



Why do Students in Australia Enrol in Criminology Degrees?

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Abstract

Students choose to study criminology for various intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. This article explores whether any distinct groupings can be discerned in relation to underlying motivational profiles. Drawing on a survey of 430 Australian undergraduate criminology and criminal justice students, we utilise latent class analysis to identify distinct motivational profiles underlying respondent decisions to study criminology. Five motivational profiles were revealed – *Curious*, *Activist*, *Lived Experience Altruist*, *Lived Experience Reformer*, and *Unclear*. Empathic motivations were key in shaping study choices within all of the profiles except the fifth. However, the first four profiles differed in their emphasis: *Curious* and *Lived Experience Altruist* place greater weight on helping individual victims of crime, whereas for *Activist* and *Lived Experience Reformer* structural reform drives their educational decisions. A multinomial logistic regression demonstrated that class classification was influenced by respondents' political ideology, attitudes towards the criminal legal system, punitiveness, and individualising moral foundations. These findings can help to address the educational challenges associated with student cohorts that have diverse enrolment motivations, and inform ongoing curriculum development. Further research can track the temporal evolution of motivational profiles to explore when and how they vary.

Keywords: Criminology; enrolment motivations; higher education; latent class analysis.

Introduction

Why do students enrol in criminology degrees? It is tempting to address this reductively: perhaps as a reflection of the popularity of true crime media or police procedural dramas, or interest in or concern about criminal legal¹ processes or decisions. We similarly risk veering into reductionism if we attribute student motivations for studying criminology to a single criminological “master trait” (Becker, 1963, p. 32), whether that be punitiveness, a desire to institute criminal-legal reform, or empathy. While reductive scholarship of this nature is rare, studies that rely on variable-centred statistical methods can struggle to do justice to the complicated ensemble of influences that shape study decisions. A holistic understanding of why students choose to study criminology is well suited to qualitative methods, including those that apply a narrative inquiry lens to unpack student self-perceptions of the role their criminology degree plays within them (for example, Dertadian et al., 2026; Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2022). In this article, we take a different approach. We utilise latent class analysis to examine whether any latent motivational profiles are shared by students enrolled in criminology degrees in Australia,² and whether the probability of belonging to any of these profiles is associated with student political beliefs, punitiveness, and other attitudinal and identity variables.

Research examining student motivations for studying criminology has often identified empathic motivations – including a desire to help victim survivors of crime, and to give back to their community (Collica-Cox & Furst, 2019; Gabbidon et al., 2003; Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999; Tontodonato, 2006). When we view these empathic motivations in tandem with other potential influences, we gain a more sophisticated account of motivational pathways into criminology that can help to identify specific



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educational needs and desires. Motivations are complex, and the kind of latent class analysis we have undertaken provides a surface-level investigation of factors shaping student reasons for studying criminology. Every pathway will be the unique product of a unique life history, which cannot be reduced to 12 or so survey items and combinations of item ratings. However, examining these combinations, and how they mirror or differ from those of other students, can provide a sense of the core motivational pathways that shape student enrolment in criminology degrees. This can then help to better understand the needs of different student subgroups. It can also illuminate some of the intractable challenges associated with teaching criminology content to a cohort that is heterogeneous in their reasons for studying, and in their expectations for their degrees.

We first set out an overview of key research of relevance to student enrolment motivations, including intrinsic and extrinsic factors, media influence, employment and job security, and broader expectations associated with social justice, activism, and lived experience. We then provide an explanation of our use of a person-centred statistical approach to discern the motivational profiles of undergraduate criminology students in Australia who responded to a nationwide survey. We document our findings and examine whether the probability of belonging to any of the profiles we have identified is associated with student political beliefs, punitiveness, and other attitudinal and identity variables.

Student Enrolment Motivations

To provide essential context from which to understand and explore student enrolment motivations, we summarise key research examining intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, enrolment expectations, media influence, employment and job security, social justice, activism, and lived experience. Much of this research originates from the United States and, in some instances, was conducted 20 or more years ago. Where available, we integrate studies that are Australian-focused and published more recently.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations

