

Syllabus SYG 2010 Social Problems (Online)

Fall 2025– Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies

Professor: Dr. Nelson Varas-Díaz (nvarasdi@fiu.edu)
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Course Description and Purpose (FIU Catalog):

This course examines social problems via local and global perspectives. It encourages "sociological imagination" by examining social problems through contemporary and historical lenses on topics such as health care, aging, social stratification, work/economy, crime/justice, family, and war.

Course's Conceptual and Practical Approach:

The course has a strong focus on both conceptual and practical tools to understand social problems from a global perspective. It addresses social problems through the lens of *extremity* – specifically, by focusing on issues that are interpreted as posing an existential threat to humanity or that push our understanding of who we are as individuals or collective entities. The course emphasizes how social problems laden by extremity can be interpreted using different perspectives, including traditional (i.e., academic research) and non-traditional (e.g., comedy, music, performance) strategies. Students will also be exposed to examples of how people tackle these existential problems through specific endeavors and strategies encompassing individual, communal, and policy actions. The course is divided into four overarching and interrelated units: 1) defining social problems, 2) the link between social problems and extremity, 3) strategies to see social problems, and 4) some options for addressing social problems.

Required Texts:

Social Problems: Continuity and Change (2019). Saylor Foundation. Open Textbook Library. Available at: <https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/141>

All other reading materials will be available on Canvas via links to the FIU library.

Office Hours: Dr. Varas-Díaz's online office hours will be Wednesdays from 9 AM - 4 PM. You must email him ahead of time (nvarasdi@fiu.edu) to ask for an appointment. Once confirmed, the meeting will take place via Zoom. Slots for Zoom meetings are assigned on a "first-come, first-served" basis.

Course-related PDFs and videos: All reading materials will be available on the Canvas site. Links will be provided to the video files in each module. Some films will need to be accessed via the Netflix platform.

Learning Objectives: At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify a variety of social problems, globally and locally, and discuss variables related to each.
- Define, summarize, and apply sociological concepts and theories to specific social problems.
- Summarize historical, political, and social variables underpinning contemporary social problems.
- Compare and contrast cross-disciplinary perspectives related to social problems.
- Demonstrate growing knowledge about social problems through a variety of applicative assignments.

Global Learning Objectives and Outcomes: This Global Learning course counts toward your FIU Global Learning graduation requirement. Therefore, the specific Global Learning Course Outcomes are as follows:

- **Global Awareness:** Students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of how local, national, transnational, and global perspectives come into play when defining social problems.
- **Global Perspective:** Students will be able to analyze from multiple perspectives how different local and global actors, via varied strategies, help us see and understand social problems locally and globally.
- **Global Engagement:** Students will be able to demonstrate willingness to engage with and conceptualize strategies to alleviate or solve social problems, considering local, national, transnational, and global variables that can help or hinder this process.

Active Learning Strategies: This course employs a variety of active learning strategies designed to engage students with the complex nature of social problems from local and global perspectives. Through case study analysis, online discussions, and interaction with multimedia resources, students will explore social issues critically and creatively. The course integrates documentary films to familiarize students with practitioners and scholars from diverse fields, offering real-world insights into contemporary challenges. Additionally, students will participate in experiential learning activities, such as analyzing social problems through creative mediums like music, photography, and performance. These strategies aim to foster an environment where students not only understand theoretical frameworks but also connect them to practical solutions, encouraging a deeper engagement with course material and its application in addressing real-world problems globally.

Assessments: Students' final grades will be calculated based on the following assignments. The dates for handing in these assignments will be announced via Canvas and in class. These include the following:

1. **Online Quizzes (20% of total grade)** – The professor will post quizzes for each module on the Canvas platform. Each quiz assesses the student's engagement with the assigned reading materials and the documentary films. (Global Learning Outcome - Awareness)

