

ACJS Today

Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences

The Study of Federal Law Enforcement: A Clarion Call to Fill the Gap in Criminal Justice Education

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Recently, I found myself engaged in what has been a very common activity for me throughout my years of teaching criminal justice: counseling a student about criminal justice careers in the federal government. Indeed, I have taught criminal justice for a long time and at several different institutions. One thing that has remained constant over time and across the country is the general interest students have in federal law enforcement.

I've always been delighted to share information about federal law enforcement careers. I've worked in both federal and local law enforcement. I enjoy discussing the pros and cons of both career's settings relative to each other. Unfortunately, what I have found to be all-too-often true is that the knowledge of students regarding local policing is not just more advanced than the
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The Study of Federal Law Enforcement, Continued from page 1

knowledge they possess about federal law enforcement (which is understandable), but that real knowledge of the latter approaches non-existence.

At the Midwest Criminal Justice Association meeting in Chicago this past September, I gave a panel presentation in which I appealed to those in attendance to consider paying more attention to federal law enforcement in our scholarship and teaching. I'd like to make that same appeal here.

To the extent that criminal justice students know anything about federal law enforcement, where do they get their information? For the most part, students get the lion share of their information about federal law enforcement from media sources (both news and entertainment driven). In addition to the occasional straight news story about a major bust or raid involving federal agents, there is a myriad of television shows and movies which contribute to name recognition of federal agencies if nothing else. I suspect few criminal justice professors, much less students, had ever heard of NCIS (Naval Criminal Investigative Service) prior to the running of the popular TV series starring Mark Harmon. Never mind that on many occasions, the NCIS special agents on television work well outside the range of the agency's actual jurisdiction.

As far as higher education is concerned, there are many occasions where students will bump into the opportunity to learn about the federal law enforcement community. Introductory criminal justice and policing textbooks often have a few pages (but typically not a full chapter) devoted to federal law enforcement. Additionally, federal law enforcement career opportunities are sometimes highlighted in the sidebars of such textbooks. However, there are no textbooks (and almost no corresponding courses) devoted to federal law

enforcement and the federal criminal justice system. With rare exception, the literature on federal law enforcement is confined to career books, kiss-and-tell books by ex-federal law enforcement officials (e.g. Louis Freeh's *My FBI: Bringing Down the Mafia, Investigating Bill Clinton, and Fighting the War on Terror*), and topical books relating to criminal enterprises at war with the federal law enforcement community (such as organized crime, terrorism, drugs, etc).

In addition to introductory courses, many criminal justice students have a chance to be exposed to federal law enforcement, or elements of it, while taking certain elective courses. For example, one cannot help but learn a little bit about the FBI and agencies within the Department of Homeland Security while taking homeland security and terrorism-related courses. And it would be difficult to avoid learning something about the IRS while taking a white collar crime course. But what about courses on federal law enforcement itself? Or even about the federal criminal justice system as a whole? Such courses just aren't there.

To illustrate this point, I examined the course offerings of criminal justice programs at five state universities in the Upper Midwest. Collectively, these five institutions offered 218 criminal justice courses. Two of those courses related to homeland security. Not surprisingly, none of the courses specifically related to federal law enforcement or mentioned federal law enforcement as part of the course content, as described in the course description.

Hence, a dearth of federal law enforcement knowledge among criminal justice students is somewhat expected. While I personally believe that criminal justice and law enforcement students aren't learning much about the federal law enforcement community in college, I don't have hard evidence that there is a persistent deficiency. So forgive me, but

anecdotal evidence will have to do—at least to get the discussion going.

Recently, I surveyed a total of 78 law enforcement students at a university in Minnesota to gauge their command of basic knowledge about federal law enforcement and the federal criminal justice system. The students were in their sophomore, junior, and senior years, but consisted primarily of juniors and seniors. A sampling of the survey questions and responses are summarized below. The results are admittedly not scientific (or even quasi-scientific). However, I still believe they are telling. The responses constitute smoke, so we should consider the possibility of fire.

1. *List any 6 federal law enforcement agencies.*

- Average # of agencies correctly listed = 3.7
- # of students who erroneously listed the CIA = 52 (67%)
- Note: there are over 100 federal law enforcement agencies

2. *Which level of government is given the broadest police powers under the U.S. Constitution?*

- # that correctly identifying the states = 20 (26%)
- # that identified federal government = 37 (47%)

3. *Which agency in the federal government possesses duties that are most similar to those of a sheriff's department (e.g. serving processes, protecting the courts, etc)?*

- 29 (37%) identified the FBI
- 21 (27%) identified the U.S. Marshals (the correct answer)
- Note: "Marshal" is a cop. "Marshall" is a boy's name, and a town in

Minnesota. Even professors get the spelling of this agency wrong.

4. *What is the oldest federal law enforcement agency?*

- 36 (46%) identified the FBI as the oldest
- Note: acceptable responses would include the Postal Inspection Service, U.S. Customs (now part of two agencies: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and U.S. Customs and Border Protection), and the U.S. Marshals Service, as all 3 lay claim to being the oldest and have arguments in their favor. The FBI, having been born in the 20th century, is far from the oldest.

5. *What is the working title for most federal criminal investigators?*

- 11 (14%) correctly indicated "special agent".

6. *Which federal law enforcement agency is the lead agency responsible for investigating counterfeiting?*

- 14 (18%) correctly indicated the Secret Service.

