

# PSC 242 – Research Practicum in U.S. Criminal Justice Reform

Fall 2016

## Course Info

Classroom and Time: MW 10:25-11:40am, Hylan 206

Instructor: Mason DeLang

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Office Hours: MW, 11:45am-1:00pm

## Course Overview

In this course, you will be working on the front lines of criminal justice reform. There are currently many problems in the United States criminal justice system. Consider just the following facts:

- The United States incarcerates people at a higher rate than any other country (698 per 100,000).<sup>1</sup>
- Over the last 40 years, the United States prison population has grown from a little over 200,000 to about 1,500,000, largely due to the war on drugs in the 80s and 90s.<sup>2</sup>
- Blacks and Latinos are more likely to be convicted of crimes after arrest than whites, and they're more likely to face tougher sentences than whites, once convicted.<sup>3</sup>
- Adjusting for inflation, the U.S. spends around \$75 billion on corrections, with the large majority on incarceration. Many of the people that we put behind jail are non-violent offenders who can and arguably should be diverted away from prison.<sup>4</sup>

This course is a collaboration between the University of Rochester Political Science Department and Measures for Justice ([www.measuresforjustice.org](http://www.measuresforjustice.org)). MFJ is a non-profit organization that aims to help citizens and policymakers assess the quality of local criminal justice systems and act to address shortcomings in the performance of those systems. It's core contribution to this effort is the compilation and publication of a set of measures of the performance of every county-level criminal justice system in the United States. These measures assess each county's performance on core goals, including public safety, fair treatment of individuals accused of crimes, and fiscal responsibility.

In order to understand where and why the criminal justice system performs poorly, as well as how to address problem areas, it is important to know how laws and practices differ across states. This is where

<sup>1</sup>Second through fifth: Rwanda (492), Russia (446), Brazil (301), Australia(151). Data come from The Sentencing Project, <http://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Center for Economic and Policy Research, <http://cepr.net/documents/publications/incarceration-2010-06.pdf>

you come in. Over the course of the semester, you will contribute to MFJ's mission by collecting data on statutory law and by conducting interviews with several people working within the criminal justice system, including judges, court clerks, public defenders, prosecutors, and people working in corrections. In addition, as a final project you will write a term paper on an area of criminal justice reform that interests you.

## **Expectations for Students**

Unlike in traditional courses, your work in this course has a direct impact on the world beyond the classroom. It is critical that you understand the responsibilities you assume by taking this course:

**Attendance and Participation:** Attend and fully participate in every class session. This time will primarily be spent working on the statutory baseline. If you cannot attend due to illness or other circumstances beyond your control, let me know ahead of time ([mason.delang@measuresforjustice.org](mailto:mason.delang@measuresforjustice.org)).

**Weekly Independent Work:** Each week you will complete six hours of independent work on the three assigned projects. Steady work will be necessary to complete the two data projects. Your weekly goal should be to answer, on average, 6 questions from the statutory baseline and to finish about 4 interviews (see next section). You will be tracking your progress on these tasks throughout the semester in a spreadsheet.

**Protection and Sharing of Data:** As a general policy, the data that you collect must be thought of as sensitive, and it cannot be shared with anyone not associated with Measures for Justice or this class. You will sign a confidentiality agreement along these lines that must be honored.

**Research Integrity:** You will accurately record all data that you collect. You will not fabricate data. You will not misrepresent your contribution or the contribution of others to any work produced as part of the course. Violation of this expectation will be treated as a violation of the College's policy on academic honesty.

## **Data Projects and Term Paper**

This course is not organized around a series of lectures, readings and exams. Instead, the core work of each student in the course is the completion of three separate projects. The following describes each project and the deliverables that students are responsible for.

**Project I – Statutory Baseline:** The performance of the criminal justice system at the local level is intimately related to state laws. You will be assigned one of five states from the following list: Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Missouri. You will then do your best to answer a collection of about 90 questions about state laws and practices by searching through official government sources, including the

state's statutes, court rulings, constitution, government reports or webpages, etc.

So you can track your progress, you will record the number of questions that you have completed and the number remaining at five dates, or checkpoints, over the course of the semester. However, remember that *the quality of your answers and your work is of the utmost importance*. The work you complete this semester will be used in a very real way by Measures for Justice, and you should not sacrifice quality for speed. In other words, we would rather see you do a thorough job on 17% of the questions by the time we've reached the 1/5th point of the course than have 20% of the questions completed with somewhat lower quality.

**Project II – Practitioner Interviews:** All counties are governed by state law, but these laws sometimes give considerable discretion to local offices and authorities on how to administer several components of the criminal justice system, such as indigent defense, diversionary programs, non-financial conditions of release, and more. The second project will require that you interview several people currently working within the criminal justice system, including judges, clerks, prosecutors, and public defenders. These interviews will help Measures for Justice and those using their data to better understand differences in how criminal justice is practiced across counties.

