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## **SOC 597 01W: Special Topics: Urban Inequality and HBO's The Wire**

COURSE SYLLABUS: Summer 1 2024 (6/3 through 7/3)

### **INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION**

Instructor: (Name & Title) Dr. Nicole Farris, Associate Professor  
Office Location: Ferguson 218  
Office Hours: By appointment  
Office Fax: 903-886-5330  
University Email Address: Nicole.Farris@tamuc.edu  
Preferred Form of Communication: **Email**  
Communication Response Time: **24-48 Hours**

### **COURSE INFORMATION**

Materials – Textbooks, Readings, Supplementary Readings

#### **Textbook(s) Required:**

*Hays, Sharon. 2004. Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform. Oxford University Press. ISBN-10: 0195176014 ISBN-13: 978-0195176018*

*Desmond, Matthew. 2023. Poverty, By America. Penguin Random House. ISBN: 9780593239919*

*Venkatesh, Sudhir. 2008. Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets. Penguin Books. ISBN 10: 014311493X ISBN 13: 9780143114932*

*The syllabus/schedule are subject to change.*

### **Other Required:**

*Access to “The Wire” Season 4. A DVD Copy will be available at Velma K. Waters Library on Reserve; other options are as follows:*

*HBO Max (9.99/month)*

*Prime Video (1.99/episode)*

*Apple TV (1.99/episode)*

*Or purchase the DVD series (4.50 to 19.00 depending on retailer)*

Software Required Access to course website- you need to have an active email username and password. I will post your grades to the course website, as well as your powerpoints, assignments, and supplemental articles that I see fit to include in lecture.

Optional Texts and/or Materials None

### **Course Description**

Urban inequality has consistently been an area of interest in Urban Sociology, which studies life and human interaction in metropolitan areas. Although themes of opportunity and prosperity dominate American culture, the United States is more unequal than any other developed country. This course will explore poverty and inequality in the contemporary United States using the television show “The Wire” to depict urban inequalities, specifically. We will investigate questions relating both to how much poverty and inequality there is and how particular individuals end up in various positions in the distribution of earnings, income and wealth. This course also seeks to promote an empathetic understanding, using a sociological perspective, that challenges the simple dichotomy between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, exposing the structural factors, policies, and racial discrimination that helped create this problem.

This course addresses a primary objective of both the department and the university in an innovative and compelling way. The new course will be both appealing to students and suited to promoting a sociological understanding of race and poverty in urban environments. To accomplish this goal the course creates a syllabus that integrates the HBO show “The Wire” with accessible and rigorous academic texts.

This course provides a unique way to draw students into serious discussions of the role race plays in contemporary U.S. society. Dr. William Julius Wilson- a well known Harvard professor and one of the most prominent voices in the field of African American Studies- has developed a similar course. Regarding the television show, Dr. Wilson stated that:

“The Wire’s exploration of sociological themes is truly exceptional. Indeed I do not hesitate to say that it has done more to enhance our understandings of the challenges of urban life and urban inequality than any other media event or scholarly publication, including studies by social scientists... The wire shows that individuals’ decisions and behavior are often shaped by- and

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indeed limited by- social, political, and economic forces beyond their control.” – Harvard University Seminar about the Wire, April 2008

More and more elite colleges and universities are incorporating “The Wire” in their course offerings.

This course offers a sophisticated depiction of systemic urban inequality that restricts the lives of the urban poor. The readings will feature academic books and research articles that describe and analyze the politics and life experiences in inner-city neighborhoods.

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

### **Minimal Technical Skills Needed**

**Using the learning management system, using Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, using presentation and graphics programs, etc.**

### **Instructional Methods**

**Main Course Meetings:** This course is entirely online, where the method of instruction will consist of a combination of lectures, discussions, and viewing of *The Wire*.

