



Crime and Public Policy

PPHA37120
Winter 2025

Instructors

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Office hours: Wednesday 11:00AM – Noon, or by appointment via email. [Calendly link](#).

Course Description

This course will cover issues in crime prevention, policing, incarceration, and the judicial system, with a focus on understanding policy issues and academic research. The course has two aims. First, to provide students with knowledge of crime prevention and the criminal justice system. Second, to train students to think critically about empirical evidence and causal inference. To this end, the focus of the course will be on the study of quantitative research that uses experimental or quasi-experimental methodology. We will not be focusing on legal doctrines or philosophical debates, though these may be touched upon as needed.

Prerequisites

PPHA31002 and PPHA31102 or equivalent coursework in statistics. Students lacking these prerequisites should seek permission from the instructor.

Key Course Details

- The course will meet at Keller 0010 on Mondays and Wednesdays from 1:30PM – 2:50PM
- Class time will be used to discuss an overview of the topic of the day, followed by a deep dive into at least one quantitative academic paper on that topic. This deep dive may be accompanied or preceded by a review of the relevant statistical tools.
- The use of screens in the classroom is forbidden, with exceptions for those with an accommodation from Student Disability Services.
- There are no TA sessions or prescribed textbooks.
- Grades will be determined by student presentations.

Student Presentations

The final two weeks of the course are reserved for student presentations. This presentation will be 100% of your grade.

This presentation must be undertaken in groups of at least 2 students and no more than 3 students. All members of a group will get the same grade. Students should ideally form their own groups, but the instructor is available to help create groups for those who cannot. Be aware that group projects are subject to the problem of free-riding and choose your colleagues carefully!

Each group must select a specific quantitative paper related to crime and present its findings. The paper must use the tools of causal inference e.g. randomized control trials or quasi-natural experiments. (*Note from your instructor: If this sounds intimidating to you, don't worry! By the end of the quarter, you'll be a pro at finding and evaluating such papers!*)

Groups will have 15 minutes for their presentations, followed by 5 minutes for question and answers. The date and time that groups present their work will be chosen by lottery. Attendance during the student presentations is mandatory, and punctuality is expected.

Groups must register at [this link](#). They must specify their choice of paper at the time of registration and use the APA citation format. You may not select a paper that another group has already chosen; allocation is on first-come, first-served basis. Registrations are due May 2nd.

Communication

Primary communication from instructors to students should happen through posting of materials on Canvas, including postings to Announcements. Please read all Canvas Announcements related to the course. To ensure receipt, you may wish to confirm that you have email notifications enabled for Canvas Announcements.

Questions from students to instructors should happen through email for administrative questions, or during office hours for content related questions.

Class Plan

Week I

Class 1 (M, Mar 24) Introduction

Overview of course; discussion of basic facts of crime; the true cost of crime; a light-hearted discussion of a paper on whether action movies increase violent crime. No prior reading is required.

Reading: Dahl, G., & DellaVigna, S. (2009). Does movie violence increase violent crime? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124(2), 677-734.

Class 2 (W, Mar 26) Policing I: Do police officers reduce crime?

Is the US over-policed or under-policed? A discussion of whether hiring more police officers reduces crime, the cost-effectiveness of hiring more police officers, and the mechanisms that might be at play.

Reading: Mello, S. (2019). More COPS, less crime. *Journal of Public Economics*, 172, 174-200.

Week II

Class 3 (M, Mar 31) Policing II: Are police officers racist?

A discussion of the disparate treatment of Whites and minorities in the US criminal justice system, with a focus on the possible racial prejudice of police officers. A discussion of “problem officers”, regulations, institutional dysfunction.

Reading: Goncalves, F., & Mello, S. (2021). A few bad apples? Racial bias in policing. *American Economic Review*, 111(5), 1406-1441.

Class 4 (W, Apr 2) Policing III: How to fix policing

A discussion of policing as a cognitively demanding task and the role that training can play in reducing such adverse effects, such as excessive use of force or unnecessary arrests.

Reading: Dube, O., MacArthur, S. J., & Shah, A. K. (2025). A cognitive view of policing. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 140(1), 745-791.

Week III

Class 5 (M, Apr 7) Prosecutors & non-violent misdemeanors

A discussion of public prosecutors, their incentives, and decision-making. What happens when prosecutors announce that they will no longer be prosecuting non-violent misdemeanors?

Reading: Agan, A., Doleac, J. L., & Harvey, A. (2023). Misdemeanor prosecution. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 138(3), 1453-1505.

Class 6 (W, Apr 9) Judges & judgement

A discussion of judges, their incentives, and their decision-making. What happens when a judges' football team unexpectedly loses?