2. **Online video discussions (20% of total grade)** – The professor will post four open discussions throughout the course, one for each unit. Each discussion explores the students' comprehension of the unit's content, critical engagement with the topics addressed, and ability to apply the material to a personal analysis of social problems and their potential solutions from a global perspective. Discussions will be uploaded as video essays (5 minutes max) to the Canvas platform. (Global Learning Outcome - Perspective)
3. **Self-assessment (20% of total grade)** – On a 1.5-line spaced page, the students must share how they perceive their performance in the course and how their understanding of social problems has changed due to the course experience.
4. **Final Essay (40% of total grade)** – Students will complete an essay on a social problem of their choice. (Global Learning Outcome - Engagement) The essay should be between 10-15 pages (double-spaced, including references) and must address the following questions:
 - a. Why is the selected issue a social problem?
 - b. What are its linkages to the topic of extremity?
 - c. What are potential solutions being implemented throughout the world to address this problem?
 - d. What recommendations would the student propose to address this problem?
5. **Site Visit and Report on a Community-Based Organization (20 points of extra credit)** - For this extra credit assignment, students will visit a community-based organization (CBO) addressing a social problem (e.g., homelessness, food insecurity, mental health, environmental justice) and write a 2–3 page report reflecting on your experience. During your visit, they must observe the organization's environment, interact with staff, and learn about their mission, programs, and the challenges they face. The final report should include an introduction to the organization, a description of its mission and services, an analysis of its approach to addressing the social problem, and a personal reflection on how the visit enhanced your understanding of the issue. This assignment is designed to connect classroom discussions to real-world efforts in addressing social problems.

Grading scale - The following is the grading scale for the course.

100-92.6%	A
92.5-89.6%	A-
89.5-86.6%	B+
86.5-82.6%	B
82.5-80.0%	B-
79.9-77.0%	C+
76.9-70%	C
69.9-60%	D
< 59.9%	F

Other Considerations: Please consider the following issues as they can influence the course's progress and students' grades.

Canvas platform – All students must be registered in the Canvas platform. Reading materials, assignments, and group discussions will be available via Canvas. Students are encouraged to check the Canvas platform three times per week.

Netiquette guidelines - Netiquette is a set of rules for behaving properly online. Your professor wishes to foster a safe online learning environment. Therefore, all opinions and experiences, no matter how different or controversial they may be perceived, must be respected in the tolerant spirit of the academic environment. Students are encouraged to comment, question, or criticize an idea but may not disrespect others. A sensitive, polite, and respectful course community must be built.

Timeliness – All assignments have due dates. The overall score of the assignment will be lowered by 10% for each day of delay. If you have a valid situation (health-related or otherwise) that seriously affects your performance, you should email the professor right away before the due date to help you meet your obligations.

Style and format of the final written assignment – All written assignments must be in the format and style used by the Chicago Manual of Style. Use MS Word, double-spaced with 1-inch top, bottom, and side margins. Use Times Roman 12-point font. Do not use footnotes. Single-space the "References Cited" section, which should immediately follow the text. Do not use a separate cover page. Place the topic of the paper, student name, and date single-spaced on top of the first page. The name should appear on the top right of each page. Bottom center page numbers. All written assignments will be turned in as electronic versions via Canvas. Feedback will be provided to the student via Canvas.

Notes on academic integrity – The faculty of the School of International and Public Affairs believes that the conduct of a student registered or taking courses in the school should be consistent with that of a professional person. Courtesy, honesty, and respect should be shown by students toward faculty members, guest lecturers, administrative support staff, and fellow students. Similarly, students should expect faculty to treat them fairly, show respect for their ideas and opinions, and strive to help them benefit from their experience.

Student academic misconduct refers to behavior that may include plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, falsification of records or official documents, intentional misuse of equipment or materials (including library materials), and aiding and abetting the perpetration of such acts.

Students with disabilities – Students with disabilities who require academic accommodations should contact the Services for Students with Disabilities area of the Office of the Dean of Students at 471-6259 (voice) or 471-4641 as soon as possible to request an official letter outlining the needed and authorized accommodations.

