

Crime, Mafias, and Prison

(POL820I)

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Class Description

This class develops a framework for the positive analysis of criminal behavior in a variety of contemporary and historical settings. It examines the rationality behind criminal choices, how governments seek to control crime, alternatives to state-enforcement of criminal law, the origins and operation of organized crime and mafia groups, and how crime affects regions characterized by failed or weak states, and the politics of mass incarceration. We'll study crime in a variety of contexts, including in the Sicilian Mafia, 18th century piracy, contemporary drug markets, and prisons. The class develops a set of analytical tools that can be used to understand the observed variation in criminal activity, the organizational structure of criminal activity, and their broader consequences.

Educational aims

The aims of this course are to:

- to introduce students to the tools of analysis that are relevant for understanding criminal behavior
- to develop an understanding of how the social science can analyze both historical and contemporary episodes of crime
- to provide students with basic tools for understanding statistical research findings
- to understand what is unique about illicit markets compared to legal markets
- to enable students to draw out the broader implication of their analyses of crime for politics and policy-making.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this module, students should be able to:

- understand how the tools of social science can be used to understand various aspects of crime;
- use theories about institutions and governance to understand various aspects of organized crime;
- understand historical patterns of crime and incarceration;
- understand the implications for public policy

Requirements

Discussion papers: Students will be expected to write two discussion papers (about 4 double-spaced pages each) based on the weekly reading. Each paper will count for 10% of the final grade (20% total). These discussion papers should identify the central arguments and themes in the reading, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses in the arguments and evidence presented, assess whether or not the reading fosters greater understanding of the topic, and highlight discussion questions for the

seminar that emerge from the reading. Papers should be submitted electronically at least 48 hours before the start of the seminar.

Final paper: Students will be expected to write a 15-20-page final research paper on a topic related to the class, but not already well covered in the course readings. This paper will count for 40% of the final grade. The topic must be cleared with me by the end of September. During the last four weeks of the semester each student will present his/her research paper and will provide detailed oral comments on the paper of another student. The paper must be circulated at least 72 hours before the class in which it is presented. The purpose of these presentations is to provide and receive detailed constructive feedback on paper drafts before making final revisions. The final, revised version of the paper is due one week after the last class of the semester.

Participation: Regular attendance and active participation are expected (and essential for a successful seminar). Any missed seminar will involve writing an additional reaction paper. Participation counts for 40% of the final grade.

Recent Papers on the Economics of Crime:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1zyRB708QpsxG_8vNCRl7gv5FyrPE81w3mF_kM_VJHbY/edit#gid=0

Quality Policing Podcast: <https://qualitypolicing.com/>

University of Chicago's Crime Lab: <https://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/labs/crime>

Readings

- Some of the readings use statistics and formal models. If you do not have much experience with these, that's okay. Read as carefully as you can through the paper. You can often get a good sense about what is being claimed, and on what grounds, even if you are not an expert with these tools. Importantly, come to the seminar prepared to ask questions and learn about those things that remain unclear.
- Most readings are available on Canvas
- All movies are optional.

September 5. How do Illicit Markets Work?

Summary: There are many valuable approaches to studying crime, including psychological, sociological, and normative ones. This class, however, mostly focuses on using models and empirical tools within the positive traditions of social science. This week's material surveys the key characteristics of the rational choice approach to understanding crime. It then examines theories that explain criminal activity. In particular, it looks at a model of crimes with victims, such as burglary. The readings highlight how economics can analyse a variety of "victimless" crimes and illicit markets.

Bill McCarthy. 2002. "New Economics of Sociological Criminology" *American Review of Sociology*, pages 417 to 429 + conclusion.

John Tierney. 2013. "The Rational Choices of Crack Addicts" *New York Times*

Josh Barro. 2014. "Here's Why Stealing Cars Went Out of Fashion" *New York Times*

Philip Cook. 1986. "The Demand and Supply of Criminal Opportunity" *Crime and Justice*.

Philip Cook, Jens Ludwig, Sudhir Venkatesh, and Anthony Braga. 2007. "Underground Gun Markets" *The Economic Journal*

Steven Levitt and Sudhir Venkatesh. 2000. "An Economic Analysis of a Drug-Selling Gang's Finances" *Journal of Political Economy*

Movies: Scarface (1983), American Gangster (2007), Freeway: Crack in the System (2015); Cocaine Cowboys (2006),

September 12. How to Control Crime?

Summary: This week's lecture examines why we have criminal law from an efficiency, rather than justice, perspective. We'll think about what is inefficient about crime, how much crime it is efficient to deter, and how to punish efficiently. Some of the papers examine how society (through both public and private means) actually attempts to reduce crime.

