University of Bern
Department of Economics

Fall 2026

Seminar "The Economics of Inequality"

Instructors

Michael Gerfin (michael.gerfin@unibe.ch)
Jeanne Tschopp (jeanne.tschopp@unibe.ch)

Teaching Assistant

Alma Zimmermann (alma.zimmermann@students.unibe.ch)

Time and location

Monday 10:15-12:00, location tba. This seminar is limited to 12 participants.

Description

Students summarize, interpret, and present academic research on topics related to inequality, including income, wealth, and wage inequality. The seminar combines the discussion of existing research with a hands-on empirical component. Students apply methods commonly used in the field to real data and present their findings. The course consists of two main tasks: (1) the presentation of an existing research paper selected from a provided list and (2) a short empirical assignment, also selected from a provided list, in which students apply standard methods to analyze real data in STATA or R. Students work in pairs on both tasks, and the same team is maintained throughout the seminar. There is no requirement to write a seminar paper.

Prerequisites and materials

We strongly recommend that the seminar participants have successfully completed Microeconomics I and Econometrics I. Readings will be indicated on Ilias.

Organizational details

Language: The seminar is held in English.

Broad schedule:

- **Introductory classes:** Four sessions from **September 14 to October 5**
  - Sessions are designed to review key empirical concepts and methods used in the analysis of inequality, and to provide the tools needed for both the research paper presentation and the empirical assignment.
  - Students must form groups and select both a research paper and an empirical assignment, on a first-come, first-served basis, by **September 18** (midnight).
    - A Google Sheet will be shared by the instructors for this purpose.

        - Papers and background reading materials for the research paper as well as detailed instructions for each empirical assignment will be available in a designated Ilias folder.

- **Meeting with the TA: Between September 18 and October 1**
    - Each group meets with the TA once to discuss the selected assignment and clarify the tasks.
    - The meeting lasts 30 minutes. Please email the TA to arrange a date and time.
    - After October 1st, each group may request one additional optional 30-minute meeting with the TA.

- **Independent work and meetings: October 12 to November 9**
    - Activities include reading papers, working with data using STATA or R, and preparing presentations.
    - Each group meets the instructor four times in total:
        - Two meetings for the empirical assignment: The purpose of these meetings is to discuss your findings and the draft of your presentation. Any technical questions regarding the assignment should be emailed to us in advance, at least four days before the meeting.
        - Two meetings for the research paper: The purpose of these meetings is to discuss the draft of your presentation.
    - Meetings last 30 minutes and take place during class time in the supervisor's office.
        - Meetings are an integral part of the learning process and of the grading

- **Presentation sessions: November 16 to November 30**
    - Each group gives:
        - one presentation of their assigned research paper (20 min + 10 min discussion)
        - one presentation of their empirical assignment (10 min + 5 min discussion)
    - The two presentations may take place on different dates.
    - Presentation slides must be emailed to the responsible instructor one week before the presentation. The instructor will upload the slides to the shared folder.
    - Each student must take an active and roughly equal speaking role in the presentation. While students work in pairs, individual grades may differ within a team based on each student's performance during the presentation.

- **Final wrap-up session: December 7**
    - The final session will include a collective discussion of the topics covered during the seminar, general feedback on the presentations, and an opportunity for students to reflect on their learning experience.
    - Student participation throughout the presentation sessions and the wrap-up session will be taken into account to adjust the final grade (rounding up or down).

