

SOCIOLOGY 150gm
Social Problems
Fall 2013
TTH 2:00-3:20 SGM 124

Dr. Karen Sternheimer

Office: HSH 214

Office hours: TTH 12:30-1:30; 3:45-4:30

and by appointment

Phone: 213-740-3541

TA: April Hovav
(Monday sections)

Office: HSH 220/321

Office hours: T 12-2 and
by appointment

▶ TA: Jazmin Muro
(T&TH sections)

Office: HSH 220/321

Office hours: T 1-2
and by appointment

sternhei@usc.edu

apriljoh@usc.edu

jazminmu@usc.edu

What is a social problem? How do we know? Who has the power to define social problems and propose possible solutions?

Throughout the semester we will continually return to these questions. Our central purpose is to critically evaluate what issues rise into the public agenda as problems, as well as who may (or may not) benefit from proposed solutions. Additionally, we will address why some issues are regularly blamed for causing social problems despite the lack of evidence to support such claims. We will also consider how claims about what causes specific social problems (and presumed solutions) stem from debates about culture and social structure within American society.

Throughout the course we will focus on issues such as poverty, racism, crime and punishment, unemployment, teen parenthood, substance abuse, immigration, education, homophobia, homelessness, and many other topics that may arise in our discussions over the course of the semester.

This course meets the General Education requirement for Social Issues. This course also meets the Diversity Requirement, and explores several dimensions of social diversity, including gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, age, and social class in the context of a range of historical, cultural, and contemporary institutional contexts.

Course Goals:

1. Explore how social problems are socially constructed within the media, by politicians, and by other interest groups;
2. Critically examine how discussions about social problems draw on both cultural and structural explanations, as well as how race, ethnicity, class, and gender are built into the discourse on social problems;
3. Understand the roles that American economic, political, educational, and cultural institutions play in perpetuating and solving various social issues, as well as consider the possibility of structural changes in American society;
4. Become informed citizens about both social issues and the communication strategies groups utilize to raise public awareness, draft legislation, and apply public policies to manage social problems.

Student evaluation:

Lecture attendance and participation	10%
Tuesday lecture in-class essays	5%
Discussion section attendance, participation, group project and presentation	25%
Take home midterm (due Thursday 10/17)	25%
Application papers (10/3, & 11/21, 12/3)	10%
Take home final (due Thursday 12/12 at 4 pm)	25%

Tracking your progress:

You are expected to seek more than a grade from this course. However, I realize grades are very important to students. You are responsible for keeping a record of your grades and to be aware of your progress as well as areas where improvement is needed, and for seeking help from your peers, TA, or professor. Use the breakdown above to calculate your grade.

Participation and Attendance:

Active student participation in class discussions and activities is absolutely essential for this class. Therefore, students are expected to attend every lecture and discussion section meetings prepared to discuss the assigned reading and relevant topics. **Note that you are required to enroll in a discussion section and most students are required to enroll in Writing 140 as part of this course. Your participation in the discussion section is central to your grade in this class, but your Writing 140 work will be graded separately.**

Students are expected to welcome differing viewpoints and to respect the thoughts and ideas of all class participants. The topics covered in this course will likely generate disagreement and debate, and it is vital that any disagreements focus on ideas, not individuals. It is never acceptable in a college classroom or discussion section to say anything that is demeaning or threatening to other students. You are expected to treat everyone in the class with respect; this means quietly listening while others are speaking, and arriving and leaving on time. Note that a great deal of information covered in the lectures may not be in the readings, and vice versa. *Students are responsible for getting notes or assignments from classmates* should an absence become necessary.

Students often overlook the importance of participation and attendance in their course grade. This grade is based on the percentage of class meetings you attend (you can't participate if you are not there!), and may be increased or decreased based on your participation. Things that will increase it are comments and questions that reflect knowledge of course material, as well as courteous attention to your professor, TA, and peers. Things that will bring your grade down include disruptive behavior (includes ringing cell phones, web browsing and texting), rudeness towards your professor, TA, or peers, and comments that reveal a lack of preparation and attention. Ideally all class members will attend class regularly, prepared to discuss the reading and be open and respectful of differing viewpoints.

It is your responsibility to sign in every class, as attendance will be taken at the beginning of each lecture and discussion section meeting. To receive full attendance credit you must attend the entire class session. Signing in for a previous day is not possible, so be sure to sign in with your TA. ***Signing in for a classmate is an act of academic dishonesty and will not be tolerated.***

Technology Etiquette:

E-mail is a great resource but never takes the place of a conversation. Please put "SOCI 150" in the subject line of e-mail messages. Lengthy questions or concerns should be addressed during office hours or a special appointment. Keep in mind that your professor and TA are quite busy and probably cannot check e-mail as often as you may. **Absolutely no assignments will be accepted via e-mail.** We will be using Blackboard (<https://blackboard.usc.edu>) to post announcements, most handouts and some articles, so check this site periodically.

