

## SOCY 4004: Gangs: Causes and Consequences

Department of Sociology  
University of Colorado Boulder

---

---

Professor: David Pyrooz, Ph.D.  
Office: Ketchum 262  
Phone: 303-492-3241  
Office Hours: W 12:00-2:00pm  
Email: [David.Pyrooz@colorado.edu](mailto:David.Pyrooz@colorado.edu)

Classroom: ECCR 1B40  
Class hours: T/TH 3:00-4:15pm  
TA: Jose Sanchez (Ketchum 482)  
TA: Office Hours: TH 11:30-1:30pm  
TA: Email: [jose.sanchez@colorado.edu](mailto:jose.sanchez@colorado.edu)

---

---

### Text

---

#### Required:

Curry, G. David, Scott H. Decker, and David C. Pyrooz. 2014. *Confronting gangs: Crime and community* (3rd ed.), New York: Oxford University Press.

Diaz, Casey. 2019. *The shot caller: A Latino gangbanger's miraculous escape from a life of violence to a new life in Christ*. Nashville, TN: Emanate Books.

Kennedy, David M. 2011. *Don't shoot: One man, a street fellowship, and the end of violence in inner-city America*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Pyrooz, David C., and Scott H. Decker. 2019. *Competing for control: Gangs and the social order of prisons*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.



### Course Description and Objectives

---

This course provides students with a comprehensive overview of the past, present, and future of street and prison gangs. The substantive focus of this course is the causes and consequences of, and responses to, gang behaviors and processes. Students will be exposed to a range of issues related to gangs. By the end of the semester, students will:

- Gain factual knowledge on concepts, trends, and the myths and realities of gangs;
- Learn to apply course material to improve thinking, problem solving, and decision-making;
- Be able to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view related to the processes and behaviors of gangs, gang members, and communities;
- Recognize the policy and practical implications surrounding the existence and responses to gangs

## Grading

---

Attendance Quizzes	100 (20%)	Grading scale:	A:	100-90%
Social Media	150 (30%)	(- = 0-2; + = 8-9)	B:	89-80%
Policy/Advocacy Essay	100 (20%)		C:	79-70%
Final Exam Essays	150 (30%)		D:	69-60%
			E:	<60%

## Attendance Quizzes (Lectures, Class Discussion, and Readings)

---

This class is scheduled to meet 29 times this semester. Attendance is required, and will be taken via short quizzes administered at the beginning of the class period. For each class period you will receive 1 point for attendance and respond to 2-5 questions on which you will be graded. For example, a quiz with four questions will be worth 5 points (1 attendance + 4 questions). These questions will be based on lecture content from the previous class and/or readings for the current lecture. Quizzes will be administered using Clickers <https://www.cubookstore.com/p-68733-i-clicker-plus.aspx>.

Your four lowest scores on quizzes will be dropped from your grade. This could be due to poor performance on the quiz. It could also be due to missing class (equivalent to a 0 on the quiz). Under no circumstances will you be able to make-up a quiz, which applies to all unexcused and excused absences—colds, car trouble, late bus, club sports, work, travel, etc. Please contact the professor for extended periods of excused absences (e.g., health). Attendance will be considered at the conclusion of the semester when rounding final grades.

Class periods will consist of lectures, discussion, group breakout sessions, and Clicker-administrated surveys. It is expected that you will ask and respond to questions during lectures, engage in discussions, participate in breakout sessions, and respond to Clicker-based questions. This is critical to achieving the learning objectives of the course. Please be mindful that some topics covered in this class may elicit rather strong and diverse opinions, such as race, immigration, victimization, and punishment. It is expected that these topics will be discussed openly, professionally, and without aggression or malice. If you feel you are unable to meet this expectation, please confer with your professor about alternative ways to have your points made. Students who feel that these topics would cause discomfort to the point that it would result in continued non-participation in class are advised to drop the course.

Attendance quizzes compose 20% of your total grade.

## Social Media

---

*Objective:* To examine gang authenticity and performance in music videos—namely, rap/hip-hop and punk/metal genres—posted on social media websites. There is considerable speculation that gang influence is evident in the content of music videos, including their financing, branding, and dissemination. It is also believed that these videos are authentic rather the performative representations of gangs, which in turn leads police and prosecutors to capitalize on such information as a source of intelligence.