Class Schedule:

Introduction to the Course		
Video: https://youtu.be/Uk5ktBu3t3M		
Unit 1: Defining social problems.		
Module	Date	Content
1	August 24-30	What is a social problem?
Video: https://youtu.be/w4NWatHMvxM		
<u>Assigned reading:</u> Chapter 1 – Understanding Social Problems. Social Problems: Continuity and Change (2019). Saylor Foundation. Open Textbook Library. Available at: https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/141		
2	August 31-September 6	Extremity, society, and social problems.
Video: https://youtu.be/HKkkWabPjr0		
<u>Assigned reading:</u> Varas-Díaz, Nelson, Niall Scott, and Bryan Bardine. "On Extremity: A Manifesto." In <i>On Extremity: From Music to Images, Words, and Experiences</i> , edited by Nelson Varas-Díaz, Niall Scott, and Bryan Bardine, 1–13. London, U.K.: Lexington Press, 2023.		
Unit 2: Social problems and extremity.		
3	September 7-13	Income inequality and surviving the future.
Video: https://youtu.be/FOM9Gi5nIEk		
<u>Assigned readings:</u> Neckerman, Kathryn M., and Florencia Torche. "Inequality: Causes and Consequences." <i>Annual Review of Sociology</i> 33, no. 1 (2007): 335–57. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.33.040406.131755 .		

Buttrick, Nicholas R., and Shigehiro Oishi. "The Psychological Consequences of Income Inequality." <i>Social and Personality Psychology Compass</i> 11, no. 3 (2017): e12304. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12304. <u>Assigned documentary films:</u> Inequality for All: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvAFPHLFMa0&t=283s Does Money Make You Mean: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJ8Kq1wucsk		
4	September 14-20	Running out of water to drink.
<u>Video:</u> https://youtu.be/HpLtsZ2ZJFQ <u>Assigned reading:</u> Sultana, Farhana. "Water Justice: Why It Matters and How to Achieve It." <i>Water International</i> 43, no. 4 (2018): 483–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/02508060.2018.1458272. <u>Assigned documentary film:</u> Who Owns Water?: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9edWX7TTsLw		
5	September 21-27	Polarization in society.
<u>Video:</u> https://youtu.be/UdcMb-VvdPs <u>Assigned reading:</u> Heltzel, Gordon, and Kristin Laurin. "Polarization in America: Two Possible Futures." <i>Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences</i> 34 (2020): 179–84. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.03.008. <u>Assigned documentary film:</u> Documenting Hate: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPLvWO_SOgM		
6	Sept 28 - Oct 4	Health, life, and choosing death.
<u>Video:</u> https://youtu.be/WoDygvxYXhk <u>Assigned reading:</u> Boer, Theo A. "Recurring Themes in the Debate About Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide." <i>Journal of Religious Ethics</i> 35, no. 3 (2007): 529–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9795.2007.00318.x.		

Supplemental reading:

Rietjens, Judith A. C., Paul J. Van Der Maas, Bregje D. Onwuteaka-Philipsen, Johannes J. M. Van Delden, and Agnes Van Der Heide. "Two Decades of Research on Euthanasia from the Netherlands. What Have We Learnt and What Questions Remain?" *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 6, no. 3 (2009): 271–83.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-009-9172-3>.

Assigned documentary film:

How to Die in Oregon: <https://tubitv.com/movies/310499/how-to-die-in-oregon>

7	October 5-11	Extractivism and everyday life.
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Video: <https://youtu.be/doPKNgZaQps>

Assigned reading:

Farthing, Linda, and Nicole Fabricant. "'Open Veins' Revisited: Charting the Social, Economic, and Political Contours of the New Extractivism in Latin America." *Latin American Perspectives* 45, no. 5 (2018): 4–17.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X18785882>.

Supplemental reading:

Zaremborg, Gisela, and Marcela Torres Wong. "Participation on the Edge: Prior Consultation and Extractivism in Latin America." *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 10, no. 3 (2018): 29–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802X1801000302>.

Assigned documentary film:

The Cobalt Challenge: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Q2IW7UEclI&t=488s>

Unit 3: Strategies to see social problems.

8	October 12-18	Understanding social problems via music.
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Video: <https://youtu.be/DevSEpAtSdo>

Assigned reading:

Varas-Díaz, Nelson, Daniel Nevárez Araújo, Eric Morales, and David Rosales. "Heavy Metal Music as Decolonial Activism: A Latin American Case Study - Zaprunder

World." *Zapruder World: An International Journal for the History of Social Conflict*, 2023.

