

Contemporary Criminological Theory (CRIJ 5303)

Term: Fall 2026

Course Dates: August 24, 2026 – December 6, 2026

Professor: Dr. Jennifer Wooldridge

Course Times: Online

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Office Hours: Tuesday/Thursday 11:00am-12:30pm & by appointment

Course Overview

Criminological theories have strong roots in sociological and psychological backgrounds, and aim to explain why individuals engage in or choose not to engage in criminal behaviors. In this class, we are going to review the foundational theories that help to build the field of criminological research, but we won't stop there. To have a firm understanding of all criminological theories we must move into modern and contemporary theories as well. During this class, students will be expected to evaluate and critique major theories for their empirical validity, parsimony, scope and applicability. As this course is part of the core for the Criminal Justice Master's Degree Program, students are expected to retain course information throughout their time in the program as these theories extend their reach into all courses within the discipline.

Student Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing this course you will be able to:

- Explain and evaluate key criminological theories, both foundational and contemporary.
- Apply theoretical frameworks to analyze and critique current crime policies.
- Compare and assess theories based on development, typology, parsimony, scope, and validity.
- Develop and integrate theoretical models to inform criminal justice reform.

Required Textbooks and Readings

- **Primary Textbook:** Akers, R.L., Sellers, C.S. & Jennings, W.G. (2016). *Criminological Theories: Introduction, Evaluation, and Application*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. (ISBN: 9780190455163). **Required.**
 - An older version of this textbook is available for free through the UT Tyler website: [ProQuest Ebook Central - Book Details](#)
- **Additional Readings:** Throughout the semester, you will encounter insightful readings assigned and posted on Canvas.
- **Total Course Cost:** \$0 (if you use the free library textbook option)

Course Structure

This course is being taught in an asynchronous, online format. Each week, you will watch a series of short micro-lectures on the weekly themes. These will be in the 10-15 minute range and are meant to be a supplement to the various readings and instructional resources provided on Canvas. In addition to a weekly assignment you will also participate in discussion boards with your classmates. Students may work ahead on material if they desire, but there will be weekly due dates for the assigned materials.

Tips for Success in this Course

1. **Participate.** I invite you to engage deeply, ask questions, and talk about the course content with your classmates. You can learn a great deal from discussing ideas and perspectives with your peers and professor. Participation can also help you articulate your thoughts and develop critical thinking skills.
2. **Manage your time.** I get it—students usually juggle a lot, and I know you've got commitments beyond this class. Still, doing your best often means carving out enough dedicated time for coursework. Try scheduling specific blocks of time and ensure you have enough room to finish assignments, allowing extra space for any tech issues that might pop up.
3. **Login regularly.** I recommend that you log in to Canvas several times a week to view announcements, discussion posts and replies to your posts.
4. **Do not fall behind.** This class moves at a quick pace and each week builds on the previous class content. If you feel you are starting to fall behind, check in with the instructor as soon as possible so we can troubleshoot together. It will be hard to keep up with the course content if you fall behind in the pre-work or post-work.
5. **Use Canvas notification settings.** Pro tip! Canvas can ensure you receive timely notifications in your email or via text. Be sure to enable notifications to be sent instantly or daily. ([Canvas Notification Guide](#))
6. **Ask for help if needed.** If you are struggling with a course concept, reach out to me and your classmates for support.

Graded Course Requirements Information

Micro-Lecture Homework Assignments (130 points)

Each week, students will complete micro-lecture activities that include short video response questions, comprehension checks, and low-stakes homework reflections. These assignments are designed to reinforce key ideas from the week's lecture material and build foundational knowledge for more complex policy analysis. Each week's micro-lecture assignments are worth 10 points total.

Final Paper Project (185 pts)

This semester, you complete a step-wise series of assignments working toward the completion of an applied theoretical case study. This semester you will either compare or contrast two theories as they apply to a real life criminal justice event, such as a high-profile murder or other large scale case.

Applied Assignments (190 points)

Each week, students will complete a short (2–3 page) applied assignment worth between 10 and 20 points. These assignments challenge students to synthesize readings, lectures, and policy frameworks to analyze major issues in drug criminalization, enforcement, and reform. Assignments may include policy critiques, legal analysis, or response plans to contemporary issues. Guidelines and prompts are already under the week's modules

Plagiarism Tutorial (20 points)

At the beginning of the semester, students must complete the tutorial on plagiarism and submit their completion certificate via Canvas in Module 1.