*Details:* You are to (1) identify, (2) transcribe, and (3) code music, and then (4) synthesize the themes found in videos, posted on social media websites (e.g., YouTube) with alleged gang ties for a single city in the United States. Additional requirements of this assignment are as follows:

1. *Identify.*

- Depending on the grade you select for this assignment (see below), you will identify between 4 and 10 music videos posted on YouTube in the last five years.
- You are to focus on videos that have purported gang ties. This will require that you learn about gangs and gang activity in the city, which can be done via online searching into the

gang nations, symbols, signs, geography and territory, violence, rivalries, and criminal justice system responses (e.g., [www.streetgangs.com](http://www.streetgangs.com); LexisNexis).

- Rap/hip-hop videos will be the dominant genre represented in these videos, but you are encouraged to seek out punk/metal videos as well, which may also contain gang-related themes albeit with radical/extremist bents.
- The videos you identify must be “underground”, i.e., the musicians are generally not assigned to a major label, the lyrics are not posted on common lyric websites, and the goal should be for fewer than one million views. Also, the videos must not be composed only of still shots.

2. *Transcribe.*

- Once you have selected a video, you are required to transcribe it, i.e., write down the entirety of the lyrics of the song. The lyrics must be written verbatim, regardless of the content.
- This will take time, usually about 4 minutes of transcribing per one minute of lyrics.

3. *Code.*

- You will be responsible for documenting the content found in the lyrics and the video of the song.
- In a spreadsheet that will be provided to students, you will document the name of the song, the musician, the year it was posted, the number of views, a URL to the video, and numerous aspects of the lyrics and video that are central to this assignment, including gang- and non-gang-related themes. Examples include: race/ethnicity, substance use, material wealth, weapons, shooting gestures, masculinity, misogyny, gang authenticity and/or performance, active and passive forms of violence and threats, hate speech, fatalism/nihilism, anti-police rhetoric, and pros-social themes. Additional themes can be identified by students. How to operationalize these themes will be provided in a handout.
- A spreadsheet will be submitted via Canvas for each individual video.

4. *Synthesize.*

- The last part of this assignment will require you to synthesize what you have observed and documented in the videos that you have identified and transcribed.
- This will be a written assignment, due Week 11 of the semester (more info to follow).
- Readings from the class—both the books assigned, along with the citations found inside of the books—must be included in the paper (>10 citations to journals/books).

The social media assignment has two components where you will be graded. First, you get to choose your grade on this assignment based on the number of videos you identify, transcribe, and code, as follows:

- “A” = 10 videos
- “B” = 8 videos
- “C” = 6 videos
- “D” = 4 videos

Second, your grade will also be determined by how well you synthesize the themes found in the videos. Scores of “thumbs down,” “thumbs sideways,” and “thumbs up” will be used, as follows:

- 10 videos = 135, 144, and 150 points
- 8 videos = 120, 127, and 132 points
- 6 videos = 105, 112, and 118 points
- 4 videos = 90, 97, and 103 points

You are almost guaranteed to receive the grade that corresponds with the number of videos you have identified, transcribed, and coded; however, exceptions will be made in the case of extremely poor syntheses of the videos.

The social media assignment composes 30% of your total grade.

\* Disclaimer: this assignment, including the videos that will be shown in class, will contain language and images that some, if not all, would consider (1) violent, (2) overtly hostile to individuals in certain racial and ethnic groups, and (3) misogynistic and abusive toward women and LGBTQ groups.

## Policy/Advocacy Letter

---

*Objective:* To demonstrate your ability to apply social scientific knowledge and logic to leading issues related to understanding and responding to gangs.

*Details:* You will draft a letter to a public official of your choice. It could be a local (e.g., Mayor), state (e.g., Governor), or federal (e.g., Senator) elected official or someone who is appointed (e.g., Chief of Police, US Attorney General). The aim of this letter is to advocate for laws, policies, or practices related to gangs that you feel strongly about, which could entail advocating for something “new,” retaining something “old,” or reforming something “old.” You are advised (although not mandated) to write to an official who currently represents or previously represented you and has the ability to impact one of the following issues:

1. Criminal gang sentencing enhancements (e.g., state or federal statutes);
2. Police gang databases at the local, state, or federal level;
3. Civil gang injunctions;
4. Gang prevention programs or strategies in schools, neighborhoods, or jails/prisons (e.g., G.R.E.A.T.);
5. Gang intervention practices/programs unrelated to law enforcement (e.g., GRID, Cure Violence, GRYD, Homeboy Industries, crisis intervention);
6. Gang intervention or suppression strategies related to law enforcement (e.g., focused deterrence; crackdowns/round-ups);
7. Placement of gang members in solitary confinement in prison;
8. Use of specialized gang units in police, prosecution, or prison agencies;
9. Use of gang labels and rhetoric by public officials and/or members of the media (e.g., President Trump on MS-13, reporting gang names/assigning gang labels in news media);
10. Other topics (pending email confirmation of approval).

