

HIS 301.01

Prisons, Policing, and Surveillance in U.S. History

Satisfies: ESI

T/Th, 11:30-12:50

Prof. Robert Chase

Course Description: In the wake of George Floyd’s murder at the hands of police officers in 2020, the nation spent a summer in protest that has awakened many to the deep racial disparities and violent abuses of the U.S. criminal justice system. This research seminar takes up the study of the U.S. criminal justice system and all its key components – policing, incarceration, and migrant detentions – through the lens of the current protest moment for Black Lives and against systematic racism as represented through police brutality, migrant detention, and mass incarceration. With 2.2 million people in prison and nearly 6.5 million people under the auspices of the criminal justice system (via probation or parole), the United States, which has only 5 percent of the world’s general population, now imprisons twenty-five percent of the world’s prison population. How did the United States come to have the world’s highest rate of incarceration and one so sharply racially disproportionate? This course traces the development of what some have termed the “New Jim Crow” and a “prison empire” by viewing American history through the lens of race, crime, punishment policing, and prisons.

As a History Department requirement, the chief purpose of 301 is to teach History majors how to read, think, write, and research as a professional historian would. As an introductory course to the historian’s craft, HIS 301 teaches students practical research skills—such as: how to use the library and discover primary sources; how to convey research through oral presentations; how to assess primary and secondary sources through critical historical analysis; how to write a persuasive historical narrative based on primary and secondary research. By its conclusion, you will have learned the historian’s research methods and practices as you write your own historical narrative in a final research paper.