

Inequality in the U.S.

Spring 2022

CORE-105-001 & CORE-107-001
Monday / Thursday 11:20-12:35
Mary Graydon Center, 303A

CORE-105-005
Monday / Thursday 2:30 – 3:45
Sports Center Annex, 157

Instructor

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Office Hours

Friday 4-6 (Zoom)

Teaching Assistant

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Inequality is a complex problem

Economic and associated social and political inequalities have always been a part of human societies, although their extremity, character, and relationship vary over time and from place to place. Unfortunately, Americans today are living through a period of acute inequalities, despite the U.S. ideal of equality.

What causes socioeconomic inequality? How is it manifested? Why do we tolerate it? And, how might we remedy it? These are some of the questions we will seek to answer in this interdisciplinary course. We will read and discuss some of the best scholarship on these topics from Economics, Philosophy, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology. Readings will be supplemented with short videos by the authors of many of these works. Student learning will be assessed via class participation, essay exams, and a scaffolded research project.

Complex Problems Learning Outcomes

Your Complex Problems seminar uses scholarly methods of inquiry—like diverse perspectives, critical reading, communication, reflection, and integrative learning—to study multi-faceted real-world problems or enduring questions. The content of your seminar is designed as a vehicle for learning and practicing those methods of inquiry, which are the course's learning outcomes. These outcomes will help you to enact your curiosity and cultivate intellectual flexibility in preparation for future work at the university and beyond.



Diverse Perspectives

- A. Complexity
- B. Multiple Perspectives
- C. Awareness
- D. Civility



Communication

- A. Audience
- B. Sources
- C. Organization



Critical Reading

- A. Summary
- B. Response
- C. Conversation



Reflection

- A. Feedback
- B. Metacognition



Integrative Learning

- A. Connect

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

- a. **Complexity.** Identify and engage with complexity (or gray areas) within issues or contexts by explaining the factors influencing different positions
- b. **Multiple Perspectives.** Use multiple perspectives to refine your understanding of an issue or context
- c. **Awareness.** Investigate the sources of your own groups' norms and biases
- d. **Civility.** Demonstrate civility through argumentation or intellectual exchange

COMMUNICATION

- a. **Audience.** Identify the audience to make choices about how to communicate your ideas
- b. **Sources.** Integrate materials or sources to develop and refine your ideas
- c. **Organization.** Use organizational strategies to develop a clear purpose or aim

CRITICAL READING

- a. **Summary.** Summarize an author's or authors' message, main points, and supporting ideas
- b. **Response.** Engage with a "text" by responding to it
- c. **Conversation.** Put "texts" into conversation with other "texts"

REFLECTION

- a. **Feedback.** Incorporate feedback from faculty, staff, or peers in subsequent work
- b. **Metacognition.** Practice metacognition by reflecting on feedback and your revision processes

INTEGRATIVE LEARNING

- a. **Connect.** Connect experiences and academic learning

COURSE EXPECTATIONS, ASSIGNMENTS, and GRADING

Exams 50%

These essay exams assess students' ability to convey and analyze evidence learned via course readings and in-class discussions and to marshal that evidence in support of an argumentative thesis.

Note that exams must be taken at the scheduled time. If you have accommodations, be sure to schedule your exam with ASAC several weeks in advance.

Exam 1 (February 3) 10%

Exam 2 (March 17) 20%

Exam 3 (April 25) 20%

Final Project 25%

This final research project will be completed in small groups. Groups will prepare and present a well-researched, carefully structured, easily understood, and appealingly designed slide presentation on how the U.S. can reduce economic inequality. All topics must be approved by the instructor, and all presentations will be reviewed and revised in response to feedback.

Individual portion of grade 20%

Collaborative portion of grade 5%

Participation 25%

Complete all reading assignments before coming to class. Record notes, including answers to the following questions: What is the author's main argument (or arguments)? What evidence supports that argument? What is your evaluation of the reading—its positives and negatives?

Participate actively, respectfully, and thoughtfully in class.

Please do not use your computer or phone during class unless given permission. (Speak with me if there is a reason why you need to use either.)

Class participation 15%

Discussion leadership 5%

Class & co-curricular reflections 5%

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Academic dishonesty, such as plagiarism or cheating, is a violation of University policy and may result in a failing grade in the course and/or other disciplinary measures.

It is important that you familiarize yourself with AU's Academic Integrity Code, located here: <https://www.american.edu/academics/integrity/code.cfm>.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS and VIDEOS

Required text

Inequality in the 21st Century: A Reader

Edited by David B. Grusky and Jasmine Hill

Routledge 2017

This text is available from the [publisher](#), [Barnes & Noble](#), and [Amazon](#).

All other texts are available via Canvas or via links embedded in the syllabus.

