Mass Incarceration in the United States

Reed College | Spring 2026

General Information

Instructor: Professor Jasmine English (jasenglish@reed.edu)
Course Website: https://moodle.reed.edu/course/view.php?id=6636
Class Sessions: Wed 6:10-9pm, Eliot 414
Office hours: Tu 3-5pm, Vollum 130 (sign-up link/link on Moodle) or email me

Course Description

This seminar examines mass incarceration as a defining political institution in the United States. We will trace the historical roots of the carceral state, analyze its expansion through policing, courts, prisons, and surveillance, and examine its political and social consequences for individuals, families, and communities. The course also situates U.S. incarceration in comparative perspective and considers contemporary reform efforts, technological developments, and future directions. Throughout the semester, we will engage with scholarship from political science, sociology, law, and history, while also incorporating journalism, documentary film, first-person testimony, and guest speakers.

Course Goals

This seminar aims to provide a critical understanding of the criminal justice system in the United States. By the end of the semester, you will have a strong substantive knowledge on this topic suitable for advanced work through an honors thesis, graduate school, or a career. This seminar will also teach you to assess the role of data in the development of arguments and to engage with these arguments in research and writing. In other words, this seminar aims to help you grow as a social scientist.

By the end of the semester, you will be able to:

- Describe key institutions and concepts related to mass incarceration in the United States.
- Apply social science theories to analyze issues related to punishment, policing, and inequality.
- Communicate insights about the carceral state clearly and persuasively in multiple formats.

Assessments

Your grade will be based on five components: weekly memos (15%), discussion leadership (15%), final exam (15%), final project (30%), participation (30%).

- **Weekly Memo (15%):** Each week, you will submit a memo on the assigned readings before class. Memos should be approximately 200-300 words and connect readings to current events, may pose questions, clarify confusing concepts, or reflect on how the material relates to earlier weeks. The purpose of the memos is to practice active engagement and to guide class discussion. I encourage you to print your memos and bring them to class. Submit your memos on Moodle by **Wednesday at 1:00 p.m.** You may **skip two memos** during the semester.
- **Discussion Leadership (10%):** Each week, a group of 2–3 students will open class with a brief (5-7 min) review of the assigned readings. These discussions are not meant to summarize every article, but rather to identify the core questions, concepts, or tensions that run across the week's readings and to pose two or three discussion questions for the class. You will participate in this role once during the semester. To support preparation and coordination, you will email me a brief plan for discussion (e.g., a short outline or set of guiding questions) by **Tuesday at 10:00 p.m.** The discussion leadership sign-up link is on Moodle.

- **Final Exam (15%):** The final exam is a closed-book, in-class blue book exam held during the final class session. It includes short-answer questions and longer analytical responses designed to assess understanding, synthesis, and argumentation rather than memorization.
- **Final Project (30%):** In lieu of a traditional term paper, you will complete an open-ended final project that allows you to engage the course material in a format of you choosing. Projects may take the form of a research paper, podcast, photographic or visual essay, interview-based analysis, comparative analysis of punishment systems, policy report, or another format approved by me. To support project development and avoid last-minute difficulties, you will meet with me in the middle of the semester (Weeks 6-8). We'll also hold two small-group conferences (in Weeks 6 and 9), where you will present your progress for feedback. The final project is due on **Sunday, May 10**.
- **Participation (30%):** Because this is a discussion-based seminar, active and engaged participation is essential to your learning and the success of the course. Participation includes completing assigned readings before class, contributing thoughtfully to discussion, engaging with activities and guest speakers, and listening respectfully to others.

Guest Speakers
We will host several guest speakers, including journalists, lawyers, scholars, and practitioners working in and around the carceral state. Our speakers will typically join for the final hour of class. These visits are intended to connect the theoretical and empirical material with how punishment operates in practice. Students are expected to **participate actively and respectfully** in discussion and Q&A. Scheduled guests: Wilson Criscione (*InvestigateWest*); David Register (Bard Prison Initiative); Clara Butler (Metropolitan Public Defender Office); Lori Coppenroth (DLR Architecture Group).

Four-Week Assessments
At the four-week mark, you'll receive a short (3-4 sentence) note from me describing whether you are meeting course expectations. This is a chance to check in on how things are going. I'm happy to meet with you then—or anytime during the semester—to talk about your progress.

