Criminology
at the University of Bristol
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This magazine showcases some of the research and teaching interests of the Bristol criminology team and provides some information about our related degrees in Quantitative Research Methods and opportunities to study abroad.

Criminology involves the study of crime, criminal behaviour and criminal justice systems – in our own society, in other places and historically. Criminology is part of broad, multi-disciplinary, social sciences tradition that aims to understand and explain social issues and social problems, and that also works to reform and improve society. Criminology focuses on understanding and explaining contemporary issues and concerns about the nature and causes of crime, responses to crime, the structure and working of policing and justice, how best to deal with offenders and how to deal with the victims of crime.

Here at the University of Bristol, Criminology has been taught for over 30 years; it has steadily grown so that it includes law, sociology, social policy, childhood and youth studies, politics and international relations, management, geography and psychology. The staff teaching Criminology are experts in policy-making, process and evaluation, as well as in a wide range of criminal-justice areas, including youth justice, prisons and punishment, drugs policy, counterfeiting, law, policing, globalisation and crime, immigration, migration/asylum, terrorism, gender-based violence, political violence, media and crime, debt, poverty, segregation and inequalities. The teaching and learning of criminology here in Bristol is organised around three pairs of inter-related themes: (i) criminal justice to social justice, (ii) crime to harm, (iii) local to the global.

Criminology in Bristol also specialises in the study of social harm (zemiology). Zemiology takes criminology to a more advanced level, it enables you to develop a better informed, deeper appreciation and wider understanding of the way that power, inequality and discrimination lead to injustices and harm people in ways that may not be adequately addressed through the law and criminal justice. Studying Criminology at Bristol means that you will look at contemporary issues and problems such as poverty, obesity, pollution, workplace stress and safety, global warming, consumerism, animal extinction and tax avoidance.

Dr Mike McBeth is a Senior Lecturer on the BSc Criminology programmes and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the School for Policy Studies.
We tend to call these “drugs” for shorthand, but in almost all societies, throughout history, there has been something that was an ‘acceptable’ drug, while other drugs have been seen as unacceptable, and controlled in some way. That acceptable drug may not be something used routinely, but may instead have a role in ritual and ceremony.

‘Acceptable’ drugs
Where a particular drug falls in terms of that ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ divide has, historically, had less to do with the particular properties of the drug itself, and everything to do with things like familiarity and who is thought to be the user of it in any given society. Social customs, norms and ‘etiquette’ grow up around ‘acceptable’ drugs, while laws and prohibitions grow up around ‘unacceptable’ drugs. This is what we mean by drug policies: the set of responses a society has to drug use – laws, arrangements for control, treatment of users – and the thinking behind those responses. Since the middle of the twentieth century, different countries’ drug policies have increasingly been framed within a global structure created by the United Nations Conventions on drugs and the systems for administering and enforcing those conventions. The UN conventions aim to eradicate the production and use of the drugs they control: all those that our own 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act classifies and bans.

Prohibition
This global framework of prohibition has many critics: countries whose own traditional ‘acceptable’ drugs are now criminalised like Bolivia, which has tried to legalise the use of coca, for example. Or international NGOs that argue against the way UN policies like crop eradication hurt less developed countries. Here in the UK, there are fierce debates about the way the law criminalises young (and not so young) people who use drugs. Several European countries have decriminalised many forms of drug use, in an effort to reduce the harms caused by the laws themselves and make it possible to provide support and treatment to drug users. Most people know about the Netherlands’ drug policies, with their coffee shops for the purchase and consumption of cannabis, for example, but other countries like Portugal have gone even further in decriminalising personal use of drugs.

