University of Chicago
Spring Quarter 2014

PPHA 37102: CRIME POLICY

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Course Mechanics:
Class meets Wednesdays, 3pm to 5:50pm
Room 289A, Harris School of Public Policy (1155 East 60th Street)

Course Objectives:
The goals of this course are to introduce students to some key concepts in crime policy and help
develop their policy analysis skills, including the ability to frame problems and policy
alternatives, think critically about empirical evidence, use cost-effectiveness and benefit-cost
analysis to compare policy alternatives, and write effective policy memos. The course seeks to
develop these skills by considering the relative efficacy of different policy approaches to
controlling crime, including imprisonment, policing, drug regulation, and gun-oriented
regulation or enforcement, as well as education, social programs and active labor market policies
that may influence people’s propensity to commit crime. While policy choices about punishment
and crime prevention involve a range of legal and normative considerations, the focus in this
class will be mostly on answering positive (factual) questions about the consequences of
different policies.

Course Requirements:
The first meeting will discuss the key objectives of the class, some background about how to
think like a policy analyst, how to read an empirical paper, and how to write a policy memo.

All students are then required to write a memo for the second class meeting. The memos
themselves should be no longer than two double-spaced pages (one-inch margins all around, 12
point font), and should be written in plain English without jargon for a client (decision maker)
who should be assumed to not know much social science themselves. These memos will be
grated on the following criteria:

- Critical evaluation of the conceptual claims being made on both sides of some policy
question or debate, and critical evaluation of the empirical evidence that is available. Your primary job with these memos is not to be an advocate for one policy approach or the other, but rather to provide the decision maker with your assessment of what we know about the benefits and costs associated with different courses of action, and how confident we can be in those conclusions. Doing a good job will require playing devil’s advocate and trying to see where holes might be poked in the arguments of all of the papers that provide relevant evidence on the larger issue.

- **Quality of the memo writing.** All two-page memos should start off with a one paragraph summary that lays out your entire argument very briefly. The body of the memo should elaborate on those key points; the first sentence of each paragraph should summarize the argument of that paragraph. Condensing complicated policy analyses into two double-spaced pages is incredibly difficult, so you will also need to think very carefully about how to prioritize the arguments you make in your memo. I myself typically find it helpful to write a longer version of my paper first to lay out the basic argument, and then spend a considerable amount of time once the key ideas are on paper thinking about whether I have the basic argument and overall structure right, then go through and cut out the least essential points and condense presentation of those points that are most central.

- **Objectivity.** Your job (in these memos) is to help a decision maker get as realistic and honest an assessment as possible about the benefits and costs of different policy or programmatic decisions. I have heard repeatedly from people in policymaking positions (even those who have very strong ideological views themselves) that the most useful people on their staffs are the ones who are able to be most dispassionate in assessing the arguments on all sides of the issue. It’s fine for you to have strong political views that shape how you personally weight the consequences of different courses of action, but for purposes of writing these memos it is important to be able to assess the claims and counter-claims in as objective manner as possible. Please do not make a recommendation in your memo – just enumerate what is known about benefits and costs. I realize in the real world you will be making recommendations, but I think for most of you taking a stand on one side of an issue or the other is not a big challenge – it’s the ability to pull ourselves out of our own personal viewpoints to try to be as honest and objective in assessing all sides of an argument that is the biggest challenge. It’s this skill that I am hoping to get you all practice with.

The remaining eight class meetings will each also be built around a memo writing assignment. Students are required to select three of the remaining eight classes (of their choosing) for which they write memos.

**Course grading:**
Each memo will count for 15 percent of the final course grade, so that the four memos (the memo written for week 2, plus the three other memos you will write at your choosing over weeks 3-10) together count for 60 percent of the course grade. Students will also be required to write a final paper at the end of the quarter that will count for 30 percent of the course grade. Constructive class participation will count for 10 percent of the course grade.

**Optional field trip:**
We will also have an optional field trip: I have scheduled two visits to the Cook County bond
court at 26th and California Avenue, for Saturday April 12, and Saturday, April 26. Bond court is where judges decide how much bail (collateral) arrestees need to provide in order to be released between the time of arrest and the time of the defendant’s next court date, when the case will be decided; if defendants don’t make bail, they stay in jail until the criminal justice system resolves their case – which in many U.S. cities can take three to nine months. I will have a sign-up sheet for students to select which Saturday they would like to attend (we sit in the jury box and observe). Participation is entirely voluntary; I took last year’s class to bond court as well and I think everyone learned a lot (I know that I did myself).

