

CRCJ 8040: Police & Society

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Course Description

In this course, we will explore the function of the police in American society—all the while considering the challenges associated with balancing civil liberties on the one hand with the goal of controlling crime on the other. I will push you to think critically about the scientific methods used to answer various research questions, as well as reflect on policing's contributions to the larger CJ system and society, more generally.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Analyze the evolution of the police function in American society from the 1960s to present
- Evaluate research evidence on police strategies and their effectiveness using rigorous methodological standards
- Apply legal and ethical frameworks to police decision-making and use of force
- Synthesize multiple perspectives on police culture, legitimacy, and reform
- Critically assess contemporary debates about the proper role and scope of policing

Required Readings

We'll read a mixture of seminal articles by police researchers and more contemporary work by a variety of interdisciplinary experts working in this area. I expect you to read critically and come prepared to discuss how the material relates to contemporary policing and society. Most of the required readings are available on Canvas and/or linked in the course schedule below. Articles not on Canvas are available through UNO library databases. If you have trouble accessing anything, contact me immediately.

The three assigned books are all available for fairly cheap as paperbacks or eBooks. You may also be able to borrow/request them from the [campus library](#) or [Omaha Public Library](#).

- Sierra-Arévalo, M. (2024). *The Danger Imperative: Violence, Death, and the Soul of Policing*. Columbia University Press.
- Cheng, T. (2024). *The Policing Machine: Enforcement, Endorsements, and the Illusion of Public Input*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bittner, E. (1970). *The Functions of the Police in Modern Society: A Review of Background Factors, Current Practices, and Possible Role Models*. (Available online through library)

Journals

Each week at the end of class, I'll ask you to take approximately 10 minutes to reflect on a question or issue and write your thoughts down in a “journal.” Then as you do the readings for the following week on your own time, you’ll update your journal. *Do you still feel the same way? Why or why not? Did the readings change your mind or make you to think about the issue in a different way? What questions do you still have?* At the beginning of the next class, we’ll break the ice by discussing what you wrote in your journals.

Journal Guidelines

- **Initial reflection** (end of class): ~250 words responding to the prompt
- **Updated reflection** (after completing readings): ~250 words on how your thinking evolved
- Focus on the **evolution of your thinking**, not summary of readings
- Graded on **depth of reflection**, not “right” answers
- Submit via Canvas by **Monday 11:59 p.m.** before each class
- Late submissions accepted up to 48 hours with 10% penalty

Exams

There will be two in-class exams this semester: a midterm on **March 10th** and a final on **April 28th**. For each exam, you will choose one of three essay questions, using class time to respond to it. You may bring one page (front and back) of handwritten notes to each exam.

Grades

- Attendance and participation: 25%
- Journal: 25%
- Midterm: 25%
- Final: 25%

These weighted scores will be added up at the end of the semester to generate your overall grade in the course:

Letter Grade	Score
A	90 - 100
B	80 - 89
C	70 - 79
D	60 - 69
F	0 - 59

Attendance & Participation

This is a seminar course—your presence and engagement matter. You may miss **one class without penalty**. Additional absences will affect your grade unless documented (illness, family emergency, etc.).

Participation means:

- Coming **prepared** (readings completed, journal updated)
- Contributing to **discussion** (quality over quantity)
- Listening **actively** and engaging respectfully with diverse perspectives
- Participating in **activities** (simulations, debates, group work)

Technology in Class

- Laptops/tablets are welcome for taking notes and accessing readings
- Please avoid non-class use (email, social media, etc.)
- Phones should be silenced and put away during class

