

## **Application Part 1: SOAR Cover Sheet**

The SOAR cover sheet will be submitted in hard copy form.

## **Application Part 2: Faculty Proposal**

**By: Debra Wetcher-Hendricks and Melanie Gutierrez**

Project title: Crackdown on Minor Crimes as a Means of Controlling Major Crime

Faculty Member: Debra Wetcher-Hendricks, Associate Professor of Sociology

Student: Melanie Gutierrez

Project Start Date: April 10, 2017

Project End Date: August 4, 2017

### **Description of Project**

As a Sociology major with an interest in law and criminal justice, Melanie has taken a special interest in crime patterns and control. This interest has led her to consider conditions that promote criminal activity with the hopes of identifying factors that, to date, have not received much attention. Her proposed SOAR project focuses upon the proposition that police response to minor violations of the law sets the tone for the jurisdiction.

Melanie reasons that, when police overlook minor violations of the law, they fail to impose their authority on the public, thus lowering potential criminals' hesitancy to break laws. However, if police issue citations and arrests for violations of minor legal standards, then those in the jurisdiction assume that major violations will receive even harsher penalties, which serves as a deterrence from criminal behavior. Melanie wishes to examine this possibility. She plans to consider the types and extents of negative sanctions for legal infractions (e.g. jaywalking, littering), which are regarded as a even more minor offense than misdemeanors, and major crime rates in various municipalities.

To test her research hypothesis that a negative correlation exists between charges filed for infractions and major crime rate, Melanie will gather and analyze data from public crime records. Because her units of analysis will be municipalities, all municipal areas identified by the U.S. Census Bureau will serve as her sampling frame. From the Census Bureau list, she will select municipalities for her sample using stratified sampling based upon population density. The majority of Melanie's work will involve obtaining crime statistics about these municipalities and describing statistical evidence for any trends that she notices.

### **Project Responsibilities and Timetable**

The table below outlines a schedule for the activities associated with Melanie's project. Please note that Melanie plans to begin work on her literature review before the end of the Spring 2017 semester. Doing so allows her to begin gathering data as soon as the SOAR "session" begins. She hopes, therefore, to have results, although likely primitive ones, to provide at her SOAR presentation during the summer.

ACTIVITY	DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITY	PROJECTED DATE OF COMPLETION
preparation of literature review	Melanie	May 5, 2017
literature review revisions	Melanie in consultation with Dr. Wetcher-Hendricks	May 19, 2017
sampling	Melanie in consultation with Dr. Wetcher-Hendricks	May 26, 2017
data gathering	Melanie	June 16, 2017
data entry	Melanie with assistance from Dr. Wetcher-Hendricks	June 30, 2017
data analysis (correlation and regression analyses; possible ANOVAs, t-tests, and chi-square tests)	Melanie in consultation with Dr. Wetcher-Hendricks	June 30, 2017
development of structure for written report	Dr. Wetcher-Hendricks directing Melanie	July 14, 2017
draft of written research report draft	Melanie	July 28, 2017
revised written research report	Melanie in consultation with Dr. Wetcher-Hendricks	August 4, 2017

#### Discipline-related Scholarship

Previous research forms a strong foundation for Melanie's study. Although no studies have addressed the exact topic that she wishes to investigate, results of a combination of studies validate her line of thinking. Kelly (2009) referred to Kant's notion that punishing one for improper behavior can prevent others from behaving improperly. Research on more recent social conditions has identified a positive correlation between arrests for misdemeanors and felonies (Cerdá, et al. 2009). These studies and others like them, when considered cooperatively, suggest that holding individuals accountable for lesser crimes deters serious criminal activity. Melanie's investigation will build upon this research by determining whether penalties for trivial crimes initiate the same pattern.

Melanie first encountered the strategy of building upon past research in her SOC 246 (Basic Sociological Research) class. In that class as well as in SOC 346 (Advanced Research Methods), Melanie explored the meaning of social research, both with respect to legitimacy of results and social value. Those lessons will help to guide Melanie through her SOAR project investigation. The faculty mentor serves as a guide in this respect, providing her with instruction when needed, ensuring that she conducts a valid study, and helping her to effectively report her findings

#### Contribution to the Discipline

Melanie's study qualifies as a form of applied sociology, particularly action research. Action research attempts to reveal information that can be used to create policies or procedures in hopes of improving social conditions. With that understanding, it becomes clear that the most important potential outcome of Melanie's study is discovering new information about conditions of crime.

