Poverty Measurement and Alleviation

Syllabus
Douglas J. Besharov
and
Douglas M. Call

This course examines the extent and demographics of contemporary poverty, and what government can do about it. The course begins by considering the origins of the 1960s War on Poverty, the U.S. poverty measure as well as those of other countries, and their implications for public (and scholarly) views about the nature and causes of poverty (as well as for pending legislation to revise the official poverty measure). It then explores efforts to alleviate poverty over the last fifty years, focusing on both income transfers and efforts to increase human and social capital (with a special focus on children, the elderly, and minorities).

The course introduces students to two statistical software packages that allow the user to analyze income and poverty data: the University of Maryland’s Poverty Analysis and Tabulation Tool (PATT) and the Census Bureau’s Data Ferrett application. Students will use both the PATT and Data Ferrett to assist them in preparing a policy analysis of the poverty of a specific demographic group (see details below).

The course will be taught jointly by Douglas J. Besharov and Douglas M. Call.

Professors Besharov and Call try to work closely with students, and are pleased to discuss exercises or other class-related issues. We both try to respond to emails in a timely manner: besharov@umd.edu or dcall1@umd.edu.

Professor Call is available in his office (3111C Van Munching Hall) M-F, between 8:00 and 5:00. Students are welcome to drop by at any time. His campus phone number is (301)405-6341. If you need to reach him outside of office hours, his home phone number is (301)593-3483 (email is strongly preferred outside of regular office hours.)

Professor Besharov is generally in his campus office (3111C Van Munching Hall) on Wednesdays (and irregularly on other days), but it is best to call to make an appointment. His campus phone number is (301)405-6341. If you cannot reach him on campus, please feel free to call him at home (301)986-1969 (preferably between 8:30 p.m. and 10 p.m.).

Please refer to the appendices for information on the Honor Code and medical absences.
Classroom procedures

All students are expected to come to class prepared, having read and digested the readings. (Supplemental readings are optional.) If some unavoidable circumstance prevents you from being prepared, please inform Professor Besharov or, in his absence, Professor Call. If you have not done so before class begins, we will assume that you are affirming your being prepared to fully participate in the class discussion.

We ask that laptops, smartphones, etc., not be open during class. Please bring printed versions of the assigned readings to class, as we will frequently refer to them in class.

A word about the classroom discussion. We will often use a version of the Socratic method. Please see Appendix 1 for a reasonably accurate description of the method and its purpose. Although it is written about law teaching, it will give you an idea of how class discussion will be handled. (Please excuse the source.)

The University of Maryland Poverty Analysis and Tabulation Tool (PATT)

The University of Maryland Poverty Analysis and Tabulation Tool (PATT) will play an integral role in the students’ understanding of poverty measurement and alleviation. Students will use the PATT to complete the exercises and also for their final papers. The PATT can be found at http://www.welfareacademy.org/PovertyTabulator/PovertyTabulator/.

This site is password protected:
Username: welfare
Password: welf@reAcademy

Please see the PATT User’s Guide (available on Blackboard) for detailed instructions on how to download the PATT. Please be aware that the PATT was developed in the JAVA programming language. If you do not have JAVA installed on your computer, you will need to do so prior to PATT installation or the program will not run. The full installation of PATT requires 6.9 GB of disk space and has not been tested in the Mac environment.

Data Ferrett

Students will also use the Census Bureau’s Data Ferrett to complete assignments and to prepare their policy analyses. Data Ferrett is a web-based program that can be found at http://dataferrett.census.gov/run.html. As with the PATT, Data Ferrett requires the latest version of JAVA.
Grading

Exercise #1: Poverty demographics 5%
Exercise #2: Altering price level adjustments and the unit of analysis 10%
Exercise #3: Assessing the impact of different government programs (such as food stamps, Medicare, and Medicaid) 10%
Presentation #1: Mapping poverty 5%
Memo and Presentation #1: Causes of poverty 10%
Memo and Presentation #2: Poverty alleviation strategies 10%
Final policy analysis 35%
Class participation 15%
(including constructive feedback to other students during classes)

PLEASE NOTE: Except under exceptionally extenuating circumstances, grades for assignments will be automatically reduced by one-half grade point for each full or part day they are late.

Papers and presentations

Policy Analysis. Each student will prepare a policy analysis for a particular demographic group (young elderly, elderly elderly, children, Hispanics, foreign-born, noncitizens, single black males, black women, never married mothers, divorced mothers, working poor, deep poverty, Whites, Native Americans, Asians, region).

The structure of the policy analysis is detailed in Appendix 4.

There is no minimum or maximum length for the policy analysis, but past experience shows that a credible policy analysis is usually at least twenty pages long. The paper should be single-spaced (double spaced between paragraphs) and in a readable font (like this one, Times New Roman 12), with standard margins and line spacing. This can include a reasonable number of tables and charts inserted in the text, as long as they directly support your analysis.

