

## Crime, Punishment, and Politics

POLS 1455

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*Office Hours:* Mondays at 3:30 at 25 George Street

*Class Meets:* MWF, 2pm – 2:50pm, Bio Med Center B13

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### 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.

### Foundational Principles (a.k.a 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	<b>October 10</b>
35%	Paper	<b>November 7</b>
40%	Final paper	<b>December 12</b>

The exam will take place in class and will cover material from the lectures, slides, and readings.

The papers will be based on one of several prompts provided. It should engage, cite, and quote relevant readings from the course, but can also include additional material.

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 or class.

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 questions and results. Complete the readings before your scheduled seminar.

This course is part of the Brown 2026 initiative marking 250 years of American Democracy. Learn more [here](#).

## **Lecture Schedule**

September 3

What makes America exceptional?

September 5

How can we explain crime?

September 8

How do police affect crime? I

September 10

How do police affect crime? II

September 12

How do police affect crime? III

September 15

How do police affect crime? IV

September 17

Why isn't policing better? I

September 19

Why isn't policing better? II

September 22 - **Class Cancelled**

September 24

What are some non-state ways of reducing crime? I

September 26

Brandon Del Pozo (Brown) Guest Lecture

September 29

What are some non-state ways of reducing crime? II

October 1

What explains the great crime decline? I

October 3

What explains the great crime decline? II

October 6

What explains the great crime decline? III

October 8

Chales Fain Lehman (Manhattan Institute) Guest Lecture

October 10 – Exam #1

October 13 – Campus Closed

October 15

What explains the great crime decline? IV

October 17

What is mass incarceration?

October 20

Jake Monaghan (USC) Guest Lecture

October 22

Why do we have mass incarceration? I

October 24

Joshua Page (UMinn) Guest Lecture

October 27

Why do we have mass incarceration? II

October 29

What is the aftermath of mass incarceration?

October 31

Why does crime organize? I

November 3

Why does crime organize? II

November 5

How do criminals signal in the underworld?

November 7 – Paper #1 Due

Why do prison gangs exist? I

November 10

Why do prison gangs exist? II

November 12 – Class Cancelled

November 14 – **Class Cancelled**

November 17

How do prison gangs extort?

November 19

What is prison like in other places? I

November 21

What is prison like in other places? II

November 24

Professor Tommie Shelby on Police Abolition ([link](#))

December 1

TBD

December 3

TBD

December 5

TBD

### **Seminar Readings**

Week 1 – Sept 3 and 5

- 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 8, 10, 12

- 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 15, 17, 19

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

Week 4 – Sept 22 (cancelled), 24, 26

- Branas, et al. A Difference-in-Differences Analysis of Health, Safety, and Greening Vacant Urban Space. American Journal of Epidemiology (2011).
- 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 29, October 1, 3

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

Week 6 – Oct 6, 8, 10

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

Week 7 – Oct 13 (Indigenous People's Day – class cancelled), 15, 17

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

Week 8 – Oct 20, 22, 24

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

Week 9 – Oct 27, 29, 31

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

Week 10 – Nov 3, 5, 7

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

Week 11 – Nov 10, 12, 14 (**Class cancelled**)

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

Week 12 – Nov 17, 19, 21

- Leeson, Peter T. An-arrgh-chy: The law and economics of pirate organization. Journal of Political Economy (2007).

Week 13 – Nov 24 (**Remote and Asynchronous**) Happy Thanksgiving!

- Professor Tommie Shelby on Police Abolition ([video link](#))
- Trammell, Rebecca. Symbolic Violence and Prison Wives: Gender Roles and Protective Pairing in Men's Prisons. The Prison Journal (2011)

Week 14 – Dec 1, 3, 5

- Trammell, Rebecca and Scott Chenault. "We have to take these guys out": Motivations for Assaulting Incarcerated Child Molesters. Symbolic Interaction (2011).

## 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](mailto: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](mailto:college@brown.edu). Graduate students may contact one of the deans in the Graduate School by emailing [graduate\\_school@brown.edu](mailto: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.

## AI Policy

One of the great joys of education is learning to think and to write. These two things are inescapably interconnected. Writing is not merely the transfer of ideas from one's brain to a page; it is about a fundamental transformation of the ideas themselves. The ideas do not truly emerge and flourish without the challenge of articulation and discovery. You cannot

genuinely think without writing. For these reasons, I do not personally use AI when doing intellectual work. However, if you choose to do so, please follow these guidelines and policies. Thank you.

1. Students may use AI tools for brainstorming, outlining, or finding relevant research sources.
2. Students should not submit AI-generated text as their own.
3. Students must disclose any AI tools used and specify how they used them. For instance, they might add a note at the end of their paper describing any AI contributions.
4. Canvas has plagiarism- and AI-detection tools that will be used to verify originality.