A great topic
So why is this such a great topic to study? It covers everything from questions about why individuals get into difficulties with drugs, and the ways we as a society treat them and provide help (or not), through to global issues – why does the UN have the line they do and where does drug policy fit into international relations? If we are looking at British policy, we can see whether national politics affect how we think about drugs – have Labour, Conservative or Coalition governments had very different approaches to drugs, for example? From a sociological point of view, drug use is a fascinating topic: many of the classics of early sociology looked at drug use as a form of deviance and have insights to help us understand policy. It raises key philosophical issues: Can we see drug use as a self-regarding action, and one that individuals should have choice over, or do we believe there are harms involved that the law must protect people from, even against their will?

In the optional unit ‘Drugs and Society’ I address these sorts of questions, and look at the way British society has developed its drug policy over the last century, putting that into the global context and comparing it to other countries’ approaches.

Dr Rachel Lart has worked on research projects looking at a range of policy initiatives in the area of health and social care. Rachel convenes the first year unit Social Policy and the Welfare State: Historical Perspectives, and teaches two optional second/third year units: Healthcare Policies and Drugs and Society.
Fashion counterfeiting
A victimless crime?

Dr Joanna Large explains why social harms create significant issues in society.

Fashion counterfeiting is a growing concern in society and to the environment. The global counterfeiting economy is estimated to be huge – in addition to concerns about the harms to designers, brands and the economy there are also concerns that the trade in counterfeit goods is linked to many other harms: to individuals, to society and to the environment.

Growing political and policing concerns about the harm and dangers of counterfeit goods and their role in funding other criminal activities has seen an emphasis on tackling the supply of counterfeit goods. This has resulted in enforcement operations that tackle the offline sales of counterfeit goods in shops and market; attempts to infiltrate and disrupt the movement of counterfeit goods and attempts to tackle the online sales of counterfeits through websites and social media. Consumers are also seen to play an important role and it is hoped that if we are ‘educated’ about the ‘dangers’ and harms of fakes we will stop wanting to buy them.

Therefore, as criminologists, as well as understanding the supply of counterfeit goods and how this relates to crime and harm, we also need to understand the demand for them. Why is it that people want to buy fake fashion goods, and will stopping people from wanting to buy them (the demand), stop the crime and harm related to their supply?

Do prisons really work?

Christina Pantazis explains how prisons can be socially harmful

We often think of prisons as institutions holding the most dangerous individuals. As a result, the rest of society – the law abiding majority – is protected from the harmful predatory actions of the minority. The idea that prisons can protect society from harm provides an appealing utilitarian argument in defence of prisons, particularly in the context of rising crime rates. However, rather than being a source of harm reduction, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that prisons can be socially harmful.

Vulnerable offenders

A major issue of concern is that the prison population is made up of society’s most vulnerable individuals. The Social Exclusion report (2002:8) depressingly found that: “compared with the general population, prisoners are thirteen times as likely to have been in care as a child, thirteen times as likely to be unemployed, ten times as likely to have been a habitual truant, 60 to 70 per cent of prisoners were using drugs before imprisonment. Over 70 per cent suffer from at least two mental disorders. And 20 per cent of male and 37 per cent of female sentenced prisoners have attempted suicide in the past.”

Whilst prison can deal with some of the problematic issues affecting vulnerable offenders, the experience of prison may serve to exacerbate problems. For example, prison may provide access to cognitive therapy and access to other counselling, yet the isolation, violence, and mundanity of prison life may contribute to the deterioration of a prisoner’s mental health. It’s not surprising that self-harming and suicide are such major problems in prisons. In 2013-14, 88 prisoners took their own lives, whilst there were a disturbing 24,000 incidents of self-harming recorded – incidents which disproportionately affect women (Ministry of Justice, 2014).

