

History of Homelessness: Unhoused Populations in US History

512:238

3 Credits

*This syllabus is a draft and is subject to change
(This will most likely be a hybrid course)*

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This course meets SAS Core goals CCD and HST. It also counts toward the Law and Society Minor/Certificate in History and the elective requirement for the Public History Certificate.

There are no prerequisites for this course, and no prior experience in History is necessary to succeed in this course. The course will introduce students to historical methods, and we will learn how to interpret, analyze, and write about historical sources.

This syllabus and all course material will be posted on Canvas.

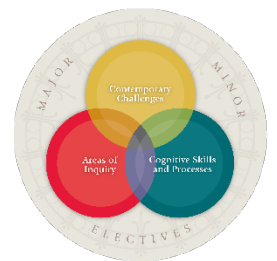
SAS Core learning goals

CCD-2, Contemporary Challenges (Diversities and Social Inequalities): Analyze contemporary social justice issues and unbalanced social power systems.

HST, Historical Analysis: Explain the development of some aspect of a society or culture over time

Course Description

This course explores the social and legal history of homelessness and unhoused populations in the United States, from the colonial period to the present. It will begin with an exploration of the contemporary crisis of houselessness and work backwards in time, considering the legal, political, cultural, and economic factors that led to current conditions. This course will challenge the dominant notion that poverty and homelessness are unfortunate but inevitable facets of life



and society by exploring the contexts in which poverty and homelessness have been constructed and addressed throughout US history. Students in this course will read about, write about, and discuss the shifting relationships between “homes,” “houses,” residence, and settlement have evolved in this context, and how these definitions have developed alongside the advent of racialized capitalism, policing, and the criminal justice system. To this end, we will consider epistemological questions about how scholarly and popular understandings of poverty and homelessness have developed and the archive on which that knowledge is based.

We will collaboratively work to answer the following questions about each historical period we discuss:

- What has it been like to experience homelessness throughout US history?
- Who has comprised the population of people experiencing homelessness, and why?
- What has caused homelessness?
- How has homelessness been addressed structurally, personally, and culturally? How have stereotypes about the unhoused developed over time?
- How have legal definitions of citizenship, race, gender, class, and labor status shaped experiences of poverty and homelessness?

With selected primary sources, class lectures and discussions, we will work as closely as possible with the voices of people experiencing homelessness and poverty directly; they will be our guides as we seek to answer the above questions. This course will pay particular attention to how unhoused populations have interacted with legal authorities throughout US history, charting the advent of homeless policing, welfare provision for unhoused populations, and welfare related institutions. Throughout the course, we will chart how the answers to these questions developed over time, as well as how historical and contemporary sociocultural perceptions, narratives, and stereotypes about homelessness have evolved from the colonial period up to the present in the United States.

Etymological note: “Homelessness” is the most commonly used term to describe the condition of living without a permanent residence, outdoors, “on the street,” or in a government or charitable shelter. In recent years, “unhoused” has begun to emerge as a preferred alternative to “homeless” when describing the status of individuals; while many advocates use both terms, as do many individuals experiencing homelessness. Both terms will be used throughout the course, because many unhoused people have created homes for themselves that don’t meet the standard or legal definitions of these terms; in other cases, the term “homeless” is more appropriate if an individual is unhoused because of exclusionary policies or painful personal experiences.

Course learning goals

- Analyze the historical relationship between homelessness and poverty throughout American history

- Analyze the contemporary crisis of homelessness and the historical contexts from which it has emerged
- Analyze how experiences of homelessness have been shaped by race, class, gender, labor and immigration status
- Read and analyze primary sources
- Read, analyze, and synthesize secondary sources
- Write analytically about primary and secondary sources

Assignments

- **Legal brief assignment (25%)**

In this essay, students will examine a specific historical law or policy regulating homelessness, such as anti-loitering or public camping ordinances. They will explain the historical context in which this policy developed, any relevant court cases, public discussion, or cultural representations relevant to our understanding of this policy's purpose, implementation, and impact.

- **Primary source analysis (25%)**

Students will select one 19th century "pauper testimony" and one 21st century oral history transcript excerpt from the class source base and write an essay comparing and analyzing these two sources. Using the assigned secondary readings in the course to frame your analysis, consider and address the following questions in your essay:

- What are the social, political, and economic factors influencing each person's experience of homelessness?
- What information can we gather about the individual narrating each source? What questions is this source asking or answering?
- What can we extrapolate about the broader context in which this person's story fits – are their experiences the rule or the exception?
- What laws or policies are relevant to this person's experience of homelessness?
- What sort of popular expectations, assumptions, or perceptions can you identify through your analysis of each source, in each period?
- What historical questions does this contemporary testimony raise?
- What contemporary parallels can you draw to this historical testimony?

