I. Catalogue Description

This course explores how aspects race, social and economic class position, public policy and bureaucratic function (and dysfunction) often conspire to reinforce economic and social inequality in America. Through the lens of the HBO drama *The Wire*, we examine this dynamic, using its semi fictional text as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of sociological theories of the “urban underclass” as well as developing students’ abilities to critically examine public policy and bureaucratic & social work practice.

Course Overview

Social Work 674 is available to graduate and undergraduate social work and social welfare majors and other interested students. Students will be introduced to a variety of concepts and analytic tools used in sociology, political science and social work. A major focus of this course is to help students develop an understanding the issue of concentrated poverty -- its (contested) definition & demographic scope -- and alternative explanations regarding its cause and reproduction over time. Students will also discuss the relationship between America’s emergent Neo-liberal approach to economic and social policy, the formation and maintenance of the urban ghetto and the decidedly problematic life trajectories of the people who reside there, particularly young African American men. While a background in sociology and social work is preferred, no previous course work is required.

II. Objectives, Core Competencies and Practice Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competencies Addressed in Course</th>
<th>Practice Behaviors Addressed in Course</th>
<th>Assignment(S) Measuring Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1.3: Apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments</td>
<td>• Distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based knowledge, and practice wisdom. • Demonstrate effective oral and written communication in working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and colleagues.</td>
<td>Assignment 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.1.4: Engage diversity and difference in practice
- Recognize the extent to which a culture's structures and values may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create or enhance privilege and power.

Assignment 1 & 2

2.1.5: Advance human rights and social and economic justice
- Understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination.
- Engage in practices that advance social and economic justice.

Assignment 1 & 2

2.1.6: Engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research
- Critically evaluating and utilizing theoretical and empirical research relevant to the problems and/or populations addressed.

Assignment 2

2.1.7: Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment
- Utilize conceptual frameworks to guide the processes of assessment, intervention, and evaluation.

Assignment 2

2.1.9: Respond to contexts that shape practice
- Continuously discover, appraise, and attend to changing locales, populations, scientific and technological developments, and emerging societal trends to provide relevant services

Assignment 2

III. Course Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic/Theme</th>
<th>Activity / Assignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction to the course: a) conceptual overview; b) Poverty and inequality in the United States; c) introduction to theories of poverty and its reproduction. Reading William J. Wilson’s “More Than Just Race.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Season 1 of The Wire: Reading Soss’s “Disciplining the Poor.” Introducing a more politically and policy oriented depiction of Wilson’s “Urban Underclass.” Introducing the notion that The Underclass and urban “hyper-ghettos” are less the product of economic evolution and more the product of economic policy choices.</td>
<td>Group Presentation and Discussion Leadership Groups 1 &amp; 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Season 3 of The Wire Reading Waquant’s Urban Outcasts. An introduction to Waquant’s more institutionally driven account of urban poverty.</td>
<td>Group Presentation and Discussion Leadership Groups 3 &amp; 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Season 4 of The Wire Reading Waquant’s Urban Outcasts. Chapters on the construction and maintenance of the urban “hyperghetto” in Chicago</td>
<td>Group Presentation and Discussion Leadership Groups 5 &amp; 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each week, students will be expected to complete the required readings before class, to provide a perspective or context for class discussions. Students must come to lecture and discussion sessions having done the readings and being prepared to connect them to general themes of social problems and social policy.

Readings

Week 1

**Session I: Income, Wages and Wealth: Widening US economic inequality**


Ta-Nehisi Coates Posts in The Atlantic Monthly (don’t worry: these are all short 1-2pg posts):


**Competing Explanations for Poverty, its concentration and reproduction**


**Session II: Wilson’s Challenge to the Conservative Culture of Poverty Thesis**

- Ch. 1: “Structural and cultural forces that contribute to racial inequality”
- Ch. 2: “The forces shaping concentrated poverty”
- Ch. 3: “The Economic Plight of Inner-city Black Males”
- Ch. 4: “The Fragmentation of the Poor Black Family”

**Week 2**  
**The Wire & Wacquant: Bringing an Institutional Perspective into the Discussion of the Underclass**

**Session I:**

*Reading:*


- Chapter 1: “Introduction”

*Watching:*

Season 1 of The Wire Episodes 1-6

**Session II:**

*Reading*


- Chapter 2: “The Rise of Neo-Liberal Paternalism”
- Chapter 3: “The Color of Neoliberal Paternalism”

