

Contemporary Criminological Theory 454

Fall 2026

Engineering Martin Building 1108

Monday & Wednesday 2:00 – 3:15 pm

Professor Bersani

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Office Hours Wednesdays 10:00-11:00am

Course Description: What is crime? What are the causes of crime? Who commits crime? How do we reduce crime? These questions – among many others – form the backdrop of this course. We will discuss the historical foundations of criminological theory, the measurement of crime, explanations of crime and criminality, and responses to crime. This course will interrogate the wide array of theories in criminology as well as deliberate their relevance for understanding crime trends, correlates of crime, application to policies and practices aimed at controlling crime, and central debates about these issues. Examining the theoretical explanations of why people offend is essential for a deeper understanding of the problems of crime, delinquency, and victimization, and in formulating responses to them.

The primary goal of this course is for you to understand and apply criminological theories. To that end, at several points across the semester we will work on a theory-to-policy project that will culminate in your final writing assignment for the class.

Required Resources:

- Cullen, Francis T., Robert Agnew and Pamela Wilcox, eds. 2018. *Criminological Theory: Past to Present*, 7th ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Various articles and online resources on the class ELMs page.

Expectations: This course is structured around a lecture and discussion format. **Keeping up-to-date with daily reading assignments is especially important.** Any questions you may have about the reading materials should be brought up during class time to facilitate discussion. Questions and comments are encouraged and provide a great opportunity to bring somewhat abstract theories to life! Students are expected to attend all class meetings on time and are responsible for the material covered in class as well as from the assigned readings. Lectures will cover some material not discussed in the book and this material **will** be included on the exams. If you must miss a lecture, I strongly advise you to get the notes from a classmate. **Missing more than 2 classes (equivalent to 1 missed week) over the course of the semester will put students at risk of failing the class.**

Classroom Code of Conduct: The success of this class is dependent not only on my abilities as an instructor to communicate new and complicated ideas, but also on our ability as a class to work together to create an environment conducive to learning. I expect students to be prepared for class and to be actively engaged in the classroom activities. Unfortunately, disruptive behaviors in the classroom cheat other students of opportunities to learn. Examples of disruptive behavior include coming late to class, repeatedly leaving and entering the classroom, making loud or distracting noises, and speaking without being recognized. Students are expected to treat each other with respect. Disruptive behavior of any kind will not be tolerated. Also recognize that the use of cell phones, surfing the internet, sleeping, eating, and reading outside material during class are inappropriate behaviors.

CLASS CONTENT

Exams: There will be three exams in this course: two regular exams and a final exam. The final exam will be cumulative. The exams may include a mixture of multiple choice, true/false, and short answer / essay questions. Exam questions will be based on the readings covered for class, the lecture material, and class discussions. I do not hand out study guides for the exams.

Writing Assignment: Throughout the semester, you will apply criminological theory to a current juvenile or adult justice policy in Maryland. This will involve examining the problem the policy is intended to address and applying a criminological theory to evaluate the policy and develop evidence-informed recommendations. Your brief should demonstrate how theoretical assumptions and mechanisms can be used to understand real-world problems and inform policy decisions. The project will be completed in several stages, including an initial policy workshop in-class workday to learn more about the policy you are assigned, followed by a second in-class workday focused on applying various theories to your policy. Additional instructions, examples, and grading criteria will be provided in class. Writing assignments are submitted electronically through the class blackboard page.

Class Participation: Class participation credit is earned through ACTIVE participation. Active Participation includes answering questions, asking questions, and most importantly engaging with the topic under discussion. In-class discussion credit also includes group work. At random times throughout the semester, you will work in small groups to think through problems or answer critical thinking questions. You are expected to be an active member of the group, which means participating in the discussion, recording responses to questions, and speaking for the group when the class reconvenes. To earn an A in class participation, students must participate at least once **each week**. Being present in class but not actively participating will earn a C for the participation portion of the class. Being absent from class will earn 0 (zero) points for the participation portion of the class.

