

Sociology of Death: Deaths that Count and Lives that Matter

SOCI 3000 (4 credits)

IHP Death & Dying: Perspectives, Practices & Policies

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

Course Description

Death comes to us all -- but not equally. This course examines the socio-political determinants of death across age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and social class. Deep dives into global, national, and local mortality rates and leading causes of death will provide insight into whose lives matter, prompting a closer examination of the policies that preserve life for the privileged few and perpetuate death for the marginalized masses. Along the way, we will learn from activists and educators who are advocating for equitable living conditions and life-affirming social change. We will also look at deaths that moved people into action.

Guiding questions:

- What do mortality rates reveal about the state and/of society?
- Do social inequities correlate to disproportionate mortality rates for marginalized populations?
- How do social institutions use exclusionary and discriminatory practices and policies to simulate and stimulate the death of living individuals and groups?
- What work is being done on the state or grassroots level to improve mortality rates and what are the success stories?
- How has death breathed life into social movements?

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Draw data-driven comparisons of key social groups across countries / contexts about mortality and morbidity
- Delineate how social inequalities experienced by marginalized groups can become de facto social determinants of death.
- Assess the impact of public policies, embedded with societal values, on mortality rates
- Evaluate the impact of community-driven organizations and individuals who advocate for improved living conditions and life expectancy.
- Analyze how death drives social movements.

Language of Instruction

This course is taught in English, but students will be exposed to vocabulary related to course content through in-country expert lectures and field visits in a wide range of locales.

Instructional Methods

SIT's philosophy of education is rooted in experiential learning model, which drives the design of this class. Each module allows for experience, reflection, and application. Experiences range from critical analyses of datasets to site visits and conversations with local activists. These experiences are framed by readings, multimedia texts, and class discussions. Reflection occurs throughout the learning process in various forms, such as verbal debriefs after learning on location experiences to reflexive components in papers/projects. Through reflection, students are encouraged to become aware of their process of learning, to make sense of their experiences, and connect the learning acquired on the program with previous experiences and information. Application activities reinforce learning by practicing communication skills, experimenting with theories, and preparing to transfer learning to future contexts.

Required Texts

Articles on Course Reserve

Assignments and Evaluation

Changemaker Profiles 30% (3 @ 10%)

Country Profile and Infographic 60% (3 @ 20%)

Collaboration 10%

Changemaker Profiles: Students will select a contemporary or historical figure or organization to profile their work toward positive social change with improved life expectancy and living conditions for an underrepresented or marginalized group within Indonesia, Ghana, and Mexico. Profiles should not be confused with hagiography or biography. The emphasis should not be on their personal histories or attributes but on their activism, contributions to their community, and impact on broader social change.

Country Profile and Infographic: Students will work within semester-long interest groups to research mortality information (mortality rates, leading causes of death, life expectancy, etc) of a marginalized group within the broader population of Ghana, Indonesia, and Mexico, such as a social group, identity category, or other demographic category. This deep-dive into the data will highlight key statistics of this population compared to the overall population of the country, report on trends, evaluate data sources and quality. To make the connection between data and policy, students will identify the laws/policies in place as well as policy changes sought by the affected population (local and international NGOs, etc). Students will visualize this profile in an accompanying infographic. At the end of the semester, students will frame the entire project with an executive summary and a conclusion that draws inferences from the comparison between these countries. Note: when selecting an interest group be cautious of selecting one you strongly identify with on a personal level. It can be very difficult exploring the data.

Collaboration: Academic and professional work relies heavily on collaborating with others in cross-functional teams. This course requires a significant amount of group work to accomplish learning outcomes and complete assignments. The effectiveness of your group's ability to

collaborate will be reflected in the work produced. However, it is important to evaluate each students' individual contribution to the group, ability to foster a constructive team climate, and resolve conflicts. These competencies will be evaluated through self-assessment and group assessment.

Note on Attendance and Participation: Due to the nature of this experiential program, full participation in all classes and program activities is required. Students may not voluntarily opt out of required program activities. Valid reasons for absence – such as illness – must be discussed with the Program Director or other designated staff person. Absences impact academic performance, which may impact grades. Excessive, unexcused absences could result in program dismissal. Alternative work for absences will be expected.

