

**Political Science 0820**  
**THE POLITICS OF RACE AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**

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**OVERVIEW**

**General Information**

*Canvas* <https://canvas.brown.edu/courses/1085333>

*Zoom* <https://brown.zoom.us/j/96808036620>

*Where/When* We meet Wednesdays, 3:00–5:30 pm

*Office Hours* Mondays from **11:00-1:00 pm** via **Zoom** Please email me in advance to reserve a 20-minute slot.

**Course Summary**

This course examines the politics of race and the criminal justice system in the U.S. It proceeds in three parts. First, it examines the political origins and consequences of racial disparities in citizens' interactions with the police, courts and prisons. Next, it considers how the public, the media, and politicians relate and respond to these issues. Finally, the course concludes by examining the prospects for reform and the consequences of inaction.

**Why Should You Take This Course?**

There are a myriad of reasons to take any course. Let me offer just two reasons to take this course. First, *this stuff matters*. The U.S. imprisons more people per capita than nearly any other nation in the world. This fact alone is troubling, and it becomes even more so in light of the systemic disparities evident at nearly every stage of the legal system. Simply put, traditionally disadvantaged groups in society—racial minorities, the poor, and, in particular, poor racial minorities—have far more frequent and far more severe interactions with the police, courts and prisons than more advantaged groups in society. Not surprisingly these disparities have profound social, economic, and, as we will see in this class, political consequences which serve to reinforce cycles of inequality and injustice.

This brings us to a second reason to take this course, which is that this stuff is hard. Hard in the sense that the topics we will discuss represent persistent and fundamental challenges for our society. But hard also in the sense that these issues pose questions for social scientists that are very difficult to answer. Why did prison population continue to grow in the past two decades when rates of both violent and non-violent crime declined? How is it that citizens can see the same events in Minneapolis (or Louisville, or Ferguson) and draw such different conclusions about why these events occurred and what should be done in response? The approaches and potential answers to these questions that we will encounter require a combination of all things that make for good social science—clear theories, clever

research designs, and convincing empirical analysis.

Taking this course will provide you with an understanding of the politics and policies associated with race and the criminal justice system. Such knowledge alone will be valuable to you as citizens in a democracy that has and will continue to struggle with issues of justice and equality. Further, by understanding how social scientists approach these difficult issues, this class will teach you skills and modes of reasoning that will be useful to you in your academic careers and beyond.

## GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

### Course Goals

This course aims to provide a critical understanding of the politics and policies surrounding the issues of race and the criminal justice system in the U.S. It does so through close readings and in-depth discussions of classic and contemporary works on these issues in political science, sociology, economics, and related fields. Beyond gaining a substantive understanding of key issues in these fields, you will learn to assess the role of data and evidence in the evaluation of a particular issue or policy and develop skills to constructively engage with these arguments through your own research and writing.

### Course Expectations

This is a discussion-based seminar. I will provide some background and context to guide our discussions, but ultimately the success of this class depends on you and the work you put in to the course. I expect that you will have done the readings and submitted your assignments on time (more on that below). In class, I expect that you will come to class eager to learn and engage with that week's topics and with each other's ideas in a critical and respectful manner. Finally, I expect that you will treat the assignments in this class not as chore or necessary evil but as an opportunity for discovery and development. These papers are a chance for you to clarify your understanding of a topic, form your own ideas on a topic and engage in ongoing scholarly and political debates. I look forward to seeing what you have to say and helping you say it in a way that clearly conveys your meaning and intent. To do this, requires that you start the process of writing early, and are revising your work often.

### Community Standards

This is a discussion-based course. Political discussions can sometimes grow contentious. All students and the instructor must be respectful of others in the classroom. If you ever feel that the classroom environment is discouraging your participation or problematic in any way, please contact me.

## **Content Note**

This class contains challenging material, including sometimes images and graphic descriptions of violence. Success in the class also requires grappling with questions about race and racism, which can be emotionally challenging in themselves. Please talk with me if you have concerns about any course materials or discussions.

