

Sociology 391 – Social Problems
The University of Montana
MWF 9:00-9:50 EDUC Rm 214

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Email is our best contact method

Office: SS 321

Office Hours: MWF 10:00-10:45

And by appointment (zoom or in person)

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course examines the social problems process primarily from a constructionist perspective. The emphasis is on developing sociological mindfulness by analyzing stages of the social problems process and several particular social problems. Topics include problems like inequality, racism, the environment, immigration, alcohol and drugs, COVID 19, violence, poverty, and crime.

INTRODUCTION: As I hope to establish a temporary learning community this semester I'll disclose some personal information that may encourage this process. Donna, and I moved from Iowa to Missoula a year ago after she accepted a position as Senior International Officer for UM. I have been a sociology professor for over twenty years and feel very fortunate to be part of this noble profession as learning and teaching inspire me and, hopefully others to contribute to a healthy society. I've been married to Donna for more than half my life and we have two sons, Drew, who is 26 and Brook who is 24. I am both athletic and musical so I do a lot of exercising of various sorts (especially biking and hiking these days). I love being outside and start to feel a little claustrophobic when stuck inside for more than a few hours. Nearly every summer for the past 15 years I spend a week in the boundary waters canoe area wilderness in Northeastern Minnesota on the Canadian border where there are no roads and no power so travel is by canoe and on foot. We just drove 3000 miles to make that happen this summer between August 1 and August 11. Live music inspires me and the Codfish Hollow Barn near Maquoketa, Iowa and Three Springs Barn near Lancaster, Wisconsin are two of my favorite venues. As we are new to Missoula we still haven't been to the Kettlehouse amphitheater due to COVID 19. I read about 30 books per year and recently enjoyed *There, There, Fools Crow, The Overstory, This is How it always is, Born to Run, Where the Crawdads Sing, The Hate U Give, The Big Burn, Mostly Dead Things, and Little Fires Everywhere.*

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES: I expect a lot from myself and from each of you as we take on the challenge of studying social problems. I firmly believe that we can enjoy the learning process even when examining really difficult or un-enjoyable topics.

Students successfully completing this course will:

1. think critically about social problems, their causes, and their solutions.
2. understand current attitudes, opinions, and legislation related to social problems.
3. apply sociological theory to social problems.
4. find and interpret qualitative and quantitative information about social problems.
5. place local, regional, and national social problems in global context.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Best, Joel. *Social Problems. Third Edition.* 2017. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.

Silver, Ira. *Seeing Social Problems: The Hidden Stories Behind Contemporary Issues.* 2020. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

OTHER IMPORTANT STUFF:

Most importantly, please be fully present! *Participation* entails much more than mere physical presence. To maximize your learning and for the good of this learning community focus on social problems while in the classroom and make examining social problems outside the classroom a priority. During class sessions I will continually seek your perspectives about causes, consequences, perceptions about and solutions to social problems. I will ask for your input frequently...*these questions are not rhetorical.* I will also ask you to identify evidence and consider various interpretations. I will ask you to discuss sociological questions connected to theory, research, socialization, norms, values, and social structures. We will consider questions like the following: Is our system of criminal justice racist? Is the earth that we live on going to survive? Can we and should we decrease poverty? Is structural discrimination really a problem? These are crucial questions for all of us to face and ultimately identify some steps toward solutions to social problems. We must carefully explore information and perceptions about social problems in society in order to promote positive social change.

Attendance

Be here. See above

**Communication**

Though many of us text often, use facetime or other apps, and use some form of social media, the primary mode of communication outside of class for this course is email. I will regularly use the Moodle email function to communicate important information about the class schedule, class content, assignments or expectations. Unless I am off the grid I will respond to your email within 24 hours during the week. On weekends I may not respond to messages until Sunday evening. I will try to control my eye roll if I have answered the question in class or it is in the syllabus. Do your best to be a responsible adult as you manage this unusual semester.

You should maintain a university email account and check it regularly for class announcements. You are responsible for all information contained in class announcements that I send via email or post on Moodle.

Please contact me via email with questions or comments about the course and/or your performance in the course. I am available for zoom calls during office hours but also at other times if you are not available during my posted office hours.