**Main Texts:**
Supplemental readings are all available online and will also be posted on the course Chalk site. Note that some of these online sources for readings, such as www.jstor.org or www.nber.org, may only work from an on-campus computer or IP address.
Syllabus:

Wednesday, April 2: Introduction

http://www.thestar.com/SpecialSections/Crime/article/460767

Pew Center on the States, Public Performance Project (February 2012) The Impact of California’s Probation Performance Incentive Funding Program. (www.pewcenteronthestates.org/publicsafety, or see also course Chalk site)


Harris School of Public Policy Writing Program, Policy Memo Writing Guide (see course chalk site)
Additional background on how to write a policy memo:
http://www.lafollette.wisc.edu/facultystaff/weimer/Writing_Memoranda.pdf

Wednesday, April 9: Consequences of Mass Incarceration

The state of California’s prison system is far above planned capacity, and as a result of court order last year was required to reduce its prison population from 150,000 to around 100,000 over the next few years. Governor Jerry Brown was and is worried about the implications for public safety in the state. Now that tax revenue is rebounding in the state of California, Governor Brown is revisiting whether the state should comply with the court order or instead try to build new prisons. “Three Strikes” has been one particularly contentious policy in California and so has been a focus of many of the policy debates. Please prepare a memo for the Governor (or come to class prepared to discuss) two issues. First, What you expect the effects of repealing California’s Three Strikes policy would be on crime and the prison population in California. Is social science theory unambiguous in its predictions on this question? What do you believe the best available empirical evidence tells us on this question? Second, rather than ending Three Strikes, an alternative approach to reducing the prison population would be to give the California department of corrections and other state policymakers the flexibility to choose how to reduce the number of prisoners to the required level. Would letting the criminal justice system decide how to reduce the prison population lead to more or less of a crime increase compared to ending Three Strikes?

www.jstor.org (or see course Chalk site)

http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/118577088/issue (or see course Chalk site)
Wednesday, April 16: Do we have too many or too few people in prison?

[Special guest: Ruth Coffman, Director of Research, Cook County, IL jail]

Suppose that you are an advisor to Governor Quinn of Illinois, who is worried about the crime problem in his state but also concerned about the costs associated with the large number of people imprisoned in Illinois – both the human costs as well as the financial costs to the government. What can the best available empirical evidence tell us about whether the public safety benefits to the people of Illinois from the marginal prisoner outweigh the marginal costs of that last prisoner?


Vera Institute of Justice (2013) A guide to calculating justice-system marginal costs. New York: Vera Institute of Justice (see course Chalk site)

Wednesday, April 23: Juvenile justice

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle has raised the possibility of closing the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, which is where youth who are deemed to be public safety risks (or who do not have a home to go to after they are arrested) are held in detention while they wait for their cases to be adjudicated in juvenile court. President Preckwinkle proposes putting youth in community-based centers as much as possible instead. Some people believe that this shift will be more humane and have no harmful effects on public safety, because they believe that the threat of punishment does not do much to deter criminal behavior by adolescents, and because they believe that getting youth out of detention settings like the JTDC will increase their access to therapeutic rehabilitation services. Others have expressed concerns that this plan will further undermine the deterrent effect of the juvenile justice system on the criminal behavior of teenage offenders, both because of the possible ripple effects of closing the JTDC on the likelihood that youth
are sent by judges to juvenile prisons after adjudication, and because for many youth the time they spend at the JTDC is the only detention they will receive as a result of their arrest. Please prepare a memo for President Preckwinkle that provides your assessment of what would happen to public safety if the JTDC were closed.


Wednesday, April 30: Policing

In 1991, at the peak of the crack epidemic in the U.S., the homicide rates in New York City and Chicago were nearly identical (just over 30 murders per 100,000 city residents per year). Today New York’s homicide rate is about one-third of ours (around 5 or 6 per 100,000, compared to a rate of 15 to 18 per 100,000 in Chicago). Much of the NYC drop is often credited to policing strategies, including implementation of Compstat, the use of targeted anti-gun policing (“stop, question, and frisk”), broken windows policing, and hiring more police (the city’s police force went from 30,000 to 40,000 over the course of the 1990s). Understanding which of these factors is responsible for the drop is relevant for thinking about which if any strategies Chicago should adopt. Please prepare a memo for Chicago PD Superintendent Garry McCarthy that describes your best judgment about the effects of different NYC policing innovations on crime, as well as the likely consequences of each of these innovations on the city’s jail population as well.


