Syllabus, Eco 499, Economics of Crime
MW 2:00pm-3:30pm, B&E room 306

Course description: This course uses economic theory and empirical methods to study the issue of crime and punishment. Traditional scholarly research in this area was done by criminologists or sociologists, who might focus on the deviant psychology of the criminal mind or the social forces that would drive someone to crime. Economists differ in focus when they discuss crime: we view most crime as utility-maximizing decisions made in response to incentives. As these incentives can be altered (say, by hiring more police, or expanding use of the death penalty), presumably crime is responsive to public policy. In some cases, economic theory will be the appropriate tool to analyze crime policy (for example, economists worry about bad incentives coming from three strikes laws), but more often, we will use empirical methods to measure how responsive crime is to different policy options.

Contact info: My name is Jeremy Sandford, and I am an assistant professor in the economics department at UK. Please call me Jeremy if you are comfortable doing so, otherwise Dr./Prof. Sandford is fine. My email address is jeremy.sandford@uky.edu. My website is jasandford.com. It has a detailed schedule, which I will update after each class, and information on homeworks and other assignments.

Office meetings: I will have regular office hours from 12:30-1:30pm each Tuesday and Thursday. Additionally, I am often in my office during business hours, so you may stop by outside of office hours with a quick question. If you have a more involved question, please email me to set up an appointment (or come during office hours).

Readings: We will read roughly 15 academic journal articles, most published in economics journals, and a few from other disciplines such as law or criminology. For the most part, I choose the papers we discuss according to two criteria: I- the paper is relevant and interesting, II- the paper is sufficiently short and simple that I feel undergraduate economics majors are capable of absorbing at least most of its information.

When we discuss academic journal articles, I expect the following:

- You have read and taken notes on the complete article prior to class.
- You are capable of answering basic questions, both on a quiz and during class discussion, regarding the motivation, results, methods, and data of the paper.
- You have put some thought into the paper, and have some idea of what you don’t understand, how it fits with other papers we’ve read, whether you agree or not with its methods or conclusions, and so on.

Additionally, I will also assign about a dozen popular press articles, from sources such as The Atlantic, The New York Times, and various blogs. About 3-4 classes will be devoted to discussing these articles. Since such articles will be easy for all students to understand, my expectations are correspondingly higher for what you be able to retain going into class, and for your contributions to the class discussion. Specifically, on days which we discuss popular press articles, I expect the following:
• You are able to summarize the complete article in a few sentences, and answer basic questions about its content.

• For articles presenting a certain point of view, you should have formed an opinion about whether or not you agree with the point of view, and be prepared to defend your stance.

• Since many popular press articles give only a partial view of a subject, you should have formed some impression of what other viewpoints would be reasonable and what the relative merits of those viewpoints are.

Finally, as the course will have a significant empirical component, I strongly urge you to consult online or paper econometrics sources. One option would be to purchase a cheap econometrics book. One particularly good undergraduate econometrics text is "Introductory econometrics: A modern approach" by Jeffrey Woodridge. Older editions of the Wooldridge text can be purchased for only a few dollars on amazon.com.

**Assessment**: Course grades will be determined by a weighting of reading quizzes (10% total), homework assignments (20%), an in-class presentation (10%), a research paper (20%), my assessment of your attendance, participation, and effort towards the class (20%), a midterm exam (10%), and a final exam (10%).

**Reading quizzes**: To incentivize reading papers, I will have an unspecified number of “reading quizzes,” which will generally test basic knowledge of papers assigned for the day of the quiz. You may use written notes to complete these quizzes, but not the papers themselves. Reading quizzes will test knowledge of each paper’s main points, ideas, data, and results. Even if you are puzzled by aspects of an assigned paper, you should do your best to prepare for a reading quiz on the day we discuss that paper.

**Homework**: There will be 3-4 graded homework assignments. Some will ask you about specific papers, while some will ask you to complete simple empirical exercises. Students may work together on homeworks, but each student should turn in his own work, and no two assignments should be substantiative identical. To be clear, if two students work together, and so their answers are qualitatively identical, with similar structure, this is fine. Any text appearing verbatim on both students’ answers is not fine, and will, at a minimum, result in a grade of 0 for the assignment.

**Class presentation**: Students will be assigned in pairs to a policy debate regarding an aspect of crime policy. Immediately before the presentations, each student will randomly be assigned to one side of the issue. You must thus prepare to argue both sides. The purpose of this uncertainty is to incentivize you to research both sides’ strong points, which I believe is essential to a good presentation. Each student should plan on speaking for about 10-12 minutes. After both students present, each student will have a chance to ask questions of the other, and I and the rest of the class will also ask follow up questions. More detailed information on the presentations, including a schedule, will follow. General topics for the debates include the death penalty, Internet gambling, illegality of prostitution and drugs, US prison policy, the importance of 4th amendment protections, and the relationship between social policy and crime. Grading for the presentation will be based on the effectiveness of your arguments, how ably you respond to questions, and my assessment of how thoroughly you have prepared.
Research paper: You will complete a research paper on a topic of your choice. If you are interested in a topic covered in class, you may cover it in (much) greater detail in your paper. You may also pursue a topic related to the economics of crime that is not covered in class. Good papers may be either normative (advocating a particular position) or positive (describing an issue). The paper assignment will be discussed in greater detail early in the semester.