### **Student Responsibilities or Tips for Success in the Course**

A variety of journalists and media critics have applauded *The Wire* (and rightfully so); however, many people do not recognize its contribution to social science. Although the series is fictional, it offers a sophisticated depiction of systemic urban inequality that constrains the lives of the urban poor. Impressed by its treatment of these complex issues, instructors were compelled to develop a course drawing on *The Wire*'s portrayal of fundamental principles that have long been the concern of social scientists and policymakers concerned with social inequality.

Students in this seminar will watch, critique and discuss selected episodes of *The Wire* along with assigned readings on urban inequality that relate to these episodes. The assigned readings will feature academic books and research articles that describe and analyze life and experiences in inner-city neighborhoods, as well as the social, economic, political, and cultural factors that shape or influence these experiences.

To be clear, this course is not intended to teach students about the show, per se. Rather, I plan to use the show as a thread that integrates the range of topics that form the basis of a thorough

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understanding of urban inequality—with readings, class discussions and assignments that relate to the themes addressed in the various episodes.

**This television series contains mature themes, including but not limited to violence, drug use, strong language, and explicit content. Viewer discretion is advised, particularly for those sensitive to depictions of urban crime, social issues, and systemic inequalities. The show portrays realistic portrayals of life in inner-city Baltimore, which may include scenes of poverty, corruption, and interpersonal conflict. Viewer discretion is advised, and individuals are encouraged to engage with the material thoughtfully and responsibly.**

## GRADING

### COURSE GRADE DETERMINATION:

A- 180- 200 points

B- 160- 179 points

C- 140- 159 points

D- 120- 139 points

F- 119 points or below

There is always a chance that papers or grades get lost in transit. Please keep a record of your grades in case something unexpected should happen. Any student who is dissatisfied with his/her grades during this course is urged to discuss this with the instructor.

Assignment	Points
Reaction Paper 1	20
Reaction Paper 2	20
Reaction Paper 3	20
Reaction Paper 4	20
Discussion Participation	20
Final Take Home Essay	100
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>200</b>

Written work in the course will consist of the following:

1. Weekly, 2-3 page (double spaced) type written “reading responses” based on the week’s assignments and/or episodes of *The Wire*. The nature of these assignments will be explained further.
2. One take home essay based on the course readings, the themes raised in *The Wire*, and in class lectures and discussion. This essay will be typed and follow the format provided at the time of the assignment.

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3. Online discussion posts on relevant content areas.

## TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS

### LMS

All course sections offered by Texas A&M University-Commerce have a corresponding course shell in the myLeo Online Learning Management System (LMS). Below are technical requirements

LMS Requirements:

<https://community.brightspace.com/s/article/Brightspace-Platform-Requirements>

LMS Browser Support:

[https://documentation.brightspace.com/EN/brightspace/requirements/all/browser\\_support.htm](https://documentation.brightspace.com/EN/brightspace/requirements/all/browser_support.htm)

YouSeeU Virtual Classroom Requirements:

<https://support.youseeu.com/hc/en-us/articles/115007031107-Basic-System-Requirements>

## ACCESS AND NAVIGATION

You will need your campus-wide ID (CWID) and password to log into the course. If you do not know your CWID or have forgotten your password, contact the Center for IT Excellence (CITE) at 903.468.6000 or [helpdesk@tamuc.edu](mailto:helpdesk@tamuc.edu).

**Note:** Personal computer and internet connection problems do not excuse the requirement to complete all course work in a timely and satisfactory manner. Each student needs to have a backup method to deal with these inevitable problems. These methods might include the availability of a backup PC at home or work, the temporary use of a computer at a friend's home, the local library, office service companies, Starbucks, a TAMUC campus open computer lab, etc.

## COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT

If you have any questions or are having difficulties with the course material, please contact your Instructor.