Drawing from their Self Determination Theory (SDT), Ryan and Deci (2000) distilled two main types of individual motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation reflects an innate human tendency to learn, explore new challenges and novel experiences, and to utilise and further extend capacity for its own sake (Ryan & Deci, 2000). By contrast, extrinsic motivations comprise a mix of internal psychological processes and external environmental stimuli that prompt some form of action: the “performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome” (p. 71). Extrinsic motivation, while still involving a level of choice, is situated within external contexts, pressures, and/or requirements – such as particular goals, desired outcomes, and responding to specific stimuli or expectations. Ryan and Deci point to a range of conditions that can support, maintain, enhance, disrupt and/or dissuade an innate propensity to intrinsic motivation. Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), a sub theory of SDT, seeks to “specify factors that explain variability in intrinsic motivation” with three underpinning conditions: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci 2000, p. 70). Social-contextual events, such as positive feedback, can enhance intrinsic motivations by reinforcing competency. By contrast, interactions that are experienced more negatively may undermine perceptions of self-competency. In an examination of the internal affective determinants of behaviour, DeCharms (1968) found that feelings of competency accompanied by a sense of autonomy can enable the subject to feel ownership of their motivation. Intrinsic motivation needs to feel like it comes from “an internal perceived locus of causality” rather than from external sources (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). However, specific external elements, such as relatedness – the positive reinforcement from a significant other – can help to provide a solid base from which intrinsic motivation can flourish (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

U.S.-based studies have identified a range of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations students have for studying criminology. In Collica-Cox and Furst’s (2019) study of 65 criminal justice students, 97% reported that they chose the subject because it was interesting (intrinsic), and 92% because it was relevant to the real world (extrinsic). Similarly, Krimmel and Tartaro (1999) found that criminal justice students strongly agreed that the subject was very interesting (intrinsic,) and that it had real-world relevance and would enhance their employability (both extrinsic). Yim (2009) surveyed 256 undergraduate criminal justice students from one U.S. university and found that the main reason for their choice of major was the interesting subject matter (intrinsic), followed by its real-world relevance (extrinsic). Tontodonato (2006) asked 141 students from one U.S. university why they studied criminal justice: interest in the subject was the top reason, followed by more extrinsic reasons, such as employment. Ridener et al. (2020) reported similar findings from their U.S. study.

The internal and external dynamics of student motivations to succeed were examined by Breen and Lindsay (2002), and their qualitative analysis explored two main categories of goals: autonomous and heteronomous. Autonomous goals, akin to Ryan and Deci’s (2000) intrinsic motivation, draw from individual student values supplemented by their own knowledge and experiences. For example, a student’s desire to learn and understand more about acquisitive crime may be derived from a belief in sustainable and resilient food systems or experiences of food insecurity. Heteronomous goals are driven by external pressures

and sources, including fear and societal expectation, or the influence of a family member, authority figure, or the media. Breen and Lindsay (2002) highlighted the intersection between a student's intrinsic motivation and potentially "ill-conceived ideas of what it really means to study in their discipline" (p. 720). For example, a decision to study criminology may reflect faulty, inaccurate and sensationalised information, such as over-playing what can be demonstrated with forensic evidence (Ridener et al., 2020; Sarver et al., 2010). Where mismatched expectations occur, an intrinsic motivation to study could be undermined, with the possibility of disengagement or withdrawal.

Enrolment Expectations

For some students, enrolment motivation may highlight, and reflect, differences between what can be broadly framed as vocational and liberal arts courses. Moodie (2002) defines vocational education as "training for an extrinsic purpose" - developing skills and knowledge for a particular occupation (p. 252). By contrast, liberal arts courses value generic transferable skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and judgment (Dekker, 2024). Lock and Kelly (2020), in their study of 462 students from 15 Australian universities, found that students often had a poor understanding of the differences between generalist degrees (e.g., liberal arts) and professional degrees (i.e., vocational education). For example, a student might enrol in a criminology course thinking they will learn specific knowledge and training for a career in policing. In reality, as a liberal arts course, criminology typically provides critical perspectives of policing as part of developing broader intellectual capabilities which might then be applied to any professional career. Lock and Kelly's research suggests that, even when students enrol in overtly vocational courses, such as engineering or nursing, they may not fully understand what those careers entail or what additional qualifications may be needed. The potential disconnect between career goals and education employment pathways can lead to misdirected course choices.