## **Accessibility**

Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me if you have a disability or other condition that might require accommodations or modification of any of these course procedures. You may speak with me after class or during office hours. For more information contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services at 401-863-9588 or SEAS@brown.edu.

## **Academic Integrity**

Neither the University nor I tolerate cheating or plagiarism. The Brown Writing Center defines plagiarism as “appropriating another person’s ideas or words (spoken or written) without attributing those word or ideas to their true source.” The consequences for plagiarism are often severe, and can include suspension or expulsion. This course will follow the guidelines in the Academic Code for determining what is and isn’t plagiarism:

In preparing assignments a student often needs or is required to employ outside sources of information or opinion. All such sources should be listed in the bibliography. Citations and footnote references are required for all specific facts that are not common knowledge and about which there is not general agreement. New discoveries or debatable opinions must be credited to the source, with specific references to edition and page even when the student restates the matter in his or her own words. Word-for-word inclusion of any part of someone else’s written or oral sentence, even if only a phrase or sentence, requires citation in quotation marks and use of the appropriate conventions for attribution. Citations should normally include author, title, edition, and page. (Quotations longer than one sentence are generally indented from the text of the essay, without quotation marks, and identified by author, title, edition, and page.) Paraphrasing or summarizing the contents of another’s work is not dishonest if the source or sources are clearly identified (author, title, edition, and page), but such paraphrasing does not constitute independent work and may be rejected by the instructor. Students who have questions about accurate and proper citation methods are expected to consult reference guides as well as course instructors.

We will discuss specific information about your written work in class in more detail, but if you are unsure of how to properly cite material, please ask for clarification. If you are having difficulty with writing or would like more information or assistance, consult the Writing Center, the Brown library and/or the Academic Code ([https://www.brown.edu/Administration/Dean\\_of\\_the\\_College/curriculum/documents/academic-](https://www.brown.edu/Administration/Dean_of_the_College/curriculum/documents/academic-)

[code.pdf](#)) for more information.

## COURSE STRUCTURE AND POLICIES

### Grading

Participation	30%
Response Papers (2)	30%
Final Paper	40%

*Participation* Learning is not a passive activity. Your active participation is a crucial part of this seminar and your grade. This includes both regular attendance in class and contribution to class discussion. I will allow one unexcused class absence; any additional ones require permission and/or a Dean’s excuse. You should complete all readings and submit all assignments before attending class.

*Response Papers* Over the course of the semester, you will write two brief response papers (two-pages single spaced) based on the weeks assigned readings. In each paper you should aim to 1) critically evaluate the week’s readings in terms of the logic of their claims and the quality of their evidence and 2) offer at least three questions about the readings which can help guide that weeks discussion. The questions can focus on a particular reading, but I encourage you to think about how different readings speak to each other. Papers are due the Tuesday before class at 5 p.m. and can be uploaded to the course website or sent directly to me, after which I will circulate them to the rest of the class to be read before class on Monday. **Late papers will not be accepted.** We will assign weeks on the first day of class.

*Final Papers* The final paper for this will take the form of a policy memo approximately 10-15 pages double-spaced, not including references and any figures or tables which should be provided in the appendix. You will start by identifying an issue area of interest to them (e.g. police, courts, or prison) and a specific policy debate in that field. For example, students may wish to know whether investigative stops are effective at reducing crime, or what calls to defund the police would look like in practice. Students should place this debate within a larger policy context that illustrates the origins of the issue, the costs and benefits a certain course of action as well as the relevant alternatives. Next students will identify a specific case study or studies that shed light onto their policy question and draw conclusions from this case study in a set of policy recommendations directed toward a specific audience.

A brief proposal (worth 5% of final paper grade) outlining your choice of paper and proposed topic is due by 5 pm before the 6th week of class. A draft of your final paper is due by 5 pm before the 11th week of class (35 %). Each of you will be asked to write two peer reviews of these drafts (2 pages single spaced) which will discuss during the paper workshop (10%) where you make a brief 5 minute presentation to the class (10%). The final paper (40%) is due one week after the final class. All assignments must be submitted online via the course website on Canvas. Any portion of the final paper submitted after its due date will lose 5 points (e.g. 100 → 95) for each day late. You may take one extension of one week on any one of these assignments (but not all of them) no questions asked: just email me at least a day before the assignment is due requesting an extension. All other extensions will

require a note from the dean.