Attendance Policy
Success in this course depends on participation because much of our learning happens through discussion. That said, I understand that on occasion it is necessary to miss class due to illness, family emergency, or other obligations. If you must miss class, you should submit a longer written reflection (500–600 words) on the readings by **Friday at 10pm** during the week of the missed class. If you miss **more than two** classes, your participation grade will be penalized.[1]

Technology Policy
Research suggests that handwritten notes improve learning and retention (Mueller & Oppenheimer 2014). As such, laptops are **not permitted** in class. If you have an accommodation or need to use electronics, please contact me.

Accommodations
Your experience in this class matters to me and I am committed to creating a learning experience that is accessible and inclusive. If you've arranged accommodations with Disability & Accessibility Resources (DAR), please let me know so we can work together to meet your needs. If you think you

[1] Exceptions will be made for emergency leaves of absence (processed by the Student Life Office).

might benefit from accommodations, please be in touch with DAR (www.reed.edu/disability-resources). Reed also offers financial, medical, and mental health resources. The Student Support Office Care Team can connect you with these resources (careteam@reed.edu).

Academic Integrity
Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this course. You should never take credit for words or ideas that are not your own, and you must give your readers enough information to evaluate the source and quality of your evidence. If you're not sure if something counts as plagiarism, **ask me!** It's better to have a conversation than make an avoidable mistake.

Getting Help
There are many ways to get help in this course. First, come to my **office hours** (Tu 3-5pm) early and often! You can sign up using the link at the top of the syllabus or on Moodle. If those times don't work, feel free to email me to set up an alternative (in person or on Zoom). Second, Reed **Academic Support** can help with study habits, note-taking, time management strategies, and free tutoring. For more info, see www.reed.edu/academic_support or email academic-support@reed.edu.

Names and Pronouns
You can change how your name shows up on class rosters. This option is helpful for various students, including but not limited to: students who abbreviate their first name, students who use their middle name, international students, and trans students. We will take time during our first class together to do introductions, at which point you can share your name and pronouns. If these change during the semester, please let me know.

Course Schedule

Week 1 – Introduction: Punishment, Democracy, and the Carceral State (1/28)
This week introduces the course's core questions: how punishment operates as a political institution, how mass incarceration reshapes democracy, and how scholars study the carceral state.

- Gottschalk, Marie. 2006. *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1.
- Lerman, Amy E., and Vesla M. Weaver. 2010. "The Political Consequences of the Carceral State." *American Political Science Review* 104(4): 817–833.
- Forman, James Jr. 2011. "Harm's Way." *Boston Review*.
- Hoover, Amelia. 2013. *How to Read Political Science: A Guide in Four Steps*. Drexel University.

Optional Materials

- The Marshall Project. "Welcome to the Zo" (3 short videos)

Week 2 – Historical Origins of the Carceral State (2/4)
We trace the racial and political foundations of American punishment, focusing on crime, race, and state-building in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

- Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. 2010. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Harvard University Press. Intro, Chapter 2.
- Gottschalk, Marie. 2006. *The Prison and the Gallows*. Chapter 8.
- Hinton, Elizabeth, and DeAnza Cook. 2021. "The Mass Criminalization of Black Americans: A Historical Overview." Annual Review of Criminology 4 (1): 261–286.

Optional Materials

- PBS. *Slavery by Another Name* (documentary)

Week 3 – Mass Incarceration's Rise: Policy & the Crime Wave Narrative, 1960s–1990s (2/11)
We examine how bipartisan politics, public opinion, and policy responses to crime produced unprecedented levels of incarceration. **Class Visit: Wilson Criscione, Journalist at Investigate West (investigative reporting on criminal justice, prison abuse).**

- Hinton, Elizabeth. 2016. *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Introduction, Chapter 1.
- Enns, Peter K. 2016. "The Public's Increasing Punitiveness and Its Influence on Mass Incarceration in the United States." *American Journal of Political Science* 60(4): 857–872.
- Baumgartner, Frank R., et al. 2021. "Throwing Away the Key: The Unintended Consequences of "Tough-on-Crime" Laws." *Perspectives on Politics* 19 (4) 1233-1246.

Optional Materials

- President Ronald Reagan, Radio Address on Crime from Camp David (September 11, 1982).
- *Justice in America* podcast, Episode 9. "How Democrats and Republicans Created Mass Incarceration"

Week 4 – Policing, Surveillance, and Social Control (2/18)
We examine policing as a form of governance and its everyday political consequences for highly surveilled communities.