Course YouTube videos are available [here](#)

Week 1

January 10 *Course introduction*

January 13 *Documenting rising inequality*

Emmanuel Saez

Striking It Richer: The Evolution of Top Incomes in the United States

Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: The Takeoff in Income Inequality (Emmanuel Saez)

World Inequality Report 2022

Executive Summary

L. Chancel, T. Piketty, E. Saez, G. Zucman et al.

World Inequality Lab

Week 2

January 17 *MLK Day (no class)*

January 20 *Why has inequality increased?*

Karl Marx

Classes in Capitalism and Pre-Capitalism

Inequality in the 21st Century

Thomas Piketty

Capital in the 21st Century

Inequality in the 21st Century

Week 3

January 24 *Why has inequality increased in the U.S.? (Part 1)*

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson

Winner-Take-All Politics: Public Policy, Political Organization, and the Precipitous Rise of Top Incomes in the United States

Politics & Society 2010

38(2): 152-204

January 26 *Why has inequality increased in the U.S.? (Part 2)*

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson 2010 (cont'd)

Video: Deunionization (Bruce Western)

Week 4

January 31 *(Im)mobility & precarious work*

Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez

Economic Mobility

Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: Current Trends in Social Mobility (Raj Chetty)

Arne L. Kalleberg

The Rise of Precarious Work

Social Stratification: Class, Race, and Gender in Sociological Perspective, 4th Edition

Edited by David B. Grusky

Routledge 2014

Video: The Great Risk Shift (Jacob Hacker)

February 3 *Exam 1*

Week 5

February 7 *Poverty in the U.S.*

Sheldon Danziger and Christopher Wimer
The War on Poverty
Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: U.S. Poverty in Perspective (Sheldon Danziger)

H. Luke Shaefer and Kathryn Edin
The Rise of Extreme Poverty in the United States
Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: Living in Poverty (Kathryn Edin)

In-class activity: <https://livingwage.mit.edu/>

February 10 *What it is like to be poor*

Barbara Ehrenreich
Nickel and Dimed
Inequality in the 21st Century

Matthew Desmond
Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty
Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: Unstable Housing (Matthew Desmond)

Video: Having Children in Poverty (Kathryn Edin)

In-class activity: <http://playspent.org>

Week 6

February 14 *What it is like to be very rich*

Chrystia Freeland
[The Rise of the New Global Elite](#)
The Atlantic January/February 2011

February 17 *How the rich avoid taxes*

Jesse Eisinger, Jeff Ernsthausen, and Paul Kiel

[The Secret IRS Files: Trove of Never-Before-Seen Records Reveal How the Wealthiest Avoid Income Tax](#)

ProPublica June 8, 2021

Week 7

February 21 *Education & inequality* (Part 1)

Sean F. Reardon

The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor

Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: The Rise in the Income Achievement Gap (Sean F. Reardon)

Video: Unequal Childhoods (Annette Lareau)

February 24 *Education & inequality* (Part 2)

Shamus Khan

Learning *Beowulf* and *Jaws* (chapter 5)

Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School

Princeton University Press 2011

Video: Training the Elite (Shamus Khan)

The Upshot

[Some Colleges Have More Students From the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60. Find Yours](#)

(American University info [here](#))

The New York Times. January 2017

Week 8

February 28 *Why racial inequality persists (Part 1)*

William Julius Wilson

The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions
Inequality in the 21st Century

William Julius Wilson

Being Poor, Black, and American
Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: Joblessness and Poor Neighborhoods (William Julius Wilson)

March 3 *Why racial inequality persists (Part 2)*

Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan

Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination
Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: Segregation in the U.S. (Douglas Massey)

~ **March 7-11 *SPRING BREAK*** ~

Week 9

March 14 *Incarceration & inequality*

Bruce Western and Becky Pettit

Incarceration and Social Inequality
Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: Race and Incarceration (Becky Pettit)

Devah Pager

Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration
Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: Race, Employment and a Criminal Record (Devah Pager)

March 17 *Exam 2*

Week 10

March 21 *Why gender inequality persists*

Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse

Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of “Blind” Auditions on Female Musicians
Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: Gender Discrimination in the Labor Market (Cecilia Rouse)

Paula England

The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled
Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: The Stall in Gender Equality (Paula England)

March 24 *Second-generation immigrants & inequality*

Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou

The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants
Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: Immigrant Communities and Social Mobility (Alejandro Portes)

Jennifer Lee

Tiger Kids and the Success Frame
Inequality in the 21st Century

Week 11

March 28 *Geographic inequality (Part 1)*

Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas

The Rural Brain Drain
Chronicle of Higher Education. September 2009

March 31 *Geographic inequality* (Part 2)

Jacob M. Grumbach, Jacob S. Hacker, and Paul Pierson
The Political Economies of Red States
The American Political Economy: Politics, Markets, and Power
Cambridge University Press 2021

Week 12

April 4 *How much inequality should there be, and under what conditions?*

(Some) Inequality Is Good for You [Optional]

Richard B. Freeman
Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: How Much Inequality Is Too Much? (Richard B. Freeman) [Optional]

Video: [Michael Sandel and Adrian Wooldridge debate meritocracy](#)
Intelligence Squared 2021

April 7 *Why is there great inequality in a democracy?* (Part 1)

Heather McGhee
Racism Drained the Pool (chapter 2); Going Without (chapter 3)
The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together
One World 2021

Week 13

April 11 *Why is there great inequality in a democracy?* (Part 2)

Heather McGhee
No One Fights Alone (chapter 5)
The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together
One World 2021

April 14 *Why is there great inequality in a democracy?* (Part 3)

Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry E. Brady, and Sidney Verba
Representing Interests through Organizational Activity (chapter 9)
Unequal and Unrepresented: Political Inequality and the People's Voice in the New Gilded Age
Princeton University Press 2018

Week 14

April 18 *Why is there great inequality in a democracy?* (Part 4)

Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page
Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens
Perspectives on Politics 2014
12(3): 564-581

April 21 *Policies to address poverty*

James J. Heckman
Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children
Inequality in the 21st Century

Video: Early Childhood Intervention (James J. Heckman) [Optional]

Video: Psychological Intervention (Carol Dweck) [Optional]

Joshua Cohen and Charles Sabel
Flexicurity
Inequality in the 21st Century

Week 15

April 25 *Exam 3*