Jacob Kaplan
Teaching Statement

While I am committed to maintaining an active research agenda, I am also passionate about engaging students in the classroom. During my time at Penn, I have had the opportunity to interact with both undergraduate and graduate students during my five semesters of experience as a TA. While I have most experience in data analysis and methodology courses, I also look forward to the opportunity to teach courses related to my research interests – including courses on policing and place-based interventions.

My teaching philosophy is to prioritize teaching students how to evaluate the available evidence on a policy rather than simply teach what that evidence is. This approach provides students with tools for their time in school and after they graduate. It allows them to better assess the available evidence regarding how the criminal justice system works, and which policies are effective at reducing crime. Though the number and detail of crime data sets has grown rapidly in the last several years, even seemingly simple descriptive questions – such as how many people are arrested in the United States each year – are hard to answer without a great deal of uncertainty.

These data limitations mean that criminology often has a high level of nuance in its evidence on policies – and even on descriptive statistics – and that the best way for students to understand this is to think about how the researchers arrived at the conclusions they did. The rapid growth of data available also means that the evidence on a particular topic is likely to change in the coming years. Teaching students how to evaluate evidence will help them throughout the full length of their career in this field and in other facets of their life as well.

To facilitate this approach, I wrote the freely available online textbook R for Criminology, which introduces the programming language R to students with no prior programming experience. This textbook covers standard skills in criminological research such as subsetting data, scraping data from the web or PDFs, and generating maps and graphs. Each lesson uses actual crime data from commonly used sources, introducing the data to readers, explaining how it can be used in research, and any caveats with using it. To teach students how to understand and approach research, this textbook uses research questions that current criminologists are studying as the background for learning these techniques. For example, several chapters ask the question “where do police-involved shootings happen in Philadelphia” and teach every step towards answering this question - from initially scraping the locations from the Philadelphia Police Department’s website to visualizing the data. Successive lessons build upon the core concepts of past lessons to ensure that students have sufficient reinforcement on the topics to properly understand them.

These lessons give students the tools to participate in scholarly discourse by methodically incorporating them into the process behind the research. By the end of the textbook they will be able to conduct large parts of many studies by themselves. In my experience working with undergraduate and graduate students at Penn, allowing students to engage with the evidence themselves – in particular by visualizing the data in question – helps them become more engaged

with the topic. While programming skills are not essential for every career in criminology, it is crucial that students acquire the knowledge of how to approach an empirical question and develop the necessary tools to answer it.