

Course Overview

The US has worse pregnancy and child outcomes than any other high-income country in the world. Is this because the US spends less providing direct income support to families than other high-income countries? This course will discuss the intersection between maternal and child health outcomes and poverty through a medical, economic, political, and historical lens. We will compare and contrast US policies with those of other low, middle and high-income countries. Assignments will ask students to become familiar with and attempt to navigate available supports for pregnant people and their children. Students will visit the Harvard art museum to observe how pregnancy and early childhood health and social supports for families with low incomes were conceptualized at the turn of the 20th century. Students will discuss elements of design and implementation of ongoing projects being conducted by Harvard faculty and collaborators to rollout and test direct cash support to pregnant or postpartum people.

This course has the following goals:

- To provide an understanding of the current landscape of maternal and child health and social safety net policies with a focus on the impact of existing policies and new innovations
- To analyze the historical and political antecedents of maternal and child health outcomes for economically disadvantaged families
- Differentiate between research and advocacy and understand the role played by each in shaping policy and health outcomes for pregnant people and their children

Requirements

- Active participation: You are expected to come to class having completed the readings and assignments and prepared to actively participate.
- Instructor input on final project: You are expected to meet at least once with the instructor over the course of the semester to develop your final project.

Useful resources

- [Kff.org](#): independent source of information and statistics on state level policies, populations, health
- [CDC Wonder](#): CDC's data repository of public health data and vital statistics, including detailed information on births
- [State Safety Net Interactive](#): Interactive resources for comparing states based on safety net provision of income and food support
- [Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard](#): Detailed data on rental costs and availability of rental units
- [Atlanta Fed Guaranteed Income Dashboard](#): Calculate the impact of receipt of additional income on eligibility for different public benefit programs
- [Economic Policy Institute Family Budget Calculator](#): helps to calculate cost of living for families in different areas of the U.S.

Policies

Inclusivity: In this class we will grapple with complex and potentially painful topics, from pregnancy complications to racism to economic deprivation. We will all work to keep in mind that these experiences are not academic and reflect people's lived reality, including potentially for members of our classroom community. We expect that you have an open mind and respect differences of all kinds in this classroom. I share responsibility with you for creating a learning climate that is hospitable to all perspectives and cultures. When interacting with other the students and instructors in this course, keep in mind the followingsuggestions:

- Avoid generalizing your view as being a universal truth
- Withhold unsolicited personal judgments
- Ask questions from the standpoint of curiosity as opposed to arguing or debating
- Speak personal viewpoints in constructive and respectful ways
- Be willing to examine and grapple with how personal assumptions shape your perspectives

Collaboration and AI: I encourage you to collaborate with your fellow students, including ongoing discussions about topics we cover in class or input on how to approach assignments. The use of GAI (generative artificial intelligence) may be useful in this class in looking for resources related to assignments, aggregating data or checking the grammar and sentence structure of your written work.

However, the assignments and writing you turn in for this class should be your own, written in your own voice and reflecting your own reasoning. Use of GAI when completing assignments must be appropriately acknowledged and cited. Guides on citations of the following styles are available:

- **MLA:** [How do I cite generative AI in MLA style?](#)
- **APA:** [How to cite ChatGPT](#)

Weekly plan

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Week 1 (September 5th): Class plan, intro and basics

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Week 2 (September 12th): Where we are? Maternal health in the United States

- Eugene Declercy and Laurie Zephyrin, ["Maternal Mortality in the United States: A Primer,"](#) Commonwealth Fund, 2020.
 - ["Childbirth is Deadly for Black Families: Even When They're Rich: Expansive Study Finds"](#) New York Times, February 12, 2023
 - [What to know about the roiling Debate over Maternal Mortality Rates](#), ProPublica April 5, 2024
- Souza JP, Day LT, Rezende-Gomes AC, Zhang J, Mori R, Baquiya A, Jayaratne K, Osoti A, Vogel JP, Campbell O, Mugerwa KY, Lumbiganon P, TunÅšalp Å-, Cresswell J, Say L, Moran AC, Oladapo OT. [A global analysis of the determinants of maternal health and transitions in maternal mortality.](#) Lancet Glob Health. 2024 Feb;12(2):e306-e316. doi: 10.1016/S2214-109X(23)00468-0. Epub 2023 Dec 6. PMID: 38070536.
- Chen A, Oster E, Williams H. ["Why Is Infant Mortality Higher in the United States Than in Europe?"](#) *Am Econ J Econ Policy.* 2016;8(2):89-124. doi:10.1257/pol.20140224