*Watching*

Season 1 of The Wire Episodes 7-13

**Week 3**  
**Session I:**

*Reading:*


*Watching:*

Season 3 of The Wire Episodes 1-6 (26-31)
**Session II:**

**Reading**


- Ch. 2: The State and Fate of the Dark Ghetto at Century’s Close (pgs. 43-90)

**Watching:** Season 3 of The Wire Episodes 7-12 (32-37).

---

**Week 4**

**Session I:**

**Reading:**


- Ch. 3: The Cost of Racial and Class Exclusion in ‘Bronzeville’

**Watching:** Season 4 of The Wire. Episodes 1-6 (38-43).

**Session II:**

**Reading:**


- Ch. 4: West Side Story: A High Insecurity Ward in Chicago

**Watching:** Season 4 of The Wire Episodes 7-13 (44-50).

---

**Additional Reading:**

*For a slightly less radical interpretation of changes in the American Welfare State, post-Reagan, see:*


- Prolouge: America as Living Laboratory of the Neoliberal Future
- Ch. 1 Social Insecurity and the Punitive Upsurge (pgs. 1-37)

• Ch. 2 The Criminalization of Poverty in the Post Civil Rights Era (pgs. 41-74)

For a more thorough review of William Julius Wilson’s Theory of the Urban Underclass see:


For a more thorough of review of the organization and disorganization of violence and neighborhood level effects of concentrated poverty, see:


Watching The Wire: Resources

HBO Home Page for The Wire:

HBO page with complete synopsis(es) of each episode from season 1 through season 5.

Note: to find episode synopsis, find the episode you’re looking for, click on it; that episode’s page will then open and on the left side of the page, you’ll see the word “synopsis”. Click it. A thorough synopsis will then appear on screen (note that on the right side is a somewhat obscure scroll bar to navigate downward on the page).

HBO page featuring The Wire’s Cast of (main) Characters
http://www.hbo.com/the-wire/index.html#/the-wire/cast-and-crew.html/eNjrcmb00CzLTEnNd8xLzKksyUx2zs8rSa0oYS5kzlfpZ0mBCQckpQf6JeamsjGySSeWluQX5CRW2pYWlaZyMjKyMQIAbAUXOA==

Note: This page is VERY important, as this series has an enormous cast of characters that run in and out of the plotlines over its 5 seasons)

Note 2: if this link fails: go to main HBO page for the Wire – above – and scroll down to link “Cast of Characters.”

V. Texts and Reading Materials for the Course


• ARTICLES: available in electronic (PDF) form via the SW 674 “Learn@UW” web-page.

Recommended, but not required:


**Course Web Site**

Articles and additional class materials will be available on the class web site available through Learn@UW ([https://learnuw.wisc.edu/](https://learnuw.wisc.edu/)). Use your net ID and password to logon. In addition, the web site will include:

1) *Readings & additional resources.*
2) *Lecture Outlines (“slides”) —* generally posted by 8 am on the day of the lecture;
3) *Class Announcements*

**VI. Evaluation of Competencies and Practice Behaviors: Assignments, Grading and Methods**

**Grading**

Grades are not assigned on a curve. There are no extra credit or make-up assignments. Grades on each assignment and your final grade will be assigned as follows:

> 94-100 A Outstanding, surpasses expectations in all areas
> 88-93 A/B Surpasses expectations in many areas
> 82-87 B Meets expectations
> 76-81 B/C Meets expectations in some areas but is below expectations in others
> 70-75 C Below expectations in all areas, not acceptable graduate level work
> 64-69 D Clearly unacceptable in all areas
< 64 F Fails to meet minimal requirements in all areas, not acceptable graduate work.

Please note that the > = sign proceeding the lower cut-off point for each grade implies that numerical grades will not be rounded up. Additionally, your goal for this and other courses should be to make the most of your learning experience, and not to simply “get an A.” Your expectations about the grades you receive on assignments should be wholly based on (1) your efforts, (2) the extent to which you respond to assignment objectives, (3) the quality of your writing (including grammar and spelling, organization and clarity), and (4) your ability to demonstrate critical thinking. If there is something about an assignment that is unclear to you, it is your job to bring this to my attention. Grade expectations should NOT be based on what you have received in other courses. If you have an issue with a grade that you receive in this course, please document the reasons for your [appeal in writing](https://learnuw.wisc.edu/) with specific attention to the four points raised above.