Prisons, far from rehabilitating prisoners so that individuals are less likely to commit crime when released, may reinforce and even entrench offending patterns. Ultimately this means that the law-abiding majority is made less safe by prison. The latest figures reveal that re-offending rates among adult prisoners is 45%: nearly one in two prisoners will be re-convicted within a year of release. The re-offending rate for juvenile offenders is even higher, at a shocking 68.5% (Ministry of Justice, 2015). Leaving aside whether crime groups, structures, and activities can address issues of rehabilitation, there are factors upon release – relating to housing, employment, social relationships, for example – which make desisting from crime difficult. This can lead to prisons becoming a ‘reversing door’ for offenders. Despite the evidence that, in many respects, it can be said that prisons are socially harmful institutions which prevent not only a danger to those inside them, but also to the rest of society, our politicians are keen to proclaim that “Prisons work!” This explains the upward trend in our prison population since the 1990s (between 1990 and 2012 the prison population in England and Wales increased by 41,800 prisoners to over 86,000) and why England and Wales imprisons more people than any other country in Western Europe per head of population (PRT, 2014). A key question arises from this analysis: as Hillyard and Tomsis argue “If a car broke down on nearly 60 out of every 100 journeys, we would get rid of it.” But the question is why we don’t, why is it that we maintain the prison system?

These topics and questions are discussed in the Punishment in Society unit – an optional unit available to students studying on the BSc Criminology or BSc Social Policy.

Dr Joanna Large is a lecturer in Criminology. She teaches on the ‘Understanding Crime, Harm and Society’ unit. This unit introduces students to the various forms of crime and harms which are prevalent in different societies, including what we term ‘social harms’ - these are less visible but may have a significantly negative impact on people’s well-being.

Christina Pantazis is a Professor in Sociology (social harm), and teaches on the ‘Punishment in Society’ unit.
Traditionally, both academic study and popular discourse have focused on those selling sex: usually women. Law and policy from the Contagious Diseases Acts of the nineteenth century through to the ‘prostitute’s caution’ have focused on identifying and managing the movement and sexual activity of those selling sex.

Following the 2000 United Nations ‘Palermo’ Protocol, many activists and politicians sought publicly to link sex markets more explicitly with sex trafficking. This brought the (invariably male) buyer into the legal and policy spotlight. Some countries in Northern and Western Europe and elsewhere considered or adopted legislation to place criminal sanctions on sex buyers. For many scholars, such legislation recognises and seeks to eliminate prostitution as a practice which subordinates women and constitutes gendered violence.

Rather than exploitation or gender inequality, selling sex could also be framed simply as employment. Indeed, sex-positive activists would view sex work as a form of emancipatory labour: a way for women and others to challenge social expectations of femininity and of sexuality broadly. Sex work could be conceived and regulated as any other commercial service sector. Alternatively, buying and selling sex could be decriminalised, which could protect the anonymity of sex sellers and focus resources on support (as needed), rather than sanction.

Another way of making sense of sex work is to recognise that while it is a practice patterned by gender, it is foremost (and often relatedly) an issue of economic inequality. Many women turn to sex work intermittently or longer term to make ends meet. Entry costs are low and often women will be sole carer for children or other adult dependents. In an increasingly austere welfare environment, they struggle to manage on low-paid jobs with inflexible working hours. From this perspective then, women’s entry into prostitution is structured by gender, but their rationale is economic.

From 2018-2019, I worked with colleagues here at the Centre for Gender and Violence Research on a Home Office commissioned piece of work to report on the current nature and prevalence of prostitution and sex work in England and Wales.

The report heard from over 500 individuals involved in selling sexual services across multiple contexts, indoor and outdoor. These included women, trans women, men and couples, selling predominantly to the last two groups, but some to other women. We heard from a number who saw their work as a well-paid and enjoyable career and from many whose experience was more mundane and precarious, sometimes dangerous. Our participants demonstrated that many different factors combine to characterise entry into, and the experience of, sex work: these include economic status, ethnicity, age, sexuality, gender identity, migrant status, education, physical and mental health, and so on. We heard from a small number of buyers too, who related their experiences and motivations for buying sex.

The social and individual harms intrinsic to buying and selling sex are hotly contested. Setting these to one side, scholars and activists of different shades of opinion identify the prevailing English legal framework – a hotchpotch of outdated statute and policy layered over decades – as being inconsistent and potentially harmful.

