CRIM 491/492 Honors Seminar

Mass Shootings in the United States: Patterns, Causes, and Responses

2020-2021 (Professor: Beidi Dong)

Course Overview

Mass violence has become an all too common occurrence and is one of the most alarming and defining crime issues in the United States today. Running contrary to national declining trends in homicide and violence, mass public shootings have increased in regularity and severity (e.g., see https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/12/mass-shootings-mother-jones-full-data/). While accounting for only a small share of all homicide deaths, mass shootings are disproportionally detrimental to public well-being due to their uniquely traumatizing and threatening nature. The widespread media coverage of mass public shootings leads to an unprecedented level of indirect or secondary exposure to extreme violence among the general public. The apparent randomness of mass shootings combined with the sense of helplessness of the targets brings about a panicked sense of fear and anxiety across the nation, creating a perception that such incidents can happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime. Mass shootings thus cause damage and devastation far beyond the simple statistics of fatal and non-fatal injuries.

To help inform public dialogue on this issue, students in the class will learn fundamental facts and knowledge about mass shootings in the United States and conduct research on the prevention and response to mass shootings. This work will build on and extend prior studies that the

instructor has conducted regarding mass shootings. Specifically, students will engage in research on a number of issues including identifying high-risk gun owners and threat assessment model, the effects of firearm legislations on mass shootings, and the potential negative impacts of mass shootings on local communities. In the process, students will also learn about the fundamentals of quantitative data analysis and apply the techniques to address mass shootings in the United States.

Course Activities

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

- Definitional and measurement issues of mass shootings
- Patterns and trends of mass shootings
- Perpetrator, incident, and contextual characteristics of mass shootings
- Offender profiling and threat assessment model
- Mental illness and mass shootings
- Firearm legislation and its impact on mass shootings
- The role of media in mass shootings
- Responding to mass shootings
- Theoretical perspectives of violence
- Fundamentals of social science research
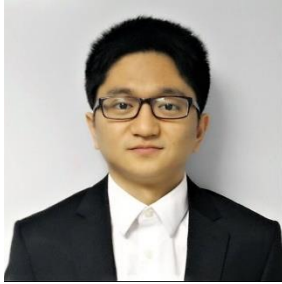- Fundamentals of quantitative data analysis

In the second part of the course, students will design and conduct their own (or group) studies using methods that best address their research questions. Depending on the research question, students may collect their own primary data and/or compile and use secondary data (with the assistance of the instructor) from existing data sources. At the conclusion of the course, students will present their work to the Criminology, Law and Society faculty. 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 (a B+ and above grade from CRIM315—Research Methods and Analysis in Criminology is strongly recommended). 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 concentration. This seminar will meet on Wednesdays from 1:30pm - 4:10pm in the Fall semester (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. Dong at bdong@gmu.edu.

About the Instructor

Dr. Beidi Dong is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society and a Senior Fellow in the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy at George Mason University. He obtained his PhD from the Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law at the University of Florida in 2015. He received post-doctoral training in the Department of Biostatistics, Epidemiology and Informatics at the University of Pennsylvania between 2015 and 2017. His research interests center around understanding the patterns and trends of gun violence (in particular, mass shootings) in the United States, identifying risk and protective factors, and developing and implementing preventive intervention strategies. He is currently conducting a funded research project examining the impact of firearm legislations on the co-morbidity of youth gun carrying and substance abuse. With his interdisciplinary background, Dr. Dong links theories, methods and practices of public health with those of their criminal justice counterparts to enhance public safety.