Note on Late Assignments: IHP programs integrate traditional classroom lectures and discussion with field-based experiences, site visits and debriefs. It is critical that students complete assignments in a timely manner to continue to benefit from the sequences in assignments, reflections and experiences throughout the program. Extensions may be granted on a case-by-case basis with approval from the Program Director or other designated staff person. Requests must be made in writing and at least 12 hours before the posted due date and time. Students who do not submit their work within the extension period will receive a failing grade.

Grading Scale

94-100%	A
90-93%	A-
87-89%	B+
84-86%	B
80-83%	B-
77-79%	C+
74-76%	C
70-73%	C-
67-69%	D+
64-66%	D
below 64	F

Program Expectations

In order to make the most of the opportunities presented in program, communicate respectfully, prepare for student success, and demonstrate best possible engagement, SIT has the following expectations of students:

- **Content Considerations:** The texts and activities you will encounter in this course delve into sensitive topics that may be emotionally and intellectually challenging. Our classroom is a space where we can engage with challenging ideas, question assumptions, and navigate difficult topics with respect and maturity. As possible, I will flag content and activities that are especially graphic or intense, so we are prepared to address them soberly and sensitively. If you are struggling to keep up with the work or

participate in the course because of the nature of the content and activities, you should speak with me and/or seek help from counseling services.

- **Learning Community:** Respect differences of opinion (classmates', lecturers, local constituents engaged with on the visits). You are not expected to agree with everything you hear, but you are expected to listen across differences and consider other perspectives with respect.
- **Presence.** Show up prepared. Be on time, have your readings completed and points in mind for discussion or clarification. Complying with these elements raises the level of class discussion for everyone.
- **Engage.** Ask questions in class. Interact with the lecturer. These are often very busy professionals who are doing us an honor by coming to speak.
- **Be Honest.** Comply with academic integrity policies (no plagiarism or cheating, nothing unethical).
- **Store Your Work:** Keep several copies of your work as back up and keep one copy accessible to you through an online forum, such as an attachment in your email, the course learning management system, or cloud-based storage. This way your work will always be available despite technical issues. Lost files, deleted drives, or computer crashes are not excuses for late, missing work.
- **Personal Technology Use:** Cell phones and other personal electronics can be used for taking notes and other class activities. Off-task usage is not acceptable. You may be marked as absent for habitually using them for something other than classroom activities.
- **Course Communication:** Course documents and assignments will be posted on the learning management system, Canvas. Although the course calendar provides a broad overview and the general sequence of work and assignments for the course, what we accomplish in class will vary, and revisions to the calendar will be posted at the course site. You will need to check the course site regularly. You are responsible for letting me know about any network-related problems that prevent you from accessing or submitting assignments.
- **Recording Policy:** To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use. Documented academic accommodations may supersede this policy.

SIT Policies and Resources

SIT Policies and Resources

Please refer to the Policies section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as Library resources and research

support, Disability Services, Counseling Services, Title IX information, and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion resources.

Course Schedule

**Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs*

Note: This is a suggested sequence of modules and topics based on the texts suggested above. Faculty should appropriately adapt how these topics are taught and select local texts, case studies, guest speakers, and site visits that are relevant to the context and CGI. This course framework is designed to be adaptable to local context.

MODULE #1: NEW YORK, NY

Session 1: Death by the Numbers, Part I

Discussion Topics: Who is dying? How are they dying? At what age are they dying? Data sources, NYC vital statistics, life expectancy, leading causes of death, borough-level data, demographic-level data

Required Texts:

- Adair, T., Mikkelsen, L., Hooper, J., Badr, A., & Lopez, A. D. (2023). Assessing the policy utility of routine mortality statistics: a global classification of countries. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 101(12), 777–785. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.2471/BLT.22.289036>
- Truong, N., & Asare, A. O. (2021). Assessing the effect of socio-economic features of low-income communities and COVID-19 related cases: An empirical study of New York City. *Global Public Health*, 16(1), 1–16. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/17441692.2020.1850830>
- Edwards, F., Esposito, M. H., & Lee, H. (2018). Risk of police-involved death by race/ethnicity and place, United States, 2012-2018. *American Journal of Public Health*, 108(9), 1241–1248. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.2105/AJPH.2018.304559>

Session 2: Death & Social Stratification

Discussion Topics: Form interest groups to study deaths based on social group, identity, or other demographic category.

