

Defund Police and Prisons?

Punitive Social Control and its Alternatives

Meeting times: MWF 11-11:50 am
Building/Room:
Course: Soc 140a
Instructor: Neil Gong
Email: nmgong@ucsd.edu
Office hours: M-W 2-3pm. Social Sciences 463

Overview:

Following mass protests against police brutality and racial injustice, both policymakers and the public at large have engaged with radical critiques of policing and prisons. Activist rallying cries like “defund the police” and “care not cages” draw on an abolitionist vision of a possible world—one where punitive control is replaced with alternative approaches to social problems. What is the case against police and prisons, and what are these alternatives? What are the arguments for things like mental health diversion, more “humane” prison models from other parts of the world, or the wholesale abolition of punishment? On the other hand, are there limits to what can be “un-policed”? We will consider these as simultaneously social scientific questions of knowledge (what do we know and how), political questions of power (who is served and harmed), and ethical questions of values (how do we want to live).

To analyze both our current political moment and the history leading to it, we draw on tools from the sociology of deviance, which interrogates the social construction and social causation of things deemed “crime.” We also consider canonical prison abolitionist texts. Once equipped with a theoretical toolset, we examine the impact of policing on individual people, communities, and political movements. We then consider alternatives to policing homelessness, drug use, psychiatric disability, school disciplinary issues, and more. At the same time, we hear counterarguments, with special focus on certain issues—for instance, gender-based and increasing murder—that conceivably require *more* policing. Finally, we ask when and whether radical changes to social control systems are appropriate versus moderate reforms. For a final project, students will produce a publishable short op-ed on policy responses to a currently criminalized issue.

Learning Objectives

- 1) Understand sociological theory regarding the construction of social problems
- 2) Become familiar with contemporary debates on police and prisons
- 3) Formulate a policy position and present it in op-ed form
- 4) Demonstrate discussion skills, including fair interpretation of opposing views, finding common ground, and respectfully articulating points of difference.

Note of content warning: Subject matter touched upon in this course will include violence, race and racism, hateful language, and other topics. If you anticipate this content will cause you distress, please meet with me to discuss.

Please note that students may not be warned about individual readings or in-class lectures, and we will not limit discussions, as sensitivity to topic will vary from student to student.

Assessment

Assessment for the class will consist of participation on Perusall, reading response memos, a midterm exam and a final op-ed. The breakdown of final grades will be as follows:

Perusall Readings: 30% of your grade. Readings will be online in the Perusall application. Read through and make 3 comments for each reading—this might mean noting something you are confused by, agree or disagree with, or can connect to a previous reading, etc. It might also mean posing a question, or a comment on another student’s posting.

Reading response memos: 15% of your grade. You will be required to submit 3x 0.5-1 single-spaced page memos in the ‘Reading response’ assignments in the Content section of Canvas. They will be worth 5 points and graded pass/fail. You must submit your memos the night before any five classes of your choosing, and each memo must engage one of the starred readings for that class (along with other readings if you wish). All memos must summarize at least one reading from a scholarly book or journal—suitable readings are marked with an asterisk (*)—and present a question for further discussion.

Midterm exam: 20% of your grade. It will consist of short answer questions and essay responses. The exam will cover both readings and lecture materials that are *not* taken directly from the readings.

Final project (30%): Write an op-ed, 800 words or less, on a topic of interest that is currently criminalized. Explain why it is appropriate or inappropriate for this issue to be treated as criminal, and if alternatives are needed, propose and justify an alternative response. For example, you might argue that treating addiction as a crime is analytically wrong (perhaps it’s better understood as a disease or response to hardship) and ethically problematic (it blames people who are in some sense victims.) Then you might cite evidence that diversion, harm reduction, or decriminalization efforts are morally correct, cost effective, or otherwise better on some other criterion. On the other hand, you could argue that criminalization is an appropriate policy response and ethically correct, so long as this is justified with evidence and argumentation.

