Contemporary Issues in Criminal Justice
JAC/SOC 0735-4010
Wednesday 6:00-8:40

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**NOTE** This course will utilize CourseWeb (https://courseweb.pitt.edu/) for announcements, assignments, readings, and other materials pertinent to the course. If you have any questions about using CourseWeb, please contact me.

Course Description
This course offers an in-depth analysis and examination of current controversies in the criminal justice system, including contemporary criminal justice policy, application of the law, and criminal justice ethics.

Course Objectives
1. Students will be expected to acquire an informed understanding of the history and current status of several contemporary debates in criminal justice.
2. Students will be expected to learn how to critically evaluate the arguments being made on all sides of a debate and the evidence used in support of each position.
3. Students will be expected to learn the complexity of current debates in criminal justice and to gain an understanding and respect for positions with which they may not agree.
4. Students will be expected to formulate, articulate, and defend their own informed opinions on current criminal justice controversies utilizing contemporary academic research in the fields of criminal justice, socio-legal studies, criminology, sociology, and any other relevant field.
5. Finally, students will be expected to engage with and interact with other students who may hold different opinions in a thoughtful, respectful, and mature manner.

Course Expectations
In this course, we will be discussing numerous topics that are inherently controversial. To get a fuller understanding and appreciation for these issues, class attendance and participation are essential. Classes will be conducted predominantly through class discussions. You are expected to have read and thought about the assigned readings prior to the class for which they are assigned. This will facilitate discussion and make learning easier; much of what you learn in this class will come from your interactions with fellow students. This course is designed to get students to think about social issues in a critical manner. In this sense, you will be challenged to support your opinions or beliefs with material from the text, the lectures, or any other appropriate source. You will be expected to participate and to interact with your classmates.
There are no wrong opinions, as long as they can be defended. However, when participating in class, you are expected to respect your classmates at all times. Derogatory, racist, sexist, and other offensive or insulting remarks or comments will not be tolerated; when someone else is speaking, you are expected to listen and wait until he or she is done before responding. Because of the discussion-based nature of this course, you are expected to attend class and will be graded based upon your participation.

Course Grading
Your course grade will be based upon five assignments, weighted as follows:

- Midterm: 25%
- Final Exam: 25%
- Panel Debate: 12.5%
- Position Paper: 12.5%
- Term Paper: 25%

Each of these areas will be described in greater detail below.

Midterm and Final Exam
The midterm and final exam will both be take-home exams in essay format. The exams will be available on CourseWeb a MINIMUM of ONE WEEK before they are due, and students will submit their answers (and receive their grades) via CourseWeb. Because exams will be available for at least one full week and be submitted online, NO LATE EXAMS will be accepted barring EXTREME, UNFORESEEABLE extenuating circumstances (in other words, having a sporting event on the due date of an exam will not be a sufficient excuse for not submitting the exam on time). Students who experience a misfortune that prevents them from being able to submit their exam in a timely fashion MUST contact the instructor AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, and each student’s circumstances will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Panel Debate
During this course, students will be assigned to groups of two or three to argue in favor of one position on one topic. Each group will be opposed by another group of two to three students, who will be arguing the other side. The panel debate will typically be held during the final class in which we are discussing the particular topic. Groups will be assigned during the first class meeting. The instructor will moderate the debate. The remaining students in the class are expected to be attentive, to ask the panel questions, and to judge the “winner” of the debate. Their feedback will be utilized to aid in determining the group’s grade.

Your grade will not be determined by whether you “won” the debate. Rather, your grade will be based on how well prepared you are, the comprehensiveness of your presentation, your ability to summarize the arguments and empirical evidence in favor of your position, your ability to address counter-arguments, and the extent to which your group researched evidence and facts beyond the assigned course readings. In other words, you are expected to do additional research.
on your topic so you can add something to the class’s knowledge base that cannot be found in the readings. You are expected to work together within your group as you will receive one grade for the entire group. This assignment should not be taken lightly. Your group should be prepared and able to provide a complete understanding of your group’s side of the topic. I will basically be looking for the same elements that I look for in paper assignments.

If there are dates that you know in advance you will not be available to attend, you MUST inform the instructor AS SOON AS POSSIBLE so you can be assigned to a different date. Athletes should know their schedules in advance and should inform the instructor IMMEDIATELY what dates they are not available. If there are last minute situations that arise that will prevent you from being able to present on your assigned date, you MUST inform the instructor as soon as possible so that alternative arrangements can be made. This alternative plan will be designed with the consultation of the remaining panel members.

