

Crime, Punishment, and Politics

POLS 1455

<i>Professor:</i>	Prof. David Skarbek David_Skarbek@Brown.edu
<i>Office Hours:</i>	Mondays at 2:30 at 25 George Street
<i>Class Meets:</i>	MWF, 1pm – 1:50pm in List Art Center 110

Course Description

This class uses theories and tools from the social sciences to understand criminal behavior in a variety of settings. It examines whether we can use rational choice theories to explain patterns of offending and the organization and operation of illicit markets. We will investigate the different ways that governments seek to control crime, as well as, non-state alternatives to public safety. Organized crime groups have significant influence in communities both historically and today, so we study why they exist and how they organize. Throughout, we look at how political institutions affect crime and the operation of the criminal legal system, including persistent problems of racial disparities at all points in the system.

Ground Rules

- **The Principle of Freedom:** Brown University's Code of Conduct affirms its foundational commitment that "academic freedom is essential to the function of education and to the pursuit of scholarship in universities and, mindful of its historic commitment to scholarship and to the free exchange of ideas, affirms that members of the community shall enjoy full freedom in their teaching, learning, and research." These rights are sacrosanct in this class, and are possessed by faculty and students alike. Our goal is to advance and deepen every member's understanding of the issues addressed in the course; accordingly, I encourage each and every person to speak their mind, explore ideas and arguments wherever they might lead, voice your tentative thoughts and conclusions, play "devil's advocate," and engage in robust and civil discussion. We will not "police" each other's thoughts or language—instead, we will offer reasons for our views, through arguments and by telling our stories, reflecting and hopefully laughing together at times. In this class, intellectual courage is to be encouraged, imitated, and rewarded, rather than punished. You will find that such courage is contagious, and its practice creates greater freedom in the classroom. This freedom is as much a gift we give each other and a collective achievement as it is an individual right.
- **The Principle of Charity:** When approaching a new idea, attempt to understand the idea sympathetically and in its most persuasive form. When you then critique the idea, focus on the argument itself, not the person who said it. Do not attribute bad

motives for other's beliefs, which they do not think they have. When disagreeing, work towards understanding and keeping the conversation going. This means we do not cancel each other in this class. Rather than "calling out," we will "call in," which should be apparent in both the content and tone of our comments, as well as our body language. To help encourage honesty and a willingness to make oneself vulnerable, we will practice Chatham House Rules in this class. Anyone who comes to a meeting is free to use information from the discussion, but is not allowed to reveal who made any particular comment.

- **The Principle of Humility and Curiosity:** Acknowledge the weaknesses in your own arguments and privilege the pursuit of truth over "winning" the argument. Let's have conversations, not "debates." Remember that we are all fallible and all of us surely hold beliefs that are wrong, though we don't know which ones. Keep your mind open to learning new things from authors and fellow classmates whose ideas you don't share. Be curious. Keep returning to the question, "What might I be missing here?" A sincerely asked and probing question does wonders to improve the atmosphere surrounding difficult conversations, and by expressing curiosity about another's views you show respect and build trust. Being curious also means being willing to "think in real time" (instead of coming with prepackaged conclusions) and giving others the space, the grace, to do so as well.

Assessments

25%	Exam #1	October 4
35%	Exam #2	November 1
40%	Final paper	December 13

Each exam will take place in-class and will cover material from both the lectures and the readings.

The final paper will be based on one of several prompts provided to you late in the semester. It should engage with relevant readings from the course.

Late work is penalized with a 2-percentage point reduction in the grade, and another 2-percentage point reduction is made every 24 hours thereafter.

I will post my slides on canvas at the end of each week.

The readings are **complements** to the lectures, not substitutes, and they will be discussed in your seminars. For the academic articles, do not worry about mastering the technical details and methods; focus on the research question and results. Complete the readings before your scheduled seminar.

Course Schedule and Seminar Readings

Week 1 – Sept 4 and 6

- Barro, Josh. Here's why stealing cars went out of fashion. *New York Times* (2014).
- Tierney, John. The rational choices of crack addicts. *New York Times* (2013).

Week 2 – Sept 9, 11, 13

- Wilson, James Q., and George L. Kelling. Broken windows. *The Atlantic* (1982).
- Chalfin, Aaron, et al. Police force size and civilian race. *American Economic Review: Insights* (2022).

