

# Course Syllabus for Sociology 20033

## Introduction to Social Problems

### Spring 2024

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<b>Time and Place</b>	Jenkins and Nanovic Hall B052, MW 9:30 AM – 10:45
<b>Canvas/Web use</b>	We will make extensive use of both Canvas and the course web page in this class. The web page will have most of the readings and discussion questions. The Canvas page will include the most critical links for the course, e.g. announcements, assignments, Zoom links. You should check it regularly. All assignments should be submitted through Canvas unless you are told otherwise. You may understand Canvas better than I do, but if you need help you can either click the help button in Canvas or check out <a href="https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/tkb-p/student">https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/tkb-p/student</a> .
<b>Office Hours</b>	MW 2:30-3:30 and by appointment, usually via Zoom unless we arrange something different. I am generally very accessible via phone, voicemail, email, and Zoom – including on nights and weekends if necessary.

### Course summary

Today's society is beset by many serious social problems, for example, conflicts over gay rights, sexual violence, battles over abortion and reproductive rights, poverty & inequality, racial/ethnic discrimination (which has helped give rise to the Black Lives Matter social movement). How do we think about these problems in ways that lead to helpful solutions? In this course, students will learn to take a sociological perspective not only in examining the causes, consequences, and solutions to some of society's most troubling social problems, but also in taking a critical look at their own perceptions of the problem. When possible, I will often try to provide a local angle to problems, e.g. from Notre Dame or South Bend. I encourage you to think of incidents from your own communities or personal experiences that are relevant and sharing them in class if you feel comfortable doing so.

## Course Web Page/ Required Readings

*Course Web Page (Check it often).* Online readings, discussion questions and other links of interest will be available on the course web page:

<http://www3.nd.edu/~rwilliam/xsoc20033/>

*Online Readings Packet and Discussion Questions for Sociology 20033.* There is no text book for the course. All readings are online. The readings packet includes selections from a wide variety of mass media and scholarly sources, ranging from Atlantic Monthly to The American Sociological Review. Though sometimes lengthy, most of the material in the packet is not extremely difficult to read. The packet is designed to achieve the following purposes:

- To illustrate, and provide a sociological perspective, on the wide array of issues, controversies and opinions on social problems facing the US and world today
- To show the “real” impact that social problems have on people’s lives

All readings will be available about a week in advance. The packet reflects a wide range of views, but I do not claim to present a perfectly-balanced perspective on each and every single issue. Students are encouraged to offer their own views on the issues and to do additional reading on topics of interest to them.

## Classroom Policies & Format

We will use a variety of learning styles in this class – I will lecture some but **much of the class will be taught seminar style, including small-group discussions and end-of-year student presentations.**

- **Diverse viewpoints are welcome.** It doesn’t matter whether I agree or disagree with you. The critical thing is how well you make your case. At the same time I do expect you to be respectful of other people – no personal insults, no rolling your eyes, etc.
- **Handling of Sensitive topics.** Several topics have the potential to be personally disturbing to some people. You may have been harassed or discriminated against because of your race, gender, or sexual orientation; A loved one may have been sexually assaulted; etc. While you are welcome to share personal details in class, you should never feel compelled to do so if it makes you feel uncomfortable. If you ever feel the subject matter is so personal that it impairs your ability to function in class, you should let me know and we’ll see if we can make accommodations for you.
- **Readings and classroom discussion are critical!** If you stay on top of the readings, instead of just cramming for exams, the classroom experience will be much better for you and everyone else.
- **Around six times a semester, I will break you down into small groups to go over discussion questions based on the readings.** I want everyone to be ready for these discussions; so, as noted below, you need to turn in your discussion notes beforehand.
- **I will often do low cost cold-calling on people.** I am not trying to embarrass anyone – you can occasionally defer on a question – but cold calling can be a good way to keep students involved and paying attention. **If speaking in class is a major problem for you, please let me**

know as soon as as possible.

- I strongly discourage but do not ban the use of laptops during class (but I reserve the right to do so if laptops become a distraction or are being misused).
- Some material may be presented asynchronously, e.g. instead of having a regular class you will be asked to watch something on your own and discuss it later. This was very popular when the course was all-online so I may keep doing it.
- You are strongly encouraged to make contact with me outside of class, either by phone or electronically. If necessary and mutually convenient, I am willing to have Zoom meetings on nights and weekends, especially when major assignments are soon due.
- **Check your ND email regularly, preferably every day or two.** You may not use email much but I do, and I frequently send messages about upcoming readings and discussion topics.
- Do not lose your work – use some sort of Cloud backup service.
- **Any files you send me electronically (e.g. exams, papers) should begin with your last name so I can easily alphabetize them, e.g. WilliamsExam1.docx.** The document itself should include your name, so I do not have to dig through my email to figure out who sent something. **Include page numbers on any document more than 2 pages!!!** (It is a major source of irritation to me that some students repeatedly fail to do so!) I prefer Word or PDF formats; if you use some other format (e.g. Google Docs) it is pretty easy to convert it to Word or PDF.

