

## 2009-10 ADJ HONORS SEMINAR

### **On the Beat: What Does Good Policing Look Like To the Street Cop?**



#### **GENERAL DESCRIPTION**

Should an officer arrest someone for panhandling outside a store? Should an officer spend most of her shift preventing a domestic dispute from blowing up rather than making herself available to others in her assigned beat? How should an officer resolve a dispute over a bicycle where neither party has proof of ownership? When making a traffic stop for speeding, should an officer treat a middle-aged driver with his children more leniently than a teenager with her friends?

In this Honors course we shall examine the quality of decision making by a department's largest resource—its patrol officers. We shall ask, “How do street cops define good policing?” Is it just a case of ‘I know it when I see it?’, as Justice Stewart once described pornography, or can we actually uncover *how* officers make judgments about what actions to take in a given context. While on patrol, officers are often faced with complex situations that require them to make difficult choices. Oftentimes it is by no means clear what the best course of action should be. In the scenarios above, what criteria might an officer use to make a good decision and avoid a bad one?

The goal of this seminar will be to deepen our understanding of the considerations that patrol officers use to make decisions. How do they judge good policing? Ultimately, our goal will be to produce a set of guidelines to improve the quality of police decision making more generally.

## RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Over two semesters, students will work closely with Dr. James Willis on cutting-edge research on policing. Working as a team of ‘research detectives,’ it is expected that students will challenge common place assumptions about police work by collecting empirical evidence, and have the opportunity to present their research findings to police leaders and scholars.

Specifically, students will:

1. Read and summarize previous research on police decision making
2. Plan and conduct a research project to identify and clarify the considerations that influence officers’ discretionary choices. Students will conduct interviews with patrol officers and conduct ridealong observations of them at work
3. Analyze original data to present written and oral reports, which will be delivered to the participating police department and possibly at a national research conference

## OTHER INFORMATION

Students must have at least a 3.2 GPA to participate. Students who successfully complete ADJ 491/492 with a GPA of 3.5 or above will receive the honors designation in Administration of Justice when they graduate. The seminar will meet on Thursdays from 1.30-4.10 p.m. at the Prince William campus, although some of the class seminars and meetings will be substituted with field work assignments. General information on the Honors program can be found at: <http://adj.gmu.edu/resources/honors.html>

## ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR



James Willis is an Assistant Professor in the Administration of Justice Department. His research interests include figuring out why Britain transported so many of its convicts to America and Australia, the degree to which police reforms like COMPSTAT and community policing change the way that police departments operate, and how different theories about ethics and values can be applied to justice issues. He feels the Honors seminar is a great opportunity for students to challenge themselves intellectually and to have fun while doing so.