

## **SOC 312: Poverty and Society**

Professor Ryan Parsons  
[parsons@olemiss.edu](mailto:parsons@olemiss.edu)  
Office: Lamar 561

MWF 10:00am – 10:50am  
Classroom: Lamar 555

Office hours by appointment: <https://calendly.com/parsons-um>

The United States has one of the highest poverty rates in the developed world. Poverty is particularly urgent in Mississippi, where nearly a third of children live in poverty. We confront poverty with a complex array of social policies designed to help offset the costs of food, housing, medical care, utilities, and the other costs of living that make life difficult. How have we become a rich country defined by deep poverty? Are our anti-poverty policies working as intended? Could they be improved? What does poverty mean anyway? This course blends conversations around social theory and social policy to build the tools necessary to answer these questions. We will consider what poverty means as a theoretical concept but also delve into the practical problems of the modern “welfare” state. Successful conversations will balance scientific, moral, and pragmatic concerns as we seek to answer fundamental questions about poverty and opportunity in the United States. By the end of the semester, students will be able to:

- Provide working definitions of “poverty” and discuss the origins and limitations of prevailing definitions,
- Synthesize current literature on poverty in America,
- Describe various public policy responses to poverty in the United States, and,
- Use this evidence and theoretical lenses to articulate their own approach to ameliorating poverty.

### **Assignments**

- Midterms (50 points) – There will be two midterms designed to assess mastery of course concepts. Each is worth 25 points and will include short answer questions based on course readings and lectures.
- Book reviews (50 points) – You must write an academic-style review of each of the four books and the documentary assigned for this class for a total of four assignments, each worth 10 points towards your total grade. Reviews will normally be due one week after we finish discussing the book.
- Policy Proposal (30 points) – A written policy memo in which you describe either a new policy or revision to existing policy will be due during the final week of classes. Detailed instructions and a rubric will be distributed later in the semester.
- Success Strategies (50 points) - “Success Strategies” are behaviors or activities associated with strong performance in college level courses. They also serve as opportunities to become more connected with the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and other organizations on campus. You must receive 50 Success Strategy points for full credit; there are 80 possible Success Strategy points. You may not receive more than 50, but there are many ways to receive full credit in this category:

- Reading quizzes – There will be a minimum of 20 reading quizzes during class throughout the semester. These are intended to assess whether or not you've done the reading ahead of time and should be very simple. They will be 1-2 questions and are intended to be complete in a minute or two. Maximum of 20 points. **20 possible points**
  - These must be completed in class.
- Reading notes – submit your notes on course readings. One point per page of notes for up to 10 points. Bad-faith submissions (e.g., writing gibberish, writing in huge handwriting) will receive 0 points. **10 possible points**
  - You may submit these anytime before the last day of classes.
- Annotated readings – submit a paper copy of a quantitative article that has your notes, annotations, questions, summaries, etc. on it. This is intended to demonstrate your engagement with a difficult text. Minimal or shallow annotations will be returned to you ungraded. Up to ten points for one article. **10 possible points**
  - Annotations must be submitted within two weeks of the day that the reading is assigned.
- Campus Events – attend up to three *academic* events related to sociology, poverty, or the South (e.g., talks, panels, documentary screenings) and submit a 300-word summary of the event. You must stay until the end, including any Q&A. Five points each for a maximum of 15 points. **15 possible points**
  - These must be submitted within two weeks of attending the event.
- Office Hours – Visit my office hours (in person or Zoom) with a question about an assignment for the course material; you can't just come say hi. Five points per visit for up to one visit. **5 possible points**
  - You may visit office hours for Success Strategy points any time before Thanksgiving Break.
- Writing Center – Visit the UM Writing Center with one of your book reviews or a draft of your policy proposal and work with them on improving your response. You may also bring in a graded writing response and resubmit it for a re-grade. Five points per visit for up to two visits. You must submit a brief summary of your visit and a reflection on what you learned. **10 possible points**
  - Reflections must be submitted by the last day of classes. Revised assignments must be submitted before Thanksgiving break.
- Book Forum Discussion Questions – We will have an open discussion about each of the books we read during the semester. You may submit up to two discussion questions before these class sessions for a point each. **10 possible points**.
  - These must be emailed to me by midnight the day before a book forum. You must be present in class to receive credit for these.

