

Economics of Crime

Course	Instructor	Office Hours
EC297	Jadon J. Buzzard	MWF 2-3pm, or by appt
JanPlan 2025		Office: Diamond 367
MWF 9am-12pm Classroom: Diamond 344	jbuzzard@colby.edu	Course website: Moodle Link

READ THIS SYLLABUS CAREFULLY. IT REPRESENTS A CONTRACT BETWEEN YOU AND THE INSTRUCTOR OF THIS COURSE. The syllabus is a “living” document, in that the information contained herein is not necessarily concrete. Any changes to the syllabus will be discussed in class.

Course Overview: This 1-month intensive course explores the economic approach to understanding crime, policing, and the U.S. criminal justice system. Each day is structured to provide both theoretical and empirical perspectives. This course will introduce students to the basic theoretical framework behind crime economics by modeling the interactions of the various agents involved. It will then familiarize students with methods to test theoretical predictions in real-world scenarios. We will read and discuss foundational research in the economics of crime literature and participate in activities such as policy debates and viewing relevant documentaries. EC297 is **not** a criminology course—that is, we are not focused solely on cataloging facts about the criminal justice system. While we will develop a solid factual understanding, the primary aim is to use the economist’s toolkit to analyze the trade-offs inherent in criminal justice policies. By doing so, students will learn to craft thoughtful, practical recommendations for reform based on evidence and rigorous reasoning.

My Role as Instructor: In this course, my role is to guide you through an introduction to the economic way of thinking as it applies to the criminal justice system. My goal is to be as **accessible** and **helpful** as I possibly can be. Economics is challenging, but I’m here to equip you with the tools you need to succeed! Here are a few key things to keep in mind:

- **Questions and Help:** If you have questions about the material—no matter how basic—don’t hesitate to email me or visit during office hours. I’m here to help you. (Seriously, stop by my office anytime the door is open.)
- **Mental / Emotional Health:** If you’re struggling with your mental or emotional health in a way that affects your coursework, please reach out to me as soon as possible. I will never judge you or assume that you are faking. I’ll do everything I can to help you succeed in my class, but I need to know before deadlines pass. There’s little I can do if you ask for help on or after a due date.
- **Grading Philosophy:** My goal is not to undermine your GPA, and I sincerely want everyone to earn an A in this class. However, grades must reflect both effort and understanding, which means I have to be willing to give out grades below an A for unsatisfactory work. This elective course is designed to expose you to new ideas, so if you’re actively engaging with the class material and trying your best, you will do well.
- **Disagreements and Dialogue:** Constructive discussion is encouraged! A significant part of this class involves learning to navigate policy disagreements civilly. Feel free to voice concerns or disagreements with me or the material, but ensure they are constructive and aimed at fostering understanding. Occasionally, we may need to pause discussions to cover additional material, but your input is always valued.

Office Hours (Diamond 367): My “official” office hours are MWF 2-3pm, or by appointment. But please feel free to come in whenever my door is open (which is generally always the case if I am there!)

Prerequisites: EC134 or equivalent. A principles-level familiarity with the discipline of economics is presumed. This course **will** expose you to ideas that are more advanced than principles, but my goal is for you to obtain an *intuitive* rather than *technical* understanding of these ideas. If you ever feel like a concept is too complicated or that I've not explained it sufficiently, please email me or come to office hours right away.

Course Text: There is no official textbook. I will assign readings for each class period. All necessary readings and course materials will be posted on Moodle. **This means you must be regularly checking the Moodle topics list and announcement pages!**

Sensitive Topics. I can't teach an Economics of Crime class without talking about crime. And crime is traumatizing, especially for victims. In constructing this course material, I avoid going into unnecessary detail about crimes that might be especially uncomfortable to talk about, but just let me know if a particular reading or assignment causes you distress. I will work with you on finding another assignment.

Course Meetings: We will meet for a 3-hour class session each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Generally, these class sessions will be composed of two 1hr 15min lectures with a 30-minute break in-between. During the break, students are free to leave the classroom or converse about the material. Several of our standard lecture periods will be used for class activities, such as watching documentaries, and engaging in classroom debates.

Grading Components: Your grade in this class is composed of 4 parts:

1. Participation (40%): In order to learn from this class, you must be actively engaged in the material over the whole month of January. Classroom discussion and dialogue is extremely important for this particular class as much of the learning will come from actively wrestling with ideas you may agree with or disagree with. As such, participation comprises the largest part of your grade for the course. Your participation grade is split between attendance and discussion.

1. **Attendance (10%):** Show up to class every day, simple as that. Everyone gets 1 excused absence—that's not very many, but our course is very short, so missing a full day of lectures will set you far behind. I am unlikely to excuse any additional absences except for extenuating circumstances (family emergency, sickness, etc.) I will log attendance by having you turn in Think-Pair-Share sheets at the end of each class day (more on this in lecture).
2. **Discussion (30%):** To get full credit for discussion, show up every day with the readings **read and annotated**, as well as printed out or easily accessible on laptop or iPad (see technology policy section). Our standard approach to a new reading will be to go around the room and ask questions like: "What is the author's research question? What data did the author use? What is their identification strategy?" Your ability to answer these questions will inform me about what grade to give you here. We will also have occasional discussion board reflection assignments, usually in response to watching a documentary or listening to a podcast. These will also factor into your discussion grade. Aim to ensure I know your name and some of the elements of discussion you brought to the table.

