

Oral Defense Announcement

University of Missouri – St. Louis Graduate School

An oral examination in defense of the dissertation for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Criminology and Criminal Justice

Faraneh Shamsrad

M.A., Criminology & Criminal Justice, University of Missouri – St. Louis, 2020
B.S., Criminology & Criminal Justice, University of Missouri – St. Louis, 2017

Immigration, Moral Panics, and Punishment: The Impact of Media Coverage and Public Interest on Jail Incarceration

Date: April 9, 2024
Time: 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.
Place: Jim Short Room, 324 Lucas Hall

Abstract

Despite extensive empirical evidence showing that immigration does not lead to increases in crime, the purported immigration and crime link has been used to buttress increasingly punitive immigration policies over the past few decades. While previous studies have explored the role of enforcement practices for punishment, this dissertation delves into the mechanisms through which immigrants are transformed into “criminal subjects” and the consequences for punishment at the local level. By integrating moral panic theory with research on immigration, crime, and punishment, I propose that the inflammatory language surrounding immigration in media and public discourse has punitive consequences for immigrants. Moreover, although the mass media has traditionally had a monopoly on the ability to shape collective sentiment, the rise of digital platforms and communications have transformed the public into “digitally empowered claim-makers” with significant capabilities to sculpt public sentiment and define social problems. To understand whether increased concern over immigrant criminality impacts punishment, data on newspaper coverage and Google search volumes for the term “illegal immigration” are collected, alongside county-level jail data from the entire United States. Using a series of statistical models, this study finds that Google search volumes increase the total jailed population and jailed citizens. The findings of this study suggest that the symbolic power of moral panics linking immigration to crime has far reaching implications. Moreover, the nonsignificant effect of newspaper coverage coupled with the significant effect of Google searches on jail incarceration underscore the necessity to reconsider the ways in which technological changes have transformed the production of public knowledge, and the significant role “digitally empowered claim-makers” play in constructing social problems and mobilizing consensus.

Defense of Dissertation Committee

Adam Boessen, Ph.D.
Marisa Omori, Ph.D.
Lee Ann Slocum, Ph.D.
Stephanie DiPietro, Ph.D.