If fully completed, each interview will take about 10-15 minutes, and almost all questions will be provided by Measures for Justice. For each interview, you will also be asking two of your own questions related to the area of reform that you will be writing about in your term paper. These questions and answers might help inform you about specific problems in some counties as it relates to your topic, or perhaps about policies or laws that would improve the functioning of the criminal justice system.

**Project III – Term Paper:** The final project is a term paper that you will write on an area of criminal justice reform that interests you. There are many topics you might consider, including bail reform, eliminating mandatory minimum sentences for drug-related crimes, reforms aimed at the equal treatment of all individuals, reforms that divert more non-violent offenders towards rehabilitative programs, reforms aimed at improving indigent defense, etc. Take a look at some of the resources in the Additional Sources folder in the Google Drive repository to get you started. During finals week (TBD but possibly Friday 12/16) we will schedule a time for you to present your work for Measures for Justice and others in the Political Science Department.

## Schedule

The semester consists of thirty class days which can be divided into fifths. The days that separate the course into fifths will be special days called checkpoints. On these days you will hand in assigned work and update your progress on the checkpoint spreadsheet within your state's folder. See the next page for a tentative schedule.

### Checkpoint #1 – September 19<sup>th</sup> – (20%)

- Hand in a preliminary description of your term paper and topic, which includes: 1) One or two paragraphs describing your topic; 2) The interview questions you would like to ask; and 3) Some of the resources that you will be using.
- Update checkpoint spreadsheet. By this point you should have completed roughly 18 questions from the statutory baseline and 12 interviews.

### Checkpoint #2 – October 10<sup>th</sup> – (40%)

- Update checkpoint spreadsheet. By this point you should have completed roughly 36 questions and 24 interviews.

### Checkpoint #3 – October 31<sup>st</sup> – (60%)

- Hand in an outline of your paper. This outline should include at least two core components: 1) A section detailing the problem(s) in the criminal justice system that your paper targets; 2) A section detailing any reforms, policy proposals, or new legislation that might improve matters.
- Update checkpoint spreadsheet. By this point you should have completed roughly 54 questions and 36 interviews.

### Checkpoint #4 – November 21<sup>st</sup> – (80%)

- Hand in a rough draft of your term paper.
- Update checkpoint spreadsheet. By this point you should have completed roughly 72 questions and 48 interviews.

### Checkpoint #5 – TBD, possibly December 16<sup>th</sup> – (100%)

- Hand in the final draft of your term paper.
- Present your paper at a location to be decided, perhaps the Measures for Justice office.
- Update checkpoint spreadsheet. By this point you should have all questions and interviews completed.

## **Grading**

**Data Projects:** The data projects will be evaluated together on a Pass/Fail basis. To earn a passing grade, you will need to keep pace with the statutory baseline and interviews reasonably well. You are expected to complete, on average, 6 questions and 4 interviews per week. At this pace you will meet the goals at each checkpoint and you will complete both tasks by the end of the semester.

Keep in mind that *it is not necessary to meet each of the goals at every checkpoint in order to pass this part of the course*. There are at least two reasons for this policy. First, the statutory baseline may be easier to complete for some states, so these deadlines aren't perfectly fair. Second, the data you collect will be used by Measures for Justice, and the quality of your work is paramount. For this reason, we do not want you rushing through either task in an effort to reach a goal. Thus, you will be evaluated partly by the progress you have made at the checkpoints, but also by the effort and engagement that you demonstrate throughout the semester.

**Term Paper:** The term paper will be graded in a more traditional way. At four of the five checkpoints, you are required to hand in a write-up regarding your paper (see schedule above). These write-ups will not be graded, but they are still required, and will allow me to provide feedback. The final grade of your paper will be penalized one-half grade for each write-up that is not handed in.

When grading, I will focus on the following three areas:

- Your discussion of the current problem(s) in the criminal justice system that your paper targets.
- Your discussion of possible reforms. What policies or laws might improve the system?
- The extent to which you successfully integrate scholarly work (academic articles and books) and practitioner interviews into your paper.

**Overall Grade:** Your final grade will be treated as an average of the two components, where a Pass in the first component is treated as an A and a Fail is treated as an E. The table below illustrates how final grades are determined.

Data Projects	Term Paper	Overall Grade
Pass	A or A-	A
Pass	B+ or B	A-
Pass	B- or C+	B+
Pass	C or C-	B
Pass	D+ or D	B-
Pass	D- or E	C+
Fail	A or A-	C
Fail	B+ or B	C-
Fail	B- or C+	D+
Fail	C or C-	D
Fail	D+ or D	D-
Fail	D- or E	E

## **Resources and Materials**

All of the materials for the course will be provided through a Google Drive repository that will be shared with you after you have signed the confidentiality agreement. This repository will include downloadable documents relevant to the course, including the syllabus, important sources you will use, spreadsheets you will access to record data, and other items.