<u>Expectations:</u>

- **Research paper presentation:**
    - Students are expected to have a solid understanding of the paper
    - The presentation should cover:
        - the research question and motivation
        - the main methodology
        - the key findings
        - a critical assessment of the paper's strengths and limitations
    - Presentations should connect to the topics discussed in the introductory sessions and may incorporate insights from additional readings
    - Technical details should be explained at an intuitive level

- **Empirical assignment:**
    - Using the provided data, students analyze an empirical pattern related to inequality, as outlined in the assignment instructions.
    - The presentation should:
        - describe the data
        - briefly explain the empirical approach
        - present and discuss the main findings and their interpretation

- **General expectations:**
    - Meetings are mandatory and part of the grading. Students are expected to come prepared and actively engage with feedback.
    - Each group meets the instructor twice per task:
        - First meeting: discussion of initial ideas, structure, and approach (students should bring a draft outline or preliminary work)
        - Second meeting: discussion of a near-final and well-polished version of their slides (students should bring a well-developed and largely polished set of slides, and, for the empirical assignment, preliminary results)
    - Both students must contribute actively to all presentations.
    - Attendance is mandatory.
    - Active participation in discussions is expected and will be graded.
    - Students are expected to familiarize themselves with all topics and to carefully prepare the papers discussed in class.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the seminar, students are able to:

- summarize, explain, and critically assess an academic research paper in a structured presentation,
- explain the main economic mechanisms underlying different forms of inequality,
- discuss the advantages and limitations of policies aimed at reducing inequality,
- produce, interpret, and clearly communicate empirical results using real data and standard methods,
- work effectively in teams.

Grading

The final grade will be based on the following components:

1. Research paper presentation (Task 1): 50%
2. Empirical assignment (Task 2): 50%
3. Participation: used to round the final grade up or down (no separate weight)

Attendance is mandatory. Students are required to attend all presentation sessions.

The evaluation of Tasks 1 and 2 includes both the final presentations and preparedness for meetings, as well as engagement with feedback.

Dates

Intro course	Sep. 14	10.15 – 12.00
Intro course	Sep. 21	10.15 – 12.00
Intro course	Sep. 28	10.15 – 12.00
Intro course	Oct. 5	10.15 – 12.00
Meetings with supervisor	Oct. 12	10.15 – 12.00
Meetings with supervisor	Oct. 19	10.15 – 12.00
Meetings with supervisor	Oct. 26	10.15 – 12.00
Meetings with supervisor	Nov. 2	10.15 – 12.00
Meetings with supervisor	Nov. 9	10.15 – 12.00
Student presentations	Nov. 16	10.15 – 12.00
Student presentations	Nov. 23	10.15 – 12.00
Student presentations	Nov. 30	10.15 – 12.00
Wrap-up session	Dec. 7	10.15 – 12.00

Topics:

[1] C. Goldin and L. Katz. The Race between Education and Technology: The Evolution of U.S. Educational Wage Differentials, 1890 to 2004. NBER Working Paper 12984, March 2007.

[2] D. Autor and D. Dorn. The Growth of Low-Skill Service Jobs and the Polarization of the US Labor Market. American Economic Review, 103(5):1553–1597, 2013.

[3] C. Goldin. A Grand Gender Converence: Its Last Chapter. American Economic Review, 104(4):1091–1119, 2014.

[4] E. Barth, A. Bryson, J. C. Davis, and R. Freeman. It's Where You Work: Increases in the Dispersion of Earnings Across Establishments and Individuals in the United States. Journal of Labor Economics, 34(S2): S67–S97, 2016.

[5] Blanchet, T., L. Chancel, and A. Gethin. Why is Europe more equal than the United States? American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 14(4): 480–518, 2022.

[6] Blanchet, T. and C. Martínez-Toledano. Wealth inequality dynamics in Europe and the United States: Understanding the Determinants, Journal of Monetary Economics 133, 25–43, 2023.

[7] He, Z. and Y. Jiang. Decomposing income inequality in the United States: 1968–2018, Empirical Economics, 65:2751–2778, 2023.

[8] Almas, I, A. W. Cappelen, and B. Tungodden. "Cutthroat Capitalism versus Cuddly Socialism: Are Americans More Meritocratic and Efficiency-Seeking than Scandinavians?" Journal of Political Economy 128(5), 1753-1784, 2020.