## Assignments, Exams and Grading

There will be one take-home exam during the semester, a take-home final, and a paper. These are each worth 28% of your grade.

**Exams.** Both exams will consist of short answer problems and 2-3 long essay questions. The final will emphasize material from the second half of the course but may also give you a chance to apply principles that were learned earlier in the semester.

One of the things that will be most important on the exams will be your ability to incorporate material from the readings. **The best exams will go beyond what was said in class and will cite specific facts, opinions, authors and articles. Citing sources and offering specific details and quotations from them will demonstrate that you really have done the readings, and will strengthen your answers and make them seem more authoritative.** They will be like short research papers, incorporating information from a variety of sources, except I have provided you with the readings in advance.

**Papers.** The paper should be typed, double-spaced, and approximately 10 to 20 pages long. The paper should include a bibliography and all sources for material should be clearly cited.

- I must approve your topic. By **March 6**, you should give me a one-page typed summary briefly describing your proposed topic and any sources you have already identified. I encourage you to schedule meetings with me to talk about your ideas.
- If you want to give me a draft of your paper by **March 27**, I will return it with comments within about 7 days.
- Papers are due **April 11** (although you are welcome and encouraged to hand them in well before that.).

- During the week of **April 15**, you will be given 15 minutes to discuss some aspect of your paper that you think would be of interest to the class (Amount of time and dates may be adjusted based on final enrollment). If all goes according to plan, there will be in-class presentations on **April 15 and 17** and one or two Zoom sessions outside of regular classtime (but you only have to attend 2 sessions altogether). As a courtesy to your fellow students, I expect everyone to be there on those days. I often assign grades *after* the presentation, so an exceptionally strong (or weak) presentation can impact your grade.
- Note that there is nothing that stops you from starting or even completing your paper well in advance of the due date; if you get a lot of the work done early the end of the semester will be a lot less hectic for you.

The paper should be a major, in-depth examination of some major social problem. It should demonstrate that you are familiar with the relevant research, and that you understand the issues and controversies involved. Your own original thinking, or your ability to offer some sort of critique, may be most helpful (but your own thoughts must not be used as a substitute for adequate research). A minimum of four or five scholarly sources should be cited (e.g. books, journal articles). You can also cite other sources – Time, Newsweek, Atlantic Monthly, the New York Times and Wall Street Journal often have excellent articles - so long as you have the minimum number of scholarly references. Note that scholar.google.com is generally better than Google when searching for sources.

There will actually be 3 or 4 paper sessions – two during regular classtime, and one or two sessions held at other times. You only need to attend two sessions – the one you present in and one other. This is a covid-inspired change that has been very popular in my other classes. It allows for smaller, more casual, and in-depth discussions, while at the same time not requiring you to listen to everyone’s paper.

**Short assignments/ class participation/ paper presentations/ attendance** account for the other 16% of your grade. **Do not underestimate the importance of these!!!**

- This should be an easy 15 or 16 points for you. Come to class, keep up on the readings, hand in all the required short assignments and notes on the readings **on time**, and participate in discussions at least occasionally. In other words, do what you should be doing anyway. Unfortunately, **missed classes and assignments sometimes lower final grades substantially**. More critically, though, I think these will help you to understand the material better, produce better papers and exams, and improve the overall quality of the classroom experience.
- To make sure that everyone is familiar with the material and has something to contribute, I want you to jot down at least a dozen notes from the readings that you think are especially important, any thoughts of your own on the subject, and questions which you would like to see discussed. (It is a good idea to always do this but it is especially critical to do so on discussion days.) In general, you should be prepared to make at least a few points about every major discussion question asked. **In your notes, I encourage you to keep track of the sources you are getting information from**, as specific citations can strengthen your answers.
- In particular, you will be required to hand in discussion notes before class on the days we are breaking down into small groups, approximately 6 times this semester. We will typically have discussion groups on the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> day we are discussing a topic. The exact due dates will be posted on Canvas.