Media Influence

Media depictions are an acknowledged source of potentially "ill-conceived ideas" relating to the study of criminology (Breen & Lindsay, 2002, p. 720). However, the influence of crime-related media on student motivation to study criminology is a contested space. The popularity of crime-related media – including police procedural dramas, true crime documentaries, movies, books, podcasts, and social media – shows no signs of diminishing (Sherrill, 2020; Vitis, 2023), and it is reasonable to assume some influence on motivations to study criminology. In their study of 335 students enrolled in criminal justice degrees within two U.S. universities, Barthe et al. (2013) found that 65% of respondents were influenced by crime-related television shows. In three other U.S. studies, student respondents reported that their decisions to study criminal justice were influenced by crime-related media: one-third of 63 students in Stringer and Murphy's (2020) study, just under a quarter of 65 students in Collica-Cox and Furst's (2019) study, and 36% of 145 criminology and criminal justice students in Sarver et al.'s (2010) study.

Employment and Job Security

Employment and career aspirations are commonly reported extrinsic motivations for U.S. students undertaking criminology and criminal justice courses (e.g., Barthe et al., 2013; Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999; Ridener et al., 2020; Stringer & Murphy, 2020). Similarly, Coleman (2024) found that nearly 60% of criminology and criminal justice students at one university in the United Kingdom were motivated by a desire for a criminal justice-focused career. Some specific gender differences have been identified. Tontodonato's (2006) U.S. study found that female students were more likely to indicate an interest in working in law, whereas male students were more interested in law enforcement. Stringer and Murphy (2020) revealed that male students (63%) were more likely than female students (36%) to list "job security" as a reason for majoring in criminal justice, and to view local law enforcement as an attractive career. Their U.S. study also rated law enforcement careers more generally (e.g., federal, state and local) as more appealing than those in corrections – a finding mirrored in a recent Australian study examining careers considered by criminology students in the country (Wood et al., 2026). Students were more likely to be drawn to work as a probation or parole officer as they progressed through their academic journey (Stringer & Murphy, 2020). In a much earlier study, Krimmel and Tartaro (1999) found that law enforcement was the target career for the largest proportion of criminal justice students (45%), compared with 10% who wished to enter corrections, juvenile justice and academia (combined). In one of the few Australian-based studies, with 14 graduates who obtained double degrees with criminology at one Australian university, Wimshurst and Manning (2017) found that improved employment prospects was the key enrolment reason. Interestingly, these graduates typically viewed criminology as supplementary to their primary or preferred vocation (e.g., psychology or law), which can often have more clearly defined employment pathways.

Social Justice, Activism, and Lived Experience

Criminal justice students have also reported more altruistic study motivations (Eren et al., 2019; Gabbidon et al., 2003; Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999; Tontodonato, 2006). While not specifically relating to criminology, two studies involving social work students point to the potential influence of altruistic and ideological intrinsic values on degree choice decisions. In a study with 497 students in England, Furness (2007) found that the most common enrolment reason was to help and to improve the quality of life of others. McFadden et al.'s (2024) study of social work students in Finland and Ireland highlighted the perceived importance of helping people and working for social change (including addressing societal grievances and oppression). Collica-Cox and Furst (2019) directly linked social work, social justice, and criminal justice students – suggesting that each can possess an intrinsic drive to be altruistic. Several studies from the US also support this broad intersection. Tontodonato (2006) noted that 12% of students reported that they chose criminal justice as a major due to a desire to help others. Krimmel and Tartaro (1999) found that women were more likely than men to report choosing criminal justice for the same reason. Gabbidon et al. (2003) found that African American students were more likely than White students to cite helping others and protecting people from oppression as reasons for their choice of criminal justice as a major.

In Eren et al.'s (2019) U.S. study, direct experience of victimisation linked decisions to study criminal justice and were indicative of a desire to make a difference, to fight oppression, and to be treated equally. Direct and indirect experiences with crime or criminal legal processes can influence intrinsic and extrinsic study motivations. Disha et al. (2021) surveyed 371 students from two U.S. colleges. Those who had experienced arrest were more than twice as likely to choose criminal justice as their major, mostly due to the relevance of the subject matter. Students who had witnessed a family member or friend become a victim of crime were about twice as likely to choose criminal justice as a major. Trebilcock and Griffiths (2022) found that exposure to crime, through experiences as an offender, victim, or witness, were crucial to the enrolment motivations of students in their study. One participant described how he wanted to understand why the peer group who victimised him chose to engage in activities such as theft and property damage (Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2022).