You are welcome to bring laptops and handheld devices to class, however, if their use becomes a distraction you will be asked to turn them off. Cell phones and web browsers must be turned off during all class meetings. *Multitasking (web surfing, Facebooking, texting, studying for another class) is disruptive and will reduce your grade.*

Essays:

For five Tuesdays of the semester (from 9/10-10/8) there will be a brief essay assignment at the start of lecture to ascertain how well you are engaged in the course (attending lectures and reading assignments). The assignment will start at the beginning of class so if you are late you will lose time and may not be able to complete the assignment. The essay topic will come from a central theme from the

previous week's reading and course discussions and will be an opportunity for you to reflect on the material. Do not assume that simply filling a page will earn you credit; your writing must reflect awareness of central issues and ideas from readings and lectures expressed in your own words. These assignments are graded credit/no credit and are each worth 1 percent of your total course grade. **Missed essays or essays that earn "no credit" can be made up with extra credit assignments, as noted below.**

Extra Credit

After the midterm, an essay question will be posted on Blackboard at the end of each week. Your one page response must be uploaded onto Blackboard before the start of class the following Tuesday. By completing these assignments you may make up any missed essays or no credit essays and/or earn up to 3 percent extra credit in the course (1 percent per essay). **You may do all three essays and the additional extra credit option:**

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WELFARE RECIPIENTS

Read Sharon Hays' *Flat Broke with Children* (listed as an optional text) in its entirety, and write a **5-page paper** examining how her findings compare with stereotypes and assumptions about people receiving public assistance. Also discuss which course concepts you see reflected in this book. Due 12/5; ***no late papers accepted***. Based on the quality of your paper, you can earn up to an additional ten points on your final exam.

Group Project, Report, and Presentation

Within your discussion section, you will join a group of 3-5 students and focus on a central social issue throughout the course of the semester. Each week you will participate in an exercise designed to help your group prepare for your 10-12 page report and presentation, which will be due during the last 2-3 meetings of your discussion section (specific timing will be at the discretion of your TA). Your participation will be evaluated by your TA and by your group members. Each group's presentation will be evaluated by your TA and discussion section classmates; your report will be evaluated by your TA. *Specific instructions for this project will be posted on Blackboard soon.*

Application Papers

During the semester you will be required to write **two** essays based on a social issue that is meaningful to you and discuss how at least one class concept has helped you understand the issue in a more complex way.

You may choose an event in the news, an issue of interest that you read about online (you might want to explore everydaysociologyblog.com, thesocietypages.com, or socimages.com for ideas). In your **3-5 page paper** define the issue, explain why it is meaningful to you and how it relates to one or more central course concepts. Each paper is worth 5% of your grade. ***The first paper is due in class on 10/3; the second is due 11/21. Feel free to turn in your papers early until the deadline; no late papers will be accepted. More details will be posted on Blackboard soon.***

OR

Sign up for JEP during the first two weeks of the semester and participate in the program at least two hours a week. You will write about how your experience relates to a concept (or concepts) we have learned about in class. **Your participation will be partly evaluated by JEP program assistants. You will write only one 3-5 page paper due 12/3; no late papers will be accepted, nor will substitutions for JEP. More details will be posted on Blackboard soon.**

Midterm & Final Exams:

Both the midterm and final exams will be take home, essay format and should incorporate your ideas with those in the reading and class discussions. Both exams will be distributed at least one week prior to their due date. All assignments (including application papers) must be submitted in hard copy **and** on

Blackboard to ensure academic integrity (instructions will be provided). Late papers will be reduced by 10% per day (including weekend days); **no late final exams can be accepted.**

All assignments must reflect original work. Plagiarism will not be tolerated and consequences will be in accordance with university policy. Any papers that are dramatically different in style and content from in-class work will require an oral exam. Failure to appear or to successfully demonstrate that the work is your own within one week of notification will result in a failing grade and will be reported to Student Judicial Affairs.

Extra credit opportunities may arise at times; note that special individual opportunities for extra credit violate university policy and will not be considered. Finally, grades are earned, they are not given. It is your responsibility to do the best work you are capable of producing. *Nitpicking over points is discouraged, as it reveals a commitment to a grade rather than to learning.* **Continued enrollment in this course indicates acceptance of class policies.**

****Any special learning needs should be brought to our attention as soon as possible****

Required Reading:

1. Best, Joel. 2013. *Social Problems, second edition*, W.W. Norton.
2. Sternheimer, Karen. 2013. *Connecting Social Problems and Popular Culture: Why Media is not the Answer, second edition*, Westview Press.
3. Wilson, William Julius. 2009. *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*, W.W. Norton.
4. Assorted articles, mostly from *Contexts* magazine, available on Blackboard (denoted by “Bb”)

Optional Reading:

Hays, Sharon. 2003. *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform*, Oxford University Press.