Writing a compelling argument in 800 words is at least as challenging as writing a long essay. You can use an additional 400 words to separately comment on why you’ve made certain choices, e.g. what you left out, who you were trying to reach. We’ll have a session where we talk about the op-ed as a form of writing.

Extra credit for participation: A few points will be available for class participation, especially during the “Open discussion of...” sessions we will hold on the Fridays. The price of admission is a question or discussion topic for the group.

Office Hours:

You are most welcomed and encouraged to meet with me during office hours to discuss the course materials, your chosen projects, or any questions and concerns you might have. If these times do not work for your schedule, please email me for an alternative appointment which can potentially be done over Zoom.

Policies and Information

*Learning in a Time of Crisis: We are in a difficult and painful moment that remains full of uncertainty. I recognize that all of us may face unexpected challenges this quarter, and perhaps you, your classmates, and even I will need to adapt in ways we can’t yet predict. I’ll try my best to be flexible, and ask that we all try to be generous with each other.

*Diversity and Inclusion: I am personally committed to creating a safe and inclusive classroom where everyone feels welcome to express their views. Many of you will have deeply personal experiences regarding the topics of the course. I expect there may be rigorous discussion and even disagreements, but I ask that we engage each other with care and empathy. We should all feel comfortable to assert our beliefs, but also should be open-minded about hearing differing perspectives. I will work to create a learning environment that supports the emotional risk that participation can entail.

*Accommodations: Services for Students with Disabilities will contact me regarding official accommodations, but feel free to speak with me directly as well. You can reach out to me about needs, defined broadly, that may affect your ability to participate in class. This might include issues of disability, but could also range from financial stresses, to parenthood, to work obligations, to whatever. I'll try my best to be accommodating, flexible, and fair.

* Mental Wellbeing: I'm sympathetic to mental health needs broadly, and aim to offer support, but I am not trained as a therapist. There are resources on campus, and we can work to help connect you to them or other resources as needed.

* Attendance: Consistent attendance and participation are crucial for your learning and a successful overall class. I'll trust you will be present and on time. For the most part, I don't take roll for upper division courses, but if it becomes an issue of repeated absence, I may turn to an attendance requirement.

* Academic Integrity: All academic work for this course must meet the University of California San Diego's standards of academic integrity. For more information see the website: <https://academicintegrity.ucsd.edu/>

Course Schedule

Part I— Contested Definitions

Week 1: What is Policing? Crime? Punishment?

- Monday: 3.31: The Meaning of Police
 - Jill Lepore. 2020. "The Invention of Police." *New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-invention-of-the-police>
 - Peter Moskos 2020. "History is not bunk—response to Jill Lepore."
- Wednesday 4.2: The Social Construction of Crime
 - Stuart Hall, et al. 1978. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. * McMillan. (Introduction and excerpts)
- Friday 4.4: Punishment and its Alternatives
 - David Garland, 1991. Sociological Perspectives on Punishment. *Crime and Justice*. *

Week 2: What is Reform? Defunding? Abolition?

Reading:

- Monday 4.7: The Abolitionist Challenge
 - Angela Davis. 2003. "Abolitionist Alternatives." *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Penguin Random House.* https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Are_Prisons_Obsolete_Angela_Davis.pdf
 - Miriam Kaba. 2020. "Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police." (Perusal optional).

- Wednesday 4.9: Reform and Rebuilding
 - Rashawn Ray and Clark Nelly. 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-better-path-forward-for-criminal-justice-police-reform/>
 - Katherine Landegan. “The City That Really Did Abolish the Police.” *Politico*. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/06/12/camden-policing-reforms-313750>
- Friday 4.11: Discussion
 - What Does It Mean to Defund or Abolish the Police? Panel Discussion with Trevor Noah
 - Movement for Black Lives, Vision statement and talking points. Online <https://m4bl.org/defund-the-police/>

