

SOCIOLOGY 353
Public Policy and the Criminal Justice System:
Perceptions and Realities
Spring 2018
TTH 9:30-10:50 VKC 154

Dr. Karen Sternheimer

Office: HSH 318

Office hours: TTH 11:30-1:30 and by appointment

Phone: 213-740-3541

sternhei@usc.edu

In this course we will consider how we know what we think we know about crime in the United States. Beginning with an analysis of news coverage of crime and crime in popular culture, we will analyze how meanings about crime (as well as who commits crimes and why) are constructed in social contexts. We will also explore actual crime trends and consider the extent to which crime and treatment within the criminal justice system is related to inequality, particularly racial and economic disparities.

Fear of crime is a potent personal and political force. The aim of this course is to examine both the myths and realities of crime in the United States to better understand the complexities of why people commit various crimes as well as societal reaction to crime. We will consider how changes can be made through political action and public policy.

Course Goals:

1. Explore concepts, theories, and empirical research that seek to explain crime in the United States.
2. Critically examine the relationship between crime, punishment, and class, race, ethnicity, and gender.
3. Understand how and why crime is used both to entertain and in political processes.
4. [Develop critical thinking, research, data analysis, writing, presentation, and teamwork skills.](#)

Student evaluation:

Attendance and participation	15%
Tuesday In-Class Essays	5%
Take Home Midterm (due 2/22)	25%
Research project (due various dates)	25%
Take Home Final exam (due 5/8 at 10am)	30%

Tracking your progress:

You are expected to seek more than a grade from this course. However, I realize grades are very important to students. You are responsible for keeping a record of your grades and to be aware of your progress as well as areas where improvement is needed, and for seeking help from your peers or professor. Use the breakdown above to calculate your grade.

Participation and Attendance:

Active student participation in class discussions and activities is absolutely essential for this class. Therefore, students are expected to attend every class meeting prepared to discuss the assigned reading.

Students are expected to welcome differing viewpoints and to respect the thoughts and ideas of all class participants. You are expected to treat everyone in the class with respect; this means quietly listening while others are speaking, and arriving and leaving on time. Note that a great deal of information covered in the lectures may not be in the readings, and vice versa. *Students are responsible for getting notes or assignments from classmates* should an absence become necessary.

Students often overlook the importance of participation in their course grade. This grade is based on the percentage of class meetings you attend (you can't participate if you are not there!), and may be increased or

decreased based on your participation. Things that will increase it are comments and questions that reflect knowledge of course material, as well as courteous attention to your professor and peers. Things that will bring your grade down include disruptive behavior (includes ringing cell phones and texting), rudeness towards your professor or peers, and comments that reveal a lack of preparation and attention. Ideally all class members will attend class regularly, prepared to discuss the reading and be open and respectful of differing viewpoints.

It is your responsibility to sign in every class, as attendance will be taken at the beginning of each meeting. To receive full attendance credit you must attend the entire class session. Signing in for a previous day is not possible, so be sure to sign in.

Technology Etiquette:

E-mail is a great resource but never takes the place of a conversation. **Please include “SOCI 353” in the subject line of any email.** Lengthy questions or concerns should be addressed during office hours or a special appointment. Keep in mind that your professor is quite busy and probably cannot check e-mail as often as you may. **Absolutely no assignments will be accepted via e-mail.**

Cell phones and laptops or electronic devices must be turned off and out of sight during all class meetings, and may only be used by special permission. Multitasking (web surfing, Facebooking, texting, studying for another class) is expressly forbidden.

Essays:

For five Tuesdays of the semester (from 1/23-2/20) there will be a brief essay assignment at the start of class to ascertain how well you are engaged in the course (attending lectures and reading assignments). The assignment will start at the beginning of class so if you are late you will lose time and may not be able to complete the assignment. The essay topic will come from a central theme from the previous week's reading and course discussions and will be an opportunity for you to reflect on the material. Do not assume that simply filling a page will earn you credit; your writing must reflect awareness of central issues and ideas expressed by authors and in class. These assignments are graded credit/no credit and are each worth 1% of your total course grade. **Missed essays or essays that earn “no credit” can be made up with extra credit assignments, as noted below.**

Extra Credit

After the midterm, an essay question will be posted on Blackboard at the end of each week. Your one page response must be uploaded onto Blackboard before the start of class the following Tuesday. By completing these assignments you may make up any missed essays or no credit essays and/or earn up to 3 percent extra credit in the course (1 percent per essay).

You may earn *up to* 10 points extra on your group project grade or midterm (i.e. a grade of 90 can be increased to a grade of 100) by reading one of the optional books in its entirety (listed on Blackboard) and answering the questions (also on Blackboard) in a 5-7 page paper (due date 4/17). A brief, informal presentation to the class is required as well.