Academic Integrity

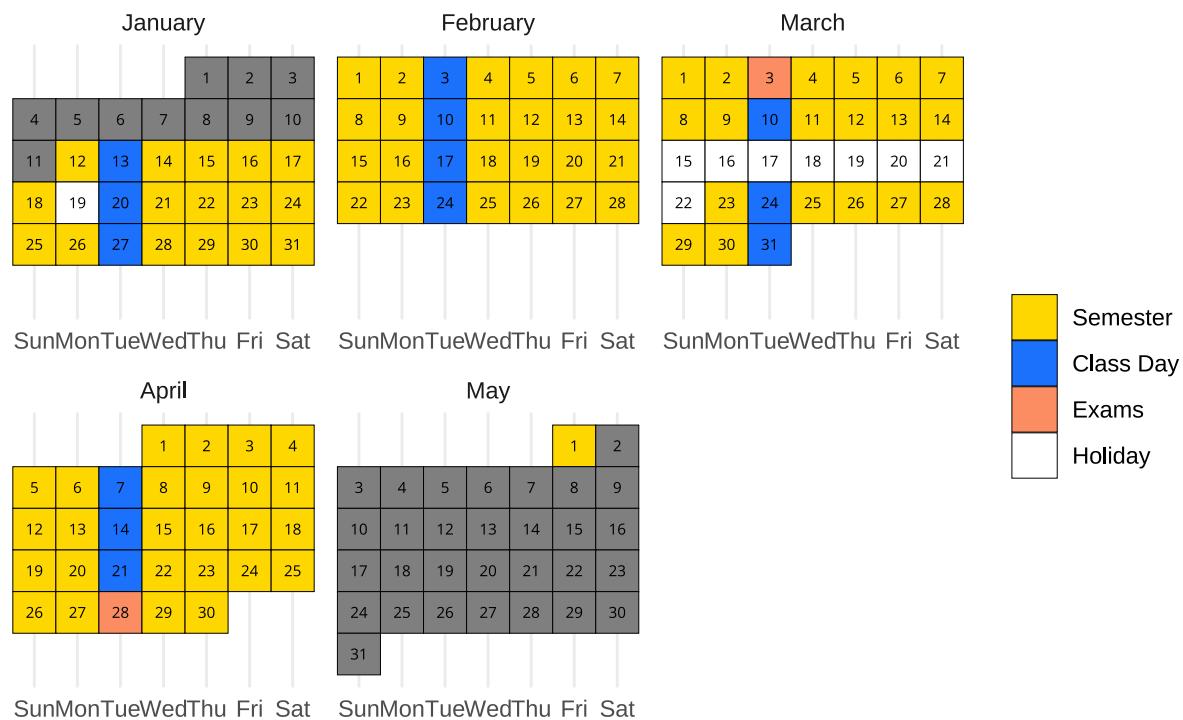
Don't cheat. Students should familiarize themselves with the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities and the [policy on academic integrity](#). Any form of academic dishonesty is unacceptable. Instances of academic dishonesty will, at a minimum, result in a zero for that assignment, and a record of academic dishonesty will be placed in the student's academic file that is maintained by the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. Instances of academic dishonesty may also be subject to disciplinary action by the University.

Please note: The use of generative AI tools (such as ChatGPT or others) is strictly prohibited and constitutes a violation of academic integrity in this course.

Students with Accessibility Needs

Reasonable accommodations are provided for students who are registered with the Accessibility Services Center and make their requests sufficiently in advance. For more information, contact the Accessibility Services Center (MBSC 126, Phone 554-2872, TTY 554-3799, or visit their [website](#)).

Tentative Class Schedule



MLK Day 1/19 • Spring Break 3/15-3/22 • Exams: 3/3, 4/28

Week 1 : 1/13 | Setting the Scene

Schwartz, M. A. (2008). The importance of stupidity in scientific research. *Journal of Cell Science*, 121(11), 1771.

Week 2 : 1/20 | Function of Policing (Foundations)

President's Commission on Law Enforcement & Administration of Justice. (1967). *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society: A Report*. US Government Printing Office. (Chapter 4)

Bittner, E. (1970). *The Functions of the Police in Modern Society: A Review of Background Factors, Current Practices, and Possible Role Models*. (Chapters 1-3)

Bittner, E. (1974). Florence Nightingale in pursuit of Willie Sutton: A theory of the police. In H. Jacob (Ed.), *The Potential for Reform of Criminal Justice*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Week 3 : 1/27 | Function of Policing (Contemporary)

President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. (2015). *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

Thacher, D. (2022). Shrinking the police footprint. *Criminal Justice Ethics*, 41(1), 62-85.

Thacher, D. (2025). The invention of urgency: The transformation of the police role in society's response to mental illness, 1900-1970. *Policing and Society*, 1-25.

Week 4 : 2/03 | Culture (Foundations)

- Westley, W. A. (1953). Violence and the police. *American Journal of Sociology*, 59(1), 34-41.
- Skolnick, J. H. (1968). *Justice Without Trial: Law Enforcement in Democratic Society*. John Wiley & Sons. (Chapter 3)
- Van Maanen, J. (1973). Observations on the making of policemen. *Human Organization*, 32(4), 407-418.
- Herbert, S. (1998). Police subculture reconsidered. *Criminology*, 36(2), 343-370.

