MSc in Criminology and Criminal Justice

Research Design and Data Collection

Michaelmas Term 2016

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Note: This compulsory course runs on Thursdays from 10.00 to 11.30 in Seminar Room G in the Manor Road Building, except for week 6 when the class is divided in two. One group will meet from 10.00-011.30 in Seminar G, and the second 12.00-13.30 in Seminar D.

Students who already have a strong background in Research Methods can request exemption from this course and instead take the Social Explanation and Data Collection course also offered in Michaelmas term. This will need to be approved before the start of Michaelmas term. Students must take one of these courses, and can take both.

Description of the course

How can social scientists working in the field of criminology be sure that their research is valid and that their data are reliable? This course is designed to serve as an introduction to research methods in criminology and criminal justice. It is a compulsory course taken by all students, some of whom will have little or no previous experience with social science research methods. The course begins by examining basic concepts such as causation and correlation, and then proceeds to examine research design issues, including threats to validity. We shall examine different research designs including true randomized experiments, survey research and forms of qualitative research, as well as covering issues such as the process of designed research and ethics. Throughout the option we shall consider research concepts as they apply to specific research projects in criminology and criminal justice. The course will help students become more sophisticated “consumers” of research in criminology by sensitizing them to the strengths and weaknesses of published research. Throughout the course we shall discuss examples of published research.

Course Structure

Week 1: Systematic approaches to research (Julian Roberts)
Week 2: Qualitative research design (Alpa Parmar)
Week 3: Counting crime (Ben Bradford)
Week 4: Establishing causality (Julian Roberts)
Week 5: Survey Design (Ben Bradford and Julian Roberts)
Week 6: Designing Research (Julian Roberts) Note: this session class will be divided
Week 7: Evaluating Published Research (Julian Roberts)
**Assessment**

This course will be assessed by means of an essay of up to 3,000 words in length to be submitted at the end of Michaelmas term.

**Some Background Texts**

Students wishing to read more about research methods in criminology and criminal justice or students with no research background and who plan to go on to higher degrees in criminology might wish to consult one or more of the following texts. Most of these volumes are available in the Social Sciences Library or the Bodleian Law library. We would strongly advise students intending to pursue a career in criminology to purchase one of the following research methods texts for current and future reference.


SEMINAR ONE: Systematic Approaches to Research

Required Readings

Note: The assigned readings comprise (a) general introductory readings; (b) a reading pertaining to the effects of imprisonment. Students should read the general texts first.


Case history: the effects of imprisonment


Optional Reading

Seminar Discussion Questions

1. What are the principal limitations or weaknesses of the research review reported by Bonta and Gendreau? That is, in what way might it be deficient as a guide to the effects of imprisonment? Bonta and Andrews have adopted an exclusively quantitative approach to researching the effects of imprisonment upon prisoners. What specific kinds of qualitative alternatives were/are available to researchers interested in this issue?

2. Is it possible to conduct research on this controversial question without adopting any ideological position regarding imprisonment as an acceptable penal sanction?

3. In a response commentary to the Bonta & Gendreau article (which you have not been asked to read), one of the authors argues that we already know enough about the effects of imprisonment from prison memoirs and related “unscientific” materials. What is your reaction to this assertion?

4. Is there a “burden of proof” issue here, in the sense that researchers are under a burden of proof to disprove, rather than prove, adverse psychological and physical effects of incarceration?

5. Are there any specific issues within the general area of “effects of imprisonment” which are more amenable to one approach to research?

6. Is there any role for interviews with correctional officials – prison officers etc – in a project examining the effects of imprisonment on prisoners?

7. If we accept the conclusions of this article – that the adverse effects of imprisonment have been overstated – what policy lessons should be drawn about the use of custody as a sanction? How do you evaluate the policy lessons or implications drawn by Bonta and Gendreau at the end of their review?

8. Is there any evidence that researchers in the area have let their attitudes towards the use of custody as a sanction influence their research? How might researchers best set aside their personal views – what safeguards can be put in place to ensure that bias does not affect research outcomes?

9. Should researchers adopting a single approach to researching a problem (qualitative or quantitative) add a “health warning” at the end of their article alerting the reader that an alternative approach may yield different research outcomes?
SEMINAR TWO: Qualitative Research

This seminar explores the principles of qualitative research design and consider the question of what makes a good qualitative research study. We will consider some of the fundamental assumptions underpinning qualitative research and why we might choose particular qualitative methods.

