

Crime, Mafias, and Prison

POLS820I

Professor: Dr. David Skarbek
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Class Meets: Thursdays, 4 to 6:30pm EST on zoom
Office hours: Fridays at 3pm EST

Class Description

This class develops a framework for the positive analysis of criminal behavior in a variety of contemporary and historical settings. It examines the rationality behind criminal choices; how governments seek to control crime; alternatives to state-enforcement of criminal law; the origins and operation of organized crime and mafia groups; how crime affects regions characterized by failed or weak states, and the politics of mass incarceration. We will apply this framework to crime in a variety of contexts, including in the Sicilian Mafia, 18th century piracy, contemporary drug markets, and prisons. The class develops a set of analytical tools that we can use to understand the observed variation in criminal activity, the organizational structure of criminal activity, and their broader consequences.

Educational aims

The aims of this course are to:

- to introduce students to the tools of analysis that are relevant for understanding criminal behavior
- to develop an understanding of how the social science can analyze both historical and contemporary episodes of crime
- 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 module, students should be able to:

- understand how the tools of social science 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

Students will spend 2.5 hours per week in class (32.5 hours total), 8.5 hours per week doing course reading (110.5 hours total). In addition, there are two discussion papers, each of which requires an estimated 4.5 hours of work (9 hours total), a draft research paper (20 hours total), and a revised/final research paper (8 hours total).

Grading

Discussion papers: Students will write two discussion papers (about 4 double-spaced pages each) based on the weekly readings. Each paper will count for 20% of the final grade (40% total). These discussion papers should identify the central arguments and themes in the reading, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses in the arguments and evidence presented, assess whether or not the reading fosters greater understanding of the topic, and highlight discussion questions for the seminar that emerge from the reading. Papers should be submitted electronically at least 48 hours before the start of the seminar.

Final paper: Students will be expected to write a 10-15-page final research paper on a topic related to the class, but not already well covered in the course readings. This paper will count for 40% of the final grade. The topic must be cleared with me by the end of February. During the last two weeks of the semester each student will present their research paper and will provide detailed verbal comments on the paper of another student. The paper must be circulated at least 72 hours before the class in which it is presented. The purpose of these presentations is to provide and receive detailed constructive feedback on paper drafts before making final revisions. The final, revised version of the paper is due one week after the last class of the semester.

Participation: Regular attendance and active participation are expected (and essential for a successful seminar). Any missed seminar will involve writing an additional reaction paper. Participation counts for 20% of the final grade.

Required books

Moskos, P. (2008). *Cop in the hood: My year policing Baltimore's eastern district*. Princeton University Press.

Skarbek, D. (2014). *The social order of the underworld: How prison gangs govern the American penal system*. Oxford University Press.

Zimring, F. E. (2011). *The city that became safe: New York's lessons for urban crime and its control*. Oxford University Press.

All other readings are available on Canvas. All movies are optional.

Other, useful sources of reference:

- Recent Papers on the Economics of Crime:
 - https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1zyRB708QpsxG_8vNCRI7gv5FyrPE81w3mE_kMVJIHbY/edit#gid=0
- Quality Policing Podcast: <https://qualitypolicing.com/>
- Probable Causation Podcast: <https://www.probablecausation.com/>

January 21: How do Illicit Markets Work?

McCarthy, B. (2002). New economics of sociological criminology. *Annual Review of Sociology*.
Read pages 417 to 429 + conclusion.

John Tierney. 2013. "The Rational Choices of Crack Addicts" *New York Times*.

Josh Barro. 2014. "Here's Why Stealing Cars Went Out of Fashion" *New York Times*.

Cook, P. J., Ludwig, J., Venkatesh, S., & Braga, A. A. (2007). Underground gun markets. *The Economic Journal*

Levitt, S. D., & Venkatesh, S. A. (2000). An economic analysis of a drug-selling gang's finances. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*.

Movies: Scarface (1983); American Gangster (2007); Freeway: Crack in the System (2015)

January 28: How to Control Crime?

Klick, J., & Tabarrok, A. (2005). Using Terror Alert Levels to Estimate the Effect of Police on Crime. *Journal of Law and Economics*.

