School of Criminology and Criminal Justice

Doctor of Philosophy in Criminology and Criminal Justice

Criminology Comprehensive Exam

Reading List and Instructions

Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Nebraska Omaha refers to the scientific study of the causes of and societal responses to crime and deviant behavior. The reading list for the criminology comprehensive examination provides students with a substantive knowledge base pertaining to the causes of crime and deviant behavior. Although the list is not intended to be exhaustive in any area, it identifies readings deemed by the faculty as essential knowledge for students who graduate from the University with the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Criminology and Criminal Justice.

The criminology comprehensive examination assesses students’ ability to critically evaluate extant literature, to integrate knowledge drawn from different scholars and perspectives, and to demonstrate a solid understanding of central issues facing the field.

The purpose of the reading list for the criminology comprehensive examination is threefold:

1) Aid students in passing the exam.

The list is inclusive of the readings with which you must be familiar to pass the exam. However, the reading list should not be viewed as exhaustive but rather as a very good starting point. You also should be familiar with relevant literature published in the major journals of the field in the past five years and/or covered in your coursework, even if these readings do not appear on the list. Major journals include Criminology, Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, Crime and Delinquency, Justice Quarterly, Journal of Quantitative Criminology, Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, Law and Society Review, American Sociological Review, American Journal of Sociology, Social Problems, and Social Forces.

A successful examination demonstrates an ability to apply understanding of the criminological literature to broad questions facing the field. Rarely is the inclusion or exclusion of a single article or book sufficient to warrant a “pass” or “fail.” Instead, you must demonstrate intimate familiarity with relevant issues and the extant literature, the idea being that you possess the knowledge base to produce an informed and well thought out answer to each question posed by the examining committee. Thus, rather than simply memorize what the authors of the items on the list say, you will need to focus on synthesizing the literature in a way that shows you understand it and have thought about how individual readings might fit together.
2) Aid students in thinking about their research interests more broadly.

In conducting research, criminologists often fall victim to overspecialization and fail to think about the relevance of broader criminological research to their own research interest(s). As you read through the materials on this list, you should think about how they could be used to develop your own research agenda. Regardless of whether you know what you want to study or whether you are still figuring it out, you will (or should) learn that grounding your research in broader theoretical and methodological traditions in criminology and criminal justice will help you become a more successful researcher and scholar (e.g., publications in major journals, securing extramural grants). The readings on this list will provide you with the knowledge base to do just that.

3) Aid students in preparing their courses.

In a perfect world, all Ph.D. graduates would obtain a job at a university that only requires them to teach in their specific area(s) of interest. Unfortunately, this rarely is the case. It is highly likely that you will be required to prepare and teach a variety of courses within criminology and criminal justice, both within and outside of your specific area(s) of interest. The readings on this list will provide you with the background knowledge to teach a number of criminological courses. Taking thorough notes and/or preparing detailed summaries of the readings on this list will not only aid you in passing the exam, but will also provide you with a wealth of knowledge from which to draw when preparing to teach courses you are assigned in your eventual academic appointment.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE EXAMINATION

The exam will be given on one day in both the fall and the spring semester. The exam will have two sessions (a morning session and an afternoon session). Each session will be 4 hours long. During each session you will be asked to answer two of three questions prepared by the grading committee.

TAKING THE EXAMINATION

There is no advice that will ensure a passing grade on the comprehensive examination. However, below are a few general suggestions regarding those factors likely to be considered by the committee in the grading each examination.

In order to pass, your answer must respond to the test questions. You should expect to write a detailed, thorough, and well-integrated answer to each question you address. A successful answer will not only refer specifically to the relevant literature, but also demonstrate an understanding of the material. Generally speaking, in writing a well-structured answer, you should first tell the grading committee how you plan to answer the question, then tell the committee what you said you would tell them, and lastly, sum up and conclude what you wrote.
If a question requires knowledge of a criminological theory or theories, it is essential that you demonstrate such knowledge. An answer that demonstrates only surface knowledge is not acceptable, answers that show scholarly depth will be more likely to pass, and answers that are filled with broad statements that are not supported with appropriate citations to the literature do not show convincingly that a student truly knows the subject matter. Remember this simple but important point: only what is written on the exam can be graded. Members of the examining committee cannot “fill in the blanks” or “assume you know the answer.”

Related to the discussion above, citations to textbooks are not recommended. Textbooks or readers that contain overviews or summaries of theories may be useful in helping to organize main points about different theories and/or learning about a given theory’s empirical status. However, in no way should these works be considered as replacements for reading the original theoretical or empirical contributions of the authors in your reading list. In your answers, you should cite the original theoretical works and research studies.

With all of the above in mind, you should take a moment to reflect on what you are about to do. Although preparing for and eventually taking comprehensive examinations is a stressful and very time-consuming endeavor, it is also the only time in your academic career that you will be afforded the opportunity to immerse yourself in the criminological and criminal justice literatures. Faculty members are here to guide you if needed, but this is also the time during which you will train yourself to 1) read literature and pick out relevant points; 2) think about a large body of literature and how different works may or may not fit together; and, 3) develop ideas that can be used to answer questions on a comprehensive examination or in your future research.

Good luck!
A. Theoretical perspectives

1. Anomie/strain theory
   1.1 Anomie, Institutional anomie, and other macro-level perspectives

   - (Durkheim’s anomie from Cullen & Agnew)


1.2 Strain theory/individual level perspectives


### 2. Control theory and social disorganization

#### 2.1 Social bonding theories


2.2 Self-control/general theory


2.3 Social disorganization and collective efficacy

- Shaw & McKay covered in Cullen & Agnew


3. Social learning/differential association and cultural perspectives


4. Rational choice, opportunity, and situational theories

4.1 Rational choice, offender decision-making, deterrence


4.2 Routine activities, opportunity, and lifestyle theories


4.3 Situational-interactional perspectives


5. Labeling theory, critical theory, feminist theory


6. Life course and developmental perspectives


B. Correlates of Crime

1. Demographic correlates

1.1 Age


1.2 Gender


1.3 Race and ethnicity


2. **Family factors: family structure, parenting, maltreatment, etc.**

2.1 *Family, parent and parenting effects*


2.1 Marriage, family transitions, and desistance


### 3. Social class, inequality, and poverty

#### 3.1 SES, poverty, and crime


4. Social institutions and crime

4.1. Schools and education


4.2 *Work, employment, unemployment*


4.3 Religion, spirituality, and morality


5. Peer processes


6. **Bio-psychological factors**

   6.1 **Psychological characteristics**


6.2 Genetic and other biological processes


7. **Historical and cross-national research**

7.1 Historical studies, crime trends


7.2 Cross-national and international criminology


8. \textbf{Neighborhood-level factors}


C. Crime problems or topics

1. Gangs and street offenders


2. **Interpersonal violence**

2.1 **Intimate partner and family violence**


**2.2 Rape and sexual assaults**


2.3 Homicide and gun violence


3 Victimization research


D General Issues in Criminology

1. Methodological studies


2. **General overviews, anthologies, and transcendent readings**


