Greetings! I hope that this letter finds you in good spirits during these closing days of winter.

The department is happy to announce the addition of a new faculty member – Professor Brianna Remster who is completing her Ph.D. in sociology at Penn State. Brianna will join the department this fall and will have primary teaching responsibilities in the Criminal Justice major. Look out for more information on Brianna on our website and in a future newsletter.

The department will be offering several new courses in the fall which enhance our already strong programs. These include Discrimination and Segregation, Social Justice, Sociology of College, Gender and Crime, and Comparative Criminology. In addition, we will offer Medical Sociology which has not been scheduled for a few years. All these courses provide a great opportunity for students to broaden and deepen their knowledge of sociology and criminology. I encourage you to explore these new possibilities along with our other courses.

Student research is a key part of our majors’ education, and there are some exciting developments on that front. First, the department will be hosting the 33rd Annual Mid-Atlantic Undergraduate Research Conference here at Villanova on Friday, April 19th. The Conference allows students to present original research that they have completed, either independently or as part of their coursework. Our majors have uniformly said that the Conference is a great experience that helps bring together various aspects of their education. An announcement has been sent to students, and I strongly urge you to participate. Please visit our website at socandcrim.villanova.edu to register.

A second research-related development is the establishment of a new student research fellowship. The William and Carolyn Vreeland and Bernard J. Gallagher III Fund for Mentored Research provides the department money to support students conducting research about or within developing regions such as Africa, Latin America, India or Southeast Asia. The research is to be student driven and overseen by a faculty mentor. Funds can be used for a research stipend, travel expenses or other research-related activities. The scholarship is only open to Sociology majors with demonstrated financial need. Women are especially encouraged to apply.

Starting in fall 2013, the department will have a new name – Sociology and Criminology. The change is being made to better reflect the purposes and content of the curriculum and majors. Students who declared as Criminal Justice majors will receive a Criminal Justice degree upon graduation. Only those students declaring in the fall 2013 semester and after will get a Criminology degree.

Good luck with the rest of the semester!

- Dr. DeFina
Independent Study on Prison
by Molly Sapia, Sociology '13

During the Fall 2012 semester, I tutored an inmate in math at Graterford State Correctional Institution as part of an independent study. The object of the independent study was to use my "sociological imagination," connecting the personal history of the inmate to larger social forces that have affected his life chances. The theoretical basis that informed my study included the works of sociologists Loïc Waquant, Jeffrey Reiman, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. I combined their ideas with my experience of going to the Giovanni Reid and Carlton Bennett trial in Philadelphia, and my interactions with other inmates in Graterford. Using the sociological framework of C. Wright Mills, which incorporates the ideas of history, social structure, and biography, I was able to bring these experiences together to develop a much deeper understanding of mass incarceration in the U.S.

Having taken many courses here at Villanova relevant to the ideas of race or imprisonment (Race and Ethnic Relations, Sociology of Law, Criminology, etc.), I thought I had a decent understanding of mass imprisonment as a phenomenon of American society. But seeing it play out in the lives of real individuals added considerable nuance and detail. I continue to tutor a new student who told me that the first time he ever got shot, “it was all over a Slim Jim.” An argument with a stranger over a piece of dried meat escalated to a bullet in the hamstring. He explained the situation with a “that’s how it goes in the projects” sort of attitude. Without experiencing day-to-day life in the projects, it can be hard for outsiders to understand the pressures that lead to criminal activities. The key insight to be gained here is that ending up in prison is not as simple as a series of bad individual decisions or personal immorality, but rather finding different means to obtain that pursuit of happiness we are all promised as American citizens.

Mass incarceration in the United States is more than just leftover slavery, more than just statistics about African American males, more than just what textbooks can teach us. It is a major social problem that is deeply embedded in our society—in the laws and police force, in the belief systems of white Americans, in urban populations and standards of living. And this latent racism, that will likely still be around at the end of my lifetime, plays out in the lives of millions of Americans in ways that I will never fully understand. But tutoring at Graterford added a vital piece to my understanding of racism in American society, and is an opportunity at Villanova that no student should pass up.