When emailing me (and other UM faculty), always:

- Use your UM email account
- University policy prohibits faculty and staff both from responding to emails sent from students' personal, non-UM email accounts and from sharing grade information via email
- Include "SOC1 391" or "Social Problems" in the subject line of your email
- Sign your full name (first and last)

Devices

Don't use them...unless they are enhancing your learning and not distracting others. Seriously, don't check messages and/or social media during class it hinders your learning and disrespects others including me. Really! Don't check 'em! For real! You may use your computer to take notes and sometimes I'll ask you to search for info on a device but other than that our cool devices tend to hinder learning.

Academic Honesty

Do not cheat. The majority of students do honest work. To the few students who do not adhere to such ideals, I want to stress that cheating (getting unauthorized help on a quiz, test, or assignment) and plagiarism (submitting work as your own that is someone else's) in any form are unacceptable and will not be tolerated. The institution will hold students accountable for academic dishonesty (full policy available in the student handbook). Please ask if you have questions about plagiarism or other forms of cheating. Cheating really hurts you in the long run. Just dig in and do your work and you will get a lot out of this class. Bottom line- don't cheat. It's stupid and it will not pay off in the long run.

University Policy

You must practice academic honesty in this course. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code, which is available for review online (<http://www.umt.edu/student-affairs/dean-of-students/default.php>).

Accessibility

The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction through collaboration between students with disabilities, instructors, and Disability Services for Students (DSS). If you think that you may have a disability that adversely affects your academic performance, and you have not already registered with DSS, please contact them in Lommasson Center 154 or (406) 243-2243. I will work with you and Disability Services to provide an appropriate modification.

Preferences

My pronouns are he, him, and his and I acknowledge, affirm and respect all gender expressions and identities. Please share your pronouns with me and the class as you are comfortable.

If you prefer a different name than the name on the class roster, please let me know so that I can call you by that name.

UM's Cultural Leave Policy

The new cultural and ceremonial leave policy allows excused absences for cultural, religious, and ceremonial purposes. To receive an authorized absence for a cultural,

religious, or ceremonial event, the student or their advisor must submit a formal written request to the instructor. The request must include a brief description (with inclusive dates) of the cultural event or ceremony, and a brief statement about the importance of the student's attendance or participation. Authorization for the absence is subject to approval by the instructor; students may appeal the instructor's decision to the Department Chair, Dean, or Provost. The excused absence or leave may not exceed five academic calendar days (not including weekends or holidays). Students who take excused leaves are responsible for completion or make-up of assignments, at the instructor's discretion. Students can find more information about the University of Montana's cultural leave policy here: <https://catalog.umt.edu/academics/policies-procedures/>.

Accommodations

If you have a condition that may have some impact on your work in this class and for which you may require accommodations, please contact me ASAP. All DSS requests accompanied by a letter for accommodation will be honored.

Late Work

We begin this semester with the hope of completing it in-person therefore all quizzes will be taken in class on the assigned day unless accommodations are made prior to the quiz. Given our unusual times, however, I will consider make-up quizzes on an individual basis and it is your responsibility to contact me ASAP should the need arise.

Scores for **journals** and **papers** decrease 10 points for each day they are late.

Enjoy the Frustration. The study of social problems requires the examination of controversial material. This is a good thing! True learning can only take place if we are willing to think about and critically explore our own beliefs, opinions, and lives. I ask that you take full advantage of the times that you are disquieted as they are a real educational opportunity! Ask questions, respectfully challenge me and your colleagues, and attempt to distinguish between facts and opinion (your own and others'). Remember that civil discourse compels us to disagree with the idea without making it personal. It may be worth reminding yourself regularly that we are studying social problems so it should not surprise you that some of this is unpleasant.

Please contact me if you have any questions, concerns, or particular considerations about any of the course requirements. Do not wait until you are completely overwhelmed.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS in BRIEF:

- 1) **Read**, consider, understand, and utilize material in our books.
- 2) Be **fully present** and **engage** with social problems, one another, and me **every class meeting and virtually**. Participation scores are based on cues that suggest you are present and engaged, physically and mentally.
- 3) Complete all **quizzes** based on assigned readings (6 quizzes worth 25 points each but drop the lowest score).

- 4) Write a **Social Problems Journal**. The journal requires frequent reflective writing and will be collected and graded 3 times throughout the semester. I will provide some mandatory prompts but most of the journal topics are up to you- that is part of the assignment. Pay attention to current events and determine issues that measure up as social problems then write in a thoughtful, blog style fashion that demonstrates critical thinking and an awareness of multiple perspectives. You must complete a minimum of 6 new journal entries each time the journal is submitted which comes to about two entries per week. Entries should be approximately 200-500 words.
- 5) Create a **Priority Problems Paper** by ranking your top 5 social problems in order of their current significance. Justify your rankings using our Social Problems texts, and additional sources if you wish. Your final paper should be 1500-3000 words.
- 6) Finish with a **Final**. Rather than completing a final exam you will identify and share some of your best blog-worthy journal entries during this interactive session.