Required Readings


Further Reading


Issues for discussion

The philosophical basis of qualitative research
Considerations in designing a study
How to develop good research questions
Validity, reliability and generalizability in qualitative research
What should be the criteria for evaluating qualitative research?
Seminar 3: Counting Crime

In this seminar we shall consider one of the central questions in the field of criminology: how to measure crime. We shall explore the pitfalls of official (i.e., police recorded) statistics and will examine alternative measures of criminal behaviour, including victimization surveys such as the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW) (formerly the British Crime Survey (BCS)). As with other victimization surveys such as the National Crime Victimization Surveys in the US, the CSEW provides an important “check” upon police-recorded crime statistics.

Required Readings


Questions to consider

1. What are the principal advantages and disadvantages associated with measuring crime (and crime trends) by means of a victimization survey such as the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW)? What are the principal critiques of the CSEW noted by Maguire (2012)?

2. What sources of error are likely to be introduced by victimization surveys? That is, what kinds of factors are likely to distort the picture of crime derived from such surveys?

3. In addition to providing a useful “check” upon “official” crime statistics derived from the police, are there any other useful purposes served by victimization surveys such as the CSEW?

4. What does Maguire (2012) conclude about the shapes of crime trends emerging from the CSEW and the official crime statistics?

5. If the crime picture emerging from official (i.e., police-based) statistics is different from that which emerges from victimization surveys, which is likely to be the most accurate (assuming an equivalent period of data coverage)?

6. What are some of the problems of comparing crime rates across different countries/jurisdictions?

7. “Comparing official crime statistics with victimization survey data is like comparing apples and oranges”. How much truth is there to this assertion?

8. If a member of the public asked you to describe recent crime trends in Britain, how would you answer?

9. For which kinds of offences are official crime statistics likely to be most accurate and for which are they likely to be inaccurate?

10. Most offenders appearing in court face multiple charges, often arising from the same criminal “episode”. With respect to compilation of statistics, criminal justice agencies around the world generally use an MSO (most serious offence) rule when compiling crime statistics. This means that only the most serious offence charged enters the statistical database in multiple charge cases. What implications does this have for crime statistics?
SEMINAR Four: Establishing Causality in Research

This seminar will explore the question of causality in research. Establishing causality represents an important challenge for researchers in criminology who are usually unable to randomly assign subjects or experimental units to treatments. We shall discuss correlational, experimental, and quasi-experimental designs, using actual research studies as illustrations, discussing the potential weaknesses of each design.

Required Readings

General Reading:


Research Illustrations


Issues for Discussion

Correlation vs. Causation: how to infer causality in the absence of a true experimental design
Independent and Dependent Variables
The concepts of validity and reliability: which is more important?
Field vs. Laboratory Research Designs
Experimental simulations: what are their limits? Where are they most useful/appropriate?
What does random assignment achieve and when may it not be the most appropriate way to assign subjects to treatments?
This seminar explores survey-based research. After introducing the basic concept of statistical inference, key issues for discussion will be: when and why surveys of populations or particular groups should be used (and when and why they should not); sampling and sample design; question design; and dealing with non-response.

**Required Readings**


**Additional Readings**


**Issues for discussion**

Developing research hypotheses

Defining concepts

Matching questions to concepts

Developing question sets

Validity, reliability and generalizability

Interpreting the results of surveys
Seminar Six: Designing Research in Criminology

The goal of this seminar is to develop students’ ability to design good research. We shall start by considering some general hypotheses or research questions, and then move to consider specific research designs, potential threats to validity etc. In the seminar we shall collectively design some research studies addressing two or possibly three research questions. This seminar will examine some of the key issues that need to be considered when different methods are employed in one study. What does it mean to ‘mix’ methods? What are the strengths of bringing qualitative and quantitative methods together, and what are some of the challenges that researchers might face? In this seminar we will critically examine some examples of mixed methods research in criminology and consider how these studies have ‘made sense’ of data generated by different strategies.

Readings


Further Reading


Issues for Discussion

How to develop good research questions
How to identify appropriate independent and dependent variables
How to select the appropriate research design
How to address relevant threats to validity
What kinds of conclusions to draw from the data
SEMINAR Seven: Evaluating Published Research

Researchers often make claims about their research that are not supported by the actual data. The purpose of this seminar is to hone students’ evaluative skills by critically examining two published research articles in criminal justice. We shall discuss these articles carefully with a view to establishing the weaknesses of the research: has the author proven what he or she claims to have proved? What alternative explanations may exist for the research findings? Have all relevant threats to validity been addressed or at least considered? As was the case in the first week’s readings, texts this week comprise some general material, and then the specific articles to be critiqued. We will the two articles (Stevens; Zinger) in class.

Readings

General


Article to Critique