- **Policy proposal assignment (25%)**

This assignment will build on the "legal brief" assignment through which students will examine a specific historical law or policy regulating homelessness, such as anti-loitering or public camping ordinances. In the policy proposal assignment, students will develop their own policy proposal to replace, improve, expand, or otherwise reimagine an existing policy area, drawing on the historical context explored throughout the course to identify

new policies that would build on lessons from previous efforts to resolve the issue in question.

In the assignment, students will:

- explain the historical context which led to existing policy in their selected area
 - enumerate the motivation and legal basis for the proposal
 - explore how this new policy proposal would change the experiences of unhoused populations from a legal, political, economic, and social perspective
 - consider how this policy would be implemented and relate to existing systems in place, including how it might differ depending on the level at which it was implemented (municipal vs state, rural vs urban communities, etc.)
- **Class participation (25%)**

Class participation will be assessed according to the following rubric:

A	Student participated meaningfully in every, or nearly every, class discussion; offered comments and/or questions that reflected substantive engagement with the assigned reading; and responded thoughtfully to the other students' and professor's own contributions to class discussions
B	Student excelled in most of the above ways, but fell somewhat short on one or two of the criteria (e.g., had more than a few days of no oral participation, <i>or</i> about a third of the time made comments that reflected only a superficial engagement with the assigned reading)
C	Either the student excelled in some criteria but failed in others (e.g., made frequent contributions in class but comments were not relevant to the topic or did not reflect engagement with the assigned reading), or the student performed merely adequately on all the above criteria (e.g., only sometimes participated in class discussions)
D	Student did not meet most of the above criteria overall, but occasionally did meet one of the above criteria.
F	Student did not engage with the lecture material, assigned reading, or class discussion throughout the semester.

Grading Scale

- A: 92-100
- B+: 87-91
- B: 81-86
- C+: 77-80
- C: 70-76
- D: 60-69

- F: 0-59

Attendance & Other Class Policies

Students must check their email and other University digital course tools (including Canvas) regularly in order to stay up to date with class meeting information, syllabus adjustments, assignments, etc.

Attendance and participation are essential in this course. The practice of history relies on frequent and open communication, and the structure of the course reflects this.

Students are expected to attend all sessions and to be active and thoughtful participants in class discussion. More than three (3) unexcused absences (i.e., other than a documented illness, documented emergency, religious observance, or university-approved absence) will have an adverse effect on your grade. For each unexcused absence beyond the 3 allowed, your final course grade will be lowered by 2 percentage points. For example, if you accumulate 5 unexcused absences during the semester and have a grade of 83%, your grade will be lowered to 79%. Please note that an excused absence means that you provide a note from a doctor, dean, or coach that explains your absence. All absences should be entered into the Rutgers University absence reporting website, where you will indicate the date and reason for your absence. I will receive an automatic email from this system, so there is no need to send me a separate email regarding your attendance.

“Policy on Mutual Responsibilities and Classroom Etiquette”, Department of History

“Our commitments to a strong learning community are expressed in many ways. Respectful professors convey their commitment to the discipline of history and their desire to share its delights and challenges. They are well prepared for class, provide students with clear goals and expectations, listen carefully to student questions and comments, and conscientiously evaluate their students' work. Respectful students bring a strong work ethic to the history courses that they select. They expect to attend the scheduled classes, to be on time, to be prepared for class, and to be attentive during class. A shared respect for the discipline of history and for one another as teachers and students of history is essential to the academic integrity of our program. We must all do our part to maintain an environment of openness and civility that encourages and honors the intellectual achievement represented by the discipline of history.”

Each of you is a valuable member of our intellectual community this semester, and I trust that you will conduct yourselves accordingly. My goal is that our classroom will be a space for thoughtful, sustained, and respectful engagement with the course material and with each other. In order to achieve that goal, we will need to give each other and the material our undivided attention, which means that texting and online activity unrelated to the class are not permitted for any reason.

Technology use in-class:

Laptops and tablets may be used for note-taking and for accessing the assigned reading only. I trust that you will make your best effort to contribute to our intellectual collaboration by arriving to class on time, participating in class discussions and activities, not distracting yourself or others during class, and not leaving class early (unless you have explained to me in advance why you must leave early).

Participation entails active engagement within and outside of the classroom setting. Students should regularly ask and answer questions in class, share relevant observations from the assigned readings and other course material or discussions, regularly post in the course management system learning engagement tools, etc.