Week 3 (September 19th): What should we try next? Maternal Health Policies and Programs

- Example legislation: [MOMNIBUS Act](#)
- Example advocacy: [We can make childbirth safer for Black mothers. Here's how.](#)
- Example research: Shah, Soleil, ["South Carolina's Bold Maternal Health Experiment Disappoints,"](#) Tradeoffs
 - McConnell MA, Rokicki S, Ayers S, Allouch F, Perreault N, Gourevitch RA, Martin MW, Zhou RA, Zera C, Hacker MR, Chien A, Bates MA, Baicker K. [Effect of an Intensive Nurse Home Visiting Program on Adverse Birth Outcomes in a Medicaid-Eligible Population: A Randomized Clinical Trial.](#) JAMA. 2022 Jul 5;328(1):27-37.
 - Gourevitch RA, Zera C, Martin MW, Zhou RA, Bates MA, Baicker K, McConnell M. [Home Visits With A Registered Nurse Did Not Affect Prenatal Care In A Low-Income Pregnant Population.](#) Health Aff (Millwood). 2023 Aug;42(8):1152-1161.

Week 3 (September 26th): Child health and poverty and their consequences

- COUNCIL ON COMMUNITY PEDIATRICS. [Poverty and Child Health in the United States.](#) Pediatrics. 2016 Apr;137(4):e20160339. doi: 10.1542/peds.2016-0339. Epub 2016 Mar 9. PMID: 26962238.

- Shonkoff JP and Garner AS. (2012). [The Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress](#). *Pediatrics* 129(1): E232-E246.
- Almond D, Currie J, Duque V. [Childhood Circumstances and Adult Outcomes: Act II](#). *Journal of Economic Literature*. 2018;56(4):1360-1446. doi:[1257/jel.20171164](#)
- Aizer, Anna and Currie, Janet, [The intergenerational transmission of inequality: Maternal disadvantage and health at birth](#), *Science*, 2014 May 23;344(6186):856-61.

Week 4 (October 3rd): How did we get here? History of income supports to families in early life

- Papanicolas I, Woskie LR, Orlander D, Orav EJ, Jha AK. [The Relationship Between Health Spending And Social Spending In High-Income Countries: How Does The US Compare?](#) *Health Aff (Millwood)*. 2019;38(9):1567-1575. doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2018.05187
- Mauer, Alvin, [The WIC Program or `The Perils of Pauline`](#) *JAMA Pediatrics*, May 1979.
- Matthews, Dylan, [If the goal was to get rid of poverty, we failed: the legacy of the 1996 welfare reform](#). *Vox*, 20 Jun. 2016
- Torrella, Kenny, [The brewing war over who goes hungry in America](#) and how to feed them *Vox Future Perfect*, March 18, 2023.

Week 5 (October 10th): Family Structure: Elephant in the room?

- Kearney, Melissa, [The Two Parent Privilege](#), Chapters 1, 8

Week 6 (October 17th): Administrative burden: what is it and why does it matter?

Assignment 1 DUE

- Herd, Pamela, Moynihan, Donald, [How Administrative Burdens Can Harm Health](#), *Health Affairs*, 2 Oct. 2020.
- Herd P, Hoynes H, Michener J, Moynihan D. [Introduction: Administrative Burden as a Mechanism of Inequality in Policy Implementation](#). *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*. 2023;9(5):1-30. doi:[7758/RSF.2023.9.5.01](#)
- Ballentine K, Goodkind S, Shook J. [How Low-Paid Parents Navigate the Complex Financial Landscape of Benefit Cliffs and Disincentive Deserts](#). *Health Aff (Millwood)*. 2022;41(12):1707-1714. doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2022.00742

Week 7 (October 24th): Field trip: We will visit the Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum to view a collection of artefacts related to medical and social care during the early 1900s on loan from the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Social Museum Collection

Week 8 (October 31st): What have we tried? Policy proposals to address childhood poverty

Assignment 2 DUE

- Example policy: Child Tax Credit
 - National Academy of Sciences, [A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty, Ten Policy and Program Approaches to Reducing Child Poverty](#)
 - Jarow, Oshan, [We cut poverty to historic lows, then let it rebound faster than ever before](#) *Vox Future Perfect*, 9/21/2023
- Research:
 - Aizer A, Lleras-Muney A, Michelsmore K. [The Effects of the 2021 Child Tax Credit on Child Developmental Outcomes](#). Published online June 2024. doi:10.3386/w32609
 - Gennetian LA, Gassman-Pines A. [The Effects of the 2021 Child Tax Credit on Parents' Psychological Well-Being](#). Published online July 2024. doi:10.3386/w32662