Part II— History of the Present

Week 3: Causes and Consequences of Racialized Mass Incarceration

- Monday 4.14: Mass incarceration as Racial Control System
 - Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow*. * The New Press. Introduction and chapter 1.
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- Wednesday 4.16: Critique of the New Jim Crow
 - James Foreman “Locking Up Our Own” introduction
 - Adaner Usmani with Glenn Loury: “How We Got Here, and Where We’re Going.” 5.38–33.00 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rj7mh6EkaDA>
- Friday. 4.18: (Kim Moore)

Week 4: Developments in Police Culture

Reading:

- Monday 4.21 Becoming a Cop
 - Peter Moskos. 2008. *Cop in the Hood*. Princeton University Press. Excerpts.*
- Wednesday 4.23 Officers as Warriors, Officers as Social Workers
 - Forrest Stuart. 2016. “The Rise of Therapeutic Policing” in *Down, Out, and Under Arrest*. University of Chicago Press.*
 - Radley Balko. 2014. *Rise of the Warrior Cop*. Public Affairs. Introduction.
- Friday 4.25 Peter Moskos visits

Week 5: Social Movements: Black Lives Matter and its Predecessors

Reading:

- Monday 4.28: Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. (2016) *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, chp. 6. “A Movement, Not a Moment.”*
- Wednesday 4.30
 - Review session in preparation for mid-term
- Friday 5.2
 - In class midterm

Part III—Alternatives

Week 6: Homelessness and Mental Health Crisis

Reading:

Listening:

- 5.5. The Criminalization of Homelessness
 - Alex Vitale. 2017. *The End of Policing*. “Criminalizing Homelessness”*
 - Chris Herring: Democrats Hate Trump’s Homelessness Plan...It’s their Plan too.” *Washington Post*
- 5.7: The Crisis of American Mental Health Care
 - Read Neil Gong. “How Defunding Abusive Institutions Goes Wrong, and How We can Do it Right.” *LA Review of Books*
 - The Largest Mental Hospital is a Jail
- 5.9. Open discussion on Alternatives to Policing Mental Health Crisis and Homelessness
 - Abolition must include psychiatry
 - Reading on CAHOOTS
 - Guest Speaker: Faith?
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Week 7: Drug Policy and Border Policing

Reading:

- 5.12 The War on Drugs
 - Alex Vitale. 2017. *The End of Policing*. “The Drug War.” *
- 5.14 Varieties of Drug Legalization
 - Mark Kleiman et. al on Designing Bad Markets*
 - Castellano et al. “Two Years after Prop 47, Addicts Walk Free With Nowhere to Go.” *Desert Sun*. https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/crime_courts/2016/12/14/prop-47-california-addiction/94083338/
- 5.16 ZOOM visit from Alex Vitale

Week 8: “Delinquency”: Youth Disciplinary Issues

- 5.19: The Youth Control Complex
 - Victor Rios. 2011. *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*. UC Press.*
- 5.21: The Role of Schools
 - Alex Vitale. 2017. *The End of Policing*. “The School to Prison Pipeline”*
 - Allison Fried. 2019. “If You Won’t Do Restorative Justice Right, Don’t Do It.” *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-if-you-wont-do-restorative-justice-right-dont-do-it/2019/06>
- 5.23: Charles?

Part IV—Dilemmas

Week 9: What about...Gender-Based-Violence? Violent murder?

Reading:

- 5.26:
 - Class Cancelled, Memorial Day
- 5.28
 - Leigh Goodmark. Blog on her “Decriminalizing Domestic Violence.”

- 5.30
 - o Jill Legovy?

Week 10: Timing and Unanticipated Consequences

Reading:

- Monday 6.2 : What if there is decriminalization without social investment?
 - o Neil Gong. “California Gave People the Right to Be Homeless, But Little Help Finding Homes.” *Washington Post*
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- Wednesday 6.4: Root cause or proximal cause intervention for “murder wave?”
 - o Charles Fain Lehman. “‘Reimagining’ Police Won’t Stop Kansas City’s Murder Wave”
- Friday 6.6: Final Class Open Discussion
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 - o Keeanga-Yamahata Taylor. “We Should Still Defund the Police.” *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/defund-the-police>