Grading Structure

Assignment	Points
Micro-Lecture Quizzes	130 pts
Online Activities	190 pts
Final Paper Project	185 pts
Plagiarism Tutorial	20 pts
Total	525 pts

Grading Scale

- A - (525 - 472)
- B - (471.5 – 420)
- C - (419.5 – 353)
- D - (352.5 – 315)
- F - (341.5 – below)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use:

UT Tyler is committed to exploring and using artificial intelligence (AI) tools as appropriate for the discipline and task undertaken. We encourage discussing AI tools' ethical, societal, philosophical, and disciplinary implications. All uses of AI should be acknowledged as this aligns with our commitment to honor and integrity, as noted in UT Tyler's Honor Code. Faculty and students must not use protected information, data, or copyrighted materials when using any AI tool. Additionally, users should be aware that AI tools rely on predictive models to generate content that may appear correct but is sometimes shown to be incomplete, inaccurate, taken without attribution from other sources, and/or biased.

Consequently, an AI tool should not be considered a substitute for traditional approaches to research. You are ultimately responsible for the quality and content of the information you submit. Misusing AI tools that violate the guidelines specified for this course (see below) is considered a breach of academic integrity. The student will be



subject to disciplinary actions as outlined in UT Tyler's Academic Integrity Policy. For this course, AI is encouraged during the course, and appropriate acknowledgement is expected.

You can use AI programs (ChatGPT, Copilot, etc.) in this course. These programs can be powerful tools for learning and other productive pursuits, including completing assignments in less time, helping you generate new ideas, or serving as a personalized learning tool. However, your ethical responsibilities as a student remain the same. You must follow UT Tyler's Honor Code and uphold the highest standards of academic honesty. This applies to all uncited or improperly cited content, whether created by a human or in collaboration with an AI tool. If you use an AI tool to develop content for an assignment, you must cite the tool's contribution to your work.

Late Work and Make-Up Exams:

As a general rule, I do not accept late assignments. I never spring any last-minute assignments on you – from the first day of class, you will know what is due and when it is due to me. It is up to you to plan accordingly as you have ample time to complete these assignments. If you do not turn in your assignments on time, it is a zero in the gradebook and I will not grade the assignment. However, there are always times when I am lenient and will accept the assignment so long that it is submitted before I begin grading. But that's a game of chance on your end 😊

If you have a documented excuse (death in the family, illness, car accident, etc...), you must inform me of your situation within 2 days of the missed assignment and it is mandatory for you to provide documentation to me in order to be eligible for a make-up. Please note that having to work is not an excused absence. While I am sympathetic and understanding to your work schedule, you have made a choice to enroll in this class and it must be considered a priority. First responders and military personnel will receive exemptions from the work policy in this class on an individual basis. Religious holiday are always accepted as exemptions. Pregnant and parenting student policies also apply here as per state law, so long as the student is on record with the university.

Attendance Policy:

As this is an online course, there are no scheduled times in which we will meet. The entire course is asynchronous in nature.

University Policies & Student Resources:

University policies and student resources are available on the University website and in Canvas under "Syllabus". (You may copy or print the following information to include in your syllabus or use the links provided below.)

- [University Policy](#)
- [Student Resources](#)



Calendar of Topics, Readings, and Due Dates

Course Schedule

Schedule	Topic	Assignments
Module 1 8/24 – 8/30	<i>Introduction: What is Criminological Theory</i> <i>Classical Theory</i> Readings: - Akers: Chapter 1 - Other Canvas Readings	Lectures: - What is Criminological Theory & Why Does it Matter (4 pts) - Theory Meets Policy – The Case of Deterrence (3 pts) - Rational Choice Theory – Crime as a Decision? (3 pts) Assignments: - Plagiarism Certificate Submission (20 pts) - Module 1 Assignment: Audio/Visual + Theory Reflection (10 pts)
Module 2 8/31 – 9/6	<i>Biological Theories</i> Readings: - Akers: Chapter 2 - Other Canvas Readings	Lectures: - Born Criminals? Biological Explanations of Crime (5 pts) - Biosocial Criminology – Bridging Nature and Nurture (5 pts) Assignments: - Module 2 Assignment: AI Co-Analysis – Rational Choice and Deterrence (15 pts)
Module 3 9/7 – 9/13	<i>Social Learning Theory</i> Readings: - Akers: Chapter 5 - Other Canvas Readings	Lectures: - From Sutherland to Social Learning Theory – The Theoretical Family Tree (5 pts) - Biosocial Criminology – Bridging Nature and Nurture (5 pts) Assignments: - Module 3 Assignment: 3-2-1 Discussion Post – Social Learning Theory (15 pts)
Module 4 9/14 – 9/20	<i>Social Bonding and Control Theories</i> Readings: - Akers: Chapter 6 - Other Canvas Readings	Lectures: - Techniques of Neutralization – Justifying the Unjustifiable (4 pts) - Social Bonding Theory – The Glue That Holds Us Together (3 pts) - Self-Control Theory – Crime, Character, and the Internal Brake (3 pts) Assignments: - Module 4 Assignment: Annotated Article Share – Social Bonding & Control Theories (15 pts) - Final Paper Step 1: Case Study Selection + Source List (25 pts)



