A Sociological Perspective on Teaching Poverty

SOC 495: Reaching for the American Dream: Poverty in the Contemporary United States

Course Logistics

The course is aimed at any student who wants to learn more about poverty and social policy in the U.S. - a sociology major or previous coursework in sociology is not required.It may be especially useful for individuals whose future career plans will put them in contact with low income populations or who plan to study social policy after graduation, including those who plan to go into social work or counseling, nursing, medicine, dentistry, education, public policy or government, law, or criminal justice.

What is the Sociological Perspective?

↗ Sociology's unique feature is *how* we study society.

↗ We use what C. Wright Mills calls the **Sociological Imagination**

↗ A sociological imagination allows us to see the ways in which individual behavior and choices are shaped by cultural, historical, political, and economic forces.

   ↗ Why are things the way they are?

   ↗ How did they get to be like this?

   ↗ Could things be arranged differently?

Course Goals

↗   Students will apply a sociological framework to the issue of poverty and understand how sociological ideas can be used when addressing any social condition.

WHAT is the nature of poverty in the U.S. today?

↗   Students will be able to explain various features of poverty in the United States today, including how we measure poverty, who is poor, and the likelihood of people escaping poverty.

↗   Students will gain first-hand insight into the nature of poverty in the United States through simulated attempts to find employment, housing, child care, and/or health care in southeastern Michigan.

WHY are people poor in the U.S. today?

↗   Students will critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of various theories for the causes of poverty in the contemporary United States.

HOW do we work to reduce poverty?

↗   Students will use the knowledge they gain about the theories of poverty to assess current anti-poverty policies and create and defend new policies.

Topics: Laying the Groundwork

↗ **What does it mean to examine poverty (and other social problems) from a sociological perspective?**

↗ **How do we measure poverty in this country? What do we mean by relative and absolute poverty? How should we measure poverty in this country?**

↗ **A portrait of poverty in the U.S.: How many people are poor? Who is most likely to be poor? Trends among groups and over time.**

↗ **Material Hardship / Characteristics of the Poor**

↗ **Economic Mobility in a Comparative Perspective**

Topics: Why are People Poor?

- ↗ **Culture and Poverty: Differing Perspectives**

- ↗ **Employment and the labor market**

- ↗ **Family, Marriage, and Childbearing**

- ↗ **Reproducing Social Class (Social /Cultural Capital)**

- ↗ **Educational Inequalities**

- ↗ **Race**

- ↗ **Gender**

Topics: Why are People Poor?

↗ **Incarceration & the Criminal Justice System**

↗ **Neighborhoods / Space**

↗ **Debt and Credit**

Topics: Poverty Policy

- **Politics and the Policymaking Process**

- **Discourse and Deservingness: Public perceptions and stereotypes of the poor and poverty**

- **Overview of Current Anti-Poverty Programs in the U.S.**

- **How does the U.S. Compare to Other Countries in terms of its Poverty Policy?**

- **Welfare Reform and its Aftermath**

- **Does the Welfare State in the U.S. Decrease Poverty? How could it be improved? Who falls through the cracks?**

- **Next Steps in Policy: From Small to Pie in the Sky**

Possible Requirements

↗ **Poverty simulation exercises and write-up (25%)**

↗ **Take-home midterm (25%)**

↗ **Policy brief (25%)**

↗ **Attendance/Participation (25%)**

Thank You!