The format of this class – a mixture of lecture and class discussion – requires constant participation. Students will not be able to make-up the points from missing in-class discussion assignments unless they have an excused absence (see the excused absence policy). For those who have an excused absence, in-class participation points will be assessed based on the class days attended.

Point Distribution:	Percent of Final Grade	Your Earned Grade	Points
<u>Exams (50%)</u>			
Exam 1	15%	_____ (* .15)	= _____
Exam 2	15%	_____ (* .15)	= _____
Final Exam	20%	_____ (* .20)	= _____
<u>Assignments (40%)</u>			
Policy Workshop	5%	_____ (* .05)	= _____
Theory Workshop	5%	_____ (* .05)	= _____
Final Paper	30%	_____ (* .30)	= _____
<u>Class Participation (10%)</u>			
Participation / Attendance	10%	_____ (* .10)	= _____
Total	100%		= _____

Grading Breakdown:

A+ 97-100%	B+ 87-89	C+ 77-79	D+ 67-69	F 59% or Below
A 93-96	B 83-86	C 73-76	D 63-66	
A- 90-92	B- 80-82	C- 70-72	D- 60-62	

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Policies and Resources for Undergraduate Courses

It is our shared responsibility to know and abide by the University of Maryland's policies that relate to all courses, which include topics like:

- Academic integrity
- Student and instructor conduct
- Accessibility and accommodations
- Attendance and excused absences
- Grades and appeals
- Copyright and intellectual property

Please reference and review the [Office of Undergraduate Studies' Course-Related Policies](#) and follow up with me if you have questions.

CLASS POLICIES

Exams: Students have 75 minutes to complete each exam during our regularly scheduled class time.

Makeup exams are only allowed in cases of excused absences with **official documentation** and include instances such as: an illness with a doctor's note excusing you from class, death in the immediate family, required University activities, and required court appearance. Documentation must contain information on the **specific dates** for which you are unable to take the exam, and you are expected to take the exam **immediately** before or after the circumstances have passed. I must be notified in person, by e-mail, or in writing **PRIOR** to missing an exam for me to consider giving you a makeup. When you notify me in advance of a situation, I will respond via email. If you do not receive my response, then you should contact me again. **Do not assume** that I received your notification unless you receive an email response from me.

Late Work: Assignments are submitted via ELMs and are due at the **beginning** of class on the date listed on the class syllabus. ELMs allows students to submit assignments "on time" regardless of whether or not they are physically able to be in class. **Once class has started, any work handed in is considered late.** Late submissions will incur a penalty of one letter grade reduction (A to B; A- to B-; etc.) for each day that it is late. A "day" is 24 hours from the due date (start of class) including weekend days. If you must miss class, it is your responsibility to contact me as soon as possible before class to discuss your options.

Technology: Put your phone, laptop and iPad away! Research consistently shows that student performance (**your grade**) increases when technology is banned from the classroom. These devices are often distracting to you AND to the students around you. Students with accommodations for use of technology in the classroom must speak with me in advance during office hours and sit in designated areas of the classroom. Students using social media, surfing the web, instant messaging, or completing work for a different class during class time will be asked to put their laptop away. **You should bring your laptop for in-class workshop days.**

Course Guidelines

Names/Pronouns and Self-Identifications. The University of Maryland recognizes the importance of a diverse student body, and we are committed to fostering inclusive and equitable classroom environments. I invite you, if you wish, to tell us how you want to be referred to in this class, both in terms of your name and your pronouns (he/him, she/her, they/them, etc.). Keep in mind that the pronouns someone uses are not necessarily indicative of their gender identity. For more information about names and gender markers, visit the [LGBTQ+ Equity Center](#).

Additionally, it is your choice whether to disclose how you identify in terms of your gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, and dis/ability, among all aspects of your identity (e.g., should it come up in classroom conversation about our experiences and perspectives) and should be self-identified, not presumed or imposed. I will do my best to address and refer to all students accordingly, and I ask you to do the same for all of your fellow Terps.

