nation, Underprivileged*. Oxford University Press.
- Edin, Kathryn and Laura Lein. 1996. "Work, Welfare, and Single Mothers' Economic Survival Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 61: 253-266.
- Wilson, William Julius. 1999. "When Work Disappears: New Implications for Race and Urban Poverty in the Global Economy." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22: 479-499.
- MacLeod, Jay. 1995. *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*. Second edition. Westview. Chapters 1, 3-7, 9-11.

Exam 2 — Thursday, October 6

Inequality I

Class dates

- October 11, 13, 18, 20, 25

Questions

- How much inequality is there?
- Why should we care about inequality?
- Has income inequality really increased?
- Has income inequality increased mainly because the rich have gotten richer?
- Why hasn't wealth inequality increased more than income inequality?

Readings

- Kenworthy, Lane. 2006 (forthcoming). "Why Should We Care About Inequality?" Chapter 2 in *Jobs with Equality*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Scott, Janny and David Leonhardt. 2005. "Shadowy Lines That Still Divide." *New York Times*, May 15.
- Gottschalk, Peter and Sheldon Danziger. 1998. "Family Income Mobility: How Much Is There and Has It Changed?" Pp. 92-111 in *The Inequality Paradox*, edited by James A. Auerbach and Richard S. Belous. National Academy Press.
- Krugman, Paul. 2002. "For Richer." *New York Times Magazine*, October 20.
- Frank, Robert H. and Philip J. Cook. 1996. Pp. 1-7, 61-99 in *The Winner-Take-All Society*. Penguin.
- Wolff, Edward N. 2002. Pp. 1-41 in *Top Heavy*. Updated edition. New Press.

Exam 3 — Thursday, October 27

Inequality II

Class dates

- November 1, 3, 8, 10, 15

Questions

- Has racial inequality diminished?
- Is gender inequality a thing of the past?
- Is the American middle class financially secure?
- Is the United States the most unequal affluent country?
- Does inequality make other things worse?

Readings

- Thernstrom, Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom. 1997. Excerpt from "The Rise of the Black Middle Class." Pp. 183-200 in *America in Black and White*. Simon and Schuster.
- Padavic, Irene and Barbara Reskin. 2002. "Sex Differences in Earnings." Pp. 121-147 in *Women and Men at Work*. Second edition. Pine Forge Press.
- Cohen, Stephen S. and J. Bradford DeLong. 2005. "Shaken and Stirred." *The Atlantic Monthly*, January-February, 112-117.
- Warren, Elizabeth and Amelia Warren Tyagi. 2003. Pp. 1-11, 15-70 in *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Parents Are Going Broke*. Basic Books.
- Kenworthy, Lane. 2006 (forthcoming). "Sources of Equality and Inequality: Wages, Jobs, Households, and Redistribution." Chapter 3 in *Jobs with Equality*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Freeman, Richard. 1998. "Is the New Income Inequality the Achilles' Heel of the American Economy?" Pp. 219-229 in *The Inequality Paradox*, edited by James A. Auerbach and Richard S. Belous. National Academy Press.
- Kozol, Jonathan. 1991. Excerpt from "Other People's Children." Pp. 40-67 in *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. Crown Publishers.

Exam 4 — Thursday, November 17

What To Do?

Class dates

- November 22, 29; December 1, 6 (no class November 24)

Questions

- Is egalitarianism still feasible? Are there tradeoffs?
- Has American redistributive policy become less generous?
- Are universal benefits more effective than targeted benefits at reducing poverty and inequality?
- Is progressive income taxation a key to redistribution?
- What would it take to substantially reduce poverty in America?

Readings

- Kenworthy, Lane. 2005. "Egalitarian Capitalism: Still Feasible? Still Desirable?" Unpublished.
- Goodin, Robert E., Bruce Headey, Ruud Muffels, and Henk-Jan Dirven. 1999. Pp. 1-17, 125-186, 259-264 in *The Real Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lindert, Peter. 2004. "Keys to the Free-Lunch Puzzle." Pp. 227-263 in *Growing Public: Social Spending and Economic Growth Since the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press.

- Kenworthy, Lane. 2004. "Which Way Forward?" Pp. 146-173 in *Egalitarian Capitalism*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Exam 5 — Thursday, December 15, 8:00-10:00am