

CRIM 491-492 Honors Seminar

The Broken Windows in Urban Areas— Disorder, Crime and Racial Stereotypes

2017-2018 (Professor Sue-Ming Yang)



Course Overview

In 1982 Wilson and Kelling published their seminal piece “Broken Windows” in the Atlantic Monthly in which they suggest that disorder has criminogenic effects with untended disorder eventually leading to crime problems. Since then, urban disorder has become a center of public policy. Urban Sociologist Richard Sennett views so-called disorder as a manifestation of the social diversity of a place where people come from different racial, ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds. Thus, disorder is considered a byproduct that comes with the modernization of urban cities. On the contrary, criminologists often classify disorder as a social negativity. Urban disorder has been argued to be the main source of the “fear” of residents, rather than the true fear of “crime.” In our fast-changing society, these contrasting viewpoints illustrate the subjective nature of what disorder is and its corresponding social meanings.

In this course students will identify “factors” that affect individual perception of urban disorder. Based on the findings, students in this class will learn to design experiments to test different types of racial stereotypes and how they affect our perception of urban disorder and fear of crime. This study will build on and extend prior studies that the instructor has conducted regarding disorder perception. Students will conduct research on various issues related to racial stereotypes and implicit biases. The controversies related to zero-tolerance policing will also be reviewed and discussed.

Course Activities

In the first part of the course students will be introduced to theoretical and methodological concepts related to the course topics, including:

- Prior theoretical perspectives related to urban disorder (a.k.a. broken windows)
- Prior research on broken windows style policing such as zero-tolerance policing or stop-question-and-frisk and the controversies related to the enforcement
- Methodological innovations on studying disorder around the world
- Prior literature on implicit racial bias and racial stereotypes

Students will go over data that were collected by the instructor in the previous experiment to identify salient visual cues that have impacts on individual's perceptions of disorder. We will then discuss and identify other visual cues that are relevant to racial stereotypes and could potentially foster implicit bias against certain sub-groups in the society.

In the second part of the course, students will design their own experiment to test their hypothesis related to racial bias and urban disorder. We will work with local police departments to recruit officers and lay people as our research participants to understand whether police and lay persons are equally likely to be affected by racial stereotypes. Throughout the process, students will work with the instructors to produce different types of publications based on the results of their research. Students will also present their research for the CLS faculty at the end of the course.

Course Enrollment

The Criminology, Law and Society Honors Program is open to Criminology, Law and Society majors who show the ability and drive to benefit from intensive study in the honors seminars. There are no formal course or GPA requirements, although the most promising candidates will be students who have taken challenging courses at Mason and who have earned at least a 3.5 overall/cumulative GPA. Students must have permission to participate in this course and are expected to make a one-year commitment to participate in both CRIM 491 and CRIM 492. Students who successfully complete CRIM 491 and 492 with a GPA of 3.5 or above will receive the honors designation in Criminology, Law and Society when they graduate and the letters "RS" will appear on their academic transcripts indicating they have participated in a Research and Scholarship Intensive course. The six credits from these two courses count in the elective category and toward the criminal justice concentration. This seminar will meet on Tuesdays from 4:30pm-7:10pm in the Fall semester at Innovation Hall 333 (day/time for the Spring semester to be confirmed) on the Fairfax campus. There will also be opportunities for meetings 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 Dr. Yang at syang10@gmu.edu.

About the Instructor



Dr. Sue-Ming Yang is an Assistant Professor at George Mason University and a Senior Fellow in the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy at GMU as well as investigator of National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland. She received her PhD from the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Maryland. Her current research focuses on understanding the relationship between stereotypes, race, and perceived disorder in urban settings. She also studies place-based criminology, disorder and crime association, experimental research methods, and international terrorism. Currently, she is working on a Bureau of Justice

Assistance (BJA) funded research project collaborating with Roanoke County Police Department evaluating the effectiveness of an innovative referral program for people with mental health problems.