EARNING YOUR GRADE:

Grading is based on individual accumulation of points throughout the entire semester.

		<u>Points</u>
Quizzes	25 points x 5	125
Social Problems Journal	50 points x 3	150
Priority Problems Paper		70
Participation		50
Final		30
Total		425

You should regularly check Moodle to be sure that all scores are recorded properly. At any point of the semester simply divide your total by the total to date to calculate your letter grade. There should not be any surprises about midterm or final grades.

GRADING SCALE

A	93-100%	A-	90-92.9%	B+	87-89.9%
B	83-86.9%	B-	80-82.9%	C+	77-79.9%
C	73-76.9%	C-	70-72.9%	D+	67-69.9%
D	63-66.9%	D-	60-62.9%	F	0-59.9%

Best= *Social Problems 3rd edition*

Silver= *Seeing Social Problems*

COURSE SCHEDULE:

wk	Day	Date	Theme	Assignments & Notices	Quizzes and Journals
1					
	W	8/19	<i>First day of class!</i>	<i>Study syllabus!</i>	Understand this entire syllabus- <i>BEFORE</i> our Friday class
	F	8/21	Social Problems	<i>Best- Ch 1</i>	
2	M	8/24	Soc Prob Process	<i>Best -Ch 1</i>	
	W	8/26	Curiosity	<i>Silver- Ch 1</i>	
	F	8/28	Claims	<i>Best -Ch 2</i>	
3	M	8/31	Am. Dream	<i>Best -Ch 2</i>	
	W	9/2	Activists	<i>Best -Ch 3</i>	
	F	9/4			Quiz 1
4	M	9/7	No Class		
	W	9/9	Money	<i>Best -Ch 3</i>	
	F	9/11	Opportunity	<i>Silver- Ch 2</i>	
5	M	9/14	Experts	<i>Best -Ch 4</i>	
	W	9/16	Forecasting	<i>Best -Ch 4</i>	
	F	9/18			Quiz 2
6	M	9/21			Social Problems Journal Part 1
	W	9/23	Media	<i>Best -Ch 5</i>	
	F	9/25	More Media	<i>Best -Ch 5</i>	
7	M	9/28	I Can't Breath	<i>Silver- Ch 3</i>	
	W	9/30	Race and Policing	<i>Silver- Ch 3</i>	
	F	10/2			Quiz 3
8	M	10/5	Public Reaction	<i>Best -Ch 6</i>	
	W	10/7	Epidemics	<i>Best -Ch 6</i>	
	F	10/9	Drugs and Race	<i>Silver- Ch 4</i>	
9	M	10/12			Social Problems Journal Part 2
	W	10/14	Cheating	<i>Silver- Ch 7</i>	
	F	10/16			Quiz 4
10	M	10/19	Policymaking	<i>Best- Ch 7</i>	
	W	10/21	Mass Shootings	<i>Silver- Ch 8</i>	
	F	10/23	#MeToo	<i>Silver- Ch 9</i>	
11	M	10/26	Social Probs Work	<i>Best- Ch 8</i>	
	W	10/28	Cruelty to Animals	<i>Silver- Ch 10</i>	
	F	10/30			Quiz 5
12	M	11/2	Policy Outcomes	<i>Best- Ch 9</i>	
	W	11/4	Cyberbullying	<i>Silver- Ch 12</i>	
	F	11/6	Constructionist	<i>Best- Ch 11</i>	
13	M	11/9			Social Problems Journal Part 3
	W	11/11	No Class	<i>Veteran's Day</i>	
	F	11/13			Quiz 6

14	M	11/16	Mental Illness	<i>Silver- Ch 13</i>	
	W	11/18	Seeing Soc Probs	<i>Silver- Ch 14</i>	
15	T	11/24	Final 8:00-10:00 a.m. (morning!)	Priority Problems Paper	Submit Priority Problems Paper on Moodle before 8:00 a.m.
			Prepare to share	themes from your journal and your	Priority Problems Paper

COURSE REQUIREMENTS- EXPANDED EXPLANATIONS:

Best Chapters

Everyone reads every assigned chapter of Best. These chapters present and thoroughly describe the social problems process. I strongly encourage you to mark up your book! Make notes in the margins, identify important statements, circle good quotes and write your own comments or questions about them, reread sections or statements. If you are renting or working from a digital version then find creative ways to make notes that will help you understand and remember the framework.