The presentation is worth 12.5% of your grade, and it will be done in conjunction with a position paper, also worth 12.5% (described below).

**Position Paper**
On the night of your assigned panel debate, you are expected to submit an INDIVIDUAL position paper on your assigned topic. Many of you may end up arguing a position you do not personally support; that is okay. Part of learning to think critically is being able to understand and argue a policy with which you disagree. This will increase your understanding of the topic and the different positions, which will help you to strengthen, modify, or alter your own view and make you better able to persuade others.

Although much of the research for this paper will be done collaboratively, you are expected to write your papers independently. For this paper, you MUST present ACADEMIC evidence in favor of your policy. You should also address and attempt to refute arguments that oppose your policy position. Papers may be a MAXIMUM of three pages (excluding references), double-spaced, with standard font and 1-inch margins. This requirement is designed to get you to think critically about your topic and to write succinctly, focusing on the most important arguments and most compelling pieces of evidence. Students are expected to consult and cite academic works to support their arguments (no minimum requirement). These works MUST be cited in the body of the paper (using parenthetical references or footnotes/endnotes). The paper will due by 6:00 pm on the night that you present your topic. You will lose one letter grade (5 points) for every day or part of a day that the paper is late. No papers will be accepted more than 5 days late. Papers MUST be submitted online via CourseWeb. No hard copies or emailed copies will be accepted. The paper is worth 50 points.

**Term Paper**
The point of this course is to get students to think about controversial issues in criminal justice in a critical and analytical manner. As such, this course will be capped off with a term paper that will allow the student to explore one such issue in depth. You are free to select any controversial issue related to criminal justice that IS NOT COVERED IN THIS COURSE as long as it is approved by the instructor. Papers are expected to include each of the following elements:
1. An overview of the controversy, its history, and why it is relevant, important, or interesting. In other words, why should the reader care? Not every debate is of pressing importance, so your paper should first allow the reader to understand the history and relevance of the debate.

2. You must then provide an overview of ALL sides of the issue and present the arguments for and against the specific policy, so the uninformed reader can get a better understanding of the major arguments on each side of the debate (much like what was done in class sessions).

3. You should then conclude by giving YOUR opinion on the manner and providing reasons for your position. These reasons should be supported with factual, empirical evidence. You also should anticipate and refute counter-arguments likely to be made by opponents of your position. Note: You should also include your position in a thesis statement somewhere in the beginning of the paper. The goal of this section is to persuade the reader to adopt a certain position by arguing in favor of one position and against the other position(s).

4. The paper must cite at least five academic sources for support. Please note, you are permitted to use additional credible sources that are not academic in addition to your five academic sources, but Internet websites will not be accepted without prior approval from the instructor. These academic sources will be crucial for providing convincing evidence to support your point of view.

The paper is worth 25% of your grade and will be due in four parts:

1. Topic approval: Due by January 27 on CourseWeb.
2. Bibliography approval: Due by February 24 on CourseWeb. Note: you will still be allowed to add to and modify your bibliography after this date. If your bibliography gets rejected, you will have ONE WEEK to figure out why and submit a new bibliography without penalty, but your first attempt must be submitted by Feb. 26.
3. Rough draft: Bring to class on March 23 (date subject to change).
4. Final draft: Due by April 20 on CourseWeb.

A guideline rubric will be provided.

**Note on Disabilities**

Students with disabilities who require special testing accommodations or other classroom modifications must notify the instructor and the Coordinator of Disability Services in writing no later than the second week in the term. Documentation of a disability may be needed to determine the appropriate accommodations or classroom modifications. For information or to schedule an evaluation-of-need appointment, call the Office of Health & Counseling Services in G10 Student Union, at (814) 269-7119.

