Mortality and Population Health
Sociology 570
Fall 2014
Mondays 1:00-3:40 pm

Professor: Julie Phillips  
Office: B039 Davison Hall, Douglass / Office 452, Health Institute, 112 Paterson Street  
Email: jphillips@sociology.rutgers.edu  
Phone: 848-932-1824 (IHHCPAR office)  
Office Hours: Thursdays, 1:00pm to 2:00pm or by appointment  
Website: http://sakai.rutgers.edu

Course Description

This course will introduce students to a major branch within the field of demography, namely mortality and health. The class will focus primarily on substantive theories and debates within the area and less so on methodological issues, although we will spend the first meeting discussing some key tools used by demographers in the study of mortality and health. Throughout the semester, we’ll consider whether and how various social processes are associated with health and mortality differentials. We’ll begin by discussing the scope and nature of mortality transitions in both developed and developing countries and the key explanations for these transitions. We’ll then consider future prospects for improved life expectancy (the demography of longevity) and the related consequences. The middle part of the course will be devoted to understanding gaps or disparities in mortality and health across different groups – social class, sex, race and ethnicity, and the life course. How do various inequalities in life become manifest in health and mortality outcomes? We’ll conclude the semester with two sessions that consider policy and health systems approaches to improving overall population health. The course will focus on health and mortality issues more closely in developed countries, particularly the United States, than in developing countries.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students should have a good foundation in research on:

(1) Major trends and patterns in population health and mortality  
(2) Primary tools and methods used by demographers to study health and mortality  
(3) Key issues, hypotheses and debates in the field of mortality and population health  
(4) Social inequalities and disparities in health and mortality

Prerequisites

Graduate standing or permission of the instructor is required. Some familiarity with quantitative research methods is recommended. A handout distributed on the first day of class provides a basic overview of statistical methodologies; students with limited backgrounds in statistics should familiarize themselves with this information.

Course Requirements
This class will be taught as a seminar, with a combination of lectures and discussions. All readings are available on the course website and are listed below. I have assigned one book (*The Healing of America*) and recommend that you purchase that one book from Amazon. I have tried my best to limit the number of required readings. Less can be more, and I'd prefer that you read the required pieces in depth and carefully rather than skim a large number of pieces. However, you will see that I have included additional articles that you will find to be useful references and I recommend that you read them at some point, either during the course of the semester or down the road. I will draw on these during class as well.

Your grade in this course will be based on the following criteria:

(1) Memos and Op-Eds (15%): Over the course of the semester, you must prepare three short (1-2 pages singled-spaced) memos or op-ed pieces (not more than 800 words) on the assigned readings. You can choose which format you would like to use for a particular lecture, but you must do at least one of each format during the course of the semester. These assignments should help you to come prepared for class and to offer insightful questions and comments. Due by 5pm the day before class (send by e-mail to jphillips@sociology.rutgers.edu).

   a. The memos should briefly summarize the main points of the readings, but also consider issues such as the strengths and weaknesses of the research, the theoretical and/or empirical connections between the readings, and key questions raised by the readings. These memos are intended to help you synthesize literature and identify links among the different pieces.

   b. The op-ed pieces will allow you to focus on one area of particular interest in the reading and help you to develop the ability to take a point of view and argue it effectively. For guidelines on writing an effective op-ed piece, please refer to the following website: [http://newsoffice.duke.edu/duke_resources/oped](http://newsoffice.duke.edu/duke_resources/oped). The op-ed pieces in the New York Times can also serve as a good guide.

(2) Problem Set (5%): A problem set reviewing demographic methods for the study of mortality and health will be assigned after our second meeting and will be worth 5% of your final grade.

(3) Class presentation (20%): Each week, a student or pair of students will be responsible for giving a presentation and leading a discussion on the assigned readings. Essentially, the class presentation is an oral memo. A successful class presentation will do the following:

   a. Provide a summary of the assigned material, identifying the key insights made into the core questions for the topic of the day and highlighting the main points of each reading.

   b. Identify the key strengths and weaknesses of the various research articles. Consider data sources and methods if relevant, breadth and depth, and logic/consistency of core arguments/empirical tests.

   c. Discuss relevant theoretical and/or empirical connections between the different readings.

   d. Identify missing gaps in our knowledge and key areas for future research.

   e. Identify the major questions raised by the readings for further discussion.