Supplemental reading:

Mondillo, Mirko, and Claudio de Majo. "Between Cultural Essence and Stereotype: A Visual Analysis of Childish Gambino's This Is America." *SigMa - Rivista Di Letterature Compare, Teatro e Arti Dello Spettacolo* 5 (2021).

Assigned documentary film:

Acts of Resistance - Heavy Metal Music in Latin America:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gm0oozTOEbE&t=2600s>

9	October 19-25	Comedy, laughing out loud, and social change.
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Video: <https://youtu.be/SsdULnfhC4c>

Assigned reading:

Chattoo, Caty Borum. "A Funny Matter: Toward a Framework for Understanding the Function of Comedy in Social Change." *HUMOR* 32, no. 3 (August 27, 2019): 499–523. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2018-0004>.

Supplemental reading:

Feldman, Lauren, and Caty Borum Chattoo. "Comedy as a Route to Social Change: The Effects of Satire and News on Persuasion about Syrian Refugees." *Mass Communication and Society* 22, no. 3 (May 4, 2019): 277–300.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2018.1545035>.

Assigned documentary film:

Vaccines: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VG_s2PCH_c&t=332s

10	Oct 26 - Nov 1	Photography, social problems, and justice.
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Video: https://youtu.be/uk_gUYQ-A6E

Assigned reading:

Molloy, Jennifer K. "Photovoice as a Tool for Social Justice Workers." *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 18, no. 2 (August 15, 2007): 39–55.
https://doi.org/10.1300/J059v18n02_04.

<u>Supplemental reading:</u> Fairey, Tiffany. "'These Photos Were My Life': Understanding the Impact of Participatory Photography Projects." <i>Community Development Journal</i> 53, no. 4 (October 1, 2018): 618–36. https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsx010 . <u>Assigned documentary film:</u> El Testigo - Caín y Abel: Watch this on Netflix.		
11	November 2-8	Miniatures that help us see extreme social problems.
Video: https://youtu.be/63_OxFm9I-0 <u>Assigned reading:</u> Varas-Díaz, Nelson. "Miniaturization and the Ethical Magnification of Extremity." In <i>The Ethics of Extremity</i> , edited by Nelson Varas-Díaz and Vivek Venkatesh. London: Lexington, 2025. <u>Assigned documentary film:</u> Absurdist Microcosmos https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2H7Wbe4o4w		
12	November 9-15	Artistic performance to highlight social problems.
Video: https://youtu.be/tuq9KIvQBj4 <u>Assigned reading:</u> Milbrandt, Melody K. "Understanding the Role of Art in Social Movements and Transformation." <i>Journal of Art for Life</i> 1, no. 1 (2010): 7–18. <u>Assigned documentary film:</u> Marina Abramovic's Relentless, Violent Genius Brilliant Ideas Ep. 26: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASB07-v_ADM The Theater of the Oppressed: Forum for Social Change https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTA1b4rlTXI		
Unit 4: Options for addressing social problems.		
13	November 16-22	Policy – Basic income and the idea of work.

Video: <https://youtu.be/z5Zv84aXAd0>

Assigned reading:

Van Parijs, Philippe. "The Universal Basic Income: Why Utopian Thinking Matters, and How Sociologists Can Contribute to It." *Politics & Society* 41, no. 2 (June 2013): 171–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329213483106>.

Assigned documentary film:

Will Universal Income Become Mainstream?:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SraQi_BXsJc&t=22s

14	November 23-29	Community – On gardens and food.
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Video: <https://youtu.be/2KBsOEtpB4g>

Assigned reading:

Firth, Chris, Damian Maye, and David Pearson. "Developing 'Community' in Community Gardens." *Local Environment* 16, no. 6 (July 2011): 555–68.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2011.586025>.

Assigned documentary film:

The Bee: A Reflection on Women, Land, and Occupation:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_V0aXLPVT4

15	Nov 30 - Dec 5	Community – Solar energy for all.
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Video: <https://youtu.be/U7nxanPHX1M>

Assigned reading:

De Onís, Catalina M. "Energy Colonialism Powers the Ongoing Unnatural Disaster in Puerto Rico." *Frontiers in Communication* 3 (January 29, 2018): 2.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2018.00002>.

Assigned documentary film:

After the Dark: The Movement to Light Up Puerto Rico with the Sun
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kF6fficXegk>