Limited research has explored the study motivations of students from groups that are disproportionately affected by the justice system. In the United States, African Americans are both over-policed and over-represented within corrections settings (Baumgartner et al., 2017; Mueller & Kluckow, 2025; West & Sabol, 2008). Baumgartner et al. (2017) found that young black drivers in North Carolina were more likely to be searched and arrested than young white drivers, even though the rate at which these searches uncovered illegal items was consistently lower for young black drivers. In 2023, data from the U.S. Department of Justice shows black adults received a sentence of more than one year in prison at a rate that was five times that of white adults (1,218 per 100,000 v. 231 per 100,000), and black adults comprised 33% of state and federal prison populations (Mueller & Kluckow, 2025). In their survey of 284 African American students from five U.S. universities, Gabbidon et al. (2003) expressed surprise about the number of African American students who were motivated to enrol in criminal justice related courses, given the longstanding and endemic nature of unfair treatment and racial discrimination across U.S. law enforcement and justice systems.

First Nations peoples in Australia similarly experience over-policing and over-representation within custodial settings (Morgan & Dodd, 2024). Melville (2017) reported that Indigenous young people may be intrinsically motivated to enrol in law-related degrees as a source of empowerment. However, the ongoing effects of colonisation, including poor secondary school outcomes, health issues and other systemic barriers, create structural impediments to university entry for many Indigenous students. For those who do enrol, retention can be impacted by learning environments, and lack of cultural sensitivity within universities (Melville, 2017). These barriers must also be read alongside a further issue: Australian criminology's historic complicity in harms perpetrated by colonial criminal justice systems (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016, pp. 28–29). While recent research has indicated that many criminologists have sought to embed Indigenous knowledges, perspectives, and experiences into their curriculum (Gleeson et al., 2026), this work is complicated by the scarcity of Indigenous scholars working in Australian criminology – a fact some have attributed to the continued alienation and ostracism faced by Indigenous scholars within the discipline (Porter, 2019).

The Current Study

This article is part of a wider project which surveyed undergraduate criminology³ students across public universities in Australia and explored their expectations with respect to their degree choices and career aspirations. Research examining student motivations for studying a criminology or criminal justice degree have tended to utilise descriptive statistics to identify the most common motivations cited by students (Barthe et al., 2013; Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999; Tontodonato, 2006;), as well as variable-centred approaches to examine, for instance, whether certain motivations for studying a criminology degree are

associated with particular demographic or attitudinal factors (Tontodonato, 2006; Ridener et al., 2020; Sarver et al., 2010; Stringer & Murphy, 2020). Studies have not examined particular combinations of motivational factors, and whether these combinations – or classes of motivations – are predicted by demographic, attitudinal, and experiential factors.

In this article, we address this gap in the scholarship by examining whether notable latent classes of motivational profiles for studying criminology differ in the relative weight students place on lived experiences of crime and the criminal legal system; empathetic motivators, such as wanting to help victim survivors of crime; curiosity-driven motivators, such as an interest in crime and an interest in understanding its causes; and network influences, such as the role of friends or family in shaping career choices and study decisions. We identify these latent classes – or motivational profiles – to better understand the heterogeneity of our cohort and their varying motivations for studying criminology, and how these motivations form recognisable clusters and classes that are themselves associated with student beliefs, lived experiences, and identities.

This study is primarily exploratory. We have utilised latent class analysis (LCA) to explore the specific morphology of motivational profiles when considering a range of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. In this article we test the following hypothesis:

H1: motivational profiles, as identified by LCA, will differ in the relative weight students place on curiosity-, experience and empathy-driven influences.

We then sought to analyse the profiles identified by LCA to ascertain which demographic and attitudinal variables – such as punitiveness, attitudes towards the criminal legal system, and activist perspectives – predict membership. We explore whether, for instance, our LCA identified a class of students who were primarily interested in studying criminology out of intellectual curiosity but who had relatively little interest in reforming the criminal legal system, whether these students would be more likely to lean conservative politically and hold more positive views of the criminal legal system. We are interested in better understanding how motivational profiles might be shaped by broader attitudes towards crime and the criminal legal system, as well as broader moral palates – that is, the moral foundations they bring to bear on issues that require moral decision-making.