You will be graded on how convincing of an argument you make for your position. The most convincing cases will blend sound logic and theory as well as research in favor of your position. It will acknowledge competing perspectives while establishing why your position represents the best direction forward.

Essay requirements include:

- A formal letter (<https://www.thoughtco.com/write-effective-letters-to-congress-3322301>):
  - Date
  - Receiver’s address
  - Salutation
  - Text body
  - Signature
  - Sender’s contact information
- Single-spaced (no additional line or paragraph spacing)
- No more than 2 pages of text
- 1” margins all around
- Times New Roman 12 point font
- No title page
- Submit hard copy on the final day of lecture (April 29)

The police/advocacy essay composes 20% of your total grade.

## Final Essays

---

*Objective:* The final essays will evaluate your knowledge and understanding of the materials covered in the readings, lectures, and classroom discussions, as well as your ability to deeply engage and critically analyze contemporary issues related to gangs.

*Details:* You will be presented with a series of questions in which answers have seemingly opposing views. While there is no right or wrong side of the debate, you must choose one side and develop an argument that supports this view of the issue. You will be graded on the overall body of your responses to the questions, which includes a combination of crafting the argument and the logic employed, the integration of theory and empirical evidence to support your position, and general issues pertaining to writing (e.g., grammar, punctuation, spelling, citations, etc.).

The final essays are a take-home assignment. There will be no length minimum or maximum. All materials—notes, books, articles, Google Scholar—are available to you, with two exceptions:

1. The words you submit must be your own and any language or ideas taken from published works must be cited correctly, and
2. You must not work with fellow students enrolled in this class on this assignment.

The questions will be provided to you on the last day of class (April 29) when you submit your policy/advocacy essay. You must submit a hard copy of your essays on May 4 by the conclusion of our scheduled final exam time. You must sign-off that you received and submitted the exam.

The final essays compose 30% of your total grade.

## Extra Credit

---

There are three types of extra credit offered in the course:

- Additional social media videos
- Exceptional policy/advocacy letters
- Tweet threads on gangs
- Reflection essays on speakers, police ride-alongs, or public lectures

## Course Schedule

	Topic	Reading	Assn. Due
Week 1: Jan 13, 15	Syllabus		
	The study of gangs		
Week 2: Jan 20, 22	1. What's a gang? What's a gang member?	CDP: 1 PD: 3	
Week 3: Jan 27, 29	2. What explains gangs across places and people?	CDP: 2 PD: 4	
Week 4: Feb 3, 5	3. How are gangs organized and structured? Guest speaker (2/5: Cecilia Menighini)	CDP: 3 PD: 5	
Week 5: Feb 10, 12	4. How and why do youth join, persist, and leave gangs?	CDP: 4 PD: 8-9	
Week 6: Feb 17, 19	5. What is the link between gangs and violence? Guest speaker (2/17): Casey Diaz	D CDP: 5, PD: 7	
Week 7: Feb 24, 26	6. Why aren't there more girls in gangs?	CDP: 6	
Week 8: Mar 2, 4	7. Why aren't there more whites and Asians in gangs? Guest speaker (3/2): Jonathan McMillan		
Week 9: Mar 9, 11	8. Are gangs American exceptionalism?	CDP: 7	
Week 10: Mar 16, 18	9. Are street gangs going digital?	CDP: 8	
Week 11: <del>Mar 23, 25</del>	No class: Spring Break		SM: 3/29
Week 12: Mar 30, Apr 1	10. Are gangs overtaking our social institutions?		
Week 13: Apr 6, 8	11. How do we police gangs? Guest speaker (4/6): Denver PD	CDP: 9	
Week 14: Apr 13, 15	12. Are gangs in prison different?	PD: 1-2 PD: 6	
Week 15: Apr 20, 22	13. How do we legislate gangs?	K	
Week 16: April 27, 29	14. What works? What's promising? What doesn't? Guest speaker (4/29): GRID	CDP: 10	PA: 4/29
Week 17: May 4	Final exam: 7:30 to 10:00pm		Essays