Oral presentation. Each student will make three presentations. Presentations will begin in week eight and continue until week fifteen. The topics of the presentations will correspond with the first three sections of the policy analysis. (Please see the “Readings and Class Meetings” section below for a more detailed description of the format of the classes during this period.)
Each presentation should be no more than fifteen minutes. Be succinct, limiting what you say to what really matters, and what you display on the screen to information that can be easily read and grasped.

**Required texts and assigned readings**

The required texts for this course are:


The Harrington, Iceland, and Shipler books should be available for purchase online. The Green and Besharov document and most of the other readings are available on Blackboard ([www.elms.umd.edu](http://www.elms.umd.edu)). We have provided URLs for those readings that are not available on Blackboard.

*Even when the articles assigned in this course are available in electronic format, please make sure to bring a printed copy to class to facilitate class discussion and note taking.*
READINGS AND CLASS MEETINGS

**Note on schedule:** This is a tentative schedule for readings and assignments. Dates and readings may change based on class needs.

**Note on exercises:** All exercises are due by 5:00 p.m. on the **Monday** prior to the class when they will be discussed. Please send them via email to both professors and post them on Blackboard.

**Class #1. August 31. Introduction to the course.** The plan for the course: topics to be covered, course structure, classroom procedures, and what is expected of students. Class discussion on the origins of the 1960s War on Poverty and the new concern for the working poor.

**Readings**


**Class #2. September 7. Social mapping of poverty, policy analysis, and introduction to Data Ferrett.** How many Americans are poor and the extent of poverty among different subgroups of the U.S. population. What is a policy analysis and how to perform a policy analysis. Also, an extensive discussion on how to use the Census Bureau’s data software Data Ferrett

**Note:** In this class, students will select the demographic group for their policy analyses and presentations.

**Readings**


U.S. Census Bureau, “Data Ferrett Users’ Guide,”

The Brookings Institution will hold a panel discussion on the new poverty and income numbers the same day they are released by the U.S. Census Bureau. Professor Besharov has been invited to be a panelist. The event begins at 2:30 pm at the Brookings Institution (1775 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC). Attendance at the event is entirely voluntary. Students interested in attending will need to register directly with Brookings. (Registration instructions forthcoming.)

Class #3. September 14. Characteristics and causes of poverty. A continuation of the previous week’s discussion on the characteristics of poverty, and a discussion of the multiple causes of poverty, focusing on family breakdown and other behavioral aspects.

Note: In this class, we will discuss the requirements of Exercise #1. The exercise will be due the following Monday (September 19) by 5 p.m.

Readings


Note: This class will include a guided discussion of the student submissions for Exercise #1.

Readings


**Class #5. September 28. The Limitations of the Official Poverty Measure.** How the official poverty measure fails to take into account such factors as other sources of income, assets, more accurate inflation measures, and geographical differences in cost of living.

*Note:* This class will include a discussion of how to use the UMD Poverty Analysis and Tabulation Tool (PATT).

**Readings**


Class #6. October 5. Consumption measures, the National Academy of Sciences measure, and the Obama administration’s Supplemental Poverty Measure. A discussion of consumption measures of poverty and proposed changes to the official poverty measure.

Note: This class will include a discussion of the presentation schedule for classes #8 and #9.

Readings


Supplemental reading

Class #7. October 12. Material hardship measures and measures of social inclusion/exclusion. A discussion of measuring poverty by assessing material hardship in addition to income and also by assessing the degree to which individuals and households feel excluded from society.

Note: This class will include a discussion of the requirements of Exercise #2. The exercise will be due the following Monday (October 17) by 5 p.m.

Readings


Supplemental reading


Note: In this class, we will:
• discuss the requirements of Exercise #3; the exercise will be due the following Monday (October 24) by 5 p.m;
• discuss the student submissions for Exercise #2; and
• determine (by lot) the presentation schedule for classes 10–15.

Also, in this class, half the class will make presentations on mapping poverty for the particular demographic groups assigned to each student.

Readings

Supplemental reading
Class #9. October 26. Using broader measures of income. A discussion of the impact on the poverty rate of using broader measures of income such as food stamps, the EITC, assets, and capital gains.

*Note:* This class will include a guided discussion of the student submissions for Exercise #3. Also, half the class will make presentations on mapping poverty.

*Readings*

In the next three classes, students will make presentations on the causes of poverty for their demographic group. Students will submit a five-page memo on the causes of poverty on the week before they present. Class members will be expected to read the memos prior to class and be ready to make comments.

Class #10. November 2. Student presentations on causes of poverty #1.

Class #11. November 9. Student presentations on causes of poverty #2.

Class #12. November 16. Student presentations on causes of poverty #3.

In the next three classes, students will make presentations on poverty alleviation strategies for their demographic group. Students will submit a five-page memo on poverty alleviation strategies the week before they present. Class members will be expected to read the memos prior to class and be ready to make comments.


Class #14. November 30. Student presentations on poverty alleviation strategies #2.

