



# USC University of Southern California

**SOCIOLOGY 353**  
**Public Policy and the Criminal Justice System:**  
**Perceptions and Realities**  
**Fall 2020**  
**TTH 2-3:20 on Zoom**

**Dr. Karen Sternheimer**

Office hours: TTH 11:30-1:30 (*by appointment on Zoom; other appointment times may be available as well*)

[sternhei@usc.edu](mailto: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. Identify concepts, theories, and empirical research that seek to explain crime in the United States.
2. Describe the relationship between crime and punishment and class, race, ethnicity, and gender.
3. Locate and interpret government-collected crime statistics.
4. Assess how and why crime is used to entertain, produce fear, and shape political processes and public policies.
5. [Develop critical thinking, research, data analysis, writing, presentation, and teamwork skills.](#)

**Student evaluation:**

Participation	10%
Reflective Blackboard Journal Entries	5%
Weekly Essays	5%
Take Home Midterm (due 10/1)	25%
Research project (due various dates)	25%
Take Home Final exam (due 11/17 at 4pm PST)	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.

## **USC technology rental program**

If you need resources to successfully participate in your classes, such as a laptop or internet hotspot, you may be eligible for the university's equipment rental program. To apply, please [submit an application](#).

## **USC Technology Support Links**

[Zoom information for students](#)

[Blackboard help for students](#)

[Software available to USC Campus](#)

## **Technology Etiquette:**

E-mail is a great resource but never takes the place of a conversation. Please include "SOCL 313" in the subject line. Lengthy questions or concerns should be addressed during office hours or a special appointment. Emails are typically answered within one business day. Absolutely no assignments will be accepted via e-mail. We will be using Blackboard (<https://blackboard.usc.edu>) for all course content.

Even in an online platform, your complete focus is expected during live Zoom sessions. Please do not multitask during meetings. You are encouraged to attend class as if you would in person: sitting upright and ready to participate and share video and audio.

## **Synchronous session recording notice**

Synchronous sessions will be recorded and provided to all students asynchronously. To access previous recordings, go to Blackboard, Zoom, and then Cloud Recordings. ***USC prohibits sharing of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment.***

## **Participation (10%):**

This class is based on active student participation in discussions and activities and is designed to be hands-on and experiential. Students are expected to attend class meetings prepared to discuss the assigned reading and participate in all activities. If you are not able to attend a live Zoom session, you are expected to fully participate in the discussion board conversation on Blackboard that week. Discussion questions will be posted on Mondays and Thursdays each week. You are encouraged to participate on the discussion board even if you are able to attend.

Students are expected to welcome differing viewpoints and to respect the thoughts and ideas of all class participants, listen quietly while others are speaking, and arrive and leave meetings on time. Note that a great deal of information covered in class may not be in the readings, and vice versa. Students are responsible for getting notes or assignments from Blackboard and Zoom recordings.

A full rubric detailing how participation as grades is posted on Blackboard on the "Syllabus and Grading" tab. Active participation in activities, comments and questions that reflect knowledge of course material, as well as courteous attention to your professor and peers are expected.

## **Reflective Blackboard Journal Entries (5%):**

Each week, you are asked to reflect on what you have learned during the week and what questions you have about the material and your project using Blackboard's Journal function. There will be ten journal entry requirements, each worth .5% of your grade. Only you and the professor can see these entries. They are due each week of the semester by 11:59 pm PST on Fridays.

## **Essays:**

Before the midterm, there will be five essay assignments to ascertain your comprehension of the course material. 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. These essays will be posted on Blackboard by 5pm on the Thursday they are listed, and due the following Tuesday before the start of class. In order to earn credit your writing must reflect awareness of central issues and ideas expressed by authors and in class (see rubric on Blackboard for more specific details). These assignments are graded credit/partial

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 11/5). A brief, informal discussion of your paper with 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 midterms 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 are built into this class; 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 be ready to discuss them during each class each meeting on the dates posted below.**

**\*\*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  | 8/18 | Thinking critically about crime | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Potter &amp; Kappeler, Constructing Crime</li><li>• Lee, Want to Talk about Policing on TV?</li></ul> |
| 2 | TH | 8/20 | News coverage of crime          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Barlow, Race and the Problem of Crime in Time and Newsweek</li></ul>                                  |
- Essay #1 (due 8/25)**

- |   |    |      |                                  |  |
|---|----|------|----------------------------------|--|
| 3 | T  | 8/25 | Where does crime news come from? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welch et al., State Managers, Intellectuals, and the Media</li> </ul>   |
| 4 | TH | 8/27 | Crime as entertainment           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cavender &amp; Bond-Maupin, Fear and Loathing on Reality Television</li> <li>• Potter &amp; Kappeler, Constructing Crime Epilogue</li> </ul> <p><b>Essay #2 (due 9/1)</b></p> |