**Expectations:** Students are expected to:

- Attend class each session, actively participating in the in-class exercises and discussions. If you cannot attend class, you are responsible for knowing what occurred and for getting any handouts.
- Read critically (and think about) all required assignments before coming to class,
- Complete all assignments by the due dates and times (thus you are expected to plan your life so that you can make the required deadlines in the course).
Lock SW 674: Summer 2015

- Inform the instructor during the first week of the semester of any special accommodations needed for meeting class expectations (as approved by the McBurney Center).
- Be respectful of the instructor and other class members—a diversity of views and opinions may be articulated during discussions. Respect includes cell phones being turned off and laptops being used in class only for taking notes.

The instructor is expected to:
- Assure that course objectives are being met;
- Hold regular office hours and be available to students to answer questions through emailed correspondence;
- Give reasonable guidance on preparing for the exams and on other assignments;
- Be open to discussing concerns about the course.

**Assignments**

**Written Assignments (2):**

1) Weekly Reflection Journals (1-2 pages single spaced): Due each week by midnight WEDNESDAY night of that week; via Dropbox (Learn@UW). These memos are meant to be very informal in nature. I simply ask that you summarize the readings (week 1) and a few of the episodes of The Wire (weeks 2-4) for that week and reflect on them any way you see fit. Pose questions, share impressions, write about what emotions or thoughts the week’s content brings up for you. All I’m looking for is evidence that you are reading/watching and engaging the material.

   a. NOTE: Reflection Journals are not required the week one’s group is presenting. Therefore, you will be expected to turn in THREE reflections, total.

2) Final Paper (12+ pages, double-spaced). Due Sunday, July 12.

**Group Presentation and Discussion Leadership:**

1) Group Project (see handout).

**Final grades will be calculated as follows:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflection Journal</td>
<td>15 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Presentation &amp; Discussion Leadership</td>
<td>25 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Paper</td>
<td>50 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance &amp; Participation</td>
<td>10 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Policies around assignments**

- **Late papers.** Assignments that are turned in late without advance arrangement with the instructor will be docked 3% of their numeric points for each day past due.
- **Incompletes.** An incomplete may be given only when the student has been in full attendance and has done satisfactory work to within 2 weeks of the end of the quarter and has furnished evidence satisfactory to the instructor that the work cannot be completed because of illness or other circumstances beyond the student’s control.
Lock SW 674: Summer 2015

- **Plagiarism.** The School, University and I take plagiarism very seriously. Your written assignments should almost always be wholly in your own language. Whenever you use the words of another person verbatim or even paraphrase them, you must clearly give that person credit through proper APA citation format. This ethical rule applies equally to internet material. Students found to have plagiarized, **intentionally or not**, will be disciplined according to University procedures.

**Attendance and Class Participation Policy:**
Your *presence and engagement* in the class throughout the term – both verbally and bodily – will allow us to establish an intellectually and emotionally vital and safe climate for learning.

Prompt arrival and attendance for entire sessions are mandatory; please plan accordingly. Excused absences are limited to documentable illness, personal or family emergency or religious observation required during class hours. Note that because this is a short (4 week, 8 session) term, absences from class can only be allowed for truly extraordinary circumstances. Professional or personal opportunities, including internship-related meetings – while exciting and often rewarding – are not excused and will come at a cost to your participation grade, as follows:

1. **1 absence** → Lose 2 of 10 participation pts
2. **2 absences** → Lose 5 of 10 participation pts
3. **3 absences** → Lose ALL participation pts and additional action may be taken.

You are also expected to participate through making comments, asking questions, and being involved actively and thoughtfully in class exercises; net of attendance, highest participation grades will go to students who achieve a balance of speaking/inquiring and actively listening.

**Disability Accommodations:**
The professor adheres to University and school policies regarding accommodations for students with disabilities, religious holidays, incompletes, plagiarism, and student evaluation of the course and its instruction.

**Student Behavior: Policy:** In order to learn, we must be open to the views of people different than ourselves. Each and every voice in the classroom is important and brings with it a wealth of experiences, value and beliefs. In this time we share together over the semester, please honor the uniqueness of your fellow classmates, and appreciate the opportunity we have to learn from each other. Please respect your fellow students’ opinions and refrain from personal attacks or demeaning comments of any kind. Finally, remember to keep confidential all issues of a personal or professional nature discussed in class.