- I want everyone to be ready to participate in class discussions so I almost never give extensions on the readings notes. Assignments handed in on time will be worth up to 2 points (12 pts total), late assignments can still earn 1 point for a few days, and after that they will get 0 points. I'm not super-picky when grading these so long as I see a good faith effort, but I do expect you to have enough to meaningfully contribute to discussion. In the past, some people have turned in about a page, others have turned in 10 pages.
- Besides affecting your participation grade, these notes will be a great help on the exam, as the discussion questions I give you on the readings often bear a remarkable similarity to the exam questions. Canvas lets you know when the notes are due so make sure you stay on top of things.
- The due date for the discussion notes should NOT be interpreted as being the day you have to finally start the readings!!! I will let you know what readings you should have done before each class. Doing readings before class will make it easier for you to follow along.
- Regular attendance & punctuality are expected and factor into your participation grade (up to 4 pts). You are allowed up to three absences for any reason. Attendance will be taken each class. If absences are excessive, University policy allows me to give you a D or F after providing written notice.

## Honor Code

Entering Notre Dame you were required to study the on-line edition of the Academic Code of Honor, to pass a quiz on it, and to sign a pledge to abide by it. The full Code is available at <https://honorcode.nd.edu/>. I reserve the right to use University-approved mechanisms if I suspect plagiarism or cheating. Note: I am ok with students going to Notre Dame's Writing Center so long as they don't get help with the actual content of their work.

## Non-Discrimination/ Inclusion Statement

The University of Notre Dame is committed to social justice. I concur with that commitment and strive to maintain a positive learning environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. In this class we will not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, color or national origin. Any suggestions as to how to further such a positive and open environment will be appreciated and given serious consideration. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate, please advise me and we will work with the Office for Students with Disabilities to make appropriate arrangements. (My thanks to Kevin Barry for the suggested wording of this.)

## **Classroom Topics/ Schedule [Subject to revision]**

Following is the tentative but still flexible list of topics I plan to cover. The order of topics may change. Each will probably take 3 or 4 classes, give or take a day. The readings will be available about a week in advance, and I will make sure you know what topics we are covering each day. We will typically have small group discussions during the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> scheduled day of a topic, so you should have your discussion notes ready to hand in by then.

We sometimes get a little ahead or behind schedule. The syllabus page on Canvas will have the most up-to-date schedule.

There are more possible topics than could be covered in a semester, and I am open to your suggestions. If you would like to offer feedback, please email me early in the semester, indicating any topics or subtopics you find especially interesting or other topics or subtopics you would like to see added.

*January 17, 22 - Introduction & Overview.*

*January 24, 29, 31, Feb 5. The culture wars 1: The struggles over LGBTQ rights, lives and marriage.* The legalization of gay marriage was a great albeit controversial victory for gay rights activists. But, it didn't come without a long fight. We will talk about the struggles and discrimination gays have had and continue to have; arguments for and against gay marriage; why some gays aren't that excited about gay marriage and feel that it detracts from more important issues. Readings will include Ted Olson's "The conservative case for gay marriage." Transgender issues and controversies are receiving more attention this year than in the past.

*Feb 7, 12, 14, 19. The culture wars 2: The battle over abortion and reproductive rights.* Probably few issues are more divisive in this country than abortion. We will read arguments from different sides. The impact of the Dobbs decision will certainly receive attention. Not surprisingly, abortion has often created heated controversies at Notre. We'll talk about some of those instances, including when Barack Obama came to Notre Dame.

*Feb 21, 26, 28. Blacks Lives Matter: Minorities and the criminal justice system.* Black lives matter in many ways, but in this section we will focus on the criminal justice system. In her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, legal scholar Michelle Alexander writes that many of the gains of the civil rights movement have been undermined by the mass incarceration of Black Americans in the war on drugs. She says that although Jim Crow laws are now off the books, millions of Black people arrested for minor crimes remain marginalized and disfranchised, trapped by a criminal justice system that has forever branded them as felons and denied them basic rights and opportunities that would allow them to become productive, law-abiding citizens. In *On the Run*, Alice Goffman explains why many Black people do not trust the police and indeed try to hide from them even when they need help.

*February 28. First exam handed out.*

*March 4. No Class. Exam is due before midnight on March 4.*

*March 7 – Paper Topics are due (but are welcome much earlier)*

*March 6, 18, 20, 25. Wealth, Poverty and Inequality.* What are the problems of the American poor? What are some of the ways that the poor try to cope with poverty, and why is it so difficult for them to do so? What are some of the specific examples that you find particularly striking? How has poverty become a multi-billion dollar industry?