Required Texts:

- Video: Vox. (2021). How this New York island became a mass grave. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SF3eddIly3U&ab_channel=Vox

Learning on Location: Small group visits

- [Hart Island](#) aka Potter's Field (ferry from the Bronx):
- [Olde Towne of Flushing Burial Ground](#) (Queens): aka Martins field. Majority African American and Native American internments.

- [African Burial Ground National Monument](#) (Manhattan)

Session 3: Death, Killer Policies, and Social Movements

Discussion Topics

- How does death inform social movements and change? US and global examples.
- Case Study: Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

Required Texts:

- Pool, H. (2012). The Politics of Mourning: The Triangle Fire and Political Belonging. *Polity*, 44(2), 182–211. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1057/pol.2011.23>
- Video: American Experience. (2011). The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire: A Catalyst for Reform. Part 3: A Turning Point. <https://nhpbs.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/amex34tf-soc-triangleshirtwaist/the-triangle-shirtwaist-factory-fire-a-catalyst-for-reform-triangle-fire/>
- Video: PBS. (2019). The Fire of a Movement. <https://www.pbs.org/video/the-fire-of-a-movement-wwhbx/>

Learning on Location

- NYC (Greenwich Village): Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and labor reform with guest lecturer

MODULE #2: GHANA

Session 4: Death by the Numbers, Part II

Discussion Topics: Who is dying? How are they dying? At what age are they dying? Who is collecting this data? How reliable is the data?

Required Texts:

- WHO. Global health estimates: Life expectancy and leading causes of death and disability. *Global Health Observatory*. <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/mortality-and-global-health-estimates>
- WHO Data. Ghana: Health data overview for the Republic of Ghana. <https://data.who.int/countries/288>
- Afele, M. (2011). Volunteers vital for counting births and deaths in Ghana. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 89(5), 322–323. <https://doi.org/10.2471/BLT.11.020511>
- Owusu, A. Y., Kushitor, S. B., Ofosu, A. A., Kushitor, M. K., Ayi, A., & Awoonor-Williams, J. K. (2021). Institutional mortality rate and cause of death at health facilities in Ghana between 2014 and 2018. *PLoS ONE*, 16(9), 1–15. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1371/journal.pone.0256515>

Session 5: Social Determinants of Death

- Case Study: Suicide in Ghana. Suicide is one of the top three leading causes of death of young people globally. The case study in Ghana examines the work being done to destigmatize suicide, understand causes, and improve prevention.

Required Texts:

- Adinkrah, M. (2016). Suicide and mortuary beliefs and practices of the Akan of Ghana. *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying*, 74(2), 138–163. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1177/0030222815598427>
- Osafo, J., Akotia, C. S., Hjelmeland, H., & Knizek, B. L. (2017). From condemnation to understanding: Views on suicidal behavior in Ghana in transition. *Death Studies*, 41(8), 532–541. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/07481187.2017.1333357>
- Ossei, P. P. S., Niako, N., Ayibor, W. G., Asante, E., Safo, F. K., & Safowaa, A. (2022). Profile of suicide within the northern part of Ghana: A decade under review. *South African Journal of Psychiatry*, 28, 1–5. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.4102/sajpsychiatry.v28i0.1620>
- Andoh-Arthur, J., Knizek, B. L., Osafo, J., & Hjelmeland, H. (2018). Suicide among men in Ghana: The burden of masculinity. *Death Studies*, 42(10), 658–666. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/07481187.2018.1426655>

Learning on Location

- Guest speaker or site visit with activists working to address suicide in Ghana

Assignment

- Changemaker Profile #1

Session 6: Group Country Profiles

- Dedicated time for group work on country profiles and infographics

Assignments:

- Country Profile and Infographic: Ghana

MODULE #3: INDONESIA

Session 7: Death by the Numbers, Part III

Discussion Topics: Who is dying? How are they dying? At what age are they dying? Who is collecting this data? How reliable is the data?