Week 5 : 2/10 | Culture (Contemporary)

- Sierra-Arévalo, M. (2024). *The Danger Imperative: Violence, Death, and the Soul of Policing*. Columbia University Press.

Week 6 : 2/17 | Police Discretion (Foundations)

- Goldstein, J. (1960). Police discretion not to invoke the criminal process: Low-visibility decisions in the administration of justice. *Yale Law Journal*, 69, 543-594.
- Goldstein, H. (1963). Police discretion: The ideal versus the real. *Public Administration Review*, 23(3), 140-148.
- Bittner, E. (1967). The police on Skid-Row: A study of peace keeping. *American Sociological Review*, 32(5), 699-715.
- Walker, S. (1993). *Taming the System: The Control of Discretion in Criminal Justice, 1950-1990*. Oxford University Press. (Chapter 2)

Week 7 : 2/24 | Police Discretion (Contemporary)

- Goff, P. A., Lloyd, T., Geller, A., Raphael, S., & Glaser, J. (2016). *The Science of Justice: Race, Arrests, and Police Use of Force*. Center for Policing Equity.
- Pierson, E., Simoui, C., Overgoor, J., Corbett-Davies, S., Jenson, D., Shoemaker, A., ... & Goel, S. (2020). A large-scale analysis of racial disparities in police stops across the United States. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4(7), 736-745.

Week 8 : 3/03 | Midterm Exam

No readings

Week 9 : 3/10 | Legal Standards (Foundations)

- Tennessee v. Garner*, 471 U.S. 1 (1985).
- Graham v. Connor*, 490 U.S. 386 (1989).
- Walker, S. E. (1992). Origins of the contemporary criminal justice paradigm: The American Bar Foundation Survey, 1953-1969. *Justice Quarterly*, 9(1), 47-76.

Week 10 : 3/17 | Spring Break

No class

Week 11 : 3/24 | Legal Standards (Contemporary)

Barnes v. Felix, 605 U.S. ____ (2025).

Mourtgos, S. M., & Adams, I. T. (2020). Assessing public perceptions of police use-of-force: Legal reasonableness and community standards. *Justice Quarterly*, 37(5), 869-899.

Mourtgos, S. M., Adams, I. T., McLean, K., & Alpert, G. P. (2025). Risk and public judgments on police pursuits: A nationally representative conjoint experiment. *Police Quarterly*, 10986111251412794.

Week 12 : 3/31 | Reducing Crime (Foundations)

Kelling, G., Pate, T., Dieckman, D., & Brown, C. E. (1974). *The Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment*. Washington, DC: National Policing Institute. Available at <https://www.policinginstitute.org/publication/the-kansas-city-preventive-patrol-experiment/>.

Wilson, J. Q. & Kelling, G. (1982). Broken windows: The police and neighborhood safety. *The Atlantic*, 249(3), 29-38.

Sherman, L. W., Gartin, P. R., & Buerger, M. E. (1989). Hot spots of predatory crime: Routine activities and the criminology of place. *Criminology*, 27(1), 27-56.

Week 13 : 4/07 | Reducing Crime (Contemporary)

Weisburd, D., Wilson, D. B., Petersen, K., & Telep, C. W. (2023). Does police patrol in large areas prevent crime? Revisiting the Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 22(3), 543-560.

Braga, A. A., Schnell, C., & Welsh, B. C. (2024). Disorder policing to reduce crime: An updated systematic review and meta-analysis. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 23(3), 745-775.

Turchan, B., & Braga, A. A. (2024). The effects of hot spots policing on violence: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 79, 102011.

Week 14 : 4/14 | Legitimacy (Foundations)

Bottoms, A., & Tankebe, J. (2012). Beyond procedural justice: A dialogic approach to legitimacy in criminal justice. *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, 102, 119-170.

Tyler, T. R. (2003). Procedural justice, legitimacy, and the effective rule of law. *Crime and Justice*, 30, 283-357.

Bell, M. C. (2017). Police reform and the dismantling of legal estrangement. *The Yale Law Journal*, 126, 2054-2150.

Week 15 : 4/21 | Legitimacy (Contemporary)

Cheng, T. (2024). *The Policing Machine: Enforcement, Endorsements, and the Illusion of Public Input*. University of Chicago Press.

Week 16 : 4/28 | Final Exam