Exams: There will be a midterm exam. The final exam is scheduled by the university for Thursday, December 19th at 8am. The final exam will be comprehensive, and will ask you both basic recall questions regarding the papers and topics we have studied and essay-based questions asking you to tie together recurring themes from across the semester. Issues raised in student presentations may appear on the final exam.

Class participation and attendance: Attendance at all classes is required, and will enter into a student’s final grade directly. Moreover, I expect students to actively participate in class discussions. As this is a “senior seminar” class, and not a class on economic theory, I expect students to read required readings in advance, and come prepared to contribute to class discussion by asking questions, answering questions I pose, or by making any intelligent comments whatsoever. I will not give a high grade to a student who frequently misses class, and I reserve the right to determine the grades of marginal students based on quality of participation.

Late work: While I am willing to accommodate reasonable requests for extra time on assignments, work turned in after the deadline given will receive a grade penalty at my discretion, with the penalty being any amount up to and including 100%. If a student must miss a class on which an assignment is due, including for an excused absence, that student must arrange for an alternate means of turning in the assignment on time.

Academic dishonesty: Plagiarizing even a small part of a research paper is a serious violation of university policy and it is my responsibility to the university to pursue any such cases. I will seek to impose the maximum penalty allowed under university guidelines should I become aware of a student who has committed academic dishonesty. In the case of plagiarizing any part of a paper, this would most likely be a grade of XE in the course.

Students with disabilities: If you have a documented disability and need an accommodation, please make arrangements with me during the first week of the term. Please request that the counselor for students with disabilities send me a letter verifying your disability.

Topics Covered

Crime trends of the last 60 years

- Levitt, Steven (2004), “Understanding why crime fell in the 1990’s: Four factors that explain the decline, and six that do not,” Journal of Economic Perspectives, 18(1), 163-190
- “Cracked up,” Maia Szalavitz, 5/11/1999, Salon.com
- “America’s real criminal element: Lead,” Kevin Drum, January/February 2013 issue, *Mother Jones*

**The economic model of crime**

- “Thinking about crime,” James Q. Wilson, September 1983 issue, *The Atlantic*

**Demographic determinants of crime**

- “Latino immigrants and crime,” Tyler Cowan, 2/20/2010, Marginal Revolution

**Economic determinants of crime**

- “American murder mystery,” Hanna Rosin, July/August 2008 issue, *The Atlantic*
- “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop,” James Hamilton, 5/1/2007, econbrowser.com

Deterrence: police


• “Police, crime, and the usefulness of economics,” Alex Tabarrok, 12/13/2012, Marginal Revolution

• “Broken windows,” George Kelling and James Q. Wilson, March 1982 issue, *The Atlantic*

**Deterrence: death penalty**


• “The appeal of death row,” Mary Fischer, November 2011 issue, *The Atlantic*

• “The last line of defense,” Raymond Bonner, March 2012 issue, *The Atlantic*

**Deterrence: Incapacitation**


• “Fear without function: Do sex offender registries reduce crime?” Alex Tabarrok, 8/15/2011, marginal Revolution

• “The caging of America,” Adam Gopnik, 1/20/2012, *The New Yorker*


**Guns and gun control**

• “What kind of gun control?”, “Gun control - Posner’s comment” Gary Becker and Richard Posner, 2/20/2011, Becker-Posner blog
• “Can gun control laws be effective,” Becker-Posner blog
• “The case for more guns, and more gun control,” Jeffrey Goldberg, December 2012, The Atlantic
• “More guns, less crime: A dialogue,” Ta-Nehisi Coates and Jeffrey Goldberg, 12/26/2012, The Atlantic
• “There’s little we can do to prevent another massacre,” Megan McArdle, 12/17/2012, The Daily Beast
• “The simple truth about gun control,” Adam Gopnik, 12/20/2012, The New Yorker
• “Carrie Nation at the New Yorker,” Ross Douthat, 12/20/2012, The New York Times

Drugs and drug laws

• “Crime, cocaine, and marijuana,” Tyler Cowan, 1/19/2004, Marginal Revolution
• “Cracked up,” Maia Szalavitz, 5/11/1999, Salon.com
• “Have we lost the war on drugs?” Gary Becker and Kevin Murphy, 1/4/2013, The Wall Street Journal
• “Marijuana use is too risky a choice,” David Frum, 1/7/2013, cnn.com

This is a general reading list pertaining to the topics we study in class. In particular, you should consult it when you are researching topics for your class presentation. I will maintain an updated schedule on my website, jasandford.com, which will list the actual topic on each class day, as well as any additional required readings.