Class #15. December 7. Student presentations on poverty alleviation strategies #3.

December 21. Final papers due.
Appendix 1

The Socratic Method

“In a typical class setting, the professor asks a question and calls on a student who may or may not have volunteered an answer. The professor either then continues to ask the student questions or moves on to another student.

The employment of the Socratic method has some uniform features but can also be heavily influenced by the temperament of the teacher. The method begins by calling on a student at random, and asking about a central argument put forth by one of the judges (typically on the side of the majority) in an assigned case. The first step is to ask the student to paraphrase the argument, in order to ensure that the student has read and has a basic understanding of the case. . . . Assuming the student has read the case and can articulate the court’s argument, the teacher then asks whether the student agrees with the argument. The teacher then typically plays Devil’s advocate, trying to force the student to defend his or her position by rebutting arguments against it.

These subsequent questions can take a few forms. Sometimes they seek to challenge the assumptions upon which the student based the previous answer until it breaks. Further questions can also be designed to move a student toward greater specificity, either in understanding a rule of law or a particular case. The teacher may attempt to propose a hypothetical situation in which the student's assertion would seem to demand an exception. Finally professors use the Socratic method to allow students to come to legal principles on their own through carefully worded questions that spur a particular train of thought.

One hallmark of Socratic questioning is that typically there is more than one “correct” answer, and more often, no clear answer at all. The primary goal of the Socratic method in the law school setting is not to answer usually unanswerable questions, but to explore the contours of often difficult legal issues and to teach students the critical thinking skills they will need as lawyers. This is often done by altering the facts of a particular case to tease out how the result might be different. This method encourages students to go beyond memorizing the facts of a case and instead to focus on application of legal rules to tangible fact patterns. As the assigned texts are typically case law, the Socratic method, if properly used, can display that judges' decisions are usually conscientiously made but are based on certain premises, beliefs, and conclusions that are the subject of legitimate argument.

Sometimes, the class ends with a discussion of doctrinal foundations (legal rules) to anchor the students in contemporary legal understanding of an issue. At other times the class ends without such discussion leaving students to figure out for themselves the legal
rules or principles that were at issue. For this method to work, the students are expected to be prepared for class in advance by reading the assigned materials (case opinions, notes, law review articles, etc.) and by familiarizing themselves with the general outlines of the subject matter.”

Appendix 2

University Honor Code

Please note the following statement from the Student Honor Council regarding the University Honor Code and plagiarism:

The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please visit http://www.shc.umd.edu.

To further exhibit your commitment to academic integrity, remember to sign the Honor Pledge on all examinations and assignments: “I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this examination (assignment).”

If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please see the resources provided by the University at http://www.lib.umd.edu/UES/plag_stud_what.html.
Appendix 3

Medical Absences

Please note the following statement on medical absences from the UMD Provost’s office:

In the event that a class must be missed due to an illness, the policy is as follows:

• For every medically necessary absence from class, a reasonable effort should be made to notify the instructors in advance of the class. When returning to class, students must bring a note identifying the date of and reason for the absence, and acknowledging that the information in the note is accurate.

• If a student is absent more than two time(s), the instructor may require documentation signed by a health care professional.

• If a student is absent on days when a presentation is scheduled, he or she is required to notify the instructor in advance, and upon returning to class, bring documentation of the illness, signed by a health care professional.

Additional information about the University of Maryland’s attendance policies can be found at http://www.umd.edu/catalog/index.cfm/show/content.section/c/27/ss/1584/s/1540.
Appendix 4
Policy Analyses

A policy analysis is a systematic application of multiple research and analytic methods to understand a problem and then determine which of various alternative policies or programs might best achieve a specified goal. One need not agree with a policy goal or outcome in order to prepare a professional policy analysis.

The policy analysis should be structured like the following:

1. **A description of the problem that the proposal seeks to address.** This includes describing the size/extent of the problem, nature/severity of the problem, the population that is affected, and the effects of the problem.

2. **A description of the causes of the problem.** Distinguish between immediate/proximal and long-term/distal causes.

3. **Identification of all realistic options for addressing the problem.** For each option, detail the population to be targeted, the scope of the intervention (duration, resources, etc.), and the services to be provided. Remember that one option is always to “do nothing.”

4. **A detailed assessment of one of these options.** This section should assess the program theory, empirical evidence (including published research such as impact, process and economic evaluations, and original research using the PATT and Data Ferrett), implementation issues, ethical considerations, the political context, and a description of the evaluability of the program (if and how the program could be evaluated).

5. **Recommendation of actions.** Provide a detailed set of recommendations.

6. **Implementation and performance measurement.** For each recommendations, describe the implementation process and the performance measures to be used for ongoing monitoring of the programs activities, outputs, and outcomes.

7. **Impact evaluation.** Identify and describe the proximal and distal impacts to be measured by an impact evaluation.

8. **Redesign.** Develop a process that institutionalizes continual reassessment and redesign of the program.