

Criminology

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Professor: Jake Day, PhD
Email: dayj@uncw.edu
Office: Bear Hall, Rm. 224

TA: TBD
Email: TBD

Course Introduction:

Welcome to Criminology/Sociology 255. In this course, we will explore the causes and consequences of crime and crime control from a sociological perspective. Throughout this process, we will discuss multiple examples of specific criminal behaviors and crime control strategies. However, the primary goal of this class is to give you the tools to understand and think critically about criminal behavior and crime control policies that occur in the world around you. We will accomplish this with the following course objectives and student learning outcomes:

1) *Increase your knowledge about the causes and consequences of crime and crime control.*

- Examine the common social correlates of crime and predominant theories for explaining where, why, and by whom crime is committed.
- Explore the social processes through which individuals and their behavior are defined as criminal and the consequences of these processes for individuals and society.

2) *Improve your ability to critically analyze and evaluate scientific information about criminal behavior and crime control policies.*

- Learn how to comprehend complex material, summarize it in your own words, and apply it to real world examples.
- Critically evaluate empirical evidence presented to you in the media, by friends and family, and in academic discourse (especially that from professors!).
- Apply course material to specific, substantive topics that are of interest to you.

Required Text

Tibbets, Stephen G. and Alex R. Piquero 2023. *Criminological Theory: The Essentials* (4th edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bellin, Jeffrey. 2023. *Mass Incarceration Nation: How the United States Became Addicted to Prisons and Jails and How it Can Recover*. New York: Cambridge.

*Additional materials (e.g., readings; videos; lectures; discussion board) will be available on the course's Canvas site (login at: <https://uncw.instructure.com/>).

Course Requirements

1) Exams (60%)

A total of 4 exams will test your knowledge and comprehension of course materials with a combination of multiple choice, true/false, and matching questions. Each exam is worth 15% of your grade. All four exams will cover the most recent material covered in lectures, readings, videos, and assignments. You will need to purchase and bring to class a scantron ([form 30423](#)) on the day of the exam in order to complete it.

2) Personal Experience with Crime Project (20%)

Comprised of three separate assignments (*Details provided in class*).

- Phase I – Personal Experience with Crime (5%)
- Phase II – Exploring Criminological Theory via LLM (5%)
- Phase III – Critical Evaluation & Theoretical Application (10%)

3) Assignments (20%)

We will regularly have in-class (and sometimes out-of-class) assignments and/or discussion activities for you to participate in. The goal of these assignments and/or discussions is for you to think critically about, reflect on, and apply knowledge related to the topics being covered in class. You must be present to complete most (if not all) of these assignments, and they **CANNOT BE MADE UP**. Assignments will be excused for acceptable university approved absences and emergencies and at the instructor's discretion.

Grade Scale

A : 93-100%	B+ : 87-89%	C+ : 77-79%	D+ : 67-69%	F : < 60%
A- : 90-92%	B : 83-86%	C : 73-76%	D : 63-66%	
	B- : 80-82%	C- : 70-72%	D- : 60-62%	

Classroom Environment

I consider the classroom to be a professional environment, and students are expected to approach it as such. This includes completing work on time and being prepared to participate in class discussion and activities.

Throughout this class you will be asked to discuss some potentially sensitive and controversial topics. You are expected to engage in these discussions from an intellectual standpoint. As with any professional environment, students are expected to act respectfully towards others, especially when there is disagreement.

Late Work Policy

I generally **DO NOT ACCEPT LATE WORK**. However, given the weight assigned to the *personal experience with crime project*, I am making an exception to my late work policy for this project only. Specifically, for each phase of the PEC Project, you have a two-day grace period. That means that, while technically late, if you turn it in before the end of the day on Sunday (after the Friday on which it's due), it will be graded for full credit. Furthermore, if you turn in any phase of the personal experience with crime project late, but within one week of the day and time it is due, you will receive 80% credit on that phase of the project (i.e. your score on the assignment * 0.8). After a week, you can turn in any of the individual phases of the personal experience with crime project before the last day of classes (Wednesday, December 2nd) for 50% credit (i.e. your score on the assignment * 0.5). *Note: I make no guarantees that late work will be graded in a timely manner. All I guarantee is that it will be graded before grades are due at the end of the semester.*

Students with Disabilities

UNCW is open and accessible to students with disabilities and is committed to providing assistance to enable qualified students to accomplish their educational goals, as well as assuring equal opportunity to derive all of the benefits of campus life. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing accommodations of any type in order to participate in this class, you must notify the Disability Resource Center (#1033 DePaolo Hall, 910-962-7555), provide necessary documentation of the disability and arrange for the appropriate authorized accommodations. Once these accommodations are approved, please identify yourself to me so we can implement these accommodations.

