

CRIM 491/492 Honors Seminar

Wrongful Convictions in Virginia: Examining Exonerations from Multiple Perspectives

2018-2019 (Professor Allison Redlich)



Course Overview

The National Registry of Exonerations (NRE) catalogs official exonerations (see <http://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Pages/about.aspx>). Since 1989, there have been 2,187 exonerations identified, 48 of which occurred in Virginia. Just a few of their pictures are above. As defined by the NRE and in this class, a wrongful conviction is when a factually innocent person is convicted of a crime he or she did not commit; an exoneration is when this innocent person is officially cleared based on new evidence of innocence. In this first semester of the two-semester honors seminar, we will delve into these Virginia exonerations, learning about the cases and aftermath, and develop research questions and studies that stem from them.

To date, much of the focus of wrongful conviction scholarship has been to identify the contributing factors that led to the wrongful conviction. Commonly, six factors are discussed: 1) false confessions; 2) eyewitness misidentifications; 3) governmental misconduct; 4) forensic science errors; 5) ineffective assistance of counsel; and 6) informants (or snitches). In this class, we will learn about these six contributing factors and others, but we will also examine wrongful convictions and exonerations from the perspectives of a variety of different actors. When an innocent person is *convicted*, many lives are affected—of course, the wrongly convicted person is affected, as well as his/her family and the future victims of the true perpetrator. Moreover, when an innocent person is *exonerated*, there are also multiple perspectives to consider. How is the victim or victim's family affected? If there was misconduct by a forensic scientist, for example, what happens to past cases that this person worked on? How does the state or county respond? Are reforms put in place to prevent future wrongful convictions? Is the local community affected by the exoneration? And does knowledge of the exoneration influence other attitudes and aspect of the criminal justice system. In short, there are myriad perspectives to consider from when wrongful convictions and exonerations occur—this is a main focus of this honors seminar.

Course Activities

In the first semester of the course, students will learn about the contributing factors to wrongful convictions and exonerations, and about the aftermath of these occurrences. Such learning will occur primarily through assigned readings, class discussions, and guest lecturers. In addition, students will contribute to the innocenceresearch.org website.

In the second semester, students will design and conduct their own (or group) studies using methods that best address their research questions. Such methods could include analysis of NRE data; surveys of legal

actors or community members; online experiments, or others. Although to be finalized, the research studies will focus on the aftermath of exonerations in Virginia, from a variety of perspectives. At the conclusion of the course, students will present their work to the Criminology, Law and Society faculty and to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. Students will also be encouraged to present their work to criminal justice professionals and researchers and to publish their findings.

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 can be applied towards the CRIM electives section of the major and can count toward the criminal justice or the law and society concentration. This seminar will meet on Wednesdays from 1:30pm-4:10pm in the Fall semester in E 134 (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. Redlich at aredlich@gmu.edu.

About the Instructor



Allison Redlich is a Professor in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society, who was trained as an experimental psychologist but uses multiple methods to conduct her research. To a large degree, her research centers on whether legal decision-making is knowing, intelligent, and voluntary. She examines such decision-making in vulnerable (juveniles and persons with mental health problems) and non-vulnerable defendants, and across several different contexts—in the interrogation room, during the guilty plea process, and in mental health courts. Professor Redlich also studies wrongful convictions, with a particular focus on false confessions and false guilty pleas. In addition to publishing numerous articles on these and related topics, she has co-authored/edited five books, most recently two volumes on the international practices of interviewing victims, witnesses, and suspects, and another on guilty pleas. To pursue her research, Professor Redlich has received funding from the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Justice, the Brain and Behavior Research Association, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, among others.