- Soss, Joe, and Vesla Weaver. 2017. "Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race–Class Subjugated Communities." *Annual Review of Political Science*
- Weaver, Vesla M., et al. "Too Much Knowledge, Too Little Power: Political Knowledge in Highly Policed Communities." *Journal of Politics* 81(3)

- Brayne, Sarah. 2014. "Surveillance and System Avoidance: Criminal Justice Contact and Institutional Attachment." *American Sociological Review* 79(3): 367–391.
- Shoub, Kelsey. 2025. "Driving While Different." *Journal of Politics* 87(1):371-375

Optional Materials

- *Justice in America* podcast, Episode 23: "Criminalizing Mothers."

Week 5 – Courts and Sentencing (2/25)

We examine how inequality is produced through bail, judicial discretion, and misdemeanor justice, focusing on how the legal system shapes outcomes across race, class, and status. **Class Visit: Clara Butler, Staff Attorney @ Metropolitan Public Defender.**

- Page, Jacob, and Christine Scott-Hayward. 2022. "Bail and Pretrial Justice in the United States: A Field of Possibility." *Annual Review of Criminology* 5: 131–149.
- Harris, Allison P., and Maya Sen. 2026. "How Judges' Professional Experience Impacts Case Outcomes." *Journal of Politics*.
- Mendelberg, Tali, et al. "The Shadow Carceral State and Racial Inequality in Turnout." *British Journal of Political Science*. 2024.
- Harris, Allison. 2023. "Can Racial Diversity among Judges Affect Sentencing Outcomes?" *American Political Science Review*.

Optional Materials

- Court Listening Project: Selected Stories.
- A Musical Indictment of the Cash-Bail System, The New Yorker Documentary

[WEEKS 6-8: Meet with me about final projects]

Week 6 – Prisons as Political Institutions (3/4)

This week treats prisons as political organizations embedded in local economies, legal systems, and governance structures. **We will use the last section of class for our first final project conference.**

- Gottschalk, Marie. 2006. *The Prison and the Gallows*. Chapter 7.
- Thorpe, Rebecca. 2015. "Perverse Politics: The Persistence of Mass Imprisonment in the Twenty-First Century." *Perspectives on Politics* 13(2): 390–410.
- Gunderson, Anna. 2020. "Why Do States Privatize Their Prisons?" *Perspectives on Politics* 18(3): 777–795.
- Skarbek, David. Covenants without the Sword? Comparing Prison Self-Governance Globally. *American Political Science Review*. 2016;110(4):845-862.

Optional Materials

- *Ear Hustle* podcast ("Cellies" and/or "Dirty Water")
- Explore the American Prison Writing Archive

Week 7 – Collateral Consequences: Citizenship and Voting (3/11)

We explore how contact with the criminal justice system shapes political participation, civic identity, and democratic inclusion. **Students who attend Chiara Packard's 4:15pm research talk and submit a 2-3 page reflection can waive three memos. Your reflection should connect the talk to course themes.**

- White, Ariel R. 2022. "Political Participation Amid Mass Incarceration." *Annual Review of Political Science* 25: 195–214.
- White, Ariel. Misdemeanor Disenfranchisement? The Demobilizing Effects of Brief Jail Spells on Potential Voters. *American Political Science Review*. 2019; 113(2):311-324.

- Walker, Hannah L. "Extending the Effects of the Carceral State." *Political Research Quarterly*.
- Owens, Michael Leo, and Hannah L. Walker. "The Civic Voluntarism of 'Custodial Citizens': Involuntary Criminal Justice Contact, Associational Life, and Political Participation." *Perspectives on Politics*. 16, no. 4 (2018): 990–1013.

Optional Materials

- *Justice in America* podcast, Episode 5. "Excluded from Democracy"
- Niskanen Center, "How Overpoliced Communities Become Politically Engaged" (podcast)

Week 8 – Collateral Consequences: Spotlight on Education (3/18)

We focus on the intersection between educational spaces, discipline, and surveillance. With **David Register of the Bard Prison Initiative**, we also consider the democratic possibilities of education inside carceral institutions.

- Mittleman, Joel. "A Downward Spiral? Childhood Suspension and the Path to Juvenile Arrest." *Sociology of Education*, vol. 91, no. 3, 2018, 183–204.
- Owens, Jayanti. 2022. Double Jeopardy: Teacher Biases, Racialized Organizations, and the Production of Racial/Ethnic Disparities in School Discipline. *American Sociological Review*, 87(6), 1007-1048.
- Haskins, Anna, & Jacobsen, Wade. (2017). Schools as Surveilling Institutions? Paternal Incarceration, System Avoidance, and Parental Involvement in Schooling. *American Sociological Review*, 82(4), 657-684.
- Miller, Joshua. "Democracy and Education Behind Bars." *Perspectives on Politics*.
- "College Behind Bars" Documentary, Part 1.

