



Psychology of Criminal Behavior (CCJS 461)

Term: Fall 2026

Instructor: Dr. Robin Shusko

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Office Hours: by appointment

Credits: 3

Course Dates: Aug 31, 2026 – Dec 11, 2026

Course Times: ONL asynchronous

Course Description

This course examines antisocial and criminal behavior from developmental, cognitive-behavioral, and psychological perspectives. The juvenile and adult offender are viewed as individuals embedded within multiple systems that shape behavior over time. Students will examine biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors associated with the onset and maintenance of criminal behavior, with attention to both offenders and victims.

The course also explores contemporary issues affecting criminal behavior research and practice, including violence risk assessment, emerging technologies, and the opportunities and limitations of artificial intelligence in criminal justice and forensic psychology.

Learning Outcomes

After completing this course, you will be able to:

- Explain and analyze biological, psychological, developmental, and environmental factors associated with criminal behavior.
- Compare major psychological theories used to explain criminal and antisocial behavior.
- Apply research and theory to real-world criminal behavior case studies.
- Critically analyze the relationship between criminal behavior and mental disorders.
- Evaluate the strengths and limitations of crime measurement and research methods.
- Analyze violence risk factors and distinguish among commonly used forensic risk assessment approaches.
- Evaluate information generated by artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies as they relate to criminal behavior research and practice.

Required Resources

- Course Website: elms.umd.edu
- All assigned reading material will be available in our course site.

Course Structure

This course combines:

- asynchronous learning activities;
- case studies;
- multimedia resources;
- applied exercises;
- AI-assisted research activities.

Students should expect to spend approximately 6–8 hours per week outside of class completing readings, completing Case File Activities, and developing the Behavioral Case File.

This course emphasizes active learning and the application of psychological theories to contemporary criminal justice issues.

Tips for Success in this Course

- **Participate.** I invite you to engage deeply, ask questions, and talk about the course content with your classmates. You can learn a great deal from discussing ideas and perspectives with your peers and instructor. Participation can also help you articulate your thoughts and develop critical thinking skills.
- **Manage your time.** Students are often very busy, and I understand that you have obligations outside of this class. However, students do best when they plan adequate time devoted to coursework. Block your schedule and set aside plenty of time to complete assignments, including extra time to handle any technology-related problems.
- **Login regularly.** I recommend that you log in to ELMS-Canvas several times a week to view announcements.
- **Do not fall behind.** Start assignments early. This class moves at a quick pace, and each week builds on the previous content. If you feel you are starting to fall behind, check in with the instructor as soon as possible so we can troubleshoot together. It will be hard to keep up with the course content if you fall behind in the pre-work or post-work.
- **Use ELMS-Canvas notification settings.** Pro tip! Canvas ELMS-Canvas can ensure you receive timely notifications in your email or via text. Be sure to enable announcements to be sent instantly or daily.
- **Ask for help if needed.** If you need help with ELMS-Canvas or other technology, IT Support. If you are struggling with a course concept, reach out to your classmates and me for support.

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.

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 your fellow Terps.

Video or Audio Recording:

Video or audio recording of class sessions, activities, or discussions is prohibited without advanced 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 rshusko@umd.edu OR rshusko@frederick.edu (I may see emails to this address sooner than I do at the UMD email). 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. I will do my best to respond to emails within 24 hours.

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 professionally 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 defend 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!***

AI policy for this course:

This class aims to develop your skills in effectively and responsibly using and citing AI tools (TerpAI, ChatGPT, Gemini, Grammarly, etc.). You will be asked to use these tools throughout the assignment process, which will prepare you to use them thoughtfully in your future work. When using AI assistance, follow the proper citation guidelines provided in the assignment instructions. For any questions or concerns, please contact me, and I would be happy to talk more.

Responsible Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools (e.g., TerpAI, ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Grammarly AI) are permitted and, in some assignments, required.

The purpose of using AI is to:

- explore ideas;
- evaluate information;
- develop digital literacy;
- critically assess information.

Students may use AI for:

- ✓ brainstorming
- ✓ research questions
- ✓ creating hypothetical case studies
- ✓ organizing information
- ✓ generating visual products

Students may NOT:

- X submit AI-generated work as their own;
- X fabricate sources or citations;
- X use AI during exams or quizzes;
- X rely solely on AI-generated information without verification.