Professors in The New York Times

Two studies by Drs. DeFina and Hannon on the adverse effects of mass incarceration were cited in a February 19th New York Times article, *Prison and the Poverty Trap*, by John Tierney (*Time and Punishment series, Section D*). This article examines the links between incarceration, income inequality, and poverty in light of the fact that the incarceration rate in the United States has risen to be the world’s highest. Drs. DeFina and Hannon found that mass incarceration has led to an increase in both crime and poverty. These studies also demonstrate that if the mass incarceration trend had not occurred in recent decades, the poverty rate would be 20 percent lower today. This is equivalent to saying that five million fewer people would have fallen below the poverty line. Please visit our departmental website at socandcrim.villanova.edu to view the full article.
I have spent several years researching racial disparities in school discipline with my Villanova colleague, Dr. Allison Ann Payne. Our studies found that schools with proportionally more black students use harsher disciplinary approaches, including those related to zero tolerance policies and exclusionary punishment, regardless of other influences, such as delinquency and drug use, type and location of schools, and economic considerations. We were obviously troubled to see that the trends related to race and punishment that exist in the criminal justice system are being replicated in schools, in what is often termed the “school-to-prison pipeline” that disproportionally affects racial and ethnic minorities.

Although well-conceived studies have clear policy implications, there is no guarantee that those research results will be reviewed by practitioners or policymakers. Given the frequent disconnect between research and policy, last spring I was delighted that, as a result of my prior co-authored research, I was asked by the U.S. Department of Justice to serve as an expert witness and litigation consultant for a legal case. In this lawsuit, the Department of Justice was suing a school district in Texas for various racially discriminatory actions against students. Among the arguments of the U.S. was that the school district’s student discipline was implemented in a racially discriminatory manner. That’s where I came in.

I statistically analyzed student and school level data from all of the district’s schools to examine what influenced their use of zero tolerance policies, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion as well as their implementation of discretionary versus mandatory discipline. My analyses showed that, unsurprisingly, school delinquency and disorder were associated with the various types of discipline as were socio-economic status, special education enrollment, and administrator and teacher characteristics, among other factors. However, despite these influences on school discipline, results showed that the racial composition of students in schools significantly affected punitive discipline. Specifically, schools with more black students disproportionately used harsher disciplinary policies and practices, regardless of other influences.

After two exhausting depositions in Washington D.C. and testifying in Dallas in a week-long trial along with many others who examined different aspects of the charges made against the district, I was disappointed that the judge ruled in favor of the school district. It would be very easy for me to become dismayed by the politics involved in court cases like this and to refrain from future involvement in the policy process. But, that would not do anything to further social justice. Results similar to those I discovered in this case are being produced by other researchers all over the nation as the racially discriminatory implementation of discipline continues to be acknowledged as an important problem. However, more pressure needs to be applied in order for eventual change to occur. It is also possible for policy change to happen incrementally, so researchers must continue to try to bring their research to the attention of lawmakers and to involve themselves in decision-making that is relevant to their research areas. Perhaps enough of these empirical analyses will eventually result in much-needed policy change that will make school discipline fairer, thereby decreasing the likelihood that punished students will ultimately be punished by the criminal justice system.
By the end of the Fall 2011 semester, after having spent four long semesters in nearly a half dozen criminal justice courses, I gained the knowledge and ability to begin formulating my own research questions. Also, I became excited by the possibility of gathering evidence and answering these questions on my own. I soon began to think to myself, “Someday I will get my Ph.D. and then I can pursue these issues in earnest.” However, my aspirations for research would be realized much sooner than expected when an opportunity presented itself to me.

Under the mentorship of Dr. Allison Ann Payne, I submitted my proposal in February 2012 and soon after was accepted in the program. Ecstatic, I then began the process of conducting a literature review on social control theory and creating a questionnaire of over 200 survey items. In June, after receiving the approval of Villanova’s Institutional Review Board, I began data collection in Philadelphia, using my personal network of friends and peers in the subculture to recruit participants.

Throughout the following fall semester in the Criminal Justice Research and Statistics course with Dr. Payne, I conducted data analysis and completed a final paper with some rather optimistic findings.

I will be presenting my research at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research at the University of Wisconsin this April and am hopeful that my work will be well-received. In any case, the opportunity to lead an independent research study as an undergraduate has been a unique and invaluable experience, plus it has given me a head start towards my graduate studies in criminology. From learning about the University’s research protocols, to organizing survey administrations, to conducting quantitative data analysis, my experience as an undergraduate research fellow has served as the bridge between academic coursework and real-world applications. What has been most important to me, however, is that this study was born out my own personal experiences in the urban dance community, and that its findings may lead to future applications of the dance as part of community outreach and humanitarian programs.