

Frontiers of Justice
PSYC GU4612
4 Credits
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Fall 2026 | Monday 2:10 - 4 | Schermerhorn 200C

Bulletin Description. Frontiers of Justice is designed to encourage students and equip them with the skills to become active and effective “Change Agents” within their academic institutions and larger communities. Oriented by the question, *What does justice look like?*, this course aims to raise political and social awareness and engagement with the challenges facing New York City and strengthen ties between Columbia University, disadvantaged communities, and city government agencies and community organizations. Through sharing ideas about how to make structural and systemic change in ways that integrate science, law, politics, history, narrative and community engagement, the course is intended to support students in working to break down racial and ethnic barriers and toward a more fair and just society.

Prerequisites. An introductory course in psychology, sociology, African American studies, Human rights, or political science is recommended but not required. Permission of instructor required.

Office Hours

Nora Isacoff	Uris 704	Thurs 2:45 - 3:45 or by appointment
Maya Almogy	(To Be Updated)	Monday 12 - 2

Course Philosophy

Organizing questions. This course is organized around two questions: 1. What is justice? 2. How can we create change? Both are difficult in part because questions about what *is* and questions about what *ought to be* are different kinds of questions. Evidence can tell us a great deal about how the world works, but it cannot, by itself, tell us what would be just. At the same time, deciding what ought to change does not tell us what would actually change it. Throughout the course, we will consider both kinds of questions, and the ways they depend on one another.

Consider incarceration. We can ask empirical questions: Does incarceration deter crime? Does increasing sentence length increase deterrence? How likely are people convicted of serious violence to commit another serious offense? What effects does incarceration have on families and communities? Do alternatives to incarceration reduce recidivism? Evidence can help us answer these questions. But we can also ask normative questions: Does a person who has committed a serious wrong deserve punishment independent of its consequences? How should

we weigh an individual's liberty against the safety of others? How much risk may society permissibly impose on potential victims to avoid unnecessary incarceration? Evidence about recidivism or deterrence cannot, by itself, answer these questions. Yet the two kinds of questions are not independent. An argument for a policy because it makes communities safer, for example, is weakened if the policy does not in fact make communities safer.

Whose knowledge counts? Answering empirical questions also requires us to think carefully about what different sources of knowledge can tell us. We will consider empirical research, historical evidence, theory, narrative, professional expertise, community knowledge, and lived experience. Rather than assuming that any one automatically deserves priority, we will ask what each can tell us and where its limits lie. What can someone living within a system perceive that an outside expert might miss? What can systematic research reveal that individual experience cannot? What happens when people with similar lived experiences disagree? When should expertise carry particular weight, and when might experts be asking the wrong questions? Whose knowledge counts can affect how a problem is understood and which solutions are considered.

In this spirit: This fall, a cohort of undergraduate students will also be taking *Frontiers of Justice* at Sing Sing Correctional Facility through the Columbia Center for Justice. Throughout the semester, we will connect with this cohort in different ways, creating opportunities to learn alongside and from one another.

How does change happen? Change can happen in different places and at different levels. We begin with individuals, but individuals live within relationships, institutions, communities, and larger social systems, all of which shape one another. This makes questions of responsibility more complicated. Explaining why something happened is not the same as deciding who is morally responsible for it, and neither necessarily tells us who should—or who can—change it. Throughout the semester, we will distinguish among causal responsibility, moral responsibility, responsibility for remedy, and capacity for change, while asking where change is possible and where it is most likely to make a difference.

Levels of change. The course and its three projects move from personal change to community change and then to policy change. Students begin by studying individual change while attempting a change of their own. We then examine how historical processes become embedded in institutions, using punishment and mass incarceration to consider competing conceptions of justice, reform, abolition, public safety, and second chances. From there, we turn to collective action and institutional change, including student movements at Columbia, as well as education, health, environmental inequality, historical responsibility, and repair. The projects ask students to attempt personal change, engage with a specific community to support change, and work in groups to develop a policy proposal. Across the course and these projects, students must decide what should change and why, what evidence and whose knowledge are relevant, how change might occur, what tradeoffs it creates, and how to evaluate its effects. By the final project,

students must also articulate the strongest serious objection to their proposal and identify what evidence or argument would lead them to revise it.

This course does not assume that careful inquiry will always produce agreement. The aim is to understand what we actually disagree about, take competing arguments seriously, and recognize what might give us reason to change our minds.

