

SOC396H1S: World Population Challenges

Professor Hui Zheng
Department of Sociology
University of Toronto
Winter 2026

Time: Thursdays 3:10-5:00pm

Location: See ACORN

Office Hours: Wednesdays 2pm-4pm, 700 University Ave, 17th Floor

Email: huisoc.zheng@utoronto.ca

Teaching Assistant: Jimin Gim

Email: jimin.gim@mail.utoronto.ca

Course Description

This course is designed to introduce students to the tools of demography (i.e., rates, structures, and population dynamics) and use these tools to identify and examine the nature and evidence regarding key population challenges in the world and consequent social, economic, political and cultural problems. More specifically, we will touch upon the following topics: population growth, economic development, and environmental challenges; fertility and population decline; global aging; emerging global health risks; health disparities, despairs, and politics; global immigration and the future of the world.

Course Objectives

The three main goals of this course are to: 1) introduce students to the interdisciplinary literature in the field of demography; 2) teach students to critically assess the major literature across disciplines; 3) demonstrate how a demographic lens can help clarify and provide solutions to contemporary world population problems. Using a demographic lens, students will draw upon multiple disciplines in our approach to learning about contemporary world population challenges. Upon completion of the course students will 1) understand the utilities and limitations of different disciplinary perspectives; 2) understand the benefits of synthesizing multiple disciplinary perspectives; and 3) be able to synthesize and apply knowledge from diverse disciplines to a topic of interest. “The world is flat” (Thomas Friedman). Things happening in the world will eventually affect our community. Through this course, students are expected to learn to think globally.

Prerequisite

Completion of 1.0 SOC at the 200-level is required to take this course. Students without this prerequisite will be removed from the course without notice.

Class Structure

This course is designed to be seminar and class-time will be devoted to lecture and discussion. You are expected to attend all the sessions, complete the readings ahead of time, and actively contribute to class discussion.

Course Materials

There is no required textbook for this course. Instead, there is a list of required readings that consist of a mix of academic articles, population bulletin reports from the *Population Reference Bureau*, and chapters from several books. These course materials are available on Quercus.

Evaluation Criteria

You **must** read the assigned readings for that class session and **actively participate** in class discussions. Lectures often cover materials not included in the course readings.

The course requirements are as follows:

Class participation	15%
Homework	20%
In-class test I	40%
In-class test II	25%

1. Class Participation (15%)

Class participation—preparation, attendance, and discussion—is a core portion of the course.

Preparation (5%). Every student **must** read the required articles prior to the class meeting. In preparation for every class, students are required to compose 1-2 substantive questions for each session's set of readings that they would like to see addressed in the discussion. The questions should be posted to the course discussion board on Quercus by 6 p.m. on Wednesdays, as they will become the basis for our class discussion. The questions may consist of ideas that the readings provoke; critiquing problematic assumptions, logic, and measurement; discussing theoretical and empirical advances; and considering ideas for future directions. To facilitate class discussion, prior to the beginning of class, students should review the questions/comments submitted by other seminar participants to the discussion board.

Attendance (5%). Each student **must** attend the class.

Discussion (5%). Each student **must** actively participate in class discussions.

2. Homework Assignment (20%)

The homework assignment is designed to expose students to fundamental demographic methods and issues. The assignment will help you better understand the course readings and enable you to interpret findings from demographic research. Assignment is time-consuming. Don't expect to do it (well) at the last moment. **Assignment must be turned in by Feb 1. Overdue assignment is not accepted.**

3. In-class Tests (65%)

There will be two in-class tests in this course (see course schedule for dates). The material for the exam will be drawn from the course readings, discussion, and lecture. Please bring a calculator to exams.

Missed Deadlines and Tests

Students who miss a homework deadline or a test will receive a mark of zero for that homework or test unless the reason is a circumstance beyond their control. Within three days of missing a homework deadline or test, students must send the instructor a request for consideration.

Students must document their request with one of the following:

- Absence declaration via ACORN (can only be used once during the semester)
- U of T Verification of Illness or Injury Form
- College Registrar's letter (e.g., in case of personal/family crisis or emergency)
- Letter of Academic Accommodation from Accessibility Services

Students who miss the test or are late in submitting an assignment for other reasons, such as family or other personal reasons, should request their College Registrar to email the instructor.

Turnitin

Students agree that by taking this course all required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism. All submitted papers will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Turnitin.com service is described on the Turnitin.com web site.

Assignments not submitted through *Turnitin* will receive a grade of zero (0%), unless a student instead provides, along with their position paper, sufficient secondary material (e.g., reading notes, outlines of the paper, rough drafts of the final draft, etc.) to establish that the paper they submit is truly their own. The alternative (not submitting via *Turnitin*) is in place because, strictly speaking, using *Turnitin* is voluntary for students at the University of Toronto.

