

POVERTY AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN 20th CENTURY US HISTORY

HIST 179J/HSBM S461

Yale Summer Session A 2025

VIRTUAL VIA ZOOM

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Herbert Block, "There's money enough to support both of you - Now does that make you feel better?" Library of Congress, August 1, 1967.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar explores the connections between public health and poverty in American life and politics, with a particular focus on social programs intended to improve health and welfare. We will examine the social, political, legislative, and regulatory histories of the welfare state during the twentieth century, ultimately considering how these histories shaped the contemporary health and welfare apparatus and our current moment. Students will critically consider the meanings of "sickness," "health," and "poverty" in this course. Further, the seminar will acquaint students with federalism and theories of "the state," as well as provide them an understanding of the mechanics of the

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US welfare system; the ways it shaped and was shaped by constructions of gender, race, disability, and class; and how it has overlapped with the carceral state. Readings throughout the course will urge students to consider how poverty and health are measured, who they are measured by, and what it has meant to be poor and/or unhealthy in the United States during the twentieth century. The course is organized chronologically, with each session corresponding to one of three thematic categories: federal institutions, local politics, and public-private partnerships.

“Poverty and Public Health in 20th Century US History” is a reading-intensive course designed for undergraduate students who have an interest in US history. While a prior introduction to US history is helpful, no prerequisite is required. Any student excited about the topic and willing to sharpen their analytical, investigative, and reading skills is welcome. Our course readings and discussions will provide students with both a detailed understanding of the historical ties between health and poverty and a structural overview of the United States during the 20th century.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

In this course, students will:

- Engage with secondary sources on topics relating to public health and welfare in US history;
- Critically synthesize bodies of work and become familiar with the concept of “historiography,” applied to both course readings and final papers;
- Locate, identify, analyze, and contextualize diverse primary sources, including interviews, photographs and film, political ephemera, texts, and speeches;
- Practice public speaking in a supportive environment;
- Conceptualize and articulate new questions for future research.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS & ASSESSMENTS

Completing all assignments is required to receive credit for the course. You will receive written feedback on all assignments. You are expected to incorporate this feedback into your final paper. Expectations for all assignments will be discussed at length in class. Your final grade will be calculated as follows:

Seminar Participation – 25%

Students are expected to make regular, substantive contributions to seminar discussion. Active participation includes careful, proactive reading, thoughtful engagement with course themes and materials, and enthusiastic participation in peer review exercises. **Attendance is mandatory** in all Yale Summer Session Courses.

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Students are expected to be in the Zoom classroom and prepared to begin when class starts. Cameras are expected to be on at all times while class is in session.

Reading Responses – 25%

By 7:00 PM the evening before class (in our case, Sunday and Tuesday), excluding the first and last class meetings, you will submit a reading response to the relevant Canvas discussion board. Reading responses are an *informal* way to engage with our course materials. As long as you are working with the assigned reading and considering how it relates to our course, your responses will be excellent! Prose does not need to be perfectly polished (but it should be coherent and legible) and you don't need to use formal citations (but always include a page number if you're referencing something directly). Your responses are crucial to our seminar discussions the next day and will help me facilitate a discussion that touches upon the parts of the material that you find most interesting, compelling, and important.

Responses will take one of two forms:

1. Generally, your reading responses can take any form you wish, so long as they include **two questions** that we can talk through in seminar. While you are welcome to, you are not required to write anything beyond the two questions. Good discussion questions can take many forms, so long as they demonstrate thoughtful engagement with the assigned reading materials. Some examples of things you might touch on include (but are not limited to): themes or concepts from the session's readings that you found confusing; considerations of the broader stakes of the session's readings; an idea, argument, or anecdote that intrigued you; something you feel we haven't considered and should; and possible connections between the assigned reading and other materials, whether within or beyond our course. Questions should not be overly broad, nor should they be answerable with a simple "yes" or "no." You will submit **six** such responses over the course of the session.
2. **Twice** over the course of the session, you will submit a longer form, more analytical post. This type of reading response should be 250-500 words. The response should synthesize the author's key argument and engage with the argument and the author's evidence analytically. Essentially, these are an extended version of your discussion questions. These responses should include some sort of focused analysis of a particular issue, theme, or piece of evidence in the reading.

Primary Source Analysis - 20%

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Your first formal written assignment will take the form of a primary source analysis. Identify an archival collection that is relevant to American welfare history, housed either online or in a Yale library. Choose between one and three (*a hard upper limit*) documents that are of interest to you. In 500 or so words, put your document(s) in historical context, explain its meaning, and identify some of the questions it raises. When formulating your questions, consider how the document might be used in a research project.

