

## CRIM 491-492 Honors Seminar: 2014-2015 (Koper)

### Assessing the Value and Effectiveness of Assault Weapons Legislation



#### Course Overview

The topic of gun control is arguably one of the most contentious in current debates about crime policy in the United States. One particularly controversial form of gun control involves limiting public access to “assault weapons.” Assault weapon laws typically restrict ownership of semiautomatic firearms having military-style features (such as pistol grips on rifles, flash hiders, folding rifle stocks, and threaded barrels for attaching silencers) and ammunition magazines holding large numbers of bullets. These laws are intended to reduce gunshot victimizations, including mass shootings, by limiting the stock of semiautomatic firearms with large ammunition capacities and other features conducive to criminal uses. Congress passed a federal ban on assault weapons and large capacity ammunition magazines in 1994 but allowed the law to expire in 2004. In addition, a number of states and localities (including places such as New York, California, Maryland, and Connecticut) have their own assault weapons restrictions.

In recent years, mass shootings committed with these guns and magazines—such as the Newton, CT, Aurora, CO, and Virginia Tech incidents—have reignited the assault weapons debate. These tragedies have led to calls for renewing the federal assault weapons ban and prompted a number of states to pass new or expanded assault weapons laws, some of which are currently being challenged in the courts.

To help inform public dialogue on this issue, students in this class will conduct new research on the assault weapons issue. This work will build on and extend prior studies of the federal assault weapons ban that the instructor has conducted for the U.S. Department of Justice and Congress (see [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/204431.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/204431.pdf), [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/173405.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/173405.pdf), and [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/aw\\_final.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/aw_final.pdf)). Students will conduct research on a number of issues including the effects that use of assault weapons and large capacity magazines has on gun violence, recent trends in the use of assault weapons and large capacity magazines, and the effects of assault weapons legislation. In the process, students will also learn about the principles of program evaluation and apply them to the assessment of assault weapon laws.

## Course Activities

In the early phase of the course, students will learn about a number of issues that will prepare them for conducting new research on assault weapons. Topics will include basics on different types of firearms, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (and its implications for assault weapons laws), the general impacts of gun use and availability on violence, arguments for restricting particular types of weaponry, and prior research on assault weapons and assault weapon bans. Students will also learn about the basic principles of program evaluation, including how to assess the need for a program and how to evaluate program theory, implementation, and impacts. Students will then use this framework to guide their subsequent research activities and assessments of assault weapons laws.

Following their introduction to the key issues surrounding the course, students will undertake new research on the assault weapons issue. Research activities conducted during this phase of the course will include some mix of the following:

- Identifying currently available assault weapons in the civilian gun market
- Compiling and critically assessing recent research on assault weapons and assault weapon bans
- Collecting and analyzing case-level data on gun assaults (in national and/or local-level data sources) to assess the impacts that the use of assault weapons and large capacity magazines has on shots fired, persons wounded, and person killed in gun attacks
- Studying levels and trends in the use of assault weapons and large capacity magazines through analysis of police databases on recovered weapons and potentially through searches of news media stories
- Studying the effects of assault weapon and large capacity magazine use on national and/or local-level trends in gun deaths, gun injuries, mass shootings, and/or murders of police officers
- Collecting and analyzing data on the implementation and impacts of one or more state and/or local bans on assault weapons and large capacity magazines

The students will then work with the instructor to produce one or more articles for publication based on the results of their research. Students will also present their research for the CLS faculty at the end of the course. Students may also have the opportunity to present the work at other events such as the annual symposium of the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy or at other events arranged by the instructor for specialized audiences of practitioners and policymakers.

## Other Information

Students must have at least a 3.5 GPA and instructor permission to participate. Students who successfully complete CRIM 491/492 with a GPA of 3.5 or above (for these two courses) will receive the honors designation in Criminology, Law & Society when they graduate. Additionally, the letters "RS" will appear on their academic transcripts indicating they have participated in a Research and Scholarship Intensive course. These courses can apply toward either the electives category or the skills category (for students with a catalog year prior to 2013-14) and the criminal justice or law and society concentration. This seminar will meet on Thursdays from 4:30 to 7:10 p.m. at the Fairfax campus, although we will likely substitute some of the class meetings with research outside the classroom. General information on the Honors program is available at <http://cls.gmu.edu/undergraduate/honors-research>. If you are interested in registering for this course, please email Professor Koper at [ckoper2@gmu.edu](mailto:ckoper2@gmu.edu).

## About the Instructor



Dr. Christopher S. Koper is an Associate Professor in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society at George Mason University and a senior fellow in George Mason's Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy. Dr. Koper holds a Ph.D. in criminology and criminal justice from the University of Maryland and has over 20 years of experiencing conducting criminological research at George Mason, the Police Executive Research Forum, the University of Pennsylvania, the Urban Institute, the RAND Corporation, the Police Foundation, and other organizations. He has written and published extensively on issues related to

firearms, policing, federal crime prevention efforts, research methods, and other topics. Dr. Koper's work on firearms has included multiple studies for the U.S. Department of Justice and Congress on the 1994 federal assault weapons ban, as well as studies of illegal gun markets, law enforcement strategies to reduce gun crime, trends in criminal weaponry, and various other federal and state policies to reduce firearms violence. In addition to his work for the U.S. Department of Justice, Dr. Koper has also consulted with several states and localities on the assault weapons issue.