****These dates are estimates and subject to change at my discretion****

I. Defining Social Problems

Social construction

Constructivism vs. Objectivism

Claims makers

Perceptions of problems

Evaluating social issues with research

- | | | | |
|---|---------|--|---|
| 1 | T 8/27 | Introduction to course | |
| 2 | TH 8/29 | What is a social problem?
How do we know? | • Best chapters 1 & 11 |
| 3 | T 9/3 | Getting social problems on
the agenda | • Best chapters 2 & 10 |
| 4 | TH 9/5 | Social problems experts and
using media | • Best chapters 4 & 5 |
| 5 | T 9/10 | Media, audiences, and public
reaction to claims | • Sternheimer, Introduction
Best chapter 6 |

FIRST IN-CLASS ESSAY

II. Framing Social Problems: Culture and Social Structure

Debates about culture vs. structure

Racism

Homophobia

Sexism

Poverty

Joblessness

Changes in family structure

- | | | | |
|----|---------|---|--|
| 6 | TH 9/12 | Defining culture and social structure | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sternheimer chapter 11 SECOND IN-CLASS ESSAY |
| 7 | T 9/17 | Culture and structure: racial inequality | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wilson chapters 1 & 5 |
| 8 | TH 9/19 | Culture and structure: race and poverty | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wilson chapter 2 THIRD IN-CLASS ESSAY |
| 9 | T 9/24 | Culture and structure: poverty and families | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wilson chapter 4 |
| 10 | TH 9/26 | Culture and structure: single parenthood | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sternheimer chapter 7• Kathryn Edin & Maria Kefalas, <i>Unmarried with Children</i> (Bb) FOURTH IN-CLASS ESSAY |
| 11 | T 10/1 | Poverty and gender | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wilson chapter 3 |
| 12 | TH 10/3 | Bullying and homophobia | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sternheimer chapter 3 APPLICATION PAPER #1 DUE |

III. Constructing Fear: Crime and Violence

Creating fears of crime

Concerns about violence and popular culture

Race, class, and crime

Crime and immigration

Crime and the criminal justice system

- | | | | |
|----|----------|---|--|
| 13 | T 10/8 | Common beliefs about violence | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sternheimer chapter 5 FIFTH IN-CLASS ESSAY |
| 14 | TH 10/10 | Fear, crime and public policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lynn Chancer, <i>Before and After the Central Park Jogger</i> (Bb)• Mark Warr, <i>Safe at Home</i> (Bb) DISTRIBUTE MIDTERM |
| 15 | T 10/5 | Crime, inequality, and the justice system | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bruce Western & Becky Pettit, <i>Beyond Crime and Punishment</i> (Bb)• <i>The Economist</i>, <i>Rough Justice</i> (Bb) |
| 16 | TH 10/17 | Fear of crime and “the other” | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Robert J. Sampson, <i>Rethinking Crime and Immigration</i> (Bb) MIDTERM DUE |

IV. Personal or Systemic Failures: Health and Health Care

Teen sex

Substance use

Obesity

Eating Disorders

Health care

- | | | | |
|----|----------|--|---|
| 17 | T 10/22 | Common beliefs about teen sex and teen pregnancy | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sternheimer chapter 6• Barbara Reisman & Pepper Schwartz, <i>After the Sexual Revolution</i> (Bb) |
| 18 | TH 10/24 | Substance use and abuse | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sternheimer chapter 9 |
| 19 | T 10/29 | Pharmaceutical use | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meika Loe, <i>The Prescription of a New Generation</i> (Bb) |
| 20 | TH 10/31 | Obesity and eating disorders | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sternheimer chapter 8 |
| 21 | T 11/5 | Health, race, and gender | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• William Marsiglio, <i>Healthy Dads, Healthy Kids</i> (Bb)• Deborah Carr, <i>Black Death, White Death</i> (Bb) |
| 22 | TH 11/7 | American health care system | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Susan Star Sered & Rushika Fernandopulle, <i>Sick out of Luck</i> (Bb)• Lisa F. Berkman, <i>The Health Divide</i> (Bb) |

V. Public Policy and Social Change: Can Social Problems Be Solved?

Changing education

Environmental issues

Reducing homelessness

Crafting public policies

- | | | | |
|----|----------|--|--|
| 23 | T 11/12 | Is education central to solving social problems? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sternheimer chapter 4 |
| 24 | TH 11/14 | Changing schools | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Douglas B. Downey & Benjamin G. Gibbs, <i>How Schools Really Matter</i> (Bb) |
| 25 | T 11/19 | Homelessness | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Malcolm Gladwell, <i>Million Dollar Murray</i> (Bb)• Jon Morgenstern, "Housing First" and Helping the Homeless (Bb) |
| 26 | TH 11/21 | Materialism and the environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sternheimer chapter 10
APPLICATION PAPER #2 DUE |
| 27 | T 11/26 | Making change happen: Reducing gang involvement | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Best chapter 3 |
| 28 | T 12/3 | Policymaking: Gangs, con't | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Best chapter 7
JEP APPLICATION PAPER DUE |
| 29 | TH 12/5 | Policy outcomes and the politics of change: Reducing poverty | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Best chapter 9
EXTRA CREDIT OPTION #1 PAPER DUE |
| | TH 12/14 | FINAL EXAM due 4pm in HSH 314; NO LATE EXAMS ACCEPTED | |