Excused absences (for medical, religious or emergency reasons) must be documented and entered into the university's absence reporting system. Students will be permitted TWO unexcused absences; each additional unexcused absence will result in a penalty on the final grade.

Late or make-up work will only be accepted in situations where the student has had a documented absence. All other late assignments will receive a 10% grade deduction for each day the assignment is late.

If a student needs to miss class or adjust their completion of coursework for religious observation, the instructor should be notified in advance and accommodations will be made.

Special Accommodation Requests

Requests for disability or other special accommodation should be made to the instructor within the first two weeks of class. Official procedures for doing so are outlined by the Office of Disability Services here: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/applying-for-services>.

Contacting the Professor

I am available during office hours each week and by appointment. I check email regularly and will almost always respond within one business day. In compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), please use your Rutgers ScarletMail account (and not a personal email account) to communicate with me. As the Rutgers University Ethics and Compliance webpage states, "All Rutgers University students, staff, and instructors are assigned a university managed email account to be utilized for purposes of official correspondence." Please contact me with any questions or concerns as soon as they arise. I am always happy to help students with the course material and with their writing.

Academic Integrity Policy

Consult, don't plagiarize -- document your research! For tips about how to take notes so that you don't plagiarize by accident: http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/avoid_plagiarism.

All students are expected to adhere to the principles of academic integrity laid out by the university here: <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-at-rutgers/>. Plagiarism will be addressed to the fullest extent in accordance with University policy.

By participating in the coursework required for this course, you are bound to adhere to the following **honor pledge**: *“On my honor, I have neither received nor given any unauthorized assistance on this examination (assignment).”*

Student Wellness Resources

Just In Case Web App

<http://codu.co/cee05e>

Access helpful mental health information and resources for yourself or a friend in a mental health crisis on your smartphone or tablet and easily contact CAPS or RUPD.

Counseling, ADAP & Psychiatric Services (CAPS)

(848) 932-7884 / 17 Senior Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901 / <http://health.rutgers.edu/medical-counseling-services/counseling/>

CAPS is a University mental health support service that includes counseling, alcohol and other drug assistance, and psychiatric services staffed by a team of professional within Rutgers Health services to support students' efforts to succeed at Rutgers University. CAPS offers a variety of services that include: individual therapy, group therapy and workshops, crisis intervention, referral to specialists in the community and consultation and collaboration with campus partners.

Violence Prevention & Victim Assistance (VPVA)

(848) 932-1181 / 3 Bartlett Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901 / www.vpva.rutgers.edu/

The Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance provides confidential crisis intervention, counseling and advocacy for victims of sexual and relationship violence and stalking to students, staff and faculty. To reach staff during office hours when the university is open or to reach an advocate after hours, call 848-932-1181.

Disability Services

(848) 445-6800 / Lucy Stone Hall, Suite A145, Livingston Campus, 54 Joyce Kilmer Avenue, Piscataway, NJ 08854 / <https://ods.rutgers.edu/>

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation:

<https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>

If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form on the ODS web site at: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form>

Scarlet Listeners

(732) 247-5555 / <https://rutgers.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/scarletlisteners>

Free and confidential peer counseling and referral hotline, providing a comforting and supportive safe space.

Report a Concern: <http://health.rutgers.edu/do-something-to-help/>

Basic Needs Security: Any student who has difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or who lacks a safe and stable place to live, and believes this may affect their performance in the course, is urged to contact the Dean of Students for support. Also, if you are comfortable doing so, please notify the professor so that she can help however she can and connect you with campus resources.

Office of the Dean of Students <http://deanofstudents.rutgers.edu>

88 College Avenue, New Brunswick, NJ 08901

848-932-2300

deanofstudents@echo.rutgers.edu

Rutgers Student Food Pantry <http://ruoffcampus.rutgers.edu/food/>

39 Union Street

New Brunswick, NJ 08901

848-932-5500

ruoffcampus@echo.rutgers.edu

Learning Centers: <https://rlc.rutgers.edu/>

Academic Advising for SAS students: <https://sasundergrad.rutgers.edu/advi>

Course tools:

There are no required textbooks for this course. All readings will be uploaded to the course's Canvas site.

In order to succeed in this course, students will need access to a computer or other electronic device that students can use to download and read PDFs, write essays, access the course Canvas site, search for news articles, etc.

Please visit the Rutgers Student Tech Guide [page](#) for resources available to all students. If you do not have the appropriate technology for financial reasons, please email Dean of Students deanofstudents@echo.rutgers.edu for assistance. If you are facing other financial hardships, please visit the Office of Financial Aid at <https://financialaid.rutgers>.