Learning Goals

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Distinguish empirical, normative, and mixed claims about justice, and identify the forms of reasoning appropriate to each.
- Compare competing conceptions of justice, including approaches centered on welfare, liberty and rights, equality, desert, and responsibility.
- Analyze how individual behavior and social outcomes are shaped by relationships, institutions, communities, historical processes, and larger systems, while distinguishing different forms of responsibility.
- Evaluate what different sources of knowledge—including empirical research, historical evidence, theory, narrative, professional expertise, community knowledge, and lived experience—can and cannot establish.
- Apply and evaluate strategies for personal, community, and policy change, including their assumptions, mechanisms, tradeoffs, unintended consequences, and criteria for success.
- Develop and defend a policy proposal using empirical evidence and normative argument, while addressing serious objections, uncertainty, and how its effects should be evaluated.

Assignments and Grades

Assignment	Deadline (11:59p except reading responses)	Percentage
Reading Responses	Sundays at 8:00 p.m.	15%
Personal Change Project Proposal	Sun., Oct. 11	5%

Community Change Project Proposal	Sun., Oct. 25	5%
Sing Sing Reflection / Alternative Assignment	Sun., Nov. 1	5%
Social Policy Project Proposal	Weds., Nov. 11	5%
Social Policy Final Paper	Fri., Dec. 4	15%
Social Policy Presentations	Dec. 7 & 14	5%
Personal Change Final Paper	Fri., Dec. 11	15%
Community Change Final Paper	Fri., Dec. 18	15%
Class Participation	Ongoing	10%

Levels of Change Projects

The semester is organized around projects reflecting 3 levels of change. Final project requirements are listed below. Project proposal requirements are posted on Canvas.

1. Personal Change Project

Objective: Each student will identify an aspect of themselves they would like to change and work toward that change throughout the course of the semester.

Deliverable: The deliverable for this project will consist of a 5-page written reflection addressing the following:

1. Describe the change you focused on throughout the semester and why this change was important to you.
2. What individual and contextual factors facilitated or impeded your efforts to change? Use relevant concepts or findings from the course readings to help you identify and analyze these factors. How did these factors affect the strategies you used?
3. Drawing on the course readings on behavior change, analyze your efforts to change. What strategies did you use, why did you choose them, and what seemed to make change more or less likely? Discuss specific concepts or findings from the readings that help you understand your experience.
4. How, if at all, did your understanding of yourself change over the course of the project? Draw on relevant concepts from the course readings on identity and personal change to analyze your experience.
5. To what extent did the change you attempted occur? What do you think explains the outcome? Use the course readings to inform your explanation. Based on what you learned from both your experience and the readings, what would you do differently going forward, and how would you sustain any change that did occur?

Length: 5 pages

2. Community Change Project

Objective: Each student will implement methods of advocacy and intervention to enact change in NYC or in their home/school communities relevant to their own interests. This can materialize as ongoing work you are already a part of, a project you have just joined, or you may develop your own community initiative. Students are encouraged to work with other members of the course on their change project, but all written work must be their own.

Deliverable: The deliverable for this project will consist of a 5-page written reflection of what was accomplished, how the work was achieved, and any obstacles faced. Your reflection should draw on relevant concepts, findings, or arguments from the course readings to help you analyze your experience and the organization's approach to creating change.

1. Identify your project:

- What is the organization's mission?
- When and why was the organization founded?
- What are the core constituencies that the organization serves?
- What problem(s) is the organization attempting to address?

2. Assess the work you have done toward the organization's goals:

- What was accomplished?
- How did you measure the success of your project in accomplishing its goals?
- What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?
- Who benefited from your initiative?
- Whose perspectives or knowledge shaped your understanding of the problem, and did your experience change your understanding of what the community needed?
- What larger institutional or policy conditions facilitate or constrain the organization's work?
- Drawing on relevant course readings, what concepts, findings, or arguments help you understand the organization's approach to creating change, including its strategies, strengths, limitations, or challenges?

3. Include a personal reflection:

- Why did you select this organization and why is this work important to you?
- What did you set out to learn and what did you discover through your work?
- How did your experience differ from what you expected?
- How, if at all, did the course readings affect how you understood your experience or the possibilities for creating community change?
- If you could re-do your community change project, what would you do differently? Why?
- In what ways was your experience working toward community change similar to your personal change journey? In what ways was it different?

