Senior Seminar: Race, Crime, and Incarceration Policy in the United States

BC3063 (Fall 2021)

Instructor: Professor Morgan C. Williams, Jr.
Email: mcwillia@barnard.edu
Office Hours: Wednesdays 2 PM – 4 PM (Appointment Only)
Office Hours Scheduling: All office hours appointments can be made, at least 24 hours in advance, using the Calendly: https://calendly.com/mcwillia/officehoursfall2021

Course Information

Class Meeting Times: Wednesday, 12:00 PM – 1:50 PM
Class Location: TBD

Notes: This syllabus is subject to change as we approach and move forward with the Fall 2021 semester. This course intends on meeting in-person throughout the Fall 2021 semester unless public health conditions or Barnard College suggests otherwise. I strongly suggest that all students review the College’s Health & Safety guidance well before the first day of classes.

Course Description

Recent momentum behind criminal justice reform permitted new discussions concerning incarceration policy and punishment in the United States. This course examines the role of crime, incarceration policy, and institutions in driving contemporary discussions on criminal justice reform through the prism of race. The course will provide students with an opportunity to critically examine how behaviors such as racial stereotypes and stigma influence a variety of issues at the center of criminal justice reform—including racial disparities in crime, law enforcement strategy, sentencing outcomes, and prisoner reentry into the labor market. Students will ultimately learn that even as a pure social construct, race plays a vital role in shaping both social policy and outcomes related to criminal justice reform.

Prerequisites

This course requires permission from the instructor in addition to the completion of all required coursework for the economics track, political economy track, or economics and mathematics majors. Exceptions to these prerequisites may be granted by the chair of the department only.

Learning Objectives

Through this course, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate their proficiency in prominent research existing at the intersection of race, crime, and criminal justice—including work offering important theoretical perspectives within this area of research, contemporary econometric approaches to capturing these
behaviors in practice, and policy interventions designed to address racial inequality within this setting.

2. Carry out a co-authored research project examining an original research question, within the scope of the course, and employs novel methods that are well-suited to appropriately tackle this question.

3. Present findings from their group research projects that clearly articulate the research question(s) of interest, the purpose of the study, research design, main results, and conclusions (and perhaps any policy implications).

Course Materials

This seminar has no textbook and all required course readings will be made available on Canvas. However, I highly recommend the following texts for all students interested in racial inequality, crime, and crime justice:


Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is a vital component of the scholastic experience at Barnard College. All students enrolled in this class required to read, and strictly abide by, the [Honor Code](#) which states the following:

We, the students of Barnard College, resolve to uphold the honor of the College by engaging with integrity in all of our academic pursuits. We affirm that academic integrity is the honorable creation and presentation of our own work. We acknowledge that it is our responsibility to seek clarification of proper forms of collaboration and use of academic resources in all assignments or exams. We consider academic integrity to include the proper use and care for all print, electronic, or other academic resources. We will respect the rights of others to engage in pursuit of learning in order to uphold our commitment to honor. We pledge to do all that is in our power to create a spirit of honesty and honor for its own sake.

Information for Students with Disabilities at Barnard College

Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please visit the [Center for Accessibility Resources & Disability Services (CARDS) website](#) for more information. Students can also reach them directly at (212)-854-4634 or send an email to cards@barnard.edu. Students requesting accommodations must first meet with a CARDS staff member. Upon registering, students are required to request accommodation letters each semester in order to notify faculty and are encouraged to do so very early in the semester in order to ensure access to the necessary accommodations. For students who are already registered with CARDS,
please schedule a time to meet with me outside of class in order to discuss your accommodations for the course and bring your faculty notification letter at that time.

**Barnard College Policy on Religious Holidays**

*Barnard College’s Policy on religious holidays* states that members of any religious group may, without penalty, absent themselves from classes when required in compliance with their religious obligations. Please notify me in advance of religious holidays that might coincide with course obligations in order to schedule mutually acceptable alternatives.

