DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Science Course Syllabus
Department of Economics
ECONOMICS 4317A / 5317A
ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND POVERTY

September - December 2026
Classes: Monday & Wednesday 10:00AM – 11:30AM
Studley LSC C212

Instructor: Lars Osberg
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Email: Lars.Osberg@dal.ca
Office Hours: Tuesdays 2:00 to 5:00 PM or by appointment

Course delivery: In person – lectures recorded

Course Description

This course examines the inequalities of outcome and opportunity in contemporary societies and the theories and evidence underlying alternative measures, explanations and possible policies, with special emphasis on Canada.

Course Prerequisites: ECON 2200.03 (or ECON 2210.03 or ECON 2220.03), and ECON2201.03 or permission of the Instructor.

Learning Objectives

1. To increase your understanding of the conceptual and empirical 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 trends in poverty and inequality and their implications for contemporary political economy.

3. To develop general skills useful in a wide variety of contexts - 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 importance of rigorous thinking about issues that really matter.

Course Materials

Five useful general sources are:

1. *The Scandalous Rise of Inequality in Canada* (2024) Lars Osberg, James Lorimer Publishers
2. *Not Fair: Inequality of Opportunity in Canada* (2025) Lars Osberg, University of Toronto Press –
3. *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (2016) Branko Milanovic, Harvard University Press,
4. *Income Inequality: The Canadian Story,* (2016) edited by David A. Green, W. Craig Riddell and France St-Hilaire. The Institute for Research on Public Policy, Montreal
5. WID.WORLD/DOCUMENT/2024-ACTIVITY-REPORT/
   10 FACTS ON GLOBAL INEQUALITY IN 2024 - WID - WORLD INEQUALITY DATABASE

Other readings will be posted on Brightspace and updated as new material becomes available.

Course Assessment

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

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Has poverty, economic inequality, economic insecurity or economic well-being increased or decreased over time? Have they all changed in the same direction? Are they greater (or less) in Canada than in Place X? Comparative statements over time or across space give meaning to measurement. However comparisons require the calculation of some index of poverty, inequality, insecurity or economic well-being. Many assumptions and imperfect data underly such social indices. Multiple indices are now in widespread use in policy debates. However, it is clear that users of these statistics often have no clue about the properties and implications of alternative indices or how much their choice of index can matter to the perception of trends. Graduate students registered in ECON5317A are therefore expected to analyze the construction and implications of three of the indices now widely used in discussions of poverty, inequality, insecurity or economic well-being and write an essay of approximately 2,500 words assessing those assumptions and their implications. The grade on this essay will be worth 25% of the final mark. Since Artificial Intelligence now enables the painless production of plausible sounding essays, with the push of a button but without understanding, I will assign a preliminary mark to each essay after reading it and will then schedule an appointment with each student to discuss their essay. The mark assigned will be based on both the written product and the oral defence.

Undergraduate students registered in ECON 4317A will have a midterm exam on October 21st, which will also be worth 25% of the final mark,

	4317A	5317A
Group Presentation		
Team work plan: submitted by October 5th [2%]		
- written and oral presentation [10%]	12%	12%
Essay: Outline of own individual essay- due October 5th	3%	3%
- Final Revised Version of Essay: due December 11th	30%	30%
Mid Term Exam (Economics 4317A only) October 21st	25%	
Essay on Social Indicators (Econ 5317A only) November 13		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)
A	(85-89)	**B**	(73-76)	**C**	(60-64)
A-	(80-84)	**B-**	(70-72)	**C-**	(55-59)
D	(50-54)				
F	(<50)				

Course Policies on Missed or Late Academic Requirements

The weight to be placed on missed or late academic assignments or exams can be reassigned proportionately, if there is a plausible reason. 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

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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. Student essays must be written by students (NOT by ChatGPT or Gemini or other AI software) and must properly identify and reference the sources of data and factual assertions.

A fuller statement of Dalhousie University Syllabus Policy can be found at: https://dal.brightspace.com/shared/Syllabus_Policy/SECTION_C_Syllabus_Policy_June_2021.pdf

Course Content

Inequality and poverty are crucial aspects of the fairness of the world we live in and, therefore, crucial to political and social stability. However, when we compare different societies, or the same society at different times, how do we know whether inequality and poverty are "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 thus raises some of the most important, and complex, problems of measurement in 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 trends 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? How are they connected? Can they be separated? How much do they matter for "fairness"?
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 might these outcomes matter?

Each of these topics will be discussed in lectures, but it is strongly suggested that students also keep up with the attached readings (reading list will be posted on Brightspace). The class will be divided into teams and all students in the class will be part of a team presentation. Since there is often considerable improvement in presentations if students have the chance to make a dry run trial presentation first, each team will meet me in my office for a dry run on the date specified on the schedule below at 6 PM (unless we can find a better time feasible for everyone), before presenting to the class.

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Dates	Topic
December 2nd **Dry Run Tuesday Nov. 24th**	**Group A**: What are the big trends in poverty and inequality – within countries and globally? What explains these trends?
December 4th **Dry Run Wednesday Nov. 25th**	**Group B:** Which matters more: inequality of outcomes or inequality of opportunities? Can inequality of outcomes and inequality of opportunities be separated?
December 7th **Dry Run Tuesday Dec. 1st**	**Group C:** What, if anything, can or should be done to change current trends in poverty and inequality? Why?

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 general issue and decide among themselves how to assign specific 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.

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Student Resources and Support

Advising

General Advising https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/academic-support/advising.html

Science Program Advisors: https://www.dal.ca/faculty/science/current-students/undergrad-students/degree-planning.html

Indigenous Student Centre: https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/communities/indigenous.html

Black Students Advising Centre: https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/communities/black-student-advising.html

International Centre: https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/international-centre/current-students.html

Academic supports

Library: https://libraries.dal.ca/

Writing Centre: https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/academic-support/writing-and-study-skills.html

Studying for Success: https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/academic-support/study-skills-and-tutoring.html

Copyright Office: https://libraries.dal.ca/services/copyright-office.html

Fair Dealing Guidelines https://libraries.dal.ca/services/copyright-office/fair-dealing.html

Other supports and services

Student Health & Wellness Centre: https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/health-and-wellness.html

Student Advocacy: https://dsu.ca/dsas

Ombudsperson: https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/safety-respect/student-rights-and-responsibilities/where-to-get-help/ombudsperson.html

Safety

Biosafety: https://www.dal.ca/dept/safety/programs-services/biosafety.html

Chemical Safety: https://www.dal.ca/dept/safety/programs-services/chemical-safety.html

Radiation Safety: https://www.dal.ca/dept/safety/programs-services/radiation-safety.html

Scent-Free Program: https://www.dal.ca/dept/safety/programs-services/occupational-safety/scent-free.html

Dalhousie COVID-19 information and updates: https://www.dal.ca/covid-19-information-and-updates.html

Dalhousie University acknowledges its location in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People and also acknowledges the histories, contributions, and legacies of the African Nova Scotian people and communities who have been here for over 400 years.