

RETHINKING CRIMINAL JUSTICE AS PUBLIC HEALTH

Course description

The health of the U.S. population is inextricably connected to the country's criminal-legal system, which physically confines millions of Americans, surveilles and polices tens of millions more, and undermines the wellbeing of the population as a whole.

Instead of summoning the resources and ingenuity to solve substance addiction and mental illness, we exacerbate these thorny challenges by misconstruing them as 'crimes'. We struggle with a high prevalence of some infectious diseases—from hepatitis C to COVID-19—in part because we fail to manage them in the hotbeds of our jails and prisons. And our societal response to violence, which primarily takes the form of violence of its own, often perpetuates the problem it is meant to prevent.

In this course, we will consider the history of our society's conceptions of crime, the way they have shaped our societal responses to entrenched social ills, and how they differ from the values and practices of public health. We will examine the counterproductive harms that spring from this disconnect. Drawing on the instructor's reportage as well as extending beyond it, we will identify and explore public health interventions that could ultimately replace our architecture of punishment.

Course objectives

- Assess varying conceptions of crime, and the way they shape our society's response
- Describe the criminal-legal system including its history and constituent parts, and evaluate the evidence of its effectiveness
- Explain how the criminal-legal system perpetuates violence, mental illness, poverty, and infectious disease
- Examine the role that mental illness, addiction, environmental exposure, and other factors play in crime
- Evaluate public health measures for addressing crime, from drug courts to cognitive behavioral therapy to unarmed emergency responders to restorative justice

Prerequisites

A basic knowledge of public health concepts is recommended.

Course Reading List

The five-day course will be organized around five-questions, and readings suitable for each will be assigned:

1. *What is "crime," why do we punish it, and how might public health approach the same problems differently?*
2. *How does the criminal justice system harm public health?*
3. *What are the biological, environmental, and social underpinnings of crime?*
4. *What do we know about interventions that address crime as illness?*
5. *What will be the most successful political strategy for changing our approach?*

Course Structure

The class will meet from 1:30-5:30pm from Monday to Friday, June 14-18 — a total of 20 hours. Class time will be a mix of structured lecture and moderated discussion, with occasional guest participants.

Instructor

Ted Alcorn is a journalist and a lecturer at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. He has reported on topics of health and justice for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and other national publications, and has expertise in gun violence prevention policies and programs. He was previously the founding research director of Everytown For Gun Safety, and he served as a policy analyst in the Office of the Mayor of New York City.