### Technical Support

If you are having technical difficulty with any part of Brightspace, please contact Brightspace Technical Support at 1-877-325-7778. Other support options can be found here:

<https://community.brightspace.com/support/s/contactsupport>

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## Interaction with Instructor Statement

I prefer communication via email. I rarely answer my office phone and am much more likely to respond to email. I will respond to email within 24 to 48 hours, between normal business hours of 8am to 5pm. Please be sure that when you email me, you use a proper greeting (Dr. Farris, Professor Farris, Instructor Farris), an email body, and an appropriate closing. You should never send an email with just an attachment and no email body. Be sure you have an appropriate and informative subject line and include the name and section of the course you are enrolled in. See the attached page for some email expectations that would serve you well in all future communication with any professors or potential employers.

## COURSE AND UNIVERSITY PROCEDURES/POLICIES

### Course Specific Procedures/Policies

**Students are expected to hand in assignments on time.** However, late assignments (with the exception of discussions) will be accepted up to one week after they are due, and will incur a 10% penalty.

### Syllabus Change Policy

The syllabus is a guide. Circumstances and events, such as student progress, may make it necessary for the instructor to modify the syllabus during the semester. Any changes made to the syllabus will be announced in advance.

### University Specific Procedures

#### Student Conduct

All students enrolled at the University shall follow the tenets of common decency and acceptable behavior conducive to a positive learning environment. The Code of Student Conduct is described in detail in the [Student Guidebook](#).

<http://www.tamuc.edu/Admissions/oneStopShop/undergraduateAdmissions/studentGuidebook.aspx>

Students should also consult the Rules of Netiquette for more information regarding how to interact with students in an online forum: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/netiquette>

#### TAMUC Attendance

For more information about the attendance policy please visit the [Attendance](#) webpage and [Procedure 13.99.99.R0.01](#).

<http://www.tamuc.edu/admissions/registrar/generalInformation/attendance.aspx>

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<http://www.tamuc.edu/aboutUs/policiesProceduresStandardsStatements/rulesProcedures/13students/academic/13.99.99.R0.01.pdf>

### **Academic Integrity**

Students at Texas A&M University-Commerce are expected to maintain high standards of integrity and honesty in all of their scholastic work. For more details and the definition of academic dishonesty see the following procedures:

[Undergraduate Academic Dishonesty 13.99.99.R0.03](#)

<http://www.tamuc.edu/aboutUs/policiesProceduresStandardsStatements/rulesProcedures/13students/undergraduates/13.99.99.R0.03UndergraduateAcademicDishonesty.pdf>

[Graduate Student Academic Dishonesty 13.99.99.R0.10](#)

<http://www.tamuc.edu/aboutUs/policiesProceduresStandardsStatements/rulesProcedures/13students/graduate/13.99.99.R0.10GraduateStudentAcademicDishonesty.pdf>

### **Students with Disabilities-- ADA Statement**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please contact:

#### **Office of Student Disability Resources and Services**

Texas A&M University-Commerce

Gege Library- Room 162

Phone (903) 886-5150 or (903) 886-5835

Fax (903) 468-8148

Email: [studentdisabilityservices@tamuc.edu](mailto:studentdisabilityservices@tamuc.edu)

Website: [Office of Student Disability Resources and Services](#)

<http://www.tamuc.edu/campusLife/campusServices/studentDisabilityResourcesAndServices/>

### **Nondiscrimination Notice**

Texas A&M University-Commerce will comply in the classroom, and in online courses, with all federal and state laws prohibiting discrimination and related retaliation on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, age, genetic information or veteran status. Further, an environment free from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression will be maintained.

### **Campus Concealed Carry Statement**

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Texas Senate Bill - 11 (Government Code 411.2031, et al.) authorizes the carrying of a concealed handgun in Texas A&M University-Commerce buildings only by persons who have been issued and are in possession of a Texas License to Carry a Handgun. Qualified law enforcement officers or those who are otherwise authorized to carry a concealed handgun in the State of Texas are also permitted to do so. Pursuant to Penal Code (PC) 46.035 and A&M-Commerce Rule 34.06.02.R1, license holders may not carry a concealed handgun in restricted locations.

