

Faculty of Science Course Syllabus
Department of Economics
ECONOMICS 4317A / 5317A
Poverty and Inequality
September - December 2022

Instructor(s): Lars Osberg

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Office Hours: Thursdays 2:00 to 5:00 PM or by appointment

Lectures: Wednesday & Friday 13:05-14:25 Studley MCCAIN ARTS&SS 2162

Course delivery: In person – lectures not recorded

Course Description

This course examines the extent of poverty and inequality in contemporary societies and the theories and evidence underlying alternative measures, explanations and possible policies.

Course Prerequisites: ECON 2200.03 (or ECON 2210.03 or ECON 2220.03), and ECON2201.03,

Learning Objectives

1. To increase your understanding of the issues underlying the social indices commonly used and abused in economic and political debates.
2. To increase your useful knowledge – both empirical and analytical – about some of the most important issues of political economy.
3. To develop general skills that are useful in a wide variety of contexts later in life - specifically: breaking a large problem into manageable issues, teamwork, library research, critical thinking, written and oral presentation, and the ability to give and receive constructive criticism.
4. To provide some sense of the fun and importance of rigorous thinking about issues that really matter.

Course Materials

Four useful general sources are:

1. *The Age of Increasing Inequality* Lars Osberg, James Lorimer Publishers (2018)
2. *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* Branko Milanovic, Harvard University Press, 2016
3. *Income Inequality: The Canadian Story*, edited by David A. Green, W. Craig Riddell and France St-Hilaire. 2016 The Institute for Research on Public Policy, Montreal
4. WORLD INEQUALITY REPORT 2022 <https://wir2022.wid.world/> or https://wir2022.wid.world/www-site/uploads/2022/03/0098-21_WIL_RIM_RAPPORT_A4.pdf

A full reading list will be posted on Brightspace

Course Assessment

This course is cross-listed Economics 4317A/5317A.

Graduate students registered in ECON5317A are expected to write an essay of approximately 2,500 words on the assumptions and the implications of alternative indices of poverty, inequality and well-being. There are many indices of poverty, inequality or economic well-being now in widespread use in policy debates and in the economics literature and it is clear that users of these statistics often have no clue about their underlying properties or the availability and implications of alternative indices or how much their choice of index can matter to the perception of trends. Each graduate student should therefore analyze the construction, usage and implications of three of the indices now widely used in discussions of poverty, inequality or economic well-being. The grade on this essay will be worth 25% of the final mark.

Undergraduate students registered in ECON 4317A will have a midterm exam on October 12th, which will also be worth 25% of the final mark,

| | 4317A | 5317A |
|--|-------|-------|
| Group Presentation | | |
| Team work plan: submitted to me by September 28 [2%] | | |
| - written and oral presentation [10%] | 12% | 12% |
| Essay: Outline of own individual essay- due September 28 | 3% | 3% |
| - Final Revised Version of Essay: due December 9 th | 30% | 30% |
| Mid Term Exam (Economics 4317A only) October 12 | 25% | |
| Essay on Social Indicators (Econ 5317A only) November 6 | | 25% |
| Final Exam [date to be scheduled by Registrar] | 30% | 30% |
| | 100% | 100% |

Conversion of numerical grades to Final Letter Grades follows the Dalhousie Common Grade Scale

| | | | | |
|-------------|------------|------------|---|---------|
| A+ (90-100) | B+ (77-79) | C+ (65-69) | D | (50-54) |
| A (85-89) | B (73-76) | C (60-64) | F | (<50) |
| A- (80-84) | B- (70-72) | C- (55-59) | | |

Course Policies on Missed or Late Academic Requirements

If there is a plausible reason, the weight to be placed on missed or late academic assignments or exams can be reassigned proportionately. Students are not expected to use the Student Declaration of Absence form for late or missed requirements during the term.

Course Policies related to Academic Integrity

Students are expected to discuss and co-ordinate their presentations with the other students in their team but will be individually graded on their essays and presentations.

Course Content

Inequality and poverty are crucial to the fairness of the world we live in and, therefore, crucial to political and social stability. When we compare different societies, or the same society at different times, are inequality and poverty “better” or “worse” or “the same”? Available data is never “perfect” and different conceptual understandings and ethical values about inequality and poverty are implicit in different measures. Assessing trends in inequality and poverty and their implications raises some of the most important¹, and complex, problems of social science. This course will begin by examining how conceptual issues in index construction and practical issues in data collection can shape our perceptions of trends before turning to analysis of the causes and implications of inequality and poverty and discussion of the appropriate public policy response. Because international data enables us to see how different both the facts of poverty and inequality and the public policy responses have been, we will often be making comparisons between countries – i.e. between Canada, the U.S. and other affluent nations and for the world as a whole.

The course is organized around four big issues:

1. What do we mean by the terms ‘poverty’ and ‘inequality’? How have these outcomes been measured and how should they be measured?
2. Is it inequality of outcomes or inequality of opportunities that matters? Can we, or should we, discuss inequality of outcomes and inequality of opportunities separately?
3. What are the big trends in poverty and inequality – within countries and globally? What explains these trends?
4. What, if anything, can or should be done to change current trends in poverty and inequality? Why?

Each of these topics will be discussed in lectures, but it is strongly suggested that students also keep up with the attached readings (listed on Brightspace). The class will be divided into teams and all students in the class will be part of a team presentation. A useful first step in analyzing a big question often is to divide it into several more manageable smaller questions. Learning how to do this, in co-operation with others, is a very useful skill. Hence, each team will take a big issue and decide among themselves how to assign aspects of it to individual team members. Each individual team member will then present their topic as part of the team presentation and will write it up as their personal term paper. Each individual is therefore responsible for:

- (1) presenting his or her component of the larger issue as part of the team presentation;
- (2) assisting other members of the team on the topic which they have been assigned;
- (3) revising their own presentation, in the light of comments received, writing it up as an essay of approximately 3000 words and submitting it to me by December 9th.

Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.

We acknowledge the histories, contributions, and legacies of the African Nova Scotian people and communities who have been here for over 400 years.

¹ See Global Risks Report, 2017 <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2017>