City's police reforms.” Manhattan Institute Civic Report Number 22 (see course chalk site)


Wednesday, May 7: Community corrections and re-entry

The average prison spell in the U.S. is on the order of two to three years, which means that almost everyone who spends time in prison in America winds up re-entering society at some point. Recidivism rates tend to be quite high, which has generated growing policy concern about identifying ways to improve the re-entry experience for ex-offenders to reduce their risk of recidivism and increase the likelihood they can become economically self-sufficient and lead healthy, productive lives. This policy issue is particularly important here in Chicago, as over half of all people leaving prison in the state of Illinois each year return to a Chicago neighborhood. Illinois Governor Pat Quinn is receiving a great deal of pressure from advocacy organizations to spend more on helping ex-offenders improve their labor market outcomes (with many people believing transitional jobs to be the most promising approach there), educational attainment (many people focus on prison education), and reduce their drug use (the Hawaii HOPE model is often pointed to now as the most promising model). Please write a memo for Governor Quinn outlining what we know (or don’t know) about which of these approaches seems to represent the most cost-effective way to reduce recidivism rates.


Wednesday May 14: Root causes

Every time there is an increase in the crime rate, particularly the juvenile crime rate, public discussion focuses on how today’s teenagers are “worse” than yesterday’s. These usual concerns become compounded when we have demographic bulges like the Echo Boomers (the unusually large birth cohorts born in the 1980s into the 1990s who are the children of the Baby Boomers). Suppose Mayor Emanuel is aware of these demographic realities and has expressed some concern about the problem. Please come to class prepared to discuss the evidence for and against this hypothesis of “cohort effects” as an explanation for the increase in crime rates in America during the late 1980s,
and the potential for both changes in cohort criminality and cohort size to cause crime rates to increase in Chicago in upcoming years. Every mayor of Chicago is also always under a great deal of political pressure to figure out ways to steer funding towards religious organizations in the city that have a great deal of political power. So please also include in your memo a discussion of what we know about the potential benefits, costs, and implementation challenges of policies designed to address the “root causes” of crime, specifically increased government support for religious institutions (as suggested by Dilulio’s Weekly Standard essay) and efforts to reduce youth violence.


**Wednesday, May 21: Social policy as crime prevention**

Disparities in measured rates of aggression between children growing up in poor versus non-poor households have been measured at ages as young as 18 months, and are predictive of later rates of criminal involvement during adolescence and early adulthood. This has led to a great deal of interest in increasing investments in early childhood education as a way to reduce crime rates over the long term. Please prepare a memo for Mayor Emanuel describing what we know about whether early childhood investments actually reduce criminal behavior later on. Even if the Mayor is convinced that this is a good long-term investment in the city’s future, given the current budget situation there is no way that the city will be able to provide as much intensive early childhood programming to every family that would potentially benefit. Please include in your memo a discussion of what we know about whether the city would receive highest return-on-investment if additional early childhood spending was devoted to the most intensive sorts of preschool programming (like Abecedarian), to a relatively low-intensity early childhood program (like Head Start), or something in the middle (like Perry Preschool), or whether you think that all of the preschool programs are even starting too late and that the highest return-on-investment program is nurse home visits.


(course chalk site)

(course chalk site)

http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/reprint/280/14/1238
See also Child Trends summary of study and replications at:
http://www.childtrends.org/lifecourse/programs/nursehomevisitingprogram.htm

**Wednesday May 28: Gun policy**

In June 2010 the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the city of Chicago’s handgun ban by a 5-4 decision (McDonald vs. Chicago), after striking down Washington DC’s handgun ban two years earlier (District of Columbia v. Heller). As part of the city’s policy planning process, officials are trying to understand the likely long-term effects of repeal of the handgun ban on gun crime in the city. Please prepare a memo for Chicago Police Department Superintendent Garry McCarthy that discusses what we know about the effects of city handgun bans on crime and violence.


[Distribute final writing assignment].

**Wednesday, June 4: Drug policy**

One of the few things that almost everyone can agree on is that current drug policy in the U.S. is not optimal. However people disagree about what the problem is. Some think that trying to prohibit illegal drugs is a mistake and almost all restrictions on the sale or use of drugs should be eliminated.
The extreme view on the other side is that we do not do enough to enforce existing laws, since illegal drug use is so rampant with seemingly few legal consequences for the vast majority of users or sellers. Please prepare a memo for ONDCP Director ("drug czar") Gil Kerlikowski about what we currently know about what would happen if we legalized drugs, or if the government just dramatically scaled back enforcement of existing drug laws. How does your answer depend on which type of drug would be legalized (or would have enforcement scaled back for)?

