

CCJS 418R: Politics of American Criminal Justice

Thursdays 3:30-6:00 | [TWS 1310](#)

Instructor:

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Office: 2165A LeFrak Hall

Office Hours: By appointment

Course description:

The criminal justice system comprises the laws, institutions, and values that authorize and legitimate state coercion, deciding who wields it, over whom, for what purposes, under what limits, and at what cost. Contemporary American criminal justice is not inevitable; it is the product of political choices and priorities that have developed over time and remain contested today. This course examines how those choices are made, justified, challenged, and reformed. The first part of the course traces the politics of American criminal justice historically, from colonial localism through racialized crime politics, the punitive turn, and post-9/11 security governance. The second part examines the actors, interests, data systems, institutions, and values that structure contemporary criminal justice debates.

Learning Outcomes:

1. Explain how American criminal justice policies and institutions developed through political struggle, from colonial localism and racialized state-building to the punitive turn, federalized security governance, and contemporary reform politics.
2. Distinguish the framing, claims, solutions, and measurement choices in criminal justice debates, and evaluate how each shapes policy conflict.
3. Trace the organized interests behind a criminal justice policy using primary documents.
4. Engage opposing positions in good faith in order to clarify evidence, values, tradeoffs, and the limits of one's own position.

Course Format:

Our regular meetings will include some lecture, but the majority of our time will be focused on class discussions, your questions, and activities. All course materials and assignments will be available on ELMS. You will be expected to complete assigned materials before class meetings.

Class Conduct:

Respect is of paramount importance. Respect for each other, respect for yourself, respect for me, and respect for the people whose lives are affected by the criminal legal system (from all sides of the law). The topics we discuss in CCJS classes can prove more controversial or contentious than subjects in other departments. Respect for the ideas, opinions, and experiences of others is our first priority.

Undoubtedly there will be students in this class who either have been victims of crime or who have a family member/friend who has been a victim of crime. There will also likely be students who have had personal experiences with the criminal justice system as well. If you would like to

share your experiences, you are welcome to, but in no way should you EVER feel compelled or required to share your personal experiences relating to these issues if you are not comfortable doing so.

Grading and Self-Assessment:

Grading for this course will be by contract. You will determine what you want to get out of this course, how much work you plan to complete in order to meet that goal, and then commit to doing so. Together, those commitments will form the basis for your grade. You will have the choice of three contracts (A, B, or C), each of which includes a different standard you will need to meet to earn that grade. You will choose which contract works best for your learning goals, schedule, and abilities this semester, and commit to doing the work that is entailed by the contract. If you meet the conditions of your contract, you will earn the letter grade you indicated in your contract.

You will choose the grade contract that best fits your goals and submit a contract for my approval by **Thursday, September 17**. Your written contract will detail the requirements you will meet in order to receive the grade for which you have contracted. If you have accommodations, you may need to request specific, reasonable adjustments to the standard contract (this includes ADS support, religious observances, etc). For example, if your accommodations include additional absences from class or extensions on written assignments beyond what is already given in the contract, you should specify what particular modifications you would like to request.

At the midterm, you will revisit and assess your contract and reflect on your progress toward fulfilling them. If, by that point, you are not on track to fulfill your contract, I reserve the right to request that you shift to a different contract--e.g., from an "A" to a "B," or from a "B" to a "C." Likewise, if you are exceeding the terms of your contract, you may request to shift contracts in the opposite direction. Within contracts, I also reserve the right to adjust grades as I see appropriate. At my discretion, I may adjust your grade upwards (from a "B" to a "B+," for example, to acknowledge fulfillment of a B contract with work that I find to be exemplary) or downwards. **Please note:** In order to evaluate your progress, you need to keep track of your work, including days of class missed, participation, and so on. More details about the contracts can be found on ELMS.

Other Policies:

Academic Dishonesty: Don't cheat. It's bad news for everyone. If you are having trouble – again, just communicate with me.

Generative AI: One of the primary objectives of this course is to further develop your ability to make a concise but effective argument through writing. Therefore, the use of AI tools (TerpAI, ChatGPT, Gemini, Grammarly, etc.) is prohibited for any part of the assignment process, including brainstorming, writing, and editing. While there will be a place for these tools in your future work, this policy aims to foster your ability to develop original ideas and a unique voice,

both core skills of this class. If you have questions or suggestions for potential exceptions, please email me and I would be happy to talk more.

Incompletes: I can only give an incomplete if the majority of coursework has been completed, and you experience some kind of emergency. If this happens, contact me as soon as possible so we can come up with a plan.

Disability Support: I will make every effort to accommodate students who are registered with the Academic Support Services (ADS) Office and who provide me with a University of Maryland ADS Accommodation form. Just let me know.

Overview of Course Topics:

Week	Date	Topic
1	Thurs 9/3	What does it mean to say criminal justice is political?
2	Thurs 9/10	Racial control, again (and again, and again)
3	Thurs 9/17	The punitive turn
4	Thurs 9/24	Federalism after 9/11
5	Thurs 10/1	Can numbers be political?
6	Thurs 10/8	Policing and discretion
7	Thurs 10/15	Are judges political actors?
8	Thurs 10/22	Bail and pretrial detention
9	Thurs 10/29	Politics at the end of a gun
10	Thurs 11/5	Immigration enforcement
11	Thurs 11/12	Workday - No class
12	Thurs 11/19	Political economy of punishment (on Zoom)
13	Thurs 11/26	Thanksgiving - No Class
14	Thurs 12/3	Politics of reform
15	Thurs 12/10	Criminal justice as democratic choice