Week 3 – Sept 16, 18, (20 – cancelled)

- Cook, Philip J., Jens Ludwig, Sudhir Venkatesh, and Anthony A. Braga. Underground gun markets. *The Economic Journal* (2007).

Week 4 – Sept 23, 25, 27

- Garvin, Eugenia C., Carolyn C. Cannuscio, and Charles C. Branas. Greening vacant lots to reduce violent crime: a randomised controlled trial. *Injury Prevention* (2013).
- Kaba, Mariame. Yes, we mean literally abolish the police. *New York Times* (2020).
- Friedersdorf, Conor. Criminal-Justice Reformers Chose the Wrong Slogan. *The Atlantic* (2021).

Week 5 – Sept 30, Oct 2, **EXAM # 1 IS OCTOBER 4**

- Gambetta, Diego. The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection. Harvard University Press (1993). Chapters 1 & 2.

Week 6 – Oct 7, 9, 11

- Gambetta, Diego. The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection. Harvard University Press (1993). Chapter 3.

Week 7 – Oct 14 (Indigenous People's Day – class cancelled), 16, 18

- Leeson, Peter T. The calculus of piratical consent: the myth of the myth of social contract. *Public Choice* (2009).

Week 8 – Oct 21, 23, 25 (Family Weekend!)

- Pfaff, John. Locked in: The true causes of mass incarceration-and how to achieve real reform. Basic Books (2017). Chapter 5.

Week 9 – Oct 28, 30, **EXAM #2 IS NOVEMBER 1**

- Pfaff, John. Locked in: The true causes of mass incarceration-and how to achieve real reform. Basic Books (2017). Chapter 6.

Week 10 – Nov 4, 6, 8

- Gonzalez Van Cleve, Nicole. Crook County: Racism and Injustice in America's Largest Criminal Court. Stanford University Press (2017). Chapter 1.

Week 11 – Nov 11, 13, 15

- Natapoff, Alexandra. Punishment without crime: How our massive misdemeanor system traps the innocent and makes America more unequal. Basic Books (2018). Introduction.

Week 12 – Nov 18, 20, 22

- White, Ariel R. Political participation amid mass incarceration. *Annual Review of Political Science* (2022).

Week 13 – Nov 25 (Happy Thanksgiving!)

- No readings

Week 14 – Dec 2, 4, 6

- No readings

Reading Period begins December 8

FINAL PAPER IS DUE DECEMBER 13TH AT 5PM

Course Goals

The aims of this course are to:

- to introduce students to the tools of social science analysis that are most relevant for understanding criminal activity
- to develop an understanding of how these tools can be used to analyze both historical and contemporary episodes
- to provide students with basic tools for understanding statistical research findings
- to understand what is unique about illicit markets compared to legal markets
- to enable students to draw out the broader implication of their analyses of crime for politics and policy-making.

Learning outcomes

- By the end of this class, students should be able to:
- understand how the tools of social scientific analysis can be used to understand various aspects of crime;
- use theories about institutions and governance to understand various aspects of organized crime;
- understand historical patterns of crime and incarceration;
- understand the implications for public policy

Course Time Allocation:

Over 14 weeks, students will spend 3 hours per week in class (42 hours total), 3 hours preparing for, and participating in, lectures and discussion (42 hours), 5 hours per week doing course reading, assignments, and other out-of-class work (100 hours total).

Accessibility and Accommodations Statement

I am committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me early in the term if you may require accommodations or modification of any of course procedures. You may speak with me after class, during office hours, or by appointment. If you need accommodations around online learning or in classroom accommodations, please be sure to reach out to [Student Accessibility Services \(SAS\)](#) for their assistance (seas@brown.edu, 401-863-9588). Undergraduates in need of short-term academic advice or support can [contact an academic dean in the College](#) by emailing college@brown.edu. Graduate students may contact one of the deans in the Graduate School by emailing graduate_school@brown.edu.

Academic Integrity

A student's name on any exercise (e.g., a theme, report, notebook, performance, computer program, course paper, quiz, or examination) is regarded as assurance that the exercise is the result of the student's own thoughts and study, stated in his or her own words, and produced without assistance, except as quotation marks, references, and footnotes acknowledge the use of printed sources or other outside help.