

## **(Analysis of) Social Problems**

**Semester 2, 2025**

**Time:** Wednesday 16:00–19:00

**Venue:** #211, College of Social Sciences

**Lecturer:** Pildoo Sung, Assistant Professor of Sociology

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**Office:** #203, College of Social Sciences

**Office hours:** By appointment

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### **Course Description**

This course explores social problems through sociological lenses. The structural and sociocultural causes and consequences of contemporary social problems are addressed. Topics include income and educational inequality, unemployment, gender and racial disparities, and modern challenges such as population aging, environmental crises, crime, and the digital divide. While the theories and concepts are broadly applicable, students are encouraged to relate them to their own contexts to deepen comparative understanding of social problems across societies and cultures.

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### **Learning Objectives**

This is a participatory course in which students actively share their thoughts, lead discussions, and complete in-class group assignments. The goal is to develop students' skills as sociologists who can independently analyze and critique social problems. Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Critically analyze how social problems are socially constructed and systematically explain their causes and consequences by applying major sociological theories (Structural Functionalism, Conflict Theory, Symbolic Interactionism).
  - Find, summarize, and critically evaluate academic research related to a specific social problem, assessing the arguments, evidence, and implications of each study.
  - Logically articulate and present alternative policies or practical solutions to address social problems, based on sociological knowledge and data.
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## Course Format

This course employs a variety of instructional methods. Each class will consist of a weekly posting, lecture, group presentation, and in-class group assignment, which will foster students' active engagement and critical thinking. Note that these components will not always follow the order listed.

### 1. Weekly Discussion Memos

- Students post two short paragraphs weekly. The first introduces a social problem relevant to the week's topic from the student's sociocultural context (home country or personal experience). The second proposes a feasible, actionable solution.
- For example, Chinese students may introduce a problem and solution in the Chinese context, whereas Korean students discuss the same in the Korean context. International students can connect the weekly topic to their home settings.
- Length: At least five sentences per paragraph (~100–150 words each; ~200–300 words total).
- Submission: Post to LMS Discussions for Weeks 3–5 and 7–15 (12 postings total).
- Deadline: Tuesdays, 11:59 p.m. (KST).

### 2. Lecture (≈ 1 hour)

The weekly lecture will:

- Critically introduce the background of the week's focal problem.
- Explore actionable ways to address the problem.
- Highlight and discuss themes from students' online discussion posts.

### 3. Group Presentations

- Group presentations begin in Week 3. Students will be assigned to lead one session (in groups) and prepare a 30-minute presentation on a contemporary social problem relevant to the week's topic. The schedule will be arranged during Week 2. Students are strongly encouraged to begin preparation early.
- Use PowerPoint and/or videos to enhance the presentation, ensuring clear communication of data and concepts while maintaining audience engagement. The presenting team must submit materials to LMS by 12:00 p.m. Tuesday. Be prepared to revise materials based on any feedback. All group members are expected to contribute to preparation and delivery.
- Each presentation must be grounded in systematic sociological reasoning and research. Include:
  - Identify a Social Problem: Select and describe a contemporary social problem (in Korea or another sociocultural context) that aligns with the weekly topic. Describe its current state, causes, impacts, and existing solutions (e.g., homelessness, sexuality, etc.).
  - Research: Identify at least two empirical research articles directly related to

your topic. These should be recent and from reputable academic sources. Present the background, main argument, and findings of each article.

- Analysis: Discuss how the findings advance understanding and shape responses to the problem; evaluate strengths and limitations of the findings, methods, and arguments; and state the principal policy implications.
- Class Discussion: Facilitate discussion with thought-provoking questions to encourage participation and reflection among peers.

#### 4. In-Class Group Assignments and Sharing

- These activities are designed for students to share and build knowledge with peers, deepen understanding of the subject matter, and develop informed answers as a team.
- Students should read assigned textbook chapters before class. ICA materials will be uploaded each week before class.
- After the group presentations, groups will have sufficient time to discuss and prepare answers. In many cases there will be no single correct answer.
- After the in-class work, groups will share takeaways. The instructor will offer a brief debriefing highlighting key themes and ideas to carry forward.

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#### Textbook

*Understanding Social Problems* (11th ed.) by Linda A. Mooney et al.