## Grading Scale

Exams: 50 points

Reviews: 50 points

Proposal: 30 points

Success Strategies: 50 points

A 90% or higher

B+ 87%-89%

B 80%-86%

C+ 77%-79%

- C 70%-76% (minimum grade to receive credit towards the major)
- D 60%-69% (minimum grade to receive credit)
- F 59% and below

Marginal grades will be rounded up in cases where you have demonstrated progress over the semester. If you need a certain grade (e.g., to maintain a scholarship) and you are concerned about your trajectory, you should discuss this with me during the middle of the semester. No grades will be changed after the last day of classes for any reason.

## **Required Books**

The following books are required. Additional readings will be posted to Blackboard.

- Browne, K. E. (2015). *Standing in the need: Culture, comfort, and coming home after Katrina*. University of Texas Press.
  - An e-book version of this book is available through the UM Library website.
- Edin, Kathy & Luke Shaefer. (2016). *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*. Mariner Books.
  - An audiobook for this text is available on Audible.com.
- Edin, Kathy, Luke Shaefer, and Timothy Nelson. *The Injustice of Place: Uncovering the Legacy of Poverty in America*. ISBN-10: 0063239493
  - An audiobook for this text is available on Audible.com.
- Metzl, Jonathan. (2019). *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland*. Basic Books.
  - An audiobook for this text is available on Audible.com.

## **Office Hours**

You were welcome to stop by during office hours to chat about the readings, talk about your field notes, or ask questions. You can make an appointment for in-person or virtual office hours here: <https://calendly.com/parsons-um>

## **Academic Honesty and Integrity**

I expect you to produce your own work for this class and cite others' ideas appropriately. In cases of inadvertent plagiarism (i.e., incorrect citations) you will be asked to edit and resubmit the assignment. Intentional plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty, including copying others' ideas, paying someone to complete your assignments, or cheating during exams, will likely result in your failing the assignment.

## **Communication**

I will do my best to respond to all emails within 2 business days during normal business hours; if you have not had a response by then, please send a follow up message. Emails with questions that can be answered with this syllabus will likely be ignored. Please do not send emails with questions about assignments fewer than 2 days before the deadline.

## **Attendance**

The University requires that I verify attendance during the first two weeks of the semester. Missing the first two weeks of class may result in your being removed from the course roster. Beyond this requirement, students should plan to attend class every session. Attendance is primarily assessed through the reading quizzes. In extreme cases, excessive absences may result in a reduced grade.

## **COVID-19 Accommodations and Responses**

Masks are not required by the University but are always allowed. None of us should make judgements or assumptions about people who choose to wear a mask. If you need to miss class because you are feeling ill or need to isolate, let me know in advance and I will do my best to record lectures and provide supplementary material.

## **Student Support Services**

*The University prepared the following information regarding mental health services:*

The University Counseling Center is a professional facility offered by the University of Mississippi to assist students, faculty, and staff with many types of life stressors that interrupt day-to-day functioning, including the stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. They offer individual counseling, couple's counseling, group counseling, stress management, crisis intervention, assessments and referrals, outreach programs, consultations, and substance abuse services. There is no fee for currently enrolled University students and everything you say to your counselor is confidential. You can contact the Counseling Center for information about mental health issues at <https://counseling.olemiss.edu>, counslg@olemiss.edu, 662- 915-3784, 320 Lester Hall, and <https://www.facebook.com/universitycounselingcenterolemiss/>. You can schedule an appointment or get information about appointments by calling the UCC at 662-915-3784.

## **Updated Contact Information**

*Please note the following requirement from the University:*

The University must have accurate contact information, including cell phone numbers, to facilitate student communications and contact tracing. Students should check and update their University contact information available at <https://olemiss.edu/mystudentprofile>.

