

**CRIM 491: HONORS SEMINAR**  
**FALL 2014 SYLLABUS**

**Class Time:** Thursdays, 4:30 pm-7:10pm

**Class Location:** Innovation Hall, Room 208 (Fairfax campus)

**Professor:** Dr. Christopher Koper

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**Office Phone:** 703-993-4982

**Office Location:** 316 Research Hall (Fairfax campus)

**Office hours:** I will be available to meet immediately after class or by appointment at my office in Fairfax. Students may also contact me by phone or email as needed.

**COURSE PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION**

Course Topic: Assessing the Value and Effectiveness of Assault Weapons Legislation

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 (some activities may provide opportunities for visits and onsite data collection with nearby law enforcement agencies):

- Identifying assault weapons currently available 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 (second semester). Students may also have opportunities to present the work at other events such as the annual symposium of the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy, University events (such as the CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium), or other events arranged by the instructor for specialized audiences of practitioners and policymakers.

Note that this class will require students to collect, manage, and analyze quantitative data. Students will need their own computers or access to the University's computer labs to conduct this work. It is expected that students taking this course will have a working familiarity with programs like Microsoft Excel and PowerPoint that can be used for basic data management, analysis, and visual display of results.

## OTHER “RS” COURSE AND HONORS PROGRAM INFORMATION

This class is designated as a *Students as Scholars* Research and Scholarship (RS) Intensive Course, which means that students are given the opportunity to actively participate in the process of scholarship and will make a significant contribution to the creation of a disciplinary-appropriate product. To learn more about *Students as Scholars*, visit <http://oscar.gmu.edu>.

### RS Student Learning Outcomes

In this RS course, students will:

- Create an original scholarly or creative project.
- Communicate knowledge from an original scholarly or creative project.
- Engage in scholarly inquiry by:
  1. Gathering evidence appropriate to the question
  2. Assessing the validity of key assumptions and evidence
  3. Following ethical principles

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. General information on the CLS Honors program is available at <http://cls.gmu.edu/undergraduate/honors-research>.

### COURSE WEBSITE

There is a website for the course which is located at: <http://cebcp.org/links/crim491/>. This website has general information about the class, announcements about assignments and other matters, and links to readings that are not available through the University library system. Additionally, you can access this syllabus at the class website.

### COURSE FORMAT AND GUIDELINES FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

Classes will involve lecture, discussion, and group exercises. Students are expected to complete assigned readings prior to class and be prepared to discuss them during class. Students who miss class should make arrangements to obtain notes from a classmate; the professor will not provide class notes.

To ensure that everyone has a good experience with in-class participation, please observe the following guidelines: prepare for class discussion by keeping current with the readings; respect others by actively listening and putting away/turning off all cell phones and the internet; feel free to ask questions of your peers and me; and give others a chance to speak. Our research efforts will require considerable teamwork over the course of the academic year; students should thus treat classmates with proper respect and professionalism.

## REQUIRED READING

There are two books that students are required to purchase for this course:

- Spitzer, Robert J. (2012). *The Politics of Gun Control*. 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Peter H. Rossi, Mark W. Lipsey, and Howard E. Freeman. (2004). *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach*. 7<sup>th</sup> Edition. Sage Publications.

Another reading that will be central to the course is a national evaluation of the federal assault weapons ban that was completed by the instructor for the U.S. Department of Justice in 2004:

- Christopher S. Koper. (2004). *An Updated Assessment of the Federal Assault Weapons Ban: Impacts on Gun Markets and Gun Violence, 1994-2003*. Report to the National Institute of Justice (U.S. Department of Justice). Jerry Lee Center of Criminology, University of Pennsylvania.

This report is available electronically from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) at: [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/204431.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/204431.pdf). It is also available through the course website.

All other required course readings are available as documented below through the University's online library system (e-journals), the course website, or the internet. The library's e-journal system can be located on the library website at <http://library.gmu.edu/>. (The "articles and more" tab on the website provides a quick link to search for a journal's name.)

## COURSE OUTLINE: DATES, TOPICS, AND READINGS

The fall 2014 semester of the honors seminar (CRIM 491) will be divided into three sections. In Section I, we will examine basic issues surrounding gun ownership, gun crime, and gun policy in the United States. Key topics for discussion will include: the 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment and its interpretation; patterns and trends in gun ownership and gun violence; the social costs and benefits of gun availability; federal and state gun regulations; the effectiveness of gun control; public opinion about gun control; and political aspects of the policymaking process. In Section II of the course, we will examine the conceptual framework for program evaluation and probe the issues and methods involved in developing evaluation questions and assessing various aspects of program needs, theory, operation, and impacts. We will also review prior research on the federal assault weapons ban in order to: 1) illustrate the concepts of program evaluation; and 2) introduce the substantive and methodological issues involved in studying assault weapons and assault weapons legislation. In Section III of the course, the instructor and students will begin developing and executing a plan for new research to inform public debate and policymaking on the assault weapons issue.