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#### Assessment

| Component                    | Weight | Due Date                                          |
|------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Attendance and Participation | 10%    | Throughout the semester                           |
| Weekly Discussion Memos      | 30%    | Weekly (Tuesdays, 11:59 p.m.)                     |
| Group Presentations          | 30%    | Assigned week (materials due Tuesday, 12:00 p.m.) |
| In-Class Assignments         | 30%    | Each class meeting                                |

#### Detailed Assessment Information

##### 1. Attendance (10 points)

- Regular attendance is required.
- Students are expected to complete readings before class and participate in discussions.
- One point is deducted per missed class (–0.5 for late arrival).
- More than five absences (beginning with the sixth) result in an automatic course

failure (F).

## **2. Weekly Discussion Memos (30 points)**

- Submit 12 weekly discussion memos (Weeks 3–5 and 7–15).
- Two points will be deducted for each missing post.
- Due by 11:59 p.m. Tuesday. Credit is given only for timely submissions; late postings receive no credit.
- The instructor may share selected insights during lecture.

## **3. Group Presentations (30 points)**

- Topic appropriateness and creativity (5 points)
- Background and problem statement clarity (5 points)
- Comprehensive literature review and critical analysis (10 points)
- Prospects and suggestions (5 points)
- Presentation quality and teamwork (5 points)

## **4. In-Class Assignments (30 points)**

- Complete 12 in-class assignments (Weeks 2; 3–5; 7–15).
- Best 10 grades will count toward the final grade.
- Each assignment is due by the end of class; collaboration in groups is encouraged.
- Three points will be deducted for each missing assignment among the required 10.

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## **Academic Integrity and Classroom Policies**

**Academic Honesty.** All work submitted must be your own. Plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty will result in a grade of zero for the assignment and may lead to further disciplinary action by the university.

**Use of AI Tools.** Be mindful when using ChatGPT or other generative AI tools. This course endorses the ethical, limited use of AI tools for basic editing (e.g., spell-checking or grammar corrections). Any use beyond basic editing—including translation or content generation—will be regarded as plagiarism for this course. Submissions must be original and not AI-generated. Any student found using AI tools for idea generation or to plagiarize will receive an F for the course. Be aware that AI-generated content can be identified.

**Classroom Conduct.** Be respectful of your classmates. This course engages with current and sometimes sensitive topics. Respectful debate and diverse opinions are encouraged; personal attacks or offensive remarks will not be tolerated. Keep in mind that your opinions and experiences may differ from those of your peers; all students must always show respect.

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## Tentative Schedule

The schedule and readings are tentative and may be adjusted with advance notice to better support learning outcomes.

| Week | Date  | Topic                                                 | Reading | Assignments     |
|------|-------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------|-----------------|
| 1    | 9/3   | Introduction & Defining Social Problems               | Ch. 1   |                 |
| 2    | 9/10  | Sociological Approaches: Theory & Social Construction | Ch. 1   | ICA1            |
| 3    | 9/17  | Economic Inequality and Poverty                       | Ch. 6   | DM & GP & ICA2  |
| 4    | 9/24  | Education and Social Inequality                       | Ch. 8   | DM & GP & ICA3  |
| 5    | 10/1  | Labor and Unemployment                                | Ch. 7   | DM & GP & ICA4  |
| 6    | 10/8  | No class (Holiday)                                    | -       |                 |
| 7    | 10/15 | Changes in Population Structure: Aging and Fertility  | Ch. 12  | DM & GP & ICA5  |
| 8    | 10/22 | The Changing Family: Diversity and Challenges         | Ch. 5   | DM & GP & ICA6  |
| 9    | 10/29 | Gender and Sexuality                                  | Ch. 10  | DM & GP & ICA7  |
| 10   | 11/5  | Race, Ethnicity, and Multicultural Society            | Ch. 9   | DM & GP         |
| 11   | 11/12 | Health Inequality                                     | Ch. 2   | DM & GP & ICA8  |
| 12   | 11/19 | Environmental Problems and Climate Change             | Ch. 13  | DM & GP & ICA9  |
| 13   | 11/26 | Crime, Deviance, and Drugs                            | Ch. 3/4 | DM & GP & ICA10 |
| 14   | 12/3  | The Future of Science, Technology, and Society        | Ch. 14  | DM & GP & ICA11 |
| 15   | 12/10 | Conflict, War, and Terrorism                          | Ch. 15  | DM & GP & ICA12 |
| 16   | 12/17 | Course Wrap-up & Feedback                             |         |                 |

*\*DM: Discussion Memo \*GP: Group Presentation \*ICA: In-class Assignment*

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## **Detailed (Yet Tentative) Weekly Topics**

### **Week 1: Introduction & Defining Social Problems (Ch. 1)**

- Key Question: What constitutes a “social problem”?
- Topics: Definition of social problems; objective vs. subjective elements; the sociological imagination.

