

**William & Mary
Poverty in America
Syllabus**

ECON 453
Fall 2025
Mon., Wed.
2:00pm – 3:20pm in Chancellors Hall 121

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Course description and objectives

America is one of the wealthiest countries in the world yet continues to struggle with high rates of poverty. Even our cherished Williamsburg has a homelessness problem. This course will consider poverty in America with particular attention to public policies that mitigate or exacerbate the problem. Students will learn about details of public policies such as cash assistance, housing assistance, food stamps, minimum wages, healthcare provision, and discrimination law. Students will quantify the scale and distribution of poverty by using government data to measure family incomes and other characteristics. We probably won't end poverty, but we'll move in the right direction by understanding it better.

The course is designed as a capstone for the economics or public policy major, drawing upon prior courses about economic theory, statistics, and data analysis. The course fulfills the COLL 400 requirement. Students will take initiative in synthesis and critical analysis of poverty statistics, solve problems associated with how social scientists and policy makers should measure poverty, create original measurements of poverty in America, and communicate effectively with a diversity of audiences through a policy brief and other writings.

Prerequisite courses are Intermediate Microeconomic Theory (ECON 303) and Econometrics (ECON 308).

Course Materials

Selected readings posted at the course Blackboard site
Stata statistics software (see Blackboard for options)

Determinants of the Final Grade

Quizzes	8%
Project 1: Calculation of the official poverty rate	12%
Project 2: Universal Basic Income analysis	20%
Project 3: Poverty policy brief	20%
Project 4: Poverty rate design and calculation	30%
Class participation	<u>10%</u>
	100%

Quizzes

Quizzes will be available in the “Weekly activities” tab on the Blackboard course site. Most weeks will include one or two quizzes that will be due before class meetings. Quizzes provide a check on preparation for class meetings. There will be enough quizzes through the

semester that any individual quiz is a low-stakes evaluation. I will drop the lowest two quiz scores.

Projects

Students will complete four projects. See the separate document called “Guide for Projects” for details. Projects involve a mixture of empirical work with data, written work, and presentations. Essays will be evaluated for economic content and writing style. Late submission earns a reduced grade.

The Writing & Communication Center, located on the first floor of Swem Library, is a free service provided to W&M students. Trained consultants offer individual assistance with writing, presentation, and other communication assignments at any stage, from generating ideas to polishing a final product, and across disciplines. To make an appointment, visit the WCC webpage www.wm.edu/as/wcc/.

Class Participation

Class meetings are most productive when students participate in an active way. Part of the course grade will reflect the frequency and quality of a student’s participation in the class, especially during class meetings. Students should study reading assignments prior to the relevant class meetings. To facilitate this, I will distribute questions for class preparation; students should prepare responses to them and come to class ready to discuss their responses. Reading assignments for each week are posted at the Blackboard course site.

Grading Standards

Letter grades for the course will be based on a standard 100-point scale where 93-100 implies an A, 90-92.9 implies an A-, 88-89.9 implies a B+, 83-87.9 implies a B, and so on.

Office Hours

I will be available in my office (Chancellors Hall 317A) from 11am to noon each Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday during the semester. Please let me know if you would like to schedule a meeting outside those times. E-mail is an excellent way to contact me (pmchenry@wm.edu).

Honor Code

I encourage you to collaborate in your studies and discussion of course material. However, plagiarism on a writing assignment is a violation of the Honor Code. Plagiarism is presenting someone else’s words or ideas as your own. When you write a document and distribute it, you imply that its words and ideas are your own, except where explicitly noted in the text (as with citations to others’ work). Please do not plagiarize. If you have questions about plagiarism, please ask me. More resources about plagiarism (and writing in general) are available through the Writing & Communication Center (see above).

Students may refer to course notes and other materials when completing quizzes. However, assistance from other people on quizzes is prohibited.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools: I do not prohibit your use of AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) in ECON 453. However, any AI-generated content that you use in your assignments—in particular, writing assignments—must be cited appropriately, just as any other words or ideas that are not your own. For AI-generated content, you should include in your citation the specific prompts you

used. You shouldn't copy and paste AI-generated text into your assignments, but if you do, you must treat that content as a direct quotation (using double quotes "..."). William & Mary's library has [good information about citation of AI tools](#).