Length: 5-7 pages

3. Social Change Policy Proposal (written in groups)

Objective: Throughout the semester, students will work in small groups and consult with lawyers and policymakers and other guest speakers with relevant expertise to develop policy proposals to improve adverse social conditions.

Deliverable: This work will culminate in an 8–10 page legislative or policy proposal from the group plus an in-class presentation and personal reflection. The proposal should draw explicitly on relevant concepts, findings, and arguments from the course readings, as well as appropriate outside evidence.

Outline

1. What is the issue you are addressing? What is the essence of your proposal? How would you describe it in an “elevator pitch”?

2. What is the scope of the problem? How many people are affected?
3. Why is this issue important? How would you make your target audience care about it?
4. Who is your target audience? Who has the authority to make the change you are proposing?
5. What are the main changes you are proposing? What is the current situation, what would the ideal situation look like, and how would your policy move from one to the other?
6. Who would benefit from your proposal? Who might be harmed or bear costs? What tradeoffs does your proposal create?
7. What are two or three things you learned from your personal or community work, course readings, and/or other relevant sources of knowledge that informed your proposal?
8. What is the empirical case for your proposal? What evidence supports your assumptions about the problem, its causes, and the likely effects of your proposed policy?
9. What is the normative case for your proposal? Why would the change you propose be more just? What principles or values support that judgment?
10. What is the strongest serious objection to your proposal? How would you respond to it?
11. How should the effects of your proposal be evaluated? What outcomes would count as success, and for whom?
12. What evidence or argument would lead you to modify or abandon your proposal?

Length: 8–10 pages

Weekly Reading Responses

The goal of the weekly reading responses is to prepare you for substantive discussion in class. This is a reading- and discussion-intensive course, and our class time will generally not be spent walking through the readings or establishing what each author said. You should do that work before class so that we can use our time together to examine the ideas, put them into conversation with one another, identify points of disagreement, consider their implications, and learn from one another and from our guest speakers.

Each week, you will submit a short response to the assigned readings by **Sunday at 8:00 p.m.** Your response should demonstrate that you have thought carefully about the readings rather than simply summarizing them. Specific prompts may vary from week to week, but in preparing your response, consider questions such as:

1. What is the core argument? What is the author claiming, and what evidence or reasoning supports it?
2. How does it fit? How does it agree with, challenge, or complicate other readings or ideas from the course?

3. What does it tell us about justice? What values or conception of justice does it assume or support?
4. What does it tell us about change? What should change, at what level, by whom, and through what mechanism?
5. What follows in practice? What policy, program, institutional practice, or individual action might follow?
6. What are the limits or tradeoffs? What might be overlooked, what could go wrong, and who might bear the costs?
7. What would we need to know? What evidence or perspectives are missing? How would we know whether a change worked? What might change your mind?

You do not need to address every question above in every response. They are a guide to the kind of thinking you should be doing as you read. Some weeks I will provide a more specific prompt based on the readings and the focus of that class.

Responses should be approximately 300 words. They will be graded on a 5-point scale, with the lowest response (or missed response) not counted. Grading is based on accurate understanding of the readings, thoughtful engagement with their arguments and evidence, and meaningful connections among readings, course ideas, and the questions we are examining. You are not graded on agreeing with, or disagreeing with, the readings, your classmates, or me.

Course Schedule and Readings

Reading response for Class 1 is due on Sept. 13, and every Sunday night by 8p.

Additional guest speakers may be added throughout the semester.

Class 1. What Is Justice? What Kinds of Questions Are We Asking? (Sept. 14)

Sandel, M. J. (2009). Doing the right thing. In *Justice: What's the right thing to do?* (pp. 3–30). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Baggini, J. (2012). What can science tell us about morality? What facts tell us about values. In *The big questions: Ethics* (pp. 161–170). Quercus.

Shklar, J. N. (1990). Misfortune and injustice. In *The faces of injustice* (pp. 51–82). Yale University Press.

Note: No class on Sept. 21. This class will be made up by the visit to Sing Sing on Oct. 27.

Class 2. Individuals Within Systems (Sept. 28)

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2007). The bioecological model of human development. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 793–828). John Wiley & Sons.