Required Texts:

- WHO. Global Health Estimates: Life expectancy and leading causes of death and disability. *Global Health Observatory*.
<https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/mortality-and-global-health-estimates>
- WHO Data. Indonesia: Health data overview for the Republic of Indonesia.
<https://data.who.int/countries/360>
- Surendra, H., Paramita, D., Arista, N. N., Putri, A. I., Siregar, A. A., Puspaningrum, E., Rosylin, L., Gardera, D., Girianna, M., & Elyazar, I. R. F. (2023). Geographical variations and district-level factors associated with COVID-19 mortality in Indonesia: a nationwide ecological study. *BMC Public Health*, 23(1), 1–12. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1186/s12889-023-15015-0>

Session 8: Death & Identity

- Case Study: Femicide

Required Texts:

- United Nations. (2023). Gender-related killings of women and girls (femicide/feminicide): Global estimates of female intimate partner/family-related homicides in 2022. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/11/gender-related-killings-of-women-and-girls-femicide-feminicide-global-estimates-2022#:~:text=Publication%20year%3A%202023&text=This%20year%20recorded%20the%20highest,related%20killings%20is%20gradually%20increasing>.
- Noer, K. U., Chadajah, S. and Rudiatic, E. (2021). There is no trustable data: the state and data accuracy of violence against women in Indonesia. *Heliyon*, 7 (12), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e08552>.
- Jakarta Feminist. (2022). Femicide: An analysis of online coverage of cases of murdered women in Indonesia in 2021. <https://jakartafeminist.com/portfolio/femicide-an-analysis-of-online-coverage-of-cases-of-murdered-women-in-indonesia-in-2021/>
- Pratiwi, A. M. (2019). What's missing from media reports on femicide? *Jakarta Post*. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2019/09/12/whats-missing-from-media-reports-on-femicide.html>.

Learning on Location

- Guest speaker or site visit with activists working toward reducing femicide in Indonesia

Assignment

- Changemaker Profile #2

Session 9: Group Country Profiles

- Dedicated time for group work on country profiles and infographics

Assignments:

- Country Profile and Infographic: Indonesia

MODULE #4: MEXICO

Session 10: Death by the Numbers, Part IV

Discussion Topics: Who is dying? How are they dying? At what age are they dying? Who is collecting this data? How reliable is the data?

Required Texts:

- WHO. Global Health Estimates: Life expectancy and leading causes of death and disability. *Global Health Observatory*.
- WHO Data. Mexico: Health data overview for the United Mexican States. <https://data.who.int/countries/484>
- Lajous, M., Huerta-Gutiérrez, R., Kennedy, J., Olson, D. R., & Weinberger, D. M. (2021). Excess deaths in Mexico City and New York City during the COVID-19 pandemic, March to August 2020. *American Journal of Public Health*, 111(10), 1847–1850. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.2105/ajph.2021.306430>

Session 11: Necropolitics

- Case Study: Migrant deaths and Mexico

Required Texts:

- McLean, L. (2020). A question that has no end: the politics of life and death in the search for disappeared migrants in Mexico. *Citizenship Studies*, 24(8), 994–1009. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1080/13621025.2020.1769027>
- Kaplan, M. A., & Spradley, M. K. (2022). Lost in plain sight: How current burial practices impact migrant death investigation in South Texas. *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, 46(2), 122–139. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1111/napa.12189>
- Jeremy Slack. (2019). *Deported to death : How Drug Violence Is Changing Migration on the US–Mexico Border*. University of California Press. Chapter 6: The Disappeared, the Dead, and the Forgotten
- Tracey, C. (2020). “Fértil Camposanto Llamado México”: Contemporary poetry of U.S.-Mexico border deaths. *Journal of Latino-Latin American Studies* (JOLLAS), 10(2), 1–13. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.18085/1549-9502.10.2.1>
- Soto, G. (2016). Migrant memento mori and the geography of risk. *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 16(3), 335–358. <https://doi-org.reference.sit.edu/10.1177/1469605316673171>

Learning on Location

- Guest speaker or site visit with activists working to address migrant deaths and safety

Assignment

- Changemaker Profile #3

Session 12: Group Country Profiles

- Dedicated time for group work on country profiles and infographics

Assignments:

- Country Profile and Infographic: Mexico
- Collaboration evaluations