SOAN 100: The Myths of Crime
(Sayles Hill 252)

Course Objectives:
What is crime? Who is the typical offender? What percentage of the American population is victimized by crime? In this freshman seminar we examine popular answers to these and other pressing questions about crime and criminal justice and contrast them with sociologically informed accounts. The course is designed to help you acquire a necessary critical perspective on crime and the criminal justice system. In the process you will learn how to locate and interpret sociological evidence, how to assess theoretical accounts of crime, and how to analyze media accounts of crime. By the end of the course you will have acquired insights into the larger sociological enterprise, particularly as it applies to the study of crime and criminal justice in contemporary American society.

Course Materials:
Four books are required for this course:


A series of journal articles, book chapters, and newspaper articles are also on e-reserve or available online at JSTOR or ProQuest.
Readings:
All of the assigned readings should be completed before each class. The material represents a balance of classic and contemporary literature in criminological theory and research. You may find some of the material to be sophisticated and provocative, and other material to be simplistic. Be an active and critical reader – we will all benefit if you engage the readings and bring your thoughts and criticisms to class.

Requirements:
This is a writing intensive course. My aim is to help you become self-aware and self-reflective as writers, understand writing as a process, gain an awareness of audience and voice, learn how to seek and use feedback, learn appropriate forms of attribution and citation and accepted guidelines for academic honesty, and develop confidence in your writing. I have developed several writing assignments to help you achieve these goals.

- Students will submit one short research paper in which they examine rates of violent crime and criminal victimization in 21st century America.

- Students will submit two short summary and response papers based on course material. These papers will be two pages in length. On the first page you will summarize, in your own words, the texts’ arguments. Your next page will discuss your own personal reflections on or reactions to the article. These papers are due at the beginning of class, before class discussion of the topic. Papers submitted after class discussion will not be accepted.

- Students also will keep a journal in which media depictions of crime are described and analyzed. These may discuss movies you have seen or newspaper and magazine articles you have read. In approximately two pages, you will describe the media depiction and then discuss how the particular crime or criminal event was constructed in the public eye. Your task is to deconstruct the media depiction by applying concepts and ideas discussed in the course. I expect students to complete one entry in this journal every two weeks (for a total of four entries). I will collect journals at three specific points in the term.

- Finally, students will also complete one major term paper, approximately 10-12 pages in length. In this paper a specific myth of criminal justice will be examined through a review of the literature (the list of topics is provided on page 8-9 of this syllabus). Papers will be presented to the class in the latter weeks of the term but throughout the term you will submit drafts of your work to me, your fellow students, and Andrea. A complete, final draft is due November 22.

This class is also designed to help you become skilled in oral presentation. For this reason you will conduct two class presentations during the term.

- In the first presentation small groups (approximately 2-3 students per group) will choose an article on the social effects of incarceration and present it to the class. These presentations will take place over two class periods.
In the second presentation you will present your term-paper to the class. To introduce the topic to the class, you will assign one-two readings that will introduce the class to your topic. The presentation itself will be conducted “conference-style,” which means that each presenter will have 15-20 minutes to present his/her paper. Two to three presentations will be made each class, with the last 20 minutes of class devoted to class questions and discussion.

This course is graded “S/CR/NC” and in this regard, you will not receive a letter grade on your transcript. Students who complete all the assignments in a satisfactory manner will receive an “S” which can be considered a “C” or above.

COURSE OUTLINE

1. The Sociological Study of Crime

9/13  Introduction: Why Study the Myths of Crime?

9/15  What is Sociology? A Brief Introduction
Sept 15:
• Best, Joel. 1999. “Preface”
• Best, Joel. 1999. “Chapter 1: Random violence”
• Best, Joel. 1999. “Chapter 2: From incidents to instances”

9/17  Conceptualizing Crime: Classical and Positivist Approaches
How do Sociologists Study Crime?

9/20: Available Data

- Library assignment distributed and discussed. The first part of this assignment is due 9/27. The second part of this assignment is due 10/04.


9/24: Other Approaches to Studying Crime

II. Unpacking the Myths of Crime

9/27

Crime is Dramatic
- Best, Joel. 1999. “Chapter 7: “Declaring war on social problems”
- Best, Joel. 1999. “Chapter 8: Connections among claims”

9/29

Youth are Innocent
Annotated bibliography of term-paper due at the beginning of class

10/1,4  

Crime is the Product of Social Ills
10/1: The Link between Unemployment and Crime

10/4: The Link between Poverty and Crime

• Assignment one due at the beginning of class
• Journals due at the beginning of class

10/6  

Criminals are Ingenious

• Response and reaction paper due at the beginning of class.
The Problem of Juvenile Gangs

10/8:
• Best, Joel. 1999. “Chapter 4: Gangs, conspiracies, and other cultural resources”

➢ Response and reaction paper due at the beginning of class

10/11:

White Collar Crime

10/13:

➢ Response and reaction paper due at the beginning of class

10/15:
10/18: Mid-term Break

10/20-22 Criminal Victimization
10/20:
  - Response and reaction paper due at the beginning of class
  - First draft of term paper due at the beginning of class

10/22: Guest Speaker:
Ross Macmillan, Associate Professor of Sociology & Director of Population Studies, University of Minnesota
  - Journals due at the beginning of class

III. Unpacking the Myths of Criminal Justice

10/25-11/3 Criminal Rehabilitation: Prisons
10/25:
- FILM: The Farm

10/27:

10/29: Tour of Minnesota Correctional Facility-Faribault
11/1: The Social Effects of Incarceration - Families
• **Presentation Readings** (one reading will be assigned to you in class):

➢ Second draft of term paper due at the beginning of class

11/3: The Social Effects of Incarceration – Communities
• **Presentation Readings** (one reading will be assigned to you in class):

11/5: **Term Paper Presentations**
1. Dangerous Female Offenders: Women in Prison
   ➢ Readings to be announced
2. The Effectiveness of Alternatives to Incarceration
   ➢ Readings to be announced

11/8: **Term Paper Presentations**
3. Juvenile Rehabilitation
   ➢ Readings to be announced
4. Juvenile Certification
   ➢ Readings to be announced
5. Criminal Defense
   ➢ Readings to be announced
11/10: Term Paper Presentations
6. The Lenient Criminal Justice System
   ➢ Readings to be announced
7. Capital Punishment as Deterrence
   ➢ Readings to be announced
8. Gun Violence and Gun Control
   ➢ Readings to be announced

11/12: Term Paper Presentations
9. Unequal Sentencing
   ➢ Readings to be announced
10. Justice is Blind
    ➢ Readings to be announced

11/15: Term Paper Presentations
11. Justice isn’t Blind
    ➢ Readings to be announced
12. Policing as Crime Control
    ➢ Readings to be announced
13. Private Police
    ➢ Readings to be announced

11/17: Term Paper Presentations
14. Jury Deliberation
    ➢ Readings to be announced
15. A Jury of your Peers
    ➢ Readings to be announced

- Journals due at the beginning of class (11/17)