Elder, G. H., Jr., Johnson, M. K., & Crosnoe, R. (2003). The emergence and development of life course theory. In J. T. Mortimer & M. J. Shanahan (Eds.), *Handbook of the life course* (pp. 3–19). Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

Small, M. L., Harding, D. J., & Lamont, M. (2010). Reconsidering culture and poverty. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 629(1), 6–27.

Mendoza-Denton, R., Downey, G., Purdie, V. J., Davis, A., & Pietrzak, J. (2002). Sensitivity to status-based rejection: Implications for African American students' college experience. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(4), 896–918.

Guest speakers: Federica Coppola & Mujahideen Muhammad

Class 3. Can People Change? Agency, Identity, and Context (Oct. 5)

Duckworth, A. L., & Gross, J. J. (2020). Behavior change. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 161, 39–49.

McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(3), 233–238.

Yeager, D. S., & Dweck, C. S. (2020). What can be learned from growth mindset controversies? *American Psychologist*, 75(9), 1269–1284.

Maruna, S. (2016). Desistance and restorative justice: It's now or never. *Restorative Justice*, 4(3), 289–301.

Hale, M. S. (2023, November 3). Prison is a dangerous place for LGBTQ+ people. I made a safe space in the library. *The Marshall Project*, 1-6.

Guest speaker: Claudia Rincon

Note: Immediately after class. I will be giving a talk on my self-communication research in Uris. All are welcome to attend.

Personal Change Project Proposal due Oct 11.

Class 4. Who Knows? Evidence, Expertise, and Lived Experience (Oct. 12)

Collins, H. M., & Evans, R. (2002). The third wave of science studies: Studies of expertise and experience. *Social Studies of Science*, 32(2), 235–296. [Read pp. 249–256, 269–271.]

Wynne, B. (1992). Misunderstood misunderstanding: Social identities and public uptake of science. *Public Understanding of Science*, 1(3), 281–304.

Cole, E. R. (2009). Intersectionality and research in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 64(3), 170–180.

Clifton, S., Cooper, E., Bourke, J., Connor, S., Denton, S., Dominish, B., Gibellini, C., Gilroy, J., Hallahan, L., Jessep, S., Katterl, S., Mellifont, D., O’Brien, B., Farrant, F. Q., Watharow, A., & Wynn, R. (2025). Disability lived experience and expertise: Recognising the expert contributions of people with disability. *Evidence & Policy*, 21(4), 578–595.

Guest speaker: Noah Remnick

Class 5. How Does History Become Structure? Mass Incarceration as a Case (Oct. 19)

Hinton, E. (2016). Origins of mass incarceration. In *From the war on poverty to the war on crime: The making of mass incarceration in America* (pp. 1–26). Harvard University Press.

Muller, C. (2012). Northward migration and the rise of racial disparity in American incarceration, 1880–1950. *American Journal of Sociology*, 118(2), [Read pp. 281–292 and 316–326.]

Miller, R. J. (2020, December 30). How thousands of American laws keep people “imprisoned” long after they’re released. *POLITICO*.

Forman, J., Jr. (2025, January 28). What happened when America emptied its youth prisons. *The New York Times Magazine*.

Community Change Project Proposal due Oct 25.

Class 6. Why Punish? Evidence, Desert, Safety, and Liberty (Oct. 26)

Baggini, J. (2012). Are we responsible for our actions? Criminality and being in your right mind. In *The big questions: Ethics* (pp. 131–140). Quercus.

Morris, H. (1968). Persons and punishment. *The Monist*, 52(4), 475–501.

Burgh, R. W. (1982). Do the guilty deserve punishment? *The Journal of Philosophy*, 79(4), 193–210.

National Research Council. (2014). The crime prevention effects of incarceration. In *The growth of incarceration in the United States: Exploring causes and consequences* (pp. 130–156). The National Academies Press. [pp. 2-14].

Note: On Oct. 27, our class will be visiting Sing Sing Correctional Facility. This visit is optional but highly encouraged.

Sing Sing Visit Reflection (or alternative assignment) due Nov 1.

Note: No class on Nov. 2 (Fall Break.)

Class 7. Abolition, Reform, and Second Chances (Nov. 9)

Davis, A. Y. (2003). Abolitionist alternatives. In *Are prisons obsolete?* Seven Stories Press.

Remnick, N. & Muhammad, M. (2026). *Ending endless punishment: Excessive sentencing, transformation, and the case for Second Look in New York* (pp. 1–2, 42–46). Center for Justice at Columbia University.