Research Project:

You will have the option of completing an individual research project **or** participate in a group research project, listed on the last page of the syllabus, worth 25 percent of your course grade. Late papers will be reduced 10 percent per day; no late group presentations or reports will be accepted.

Midterm & Final Exam:

Both the midterm and final exams will be take home, essay format and should incorporate your ideas with those in the reading and class discussions. Both exams will be distributed at least one week prior to the due date. All assignments (including term papers) must be submitted in hard copy and on Blackboard (instructions will be provided). Late papers will be reduced by 10% per day (including weekend days); **no late final exams can be accepted.**

All assignments must reflect original work. Plagiarism will not be tolerated and consequences will be in accordance with university policy. Any papers that are dramatically different in style and content from in-class work will require an oral exam. Failure to appear or to successfully demonstrate that the work is your own within one week of notification will result in a failing grade and will be reported to Student Judicial Affairs. Extra credit opportunities may arise at times; note that special individual opportunities for extra credit violate University policy and will not be considered. Finally, grades are earned, they are not given. It is the student's responsibility to do the best work they are capable of producing. *Nitpicking over points is discouraged, as it reveals a commitment to a grade rather than to learning.* **Continued enrollment in this course indicates acceptance of class policies.**

****Any special learning needs should be brought to my attention as soon as possible****

Required Reading:

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2012.

All other readings will be posted on Blackboard. **Please print them out, put them in a binder and bring them to class each meeting.**

****These dates are estimates and subject to change****

I. Perceptions of Crime: How do we know what we think we know about crime?

- | | | | | |
|---|----|------|----------------------------------|---|
| 1 | T | 1/9 | Introduction to the course | |
| 2 | TH | 1/11 | News coverage of crime | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barlow, Race and the Problem of Crime in Time and Newsweek • Potter & Kappeler, Constructing Crime |
| 3 | T | 1/16 | Where does crime news come from? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welch et al., State Managers, Intellectuals, and the Media |
| 4 | TH | 1/18 | Crime as entertainment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cavender & Bond-Maupin, Fear and Loathing on Reality Television • Potter & Kappeler, Constructing Crime Epilogue |

II. Realities of Crime in the United States

- | | | | | |
|---|----|------|--|--|
| 5 | T | 1/23 | How do we measure crime?
FIRST IN-CLASS ESSAY | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mosher et al., The Mismeasure of Crime OPTION #1 TOPIC STATEMENT DUE |
| 6 | TH | 1/25 | Official statistics and crime trends in the U.S. | Please explore https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016 |
| 7 | T | 1/30 | Race, ethnicity, and crime
SECOND IN-CLASS ESSAY | Please explore https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv15.pdf |
| 8 | TH | 2/1 | Relationships between victims and offenders | Please explore http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/toc_3.html
OPTION #2 TOPIC STATEMENT DUE |

III. Explanations of Crime

- | | | | | |
|----|----|-----|--|---|
| 9 | T | 2/6 | Overview of theories of crime
THIRD IN-CLASS ESSAY | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Huff, Historical Explanations of Crime OPTION #1 PAPER DUE |
| 10 | TH | 2/8 | Structural explanations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merton, Social Structure and Anomie • Quinney, Class, State, and Crime |

11	T	2/13	Structural explanations: race and class FOURTH IN-CLASS ESSAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sampson & Wilson, Towards a Theory of Race, Crime, and Inequality Sampson, Rethinking Crime and Immigration
12	TH	2/15	Deterrence theories DISTRIBUTE MIDTERM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stafford & Warr, A Reconceptualization of General and Specific Deterrence OPTION #2 PAPER DUE
13	T	2/20	Interactionist theories FIFTH IN-CLASS ESSAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sutherland & Cressy, A Theory of Differential Association Sykes & Matza, Techniques of Neutralization

IV. Law Enforcement and the Criminal Justice System

14	TH	2/22	Introduction to law enforcement and the CJS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alexander, Introduction MIDTERM DUE
15	T	2/27	Race, policing, and community relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anderson, The Police and the Black Male
16	TH	3/1	Creative policing solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goldstein, Problem Oriented Policing
17	T	3/6	Arrest and interrogations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leo, Miranda's Revenge
18	TH	3/8	Prosecution, juries and jury selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cole, The Decision to Prosecute
19	T	3/20	Trial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alexander, Chapter 3