Video or Audio Recording. Video or audio recording of class sessions, activities, or discussions is prohibited without advance permission from the instructor. Maryland is one of 11 U.S. states that require [two-party, or all-party, consent](#) before it is permissible to record or otherwise intercept and/or capture communications (such as phone calls, in-person conversations, video conferences). This means that everyone participating in a conversation must give their consent before any communication is recorded. Read this UMD article on [Audiovisual Recording](#) for more information.

Communication with Instructor. Email: If you need to reach out and communicate with me, please email me at bbersani@umd.edu. Please DO NOT email me with questions that are easily found in the syllabus or on ELMS (i.e. When is this assignment due? How much is it worth? etc.) but please DO reach out about personal, academic, and intellectual concerns/questions. While I will do my best to respond to emails within 24 hours, you will more likely receive email responses from me on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 8:00am-5:00pm EST.

ELMS: I will send IMPORTANT announcements via ELMS messaging. You must make sure that your email & announcement notifications (including changes in assignments and/or due dates) are enabled in ELMS so you do not miss any messages. You are responsible for checking your email and Canvas/ELMS inbox with regular frequency.

Communication with Peers. With a diversity of perspectives and experience, we may find ourselves in disagreement and/or debate with one another. As such, it is important that we agree to conduct ourselves in a professional manner and that we work together to foster and preserve a virtual classroom environment in which we can respectfully discuss and deliberate controversial questions. I encourage you to confidently exercise your right to free speech—bearing in mind, of course, that you will be expected to craft and present evidence-based arguments that support your position. Keep in mind, that free speech has its limit and this course is NOT the space for hate speech, harassment, and derogatory language. I will make every reasonable attempt to create an atmosphere in which each student feels comfortable voicing their argument without fear of being personally attacked, mocked, demeaned, or devalued.

Any behavior (including harassment, sexual harassment, and racially and/or culturally derogatory language) that threatens this atmosphere will not be tolerated. Please alert me immediately if you feel threatened, dismissed, or silenced at any point during our semester together and/or if your engagement in discussion has been in some way hindered by the learning environment.

Academic Integrity

For this course, some of your assignments will be collected via Turnitin on our course ELMS page. I have chosen to use this tool because it can help you improve your scholarly writing and help me verify the integrity of student work. For information about Turnitin, how it works, and the feedback reports you may have access to, visit [Turnitin Originality Checker for Students](#).

The University's Code of Academic Integrity is designed to ensure that the principles of academic honesty and integrity are upheld. In accordance with this code, the University of Maryland does not tolerate academic dishonesty. Please ensure that you fully understand this code and its implications because all acts

of academic dishonesty will be dealt with in accordance with the provisions of this code. All students are expected to adhere to this Code. It is your responsibility to read it and know what it says, so you can start your professional life on the right path. **As future professionals, your commitment to high ethical standards and honesty begins with your time at the University of Maryland.**

It is important to note that course assistance websites, such as CourseHero, are not permitted sources unless the instructor explicitly gives permission. Material taken or copied from these sites can be deemed unauthorized material and a violation of academic integrity. These sites offer information that might be inaccurate, and most importantly, relying on restricted sources will hamper your learning process, particularly the critical thinking steps necessary for college-level assignments.

Additionally, students may naturally choose to use online forums for course-wide discussions (e.g., Group lists or chats) to discuss concepts in the course. However, collaboration on graded assignments is strictly prohibited unless otherwise stated. Examples of prohibited collaboration include: asking classmates for answers on quizzes or exams, asking for access codes to clicker polls, etc. Please visit the [Office of Undergraduate Studies' full list of campus-wide policies](#) and reach out if you have questions.

Finally, on each exam or assignment you must write out and sign the following pledge: ***"I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this exam/assignment."*** If you ever feel pressured to comply with someone else's academic integrity violation, please reach out to me straight away. Also, ***if you are ever unclear*** about acceptable levels of collaboration, ***please ask!*** Each assignment will contain more specific information regarding acceptable levels of collaboration.