Harassment

The role of all employees and students is to create and maintain a supportive and harassment-free working and learning environment for all members of the campus community. All faculty, staff and students are responsible for understanding and complying with harassment policies. These policies can be viewed at: http://uncw.edu/policies/documents/02.200_Unlawful_Harassment.050605.pdf.

Title IX Mandatory Reporting Policy

UNCW takes all forms of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct very seriously. When students disclose, first or third-hand, to faculty or staff about sexual harassment or misconduct, this information must be reported to the administration for follow-up. The purpose of this is to ensure that students' rights are insured, appropriate resources are offered, and further investigation is explored. Three offices are confidential, and thus do not need to make this report: UNCW CARE, the Student Health Center, and the Counseling Center. If you want to speak to someone in confidence, these resources are available, including CARE's 24-hour crisis line (910-512-4821). For more information, please visit www.uncw.edu/sexualmisconduct or www.uncw.edu/care.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is an important issue in higher education and will be treated as such in this class. You will also be required to submit major written assignments—PEC Phase II & Phase III—via Turnitin on the course's Canvas page. As a result, I will not be lenient when it comes to issues of academic integrity. As an enrolled student, you are agreeing to abide by UNCW's Student Academic Honor Code (<http://www.uncw.edu/odos/honorcode/>).

Any time you turn in an assignment or exam, you are agreeing to abide by UNCW's honor pledge: "As a student at The University of North Carolina Wilmington, I am committed to honesty and truthfulness in academic inquiry and in the pursuit of knowledge. I pledge to uphold and promote the UNCW Student Academic Honor Code."

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy

You are permitted to use Generative AI (LLMs) as specifically instructed for the ***Personal Experience with Crime Project***, with the understanding of their limitations and necessary acknowledgements (which you may learn about during that assignment). However, for other assignments, you should default to assuming it is disallowed unless otherwise stated. For example, you are expected to read/watch all assigned readings/videos, complete exams, and draft assigned critical evaluation or reflection papers *on your own*. Using Generative AI to enhance learning is an emerging skill and it is to your advantage to learn how to use it well. Generative AI can be a valuable tool for complementing and enhancing human decisions and performance, but it is not a replacement for critical thinking and the intellectual work necessary to become professionals with basic intellectual skills (e.g., reasoning, problem-solving, synthesizing information, etc.) and a degree of expertise in criminology.

Campus Student Learning Resources

The University Learning Center (www.uncw.edu/ulc), DePaolo Hall 1056 & 1003

The University Learning Center's (ULC) mission is to help students become successful, independent learners. Tutoring at the ULC is NOT remediation: the ULC offers a different type of learning opportunity for those students who want to increase the quality of their education. ULC services are free to all UNCW students and include the following:

- Learning Services (University Studies) <http://www.uncw.edu/ulc/learning/index.html>
- Math Services <http://www.uncw.edu/ulc/math/index.html>
- Study Sessions <http://www.uncw.edu/ulc/includes/StudySessions.html>
- Supplemental Instruction <http://www.uncw.edu/ulc/si/index.html>
- Writing Services <http://www.uncw.edu/ulc/writing/index.html>

Randall Library (<http://library.uncw.edu>)

The Randall Library has a host of online and in-person tools and services to assist students throughout their time at UNCW. This includes research services that are relevant to your work in CRM/SOC 255 (http://library.uncw.edu/get_started).

Tentative Course Schedule

“CTE” refers to the *Criminological Theory: The Essentials* textbook, by Tibbetts & Piquero.

“MIN” refers to the *Mass Incarceration Nation* text, by Jeffrey Bellin.

*Indicates the reading or video is posted on the course's Canvas site (<https://uncw.instructure.com/>).