7. *Approximately how many federal judicial districts are there in the U.S.?*

- 2 (2.5%) gave answers in the 90's (there are 94).
- 15 said there are 13 districts (interestingly, there are 13 federal appellate circuits).

8. *What is the working title for line-level federal prosecutors?*

- I was looking for U.S. Attorney or Assistant U.S. Attorney.
- 0 students gave the correct answer.
- Most gave either “district attorney” or “attorney general”.

9. *Federal prisons are populated by what type of offender more than any other?*

- 33 (42%) correctly indicated drug offenses.
- Other responses included white collar crime and violent crimes such as murder.

Of the 78 students surveyed, 68 of them expressed a desire to pursue a law enforcement career, and 43% of those (29) expressed a particular desire to pursue a federal law enforcement career.

It is my contention that criminal justice students are not adequately informed about the history, nature, and structure of the federal criminal justice system—and particularly federal law enforcement—to a level commensurate with their interests or its importance and influence in our society. My hope in penning this essay is two-fold: to encourage a more systematic treatment of federal law enforcement and federal criminal justice system in criminal justice curriculum, and to push for an expansion of criminal justice scholarship and literature relating to federal law enforcement.

For my own part, I created a federal law enforcement course at the last two institutions I taught at. The course touches on the nature of federalism in the United States as a form of government, including the relationship between federal, state, and local law enforcement. The course also takes a close look at the Commerce Clause, the Necessary and Proper Clause, Congress’ enumerated powers, and other elements of the U.S. Constitution, along with

relevant case law. Finally, the course explores the history of federal law enforcement in the country, and surveys the contemporary structure and activities of various federal law enforcement agencies. This includes an examination of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 and the federal law enforcement shake-up that followed.

Regarding scholarship, the pep-talk embedded in this essay is for my own consumption as well. I’ve only recently begun to pursue a research agenda that focuses, in part, on law enforcement at the federal level. Frankly, the scholarly literature on federal law enforcement is yet to be written. The topic is wide-open for study. There are opportunities to explore relationships between federal agencies and other jurisdictions, federal crime policy, normative questions such as what the federal government ought to do (and ought not do) relative to the responsibilities of state and local agencies, and many other areas. I encourage my colleagues around the country—especially newer faculty in search of scholarship niches—to help advance knowledge about American federal law enforcement through their teaching and research.

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March is National Criminal Justice Month

March was established as “National Criminal Justice Month” by the U.S. House of Representatives on March 4, 2009. ACJS played an integral role in generating the resolution that was ultimately passed by the House. Now, ACJS is encouraging all members to recognize and promote the month in attempt to promote societal awareness regarding the causes and consequences of crime, as well as strategies for preventing and responding to crime.

ACJS members are encouraged to help promote the month, for instance by:

- Hosting a student paper and/or poster contest in honor of the month;
- Selecting and recommending a criminal justice book for students to read in recognition of the month, and hosting a discussion for students to share their thoughts;
- Reaching out to police departments, courts, corrections agencies, and other criminal justice-based agencies to encourage them to promote the month;
- Encouraging school-based criminal justice societies/organizations to host events to promote the month;
- Distributing public service announcements that recognize March as National Criminal Justice Month;
- Encouraging government leaders to recognize the month.

All ACJS members are also encouraged to visit the National Criminal Justice Month website at www.acjs.org/cjmonth.cfm to learn more, and join the Facebook fan page created in recognition of the month. Further, all are invited to stop by the National Criminal Justice Month table in the Exhibit Hall at the annual meeting in Toronto.

ASC Annual Conference in San Francisco

The American Society of Criminology meetings held in San Francisco this past November were the largest ever, with some 3,100 participants and 870 sessions. The meetings next year will be held from November 16 to 19 in Washington, D.C. Deadline for submissions is March 15.

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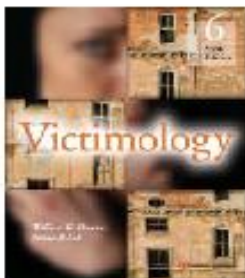
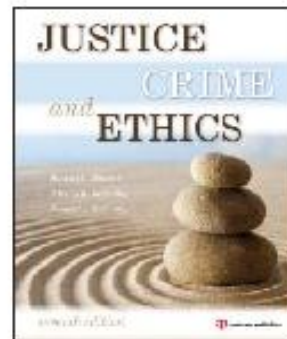
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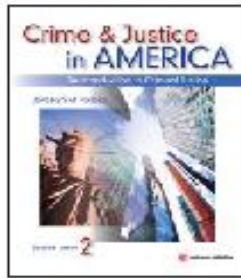
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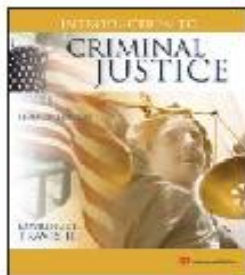
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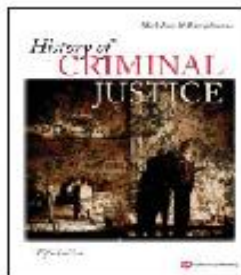
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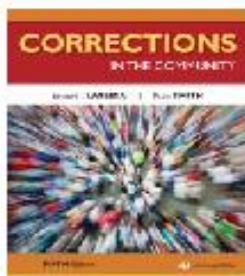
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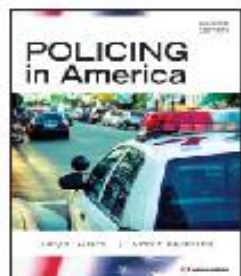
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