Following publication of our report, as well as the cumulative work of others over recent years, we wait with interest to see if Government decides to act on the evidence presented before them.

Dr Natasha Mulivhill is a lecturer in Criminology. Her research focuses particularly on UK prostitution and sex work policy, though she is also interested in the exercise of gender and power within and through the state and criminal justice system. Natasha teaches on a variety of units across all our BSc degree courses.

The exchange of sex for money (or for some other benefit) is known popularly as ‘prostitution’ or ‘sex work’. It is a social practice which often invokes vivid imagery and clear opinions, ranging from antipathy, concern and critique to tolerance, humour and curiosity. Yet the contemporary ‘reality’ of buying and selling sex is often little understood.
This policy has serious implications for extended families who may be split apart, leaving some people alone in a new country with little access to support from family, friends or other networks. The insecurity of people’s immediate future can also have implications for health, as many asylum seekers feel like they are in a temporal limbo, with little control over their lives or futures.

As my research shows, individuals who have been receiving support for experiences of torture or sexual violence which is common for people fleeing conflict or persecution, can, when they move, lose vital networks that may otherwise help them in surviving the impacts of abuse. Studies also show that pregnant women who are dispensed may lose maternity support networks or even contact with midwives, General Practitioners and family, all of which are important to the health and wellbeing of the woman and baby during and after pregnancy.

This is only one example of a multitude of policies and practices that can have serious emotional, physical and psychological consequences for people seeking asylum. These practices are, however, supported and endorsed by the state. In most cases they are legal, although some migrant support organisations have successfully challenged a number of practices as being violations of human rights (such as the detention of migrant children).

We can see in this case that the law does not necessarily consider what is best for the groups and individuals affected by the policies implemented by the state, however harmful they may be. Whereas the notion of ‘crime’ is not always present in such actions taken by the state, a social harm approach allows us to consider the human effects of decisions made by states.

Understanding crime often requires knowing how many offences took place, where, when and how often. Finding patterns in crime data is a critical part of dealing with, preventing and resolving crime. Without numbers we would not be able to say that in the year ending March 2019, there were 5,950,499 offences recorded by the police in England and Wales, an 8% rise in the previous year. We also know that the recent rise in recorded crime is happening while the longer-term trend has been a fall in crime reported in surveys (from a peak of almost 20 million crimes in 1995 to just under 6.5 million by 2019). Within the broad category of ‘crime’ police recorded offences show that there were fewer murders, but more police recorded offences involving knives or sharp instruments. Also, vehicle theft has risen, robbery generally has increased (although burglary has reduced).

Numbers can help quantify the social world by identifying the extent to which there is advantage or disadvantage in society so that areas of need can also be addressed. We know that in 2018–22% of the UK population were in poverty (source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation). This is equivalent to 14.3 million people not earning enough income to sustain decent standards of living. Similarly, numbers allow us to confirm that inequality in Britain has risen dramatically in the last 10 years. In fact, only 10% of the population earns 44% of the UK’s wealth (source: Office for National Statistics). It is now well known that high levels of inequality negatively affect individuals’ socio-economic position in society and restrict their life chances. The extent to which this happens can only be answered with numbers. In a globalised and data-driven world, it is therefore even more important to develop skills that can help analyse and interpret data, so that we can reform society as well as improve individual career options. Increasingly, numerical (or quantitative) skills are in high demand from employers and definitely enhance students’ chances of getting the career that they want.

Confidence with numbers
Although the latest research indicates that 15-year-old pupils in the UK understand the usefulness of numerical skills, the UK still lags behind when compared to other countries in the world (Source: OECD PISA report). Numeracy not only increases individuals’ ability to succeed in life and in the workplace, but at a national level it increases the country’s competitiveness and growth. In criminology, students may underestimate the value of numbers and often think that to interpret or use numbers they need to have a mathematical mind. This, unfortunately, discourages students from taking any further maths. But this is a complete misconception! As we have seen, numbers are used as an important tool in criminology.

