

## **Wrongful Convictions: Public Perceptions of Criminal Injustice**

### **Overview**

In the United States, nearly 2,800 people are known to have been exonerated after being wrongly convicted of crimes they did not commit. Research on wrongful convictions has grown in recent years and we have learned much about the factors that contribute to such errors (e.g., eyewitness misidentifications, false confessions, etc.), how injustices are discovered and overturned, and what effects wrongful conviction and incarceration have on exonerees, their communities, and others involved in their cases. The growth of research in this area has accompanied the development of the “innocence movement,” a national (and international) advocacy movement that seeks to exonerate the innocent, reform the criminal legal system, and educate policymakers, practitioners, and the public. Importantly, cases of wrongful conviction are increasingly shared with the public through news and social media, film and TV, documentaries, podcasts, and books. Many have argued, and some research has found, that such stories are consequential for public opinion about the criminal legal system.

This honors seminar will focus on examining wrongful convictions from a variety of perspectives. We will discuss fundamental knowledge about such errors—how often they happen, how they happen, and their consequences. We will, however, go beyond the cases, and explore the various factors that shape public knowledge about and attitudes toward the justice system, and build on a burgeoning area of research that explores how much people know about wrongful convictions and how learning about them affects public opinion on other issues.

### **Course Activities**

During the first semester, students will learn about wrongful convictions generally, including how often they may occur, the factors that contribute to errors, and the consequences of these injustices for exonerees, their families and communities, and others. Furthermore, students will be introduced to research on public opinion as related to criminal justice, including key theoretical and methodological perspectives, attitudes toward key issues (e.g., trust in police, support for the death penalty), and what we currently know about the consequences of wrongful convictions on public beliefs.

During the second semester, students will design and carry out a collaborative project to explore awareness and perceptions of wrongful convictions among the George Mason community. The project may include the use of qualitative (e.g., interviews) and/or quantitative (e.g., surveys) methods, depending on the specific research questions of interest (to be determined collaboratively in class).

### **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 3.3

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 3 applied towards the CRIM electives section of the major and can count toward the law and society concentration. This seminar will meet on the Fairfax campus one day a week during the Fall semester (day/time for the Spring semester to be confirmed). 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. Norris at [rnorris4@gmu.edu](mailto:rnorris4@gmu.edu).

### **About the Instructor**

Dr. Robert J. Norris is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology, Law, and Society at George Mason University. He holds a BA in Sociology from UNC-Greensboro and an MA and PhD from the School of Criminal Justice at the University at Albany. He has written two books (*Exonerated*, 2017; *When Justice Fails*, 2018), co-edited one volume (*Examining Wrongful Convictions*, 2014), and authored/co-authored more than a dozen articles on wrongful convictions and related issues. He has also published articles about racial disparities and attitudes toward police, criminal admissions (confessions and guilty pleas), and anti-homeless laws. He is currently writing his third book, *The Politics of Innocence*, about state policy reform and public opinion related to wrongful convictions in the U.S.