Reading: Eren, O., & Mocan, N. (2018). Emotional judges and unlucky juveniles. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 10(3), 171-205.

Week IV

Class 7 (M, Apr 14) Incarceration I: Does prison prevent crime?

A discussion of US incarceration rates. Does incarceration reduce crime? If so, does it do so by deterring criminals from committing a crime, or by incapacitating criminals after they commit a crime?

Readings: Drago, F., Galbiati, R., & Vertova, P. (2009). The deterrent effects of prison: Evidence from a natural experiment. *Journal of Political Economy*, 117(2), 257-280.

Levitt, S. D. (1996). The effect of prison population size on crime rates: Evidence from prison overcrowding litigation. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 111(2), 319-351.

Class 8 (W, Apr 16) Incarceration II: Does prison harden or reform criminals?

What are the aftereffects of imprisonment? Does prison rehabilitate people, or cause them to commit even more crime than they would have?

Reading: Bhuller, M., Dahl, G. B., Løken, K. V., & Mogstad, M. (2020). Incarceration, recidivism, and employment. *Journal of Political Economy*, 128(4), 1269-1324.

Week V

Class 9 (M, Apr 21) Alternatives to Prison I: Electronic monitoring

A discussion of the financial costs of incarceration, the non-financial costs of prison, and possible alternatives. What happens when people are subject to electronic monitoring instead of prison?

Reading: Di Tella, R., & Schargrodsky, E. (2013). Criminal recidivism after prison and electronic monitoring. *Journal of Political Economy*, 121(1), 28-73.

Class 10 (W, Apr 23) Alternatives to Prison II: Restorative justice

A discussion of youth crime and juvenile justice. San Francisco launches a program that allows youths to participate in a program that aims to foster self-reflection and empathy instead of being prosecuted for a felony. It works surprisingly well!

Reading: Shem-Tov, Y., Raphael, S., & Skog, A. (2024). Can Restorative Justice Conferencing Reduce Recidivism? Evidence From the Make-it-Right Program. *Econometrica*, 92(1), 61-78.

Week VI

Class 11 (M, Apr 28) Preventing Crime I: Therapy

A discussion of mental health and crime. In an experiment, researchers give criminals access to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and cash grants, which reduces their propensity to commit crime and violence.

Readings: Blattman, C., Jamison, J. C., & Sheridan, M. (2017). Reducing crime and violence: Experimental evidence from cognitive behavioral therapy in Liberia. *American Economic Review*, 107(4), 1165-1206.

Blattman, C., Chaskel, S., Jamison, J. C., & Sheridan, M. (2023). Cognitive behavioral therapy reduces crime and violence over ten years: Experimental evidence. *American Economic Review: Insights*, 5(4), 527-545.

Class 12 (W, Apr 30) Preventing Crime II: Public assistance

The US has many programs aimed at providing public assistance to low-income households. Do these programs reduce crime by recipients?

Readings: Yang, C. S. (2017). Does public assistance reduce recidivism? *American Economic Review*, 107(5), 551-555.

Week VII

Class 13 (M, May 5) Crime, employment, and race

A discussion of employment, race, discrimination, and well-intended policies backfiring.

Readings: Agan, A., & Starr, S. (2018). Ban the box, criminal records, and racial discrimination: A field experiment. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 133(1), 191-235.

Class 14 (W, May 7) Crime and immigration

A discussion of the impact of immigration on crime, and also the perils of bad website design.

Readings: Pinotti, P. (2017). Clicking on heaven's door: The effect of immigrant legalization

on crime. *American Economic Review*, 107(1), 138-168.

Week VIII

Class 15 (M, May 12) Student presentations

Class 16 (W, May 14) Student presentations

Week IX

Class 17 (M, May 19) Student presentations

Class 18 (W, May 21) Student presentations

Academic integrity

All University of Chicago students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. Among other things, this means that students shall not represent another's work as their own, use disallowed materials during exams, or otherwise gain unfair academic advantage. The Harris School's policies are available in the [Harris Student Handbook Canvas](#) site; [University of Chicago policies](#) also might be relevant.

Diversity and inclusion

The Harris School welcomes, values, and respects students, faculty, and staff from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. We believe that rigorous inquiry and effective public policy problem-solving requires the expression and understanding of diverse viewpoints, experiences, and traditions. There are [University-wide principles and guidelines](#) and ones developed [at Harris](#).

Disability accommodations

The University of Chicago has developed [policies regarding students with disabilities](#). Students who have or need disability accommodations should communicate with the Harris' Dean of Students office to coordinate the implementation.

Student mental health and other support

If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, [remote or live counseling services are available](#). For other forms of support, please consult [Harris Academic Support Programs](#) page, [Student Wellness](#), and [University Learning Resources](#).