**Academic Dishonesty**

Students are expected to be familiar with the University of Pittsburgh’s Guidelines on Academic Integrity (http://www.as.pitt.edu/fac/policies/academic-integrity) and abide by them. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Anyone caught plagiarizing, cheating, or helping anyone do so will be referred to the appropriate university authorities and, at the very least, receive a 0 on the assignment. Additional penalties may apply depending on the nature of the incident.
The *Guidelines on Academic Integrity* forbid students from presenting “as one’s own, for academic evaluation, the ideas, representations, or words of another person or persons without customary and proper acknowledgment of sources.” Plagiarism is dishonest and illegal. Writers are indebted to authors from whom they borrow exact words, ideas, theories, opinions, statistics, illustrative material, or facts (beyond common knowledge). **Writers are also indebted if they summarize or paraphrase in their own words material from sources.** All quoted material requires the acknowledgement of the source by the use of quotation marks or indentation (if exact wording is incorporated). In addition, both directly quoted and summarized material **MUST BE ACKNOWLEDGED BY USE OF A NOTE OR PARENTHETICAL CITATION** that indicates the author and/or date of publication and page number or numbers. If the writer indents a quotation, it must be clearly set off from the body of the text and must be documented in the aforesaid manner. Students are permitted to use any professionally recognized citation style, but to verify the various documentation procedures, writers should consult the style sheet for the particular citation format they are using (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.). (Note: Language of this paragraph was adapted from both the Pitt-Johnstown *Guidelines on Academic Integrity* and the Indiana University of Pennsylvania *Academic Integrity Policy*.)

**Cell Phones**
You are expected to turn off your cell phones before coming to class. I reserve the right to answer any cell phone that rings during class or to complete any text message I catch you typing during class. **Remember, you are expected to be respectful at all times. Interruptions during class, whether they are from cell phones or unnecessary conversations, are disrespectful.** Failure to respect your classmates and the instructor may result in being asked to leave.

**Tentative Course Schedule**
***Please Note: This schedule is tentative and subject to change at the instructor’s discretion. My expectation is to spend about three weeks on each of the following five topics (readings will be assigned on CourseWeb); however that timeline is subject to change if we need (or want) more or less time to discuss a particular topic. I am also willing to make changes to the list of topics we cover if there is a different topic that students would like to discuss or that ends up becoming relevant during the semester. If there is a topic we are not covering that you would like the class to cover, please let me know, and we will discuss it.**

Please be sure to check CourseWeb regularly for the weekly readings and for possible scheduling changes.
List of Proposed Topics and Discussion Questions:

1. Police use of (excessive?) force and body cameras
   a. Is there a problem with police in America using excessive force or unjustifiably using lethal force? Or is the threat of unjustifiable force by the police over-blown? Are police too quick to resort to force?
   b. Do police use force in a racially biased manner?
   c. What is the best solution for reducing police use of force and killings by police? Are body cameras the most feasible answer?
   d. Who should investigate police-involved shootings? Should internal affairs, a different police department, or an outside, independent agency investigate them? Or is there a better option?

2. Bail
   a. Is the use of bail the best way to ensure that defendants return for trial?
   b. Does bail unfairly disadvantage and/or punish poor and minority defendants?
   c. Does pre-trial detention unfairly pressure poor defendants to plead guilty and/or disadvantage them at trial?
   d. Is it just to detain non-violent criminal suspects prior to conviction?
   e. Should cash bail be abolished? If so, what should replace it?

3. Sentencing Reform
   a. Are “tough on crime” sentencing policies good public policy? Are the recent attempts to reduce sentence severity good policy?
   b. What are the drawbacks and the benefits of these policies?
   c. Are criminal penalties in the US too severe? Should they be reduced, especially for non-violent and drug offenders?
   d. Is there a better strategy for dealing with non-violent offenders? What about violent offenders? What about repeat offenders?

4. Solitary Confinement
   a. What are the benefits and drawbacks of placing prisoners in solitary confinement?
   b. Should solitary confinement be used to control unruly prisoners?
   c. Is solitary confinement cost effective? Does it deter? Does it reduce recidivism? Does it make things worse? Does it endanger society or make society safer?
   d. Are the procedures for determining who gets sent to solitary effective at ensuring only the “worst of the worst” get sent there?
   e. Is there a more effective way to control unruly or violent inmates?

5. Death Penalty and “Death in Prison” Sentences
   a. What are the positive and negative qualities of the death penalty?
b. What functions does the death penalty serve? Is the death penalty discriminatory? Have we executed innocent persons?

c. Should we abolish or retain the death penalty? If we abolish it, how should we punish murderers? Should we be trying to rehabilitate convicted killers? Or should they never be released?

d. Are “death in prison” sentences more humane than death? Are convicted killers better off with a death sentence or a “death in prison” sentence? How is society best off?