When using AI, students must disclose:

1. the AI platform used;
2. prompts entered;
3. how AI output was used;
4. limitations or inaccuracies identified.

[See the University of Maryland guidelines on Generative AI for Teaching & Learning](#) for more information

Grades

All assessment scores will be posted on the course ELMS page. If you would like to review any of your grades (including exams) or have questions about how something was scored, please email me to schedule a time for us to meet and discuss.

Late work will be accepted on a case-by-case basis, but you **MUST CONTACT ME BEFORE** the due date for consideration. But please plan accordingly to have it submitted well before the scheduled deadline. I am happy to discuss any of your grades with you, and if I have made a mistake, I will correct it. Any formal grade disputes must be submitted in writing and within one week of receiving the grade. Final letter grades are assigned based on the percentage of total assessment points earned.

Final Grade Cutoffs									
A+	97.00%	B+	87.00%	C+	77.00%	D+	67.00%	F+	
A	94.00%	B	84.00%	C	74.00%	D	64.00%	F	<60.0%
A-	90.00%	B-	80.00%	C-	70.00%	D-	60.00%	F-	

Major Assignments / Grading Structure

Behavioral Case File (4 milestones) (50%)

Throughout the semester, you will investigate a single offender through the lens of psychology, criminal behavior theory, empirical research, and evidence-based practice. Unlike a traditional research paper, the Behavioral Case File is developed incrementally through weekly Case File Activities, which serve as working drafts that receive feedback and are revised before milestone submissions. Each module contributes one professional analysis to the file, allowing you to continually revise your understanding as new theories and evidence are introduced. By the end of the semester, your completed file will represent an integrated behavioral explanation of your selected offender, supported by psychological theory, research, and critical evaluation.

Milestone	Modules	Weight
Milestone 1 – Building the Foundation	Modules 1–3	10%
Milestone 2 – Understanding the Offender	Modules 4–7	10%
Milestone 3 – Behavioral Assessment & Intervention	Modules 8–12	15%
Final Behavioral Case File (<i>revised and integrated</i>)	Modules 1–14	15%
Total		50%

The final file should be approximately **30–40 pages**, excluding the title page and references. Students are expected to revise earlier sections based on instructor feedback before submitting the final integrated file.

Weekly Case File Activities (30%)

Weekly Case File Activities are structured investigations that require students to apply module concepts to their selected offender. Each activity helps you apply the week's concepts to your selected offender while building your Behavioral Case File. Because behavioral analysis is an iterative process, students are expected to revise earlier analyses after receiving instructor feedback. Growth across the semester is part of the learning process and is reflected in milestone submissions.

Knowledge Checks (20%)

Knowledge Checks consist of open-book, scenario-based quizzes designed to assess conceptual understanding and application of course theories. Questions emphasize interpretation, comparison, and decision-making rather than memorization.

Submission of assignments – All assignments are to be submitted as .doc/.docx or .pdf files to Canvas (unless otherwise noted) by 11:59 p.m. on Sundays.

Assignment schedule – Each week's content is available by 12:01 a.m. on Sunday morning and runs through the next Sunday at 11:59 p.m.

Course Outline

Each module follows a consistent instructional design:

- **Driving Question** – introduces the central psychological issue.
- **Learning Resources** – readings, lectures, scholarly articles, and multimedia.
- **Behavioral Case Analysis** – apply the week's concepts to your selected offender.
- **Reflection** – briefly document how the week's learning changed your understanding of the case.

Complete instructions, guided questions, module analyses, milestone requirements, and reflection prompts are provided in the Behavioral Case File Workbook.

Module	Guiding Question	Weekly Analysis
1. Introduction to Criminal Behavior	What Did Your Subject Do?	Case Overview
2. Defining & Measuring Crime	How Rare Is This Crime?	Crime in Context
3. Developmental & Protective Factors	Where Did This Begin?	Developmental Analysis
4. Biological Factors	What Did Biology Contribute?	Biological Analysis
5. Learning & Situational Factors	What Did They Learn—and From Whom?	Learning Theory Analysis
6. Psychopathy	What Do Personality and Psychopathy Explain?	Personality Analysis
7. Crime & Mental Disorders	What Role Did Mental Health Play?	Mental Health Analysis
8. Human Aggression	What Drove the Aggression?	Aggression Analysis
9. Homicide & Multiple Murder	Where Does Your Subject Fit?	Comparative Analysis
10. School & Workplace Violence	What Warning Signs Were There?	Warning Behavior Analysis
11. Sexual Assault & Sex Offenses	Which Sexual Offense Theories Apply?	Applying Sexual Offense Theories
12. Juvenile Delinquency	What Could Have Stopped This?	Intervention Analysis
13. Property Crime & Economic Crime	What Situational Factors Were Present?	Situational Analysis
14. Cybercrime & Crimes of Intimidation	What Is Your Final Understanding?	Final Case Analysis

