Why not a criminal justice major?: It’s fascinating.

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.

Citation: ALDRIDGE, J., 2015. Why not a criminal justice major?: It’s fascinating. IN: Brinkley, S. ...et al. (eds.) Criminology and Criminal Justice for the Curious: Why Study Criminology and Criminal Justice? The Curious Academic Publishing, 3pp.

Additional Information:

- This is a book chapter

Metadata Record: [https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/24007](https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/24007)

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: The Curious Academic Publishing

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Please cite the published version.
Criminology and Criminal Justice for the Curious: Why Study Criminal Justice?

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Criminology is a fascinating subject for study for students in further education who are thinking about their undergraduate degree choices. Criminology degree courses at universities across the UK are hugely popular; it is one of the fastest growing degree subjects among students who are keen to understand Criminology as a discipline and Criminal Justice in practice. Studying Criminology and Criminal Justice gives students (both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels) the opportunities to understand Criminology from a theoretical perspective, including its relationship to other disciplines such as Sociology, and the chance to understand crime in society through looking at crime statistics, criminal activity and behaviour, the work of criminal justice agencies and strategies for crime prevention. At Loughborough University we combine Criminology with the study of Social Policy (as well as offer joint degrees with Sociology and Social Psychology) because students need to understand the political, social and cultural dimensions of crime and criminal behaviour as well as the important legal and policy aspects that are so vital to the work of criminal justice agencies and professionals.

It is very important for students of Criminology to understand the causes of crime and criminal behaviour from a social policy and welfare perspective. Students studying Criminology and Social Policy at Loughborough University, for example, will look at some of the underlying reasons for criminal behaviour, including welfare issues, the impact of social exclusion – low income, poor housing, poverty, homelessness and so on – and how to address these issues effectively in society. This will include looking at government responses to social and criminal justice issues as well as the impact of national and global economic crises. Students will also look at local and global crime statistics, taking a critical perspective on these drawing on the knowledge they gain from quantitative data analyses and crime mapping. As well as examining criminological and criminal justice research evidence, students also need opportunities to conduct their own research, drawing on the expertise they develop from their critical assessment of crime statistics and evidence and from studying research methods.

It is important for students also to understand how their own research, particularly at postgraduate level, can help to inform and shape criminal justice policy and practice. The importance of the connection between research evidence, policy and practice is demonstrated on our Criminology degree courses at Loughborough University through taught classes by staff who have expertise in this field and through presentations, seminars and guest lectures by criminal justice professionals and policy makers. It is also vital that students gain critical insights into those professionals in the criminal justice system who work on the front line of service delivery, such as the police, probation officers, youth offending officers and so on.

One of the most important aspects of studying Criminology for all students is the opportunity it gives them to understand social problems and criminal justice issues from different perspectives, drawing not only on criminological theories but other
relevant theories, concepts and ideas. Using my own work and teaching on gender and crime, and specifically women and crime, it is clear that even among undergraduate students who have studied Sociology prior to arriving at University, their understanding of the gendered aspects of crime is often limited. There are a number of reasons for this. One of the primary reasons is that neither gender studies nor feminism are taught subjects on the secondary education curriculum in the UK. A further reason is that students rightly believe that crime is mostly committed by men. While crime statistics suggest that the majority of criminal perpetrators are male, women and girls also commit crimes and often of a specific nature (theft and prostitution, for example). However, it is important for students to understand the gendered dimensions of crime and the various theories relating to gender and crime and criminal justice responses to male and female offenders.

Students may arrive at University with some knowledge of Criminology and Criminal Justice issues (and especially if students in the UK have studied A Level Sociology) but they are unlikely have studied Feminist Criminology. Feminist Criminology emerged in the 1970s in order to address important gender issues and to look at crime, Criminology and Criminal Justice from a women’s and feminist perspective. Prior to this time, the study of Criminology had been undertaken primarily from a male perspective; in the main this was because men were responsible for committing the majority of crimes and also because when women engage in criminal behaviour this was explained using biological and medical theories – women’s ‘deviant’ behaviour was linked to their reproductive system as well as to their supposedly inherent ‘neuroses’. It was also commonly assumed that women were not predisposed (biologically, physically or psychologically) to violence because of their gender. Feminist Criminology has made considerable contributions to our understanding of crime, patterns of criminal behaviour and the underpinning causes of crime. It has also made a substantial contribution theoretically, drawing on feminist perspectives and the views of women themselves who are the victims, perpetrators and survivors of crime as well as those who work in the criminal justice system.

Students need to understand why women commit fewer crimes than men and patterns of female offending; they also need to understand how criminal justice interventions and agencies address criminal activity when women are the perpetrators, as well as the efficacy of criminal justice policies and practices that are aimed at managing, treating and supporting women when they are victims, offenders and survivors of crime. Using case studies and ‘real life’ examples in the classroom help students engage with challenging topics and help to frame (and understand) questions such as why women rarely commit violent crimes and, when they do, how governments, the public, the media and other agencies and organisations respond. Using case studies in the classroom of well-known criminal cases such as those of convicted murderers Aileen Wuornos (US) and Myra Hindley (UK), for example, also help students gain deeper insight into the motivations and explanations for women’s violent crimes.

While some topics may be completely new to our undergraduates – this is certainly true regarding their understanding of the gendered aspects of crime – it is great to see students engage critically and with such enthusiasm for new ideas and to progress onto postgraduate study as a result. Some of our students are keen to continue their studies via a range of Masters options that are offered in our multi-
disciplinary department and even further on to PhD, drawing on the expertise of staff within the department. Studying Criminology and Social Policy offers students a broad range of subjects, topics or issues on which to focus their postgraduate research. Examples of the kinds of research being undertaken currently by research students in Criminology and Social Policy include: prostitution, diversity and sex markets; an occupational study of indoor sex work in the UK; the experiences of girls in the criminal justice system; young people with autism in the criminal justice system; an examination of the care and treatment of sex offenders in Lebanon. These are just a few examples, many others demonstrate the cross-disciplinary nature of the research opportunities available to students in the department who are able to draw on the extensive research expertise of staff, not just in Criminology and Social Policy, but also in Sociology, Social Psychology and Communications and Media Studies. Our research students also have opportunities to work alongside research staff in the various research centres in the department, including the Centre for Child and Family Research, the Centre for Research in Social Policy, the Communication Research Centre and research groups such as the Young Carers Research Group and the Crime Science Research Group.

The Department of Social Sciences is in the School of Social, Political and Geographical Sciences, Loughborough University. More details about the department are available on the website: http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/socialsciences/

More details about Criminology and Social Policy courses can be found here: http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/socialsciences/undergraduate/courses/criminologyandsocialpolicy/