**Grading Policy and Assignments**

1. Class Attendance and Participation (including the Discussion Board) (10%)
2. Research Proposal (20%)
3. Research Presentation (20%)
4. Research Paper (50%)

**Assignments**

*Discussion Board:*

Each week you will be required to submit a brief assessment (i.e., no more than 200 words) of the required readings and overall lecture topic using the online discussion board—specifically addressing the key concepts and arguments presented by the authors. Weekly assessments must be submitted no later than 10 PM EST on Tuesday evening before the lecture. Discussion board submissions will be graded on a pass-fail basis. However, late submissions will not be accepted and the participation grade will be subject to the overall quality of the assessment.

*Group Research Project:*

Students will be placed into groups (size to be determined) in order to conduct a research project that will ultimately produce a presentation and an approximately 10-page final paper (details specified below). The paper must address a novel research question within the scope of the course and must receive my approval *no later than our second lecture on September 22, 2021*. The project can be empirical or theoretical in methodological orientation. I strongly encourage you to visit the *Empirical Reasoning Center* (currently open on a virtual basis) if you choose an econometric approach to addressing your research question. *Jennie Correia, our Social Science Librarian*, is also an excellent resource to consult throughout the research process. Deliverables associated with the group research project are as follows:

- **Research Proposal:** All students are required to submit a full research proposal in preparation for carrying out their research presentation and writing the final paper. The research proposal should be a *well-crafted and thoughtful* write-up which clearly articulates the purpose of your given research inquiry and methodological approach. Students must submit their full research proposal *no later October 20, 2021 by 5 PM EST*. No exceptions! Each research proposal must address the following:
• Introduction (2 pages): The introduction should motivate the larger project, explicitly state the undertaken research questions, and provide a precise understanding as to why your chosen topic is of economic importance.

• Literature Review (2-2.5 pages): The literature review will consist of a rigorous, yet succinct, assessment of the previous scholarly sources on your chosen topic. This section of the proposal should engage the salient contributions of previous work on your topic, how those authors addressed your stated research questions, and what you perceive to be the value-added associated with your project. Students should use this section to identify the most relevant theories, methodologies, and findings within this previously established literature.

• Methodology (2-2.5 pages): Each proposal must sufficiently describe the methods being employed in addressing your stated research questions. If your proposed project is empirically oriented, this section should address the following: 1) What data will your project employ (make sure these data are readily available!)? How exactly do you go about constructing your study sample? What would be the ideal experiment in addressing your research questions and how much does your proposed econometric approach depart from this ideal experiment, if at all? How do these methods differ from previous work, if at all? What are the underlying identifying assumptions? For theoretically oriented projects: 1) What are the relevant definitions, assumptions, and structures necessary for the construction of your model (e.g., agents, preferences, and information sets)? Can you properly motivate any underlying assumptions and why they are necessary? 2) What propositions and theorems, if true, would be interesting and what steps do you anticipate taking in order to assess them? 3) What is the underlying economic intuition behind your anticipated results?

• Descriptive Statistics Tables/Figures: A crucial step in assessing the intellectual promise of a given research project often involves constructing descriptive tables and figures using the relevant data. These figures and tables can be crucial in understanding the strengths and limitations of your study sample in addition to highlighting potential mechanisms consistent with the authors’ primary conjectures. Students are expected to provide a descriptive statistics table and, if applicable, preliminary figures relevant to their chosen project. Students are also expected to explicitly state the relevance of these findings to understanding their chosen research design.

• References: Please provide a reference section citing all sources cited within your proposal using the Chicago Manual of Style with author last name(s) and year within the text.

Research Presentation: Students will also give and are required to attend brief group presentations (approximately 10-13 slides) based on their research project that will take place on December 1, 2021 and December 8, 2021 containing exactly the following components:

• Introduction (2-3 slides): What is your research question? Why is your research interesting and perhaps of policy relevance?

• Data and Descriptive Statistics (3-5 slides): Each presentation should include one slide describing your data sources and how you constructed your sample. The
remaining slides must show your descriptive statistics table and any insightful figures (if applicable).