Module 5 9/21 – 9/27	<i>Labeling and Reintegrative Theories</i> Readings: - Akers: Chapter 7 - Other Canvas Readings	Lectures: - Labeling Theory – Crime, Identity, and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy (5 pts) - Reintegrative Shaming – Forgiveness, Justice, and Repair (5 pts) Assignments: - Module 5 Assignment: Mini Policy Memo: Reducing Stigma Through Policy – A Labeling Theory Approach (20 pts)
Module 6 9/28 – 10/4	<i>Social Disorganization Theories</i> Readings: - Akers: Chapter 8 - Other Canvas Readings	Lectures: - The Foundations of Social Disorganization Theory (5 pts) - Collective Efficacy and Modern Perspectives (5 pts) Assignments: - Module 6 Assignment: Audio/Video Reflection + Midpoint Check in (10 pts) - Final Paper Step 2: Argument Outline + Theory Map (30 pts)
Module 7 10/5 – 10/11	<i>Anomie and Strain Theories</i> Readings: - Akers: Chapter 9 - Other Canvas Readings	Lectures: - Merton's Anomie Theory (4 pts) - Delinquent Subcultures & The Rise of General Strain Theory (3 pts) - Understanding Strain Types and Emotional Responses in GST (3 pts) Assignments: - Module 7 Assignment: AI Co-Analysis – Anomie & Strain Theories (15 pts)
Module 8 10/12 – 10/18	<i>Environmental Criminology</i> Readings: Canvas Readings	Lectures: - Introducing Environmental Criminology and Routine Activities Theory (4 pts) - The Core Elements of Routine Activities Theory – Motivation, Targets and Guardianship (3 pts) - From Theory to Practice – Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (3 pts) Assignments: - Module 8 Assignment: 3-2-1 Discussion Post – Routine Activities & Environmental Criminology Theory (15 pts)
Module 9 10/19 – 10/25	<i>Conflict Theory</i> Readings: - Akers: Chapter 10 - Other Canvas Readings	Lectures: - What is Conflict Theory? (3 pts) - The War on Drugs and Conflict in Action (3 pts) - Modern Applications of Conflict Theory (4 pts) Assignments:

		- Module 9 Assignment: Annotated Article Share – Conflict Theory in Action (15 pts) - Final Paper Step 3: Mini-Podcast Draft + Peer Feedback (30 pts)
Module 10 10/26 – 11/1	<i>Marxist and Critical Theories</i> Readings: - Akers: Chapters 11 and 12 - Other Canvas Readings	Lectures: - Foundations of Marxist Theory and Class Conflict (3 pts) - Marxist Criminology in Practice – Law, Poverty, and Alienation (3 pts) - Power, Labeling, and the Role of the State in Defining Crime (4 pts) Assignments: - Module 10 Assignment: Mini Policy Memo: Rethinking Cash Bail and Economic Sanctions Through a Marxist Lens (20 pts)
Module 11 11/2 – 11/10	<i>Feminist Theory</i> Readings: - Akers: Chapter 13 - Other Canvas Readings	Lectures: - The Origins of Feminist Criminology and the Generalizability Problem (3 pts) - The Justice System Through a Feminist Lens – Chivalry, Control, and Consequences (3 pts) - Pink Collar Crime, Opportunity, and the Future of Feminist Criminology (4 pts) Assignments: - Module 11 Assignment: Audio/Video Reflection + Challenging Perspective (10 pts)
Module 12 11/11 – 11/15	<i>Developmental and Life-Course Theories</i> Readings: - Akers: Chapter 14 - Other Canvas Readings	Lectures: - Trajectories, Transitions, and Turning Points (5 pts) - Moffitt's Taxonomy and the Desistance Puzzle (5 pts) Assignments: - Module 12 Assignment: Annotated Article Share – Life-Course and Developmental Criminology (15 pts)
Module 13 11/16 – 11/22	<i>Integrating Theories</i> Readings: - Akers: Chapter 15 - Other Canvas Readings	Lectures: - Why Integrate? The Value and Structure of Integrated Criminological Theories (5 pts) - Elliott, Thornberry, and the Modern Legacy of Integration (5 pts) Assignments: - Module 13 Assignment: 3-2-1 Discussion Post – Integrated Theories (15 pts)
Module 14 11/30 – 12/6	<i>No New Material</i>	Assignments: Final Paper Step 4: Case Study Analysis (100 pts)



Note: This is a tentative schedule, and subject to change as necessary – monitor the course page for current deadlines. In the unlikely event of a prolonged university closing, or an extended absence from the university, adjustments to the course schedule, deadlines, and assignments will be made based on the duration of the closing and the specific dates missed.