Date	Topic	Readings & Assignments
Introduction to Criminology		
Week #1 (August 20th)		
8/20	Course introduction	Review Course Syllabus & Canvas Site
Week #2 (August 24th – 28th)		
8/25	What is crime & how do we study it?	CTE Ch. 1 (1-17) *Video: Measuring Crime (Rubin)
8/27		CTE Ch. 1 (17-34)
Week #3 (August 31st – September 4th)		
9/1	What is causality & how do we identify causes?	Review CTE p. 11-12: “Criteria for Determining Causality” *Video: Correlation (Smeets) Optional: * Brauer (2023): “Causation without Correlation”
9/3	What are some correlates of crime?	Review CTE p. 25-30: “Rates of Crime” *Tibbetts & Hemmens (2019, p. 17-26) Optional: *Barkan & Bryjak (2009: p. 25-41) Optional: *Thornberry & Krohn (2000)
Etiological Theories of Crime – Part I		
Week #4 (September 7th – 11th)		
9/8	What is theory & why do we need it?	Review CTE p. 6-10; CTE Ch. 2 (35-60); * Brauer & Day (2025): “Should more criminologists build stuff?” *Video: What is a theory? (PBS) Optional: CTE Ch. 3 (61-76)
9/10	Early Positivist Theories of Crime	CTE Ch. 4 (77-98) PEC Project: Phase 1 (Due Friday, 9/11)

Date	Topic	Readings & Assignments
Week #5 (September 14th – 18th)		
9/15		Exam #1 In-Class – Bring Scantron (form 30423)
9/17	<i>Do neighborhoods cause crime?</i> - Social disorganization theory - Subcultural theories	CTE Ch. 7 (149-166) *Anderson (1994) *Video: Neighborhood Effects (Sampson)
Week #6 (September 21st – 25th)		
9/22	<i>Do stress/strain cause crime?</i> - Structural strain/Anomie - General Strain Theory	CTE Ch. 6 (121-135) CTE Ch. 6 (136-148) *Video: Economic Inequality (Wilkinson)
9/24	<i>Do people learn crime?</i> - Differential Association	CTE Ch. 8 (167-178)
Week #7 (September 28th – October 2nd)		
9/29	- Social Learning Theory	*Akers (2009)
10/1	FLEX	
Week #8 (October 5th – 9th)		
10/6		Exam #2 In-Class – Bring Scantron (form 30423)
10/8	FALL BREAK	NO CLASS
Etiological Theories of Crime – Part II		
Week #9 (October 12th – 16th)		
10/13	<i>Why do most people refrain from crime?</i> - Social Control Theory	CTE Ch. 8 (179-200)
10/15	- Self-Control Theory	CTE Ch. 11 (231-232) *Optional: Inzicht (2025)
Week #10 (October 19th – 23rd)		
10/20	<i>Why does crime peak in adolescence and decline in adulthood?</i> - Developmental dual trajectory model	CTE Ch. 11 (228-240) *Video: Adolescent Brain (Blakemore)
10/22	- Age-graded soc. control theory	*Video: Why are teens so moody? PEC Project: Phase 2 (Due Friday, 10/16)
Week #11 (October 26th – 30th)		
10/27	<i>Do biological characteristics cause crime?</i> - Biosocial criminology	CTE Ch. 5 (99-120) *Video: Mind of a Killer (Fallon) *Video: Neuroscience of Restorative Justice (Reisel)
10/29	<i>Are all these theories contradictory? Can they all be correct?</i> - Theoretical Integration	CTE Ch. 12 (241-270) *Video: Einstein & Theory Integration *Video: Situational Action
Crime & Crime Control in the U.S.		
Week #12 (November 2nd – 6th)		
11/3		Exam #3 In-Class – Bring Scantron (form 30423)
11/5	<i>What is “mass incarceration” or the “prison” boom” in the U.S.?</i> - Trends in crime & crime control	MIN: Intro. & Part 1, Ch. 1-4 (1 – 29); Part 2, Ch. 5-6 (30-47)