2. Policy Debates (20%): Every person in the class will debate once in a series of 2x2 cross examination debates. The ability to debate and articulate reasoning clearly is an invaluable skill, and one that is under taught in the academic space. Before the end of the first day of class, students will voluntarily pair into teams of 2 (I will randomly assign any unpaired individuals by the end of the day). Teams will be assigned several resolutions on the topic of criminal justice. Through a selection process, you and your opponents will determine the resolution you will debate about. You will debate either as an Affirmative team (affirming the resolution) or as a Negative team (negating the resolution). The resolutions will be policy oriented, meaning that the

Affirmative must advocate for the implementation of the policy specified in the resolution, and the Negative must advocate against the implementation of this policy. We will use one of our lecture periods to cover the debate format and strategy, particularly as it applies to cross-examination style policy debate. Your grade will be determined by your level of preparation, the quality of your delivery, and the technical prowess of your argumentation. Everyone in the class who is *not* participating in the debate will act as a judge. Judges will take notes on the argumentation and fill out ballot evaluation forms. Completing the ballot and watching the debate will count as part of your discussion grade.

3. Midterm Examination (15%): there will be one midterm examination on January 20 which will cover approximately the first two weeks' worth of material. The questions on the midterm will be mostly conceptual (with some very basic mathematical calculation), testing your ability to digest the content we cover in class and apply it in real-world scenarios. You are free to bring a scientific calculator (not a graphing calculator).

4. Policy Evaluation Proposal (25%): through the month of January, you will work on a study proposal for evaluating the causal effect of a particular criminal justice policy of your choice. You will turn this proposal in on the last day of class (**Jan 30**). You are to meet with me and turn in a very basic outline (less than 1 page) of your proposal by **Jan 17th**:

- I. *Motivation & Research Question (around 1-2 pages)*. Your proposal will begin with your specific policy-oriented research question, as well as a motivation section highlighting the importance of the topic and the contribution it will make to academic and policy knowledge. This should include a brief description of the relevant economic theory that relates to your hypothesis.
- II. *Institutional Background (around 1-2 pages)*. In this section, you will describe any institutional details associated with the passage of the policy. Your aim should be to describe, in a precise and detailed manner, the exact way that the criminal justice policy you analyze works. What are the agents involved? Who is the policy targeted at? Who implements the policy? Is there any research on this topic already? If so, what does it say about how the policy works?
- III. *Data Identification (around 1 page)*. This section should describe all the datasets you plan to use, how they are measured, and a brief description of how they would be helpful in your research. You must be able to explain why these particular datasets are helpful for providing an answer to your research question. Also detail any potential issues with these data, and potential solutions for dealing with these problems. While you do not need to provide summary statistics or clean the data in any way, doing so will help you get a sense of the potential data problems you will face.
- IV. *Empirical Strategy (around 1 page)*. Using our applied economics framework, provide the strategy you would use to evaluate the impact of this policy on various outcomes of your choosing. You should be answering questions like: what is the treatment/control distinction? What assumptions need to hold in order for your strategy to work?
- V. *Policy Recommendation (1-2 pages)*. Your final section should describe various policy recommendations for your expected set of results. Make sure to describe which results you expect, why you believe these results will materialize if the study you suggest is run, and how knowledge of these results should inform criminal justice policy. How should local/federal legislators respond?

Grade Breakdown:

ASSIGNMENT	POINTS POSSIBLE
Participation	40
<i>a. Attendance</i>	10
<i>b. Discussion</i>	30
Policy Debates	20
Midterm Exam	15
Policy Evaluation Proposal	25
<i>a. Research Question & Theory</i>	5
<i>b. Institutional Background</i>	5
<i>c. Data Identification</i>	5
<i>d. Empirical Strategy Description</i>	5
<i>e. Policy Recommendation</i>	5
Total	100

Letter Grade Cutoffs:

I employ standard letter grade cutoffs for this class.

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

There will be no official “curve.” An A+ is a rare grade and will be given only for exceptionally outstanding work in the course and demonstrated mastery of the topic material.

Important Dates:

- Jan 17: send outline of course project
- Jan 20: midterm examination, 9am in class
- Jan 30: final policy evaluation proposal due

Late Assignments: An assignment is considered late if it is not turned in by the end of class time on the day that it is due. Late assignments will not be accepted and cannot be made up except under extenuating circumstances. If you feel you will fall behind for any reason, please come see me as soon as possible!

Academic Misconduct: I expect you will uphold the Colby Affirmation and demonstrate academic honesty in all parts of the course - not only on exams. Students found to be in violation will receive a zero on the assignment and be referred to the appropriate Dean. Colby takes these issues seriously. Do not copy other students' work. Do not copy internet solutions or take ideas from papers you find without proper attribution. **Wholesale copy-pasting generative AI text for any assignment in this class will be considered academic integrity violation.**

Technology Policy. Feel free to bring your laptops or iPads to class and use them to follow along with or make notes on the material. However, please be considerate of your peers and refrain from using your laptop to view distracting content (e.g., images and videos). If I sense that technology is becoming too distracting, I reserve the right to prohibit its use during class time.

As stated above, you may **not** use generative AI (ChatGPT or alternatives) to generate text you will use in an assignment. You may use generative AI **ONLY** to assist with the brainstorming process of research. Even still, you must read and interact with the papers and research itself, not ChatGPT summaries of such research.

Course Schedule: Since I am teaching this course for the first time, I am still in the process of generating class materials. As such, I do not have a detailed course schedule that we will follow. The following constitutes a tentative schedule.

January 8-15: Crime & Policing

- Costs of Crime
- Intro to Causal Inference
- Structure of US Law Enforcement
- Criminal Deterrence
- Optimal Policing
- Racial Profiling
- Corruption

January 15-22: Arbitration

- Basic Structure of US Court System
- Arrest to Sentencing
- Prisoner's Dilemma
- Right to Counsel
- Plea Bargaining
- Judicial Impartiality

January 22-29: Incarceration

- [TBD]