

**Econ 374t: Poverty and Public Policy
Spring 2015**

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Course summary and goals:

Since 1965, the annual poverty rate in the United States has hovered between 10 and 15 percent, though far more than 15 percent of Americans experience poverty at some point in their lives. In this course, we will study public policies that, explicitly or implicitly, have as a goal improving the well-being of the poor in this country. Unlike many Western European countries, in the US the problems associated with poverty are approached in a somewhat piecemeal fashion, with a myriad of programs targeted at various groups and problems (such as hunger, homelessness, lack of health care, and inability to sustain an acceptable standard of living, among others). Rather than attempt to provide a complete portrait of public responses to the problems of poverty, in this course we will address a few policy questions more deeply. The questions we will examine involve safety net programs, education programs, and parts of the income tax code. We will explore the design and functioning of these programs, focusing on questions economists typically ask when evaluating public policy: Does the policy achieve its goals? Does the design of the policy lead to unintended effects (either good or bad)? Could it be redesigned to achieve its goals in a more cost-effective manner? In addition to examining how and whether these particular public policies function, we will also learn how economists bring theoretical models and empirical evidence to bear on important questions of public policy.

To provide necessary context, we will begin with a brief overview of poverty in America and the programs the government has in place to counteract it. We will then move on to our discussion of the policies on which I have chosen to focus. These policies represent some of the most important federal and state anti-poverty policies in terms of expenditures, population served, and economic interest. We will examine cash assistance (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and the Earned Income Tax Credit) in-kind benefit programs (Food Stamps, WIC, public housing and Medicaid), and public education, including Head Start. While public education was not designed as an anti-poverty program, economists and policymakers have long looked to education as a means of breaking intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Course structure:

Students will be paired, with the possibility of switching pair assignments halfway through the semester. Each pair will meet once a week for one hour. The entire class will meet together during weeks one, seven, and twelve. At each tutorial meeting, one student will read or present his or her paper and the other will offer a critical response. I will distribute an assignment sheet each week detailing the assigned reading, providing contextual information as appropriate, and setting the essay topic/questions for that week. Tutorial papers are due to me and to the tutorial partner **at least 30 hours** before the tutorial meeting to give the respondent time to prepare his or her response.

Tutorial papers:

Each tutorial paper you write should represent the culmination of a week spent reading the assigned papers, thinking about the topic, and coming to a conclusion. You should take the questions I pose in the assignment sheets as starting points—you may choose to answer them directly, or to focus on a related issue that is brought up in the readings. You should focus your paper in a way that offers you the most scope for your own analysis. It is far better to write a paper that gives a deep and rigorous treatment of a narrower topic than one that provides a superficial treatment of a broader topic.

In the paper you should take a stand on the topic, making a claim about the topic that you then support with evidence. This is critical. The responder's task is to select a few important parts of the writer's argument, raise questions about them, and critique them, but if there is no thesis in the writer's paper this will not be possible. The evidence you use to support your claim should come from the assigned papers, but may also come from additional research you do or find if you so choose. I encourage you to find data to bring to bear on the question you are addressing, as graphs or tables are often more convincing than pure argument. If you rely heavily on an additional source, please be sure to inform your tutorial partner and me when you send us your paper so that we are able to read it before the meeting. All sources should be cited in the text and in a reference list, following the *American Economic Review* style guidelines (https://www.aeaweb.org/sample_references.pdf). Internet sources should include a full address that enables the reader to go right to the document in question.

In coming to your conclusions, consider the theoretical and empirical work presented in the readings. Is it sensible? Have the authors taken a reasonable approach? Have they left out something you think should have been considered? What did they do that you found particularly convincing? Your paper will be stronger if you consider the approach taken by the authors of the readings rather than merely focusing on the conclusions the authors draw. Do not be afraid to take a nuanced view—as you will see in the readings, bringing evidence to bear on public policy questions rarely yields unequivocal answers on which everyone agrees.

As a participant in a tutorial course, you have much more responsibility for developing your understanding of each topic than you would in a typical lecture course in which a professor explains the basic material, and in many cases, its implications. In addition, the papers we will be covering are in many cases quite challenging. Plan to give yourself lots of time for the process of preparing your paper, and do not hesitate to come to me with questions about the material.

During the tutorial meeting, you will read or present your paper. During the first part of the semester, you will be asked to summarize your paper's main contention and then to read your paper aloud. In the second half of the semester, you will present your paper rather than reading it.