Wilson, J. Q., & Kelling, G. L. (1982). Broken windows. *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Levitt, S. D. (2004). Understanding why crime fell in the 1990s: Four factors that explain the decline and six that do not. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*.

Zimring, F. (2006). *The great American crime decline*. Read pages 85 to 103.

Leitzel, J. (2013). Toward drug control: Exclusion and buyer licensing. *Criminal Law and Philosophy*.

Movies: Unforgiven (1992); Minority Report (2002); Purge (2013); Kids for Cash (2013)

February 4: Why Did Crime Fall in New York City?

Zimring, F. E. (2011). *The city that became safe: New York's lessons for urban crime and its control*.
Read chapters 1 - 5.

February 11: What Is It Like to be a Cop?

Moskos, P. (2008). *Cop in the hood: My year policing Baltimore's eastern district*. Chapters 1 – 7.

February 18: When Does Crime Organize? Part I

Varese, F. (2010). What is Organized Crime? *Organized Crime*. Read pages 14-22.

Schelling, T. C. (1971). What is the business of organized crime? *The American Scholar*.

Varese, F. (1994). Is Sicily the future of Russia? Private protection and the rise of the Russian Mafia. *European Journal of Sociology*.

Buchanan, J. (1973). A Defense of Organized Crime? *The Economics of Crime and Punishment*.

Shortland, A., & Varese, F. (2014). The protector's choice: an application of protection theory to Somali piracy. *British Journal of Criminology*.

Movies: The Godfather (1972); the Godfather: Part 2 (1974); Donnie Brasco (1997)

February 25: When Does Crime Organize? Part II

Varese, F. (2011). *Mafias on the Move*. Read chapter 2.

Skarbek, D. (2014). *The Social Order of the Underworld*. Read chapters 1-4.

Movies: Goodfellas (1990); Blood in, Blood Out (1993); American Me (1992); American History X (1998)

March 4: How Do Criminals Organize and Communicate?

Leeson, P. (2007). An-*arrgh*-chy: The Law and Economics of Pirate Organization. *Journal of Political Economy*.

Leeson, P. (2010). Pirational choice: the economics of infamous pirate practices. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*.

Skarbek, D. (2014). *The Social Order of the Underworld*. Read chapters 5-6.

March 11: What are the Causes and Consequences of Mass Incarceration?

Forman Jr, J. (2012). Racial critiques of mass incarceration: Beyond the new Jim Crow. *New York University Law Review*.

Clegg, J. & Usmani, A. (2019). The Economic Origins of Mass Incarceration. *Catalyst*

Hinton, E. (2016). *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*. Read chapter 1.

Weaver, V. M., & Lerman, A. E. (2010). Political consequences of the carceral state. *American Political Science Review*

White, A. (2019). Misdemeanor Disenfranchisement? The Demobilizing Effects of Brief Jail Spells on Potential Voters. *American Political Science Review*

March 18: How do Politics and Policing Affect Each Other?

Soss, J. & Weaver, V. (2017). Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race-Class Subjugated Communities. *Annual Review of Political Science*.

Shoub et al. 2020. Fines, Fees, Forfeitures, and Disparities: A Link Between Municipal Reliance on Fines and Racial Disparities in Policing. *Policy Studies Journal*.

Prowse et al. 2019. The State from Below: Distorted Responsiveness in Policed Communities *Urban Affairs Review*.

Desmond et al. 2016. "Police Violence and Citizen Crime Reporting in the Black Community" *American Sociological Review*.

March 25: Should We "Defund the Police"?

Kaba, M. (2020). Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police. *New York Times*.

Vitale, A. (2018). *The End of Policing*. Read chapter 1.

Zimring, F. (2017). *When Police Kill*. Read chapter 3

Skarbek, D. (2021). Unbundling Policing: How to Have Less Crime and More Justice. Unpublished manuscript.

Benson, B. (2014). Let's Focus on Victim Justice, Not Criminal Justice. *The Independent Review*

The Crime Machine #1

<https://www.gimletmedia.com/reply-all/127-the-crime-machine-part-i#episode-player>

The Crime Machine #2

<https://www.gimletmedia.com/reply-all/128-the-crime-machine-part-ii#episode-player>

April 1: What have you learned? Student Presentations

April 8: What have you learned? Student Presentations