### Course Time Allotment

This seminar will meet 11 times. Over these 11 weeks, you should expect to spend 2.5 hours per week in class (27.5 hours total); approximately 5 hours per week reading and reviewing required readings (55 hours total); approximately 2.5 hours writing each of your 2 response papers (5 hours total); approximately 3 hours researching and writing a proposal for your final paper; between 20-25 hours researching, writing, and revising your final paper; and at least .5 hours meeting with me in person to discuss your work.

### Readings

The following texts are required for the course and available for purchase at the bookstore:

Alexander, M. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press

Lerman, A. E. and Weaver, V. M. (2014). *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequences of American Crime Control*. University of Chicago Press

Copies of additional chapters and articles assigned for each week will be posted to the course website.

## SCHEDULE

**Note:** This schedule is preliminary and subject to change. In particular, the books that we will read (and you will purchase) are fixed, but the required articles and supplemental readings (that I will provide) may vary. The additional readings are not required, but may be useful as you develop and research your final paper. If you miss a class make sure you contact me or one of your colleagues to find out about changes in the lesson plans or assignments.

## PROBLEMS

The course begins by assessing the origins and consequences of racial disparities in the criminal justice system (CJS) in the U.S. It starts by providing a broad overview of racial disparities in the CJS and their political consequences, before turning to more specific questions about the effects of citizens' interactions with the police, courts and prisons and the political ramifications of these experiences.

### **Week 1— Introduction and Course Overview**

**Topics:** Why should you take this course? What will we do?

**Readings** NONE!

### **Week 2—Race, Crime and Punishment**

**Topics:** What do we mean by race? How do we assess the effects of race? Why do people commit crimes? Why do we punish crimes? How do we measure these phenomena? How do we know polices are having the desired effect?

**Readings** Sen, M. and Wasow, O. (2016). Race as a Bundle of Sticks: Designs that Estimate Effects of Seemingly Immutable Characteristics. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 19(1):499–522

Muhammad, K. G. (2019). *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America, With a New Preface*. Harvard University Press (Selections)

How To Make Sense Of Conflicting, Confusing And Misleading Crime Statistics | FiveThirtyEight. [\url{https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-to-make-sense-of-conflicting-confusing-and-misleading-crime-statistics/}](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-to-make-sense-of-conflicting-confusing-and-misleading-crime-statistics/)

### **Week 3—Police**

**Topics:** What is the role of police in society? What is racial profiling? How would we measure or identify it? What's the difference between implicit and explicit racial bias?

**Readings** Soss, J. and Weaver, V. (2017). Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race–Class Subjugated Communities. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20(1):565–591

Zimring, F. E. (2017). *When police kill*. Harvard University Press (selected excerpts)

Vitale, A. S. (2017). *The end of policing*. Verso Books (selected excerpts)

Yglesias, M. (2019). Hire more police officers: an effective, popular strategy to reduce crime. *Vox*

Lepore, J. (2020). *The Invention of the Police*

### **Week 4—Courts**

**Topics:** How do prosecutors, courts and sentencing laws influence outcomes in the CJS? When, how and why does the race of defendant, judge, jury, and prosecution matter?

**Readings** Pfaff, J. (2017). *Locked in: The true causes of mass incarceration—And how to achieve real reform*. Basic Books (Selections)

Bazelon, E. (2020). *Charged: The new movement to transform American prosecution and end mass incarceration*. Random House Trade Paperbacks (Selections)

*Serial Season 3* (selected episodes)

### **Week 5—Prisons**

**Topics:** The rise of the modern prison state

**Readings** Travis, J., Western, B., and Redburn, F. S. (2014). *The growth of incarceration in the United States: Exploring causes and consequences* (Selections)

Gottschalk, M. (2016). *Caught: The prison state and the lockdown of American politics*. Princeton University Press (Selections)

*Ear Hustle* (Selected episodes)

### **Week 6—The Politics of Race and the Criminal Justice System: The New Jim Crow**

**To Do:** Policy Proposals due online before class.

**Topics:** Why are race and crime so intertwined in American politics? What do we mean when we talk about disparities in the CJS? What are the origins and consequences of such disparities?