Silver Chapters

This text is different from the other in that it takes a case study approach and examines several important social problems quite comprehensively. The emphasis of this text is on developing an ability to see and understand multiple perspectives. That skill will help you in all sorts of ways beyond the scope of this course. This text is a guide to developing a critical sociological understanding of social problems so dig in and own this course.

Quizzes

Quizzes provide an opportunity for you to communicate your understanding of concepts and consider multiple factors related to social problems. Each quiz will include significant writing and is worth 25 points. The assigned readings will provide the majority of the material for the quizzes but questions from discussion or supplemental material may also be included.

Social Problems Journal

The purpose of this journal, which will continue throughout the semester and be collected three times for evaluation, is to encourage you to recognize social problems and to think sociologically about those problems and the social problems process. You should learn to critically examine ideas related to social problems that you read about, discuss in class, or learn about in other ways like social media. You should examine evidence and consider whether issues are primarily personal or social based not on feelings but on data. More simply, the purpose of this journal is to practice sociological mindfulness.

Sometimes I will provide prompts for you to journal about and other times selecting a topic is part of the journal assignment. Pace yourself to complete an average of two

journal entries each week. Your entries may be informal and written in the first person. Still, they must be thoughtful and substantive.

You should include in your journal information from our texts but you should also consider relevant topics related to particular issues evident in our society as well as social problems more generally. For example, you could describe something making the rounds on social media (a meme, a blog, something that goes viral, perspectives on significant events, etc.) or more traditional sources of public information like newspapers, magazines, or TV. These sources, in a variety of ways, illuminate social problems and reactions to them. Some of the topics you choose to write about may carry over from class (you should look up some additional material but it may be reasonable to simply state that the topic we were discussing in class needs more analysis and go from there). You may journal about the same topic several times during the semester as long as you are adding new information and discussing new ideas in subsequent journal entries. Journal entries may vary in length but should usually be approximately 200-500 words. You should be able to write a good journal entry in one sitting and need not spend too much time worrying about formal rules of writing (though of course sloppy writing is evidence of sloppy thinking and if I really cannot decipher your thoughts that is a large problem- a personal problem not a social problem!).

You are free to create your own format for the journal but each entry must include the following:

- Date that you write the journal entry (don't get behind and write several entries on the same day as that's not an optimal learning strategy ... and it often shows up in the writing even if the dates are fabricated).
- A citation or information about or a link to any source that you refer to (e.g., date, title, author, publication, organization)

Possible topics are extensive as they could include items about football, corporate sexism, school shootings, body image, celebrity privacy, domestic violence, racism, unequal education, health care, over population, crime, poverty, the 1%, war, climate change, drugs, and many, many more topics.

Journals are submitted three times throughout the semester. You may keep working on one document but clearly and carefully date and label your entries.

The first journal due date is **Monday, September 21st (before class)**. Your journal must have at least 6 entries by this deadline.

The second journal due date is **Monday, October 12th** and must minimally include an additional 6 entries. Please clearly mark the end of part one and the beginning of part two.

The third journal due date is **Monday, November 9th**. Your journal must have at least 6 new entries clearly marked.

Priority Problems Paper
Due November 24th 8:00 a.m.

Your paper must describe or define each social problem that you select for your top 5. Explain how it is a social problem worthy of concerted attention and suggest some steps toward addressing the problem. You should explain both the perceptions and realities related to your social problem as you explore potential solutions. Your paper must cite our texts and any additional sources you employ. Popular sources like magazines, blogs, memes, infographs, cartoons, and youtube are allowed for this paper because the general public often gets its information about social problems from all sorts of weak sources. Your paper should be between 1500-3000 words.

Final: Blog-Worthy Journal Entries

For the final you will identify some of your best journal entries, topics, or themes. When we meet you tell us some of what you wrote and why it is awesome! You do not read your entries- you tell us about what made them your best entries and perhaps why it feels like there is even more to say about social problems now that the semester is done.

Disclaimer: I reserve the right to modify this syllabus at any time and in any way. Changes will be announced in class and posted on Moodle.