**CDP: Curry, Decker, and Pyrooz—Confronting gangs**

**D: Diaz—Shot caller**

**PD: Pyrooz and Decker—Competing for control**

**K: Kennedy—Don't shoot**

**SM: Social media video synthesis**

**PA: Policy/advocacy letter**

\*This syllabus and corresponding class schedule are subject to change

---

## Contact

Course content-related questions should be emailed to [David.Pyrooz@colorado.edu](mailto:David.Pyrooz@colorado.edu). The subject line should include the course name (SOCY 4004). Emails that lack a greeting, main text, and sign off may not be acknowledged. Emails that contain questions that could be answered by reading the syllabus will be responded to with "Please consult the syllabus."

---

## Sexual Misconduct, Discrimination, Harassment, and/or Retaliation

The University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder) is committed to fostering a positive and welcoming learning, working, and living environment. CU Boulder will not tolerate acts of sexual misconduct intimate partner abuse (including dating or domestic violence), stalking, protected-class discrimination or harassment by members of our community. Individuals who believe they have been subject to misconduct or retaliatory actions for reporting a concern should contact the Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance (OIEC) at 303-492-2127 or [cureport@colorado.edu](mailto:cureport@colorado.edu). Information about the OIEC, university policies, [anonymous reporting](#), and the campus resources can be found on the [OIEC website](#). Please know that faculty and instructors have a responsibility to inform OIEC when made aware of incidents of sexual misconduct, discrimination, harassment and/or related retaliation, to ensure that individuals impacted receive information about options for reporting and support resources.

---

## Late Policy

Arrive prior to 3:00pm. Late arrivals, as well as early departures, may be considered absent for that class period.

---

## Classroom Code of Conduct

Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Those who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with race, color, national origin, sex, pregnancy, age, disability, creed, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, veteran status, political affiliation or political philosophy. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student's legal name. I will honor your request to address you by an alternate name or gender pronoun. Please advise faculty of this preference early in the semester so that they may make appropriate changes to their records. For more information, see the policies on [classroom behavior](#) and the [Student Code of Conduct](#).

---

## Electronic Device Policy

Non-disruptive occasional use of cell phones is permitted. Device sound alerts must be turned off during class. Tablets and laptops are prohibited. Audio and video recordings are not permitted. Any deviation from the aforementioned policy must be discussed with me beforehand.

---

## Academic Integrity Policy and Student Honor Code

All students enrolled in a University of Colorado Boulder course are responsible for knowing and adhering to the Honor Code. Violations of the policy may include: plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, lying, bribery, threat, unauthorized access to academic materials, clicker fraud, submitting the same or similar work in more than one course without permission from all course instructors involved, and aiding academic dishonesty. All incidents of academic misconduct will be reported to [honor@colorado.edu](mailto:honor@colorado.edu). Students who are found responsible for violating the academic integrity policy will be subject to nonacademic sanctions from the Honor Code as well as academic sanctions from the faculty member. Additional information regarding the Honor Code academic integrity policy can be found at the [Honor Code Office website](#).

---

## Services for Students with Disabilities

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit your accommodation letter from Disability Services to your faculty member in a timely manner so that your needs can be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities in the academic environment. Information on requesting accommodations is located on the [Disability Services website](#). Contact Disability Services at 303-492-8671 or [dsinfo@colorado.edu](mailto:dsinfo@colorado.edu) for further assistance. If you have a temporary medical condition or injury, see [Temporary Medical Conditions](#) under the Students tab on the Disability Services website.

---

## Writing Center

If you need help with writing, visit the CU-Boulder Writing Center. Writing tutors will work with you one-on-one at any stage of the writing process (brainstorming, generating a draft, organizing a draft, or revising a draft) for any written assignment. Consult their website for resources <http://www.colorado.edu/pwr/writingcenter.html>

---

## Religious Accommodations

Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. See [campus policy regarding religious observances](#).

---

## Withdrawals

Students wishing to withdraw are cautioned to follow formal procedures outlined by the University <http://www.colorado.edu/registrar/registration-grades/adddrop-courses>