The poor aren't the only ones with problems though. The distribution of wealth in the United States has become increasingly uneven over the last few decades. People like Elizabeth Warren warn about the collapse of the middle class, and warn that even the rich suffer from inequality when people don't have the money to buy their products. We'll also about inequality in various subgroups, such as men versus women and the young versus the old.

*March 27 (Optional) Paper Drafts are due if you want my comments.*

*March 27, April 3, April 8, April 10. The #MeToo Movement and the Battles over Sexual Harassment and Assault.* The documentary *The Hunting Ground* claims that rape is a major problem on college campuses and that institutions are covering them up. The film includes a famous incident from Notre Dame where a St. Mary's student committed suicide after claiming she had been violated by a Notre Dame football player. Others challenge at least some of the claims made. We will also examine cultural controversies over whether films like *The Breakfast Club* or songs like *Blurred Lines* and *Baby, Its Cold Outside* glorify sexual assault. This topic and the final topic may switch dates on the schedule.

*April 10 – Papers are due before midnight but are welcome sooner.*

*April 15, 17. Paper presentations.* If all goes according to plan, there will be 2 paper sessions during regular classtime and 1 or 2 in special sessions outside of regular class time, probably via Zoom. You only have to participate in 2 sessions total, the one you present in and one other. This worked very well previous semesters and I hope it can again. Smaller groups allow a more casual atmosphere and discussion of each other's work. If for some reason we can't work out special sessions I will revise the rest of the class schedule.

*April 24, April 26, May 1, May 3. To Be Announced.* I often like to add at least one new topic every year. This topic might be chosen because of current events or because students request them. If you have any requests or suggestions let me know. Some possible contenders are:

*Health and health care problems in the United States.* The pandemic was a major problem the last few years, and is related to many other issues (e.g. the anti-vax movement). It has exacerbated pre-existing problems like racial and socio-economic disparities in health and health care. If I don't create a separate section for health I may discuss health issues in related areas. This was the topic I used last year and it is probably the favorite for this year, but I will consider other topics if there is strong student interest.

*The Battles over Wokeness and Identity Politics.* Governor Ron DeSantos says Florida is where Woke goes to die. Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders has banned the term “LatinX” from Arkansas state documents. Some Democratic strategists worry that battles over identity politics and wokeness are alienating voters that should be attracted to the party’s economic platform. But others contend that right-wing attacks on ‘wokeness’ are part of a wider campaign to undermine social justice and equality advocacy.

*Artificial Intelligence.* ChatGPT can write essays that are sometimes indistinguishable from what humans write. Image generators created a children’s book in only days. Teachers everywhere fear that AI will lead to rampant cheating. But others say AI should be embraced, not feared.

*Immigration* – Donald Trump said that immigrants are “bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” He wanted to build a wall to keep them out. Others say that immigrants bring benefits to this country and that the US should provide paths to citizenship. Time permitting, we could go over the empirical evidence and the many heated opinions on the topic.

*Political Polarization in the United States.* Is democracy in the United States under attack? Was Jan 6 a one-time fluke or a sign of the future? Can the two major parties work together on anything? Is the legitimacy of elections being undermined? There have been many such concerns raised over the last few years and we might go over some of them.

*Other topics we might also cover, at least briefly,* include racial identity (is race even a meaningful concept?); global warming; other aspects of the criminal justice system (e.g. white collar crime; the fight over the death penalty).

*May 1. Final exam handed out.*

*May 10 (Friday) – Take Home Final due by 10 am.* You do not need to show up in class. I am not allowed to give incompletes and I only have a few days to get my grades in, so make sure you are done on time.

## **Key Dates**

March 4th – NO CLASS. TAKE HOME EXAM DUE BEFORE MIDNIGHT. If you keep up with the readings this should be plenty of time to finish the exam. But, if the due date is problematic because you have other exams and papers due at about the same time, contact me in advance and we can negotiate over an extension. If asked I will usually give a one or two day extension but you should contact me first.

March 7 – PAPER TOPICS ARE DUE.

March 27 – (Optional) Paper Drafts are due if you want me to offer comments.

April 10 – PAPERS DUE BEFORE MIDNIGHT.

WEEK OF APRIL 15<sup>TH</sup> – PAPER PRESENTATIONS

May 1 – Take home final handed out

May 10 (Friday) – Take home finals are due by 10 am (but are welcome sooner).