Final Paper - 30%

Your final paper invites you to think creatively and analytically about primary source documents and historical scholarship on a topic of your choosing. In **8-10 double spaced pages**, your final paper will pose a historical question that you can answer with primary sources and writing by other historians. Your paper will analyze **at least three primary source documents** and connect these documents to the relevant historical literature. In addition to a clear statement of your research questions, your paper ***must include a historical argument***. The argument serves as the answer to your research question.

The topic of this paper is entirely up to the student. The only requirements are that the topic touches on some element of welfare or public health history in the 20th century US and is ***interesting*** to the writer! Papers written by bored authors read as boring.

Topics should be submitted to your instructor via email no later than the evening prior to meeting #8.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND COURSE MEETINGS

All readings are free and available online. Most secondary sources can be accessed through the Yale Online Library System. Primary sources, as well as any secondary sources not accessible digitally through the Yale Library, will all be available on Canvas. If you have any trouble accessing course readings, please contact the instructor.

Meeting #1 — Introduction: Measuring Poverty and Categorizing the Welfare Client

What does "poverty" mean? How is it measured? How does poverty affect health? Who has access to public assistance, and who decides? What does "expanding access to health care" accomplish? What do we as history students gain from studying poverty, public health, and the welfare state?

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Meeting #2 — Immigration and Racial Formation in the Progressive Era City

What was “progressive” about the Progressive Era? What were the connections between immigration, eugenics, and health at the start of the 20th century? How did sickness shape constructions of race? Why were city governments so involved in public health and hygiene reforms? Who did local politicians and departments partner with to police hygiene and enforce public health codes? How did these local projects advance a national anti-immigration politics?

Meeting #3 — The New Deal and the Right to Good Health

How did the Great Depression affect public health and health care? Which New Deal agencies were involved in public health and health care initiatives? Who advocated for expanded access to care and who lobbied against it? Who was able to claim a ‘right’ to good health? How did organized labor, corporate management, and federal bureaucrats shape the health possibilities of the New Deal? What health inequities did New Deal policies produce, and how do they compare to the inequities produced and entrenched by the broader New Deal project?

Meeting #4 — Policing Poverty and the Price of Post-War Affluence

PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS DUE BY START OF CLASS

What do the phrases ‘post-war liberalism’ and ‘post-war affluence’ mean? How did liberalism and affluence shape and reshape each other during the post-war period? Who participated in post-war affluence? Who paid for it? What are the origins of the ‘middle class,’ and which New Deal policies helped to create it during the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s? Why was housing policy so crucial to the accumulation of wealth after World War II? What are the connections between labor, liberalism, wealth, and the carceral state?

Meeting #5 — The War on Poverty I: Medicaid, Medicare, and the Right to Good Health

What was the War on Poverty? What is Medicaid? What is Medicare? Who benefited from these programs, and who was left out? What is the relationship between Medicaid and Medicare and civil rights? What are the continuities between the New Deal and the War on Poverty? What was the radical health movement, and how radical was it? What kinds of institutions did the radical health movement advocate? Which of its demands did the federal government support?

Meeting #6 — The War on Poverty II: Do All Roads Lead to the Federal Government?

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What does 'maximum community involvement' mean in the War on Poverty context? How did community involvement play out? Who did the federal government accept as suitable representatives of any given community? How much autonomy did welfare activists have in the provision of services? Why was autonomy so crucial to the operation of local programs? In what ways was welfare organizing gendered, raced, and classed? What is the War on Poverty's legacy in the realm of public health?

Meeting #7 — Mass Incarceration and the Public-Private Welfare State

What drove mass incarceration? How did the state police poverty during the second half of the twentieth century? Who benefited from the expansion of the carceral apparatus? What are the connections between mass incarceration and public health? What rights do prisoners have within the carceral state? How should we understand the prison health care system as part of the welfare state? How are the welfare state and the carceral state mutually constitutive?

Meeting #8 — Environmental Justice

What is environmental justice? How should we think about environmental justice as a historical framework and a contemporary movement? Did environmental justice exist before the term was coined? In what ways has the state stifled the aims of the environmental justice movement? How has the state protected the environment, and what does it prioritize within these protections? How has federalism shaped the successes and failures of the environmental justice movement? In what political arenas are battles over the environment played out? Who does the federal government protect?

Meeting #9 — Reproductive Justice and HIV/AIDS in the Age of Austerity

What is HIV/AIDS? Who contracted AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s? How were political responses to AIDS racist, homophobic, and classist? How did federal austerity shape the trajectory of the AIDS epidemic in the United States? Which institutions provided care to people with HIV and AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s? What made the scientific response to AIDS so political? What was the relationship between local community organizations, teaching hospitals, and the state during the early years of the AIDS epidemic?

What is reproductive justice? What was the relationship between reproductive justice and the welfare state at the end of the twentieth century? In what ways did the logics of eugenics shape welfare reforms during the 1990s? How did racist stereotypes about the "typical" welfare client emerge, and how did federal and state policies reproduce and reify these tropes? How do late-twentieth century maternal welfare policies compare to those of the Progressive Era and post-war years? How do discourses of "personal responsibility"

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as they pertain to reproduction map onto the way we approached and experienced the covid-19 pandemic?