**Readings** Alexander, M. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press (selections)

Forman Jr, J. (2011). *Racial critiques of mass incarceration: Beyond the new Jim Crow* (selections)

Pfaff, J. (2017). *Locked in: The true causes of mass incarceration—And how to achieve real reform*. Basic Books (selections)

## **POLITICS**

The second portion of the course takes up the question of how various actors in the political system both influence and are influenced by the issues of race and the criminal justice system.

### **Week 7— The Custodial Citizen**

**To Do:** Mid-semester check-in. Please schedule a time to talk with me about how things are going

**Topics:** How do citizen's interactions with the criminal justice shape their political attitudes and behavior?

**Readings** Lerman, A. E. and Weaver, V. M. (2014). *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequences of American Crime Control*. University of Chicago Press (Selections)

Burton, S. and Lynn, C. (2017). *Becoming Ms. Burton: From prison to recovery to leading the fight for incarcerated women*. The New Press (Selections)

### **Week 8—Option A: CJS and Citizen Attitudes**

**Topics:** How do different racial and ethnic groups view the criminal justice system? How can we explain variation across groups in support for specific policies?

**Readings** Bobo, L. D. and Johnson, D. (2004). A taste for punishment: Black and white Americans' views on the death penalty and the war on drugs. *Du Bois Review*, 1(01):151–180

Peffley, M. and Hurwitz, J. (2007). Persuasion and resistance: Race and the death penalty in America. *American Journal of Political Science*, 51(4):996–1012

Weaver, V., Prowse, G., and Piston, S. (2019). Too much knowledge, too little power: An assessment of political knowledge in highly policed communities. *Journal of Politics*, 81(3):1153–1166

### **Week 8— Option B: CJS and Media**

**Topics:** How does the media and the way it covers issues of race and crime influence the way people think about these issues?

**Readings** Valentino, N. A. (1999). Crime news and the priming of racial attitudes during evaluations of the president. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, pages 293–320

Gilliam, F. D. and Iyengar, S. (2000). Prime suspects: The influence of local television news on the viewing public. *American Journal of Political Science*, pages 560–573

Dixon, T. L. and Williams, C. L. (2015). The changing misrepresentation of race and crime on network and cable news. *Journal of Communication*, 65(1):24–39

### **Week 8— Option C CJS and Politicians**

**Topics:** How do politicians respond and potentially create demands for certain criminal justice policies?

**Readings** Hinton, E. (2016). *From the war on poverty to the war on crime: The making of mass incarceration in America*. Harvard University Press (Selections)

Enns, P. K. (2016). *Incarceration Nation: How the United States Became the Most Punitive Democracy in the World*. Cambridge University Press (Selections)

Tonry, M. (2004). *Thinking about crime: Sense and sensibility in American penal culture*. Oxford University Press Chapter 4

## **POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS**

In the final portion of the class, we focus on potential solutions to the issues and problems we've discussed so far. We'll also reserve time for you to work on your final papers.



### **Week 9 —Abolitionist Perspectives**

**To Do:** Drafts of policy memos due

**Topics:** Are prisons necessary? What does it mean to defund the police?

**Readings** Davis, A. Y. (2011). *Are prisons obsolete?* Seven Stories Press (Selections)

McLeod, A. M. (2019). Envisioning abolition democracy. *Harvard Law Review*, 132(6):1613–1649Selections

### **Week 10—Potential Reforms**

**To Do:** Peer reviews due Tuesday before class

**Topics:** Case studies and broader visions of reform and paper workshops

**Readings** Pfaff, J. (2017). *Locked in: The true causes of mass incarceration—And how to achieve real reform.* Basic Books (selections)

Gottschalk, M. (2016). *Caught: The prison state and the lockdown of American politics.* Princeton University Press (Selections)

### **Week 11—Presentations**

**To Do:** Class presentations due

**Topics:** Class presentations of policy memos. Closing thoughts