Course format:

This course will be primarily dialogic in structure and will employ problem-posing pedagogical models. Most course sessions will involve short lectures and discussions of primary and secondary sources. It will also utilize experiential learning models to provide students with opportunities to expand their understanding of the relevance of historical knowledge and jurisprudence throughout US history, by tracing the provenance of archival materials, crafting policy proposals, and writing legal briefs. Students will be expected to participate in substantive, scholarly engagement throughout the course, by verbally participating in class discussion, sharing analyses of primary and secondary sources, through collaborative group work, and/or through written and virtual communication, accommodating diverse learning styles.

Course schedule

A draft, subject to change based on the exigencies of the particular semester, and instructor and student needs. When any changes are made, students will be notified as expediently as possible.

(Note: this schedule lists the weekly themes of the course and assigned secondary readings, with a few exceptions; during in-class sessions each week, we will also work directly with related primary source material.)

Week 1 – Full-class discussion session

What does, and has, it mean(t) to be homeless? What does, and has, it mean(t) to be unhoused throughout American history?

Read:

Martin v. Boise [opinion](#), 2018

Week 2 – Lecture, full class discussion, small group work with excerpts from oral history transcripts

Our unhoused neighbors – voices and data in the present

Read:

Transcripts of selected oral history interviews with local people experiencing homelessness from course database (Just Shelter Project, 37 Voices Project, Neilson Street Project, Shelter Project)

Week 3 – Lecture, full class discussion, small group work with local data/statistics

Contemporary policies addressing homelessness

Read:

National Alliance to End Homelessness 2020 “State of Homelessness” Report

National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty Report: “Homelessness in America: Overview of Data and Causes”

White House Report, September 2019: “The State of Homelessness in America”

Week 4 – Lecture and student-led discussions on homelessness internationally (assigned chapters out of Beier & Ocobock in advance)

Global contextualization of American homelessness

Read:

Excerpts from *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective*, eds. A.L. Beier and P.R. Ocobock (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008).

Week 5 – Lecture, full class discussion and mapping unhoused communities exercise

Legal brief assignment due

Deindustrialization and historical geographies of homelessness

Read:

Mitchell, Don. “Homelessness, American Style,” *Urban Geography* 32, no. 7 (2011): 933-956.

Excerpts from Dan Kerr, *Derelict Paradise: Homelessness and Urban Development in Cleveland, Ohio* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2011)

Week 6 – Lecture and full class discussion

Class and social mobility in the 20th century US

Read:

Excerpts from Kenneth Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Excerpts from Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Papachristou vs. City of Jacksonville case brief

Week 7 – Lecture and small group discussions of excerpts from Davies’ memoir

Hobos, train-hopping, and itinerancy during the Great Depression

Read:

Excerpts from Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

Excerpts from W.H. Davies, *Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* (1908)

Week 8 – Lecture and full-class discussion

Race and theories of belonging

Read:

Johnson, Roberta Ann. “African Americans and Homelessness: Moving Through History,” *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 4 (2010): 583-605.

Excerpts from Carter G. Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration*

Week 9 – Lecture and small group discussions of regional/state laws regulating settlement in 18-19th century

Residence and welfare provision

Read:

Herndon, Ruth Wallis, “Women of ‘No Particular Home,’” in *Women and Freedom in Early America*, ed. Larry D. Eldridge (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

Herndon, Ruth Wallis and Amilcar E. Challú, “Mapping the Boston Poor: Inmates of the Boston Almshouse, 1795-1801,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44, no. 1 (2013): 61-81.

Week 10 – Lecture and full class discussion

Primary source analysis due

Place and movement in early America

Read:

Tim Cresswell, *The Tramp in America* (Reaktion, 2001)

Priscilla F. Clement, “The Transformation of the Wandering Poor in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia” in *Walking to Work: Tramps in America, 1790-1935*, ed. Eric H. Monkkonen (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1984).

Week 11 – Lecture and full class discussion

Read:

Excerpts from Billy G. Smith, *Down and Out in Early America* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010).

Week 12 – Lecture and student-led discussion on pauper testimonies assigned in advance; “(re)creating the archive” exercise

The personal and the political

Read:

Examinations of Paupers and other mediated testimonies from people experiencing poverty and houselessness

Week 13 – Lecture and full class discussion

Colonization, class, and citizenship

Read:

New Jersey’s “Act for the Settlement and Relief of the Poor,” Article 4 of Articles of Confederation, Vagrancy Act of 1824, Elizabethan Vagabond Code

Excerpts from Sal Nicolazzo, *Vagrant Figures: Law, Literature, and the Origins of the Police* (Yale University Press, 2021)

Week 14

Policy proposal assignment due

In-class presentations of policy proposals

Week 15

In-class presentations of policy proposals