For a list of locations, please refer to the [Carrying Concealed Handguns On Campus](#) document and/or consult your event organizer.

Web url:

<http://www.tamuc.edu/aboutUs/policiesProceduresStandardsStatements/rulesProcedures/34SafetyOfEmployeesAndStudents/34.06.02.R1.pdf>

Pursuant to PC 46.035, the open carrying of handguns is prohibited on all A&M-Commerce campuses. Report violations to the University Police Department at 903-886-5868 or 9-1-1.

### **Counseling Center Services**

**The Counseling Center at A&M-Commerce, located in the Halladay Building, Room 203, offers counseling services, educational programming, and connection to community resources for students. Students have 24/7 access to the Counseling Center's crisis assessment services by calling 903-886-5145. For more information regarding Counseling Center events and confidential services, please visit [www.tamuc.edu/counsel](http://www.tamuc.edu/counsel)**

### **COURSE OUTLINE / CALENDAR**

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6/3

**Week 1: Introduction to Urban Inequalities Structural Explanations, Part I**

**Definitions of Poverty and Current Statistics**

**Coverage of Poverty, both in the news and entertainment media**

**Labor Markets**

*Readings: Desmond, Chapters 1-5 (p. 3-103)*

**Watch: The Wire Episodes “Boys of Summer” “Soft Eyes”**

**Due: Thursday 6/6** by 11:59pm: Discussion Question Response; **Sunday 6/9** by 11:59pm: Reaction Paper #1, critical response to “The Wire” (be sure to incorporate readings).

**6/10**

**Week 2: Structural Explanations, Part II and Cultural Explanations**

**Residential Segregation (i.e. neighborhoods), Culture of Poverty, Social Isolation Theory**

Readings: *Desmond Chapter 6-End*

*Begin Flat Broke With Children*

*Massey and Denton, American Apartheid (excerpt)*

*Charles, "Neighborhood Racial-Composition Preferences"*

*Small et. Al, "Reconsidering Culture and Poverty"*

**Watch: The Wire Episodes "Home Rooms" "Refugees" "Alliances"**

Due **Thursday 6/13** by 11:59pm: DQ Response; Due **Sunday 6/16** by 11:59pm Reaction Paper #2, analysis of the so-called "culture vs. structure" debate.

**6/17**

**Week 3: Welfare, Education and Health**

Readings: *Hays, Flat Broke with Children*

*Edin and Lein: Making Ends Meet*

*Abraham: Mama Might Be Better off Dead*

“Enough to Make You Sick?” (2003 NY TIMES)

“A Night in the ER: Adrenaline, Chaos and Very long waits” (2011, LA Times County)

Activity: Family budget and constructing welfare policy

**Watch: The Wire Episodes “Margin of Error” “Unto Others” “Corner Boys”**

Due **Thursday 6/20** by 11:59pm: DQ Response; Due **Sunday 6/23** by 11:59PM: Reaction Paper #3 on welfare, education and health in urban environments.

**6/24**

**Week 4: Crime, Violence and Law Enforcement**

Readings: *Venkatesh Chapter 1-5*

*Pager, “The Mark of a Criminal Record”*

**Watch: The Wire Episodes “Know Your Place” “Misgivings” “A New Day”**

Due **Thursday 6/27** by 11:59pm: DQ Response; Due **Sunday 6/30** by 11:59pm: Reaction Paper #4 Crime, Violence, Law Enforcement

**Week 5 (Short Week): Conclusions/Revisiting course themes**

Comparisons with other countries

Future policy directions

*Readings: Finish Venkatesh*

*Smeeding, "Poor People in Rich Nations"*

*"It's better to be poor in Norway than in the US"*

**Watch: The Wire Episodes "That's Got His Own" "Final Grades"**

Due **Wednesday 7/3** by 11:59pm through D2L-  
Discussion Question Response; Final Essay:  
Compendium, Future Directions of urban inequality,  
suggestions for policy.