Note: This is a tentative schedule, and subject to change as necessary – monitor the course ELMS page for current deadlines. In the unlikely event of a prolonged university closing, or an extended absence from the university, adjustments to the course schedule, deadlines, and assignments will be made based on the duration of the closing and the specific dates missed.

[University of Maryland Policy on the Conduct of Undergraduate Courses and Student Grievance Procedure.](#)

Resources & Accommodations

Accessibility and Disability Services

The University of Maryland is committed to creating and maintaining a welcoming and inclusive educational, working, and living environment for people of all abilities. The University of Maryland is also committed to the principle that no qualified individual with a disability shall, based on disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of the University, or be subjected to discrimination. The [Accessibility & Disability Service \(ADS\)](#) provides reasonable accommodation to qualified individuals to provide equal access to services, programs, and activities. ADS cannot assist retroactively; therefore, it is generally best to request accommodations several weeks before the semester begins or as soon as a disability is identified. Any student who requires accommodations should contact me as soon as possible, allowing me sufficient time to make arrangements.

For assistance in obtaining an accommodation, contact Accessibility and Disability Service at 301-314-7682, or email them at adsfrontdesk@umd.edu.

Emergency Preparedness

Emergencies on campus can happen at any time. To prepare, visit prepare.umd.edu or use the emergency symbol in the UMD App to review information. Resources for persons with disabilities are available on the [emergency preparedness page of the ADA Coordinator's website](#).

Student Resources and Services

Taking personal responsibility for your own learning means acknowledging when your performance does not match your goals and doing something about it. I hope you will come talk to me so that I can help you find the right approach to success in this course, and I encourage you to visit [UMD's Student Academic Support Services website](#) to learn more about the wide range of campus resources available to you.

In particular, everyone can use some help sharpening their communication skills (and improving their grade) by visiting [UMD's Writing Center](#) and schedule an appointment with the campus Writing Center.

You should also know there are a wide range of resources to support you with whatever you might need ([UMD's Student Resources and Services website](#) may help). If you feel it would be helpful to have someone to talk to, visit [UMD's Counseling Center](#).

Basic Needs Security

If you have difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or lack a safe and stable place to live, please visit [UMD's Division of Student Affairs website](#) for information about resources the campus offers you and let me know if I can help in any way.

Veteran Resources

UMD provides some additional support to our student veterans. You can access those resources at the office of [Veteran Student life](#) and the [Counseling Center](#). Veterans and active duty military personnel with special circumstances (e.g., upcoming deployments, drill requirements, disabilities) are welcome and encouraged to communicate these, in advance if possible, to the instructor.

Notice of Mandatory Reporting

Notice of mandatory reporting of sexual assault, sexual harassment, interpersonal violence, and stalking: As a faculty member, I am designated as a “Responsible University Employee,” and I must report all disclosures of sexual assault, sexual harassment, interpersonal violence, and stalking to UMD’s Title IX Coordinator per University Policy on Sexual Harassment and Other Sexual Misconduct.

If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact one of UMD’s confidential resources, such as [CARE to Stop Violence](#) (located on the Ground Floor of the Health Center) at 301-741-3442 or the [Counseling Center](#) (located at the Shoemaker Building) at 301-314-7651.

You may also seek assistance or supportive measures from UMD’s Title IX Coordinator, Angela Nastase, by calling 301-405-1142, or emailing titleIXcoordinator@umd.edu.

To view further information on the above, please visit the [Office of Civil Rights and Sexual Misconduct](#).

Course Evaluation

Please submit a course evaluation through Student Feedback on Course Experiences in order to help faculty and administrators improve teaching and learning at Maryland. All information submitted to Course Experiences is confidential. Campus will notify you when Student Feedback on Course Experiences is open for you to complete your evaluations at the end of the semester. Please go directly to the [Student Feedback on Course Experiences](#) to complete your evaluations. You may access the evaluation reports for courses for which 70% or more students submitted their evaluations.

Copyright Notice

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