V. Punishment and Public Policy

20	TH	3/22	The "war on gangs"	GROUP PROJECT TOPIC STMT DUE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alexander, Chapter 1
21	T	3/27	The "war on drugs" in historical context	
22	TH	3/29	The "war on drugs"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alexander, Chapter 2
23	T	4/3	Sentencing and mass incarceration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alexander, Chapter 5
24	TH	4/5	Realities of prison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Human Rights Watch, The Human Rights Watch Global Report on Prisons
25	T	4/10	Prison policy and economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alexander, Chapter 4 GROUP PROJECT #1/JEP TOPIC STMT DUE
26	TH	4/12	Getting out: Life after prison	
27	T	4/17	Readjustment after prison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uggen et al., Criminal Disenfranchisement GROUP PROJECT #2
28	TH	4/19	The death penalty and public policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Westervelt & Cook, Coping with Innocence After Death Row
29	T	4/24	Public Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pager, The Mark of a Criminal Record EXTRA CREDIT READING ASSIGNMENT DUE
30	TH	4/26	Conclusions: Race, class, and justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Robinson, The Ultimate Sanction
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stolzenberg & D'Alessio, Gun Availability and Violent Crime JEP PAPERS DUE
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alexander, Chapter 6

FINAL EXAM DUE Tuesday May 8th at 10am in HSH 314; NO LATE PAPERS ACCEPTED

Research Paper Topics:

Choose one of the following paper or group project options. All papers are due on the dates noted; late papers will be deducted by 10% per day and 5% for papers turned in after 9:30 am on their due date. **A one-page topic statement and outline are due on dates noted, worth 10% of your overall grade. Each participant must include a 1-2 page essay detailing their contributions and what they learned from the project.**

PAPER OPTION #1: Crime Coverage Analysis

Choose one specific crime (or type of crime) and find **at least ten** articles from mainstream news sources (newspapers, magazines, TV news websites) about this example of crime and analyze them, looking for common themes. Use one course reading from the first two weeks of class as a guide to your analysis: *note that this paper is not simply a description of ten articles*. What assumptions do the articles make about this type of crime? Trends? Perpetrators? Punishment? Do they help support misperceptions about the realities of this type of crime or dispute them (or both)? Discuss your findings in an 8-10 page paper, **due February 6. No option #1 papers will be accepted after February 13; see detailed instructions on Blackboard.**

PAPER OPTION #2: Crime Data Analysis

Choose one form of crime for which the government collects statistics. What are the long-term trends? Discuss the relationship between this type of crime and race, gender, age, location, and any other factors available. What is the average sentence for this type of crime? Does it vary by age, race, or gender? How were the data on this type of crime gathered? How are the data on this type of crime limited? If applicable, how do data from law enforcement differ from victimization surveys? What do you suggest would be the best way to gather information on this type of crime in the future? Discuss your findings in a 8-10 page paper, **due February 15; no option #2 papers will be accepted after February 22; see detailed instructions on Blackboard.**

Group Project #1: Prison in the United States

Discuss the overall trends in incarceration in the United States: who is in prison and for what charges? What is the racial/ethnic, gender, and age composition of those incarcerated, and for those receiving the death penalty? How do these statistics compare with other countries around the world? Your presentation should also explore the financial costs of incarceration, for the nation, states, and local communities. Discuss your findings in an 8-10 page report, **due April 10, and in a class presentation** that day (no late projects or presentations accepted). Each student will write a brief essay detailing their contribution to the project and anonymously evaluate group members. **Detailed instructions will be posted on Blackboard.**

Group Project #2: Wrongful Conviction in the United States

What factors make it difficult for an innocent person to be exonerated once convicted? What struggles do both attorneys and their clients face in the process? Choose cases of **at least three** people who were convicted, served time in prison and later found to be innocent (the three **cannot** include case studies we discuss in class). What factors led to their conviction? Their exoneration? Be sure to apply ideas from course readings throughout your paper. Discuss your findings in an 8-10 page report, **due April 12, and in a class presentation** (no late projects or presentations accepted). Each student will write a brief essay detailing their contribution to the project and anonymously evaluate group members. **Detailed instructions will be posted on Blackboard.**

JEP (Collaboration Optional)

Use your participation in JEP as data for your term paper (10% of your paper grade will be based on your JEP evaluation). Based on your observations, choose one or more theories of crime to test whether it explains the circumstances of the people you are working with. How does the program seek to reshape their behavior? Do you predict that it will help them in the future? Based on your observations, what suggestions do you have to improve this and other programs to help young people avoid criminal involvement in the future? *You may partner with one other classmate and share a paper grade.* **Discuss your findings in a 7-9 page paper, due April 24, and in an informal class presentation. No JEP papers will be accepted after April 28. Detailed instructions will be posted on Blackboard.**