## II. Realities of Crime in the United States

- |   |    |      |  |   |
|---|----|------|--|---|
| 5 | T  | 9/1  | How do we measure crime?                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mosher et al., The Mismeasure of Crime</li> </ul> <p><b>OPTION #1 TOPIC STATEMENT DUE</b></p>  |
| 6 | TH | 9/3  | Official statistics and crime trends in the U.S. | <p>Please explore <a href="https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019">https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019</a></p> <p><b>Essay #3 (due 9/8)</b></p>  |
| 7 | T  | 9/8  | Race, ethnicity, and crime                       | <p>Please explore <a href="https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv18.pdf">https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv18.pdf</a></p>   |
| 8 | TH | 9/10 | Relationships between victims and offenders      | <p>Please explore <a href="http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/toc_3.html">http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/toc_3.html</a></p> <p><b>OPTION #2 TOPIC STATEMENT DUE</b></p> <p><b>Essay #4 (due 9/15)</b></p> |

## III. Explanations of Crime

- |    |    |      |  |  |
|----|----|------|--|--|
| 9  | T  | 9/15 | Structural explanations of crime                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Merton, Social Structure and Anomie</li> <li>• Quinney, Class, State, and Crime</li> </ul> <p><b>OPTION #1 PAPER DUE</b></p>  |
| 10 | TH | 9/17 | Structural explanations: race and class          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sampson &amp; Wilson, Towards a Theory of Race, Crime, and Inequality</li> <li>• Sampson, Rethinking Crime and Immigration</li> </ul> <p><b>Essay #5 (due 9/22)</b></p> |
| 11 | T  | 9/22 | Deterrence theories<br><b>DISTRIBUTE MIDTERM</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stafford &amp; Warr, A Reconceptualization of General and Specific Deterrence</li> </ul> <p><b>OPTION #2 PAPER DUE</b></p>  |
| 12 | TH | 9/24 | Interactionist theories                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sutherland &amp; Cressy, A Theory of Differential Association</li> <li>• Sykes &amp; Matza, Techniques of Neutralization</li> </ul>                                     |

## IV. Law Enforcement and the Criminal Justice System

- |    |    |      |   |   |
|----|----|------|---|---|
| 13 | T  | 9/29 | Introduction to law enforcement and the CJS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alexander, Introduction</li> </ul>   |
| 14 | TH | 10/1 | Race, policing, and community relations     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anderson, The Police and the Black Male</li> </ul> <p><b>MIDTERM DUE</b></p> |
| 15 | T  | 10/6 | Creative policing solutions                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goldstein, Problem Oriented Policing</li> </ul>                              |
| 16 | TH | 10/8 | Arrest and interrogations                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leo, Miranda's Revenge</li> </ul> <p><b>Extra Credit Essay #1 posted</b></p> |

17	T	10/13	Prosecution, juries and jury selection	• Cole, The Decision to Prosecute
18	TH	10/15	Trial <b>GROUP PROJECT TOPIC STMT DUE</b>	• Alexander, Chapter 3 <b>Extra Credit Essay #2 posted</b>

#### V. Punishment and Public Policy

19	T	10/20	The “war on drugs” in historical context	• Alexander, Chapter 1
20	TH	10/22	The “war on drugs”	• Alexander, Chapter 2 <b>Extra Credit Essay #3 posted</b>
21	T	10/27	Sentencing and mass incarceration	• Alexander, Chapter 5
22	TH	10/29	Prison policies and economics <b>GROUP PROJECT #1</b>	• Alexander, Chapter 4 <b>Extra Credit Essay #4 posted</b>
23	T	11/3	Getting out: Life after prison <b>GROUP PROJECT #2</b>	• Uggen et al., Criminal Disenfranchisement
24	TH	11/5	Readjustment after prison	• Westervelt & Cook, Coping with Innocence After Death Row • Pager, The Mark of a Criminal Record <b>EXTRA CREDIT READING ASSIGNMENT DUE Extra Credit Essay #5 posted</b>
25	T	11/10	The death penalty and public policy	• Robinson, The Ultimate Sanction
26	TH	11/12	Conclusions: Race, class, and justice	• Alexander, Chapter 6 <b>Extra Credit Essay #6 posted</b>

**FINAL EXAM DUE TUESDAY NOVEMBER 17 at 4pm PST; 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 2 pm on their due date; no late group projects accepted. **A one-page topic statement and outline are due on dates noted, worth 10% of your overall grade. Each group project 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 September 15. No option #1 papers will be accepted after September 22; 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 September 22; no option #2 papers will be accepted after September 29; 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 October 29, 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 are 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 November 3, 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 are posted on Blackboard.**