Optional Materials

- "College Behind Bars" Documentary, Parts 2-4
- "Higher Education Is Undergoing a Revolution. It's Happening Behind Bars." NYT. 2023.

[SPRING BREAK]

Week 9 – Collateral Consequences: Ripple Effects (4/1)

This week broadens the lens to examine the collateral consequences of criminal justice involvement, focusing on low-level policing, historical perspectives, welfare state, and spillover effects on families and labor markets. **We'll use the last section of class for our second final project conference.**

- Morris, Kevin and Jonathan Ben-Menachem. Ticketing and Turnout: The Participatory Consequences of Low-Level Police Contact. *American Political Science Review*. 2022
- Komisarchik, Mayya, Maya Sen, and Yamil R. Vélez. 2022. "The Political Consequences of Ethnically Targeted Incarceration: Evidence from Japanese American Internment during World War II." *Journal of Politics* 83(1): 18–32.
- Katzenstein, Mary Fainsod, and Maureen Waller. 2015. "Taxing the Poor: Incarceration, Poverty Governance, and the Seizure of Family Resources." *Perspectives on Politics* 13(2)
- Pager, Devah (2003). "The Mark of a Criminal Record." American Journal of Sociology.

Optional Materials

- Marshall Project. "How Incarcerated Parents Are Losing Their Children Forever."
- Marshall Project. "How Criminal Records Hold Back Millions of People."

Week 10 – Immigration, Detention, and the Carceral State (4/8)

This week examines the convergence of immigration enforcement and criminal punishment, focusing on how policing, detention, and deportation have become integrated into the broader carceral state.

- Walker, Hannah L., et al. "The Ripple Effect." *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*.
- Armenta, Amada. 2016. "Racializing Crimmigration: Structural Racism, Colorblindness, and the Institutional Production of Immigrant Criminality." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 82-95.
- Wong, Tom K., and Shklayan. "Interior Immigration Enforcement." *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*. 2024. 1-21.
- White, Ariel R. 2016. "When Threat Mobilizes." *Political Behavior* 38(2):355-382

Optional Materials

- Higher Ed Pods: Adam Goodman, "The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants" (Princeton UP, 2020)
- "How Trump Radicalized ICE." The Atlantic.
- *Justice in America* podcast, Episode 8. "Crimmigration."

Week 11 – Comparative Perspectives: Incarceration Across Countries (4/15)

We situate the US carceral state in comparative perspective, using cross-national evidence to examine variation in punishment and incarceration. **Class visit: Lori Coppenroth, DLR Group (Scandinavian architectural design principles to improve criminal justice system)**

- Clegg, John, et al. "Punishment in Modern Societies: The Prevalence and Causes of Incarceration Around the World." *Annual Review of Criminology*. 2024.
- Hyatt, Jordan, et al. "'We Can Actually Do This': Adapting Scandinavian Correctional Culture in Pennsylvania." *American Criminal Law Review*. 2021.
- Tonry, Michael. "How and Why Western Europe Avoided Mass Incarceration." *Crime and Justice*. 54. 2025.
- Nanes, Matthew. "Dominant Group Backlash?" *Journal of Peace Research*.

Optional Materials

- "Northern Ireland's Police Transformation May Hold Lessons for U.S." The Conversation.
- "Rethinking The Prison Environment: Pennsylvania's experience with piloting Scandinavia-inspired prison reform." Vital City.

Week 12 – Future Directions: Technology, Prediction, Decarceration (4/22)

We conclude by examining reform, resistance, and the future of the carceral state, focusing on emerging technologies, predictive governance, and possibilities for decarceration

- Murakawa, Naomi. 2020. "Mass Incarceration Is Dead, Long Live the Carceral State." *Tulsa Law Review*.
- Beckett, Katherine. 2018. "The Politics, Promise, and Peril of Criminal Justice Reform." *Annual Review of Criminology*.
- Brayne, Sarah. 2017. "Big Data Surveillance." *American Sociological Review*.
- Angwin, Julia. "Machine Bias." *ProPublica*.

Optional Materials

- Brayne, Sarah. "I'm a Sociologist Who Studies How Police Use Data. Relying on Algorithms Can Further Bias and Inequality—But It Doesn't Have to Be That Way." Business Insider.
- Marshall Project. "After George Floyd's Murder, Police Reforms Are Slow-Paced." 2023.

Week 13 – Final Exam (4/29)

Final Project Due (5/10)