

New Thesis Proposal Form

AY 2019-2020

1. What is your research topic?

Please list the academic field and interest of your planned project.

We would like to explore the intersection between economics and sociology to understand how various policy suggestions would fare in reducing police interactions, police brutality and prison populations in the United States, particularly as they exacerbate or alleviate the role of racial bias and inequality. While there are many ideas and public discussions about possible alleviations, there is not a lot of research on restorative justice measures. Likewise, there tends to be an overfocus in the literature on evaluating policies by the amount of arrests or prison sentences.

2. What is your research question?

At this stage, your research question will not be fully formed, and you may currently be considering more than one question. Your question will also change and evolve throughout the project. Nevertheless, it is important for us and for you to know which questions you consider addressing, so please list your key question(s) of interest.

We are considering multiple areas to focus on:

- **Causal link between the strength of a police union and the number of incidents of police brutality.** Many analysts identify police unions as the primary reason police officers cannot be fired or charged with murder when committing acts of violence. The strength of police unions varies by state and locality and local and federal laws also intersect to form a web of policies that create a high level of inconsistency among unions. Options for research questions include:
 - Is there a causal link between the strength of police unions and the number of incidents of police brutality?
 - Is there a causal link between the 6 factors of unionised policing and their effects on police brutality? (As indicated by the Police Union Contract Project: <https://www.checkthepolice.org/#review>)
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- **Impact of the CAHOOTS program in Eugene, Oregon.** The CAHOOTS program diverts about 15% of the city's 911 calls away from armed police to other responders for cases of domestic violence, suicide, substance abuse, housing crises, etc. The

idea being that lowering the appearance of armed police will reduce the incidence of police interactions and police brutality. Options for a research question include:

- What is the impact of the program after 30 years in operation? We would compare it to another city (similar in size, demographics, crime profile, and region — such as Humboldt, California) to see if there is an appreciable difference in police violence that can be attributed to the program.
- Does implicit bias by 911 callers or responders affect which calls are diverted to CAHOOTS and which remain in the hands of the police?
- **Lastly, the impact and effectiveness of policy alternatives to the cash bail bond system:** In recent years, cities in New Jersey and the district of DC have launched alternatives to bail bond systems including minimizing the use of pretrial detention and instituting practices to ensure defendants appear in court such as transportation vouchers, child care, and court date reminders. These come as experts show there is no evidence that bail bonds increase the defendants likelihood to appear in court. Possible research questions include:
 - What is the impact/effectiveness of these alternative programs?
 - Is there a causal link between the increased safety of the community and alternative programs?(or at least no appreciable rise in crime). A part of our thesis would also be predictive, analysing what part of risk assessments and other alternatives to bail bonds are factors in the success of the policy.
 - Lastly, currently on the California ballot there is a proposition to institute risk assessment as an alternative for cash bail bonds. We can use the analysis of the above work to make a prediction about the future of California's pretrial jail system under the new policy if it passes.

3. Why would you like to explore this topic and question?

Please let us know why you are curious about your research topic, and why you think your question(s) are worth exploring.

We are primarily interested in this topic as awareness of Black Lives Matter has reignited the debate about how to fix the broken policing and incarceration problem in the United States. Current empirical research lacks conclusive evidence regarding which policies are most effective and rarely analyzes policies and programs through the intersection of policy ideas in contrast to how it is implemented in real time. We also find it important to empirically study alternatives to the current system in order to create better policies in the public discourse. We are driven to understand which parts of the system can be leveraged to sufficiently lower centuries of racial bias in the system. We believe the system must be addressed at every level, with proper policies designed to remove bias.

Furthermore, we are extremely interested in causality, impact, inequality, and labour unions. Many of the topics we are interested in neatly converge on these topics and there is an abundance of detailed research questions we could pursue and add value to the field writ-large.

4. What are the debates to which your dissertation will relate?

These debates can be theoretical, empirical, normative, related to policy, or a combination of these.

Our research would likely contribute to the following debates:

- Is weakening police unions the answer to less police brutality? How and in what manner?
- Can defunding/debundling the police lead to better public safety, fewer police interactions and less police brutality? What role does bias play in determining which incidents can be handled by alternative task forces as opposed to the armed police?
- What is the best alternative to the cash bail bond system in reducing pretrial prison populations? What are the best ways to ensure offenders appear in court? Are 'cite and release' programs effective/do they make the community safer or more dangerous? What are the effects of risk assessment programs on the criminal justice system?

5. What is your proposed methodology?

Quantitative (causal inference + impact assessment) + Normative + Comparative

Methodology will vary slightly based on which question is selected. The methodology will likely involve a policy evaluation and empirical research, which may include a comparative analysis across cities and/or states. All analyses will evaluate policy in terms of alleviating racial bias and inequality and will therefore include a normative analysis as well.

6. What type of data do you need?

Have you thought about data access? If your data proves to be inaccessible, have you considered a "Plan B"?

On data access, a brief search shows that much of the data on crime and prisons is publicly available. In some cases, we may need to do considerable work cleaning or wrangling the data:

- **Police Unions:** National data set by FBI -- only 40% of the police unions are collected. We would only attempt to analyse the local effect, so this would still be feasible.
- **CAHOOTS:** 911 calls are public data (but we do not know how detailed they are for ethnicity, race, gender, etc), crime stats can be requested publicly. CAHOOTS has publicly shared data as interest has grown in the program, further inquiry could be made directly with the program. The biggest problem would be how to define bias in

calls that were not diverted and there may not be visibility into why one call is diverted and another is not.

- **Cash Bail Bonds:** Data should mostly be available through public records.

Some datasets may require payment, but we think the fees are nominal and would hope to see some sort of reimbursement for them. The other factor we are concerned about is processing time to receive the data we need. To be safe we would aim to identify the data specifically as early as possible to mitigate the time delay.

Lastly, if the data we are interested in doesn't exist, we can redefine the problem in terms of how we define the outcome variable or look at other localities, types of crime, etc. Overall, we don't foresee this being a big issue as crime data in the USA is abundant.