The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the democratic world, and imprisonment falls disproportionately on racial minorities and the poor. Why is this? Is there something distinctive about American culture, politics or society that produces these outcomes? Are we simply a more crime-prone people, a more punitive people, a more racist people, that willfully impose exceptionally harmful sanctions on even low-level offenders?

In this class, we will explore the US case in a comparative context, seeking to understand variation in imprisonment in democratic countries. In order to do this, we will seek to understand what factors contribute to imprisonment, how and with what consequences crime becomes a political issue and what extremely high rates of violence and incarceration can tell us about politics and inequality more generally in the United States, compared to other democratic countries.

The course has four main requirements: class participation, in-class midterm, book analysis and a final paper.

**Reading and assignments**

**Required readings**

There are no required textbooks. All readings are articles on Sakai, as well as data sets and analyses that we will review and discuss.

Each week has a set of questions, which you should come to class prepared to answer. Whether you do all of the readings and review all of the data sources, or focus more selectively on answers to the week’s questions is up to you. Some weeks ask general questions and some are more specific to the assigned readings. The point is to do your work before class and come prepared to answer the week’s questions, and to be able to reference the sources of your information.

**Assignments**

*Participation* (20%): Class participation has two components. First, students are required to post questions about the readings prior to class a minimum of ten times throughout the semester (10%). Second, I expect students to be prepared to answer questions in class and offer reflections and synthesis about class material (10%).

*Midterm* (25%): This is an in-class exam that involves several short answer questions addressing facts about crime and imprisonment cross-nationally, as well as a longer essay question addressing some of the theories that explain these realities.

*Book analysis* (20%): This assignment involves selecting a book from the suggested reading list or a different book that is approved by me. You may not use a book you are reading for another class just because it has something to do with crime or criminal justice! It must relate to this class and I
will make that determination. I will provide more information in class but there are two crucial elements of a book review. First, a clear and cogent summary of the book's main arguments and, second, an incisive assessment of them. The second part is particularly challenging. I will post some book reviews on the Sakai site as example and will discuss them more in class. The length is 4-6 pages.

*Final paper (35%):* Due Monday, May 7th. This is a 10-12 page paper that addresses the primary class theme: what explains high rates of imprisonment in the US? The paper will draw primarily on class material, as well as the outside book you read, as well as presentation of data comparing the US on crime (violence) and imprisonment with two other countries. We will discuss details on the paper in class.

**Suggested readings for book review**