## **Disability Access and Inclusion**

*The following language was written by the Student Disability Services office:*

"The University of Mississippi is committed to the creation of inclusive learning environments for all students. If there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your full inclusion and participation, or to accurate assessment of your achievement, please contact the course instructor as soon as possible. Barriers may include, but are not necessarily limited to, timed exams and in-class assignments, difficulty with the acquisition of lecture content, inaccessible web content, and the use of non-captioned or non-transcribed video and audio files. If you are registered with SDS, you must log in to your Rebel Access portal at <https://sds.olemiss.edu/rebel-access-portal> to request approved accommodations. If you are NOT registered with SDS, you must complete the process to become registered. To begin that process, please visit our website at <https://sds.olemiss.edu/apply-for-services>. SDS will:

1. Complete a comprehensive review to determine your eligibility for accommodations,

2. If approved, disseminate to your instructors a Faculty Notification Letter,
3. Facilitate the removal of barriers, and
4. Ensure you have equal access to the same opportunities for success that are available to all students.

If you have questions, contact SDS at 662-915-7128 or [sds@olemiss.edu](mailto:sds@olemiss.edu).<sup>1</sup>

*If you feel that there are other barriers to your success in this course (including disabilities not covered by SDS or difficult personal circumstances) please feel free to reach out to me to discuss ways to improve your experience in this course.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Student Disability Services, University of Mississippi. (n.d.). *Syllabus Statement*. Student Disability Services - Syllabus Statement. Retrieved July 26, 2022, from <https://sds.olemiss.edu/syllabus-statement/>

## **Course Schedule**

The four required books must be purchased or checked out from the Library. Additional readings are posted to Blackboard. Email me if you would like printed copies of any of the readings. Readings marked with a ♦ are eligible to be annotated for Success Strategy points.

### **1. (Week of) August 26 – Introductions**

- Monday: Course introductions
- Wednesday: “The Promise,” by C. Wright Mills. Chapter 1 of *The Sociological Imagination*. [On Blackboard, about 23 pages]
- Friday: No class.

### **2. September 2 – Poverty**

- Monday: No class, Labor Day.
- Wednesday:
  - Chapter 1 of O’Connor, A. (2001). *Poverty knowledge: Social science, social policy, and the poor in twentieth-century US history*. Princeton University Press. [20 pages]
  - Sen, A. (1983). Poor, relatively speaking. *Oxford economic papers*, 35(2), 153-169.
- Friday
  - Chapters 1 and 2 from Desmond, M. (2023). *Poverty, By America*. [25 pages]
  - Desmond, M. (2015). Severe deprivation in America: An introduction. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 1(1), 1-11. [10 pages]

### **3. September 9 – Poverty Policy in the US**

*Note: Monday, September 9 is the last day to add classes.*

- Monday:
  - Mani, A., Mullainathan, S., Shafir, E., & Zhao, J. (2013). Poverty impedes cognitive function. *science*, 341(6149), 976-980. [on Blackboard, about 5 pages]
  - Morton, J. M. (2024). Inequality in planning capacity. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 41(1), 56-65. [on Blackboard, about 9 pages]
- Wednesday: Chapters 1 and 8 from Edin, K., & Lein, L. (1997). *Making ends meet: How single mothers survive welfare and low-wage work*. Russell Sage Foundation. [35 pages]
- Friday: In class activity - Poverty Lines [**Start reading \$2 a Day to get a head start**]

### **4. September 16 - \$2 a Day**

- Monday: Introduction and Chapters 1-2
- Wednesday: Chapters 3-5
- Friday: Book Forum for *\$2 a Day*
  - Conclusion to *\$2 a Day*

## **5. September 23 – Work and Housing**

- Monday:
  - ♫ Desmond, M., & Wilmers, N. (2019). Do the poor pay more for housing? Exploitation, profit, and risk in rental markets. *American Journal of Sociology*, 124(4), 1090-1124. [34 pages]
  - Desmond, M. (January 2016). "The Eviction Epidemic." *The New Yorker*.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/08/forced-out>
- Wednesday: Intro and Chapter 1 from *Nickle and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich [on Blackboard, about 27 pages]
- Friday: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/15/what-happens-when-investment-firms-acquire-trailer-parks>