Tutorial responses:

In alternate weeks, your role will be to respond to the paper and presentation of your partner. You will do this both orally and in writing in the form of a two- to three-page paper. In this role, you are to critique the arguments of your partner, which means evaluating his or her ideas and arguments, probing them for logical flaws or any shaky implicit assumptions, and looking for

useful extensions and applications of others' ideas that she or he may have missed or under-emphasized. You should also address the merits of your partner's contentions. Are they well supported by the evidence? Is there something about the argument that is missing? Something that you found particularly compelling? Provide evidence that backs up your views.

Importantly, you must do this in a way that is constructive. This means avoiding unnecessary negativity or harshness; it means not addressing minor errors if addressing them would not advance the discussion of the major issues; it means being critical of ideas and never of the person advancing them; and it means avoiding a confrontational demeanor. (Note: as a responder, your focus should be on the ideas in the writer's paper, not the writing per se, although if you have difficulty discerning the writer's argument that is an important point to make.)

In order to do a good job with the response, you will also need to read the assigned papers, think about the topic, and draw your own conclusions. Do not wait until you receive your partner's paper to begin reading and thinking about the topic. Once you have received your partner's paper, you can begin preparing your response, which will be turned in to me and to your partner either before or at the tutorial meeting.

Although you will have written a paper, you will not read it during your response. Instead, your role is to serve as the discussion leader. Start by summarizing what you think the writer's claim is, and then begin your critique. As part of your response in the second half of the semester, you should also comment on your partner's oral presentation. Was it clear? Could you follow the arguments? Would you recommend that he or she do something different in the future?

Grading:

Each of you will write six five- to seven-page tutorial papers (five weekly papers and one revision of an earlier paper) and five two- to three-page response papers. The relative weights in grading are roughly 2/3 for your work as writer and 1/3 for your work as responder/discussion leader. In developing my assessment of your performance in the course I will consider the quality of your arguments and use of evidence, the quality of your writing, the quality of your critical engagement with your partner's ideas, and your adherence to deadlines.

While I will be giving you extensive comments and feedback on every paper and tutorial meeting, I will not be assigning you a grade until the very end of the semester. At the mid-point of the semester I will schedule an individual meeting with each of you to discuss your progress. Of course, if you wish to meet with me at any other time to discuss your work in the course, I am happy to do so.

Course Mechanics:

Tutorials are conversations, so we all need to be there. I recognize that "things happen"—illness, emergencies, and so on—and that such an event may occur for one of you in the course of the semester. If so, your obligation is to get in touch with me and with your tutorial partner as soon as possible so that we can reschedule our tutorial session. However, you should view our regularly scheduled time as a commitment that takes precedence over other commitments except in the most exceptional circumstances.

Academic honesty:

The Honor Code applies to all work in this course. This means providing full attribution for any sources of ideas, language, and data on which you rely for any written work for the course. This holds true whether you quote those sources verbatim or paraphrase them. If you have relied on a written source or other impersonal medium, you should acknowledge that source in the appropriate place in the text of your paper using the (author, date) form, with full bibliographic references provided in a bibliography. If you have obtained information or help from a non-media source (professor, friend, Writing Tutor, etc.), that too should be acknowledged in an appropriately proximate place in the text. Because your work in this course is meant to be original, it is not acceptable to submit work that is not largely your own, even if you appropriately cite its source. When in doubt, err on the side of “over-attribution.”

Course outline:

1. Overview of poverty in the United States (*Feb. 9-13: group meeting, no pairs meetings*)

I. Means-Tested Transfer Programs

2. Cash assistance and work incentives (*Feb. 16-20*)

Partner 1 writes

3. Food and nutrition programs (*Feb. 23-27*)

Partner 2 writes

4. Support for the disabled (*March 2-6*)

Partner 1 writes

5. Public housing: moving to opportunity? (*March 9-13*)

Partner 2 writes

6. Health insurance: Medicaid and CHIP (*March 16-20*)

Partner 1 writes

Spring Break!

II. The Experience of Poverty

7. Poverty simulation (*April 6-10: no pairs meetings, revision of one of first two papers due—all write*)

III. Education

8. The impact of early childhood education (*April 13-17*)

Partner 2 writes

9. Do school resources matter? (*April 20-24*)

Partner 1 writes

10. Leaving no child behind: accountability and choice (*April 27-May 1*)

Partner 2 writes

11. Financing postsecondary education (*May 4-8*)

All respond

12. Public policy towards the poor: where do we go from here? (*May 11-15: group meeting, no pairs meetings—all write*)