Klick, J., & Tabarrok, A. (2005). Using Terror Alert Levels to Estimate the Effect of Police on Crime. *Journal of Law and Economics*.

James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling. 1982. "Broken Windows" *Atlantic Monthly*

Steven Levitt. 2004. "Understanding Why Crime Fell in the 1990s: Four Factors that Explain the Decline and Six that Do Not" *Journal of Economic Perspectives*

Zimring. 2006. *The Great Crime Decline*. Chapter 4. Only read pages 85-103.

Koyama. 2012. "Prosecution Associations in Industrial Revolution England: Private Providers of Public Goods?" *Journal of Legal Studies*.

Leitzel, J. (2013). Toward drug control: Exclusion and buyer licensing. *Criminal Law and Philosophy*, 7(1), 99-119.

Movies: Unforgiven (1992); Minority Report (2002); Purge (2013); Kids for Cash (2013)

September 19. When Does Crime Organize? Part I

Federico Varese. 2010. "What is Organized Crime?" in *Organized Crime*, pgs. 14-21

Thomas Schelling. 1971. "What is the Business of Organized Crime?" *Journal of Public Law*.

Federico Varese. 1994. "Is Sicily the future of Russia? Private protection and the rise of the Russian Mafia" *European Journal of Sociology*

Timothy Frye. 2002. "Private protection in Russia and Poland" *American Journal of Political Science*

James Buchanan. 1973. "A Defense of Organized Crime?" from *The Economics of Crime and Punishment*.

Shortland and Varese. 2014. "The Protector's Choice: An Application of Protection Theory to Somali Piracy" *British Journal of Criminology*

Movies: The Godfather (1972), the Godfather: Part 2 (1974), Donnie Brasco (1997)

September 26. When Does Crime Organize? Part II

Federico Varese. 2011. *Mafias on the Move*. Chapter 2 "Mafia Transplantations"

David Skarbek. 2014. *The Social Order of the Underworld*. Chapter 1-4.

Movies: Goodfellas (1990)

October 3. How Do Criminals Organize and Communicate?

Peter Leeson. 2007. "An-arrgh-chy: The Law and Economics of Pirate Organization" *Journal of Political Economy*.

Peter Leeson. 2010. "Pirational choice: the economics of infamous pirate practices." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*

David Skarbek. 2014. *The Social Order of the Underworld*. Chapters 5 & 6.

October 10. Why Does Prison Social Order Vary Around the World?

David Skarbek. 2010. "Self-governance in San Pedro Prison." *The Independent Review*

Sacha Darke. 2014. "Managing without guards in a Brazilian police lockup" *Focaal*

Kristian Mjaland. 2014. "A Culture of Sharing: Drug Exchange in a Norwegian Prison" *Punishment & Society*.

David Skarbek. 2018. "Gay & Transgender prisoners in Los Angeles"

Doran Larson. 2013. "Why Scandinavian Prisons are Superior" *The Atlantic Magazine*

Skarbek, D. (2016). Covenants without the sword? Comparing prison self-governance globally. *American Political Science Review*.

Movies: Blood in, Blood Out (1993), American Me (1992); American History X (1998)

October 17: Why Did Conservatives Turn Against Mass Incarceration?

Dagan, D., & Teles, S. (2016). *Prison break: Why conservatives turned against mass incarceration*. Oxford University Press.

October 24: What are the Causes and Consequences of Mass Incarceration?

Forman Jr, J. (2012). Racial critiques of mass incarceration: Beyond the new Jim Crow. *New York University Law Review*

Enns, P. K. (2014). The public's increasing punitiveness and its influence on mass incarceration in the United States. *American Journal of Political Science*

Hinton, E. (2016). *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*. Chapter 1.

Weaver, V. M., & Lerman, A. E. (2010). Political consequences of the carceral state. *American Political Science Review*

Weaver, V. M. (2007). Frontlash: Race and the development of punitive crime policy. *Studies in American political development*

October 31: Student Presentations

November 7: Student Presentations

November 14 – Self-guided Student Activity

Mark Kleiman's 2018 Hoffinger Colloquium Lecture
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgV9i10EGDM>

Mark Kleiman's 2012 Dartmouth Lecture
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnHHYQX8exc>

Inside a Community's Radical Approach to Gang Violence
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4j_OtF7rrGE

The Crime Machine #1
<https://www.gimletmedia.com/reply-all/127-the-crime-machine-part-i#episode-player>

The Crime Machine #2
<https://www.gimletmedia.com/reply-all/128-the-crime-machine-part-ii#episode-player>

November 21 – Thanksgiving Break
November 28: Student Presentations
December 5: Student Presentations