## **6. September 30 – Work and Housing**

- Monday: Kalleberg, Arne L., Barbara F. Reskin, and Ken Hudson. 2000. "Bad Jobs in America: Standard and Nonstandard Employment Relations and Job Quality in the United States." *American Sociological Review* 65: 256-278. [ ~26 pages]

**Review of \$2 a Day due**

- Wednesday: Introduction and Chapter 6, Halpern-Meekin, S., Edin, K., Tach, L., & Sykes, J. (2015). *It's not like I'm poor: How working families make ends meet in a post-welfare world*. Univ of California Press. [63 pages]
- Friday: **Midterm 1**

## **7. October 7 – Dying of Whiteness**

- Monday:
  - Painter, Nell Irvin. (June 2015). "What Is Whiteness?" *The New York Times*.  
[http://www.commovereinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Opinion\\_- -What-Is-Whiteness -The-New-York-Times.pdf](http://www.commovereinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Opinion_- -What-Is-Whiteness -The-New-York-Times.pdf) [2 pages]
  - Nayak, A. (2007). Critical whiteness studies. *Sociology Compass*, 1(2), 737-755. [on Blackboard, about 18 pages]
- Wednesday: Introduction and Part 1 – "Missouri"
- Friday: Part 2 – "Tennessee"

## **8. October 14 - Dying of Whiteness**

*Note: October 14 is the last day to drop classes.*

- Monday: Part 3 – "Kansas"
- Wednesday: Book forum for *Dying of Whiteness*
- Friday: Policy Lab: Welfare in Oxford

## **9. October 21 – Documenting Poverty**

- Monday: In class - <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/poverty-politics-and-profit/>
- Wednesday: In class - <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/growing-up-poor-in-america/>

### **Review of *Dying of Whiteness* Due**

- Friday: “Book” forum for documentaries

## **10. October 28 – *Standing in the Need***

- Monday: Chapters 1-3 from Browne, K. E. (2015). *Standing in the need: Culture, comfort, and coming home after Katrina*. University of Texas Press. [56 pages]
- Wednesday: Chapters 4-6 from *Standing in the Need* [50 pages]
- Friday: Book Forum for *Standing in the Need*

## **11. November 4 – *Standing in the Need***

- Monday: Chapters 7 and 8 from *Standing in the Need* [34 pages]
- Wednesday: No Class

### **Review of Documentaries Due**

- Friday Chapters 9-11 from *Standing in the Need* [45 pages]

## **12. November 11 – Place and Mobility**

- Monday:
  - ♦ Baker, R. S. (2020). Why is the American South poorer? *Social Forces*, 99(1), 126-154. [28 pages]
  - ♦ Baker, R. S. (2022). The historical racial regime and racial inequality in poverty in the American South. *American Journal of Sociology*, 127(6), 1721-1781. [60 pages]
- Wednesday: Introduction, Ch. 1 and Ch. 2 from *The Injustice of Place*
- Friday: Chapters 3-4 from *The Injustice of Place*

### **Review of *Standing the Need* Due**

## **13. November 18 – Race, Racism, Poverty**

- Monday: Chapters 5-6 from *The Injustice of Place*
- Wednesday: Chapters 7-9 and book forum for *The Injustice of Place*
- Friday: **Midterm 2** (Online)

## **November 25: Thanksgiving Break**

## **14. December 2: Gender and Poverty**

- Monday: Introduction and Conclusion from *Promises I Can Keep* by Edin & Kefalas [on Blackboard, about 60 pages]

**Review of *The Injustice of Place Due***

- Wednesday: Introduction and Conclusion from *Doing the Best I Can* by Edin & Nelson [on Blackboard, about 45 pages]
- Friday: **Policy Proposal due**