The instructor will notify students as to any changes to the schedule or readings listed below. *Please note carefully the assigned pages for each reading and the location where the reading can be obtained.*

## **Section I: Gun Crime, Gun Policy, and Gun Politics**

### **August 28th: Course introduction. Basics on firearms, assault weapons, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment**

- Spitzer (2012) chapters 1 and 2 (pages 1-46)
- Supreme Court of the United States. District of Columbia et al. v. Heller. Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. Pages 1-3 (Syllabus). Available on the course website.
- Koper (2004) assault weapons report. Pages 1-3 (executive summary)

### **September 4th: Patterns of firearms ownership and firearms violence. Data sources for firearms research.**

- L. Hepburn, M. Miller, D. Azrael, and D. Hemenway. (2007). The US gun stock: Results from the 2004 national firearms survey. *Injury Prevention*, Vol. 13, pages 15-19. Available through the library's e-journals.
- Michael Planty and Jennifer L. Truman. (2013). *Firearms Violence, 1993-2011*. Special Report. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. Pages 1-13. Available on the course website or on the internet at:  
<http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/fv9311.pdf>.
- Supplemental reading: National Research Council. (2005). *Firearms and Violence: A Critical Review*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. Pages 19-42. Available on the course website.

### **September 11th: The social consequences of gun availability—impacts of guns on criminal victimizations and community-level violence**

- Philip J. Cook, Anthony A. Braga, and Mark H. Moore. (2011). Gun control. In *Crime and Public Policy*, edited by James Q. Wilson and Joan Petersilia. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. Pages 263-268 (pages 257-262 optional). Available on the course website.
- Franklin Zimring. (1968). Is gun control likely to reduce violent killings? *The University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol. 35, pages 721-737. Available through the library's e-journals.
- Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins. (1997). *Crime is Not the Problem: Lethal Violence in America*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pages 34-57. Available on the course website (note that pages 34-50 and 51-57 are contained in two separate entries on the website).
- D. Hemenway, D. Azrael, and M. Miller. (2000). Gun use in the United States: Results from two national surveys. *Injury Prevention*, Vol. 6, pages 263-267. Available through the library's e-journals.

### **September 18th: Gun control policies and gun politics**

- Cook, Braga, and Moore (pages 269-282)
- Ik-Whan Kwon and Daniel W. Baack. (2005). The effectiveness of legislation controlling gun usage: A holistic measure of gun control legislation. *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 64, Number 2, pages 533-547. Available through the library's e-journals.
- Spitzer chapter 4 (pages 87-128)

## **Section II: Concepts of Program Evaluation and the Federal Assault Weapons Ban**

### **September 25th: Introduction to program evaluation and assault weapons legislation**

- Rossi et al. chapter 1 (pages 1-30) and chapter 2 (pages 52-61 only)
- Koper chapter 2 (pages 4-13)
- See summaries of current state laws regulating assault weapons and large capacity magazines from the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence:  
<http://smartgunlaws.org/assault-weapons-policy-summary/> and  
<http://smartgunlaws.org/large-capacity-ammunition-magazines-policy-summary/>. *PDF versions also available on the course website.*
- Supplemental reading: Spitzer (pages 141-147)

### **October 2nd: Needs assessment in program evaluation. Assessing the need for assault weapons bans**

- Rossi et al. chapter 4 (pages 101-132)
- Philip Cook. (1981). The 'Saturday night special': An assessment of alternative definitions from a policy perspective. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Vol. 72, Number 4, pages 1735-1745. *Available through the library's e-journals.*
- Koper chapter 3 (pages 14-19)

### **October 9th: How to assess program theory. Assessing program theory underlying assault weapon bans**

- Rossi et al. chapter 5 (pages 133-168)
- Koper chapter 4 (pages 20-24) and chapter 9 (pages 80-91 only)

### **October 16th: Assessing program implementation, measuring program outcomes, and assessing program impacts**

- Rossi et al. chapter 7 (pages 203-222 only)
- Rossi et al. chapter 8 (pages 233-243 only)
- Rossi et al. chapter 9 (pages 265-300)