Date	Topic	Readings & Assignments
Week #13 (November 9th – 13th)		
11/10	- Trends in crime & crime control	MIN: Part 2, Ch. 7-8 (48-76) *Video: Violence Decline (Pinker)
11/12	<i>How do some social scientists explain mass incarceration in the U.S.?</i> - Politics of crime & crime control	MIN: Part 2, Ch. 9 (77-91)
Week #14 (November 16th – 20th)		
11/17	<i>How do some social scientists explain mass incarceration in the U.S.?</i> - Moral enterprise & panics	MIN: Part 3, Ch. 10-12 (93-129)
11/19	<i>American Society of Criminology Conference</i>	NO CLASS PEC Project Phase 3 (Due Friday, 11/20)
Week #15 (November 23rd – 27th)		
11/24	- Constructing crime scares	MIN: Part 3, Ch. 13-17 (130-161)
11/26	University Holiday	NO CLASS
Week #16 (November 30th – December 3rd)		
12/1	<i>What are some specific policies that contributed to mass incarceration?</i> <i>Implications & legacy?</i> - Crime & Public Policy	MIN: Part 4, Ch. 18-23 (163-195) *Vox (2017) (“punitive prosecutors”)
Finals Week (December 4th – 10th)		
12/8	CRM/SOC 255-001	Exam #4 (Tuesday): 8:00am – 11:00am
12/10	CRM/SOC 255-002	Exam #4 (Thursday): 11:30am – 2:30pm

CRM/SOC 255

Personal Experience with Crime Project

Project Overview:

Throughout the semester, you will be responsible for developing a project that integrates criminological theory and research. This project is designed to help you:

- *Apply criminological theory to explain specific law-violating behaviors.*
- *Become accustomed to finding relevant research on a specific criminological topic.*
- *Develop your ability to synthesize and evaluate research findings and theoretical arguments.*
- *Comprehend how your own experiences impact your views on law-violating behavior and its causes.*
- *Learn to critically evaluate AI-generated information about criminological theories.*

You will complete portions of the project throughout the semester. This will ensure that you spend adequate time on each phase of the project.

Project Phases:

The entire project will be worth 20% of your grade. The work you do in the first phase will contribute to each subsequent phase. Each phase should be typed in 12-point font and submitted electronically via Canvas. Unless otherwise noted (e.g., Phase 2 LLM transcript), write in standard sentences and paragraphs—not bullet points or unformatted blocks of text.

- **Phase 1: *Personal Experience with Crime*** (5%) (~1-3 paragraphs, no longer than one page)
 - In this phase, you will describe in detail a personal experience with law-violating behavior. Specifically, you will describe a crime that you have committed, or a crime that someone that you are close to has committed. The crime you describe does not need to be a serious law-violation; rather, any disobedient, delinquent, or antisocial behavior is acceptable for this project. Also, you may choose a recent experience or an experience from your childhood. Preferably, you will choose an experience that has ‘stuck with you’ for some reason (i.e., one that you can recall vividly, or that your parents, friends, or family are aware of and may be able to help you remember). However, please do not choose an experience that you feel uncomfortable either writing about or having me read about.
 - **Legal caveat:** In accordance with federal Title IX guidance and in compliance with the Clery Act and North Carolina law, UNCW faculty and staff must abide by the Student Sexual Misconduct Policy by reporting any first- and third-hand reports of sexual misconduct, dating violence and stalking between students to the University for investigation. Therefore, you should not discuss behaviors that fall under this policy in your PEC project.
 - After describing the experience, use your personal opinion to explain the factors, or “causes,” that you think contributed to your (or someone else’s) participation in this behavior. In other words, you should describe why *you think* you (or someone else) participated in this behavior.

- **Phase 2: Exploring Criminological Theory via LLM** (5%) (~1-2 pages)

