

CRIM 491: HONORS SEMINAR
WRONGFUL CONVICTIONS – PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CRIMINAL INJUSTICE

Instructor: Dr. Robert J. Norris

Email: rnorris4@gmu.edu

Student Hours: Thursday, 1:30-2:30; By appointment, virtual or in-person

Fall 2021

Thursday, 10:30 am -1:10 pm

West 1004

Since 1989, in the United States, nearly 3,000 people are known to have been exonerated after being wrongly convicted of crimes they did not commit. As research and advocacy around this issue has grown, wrongful convictions have increasingly reached the public sphere. Many have argued, and some have found, that this is consequential for public opinion about the criminal legal system. In this honors seminar, we will examine wrongful convictions from a variety of angles and cover various aspects of public opinion. In addition to learning about these topics, we will develop research questions and ideas for studies to answer them (more on this below).

You are expected to keep up with the assigned readings and come to class prepared every week. By staying enrolled in this course, you are agreeing to the terms set forth in this syllabus.

Required Materials

There is *one required book* for this course that you must obtain. It is available from the GMU bookstore and/or Amazon. However, you do need the book by the second week of the semester, so plan to get it as soon as possible. *All additional required readings and materials will be posted on Blackboard.*

- Norris, Robert J., Bonventre, Catherine L., and Acker, James R.. 2018. *When Justice Fails: Causes and Consequences of Wrongful Convictions*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press. (ISBN: 9781611638561).

Grading Scale

A	93-100	C+	77-79
A-	90-92	C	73-76
B+	87-89	C-	70-72
B	83-86	D	60-69
B-	80-82	F	59 or below

Grade Breakdown

Participation	20%
IRB Training	10%
Weekly Assignments	30%
Research Proposal	40%

Course Activities

This class is designated as a Students as Scholars Research and Scholarship (RS) Intensive Course, which means that you will have the opportunity to work on a real-life research project and present your results beyond the classroom. To learn more about Students as Scholars, you can visit <http://oscar.gmu.edu>.

This honors seminar is a full-year commitment. It is a research-intensive course in which students will not only learn substantive material, but about the research process as well. We will discuss how to ask and answer research questions; various methodological approaches to answering such questions; research ethics; how to find, evaluate, and integrate scholarly sources; and the research publication process.

During the first semester, the focus will be on learning the substantive material and developing an understanding of the research process. The goals of the first semester are threefold:

- First, we will develop subject-matter expertise related to both wrongful convictions (for example, what we know and don't know about their frequency, how and why they occur, and their consequences) and public opinion (for example, theories of preference formation and persuasion, what is known to influence public attitudes toward the criminal legal system, and how wrongful convictions might affect such attitudes).
- Second, we will develop a basic understanding of the research process—how we ask and answer questions, standards for ethical research, and so forth. This includes a requirement that students complete the required IRB training for human-subjects research.
- Third, students will begin to develop research questions and submit a project proposal.

During the second semester, students will finalize the design of and conduct a research study. As we will discuss throughout the course, these studies may involve both qualitative (e.g., interviews) and quantitative (e.g., surveys) research methods. Students will prepare written reports and video presentations of their studies.

CRIM 491 Grade Requirements

Weekly Participation (10%):

Students are expected to attend class having read the assigned materials ahead of time and prepared to participate in class discussion. Everyone is expected to participate by asking relevant questions that stimulate discussion and debate, and to respond to prompts from both the instructor and fellow classmates.

Discussion Lead (10%):

For one week during the fall semester, students will work in pairs to serve as the discussion leaders for that week's meeting. This will require the pair to present brief summaries of the assigned readings, prepare discussion questions or other activities for the class, and moderate class discussion.

IRB Training (10%):

Students will need to complete the brief "Citi training" through GMU's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This is required to conduct human-subjects research.

Weekly Assignments (30%):

Most weeks, students will be asked to complete a short assignment. This may be a summary of a research article, the development of a research question, or another brief task. These are designed to help you improve your writing, literature synthesis abilities, and/or research question development. These assignments will be handed out week-to-week.

Final Project – Research Proposal and IRB Application (40%)

Throughout the semester, students will work on developing research questions. By the end of the fall term, students will choose a particular subtopic related to wrongful convictions and public opinion. Each student will submit a paper (no more than 12 pages) exploring the relevant research in their area, proposing 1-2 research questions, and a basic summary of the proposed research methods (surveys and/or interviews) to answer those questions. As part of this assignment, students will also fill out (but not submit) an IRB application. We will discuss this project throughout the semester and more specific guidelines will be provided.