Sponsored tuition to help
Any criminology student can learn to use and interpret numbers if they are motivated, engaged with the topic and, most importantly, if they receive learning support. With this purpose the University of Bristol has become part of a £19.5 million national programme sponsored by the Nuffield Foundation designed to support criminology students in the acquisition of quantitative training, by setting up the Bristol G2Step centre – one of only 15 such centres in the UK. Three highly skilled lecturers have been engaged as part of the initiative to deliver new units that would not only appeal by their content to Criminology students but would also equip students with the latest analytical tools to understand society. Using a combination of interactive lectures and computer lab-based learning, you will develop skills in how to use and analyse data to better understand the UK.
Widen your horizons with Study Abroad

Hannah is a 3rd year student studying BSc Criminology with Study Abroad. Here she talks about her experiences at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia.

The study abroad year is simultaneously one of the most exciting and daunting experiences of your university career. In the months leading up to you kind of lose track of how long you have left at home as you get completely caught up in deadlines, exams and cherishing your last moments with friends and family for a while. At least this is how it felt to me. I will definitely say I had doubts and thought about calling it all off, but I think this is only natural as you really are being pushed out of your comfort zone. It is not easy leaving your friends and family behind, and there will be tears at the airport, but everyone is just a phone call, Face Time or text away and it is a lot easier than you think to regularly speak to those close to you, even with the time difference. I am now about a third of the way through, but it feels like I only left home a week ago!

During the first week it felt like I was on holiday, if not slightly hectic. Whilst you’re trying to settle yourself in and complete necessary errands, like buying a phone sim and opening a bank account, you are also trying to meet people and explore your new home before university commences. I personally didn’t struggle to meet people as I am living in a shared house with a large group of students from the Universities of Leeds, Exeter and Manchester. However, if this is not your situation or if you choose to live in the equivalent to halls, you will likely be living in a flat with 7-8 other people so meeting people is a lot easier than you think as everyone is just a phone call, Face Time or text away and it is a lot easier than you think to regularly speak to those close to you, even with the time difference. I am now about a third of the way through, but it feels like I only left home a week ago!

So far, I have found the studying side of the year enjoyable. The workload is similar to what I have been used to at Bristol, but with more frequent assessments throughout the semester. I decided to take two open units and two units compatible with my course, this has been really rewarding as it has allowed me to explore new subjects/interests outside of my degree subject.

In terms of socialising and traveling, there is so much to do in and around Brisbane and the city is always putting on events and entertainment. The university also has societies for international students which you can join to meet people or just enjoy the events they host; QUEST is particularly good for this. Lastly, with regard to travelling, you will definitely do some travelling in your year abroad and I would 100% recommend this but definitely start saving as soon as you can to ensure you can fully experience each destination you choose without feeling too much of a financial strain.

I think a great way to approach the year is to be open and friendly to everyone. You will meet so many people throughout the year so keeping an open mind to experiences and people will be hugely beneficial to you. I also think it is important to remember that you are in the same boat as lots of other students and you are all probably feeling the same way.

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I chose the Work and Work Placement unit in my second year of studying Criminology at Bristol as I was excited about the opportunities it offered. I wanted to learn more about working with and interacting with a range of people from different backgrounds, places and cultures. Not only do you have a chance to gain real life work experience in an area of professional working that is relevant to your degree, but the placement also enables you to build your knowledge of the employment market.

In my case, I’d never had to write a cv or an application letter or had a job interview before and the placement really supported me to gain valuable experiences in presenting myself successfully to employers and after being coached through the application experience, I successfully secured a really prestigious placement at the office of Thangam Debonnaire, the Labour MP for Bristol West. I was thrilled to get the job.