### **Week 2: Sociological Approaches: Theory & Social Construction (Ch. 1)**

- Key Question: How do sociologists theoretically explain and study social problems?
- Topics: Structural Functionalism, Conflict Theory, Symbolic Interactionism; methodologies (surveys, interviews, field research); social construction of social problems.
- ICA 1: Applying the sociological imagination to real-world examples.

### **Week 3: Economic Inequality and Poverty (Ch. 6)**

- Key Question: Why is there a growing gap between the rich and the poor?
- Topics: Wealth vs. income inequality; absolute vs. relative poverty; the poverty line; social mobility; structural causes of inequality; welfare—myths and realities.
- ICA 2: Relative poverty; meritocracy; social mobility.

### **Week 4: Education and Social Inequality (Ch. 8)**

- Key Question: Does education reduce or reproduce social inequality?
- Topics: Cross-cultural variation in education; functions of education (manifest and latent); social patterns of achievement gaps; the role of private education (hagwon).
- ICA 3: Academic achievement; reproduction of inequality.

### **Week 5: Labor and Unemployment (Ch. 7)**

- Key Question: How is the nature of work changing in the 21st century?
- Topics: Unemployment vs. underemployment; automation; the gig economy; precarious labor; the decline of labor unions; work-life balance.
- ICA 4: Jobs and careers; gig industry; work-life balance.

### **Week 6: No Class (Holiday)**

### **Week 7: Changes in Population Structure: Aging and Fertility (Ch. 12)**

- Key Question: What are the social consequences of low fertility and an aging population?
- Topics: Population growth and aging; demographic transition theory; low fertility; family caregiving; the “sandwich generation.”
- ICA 5: Birth rate; population aging; the role of migration.

### **Week 8: The Changing Family: Diversity and Challenges (Ch. 5)**

- Key Question: How has the definition and structure of “the family” evolved?
- Topics: Defining family; nuclear vs. extended families; diverse family forms (single-parent, same-sex parent); divorce rates; domestic violence.
- ICA 6: Declining marriage; divorce; reproduction of family abuse.

#### Week 9: Gender and Sexuality (Ch. 10)

- Key Question: How do social norms shape our understandings and experiences of gender and sexuality?
- Topics: Sex vs. gender; global gender inequality (pay gap, occupational segregation); feminist theories; social construction of gender/sexuality; same-sex marriage; LGBTQ+ rights.
- ICA 7: Persistent gender inequality; gender stereotypes; sexuality as a spectrum.

#### Week 10: Race, Ethnicity, and Multicultural Society (Ch. 9)

- Key Question: How do race and ethnicity function as systems of social stratification?
- Topics: Race as a social construct; prejudice (attitudes) vs. discrimination (actions); individual vs. institutional discrimination; myths about immigration.
- Guest lecture.

#### Week 11: Health Inequality (Ch. 2)

- Key Question: Why are some social groups healthier than others?
- Topics: Social determinants of health; disparities by socioeconomic status and race; medicalization; mental-illness stigma; comparing healthcare systems.
- ICA 8: Sociological perspectives on health disparities; obesity; *karōshi*.

#### Week 12: Environmental Problems and Climate Change (Ch. 13)

- Key Question: How do social structures contribute to environmental problems and their solutions?
- Topics: Climate change; sustainable development; environmental justice (unequal distribution of environmental harms); environmental activism.
- ICA 9: Global responsibility; international agreements; alternative energy.

#### Week 13: Crime, Deviance, and Drugs (Chs. 3–4)

- Key Question: What makes an act “criminal,” and how should society respond?
- Topics: Sociological theories and social patterns of crime and drug use; the criminal justice system; drug policy debates (legalization vs. criminalization).
- ICA 10: Social construction of crime; drug legalization; alcohol consumption.

#### Week 14: The Future of Science, Technology, and Society (Ch. 14)

- Key Question: How is technology reshaping social interactions and institutions?

- Topics: Technological dualism; the digital divide; social implications of the internet, social media, and artificial intelligence (AI).
- ICA 11: AI and jobs; social science and AI.

#### Week 15: Conflict, War, and Terrorism (Ch. 15)

- Key Question: What are the social causes and consequences of organized violence?
- Topics: War in a changing world; collateral damage; the role of international organizations in conflict resolution.
- ICA 12: Military–industrial complex; refugee crises; military conscription.

#### Week 16: Course Wrap-up & Feedback

- Topics: Review major themes and theories; connect social problems through an intersectional lens; discuss course takeaways; final course evaluations.