Class and University Policies

Contacting Me: The easiest way to get in touch is via email. Please feel free to send me an email at any time during the semester if you have any questions, comments, or concerns. Please use your GMU email account, and be sure to include your name in all emails and indicate the course number in the subject line so they do not get confused for spam. Your emails should be written in a professional manner. I will not respond to any emails that do not follow these guidelines. In addition to email, we can meet in-person or virtually. I will hold office hours shortly after our class meets, during which you should feel free to stop by. If this doesn't fit your schedule, do not hesitate to email me to set up a meeting either virtually or in-person.

Make-up Policy: If you have a legitimate, excused reason for missing an assignment, please let me know as soon as possible so we can make alternative arrangements.

Discussion Etiquette: We will be discussing many issues in this class that may be controversial and emotional. I discussion and debate. However, rudeness and hostility will not be tolerated. Remember to be critical of arguments, not the individuals making those arguments. We can and will discuss opposing viewpoints and perspectives respectfully.

Safe Return to Campus: All students taking courses with a face-to-face component are required to follow the university's public health and safety precautions and procedures outlined on the university Safe Return to Campus webpage (<https://www2.gmu.edu/safe-return-campus>). Similarly, all students in face-to-face and hybrid courses must also complete the Mason COVID Health Check daily, seven days a week. The COVID Health Check system uses a color code system **and students will receive either a Green, Yellow, or Red email response.** Only students who receive a "green" notification are permitted to attend courses with a face-to-face component. **If you suspect that you are sick or have been directed to self-isolate, please quarantine or get testing. Faculty are allowed to ask you to show them that you have received a Green email and are thereby permitted to be in class. Further, students** are required to follow Mason's current policy about facemask-wearing. As of August 11, 2021, all community members are required to wear a facemask in all indoor settings, including classrooms. An *appropriate facemask* must cover your nose and mouth at all times in our classroom. If this policy changes, you will be informed; however, students who prefer to wear masks either temporarily or consistently will always be welcome in the classroom.

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty: George Mason University's Honor Code requires all members of this community to maintain the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. Students are expected to abide by the Mason Honor Code, which prohibits lying, cheating, stealing, and plagiarizing (<https://oai.gmu.edu/mason-honor-code/>). Familiarize yourself with this policy and remember your legal fundamentals: Ignorance of the rules is not a valid defense!

Note: Please be sure that the work you submit in this class is your own and that you provide proper citations when referencing another person's **words or ideas.** Instructors are required to report all violations of the Honor Code to the Mason Honor Committee. Violations of the Honor Code may result in a failing grade for the assignment or exam, a failing grade for the course, or any additional penalties determined by the committee, including dismissal from the university.

Disability Accommodations: Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to upholding the letter and spirit of the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. Under the administration of University Life, Disability Services implements and coordinates reasonable accommodations and disability-related services that afford equal access to university programs and activities. Students can begin the registration process with Disability Services at any time during their enrollment at George Mason University. If you are seeking accommodations, please visit <http://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability

Services registration process. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email:ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993-2474

Sexual Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, and Interpersonal Violence: George Mason University is committed to providing an environment that is free from discrimination, sexual misconduct, and other acts of interpersonal violence in order to promote community well-being and student success. We encourage students who believe that they have been sexually harassed, assaulted or subjected to sexual misconduct to seek assistance and support. University Policy 1202: Sexual Harassment and Misconduct speaks to the specifics of Mason's process, the resources, and the options available to students (<https://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/policies/sexual-harassment-policy/>).

As a faculty member, I am designated as a "Non-Confidential Employee," and must report all disclosures of sexual assault, sexual harassment, interpersonal violence, stalking, sexual exploitation, complicity, and retaliation to Mason's Title IX Coordinator per University Policy 1202. If you wish to speak with someone confidentially, please contact one of Mason's confidential resources, such as Student Support and Advocacy Center (SSAC) at 703-993-3686 or Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at 703-993-2380. You may also seek assistance or support measures from Mason's Title IX Coordinator by calling 703-993-8730, or emailing titleix@gmu.edu.

Diversity and Inclusion: I, the CLS department, and GMU seek to create a learning environment that fosters respect for people across identities. We welcome and value individuals and their differences, including gender expression and identity, race, economic status, sex, sexuality, ethnicity, national origin, first language, religion, age and ability. We encourage all members of the learning environment to engage with the material personally, but to also be open to exploring and learning from experiences different than their own. You are encouraged to read the [Mason Non-Discrimination Policy](#) or the [Mason Diversity Statement](#).

Counseling and Psychological Services: If you are facing significant life stressors and feeling overwhelmed, there are resources available to help you. These include Counseling and Psychological Services (703) 993-2380, which provides confidential psychological services, including 24/7 crisis intervention. There is also Student Support (703) 993-5376, which helps students negotiate life situations by connecting them with appropriate resources. Student Support also has an on-line referral system (for non-emergencies only): <https://ssac.gmu.edu/>. The non-emergency number for the GMU police is (703) 993-2810. See <https://ulife.gmu.edu/about-us/offices-of-university-life/> for a full listing of service areas and contact information.