Research Design

This study draws from an anonymous online (Qualtrics) survey of undergraduate criminology students in Australia. Following institutional research ethics approval (Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee [ref: 2025/HE000404]), the survey was active between June and September 2025. Due to the absence of a national sampling frame, it was not possible to ensure a random or representative sample. To maximise participation, the project employed a broad outreach strategy to recruit respondents from across the Australian university sector. The project team contacted leading criminology staff at each of the 36 universities in Australia which currently offer undergraduate programs that include criminology or a cognate discipline, or both. Of these, 14 offered pure Bachelor of Criminology degrees,⁴ 10 offered Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice degrees,⁵ three offered Bachelor of Criminal Justice degrees,⁶ seven offered Bachelor of Arts with a Criminology major⁷ and six offered Justice, Security, or Policing degrees.⁸ Staff were provided with brief information about the project and asked to share the study advertisement, including the survey link, with relevant students via their subject learning management systems, and during lectures and tutorials. The project team also shared the survey link via their LinkedIn profiles and contacted student criminology societies at each Australian university, inviting them to share the survey advertisement with their members.

The survey was open to current undergraduate students studying criminology and related subjects, as a dedicated degree or as a major or minor component within a broader degree (e.g., Bachelor of Arts) - including double degrees. To encourage participation, students were invited to enter a prize draw to win one of five A\$100 eGift cards, with respondents directed to a separate, unlinked survey into which they could provide their university email address. This approach minimised the risk of “bot” respondents – as an “.edu.au” email address was required⁹ – while also ensuring that the substantive survey responses remained fully anonymous.

Sample

There were 430 surveys that met our minimum completion threshold of 66%. Of the 459 respondents who commenced the survey, 83% ($n = 380$) were complete, 3.3% ($n = 15$) were 88–89% complete, and 7.6% ($n = 35$) were 68% complete. The remaining 6.3% ($n = 29$) completed fewer than 66% of items and were excluded.¹⁰ Demographic focused descriptive statistics for the final sample are set out in Table 1.

To assess sample representativeness, a chi-square test compared the gender distribution of the sample with Department of Education (2024) data for students enrolled in Society and Culture undergraduate degrees in 2022. While this category extends

beyond criminology, the reported gender breakdown – 67.81% women ($n = 145,865$), 31.75% men ($n = 68,301$), and 0.43% non-binary or third gender ($n = 942$) – closely mirrors the 2025 gender profile of students enrolled in Deakin University's Bachelor of Criminology (68.05% women, 31.39% men, 0.56% non-binary or third gender).

Because the expected count in one of the six cells fell below five, a Monte Carlo simulation was used to obtain an unbiased estimate of the exact p value. The results indicated that the sample was not gender representative (χ^2 ($df = 2$) = 173.982, $p = 0.001$). Men were under-represented (observed $n = 54$; expected $n = 135.3$), while women (observed $n = 356$; expected $n = 288.9$) and non-binary or third gender participants (observed $n = 16$; expected $n = 1.8$) were over-represented. To correct for these imbalances, we applied weights calibrated to Department of Education gender benchmarks.

Table 1

Overview of Respondent Demographics ($n = 430$)

	Sample (percentage)
<i>Gender</i>	
Woman	356 (83%)
Man	54 (12.6%)
Non-binary, gender-queer, gender-fluid, or uses another term	16 (3.7%)
Missing or prefer not to say	4 (0.9%)
<i>Age</i>	
17 to 24	355 (82.8%)
25 to 34	46 (10.7%)
35 to 44	12 (2.8%)
45 to 54	14 (3.3%)
55 to 64	2 (0.5%)
Missing or prefer not to say	1 (0.2%)
<i>LGB+</i>	129 (30.1%)
Lower socio-economic background	147 (34.3%)
<i>Urban, suburban, or rural upbringing</i>	
Rural upbringing	93 (21.7%)
Suburban upbringing	244 (56.9%)
Urban upbringing	36 (8.4%)
It varied	55 (12.8%)
Missing or prefer not to say	2 (0.5%)
<i>Ancestry and ethnicity</i>	
European	307 (71.4%)
Southern and Central Asian	34 (7.9%)
East Asian	31 (7.2%)
Sub-Saharan African, North African and Middle Eastern	23 (5.3%)
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	16 (3.7%)
Pacific Islander	3 (0.7%)
Peoples of the Americas	1 (0.2%)
Missing or prefer not to say	15 (3.5%)
Total	430