Meeting #10 — HIV/AIDS Continued and Conclusions

Concluding questions: *What was the status of the welfare apparatus at the end of the twentieth century? How did "shortening the welfare rolls" enter the public consciousness as a political goal during the late 1980s and 1990s? What does it mean to be dependent, and how has the concept of dependency been raced, classed, and gendered? What constitutes welfare in our contemporary moment?*

FINAL PAPER DUE SUNDAY, JUNE 29 @ 11:59 PM

Academic Integrity Statement

Students are expected to use the Chicago Manual of Style in all course assignments. We will discuss the mechanics of citing in Chicago Style in class, and the instructor will provide students with resources on how to format footnotes and bibliographies. We will additionally discuss *why* we cite. Footnotes are not only a means for avoiding plagiarism. They are also a way to demonstrate which historians we are in conversation with and, ultimately, to push scholarly discourses further. Academic integrity goes beyond simply citing source material. It is a commitment to developing our own ideas and authorial voices, and to working out where those ideas fit into the body of literature we are studying this semester.

Any attempt to portray someone else's work, words, or ideas as your own constitutes plagiarism. This includes (but is not limited to) failing to attribute paraphrased ideas to their original author; insufficiently paraphrasing or omitting quotation marks around text taken directly from another source; submitting the same paper for more than one course; or submitting a paper that has been *substantially rewritten* by another person (this does not include incorporating feedback from peers, the Writing Center, or the instructor). **The use of ChatGPT (or any other AI program) for assignments and participation in class discussion is STRICTLY PROHIBITED. Using ChatGPT (or any other AI program) to write an essay or otherwise complete an assignment in this course is a serious breach of academic integrity. You will receive a ZERO on any assignment for which you have used generative AI.** Yale has a zero-tolerance policy for plagiarism. If you have any questions or concerns about what that policy means in relation to your coursework, **please ask me.** [This](#) Poorvu Center resource is also helpful.

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Guidance for Submitting Work

Please submit all assignments to Canvas in **.docx format**. If you use Google Docs, you can download your work as a Microsoft Word document by clicking "File: download: Microsoft Word (.docx)" in the toolbar.

Please aim to submit all work on time. **If you are unable to meet a deadline, be sure to contact me well in advance to ask for an extension. I will do my best to accommodate these requests.** If you email me the day an assignment is due, I may not be able to grant your request. That being said, I understand that life happens and I will try to accommodate last-minute requests *within reason*.

Email Policy

From Monday to Friday, I will respond to emails within 24 hours of receipt. If 24 hours have passed since you sent your message and you have not yet received a response, please feel free to send me a follow-up email.

Office Hours

Office hours are by appointment. I am always happy to meet with you to discuss your assignments, course material, or anything else relevant to our work together. I welcome all questions, big or small, about our course. While I cannot commit to reading full drafts of work, I would be pleased to look over and discuss paper outlines and ideas in office hours.

Statement on Inclusion

As a community, Yale is committed to creating and sustaining an equitable learning environment so that all students can engage in this course as fully invested learners. Yale is committed to facilitating individual accommodations for all students with disabilities throughout the entire University, and to work to remove physical and attitudinal barriers. I share in this goal, and request that you – or Student Accessibility Services inform me – as soon as possible regarding any accommodations that will help you to succeed in this course.

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Additionally, our course is a learning space in which I commit to work actively to address and eliminate all forms of bigotry, discrimination, and exclusion – including, but not limited to, racism, anti-Blackness, sexism, ableism, classism, and marginalization based on gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or language. If you observe an instance of such behavior or attitudes, I encourage you to let me know immediately.

Finally, I recognize the emotional difficulties that this institution can foster. I also recognize that the resources provided to you through Yale Mental Health & Counseling may be helpful to some, but insufficient for others. While you are never required to disclose to me more than you are comfortable sharing, I am here to support you and your learning. If it is relevant to your work in this course and if you are comfortable doing so, you are always welcome to loop me in (with as much or as little detail as you feel is necessary) on how you are doing mentally and emotionally. If there are other ways that I can support you as you navigate these challenges, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Resources

Writing Support: Consider scheduling an appointment with one of your Residential College Writing Tutors or the Writing Center at [the Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning](#). I am also happy to discuss questions about writing assignments in office hours.

Concerns about Sexual Harassment and/or Assault: You can contact me, the SHARE Center ([sharecenter.yale.edu](#); 203-432-2000), and/or the Title IX coordinators ([provost.yale.edu/title-ix/coordinators](#)). ***Please note that I am required to report any instances of sexual assault or harassment that I witness or that are disclosed to me.*** If you have questions about what it means for me to be a mandatory reporter, please ask.

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