The Writing Center and Mason Library: The Writing Center at Mason (<https://writingcenter.gmu.edu>) is a fantastic and free resource providing information and one-on-one tutoring for all your writing needs. While I will provide feedback on your written work, consider the Writing Center if you need more intensive assistance before submitting assignments with any part of the writing process, from planning and organizing your paper to proof-reading and revising. Their website also has guides on best practices for reading, note-taking, and citing sources. Mason Library also has excellent tutorials on writing, reading, note-taking, giving presentations, time management, and academic integrity. See <https://library.gmu.edu/tutorials> for a full list.

Purde OWL: Purdue University's Online Writing Lab is a great resource for tips on writing and citations. In particular, if you are unsure of how to cite materials in your work, be sure to check their website, which is available at https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html.

Class Schedule

Notes:

- “Textbook” denotes Norris et al., *When Justice Fails* (see details on first page of syllabus)
- Class schedule is subject to change. I will notify you of any changes via Blackboard

Week	Class Dates	Topic(s)	Required Readings/Materials
1	Aug. 26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductions and Overview • Reviewing the criminal legal process • Thinking ahead about research: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sources • Questions • Ethics 	
2	Sept. 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What we know (and don’t know) about wrongful convictions • Aggregate opinion on criminal justice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norris et al., “Thirty years of innocence” • Zalman & Norris, “Measuring innocence” • Pickett, “Public Opinion and Criminal Justice Policy”
3	Sept. 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social and political context of criminal justice and wrongful convictions • Race, ideology, and public opinion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WJF 2e., Ch. 2 • Duru, “The Central Park Five, The Scottsboro Boys, and the Myth of the Bestial Black Man” • Unnever, “Two Words Far Apart” • Enns & Ramirez, “Privatizing Punishment”
4	Sept. 16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The police role in wrongful convictions • Public attitudes toward police 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Textbook</i>, Chs. 2-3 • Mullinix & Norris, “Pulled-Over Rates” • Mullinix et al., “The Feedback Effects of Controversial Police Use of Force”
5	Sept. 23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forensic issues and wrongful convictions • Public perceptions of forensic science 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Textbook</i>, Chs. 4 • Machado & Silva, “What influences public views of forensic DNA testing in the criminal field?” • Kaplan et al., “Public beliefs about the accuracy and importance of forensic evidence”
6	Sept. 30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal actors and wrongful convictions • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Textbook</i>, Chs. 6-7 • Nelson, “Responsive Justice?” • Wright, “Public Defender Elections and Popular Control over Criminal Justice”

7	Oct. 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pleas and plea bargaining 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bibas, “Plea Bargaining’s Role in Wrongful Convictions” • Redlich et al., “Self-Reported False Confessions and False Guilty Pleas among Offenders with Mental Illness” • Johnson, “Public Perceptions of Plea Bargaining”
8	Oct. 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological biases and decision-making • Motivated reasoning • Behavioral ethics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • O’Brien & Findley, “Psychological Perspectives” • Bazerman & Gino, “Behavioral Ethics” • Bolsen et al., “The Influence of Partisan Motivated Reasoning on Public Opinion”
9	Oct. 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discovering and overturning wrongful convictions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Textbook</i>, Ch. 9 • Brooks et al., “If Hindsight is 20/20” • Calvin et al., “On the Relationship between Public Opinion and Decision Making in the U.S. Court of Appeals”
10	Oct. 28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aftermath of exonerations and compensation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Textbook</i>, Ch. 10 • Blandisi et al., “Public Perceptions of the Stigmatization of Wrongly Convicted Individuals” • Karaffa et al., “Perceptions of Exonerees’ Deservingness”
11	Nov. 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The “Circle of Harm” (Original crime victims & true perpetrators) • Framing theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Textbook</i>, Ch. 11 • Chong & Druckman, “Framing Theory” • Shachar, “Criminal Justice or Public Health”
12	Nov. 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrongful convictions and the death penalty • Public opinion on capital punishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bobo & Johnson, “A Taste for Punishment” • Peffley & Hurwitz, “Persuasion and Resistance” • Sarat et al., “The Rhetoric of Abolition” • Norris & Mullinix, “Framing Innocence”
13	Nov. 18	NO CLASS MEETING – TRAVELING FOR ASC CONFERENCE WORK ON RESEARCH PROPOSAL	
14	Nov. 25	NO CLASS – UNIVERSITY CLOSED FOR THANKSGIVING BREAK	
15	Dec. 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catch-up and wrap-up 	

Scheduled Final Exam: Thursday, Dec. 9, 10:30-1:10

NOTE: There is **no final exam** for this class. Instead, this is the **due date** for your final project.