Week 9 (November 7th): What can pass? Politics of income supports to families during early life

Initial proposal for final paper DUE

- [Michener J. LeBrÃ³n AMW. Racism, Health, and Politics: Advancing Interdisciplinary Knowledge. Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law. 2022;47\(2\):111-130.](#)
- [Jones DK. Political Participation in the Least Healthy Place in America: Examining the Political Determinants of Health in the Mississippi Delta. Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law. 2019;44\(3\):505-531.](#)

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Week 10 (November 14th): Cash transfer innovations? Current Implementation and Evaluation of Cash Transfers

- McConnell M, Agarwal S, Hanson E, McCrady E, Parker MG, Bona K. "Prescription for Cash? Cash Support to Low-Income Families in Maternal and Pediatric Health Care Settings." *Milbank Q*. Published online November 22, 2023. doi:10.1111/1468-0009.12679
- [Abundant Birth Initiative in California](#)
- [Rx Kids in Flint, Michigan](#)
- [Bridge in New York](#)
- [The Nest in Washington State](#)
- [Healthy Beginnings in Denver](#)

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Week 11 (November 21st): What do you propose? Class presentations

Final Assignment DUE (Date TBD)

Detailed Assignment Plan

Assignment 1: Family budget exercise

This is a family budgeting exercise. You will be expected to turn in a 1 page write-up on your experiences. We will discuss your experiences during class.

Here are the parameters of the exercise:

- Every student starts with a budget of \$30.
- Pick a household profile (i.e. 20 weeks pregnant with two year old child or parent living with 73 year old grandma, 5 year old kid and 9 year old kid)
- Choose income and assets
- Choose a US state (we will make sure we have different states represented)
- Specify whether you have any specific "health" challenges (i.e. a diagnosis of hypertension during pregnancy)

You should write a response to the exercise (1-3 pages total) that considers the following:

- What benefits are you eligible for in your state? How did you figure out what benefits you were eligible for?
- What documents would you need to produce to prove that you were eligible?
- What percentage of your monthly SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits would your \$30 budget represent?
- Go to an actual grocery store. Right down exactly what you would buy with \$30 and what you would plan to feed your household. Make sure you are allowed to use your funds to on your planned purchases (I.e. are the items you want to buy EBT eligible).
- Discuss what you found challenging about this exercise, what questions it brings up and any other reactions.

Assignment 2: 100ish Year Project

You will choose one image that you saw at the Harvard Museum collection we visited and one contemporary image (created anytime starting in 2020) that you think addresses related themes or topics. Reflect on ways that representations and messages surrounding health and social support during pregnancy, postpartum and infancy have and have not changed over time. You can choose to either:

- Create a social media product using the two images for advocacy or awareness raising.
- Create a one paragraph Exhibit Caption that could be displayed alongside the two images if they were to be displayed at the Harvard Museum

Be prepared to share what you have created with the class.

Final assignment (initial proposal during term; final paper End of term)

Choose your final assignment from two lanes:

Lane 1 (policy):

You have been invited to submit a brief to the Medicaid director of the state you chose for Assignment 2 assessing whether Medicaid should provide cash support to pregnant people and families with small children. Clearly articulate whether or not you think Medicaid should pursue this proposal. Consider the following prompts:

- What are the biggest maternal and child health challenges in your state?
- How would cash support address these challenges?
- How much would it cost to provide cash support to pregnant people and families with small children?
- What are alternative uses of these funds to achieve improved health outcomes and how does that affect your decision about whether to support a proposal to provide cash supports?

You will turn in a one-page initial outline during the term. You will develop the idea by meeting with the professor at least once during the semester. The final assignment will be a five-page memo due at the end of the course. You will have 5 minutes to present the findings from your memo in the final week of class.

OR

Lane 2 (advocacy):

Design a piece of advocacy that moves toward the objective of improving maternal and early child health outcomes for economically disadvantaged families in the state you chose for Assignment 1. This could be a social media post that raises awareness, a board game that helps people experiences the challenges of navigating current systems, a data visualization exercise or something else you have invented. Make sure you consider who is the audience for your advocacy and why you think advocacy targeted toward this audience will improve health outcomes. You will turn in a one-page initial outline during the term. You will develop the idea by meeting with the professor at least once during the semester. Your final output can be multi-modal. You will have 5 minutes to share your advocacy during the last week of class.