**Spring 2026**

**PA 388K--Criminal Justice Policy: Corrections and Sentencing**

**Prof. Michele Deitch**

**Course Description**

**Course Overview**

Few policy issues have had as big an impact on the Texas political or social landscape as criminal justice, and fewer still have such a hold on the popular imagination. Yet it is only in the last decade or so that debate about criminal justice policy has started to take account of the financial and social costs of our state's incarceration policies. Time and again, public officials at all levels and in all branches of government find themselves confronting the thorny problems presented by the policy choices the state has made in the criminal justice arena, and by constantly shifting political winds.

This course will force us to go beyond the simplistic debates between "tough on crime" and "soft on crime" rhetoric, and confront the hard policy questions that mirror the daily challenges faced by policy-makers and public officials. For example, how can policy- makers safely and effectively downsize our massive prison system? What role does race play in the criminal justice system, and how should public officials take into account the impact of criminal justice practices on certain segments of the community and on families? How can legislators protect the public from people who have committed serious or violent crimes, especially while facing immense budget pressures? Should the pretrial bail system be based on a person’s risk or their ability to pay money bail? Should any limits be placed on judicial or prosecutorial discretion? When is it appropriate for a court to intervene to improve prison or jail conditions? What steps should policy-makers take to protect people in custody from unsafe conditions of confinement? What forms of external oversight should exist when it comes to prison operations? Are humane prisons possible?

Although the course will have a heavy focus on Texas' criminal justice policies and practices, we will often refer to the experiences of other states and other countries to examine a range of practices in this field and to explore alternative options for developing policy.

**Goals**
Students in this interdisciplinary seminar (cross-listed between the LBJ School and the Law School) will gain a firm understanding of the key criminal justice policy challenges facing public officials. Students will begin to appreciate the complexity of these issues; understand how both good and bad policies are developed; understand the financial and social costs of criminal justice policy decisions; recognize the extent to which criminal justice issues have an impact on almost every aspect of government; and explore the relationship between law, constitutional requirements, the administration of justice, and public policy. Students will also learn practical policy research and writing skills.

**Course Materials, Outside Speakers, and Legislative Hearings**
Each topic will be examined critically through a wide range of readings, including empirical studies, essays, books, statutes, legal cases, and official reports, as well as podcasts and videos. The reading load can be very heavy at times, but it is all interesting material. If possible, we will seek to visit prison and/or jail facilities to learn about life inside these facilities and hear from people with lived experience. We may have guest speakers such as a national expert/advocate, a prison agency official, and a person who was formerly incarcerated, all of whom have been deeply involved in policy-making or practice in this area. We also will watch some archived videos of relevant legislative hearings to observe the policy development process.

**Course Requirements**

This seminar is dependent upon an informed and lively discussion. Students are expected to attend all classes, do all the reading, and come to class with thoughtful comments or questions about their reading assignments. Class participation is critical and will be considered in grading. Students will be required to undertake an original research project on a topic of their choice and to write a 10-page issue brief about their topics. Additionally, students will write two policy memos on designated criminal justice issues. Students will also submit an ungraded reflection essay.

Use of AI to research or write any part of an assignment for this class is strictly prohibited.