While AI can be a valuable tool for some parts of a research process, be aware that AI tools can be misleading. For example, they hallucinate and make up citations to research that doesn't exist. Verification of information is your responsibility when completing assignments.

AI tools are helpful resources for writing computer code, including Stata. I use ChatGPT to remind myself of syntax in Stata and Python. I encourage you to use AI tools for coding as well. But always check that the code does what you want it to do, even if it doesn't generate visible errors.

Each course project will require a statement about the ways that you used AI tools while working on the project, or a confirmation that you did not use AI tools.

When you're in any doubt, let's talk. Especially as AI is evolving quickly, we should have conversations about appropriate uses. Let's start those conversations early.

Schedule with Meetings and Due Dates

Week 1: Introduction and course details

Meeting: 8/27 at 2pm

Week 2: Measuring poverty

Meeting: 9/3 at 2pm

Assignments:

Blackboard quiz before Wednesday class meeting

9/8 is the end of the Add/Drop registration period

Week 3: Characteristics of poverty populations / Stata practice

Meetings:

9/8 at 2pm

9/10 at 2pm (coding day: bring your computer)

9/11: Conversation with Fred Liggin, 6pm to 8pm, location to be announced

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Week 4: Poverty and decision making / Economic trends

Meetings:

9/15 at 2pm

9/17 at 2pm

Assignments:

Blackboard quiz before Monday class meeting

Project 1 (Calculation of the official poverty rate) due by 11:59pm on Thurs., Sept. 18

Week 5: Anti-poverty public policies / Guaranteed Income

Meetings:

9/22 at 2pm

9/24 at 2pm

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Week 6: Universal Basic Income (UBI)

Meetings:

9/29 at 2pm

10/1 at 2pm

Assignments:

Meetings with group for Project 2

Week 7: Housing & neighborhoods

Meetings:

10/6 at 2pm

10/8 at 2pm

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Project 2 (Universal Basic Income analysis) due by 11:59pm on Tuesday, Oct. 7

Week 8: Housing & neighborhoods / Stata practice

Meetings:

10/13 at 2pm

10/15 at 2pm (coding day: bring your computer)

Assignments:

Blackboard quiz before Monday class meeting

Notify Prof. McHenry about your Project 4 group by 11:59pm on Sunday, Oct. 19:
whether individual, or who is in your group

Week 9: Employment

Meetings:

10/20 at 2pm

10/22 at 2pm

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

10/27 is the last day to withdraw from courses

Week 10: Employment / Healthcare

Meetings:

10/27 at 2pm

10/29 at 2pm

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Project 3 (Poverty policy brief) written portion due by 11:59pm on Sunday, Nov. 2

Week 11: Food / Stata practice

Meetings:

11/3 at 2pm

11/5 at 2pm (coding day: bring your computer)

Assignments:

Blackboard quiz before Monday class meeting

Short meeting with Prof. McHenry to explain your poverty policy brief

Project 4 plan due by 11:59pm on Sunday, Nov. 9

Week 12: Race, ethnicity, and nativity

Meetings:

11/10 at 2pm

11/12 at 2pm

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Project 4 Stata code due by 11:59pm on Sunday, Nov. 16

Week 13: Race, ethnicity, and nativity / Education

Meetings:

11/17 at 2pm

11/19 at 2pm

Assignments:

Blackboard quizzes before Monday and Wednesday class meetings

Week 14: Student presentations

Meeting: 11/24 at 2pm

Assignments:

Project 4 presentation for students scheduled this week

Week 15: Student presentations

Meetings:

12/3 at 2pm

12/5 at 2pm

Assignments:

Project 4 presentation for students scheduled this week

Project 4 due by 11:59pm on Tuesday, December 16

Instructor: Peter McHenry

I was born 50 miles away into a Navy family in Portsmouth, VA. I earned my BS from Vanderbilt and my PhD in economics from Yale. My research is mostly in labor economics and health economics. I use a variety of survey and administrative data sets to test and measure theories about work and pay. I have studied schools, hospitals, and nursing homes in depth, and I have a particular interest in the influence of public policies on people's lives.

Over the past several years, I've been getting more involved with those trying to serve the poor in Williamsburg. I'm learning a lot. I hope you can say the same throughout this semester. Toward that end, I welcome your questions and comments. My contact information is on the first page.