- Part A: LLM Interaction

- Sign up/log into an LLM (“AI”) of your choice (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, Claude.ai).
 - Using only the general type of behavior from Phase I (e.g., “underage drinking,” “shoplifting,” “fighting,” etc.) - **NOT** your personal details - use the following prompts to ask the LLM about theory and evidence surrounding the behavior. Insert your specific [details] where there are brackets:
 - “What criminological theory or theories best explain [behavior type]? Explain why each theory you identify is well-suited to explaining this behavior.
 - “Provide 3-5 **peer-reviewed empirical studies** (studies that collected original data from participants, not review articles or theoretical essays) that have tested [theory name]’s explanation of [behavior type] or criminal/delinquent behavior in general. For each study, include a reference in APA format and summarize key details about the study (e.g., main findings, sample description, research methods and measures).”
 - “Provide 2-3 **peer-reviewed empirical studies** whose findings challenge or fail to support [theory name]’s explanation of [behavior type] or criminal/delinquent behavior in general. For each study, include a reference in APA format and summarize key details about the study (e.g., main findings, sample description, research methods and measures).”
 - Save the entire LLM conversation as a PDF file and submit it.
 - ***Note:** You are specifically looking for empirical research articles—studies where researchers collected and/or analyzed original data. Review articles, meta-analyses, and purely theoretical essays do not count toward your two required sources in Phase 3, even if the LLM suggests them.*

- Part B: Initial Reflection.

- Write a reflection addressing (~ 1-2 pages):
 - Which theories did the LLM suggest? Are you familiar with any of them from this class or prior coursework?
 - Was the LLM able to provide different arguments for and against the theory’s explanation of your Phase 1 behavior? Did the specific prompt affect the summary you received? For example, did asking for evidence supporting or contradicting the theory’s explanation impact the summary you received? Explain.
 - How do the LLM’s explanations compare to your personal explanation from Phase 1? In other words, you should describe whether the LLM’s explanations are similar to your earlier beliefs, contradict your earlier beliefs, or perhaps add to your earlier beliefs in some way.

- **Phase 3: Critical Evaluation of LLM Performance** (10%) (~2-4 pages)

- Part A: Critical Evaluation of LLM Performance

- Find and read two (2) *peer-reviewed empirical studies* cited by the LLM regarding **one** of the theories identified by the LLM in Phase 2.
 - If possible, pick one source that supports your theory’s explanation of the behavior you described in phase 1 and one source that contradicts or does not support the theory’s explanation.

- There are various ways to find sources cited by an LLM. One way is to search on Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com/>). You can also search via the UNCW library (<https://library.uncw.edu/>).
- LLMs routinely rely on non-peer-reviewed sources and sometimes make up (hallucinate) sources. If this happens, you will need to find two (2) peer-reviewed sources evaluating the program on your own. UNCW's library has access to multiple databases that allow one to limit their search only to peer-reviewed research (<https://libguides.uncw.edu/subject/criminology>).
- Critically evaluate the two articles
 - Of the two studies, which provides more compelling evidence either for or against the theory? Why?
 - Identify one direct quote (with page number) from each article that illustrates a key finding or methodological choice. Explain in 2-3 sentences why you selected this quote and what it reveals about the study.
- Critically evaluate the LLM's performance:
 - Did the LLM accurately summarize the theory it suggested?
 - Did the LLM accurately represent research evidence in the two sources you read? Explain and provide details.
 - What did the LLM get right? What did it get wrong or oversimplify?
- Part B: Theoretical Application and Personal Reflection (~ 1-2 pages)
 - *Course Theory Selection:* Which theory from our course readings and lectures do YOU think best explains your behavior?
 - Describe the basic argument of the theory (in your own words)
 - Explain how it specifically applies to your Phase 1 experience (in your own words).
 - In doing this, you should identify specific causal mechanisms your theory proposes then explain how these mechanisms operated in your Phase 1 experience. Be specific about what conditions were present (or absent) and how they influenced the behavior.
 - *Comparative Analysis:* How does your chosen course theory compare to:
 - Your original Phase I personal explanation?
 - The theory (or theories) suggested by the LLM?
 - The evidence you found in peer-reviewed research?
 - *Theoretical Understanding:* How has your understanding of the causes of this behavior changed from Phase I to now? What role did the LLM suggestions, course content, and peer-reviewed research play in this evolution?
- Part C: Learning Reflection (~ 1 paragraph)
 - Include a final paragraph reflecting on:
 - What you learned from this project overall and about using LLMs for academic research.
 - How this experience might change how you use LLMs in future academic work.
- Include a reference list at the end of your paper using APA format citing both peer-reviewed sources and your LLM conversation. For citing LLM conversations, see: <https://apastyle.apa.org/blog/how-to-cite-chatgpt>