AI use is prohibited. AI assistance (TerpAI, ChatGPT, Gemini, Grammarly, etc.) is not permitted for coding, research, writing, editing, or any other part of the assignment process. Even though you may use these tools in the future, this approach will help you build a solid understanding of the subject matter. If you have questions or suggestions for potential exceptions, please contact me, and I would be happy to talk more.

Class Schedule

Date	Topic	Required Readings / Activity	Due
M: Aug 31	Introduction to the Class; Importance of theory		
W: Sept 2	Foundations of Criminological Theory: Classical and Positivist Schools	Part 1 introduction The Origins of Modern... Reading 1 An Essay on Crimes and Punishments Reading 2 The Criminal Man	
M: Sept 7	No Class – Labor Day		
W: Sept 9	Maryland Policy Workshop – In class Group Activity		End of class: Slide Deck Group work on MD Policy
M: Sept 14	Contemporary Classical Theories	Part 10 Intro. Reviving Classical Theory Reading 32 Reconceptualizing Deterrence Theory Reading 33 Crime as a Rational Choice	
W: Sept 16	Contemporary Classical Theories	Part 11 Intro. Environmental Criminology Readings 36 Routine Activity Theory	
M: Sept 21	Foundational Social Disorganization	Part 2 Intro. The Chicago School Reading 3 Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas	
W: Sept 23	Contemporary Social Disorganization	Reading 5 Collective Efficacy and Crime Reading 6 Legal Cynicism and Crime	
M: Sept 28	Discussion Day – Application of Theory	Watch Boys of Baraka before class	
W: Sept 30	Exam 1		

M: Oct 5	Foundational Learning Theory	Part 3 Intro. Learning to be a Criminal Reading 7 A Theory of Differential Association
W: Oct 7	Contemporary Learning Theory	Reading 9 A Social Learning Theory of Crime Reading 10 The Code of the Streets
M Oct 12	No Class – Fall Break	
W: Oct 14	Foundational Strain Theory	Part 4 Intro. Anomie / Strain Theories of Crime Reading 11 Social Structure and Anomie Reading 12 Delinquent Boys
M: Oct 19	Contemporary Strain Theory	Reading 13 Crime and the American Dream Reading 14 Pressured into Crime
W: Oct 21	Foundational Control Theory	Part 5 Intro. Varieties of Control Theory Reading 15 Techniques of Neutralization
M: Oct 26	Contemporary Control Theory	Reading 16 Social Bond Theory Reading 17 A General Theory of Crime
W: Oct 28	Discussion Day – Application of Theory	Listen to Allure of Crime before class
M: Nov 2	Exam 2	
W: Nov 4	Life Course Theory	Part 13 Intro. Getting Into and Out of Crime Reading 43 Pathways in the Life Course to Crime
M: Nov 9	Life Course Theory	Reading 44 A Theory of Persistent Offending... Reading 45 The Feared Self:...
W: Nov 11	Labeling / Societal Reaction	Part 6 Intro. Labeling Theory Reading 18 The Saints and the Roughnecks Reading 19 Crime, Shame, and Reintegration
M: Nov 16	Class and Power	Part 7 Intro. Critical Criminology Reading 22 Crime in a Market Society

W: Nov 18	No Class – Work on your class paper		
M: Nov 23	Theory Matrix Workshop – In Class Group Activity		End of Class: Theory Matrix
W: Nov 25	No Class – Thanksgiving Holiday Break		
M: Nov 30	Gender	Part 8 Intro. Feminist Theories Reading 24 Sisters in Crime Reading 27 Getting Played	
W: Dec 2	Race	Part 9 Intro. How Black Lives Matter Reading 28 A Theory of Race, Crime, ... Reading 29 Imprisoning Communities	Final Paper Due Before Class
M: Dec 7	MD Policy-Theory Discussion		
W: Dec 9	Review		
TBA	Final Exam		