

Juvenile Justice Policy
Prof. Michele Deitch
Spring Semester 2016

Course Description

Juvenile justice reform efforts have been a major feature of the last five legislative sessions in Texas, and are often in the news nationally. From Texas to California to New York, policy-makers are trying to improve the operations of their juvenile justice systems. Guided by both fiscal concerns and research indicating that juveniles are best served in community-based programs, policy-makers are beginning to emphasize local responsibility for juvenile justice rather than state-level incarceration. There is also an increasing emphasis on prevention and rehabilitative services, even as the juvenile systems around the country still function under laws and policies designed during the “tough on crime” period in the 1990s. At the same time, the United States Supreme Court is changing its views about juvenile sentencing, recently eliminating mandatory application of life without parole sentences for youth under age 18.

This seminar will cover a broad range of topics that examine these shifting policies, with a particular focus on recent reforms in Texas. Texas provides a perfect laboratory for us as the Texas Legislature recently has changed numerous laws affecting juvenile offenders, has closed several state-run juvenile facilities, and has been seeking to reduce the use of incarceration for youth. Moreover, Texas is considering raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction from 17 to 18. Yet problems in the Texas juvenile system remain: youth violence continues to be a problem; many youth still get sent to the state’s adult criminal justice system; there are limited options for juvenile offenders with mental illness; and funding is inadequate to support important therapeutic programs for youth. All of these issues will be addressed in the course.

In addition to examining these challenges, we will discuss national best practices in juvenile justice and will learn about the operations of the different parts of the juvenile justice system in Texas, from the courts to the probation system to juvenile correctional facilities. We will also explore a variety of substantive issues such as juvenile sentencing laws, juveniles in the adult criminal justice system, juvenile life without parole, ticketing of juveniles for minor school-based misbehavior, truancy, prevention of delinquency, and cross-over youth who are in both the juvenile justice system and the child protection system.

We will invite various key players in the juvenile justice system to join us as guest speakers in the class. We will also ground our discussions by spending time observing proceedings in juvenile court and touring juvenile correctional facilities. Students will be expected to write essays that reflect on those experiences. We may also observe legislative hearings, if any take place during the semester, or archived videos of hearings from the most recent legislation session and interim. Students will undertake a significant research and writing assignment on a topic of their choosing as their final project for this seminar, and shorter writing assignments will also be required during the course of the semester. There may be a possibility that students can work on projects requested by legislative committees considering interim charges related to juvenile justice or by stakeholders in need of some research, in lieu of one of the writing assignments.

Students are expected to attend all classes and field trips, and to prepare for and participate fully in class discussions. Grading will take into account class participation as well as the various research and writing assignments. To the extent possible, the instructor will accommodate students’ interests in pursuing research on subjects of their own choosing.

This seminar is open to students in both the LBJ School and the Law School. This course will also serve as a prerequisite for the Spring 2017 seminar “Advanced Juvenile and Criminal Justice Policy: The Legislative Process,” in which students will be placed with a legislative office or committee to work on issues related to those studied in this course during the upcoming legislative session.