- **Research Design (1 slide):** What estimation strategy or theoretical approach did you use in order to produce the relevant estimates and findings? Write down the necessary equations and assumptions behind these models.
- **Main Results (1-2 slides):** Describe your main estimates and results.
- **Discussion and Concluding Remarks (2-3 slides):** Can you place your results within the context of the larger literature. For example, are your estimates larger or smaller than previous estimates? Does your empirical strategy or proof improve on strategies adopted in other papers? What are the limitations of your study and do your results have policy relevance? What are some directions for future work?

- **Research Paper:** The final research paper should be approximately 10 pages double-spaced with 12 point Time New Roman font and one-inch margins. The full page count does not include title pages, tables, or figures (or excessive block quotes and footnotes). Please abstain from citing irrelevant anecdotal evidence, personal experiences, or referencing other forms of non-scholarly work. Please cite all references using the Chicago Manual of Style with author last name(s) and year within the text. I will discuss the paper format in greater detail later this semester, but each paper should have the following sections: 1) Introduction, 2) Data, 3) Empirical Strategy/Theoretical Framework, 4) Main Results, 5) Discussion and Concluding Remarks, and 6) Appendix. All papers should be prepared to provide all code necessary to producing (and replicating) your results while theoretical papers should provide the derivations and proofs behind your results. *All papers are due by December 22, 2021 by 5 PM EST. No exceptions!*
- **Peer Evaluation:** A peer evaluation will also factor into the overall grade for the project.

### Semester Overview

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Assignment Due</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 15, 2021</td>
<td>Race, Crime, and Stereotypes</td>
<td>• Discussion (9-14-21)</td>
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<td>September 22, 2021</td>
<td>Reflecting on the “War on Drugs”</td>
<td>• Discussion (9-21-21)</td>
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<td>• Research topic approval</td>
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<td>September 29, 2021</td>
<td>More Polic(ing), Less Crime?</td>
<td>• Discussion (9-28-21)</td>
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<td>October 6, 2021</td>
<td>Assessing Racial Bias in Policing</td>
<td>• Discussion (10-5-21)</td>
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<td>October 13, 2021</td>
<td>Race and Police Use of Force</td>
<td>• Discussion (10-12-21)</td>
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<td>October 20, 2021</td>
<td>Race and the Court System: Part I</td>
<td>• Discussion (10-19-21)</td>
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<td>• Research proposal due by 5 PM EST</td>
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<td>October 27, 2021</td>
<td>Race and the Court System: Part II</td>
<td>• Discussion (10-26-21)</td>
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<td>November 3, 2021</td>
<td>Algorithmic Discrimination</td>
<td>• Discussion (11-2-21)</td>
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November 10, 2021  Crime and Punishment in Schools  • Discussion (11-9-21)
November 17, 2021  Criminal History and Labor Markets  • Discussion (11-16-21)
December 1, 2021  Student Presentations I
December 8, 2021  Student Presentations II
December 22, 2021  Research Paper (and materials)  • Submit by 5 PM EST!

Detailed Course Overview

Week One: Race, Crime, and Stereotypes

Required Reading:


Supplemental Reading:


**Week Two: Reflecting on the “War on Drugs”**

** Required Reading:  


**Supplemental Reading:**


**Week Three: More Polic(ing), Less Crime?**

**Required Reading:**


Supplemental Reading:


**Week Four: Assessing Racial Bias in Policing**

Required Reading:


Supplemental Reading:


**Week Five: Race and Police Use of Force**

**Required Reading:**


**Supplemental Reading:**


**Week Six: Race and the Court System: Part I**

*Required Reading:*


*Supplemental Reading:*


**Week Seven: Race and the Court System: Part II**
Required Reading:


Supplemental Reading:


**Week Eight: Algorithmic Discrimination**

Required Reading:


**Supplemental Reading:**


**Week Nine: Crime and Punishment in Schools**

**Required Reading:**

Supplemental Reading:


**Week Ten: Criminal History and Labor Markets**

**Required Reading:**


**Supplemental Reading:**


Weeks Eleven and Twelve: Group Presentations