### **October 23rd: Class does not meet**

(Reading assignment for weeks of Oct. 23rd and Oct. 30th)

- Koper chapters 5 through 8 (pages 25-79) and chapter 9 (pages 91-97 only)
- Jeffrey A. Roth and Christopher S. Koper. (1997). *Impact Evaluation of the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act of 1994*. Report to the National Institute of Justice (U.S. Department of Justice). The Urban Institute. Pages 98-100 only. *Available on the course website.*

### **October 30th: Assessing the impacts of assault weapons bans**

- See reading assignment for Oct. 23rd

## **Section III: Formulating New Research on Assault Weapons**

**November 6th: Recent media and advocacy group reports on assault weapons. Begin planning and analysis tasks for class project.**

- Violence Policy Center. (2013). *Assault Pistols: The Next Wave*. Available on the course website.
- Bruce Falconer. (2008). Semiautomatic for the people. *Mother Jones*, July 13. Available on the course website.
- Violence Policy Center. (2010). *Target: Law Enforcement. Assault Weapons in the News, March 1, 2005-February 28, 2007*. Available on the course website.
- David S. Fallis. (2013). Data indicate drop in high-capacity magazines during federal gun ban. *The Washington Post*, January 10. Available on the course website.
- Mayors Against Illegal Guns. (2013). *Analysis of Recent Mass Shootings*. Available on the course website.
- Violence Policy Center. (2013). *Mass Shootings in the United States Involving High-Capacity Magazines*. Available on the course website.

#### **November 13th: Planning and research tasks (continued)**

- Tasks to be assigned
- Supplemental readings to be assigned if/as needed

#### **November 20th: Class does not meet**

- Continue assigned tasks
- Supplemental readings to be assigned if/as needed

#### **November 27th: Thanksgiving holiday (class does not meet)**

#### **December 4th: Final class of semester. Review tasks completed to date.**

- Final assignments due

### **COURSE GRADING AND ASSIGNMENTS**

Students grades will be based on: 1) 10 weekly homework assignments; 2) an assigned research project; and 3) class attendance and participation. The weekly homework assignments will require students to prepare written answers to questions about the course readings (these briefs should be 2-3 pages single spaced unless otherwise specified) or to carry out small research tasks. The homework assignments will be posted each week on the course website. Students will also be given a short research project to carry out during the later weeks of the semester. This project, which will be assigned in November, will constitute one component of a larger research effort that the instructor and students will conduct over the course of the full academic year. The instructor will provide further instructions and details about the project when it is assigned. Students should submit all assignments to the instructor electronically and (if asked) in hard copy by the beginning of class on the dates they are due.

The homework assignments, research project, and class participation components will be weighted as follows:

Homework assignments:	60%
Research project:	25%
Class attendance / participation:	15%

The grading scale for the course will be:

<u>Points</u>	<u>Grade</u>
93-100%	A
90-92%	A-
87-89%	B+
83-86%	B
80-82%	B-
77-79%	C+
73-76%	C
70-72%	C-
60-69%	D
Below 60	F

### **EMAIL CONTACT INFORMATION**

Mason uses only Mason e-mail accounts to communicate with enrolled students. Students must activate their Mason e-mail account, use it to communicate with their department and other administrative units, and check it regularly for important university information including messages related to this class. See <http://masonlive.gmu.edu> for more information.

### **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

George Mason University has an Honor Code that requires all student members of the George Mason University community to pledge not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, or lie in matters related to academic work. All violations of the Honor Code will be reported to the Honor Committee and result in failing the course. Further information about these matters is available at: <http://oai.gmu.edu/the-mason-honor-code/>.

### **STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 993-2474 (<http://ods.gmu.edu>). All academic accommodations must be arranged through the ODS. Students with disabilities are responsible for registering with ODS and obtaining proper documentation to provide to the course instructor. Accommodations will only be provided to students who are registered with ODS.

### **ENROLLMENT INFORMATION**

Students are responsible for verifying their enrollment in this class. Schedule adjustments should be made by the deadlines published in the Schedule of Classes. (Deadlines each semester are published in the Schedule of Classes available from the Registrar's Website at [registrar.gmu.edu](http://registrar.gmu.edu).)

The last day to add this course is September 2, 2014.



The last day to drop this course without tuition penalty is September 2, 2014. The final drop deadline is September 26, 2014. After the last day to drop a class, withdrawing from this class requires the approval of the Dean and is only allowed for nonacademic reasons. Undergraduate students may choose to exercise a selective withdrawal. See the Schedule of Classes for selective withdrawal procedures.