These presentations, which are excellent practice in giving lectures, conference presentations, and job talks, should last about half an hour or so. Visual aids are advised.
The student(s) giving the class presentation will also be responsible for leading and facilitating the class discussion that day following the class presentation. To help the class presenter(s), all students should submit two discussion questions to all members of the class by 5pm on the day before the class meets.

(4) Participation in class discussions (10%): This is a seminar, and class attendance and participation are vital to its success. All seminar participants are responsible for all of the required readings. Students should read carefully so that they come to class with useful comments and questions and submit consistently discussion questions on time. Students should feel free to offer specialized knowledge from readings not assigned or other experience that is relevant to the discussion. We will also open up each meeting with a “Minute for Media”. Demography and population health are featured in the news every single day. Please bring in relevant stories you came across and be prepared to summarize briefly in class (you should do this a minimum of three times over the course of the semester).

(5) Final research paper (50%): Students are expected to prepare a research paper (20 pages in length) by the end of the semester. Your grade on this paper will be based on both the final written product and an oral presentation of the paper. Oral presentations of the paper should be about 15-20 minutes in length using PowerPoint. We will have these oral presentations on December 8, and the final paper will be due at the end of that class. A one-page proposal describing your paper topic and identifying your primary literature sources is due on October 27. The final paper is due on the last day of class (December 8). Your final paper may take one of the following suggested formats:

a. An original empirical research paper on a topic relevant to population health. This might serve as the basis of a journal submission, a qualifying paper or a dissertation chapter.

b. A detailed research proposal on a health-related topic, including an extensive and critical review of the existing theoretical and empirical literature on your topic. This might serve as the basis for an actual grant proposal to support your dissertation or other work.

c. A thorough analysis of the literature in one of the broad topic areas covered in this class (e.g. gender or race inequality in health; socioeconomic differences in health; etc). This review should include the readings from the syllabus as well as other critical work in the area and should outline the key issues, primary arguments or perspectives. Importantly, the review should provide a critical assessment of these various contributions to the literature. This option should assist those Sociology graduate students who choose to take an exam in lieu of one qualifying paper.
Course Schedule and Assigned Readings
(subject to modification with advance notice)

September 8  Course introduction and core concepts

Required:


Recommended:


September 15  Tools for measuring mortality and health

Required:


Recommended:


September 22  Transitions: General patterns

Required:


http://www.prb.org/Articles/2006/ChronicDiseasesBeleaguerDevelopingCountries.aspx

**Recommended:**


**September 29**

**Transitions: Causes**

**Required:**


**Recommended:**


**October 6**

**Future prospects for life expectancy and healthy life expectancy**

**Required:**
Couzin-Frankel, J. 2011. “A pitched battle over life span.” *Science* 333, 549-550 (Read this before Olshansky and Oppen/Vaupel pieces)


**Recommended:**


**October 13**

**Gaps: Social class**

**Required:**


Recommended:


October 20   Gaps: Social relationships and psychosocial processes

Required:

Reidl, J. 2013. “Statistics and the social causes of obesity.”
http://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2013/issue134b/

Recommended:


October 27   Gaps: Race

*** One-page paper proposal is due today ***

Required:


### Recommended:


### November 3

**Gaps: Immigrant groups**

### Required:


### Recommended:


November 10  
Gaps: Sex

Required:


Recommended:


November 17  
The life course and birth cohort

Required:


Recommended:

Schafer, MH, LR Wilkinson, and KF Ferraro. 2013. "Childhood (mis)fortune, educational attainment, and adult health: Contingent benefits of a college degree?" *Social Forces*

**November 24**

**Policy approaches to improve population health**

Required:


Recommended:


**December 1**

**Health care systems approaches to improving population health**

Required:

Everyone is strongly encouraged to read the entire book. At a minimum, you should read chapters 1-3 and 11-13. One additional chapter (discussing a particular country) will be assigned to each student to present in class.


December 8  Paper presentations