While the idea of working for an MP was compelling, politics was not a field I was really interested in at the time. Now I stand corrected. My experience was anything but dull, particularly as I worked at a time during a heightened political climate, characterised by Brexit. The experience that I gained in this work was so good that it has completely altered my outlook on life for the better.

I am thankful for the guidance and support that I have received throughout this experience and I cannot recommend the work placement unit enough to future Criminology students.

Being fortunate enough to land such a placement not only broadened my horizons on the political situation in the UK, which as an international student I found invaluable, it also helped me explore the working sector in London and Parliament. I learned how important an open mind, dedication, commitment and most importantly a sense of community and a desire to change things for the better can be to the modern world of work. I also learned that trying something new isn’t so bad!

My six months on placement also enabled me to launch my own research project on the plight of refugees in the UK and specifically, Bristol. This assignment allowed me to really challenge myself and even helped me gain the title of TargetJobs Undergraduate of the Year for Social Impact for the year 2019. I hope to be involved in politics myself in future – to help and support people.

I am thankful for the guidance and support that I have received throughout this experience and I cannot recommend the work placement unit enough to future Criminology students.

“I cannot recommend the Work and Work Placement unit enough to future Criminology students”

Samir
Abi, year 2

"Studying criminology has allowed me to explore new perspectives on contemporary topics."

You don’t just learn about crime but also about deeper rooted societal and political issues. The course encompasses such a variety of topics from gender-based violence to corporate crimes. This has meant that for someone like me, who was not quite sure what areas I wanted to focus on, I was able to explore a wide range of issues and discover what I found particularly interesting. The course is suited really to anyone who has an interest in the real happenings of the world, allowing you to see things through alternative and interesting lenses.

Kirsty, year 1

Before coming to Bristol to study criminology, I thought I knew what I wanted to pursue career wise afterwards with my degree. However the diversity of the Criminology degree has opened my eyes to many other career paths in the field that I had never thought about before!

The criminology lecturers at Bristol are all really inspiring, all in such interesting fields of expertise. I especially think the study of zemiology (social harm) as part of the course is a fascinating area that expands the degree further than just what is considered ‘crime’.

Ester, year 1

What I find the most fascinating about Criminology at Bristol is that the focus is on Critical Criminology and that it is taught by the leading experts of this approach. This means that we are constantly encouraged to challenge the assumptions we have about crime and think critically about all the ways we, as a society, are dealing with these issues.

Max, year 1

I have enjoyed all of the Criminology units this year and I feel like the staff do a great job at preparing you for what is expected of you in your studies and how to correctly write essays (as they are very different to what most people are used to from what they have learnt at school). I didn’t feel at all as if I was thrown in the deep end, which I was initially worried about before I started at Bristol. All of the lecturers and seminar leaders are extremely knowledgeable as well as approachable, which is very important because there will inevitably be times where you are confused about particular assignments or didn’t understand certain lectures. I also love the city and have had a great first year at Bristol University.

Ed, year 1

I enjoy Criminology at Bristol because of the wide range of resources and support available to students. Whenever I found anything difficult, I had full confidence in the department in their ability to help me. Furthermore, the year provides a clear narrative of learning that works on effectively building your knowledge of crime. Each week you feel like you have a greater understanding of the criminal mind and efforts made to control crime. I feel as though my understanding was crafted gradually and over the year, rather than being bombarded with revision in the summer term.

Ona, year 3

What I enjoyed most about the criminology units were the experiences we had outside the University, such as a visit to HMP Bristol and Bristol Magistrates Court. These visits gave us an insight into the wider context of our lectures. In terms of Bristol as a city, I have loved every minute of living in Bristol. The city is so tidy and clean and there’s always something going on. The size of the city is just perfect, you get a big city feel like you’re in the middle of London at times, and yet it’s small enough that you constantly find yourself bumping into people you know on the street. Everything is within walking distance.
Get in touch…

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