

Special Topics in Public Policy: Population Policy

Semester:	Spring 2025-2026
Course code:	PPOL 6101B (3 credits)
Course title:	Special Topics in Public Policy: Population Policy
Abbreviated title:	Population Policy
Course instructor:	Prof. Stuart Gietel-Basten

Course description:

Demographic change is a crucial policy issue for all countries, from those facing rapid population growth to those grappling with stagnation, ageing, and decline. This course provides a comprehensive exploration of population policy, tracing its historical roots from a 20th-century model focused on controlling individual behaviour for macroeconomic goals to the paradigm shift embodied by the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). The course critically examines the contemporary paradigm, grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasises human rights, reproductive autonomy, and gender equality. Students will analyse key thematic areas including migration, health, family and fertility, ageing, and youth policy, culminating in strategies for managing contemporary demographic challenges.

A distinctive feature of the course is a series of four practitioner sessions, in which senior population-policy practitioners from international organisations and government engage with students on the realities of designing and delivering population policy in different settings. Students apply a structured analytical rubric to each session, building toward the final assessment.

Recommended Prerequisite:

Nil

Intended Learning Outcomes:

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

- Trace the historical evolution of population policy from 19th-century Malthusianism, through the eugenics era and the 1994 ICPD paradigm shift, to contemporary debates over fertility decline, ageing, and migration.
- Critically evaluate the persistence of population-control and 'quality'-based logics — including eugenics and scientific racism — and recognise their re-emergence in present-day policy discourse.
- Analyse the role of international frameworks (the ICPD Programme of Action, the SDGs, MIPAA, the GCM, ICPD+30) in shaping national population policy, and identify the recurring gap between framework principles and policy delivery.
- Apply a structured analytical rubric — covering rights, evidence, political economy, international frameworks, implementation, historical continuity, and futures — to specific population-policy cases and to the four practitioner sessions.

- Compare the design, implementation, and likely consequences of contrasting policy responses to contemporary demographic challenges, including pronatalism, restrictive migration, and ageing-society reform.
- Synthesise material from across the course — including the practitioner sessions — into coherent, evidence-based, and politically realistic policy recommendations.

Course outline

WEEK	Topic
1 4/2	Intro & What is Population Policy?
2 11/2	Counting People (Measurement & Data)
3 18/2	HOLIDAY
4 25/2	Population Growth in the Past; (Neo-)Malthusianism and Antinatalism
5 4/3	Population 'Quality', Eugenics and Scientific Racism
6 11/3	International Conference on Population and Development 1994; International Frameworks since ICPD
7 18/3	Mid-term Exam
8 25/3	Practitioner Session 1
9 1/4	Practitioner Session 2
— 8/4	MID-TERM BREAK
10 15/4	Practitioner Session 3
11 22/4	Practitioner Session 4
12 29/4	Youth Bulge, Demographic Dividend(s); Ageing
13 6/5	Field trip to LegCo and discussion of population policy with LegCo member

Practitioner sessions

Across the second half of the course, students engage with four senior population-policy practitioners from international organisations and government. Each session pairs a substantive course theme with first-hand practitioner perspective. Students prepare in advance, lead the questioning during the session, and produce a short post-session reflection that locates the practitioner's account within the course material.

The four sessions are as follows:

- Session 1 (Week 8) — Public Health and Population Policy. Dr. Tarun Weeramanthri, public-health practitioner with experience of national and sub-national policy implementation.
- Session 2 (Week 9) — UNFPA: Africa, Middle East, and Latin America. Alanna Armitage, senior UNFPA representative on population policy across diverse middle- and lower-income contexts.
- Session 3 (Week 10) — UNFPA Myanmar: Population Policy in Crisis and Conflict Settings. Jaime Nadal, UNFPA Representative, Myanmar.

- Session 4 (Week 11) — UNFPA China: Population Policy in a Country Balancing an ICPD Framework against a Demographic Policy Legacy. Nadia Rasheed, UNFPA China.

Practitioner session rubric

Students approach each practitioner session with a common analytical rubric of seven lenses. The rubric is introduced in Week 1 and applied across all four sessions, building toward the synthesis required in the final assessment.

- Rights and Ethics — How are reproductive autonomy, dignity, and the rights of vulnerable groups handled in this practitioner's setting?
- Evidence and Data — What evidence base is the practitioner using? What gets counted, and what does not?
- Political Economy — Which actors hold power in this setting? Who funds the work? Where is the resistance?
- International Frameworks — How do ICPD, the SDGs, MIPAA, the GCM, and other instruments operate in practice in this setting?
- Implementation — What is the gap between policy design and policy delivery? What goes wrong, and why?
- Historical Continuity — Where do older policy logics (population control, eugenics, pronatalism) reappear in present-day work?
- Futures and Emerging Challenges — What does the practitioner see as the most pressing population-policy questions of the next decade?

For each session, students are expected to prepare two questions in advance — drawn from at least two different lenses — and to submit a short post-session reflection. These reflections feed into the participation grade and into preparation for the final exam.

Course requirements and grading weighting

No course requirements.

Class Participation & Engagement (20%): Based on attendance, peer review of group work, contribution to in-class discussions and activities, advance preparation for and engagement with the four practitioner sessions, and quality of post-session reflections.

Mid-term Exam (30%): Closed-book examination of material covered in classes up to Week 7. The exam consists of multiple-choice and written questions.

Final Exam (50%): Closed-book, three-hour handwritten examination covering all material across the course. The exam is in two parts of equal weight (50% each):

- Part A — Essay. Students choose ONE of four prompts spanning the major themes of the course (approximately 600–800 words). Strong essays will refer explicitly to material from the practitioner sessions.
- Part B — Policy brief. Students respond to a hypothetical case scenario, critiquing a stylised opposition policy and setting out an alternative grounded in ICPD principles that is also politically viable and macro-economically credible (approximately 500–600 words).

Detailed marking criteria and a sample paper will be provided in advance of the examination.