Plagiarism

Be careful to avoid plagiarism. It is a serious academic offense with serious penalties (see the "Code of Behavior on Academic Matters"). If you are using somebody else's ideas, do not present them as your own. Give proper references if you are using somebody else's ideas, and use quotation marks if you are quoting. When in doubt, it is always safer to over-reference -- you are not going to be punished for that. Please also be aware that turning in an old paper, or large parts thereof, for credit in a second (or third etc.) course, is considered an academic offense that results in students being referred off to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Use of Generative AI Tools

You will not be permitted to use generative AI on any of the homework or in-class tests. While some generative AI tools are currently available for free in Canada, please be warned that these

tools have not been vetted by the University of Toronto and might not meet University guidelines or requirements for privacy, intellectual property, security, accessibility, and records retention. Generative AI may produce content, which is incorrect or misleading, or inconsistent with the expectations of this course. These tools may even provide citations to sources that don't exist—and submitting work with false citations is an academic offense. These tools may be subject to service interruptions, software modifications, and pricing changes during the semester.

Generative AI is not required to complete any aspect of this course. Instead, it is recommended that you treat generative AI as a supplementary tool only for exploration or further study. Ultimately, you (and not any AI tool) are responsible for your own learning in this course. It is your responsibility to critically evaluate the content generated, and to regularly assess your own learning independent of generative AI tools. Overreliance on generative AI may give you a false sense of how much you've actually learned, which can lead to poor performance on the assignments, in later courses, or in future work or studies after graduation.

Accessibility Needs

The University of Toronto is committed to accessibility. If you require accommodations or have any accessibility concerns, please contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible: disability.services@utoronto.ca or <http://studentlife.utoronto.ca/accessibility>.

Class Schedule and Required Readings

Jan 8 – Introduction: review of syllabus

- Movie Screening: Demographic Bomb: demography is destiny

Jan 15 – The tools of demography

- Population Reference Bureau. 2021. *Population: An Introduction to Demography*.

Jan 22 – Population growth and homeostatic balances

- Livi-Bacci, M. 1997. *A Concise History of World Population*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1-3.

Jan 29 – Demographic transitions and runaway population growth

- Cohen, Joel. 1995. *How Many People Can the Earth Support?* New York: Norton Publishing Company. Chapter 4. Pp.46-75.
- Kaneda, Toshiko, and Carl Haub. 2021. *How Many People Have Ever Lived on Earth?* <https://www.prb.org/articles/how-many-people-have-ever-lived-on-earth/>

Homework is due on Feb 1.

Feb 5 – Population growth, development, and environment

- Population Reference Bureau. 2014. “*A Practical Guide to Population and Development*.”
- Dovers, Stephen, and Colin Butler. 2020. *Population and Environment: A Global Challenge*. <https://www.science.org.au/curious/earth-environment/population-environment>
- UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2022. *Why population growth matters for sustainable development*.

Feb 12 – In-class test I

Feb 16-20 Reading week

Feb 26 – Fertility decline and lowest-low fertility

- IHME. 2024. The Lancet: Dramatic declines in global fertility rates set to transform global population patterns by 2100. <https://www.healthdata.org/news-events/newsroom/news-releases/lancet-dramatic-declines-global-fertility-rates-set-transform>
- Population Reference Bureau. 2021. Why Is the U.S. Birth Rate Declining? <https://www.prb.org/resources/why-is-the-u-s-birth-rate-declining/>

Mar 5 – Global aging

- Kinsella, Kevin and David R. Phillips. 2005. “Global Aging: The Challenge of Success.” *Population Bulletin* 60 (1).
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2023. “World Social Report 2023: Leaving No One Behind in an Ageing World.”

Mar 12 – Global health risks

- Michael H Merson, Jeffrey O’Malley, David Serwadda, and Chantawipa Apisuk. 2008. The history and challenge of HIV prevention. *The Lancet* 372:475-77.
- Population Reference Bureau. 2016. “Interventions to Address the Economic Causes and Consequences of HIV/AIDS.”
- Jaacks et al. 2019. “The obesity transition: stages of the global epidemic.” *Lancet Diabetes Endocrinol* 7: 231–40.

Mar 19 – Health disparities, despair, and politics

- Marmot, Michael G. 1994. Social differentials in health within and between populations. *Daedalus* 123(4):197-216.
- Case, A., & Deaton, A. 2015. Rising morbidity and mortality in midlife among white non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st century. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 112(49), 15078–15083
- Bor, Jacob. 2017. “Diverging Life Expectancies and Voting Patterns in the 2016 US Presidential Election.” *American Journal of Public Health* 107(10): 1560-1562.

Mar 26 – Global migration, and the future of the world

- Mavroudi, Elizabeth, and Caroline Nagel. 2016. *Global Migration: Patterns, Processes and Politics*. Chapter 1 “Making Sense of Global Migration.”
- World Bank. 2024. *Migrants, Refugees, and Societies*. “Overview.”
- The National Intelligence Council. 2021. “The Future of Migration.”

Apr 2 – In-class test II