SOC 172: SOCIOLOGY OF CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Syllabus

This course is organized around three general topics: (1) the social production and organization of crime, (2) the role of police and other official actors in managing criminality, and (3) the punishment of criminals. Under each topic, we will bring a sociological perspective to bear on important policy debates. Crosscutting all of these topics, we will attend to the role of racial and class inequality in the production of crime and the criminal justice process.

Requirements: Do the readings, think critically, and participate in class discussions. There will be a midterm (short answers, worth 35%) and a final exam (short answer and essay, worth 55%). Both exams are in take-home format. Attendance and occasional quizzes will count for an additional 10%.

Readings: All readings listed below are required. Two books are available for purchase:


Other readings are available for download on GauchoSpace. The reading load is fairly heavy, about 100-150 pages per week; much of the material is fairly technical, requiring careful attention to data in the form of graphics and tables.

Week 1 Introduction to Crime, Crime Rates, and Crime Trends

Crime is a slippery concept, and whether you think crime is increasing or decreasing depends in part on how it is defined and counted. Our task this week is to learn about different sources of data on crime, and to figure out what they tell us about recent patterns of criminal activity in the U.S.

Hagan, Crime and Disrepute, ch. 1


Week 2  Crime and the Life Course

One of the most fundamental insights to come out of criminological research is the relationship between age and crime. Is the “age-crime curve” a universal phenomenon, or does it vary across social contexts? What are the implications of this issue for sociological explanations of crime?


Week 3  Crime and Inequality: Social Class

For hundreds of years, poverty, unemployment, and homelessness have been linked to criminality, but among criminologists the exact nature of the class-crime relationship remains a matter of controversy. Three questions will preoccupy us this week: What does the research literature tell us about the relationship between social class and crime? If there is an association, what does it mean? What are the implications of this research for crime-control policy?

Hagan, *Crime and Disrepute*, ch. 3


Week 4  Crime and Inequality: Race

In the U.S., official data suggest that African-Americans and Latinos are more likely than others to commit crimes and get arrested. How can this connection be explained? This week we will review the empirical evidence on the relationship between race and crime, and examine a variety of explanations for this link.


**Week 5  Managing Crime: Police**

The police play a crucial role in noticing, recording, and responding to crime, and new strategies of policing have recently been proposed as means to prevent crime. How do these strategies work? How effective can police be as agents of crime control?


**Week 6  Managing Crime: Courts and Sentencing**

A great deal of sociological research has been motivated by the suspicion that the criminal justice system is biased against minorities and the poor. This week we will review this research in the context of the organizational structure of courts and recent legal reforms that have sought to limit the discretionary authority of prosecutors and judges.


Week 7 Prisons and the Trend Toward Mass Incarceration

Since the mid-1970s, the rate of incarceration in the U.S. has multiplied fivefold, and poor African-Americans and Latinos make up an increasingly large share of the prison population. What accounts for these trends?


Week 8 The War on Drugs

Changes in drug-control policies have powerfully influenced the growth of incarceration in the U.S. How and why have these policy changes occurred? What have been the effects of the war on drugs?

Hagan, Crime and Disrepute, ch. 5 pp. 154-168

Tonry, Malign Neglect, pp. 81-209

Week 9 The Impact of Mass Incarceration

Proponents of “get-tough” penal policies have argued that the threat of imprisonment deters potential criminals, or at least that it incapacitates the most dangerous offenders. We will evaluate these arguments, and consider other impacts of incarceration on convicts, their families, and their communities.

James Austin and John Irwin. 2001. *It's About Time: America's Imprisonment Binge*, ch. 10 pp. 219-252


**Week 10  The Death Penalty**

The United States stands out as the only industrialized democracy that executes criminals for civil crimes. What makes the U.S. unique in this way? Is the use of the death penalty influenced by reason and fairness, as the Supreme Court has required, by racial and class bias, or simply by capriciousness? What goals is capital punishment supposed to serve, and how well does it serve them?


## Course Schedule

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