Levin, B. & Levine, K. (2024). Redistributing justice. *Columbia Law Review*, 124(5), 1531–1594 (pp. 1532–1540, 1556–1562).

Guest speaker: Mujahideen Muhammad

Social Change Project Proposal due Nov. 11

Class 8. Who Gets to Change a Community? Collective Action, Power, Participation, and Movement Strategy (Nov. 16)

Crutchfield, L. R. (2018). Turn grassroots gold. In *How change happens: Why some social movements succeed while others don't* (pp. 21–50). John Wiley & Sons.

Garza, A. (2020). United fronts and popular fronts. In *The purpose of power: How we come together when we fall apart* (pp. 207–218). One World.

Feinberg, M., Willer, R., & Kovacheff, C. (2020). The activist's dilemma: Extreme protest actions reduce popular support for social movements. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 119(5), 1086–1111. (pp. 1086–1093, 1106–1109).

Guest speaker: Michelle Kaminsky

Class 9. How Do Movements Create Change? Columbia, Student Activism, and Movement Strategy (Nov. 23)

de Guzman, C. (2025, May 8). Protests, police, and politics at Columbia University take the national spotlight again: What to know. *TIME*.

Chenoweth, E. (2023). The role of violence in nonviolent resistance. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 26, 55–77.

Levendusky, M. S., & Malhotra, N. (2016). (Mis)perceptions of partisan polarization in the American public. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(S1), 378–391.

Feinberg, M., & Willer, R. (2015). From gulf to bridge: When do moral arguments facilitate political influence? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(12), 1665–1681.

Class 10. Evaluating the Effects of Interventions (Nov. 30)

McConnell, A. (2010). Policy success, policy failure and grey areas in-between. *Journal of Public Policy*, 30(3), 345–362.

Oliver, K., Lorenc, T., & Tinkler, J. (2020). Evaluating unintended consequences: New insights into solving practical, ethical and political challenges of evaluation. *Evaluation*, 26(1), 61–75.

Baxter, A. J., Tweed, E. J., Katikireddi, S. V., & Thomson, H. (2019). Effects of Housing First approaches on health and well-being of adults who are homeless or at risk of homelessness: Systematic review and meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 73(5), 379–387.

Social Change Final Paper due Dec. 4 (Group paper)

Classes 11 & 12. Social Change Project Presentations (Dec. 7 & 14)

No Reading Reflections are due before these classes. More information about presentations will be provided in class and on Canvas.

Personal Change Final Paper due Dec. 11

Community Change Final Paper due Dec. 18

Additional Information

Academic integrity. Please see www.college.columbia.edu/academics/academicintegrity. Note that turning in work that is not your own, whether written in part or fully by another human or by AI, can result in very serious consequences such as failing the class.

Attendance. Class participation is the foundation of any seminar course, including this one. If you need to miss a class, please notify me as soon as possible. Of course, if you are sick (even with a cold) you should stay home, but staying in touch with me about this will be very helpful.

Late assignments. Reading reflections posted after the 8p deadline will earn a maximum of 3 points. Reading reflections cannot be turned in after we have discussed them in class. Other late assignments will lose 10% per day late. Please be in touch with me ahead of time with any concerns.

Students with disabilities. Contact Disability Services before the first class to register for accommodations (<https://health.columbia.edu/disability-services>)

Columbia University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Pledge on Academic Freedom in the Classroom. Knowledge flourishes when inquiry is free and respectful. This class, which has been approved as part of the Columbia curriculum by appropriate faculty bodies, aims to advance knowledge through discussion, debate, and carefully selected readings and assignments. In accordance with principles of academic freedom promulgated by the American Association of University Professors and affirmed by many universities, including Columbia, the instructor has the authority to set the class syllabus, which may include controversial material relevant to topics being studied. While all participants and their views will be treated respectfully, no one should expect to be shielded from challenging or even upsetting ideas, since thoughtfully engaging such ideas is crucial to free inquiry and intellectual growth.

Participation. We all need every one of you to come to class having completed all of the readings and to be fully present in our discussions, pushing yourselves to listen more closely as

well as contributing your questions, concerns, and insights to each discussion. If you don't understand something you'd like to understand, please ask. If you don't understand why we are even reading a particular paper, you are welcome to share that. I ask that you bring with you to class respect for each other and me, curiosity, an open mind, and all of your unique gifts and backgrounds, and let's see where this takes us.