Any support for her research hypothesis could prompt changes in law enforcement strategies. Thus, her research may facilitate social change, the goal of all applied sociology.

Many opportunities exist for Melanie to present the results of her research. As required of all students involved in the SOAR program, Melanie will participate in Moravian College's Scholars' Day. The LVAIC Social Justice/Social Research Conference in the Spring of 2018 offers another presentation venue for Melanie, this one with a wider audience than she would have at Scholars' Day. Additionally, depending upon the concreteness of her findings, Melanie may choose to summarize her study in a poster presentation and submit proposals to display the poster at student sessions of the Pennsylvania Sociological Society, the Eastern Sociological Society, or the American Sociological Association annual meeting.

## SOURCES

Cerda, M., Tracy M., Messner, S.F., Vlahov, D., Tardiff, K., & Galea, S. (2009). Misdemeanor Policing, Physical Disorder, and Gun-related Homicide. *Epidemiology*, 20(4), 533-541. doi:10.1097/ede.0b013e3181a4a99

Kelly, E.I. (2009). Criminal Justice Without Retribution. *Journal of Philosophy*, 106 (8), 440-462. doi:10.5840/jphil2009106840

## **Application Part 3: Student Statement of Purpose**

**By: Melanie Gutierrez**

Crime, regardless of the degree, is generally perceived as an overall negative trait of any area. Unfortunately, “violent crime increased in many of the nation’s largest cities in 2016, the second year in a row that metro areas saw jumps in homicide, robbery and aggravated assault.” (Sanburn and Johnson 2017) The executive director of the Major Cities Chief Association (MCCA) cautioned that it is too early to know whether these increases seen over the last few years were merely blips or the beginning of a sustained increase in overall crime rates around the country (Sanburn and Johnson 2017). Criminologists often say it takes at least three to five years of data to show true trend lines. However, in my opinion, it is foolish to wait a few years to make a decision when in fact it could be too late to change at that point.

It would be much more effective to be proactive rather than reactive in such situations; perhaps, rather than punishing criminals after the fact, prevention is a better approach. My proposed key to a proactive approach is to explore the relationship between petty crime and severe crime. It is beneficial to investigate whether severe crime seem to be more common in areas without strong enforcement of the law when it comes to minor crimes. Identifying a this trend could be the basis for improving the effectiveness of crime prevention.

Therefore, I would like to investigate the relationship between legal penalties for petty crime and prevalence of severe crime. This investigation can serve as the first step in determining whether the prevention approach has merit. If low-level infractions are punished, theories of deterrence suggest that serious crime rates should be lower than they are if low-level crimes are not punished. This study attempts to provide data as evidence of this trend identified by the research hypothesis, H, below. The corresponding null hypothesis, H<sub>0</sub>, needed for data analysis purposes, follows.

$$H: r_{ES} < 0$$

E= extent to which enforcement of infraction-related laws occurs

$$H_0: r_{ES} = 0$$

S= Serious crime rate

The information gathered from this study could benefit society by possibly providing law enforcement officials with proof of a way to reduce the amount of overall crime rate in areas; not solely cities or counties that have a reputation of being ‘unsafe’ in comparison to other, but all places. It can give society hope, and condition those who may believe that the benefits outweigh the costs of minor crimes to think twice before acting.

Personally, I will gain a great deal as well from this project. I am a Sociology Law and Society major, with plans on attending the police academy upon graduation from Moravian College. This study will not only provide me with knowledge about a topic and the research process relating directly to my major, but will also allow me to gain contacts who are already a part of the career field that I hope to join someday.

## SOURCES

Sunburn, Josh, and David Johnson. "Violent Crime Is On the Rise in U.S. Cities." *Time*, 30 Jan. 2017. Web. 12 Mar. 2017.



## **Application Part 4: Expense Proposal**

**PROJECT TITLE:** Crackdown on Minor Crimes as a Means of Controlling Major Crime

**Faculty Mentor:** Dr. Debra Wetcher-Hendricks (Sociology Department)

**Student:** Melanie Gutierrez

### **ITEMIZED LIST OF EXPENSES**

crime record access fees	\$ 200.00
Some municipalities charge a fee for accessing their crime records. Funds are requested for such situations.	
conference expenses	\$ 250.00
These funds would be applied to travel costs and registration fees for any regional conferences at which Melanie presents her findings from this project.	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$450.00</b>