## Appendix: Selected References for Lectures

- Aizer, Anna, and Janet Currie. "Lead and juvenile delinquency: new evidence from linked birth, school, and juvenile detention records." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 101, no. 4 (2019): 575-587.
- Allen, Danielle. *Cuz: An American tragedy*. Liveright Publishing, 2017.
- Balko, Radley. *Rise of the warrior cop: The militarization of America's police forces*. Hachette UK, 2021.
- Barro, Josh. "Here's why stealing cars went out of fashion." *New York Times* (2014).
- Bayer, Patrick, Randi Hjalmarsson, and David Pozen. "Building criminal capital behind bars: Peer effects in juvenile corrections." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124, no. 1 (2009): 105-147.
- Beccaria, Cesare. *On crimes and punishments and other writings*. University of Toronto Press, 2009.
- Becker, Gary S. "Crime and punishment: An economic approach." *Journal of Political Economy* 76, no. 2 (1968): 169-217.
- Bentham, Jeremy. *The panopticon writings*. Verso Books, 2020.
- Blanes i Vidal, Jordi, and Tom Kirchmaier. "The effect of police response time on crime clearance rates." *The Review of Economic Studies* 85, no. 2 (2018): 855-891.
- Branas, et al. "A Difference-in-Differences Analysis of Health, Safety, and Greening Vacant Urban Space." *American Journal of Epidemiology* (2011).
- Bruinsma, Gerben. "Proliferation of crime causation theories in an era of fragmentation: Reflections on the current state of criminological theory." *European Journal of Criminology* 13, no. 6 (2016): 659-676.
- Chalfin, Aaron, and Justin McCrary. "Are US cities underpoliced? Theory and evidence." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 100, no. 1 (2018): 167-186.
- Chalfin, Aaron, et al. "Police force size and civilian race." *American Economic Review: Insights* (2022).
- Cook, Philip J. "The demand and supply of criminal opportunities." *Crime and Justice* 7 (1986): 1-27.
- Cook, Philip J., and Ashley Mancik. "The sixty-year trajectory of homicide clearance rates: Toward a better understanding of the great decline." *Annual Review of Criminology* 7, no. 1 (2024): 59-83.
- Cook, Philip J., Jens Ludwig, Sudhir Venkatesh, and Anthony A. Braga. "Underground gun markets." *The Economic Journal* (2007).
- Davis, Angela Y. *Are prisons obsolete?* Seven Stories Press, 2011.
- Del Pozo, Brandon. *The Police and the State*. City University of New York, 2020.
- Dickinson, Timothy, Volkan Topalli, and Richard Wright. "A Criminology of Time." *The British Journal of Criminology* (2025).
- Draca, Mirko, Stephen Machin, and Robert Witt. "Panic on the streets of London: Police, crime, and the July 2005 terror attacks." *American Economic Review* 101, no. 5 (2011): 2157-2181.
- Draca, Mirko, Theodore Koutmeridis, and Stephen Machin. "The changing returns to crime: Do criminals respond to prices?." *The Review of Economic Studies* 86, no. 3 (2019): 1228-1257.
- Evans, William N., and Emily G. Owens. "COPS and Crime." *Journal of Public Economics* 91, no. 1-2 (2007): 181-201.

- Feigenbaum, James J., and Christopher Muller. "Lead exposure and violent crime in the early twentieth century." *Explorations in Economic History* 62 (2016): 51-86.
- Friedersdorf, Conor. "Criminal-Justice Reformers Chose the Wrong Slogan." *The Atlantic* (2021).
- Fryer Jr, Roland G. "An empirical analysis of racial differences in police use of force." *Journal of Political Economy* 127, no. 3 (2019): 1210-1261.
- Fryer Jr, Roland G., Paul S. Heaton, Steven D. Levitt, and Kevin M. Murphy. "Measuring crack cocaine and its impact." *Economic Inquiry* 51, no. 3 (2013): 1651-1681.
- Gambetta, Diego. *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection*. Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Garrett, Brandon L. *Autopsy of a crime lab: exposing the flaws in forensics*. Univ of California Press, 2021.
- Garrett, Brandon L. *Convicting the innocent: Where criminal prosecutions go wrong*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Goldstein, Rebecca, Michael W. Sances, and Hye Young You. "Exploitative revenues, law enforcement, and the quality of government service." *Urban Affairs Review* 56, no. 1 (2020): 5-31.
- Gonzalez Van Cleve, Nicole. *Crook County: Racism and Injustice in America's Largest Criminal Court*. Stanford University Press, 2017. Chapter 1.
- Higney, Anthony, Nick Hanley, and Mirko Moro. "The lead-crime hypothesis: A meta-analysis." *Regional Science and Urban Economics* 97 (2022): 103826.
- Hinton, Elizabeth. *America on fire: The untold history of police violence and Black rebellion since the 1960s*. Liveright Publishing, 2021.
- Hollingsworth, Alex, Jiafang Mike Huang, Ivan Rudik, and Nicholas J. Sanders. "A thousand cuts: Cumulative lead exposure reduces academic achievement." *Journal of Human Resources* 60, no. 3 (2025): 950-976.
- Kaba, Mariame. "Yes, we mean literally abolish the police." *New York Times* (2020).
- Kleiman, Mark AR. *When brute force fails: How to have less crime and less punishment*. (2009): 1-256.
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- Leeson, Peter T. "The calculus of piratical consent: the myth of the myth of social contract." *Public Choice* (2009).
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- Levitt, Steven D. "Understanding why crime fell in the 1990s: Four factors that explain the decline and six that do not." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2004): 163-190.
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- Ludwig, Jens. "Unforgiving Places: The Unexpected Origins of American Gun Violence." In *Unforgiving Places*. University of Chicago Press, 2025.
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- Miller, Reuben Jonathan. *Halfway home: Race, punishment, and the afterlife of mass incarceration*. Little, Brown, 2021.
- Monaghan, Jake. *Just Policing*. Oxford University Press, 2023.
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- Page, Joshua. *The toughest beat: Politics, punishment, and the prison officers union in California*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Pfaff, John. *Locked in: The true causes of mass incarceration-and how to achieve real reform*. Basic Books (2017). Chapter 5.
- Quinones, Sam. *Dreamland: The true tale of America's opiate epidemic*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2015.
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- Shelby, Tommie. "The idea of prison abolition." (2022): 1-228.
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