Dependent Variables

To identify latent motivational profiles for students studying criminology, we utilised LCA, a person-centred statistical method that enables researchers to identify homogeneous subgroups drawing on categorical indicators (Sinha et al., 2021). Indicator variables used to generate these motivational profile classes were derived from two five-point Likert-scale matrix tables, the first containing 10 items and the second, five items. The first matrix table asked participants to rate the extent to which a set of factors had influenced their decision to study criminology, on a scale ranging from “not at all influential” (1) to “extremely influential” (5). The 10 factors included in this table were drawn from those most commonly examined in studies of student motivations for enrolling in criminology or criminal justice degrees. Three items pertained to intellectual curiosity and interest in the subject matter: “a general interest in crime and justice issues,” “a desire to understand the causes of crime,” and “personal interest in the subject matter” (Walters et al., 2022). A single item captured justice reform-oriented motivations: “a belief that the criminal justice system needs reform.” Three items addressed the role of lived experience in shaping students’ decisions to study criminology, namely: “a personal experience as a victim of crime,” “a personal experience witnessing a crime,” and “a personal experience with the criminal justice system” (Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2022). A single item pertained to crime media consumption: “exposure to crime through the media (news, TV shows, movies, podcasts, documentaries, etc.)” (Collica-Cox & Furst, 2019). A single item captured social network influences: “a family member or friend working in a criminal justice profession” (Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2022). Finally, a single item addressed labour market considerations: “job availability” (Walters et al., 2022).

The second matrix table asked participants to rate the extent to which they were motivated by five motivations commonly examined in studies of students’ enrolment in criminology and criminal justice degrees, on a scale ranging from “not at all” (1) to “extremely” (5). These five motivations were: a desire to “help victims of crime”; to “address social injustices”; to “advocate for policy changes in the criminal justice system”; to “work in a fast-paced and exciting environment”; and to “solve complex problems.” Though a desire to advocate for criminal legal policy changes and a desire to address social injustices overlap, they are far from co-extensive. Some students may count themselves as penal abolitionists and view criminal legal reforms as insufficient, if not harmful. The inclusion of both items in our LCA enabled us to examine whether “reformist” and “abolitionist” classes emerged from our dataset, each characterised by different orientations toward the criminal legal system.

Covariates

Moral foundations: Students’ moral foundations were measured using the 20-item short version of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2011). The scale comprises two 10-item parts, both rated on a six-point response format and each containing two items measuring each of the five original moral foundations: Harm, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity. Following Vaughan et al. (2019), the Individualising moral motive was operationalised by averaging scores on the Harm and Fairness subscales ($\alpha = 0.680$), and the Binding moral motive by averaging scores on the Authority, Loyalty, and Purity subscales ($\alpha = 0.824$).

Punitive sentiment: Punitive sentiment was similarly included as a predictor variable, given the mixed evidence from U.S.-based research regarding whether students enrolled in criminal justice degrees hold more punitive attitudes than those enrolled in other degrees (see Falco & Martin, 2012; Lambert, 2004). It was measured by averaging respondent scores on two items adapted from Roberts et al. (2011) and rated on a five-point scale from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5): “courts are too soft on offenders” and “the most effective response to criminality is to have harsher sentences” ($\alpha = 0.706$).

Political beliefs: Rounding out the attitudinal predictors, political orientation was captured through a single self-report item on a five-point scale ranging from “extremely progressive/left wing” (1) to “extremely conservative/right wing” (5), retained as an ordinal variable for analysis.

Attitudes towards the criminal legal system: Student attitudes towards the criminal legal system were derived from a modified version of Martin and Cohn’s (2004) Attitudes Toward the Criminal Legal System (ATCLS) scale. The ATCLS contains three conceptual subscales examining respondent views on the integrity (Tyler & Smith, 1998), competence (Tyler, 2003), and fairness (Tyler, 2003) of the criminal legal system. Rather than limiting the focus to specific criminal legal components, such as police or punishment, the ATCLS measures individual attitudes towards “a unified, multi-faceted structure” (Martin & Cohn, 2004, p. 369). To reduce the length of this study’s survey, 13 ATCLS survey items pertaining to judges and defence lawyers were removed, leading to a scale consisting of 25 items ($\alpha = 0.863$). Descriptive statistics for our covariates are provided in Table 2.

Age, gender, ancestry, sexuality and socio-economic status: A number of demographic characteristics were included as control variables. Respondent age was coded into ordinal bands; all remaining demographic variables, namely, gender (Man = 1,

Woman or gender diverse = 0), low socio-economic status, sexuality, and ancestry were dummy-coded. Respondents selecting “lower socioeconomic background” or “lower-middle socioeconomic background” were recoded into a single lower socioeconomic background dummy variable, with all remaining response options forming the reference category. Although a substantial number of respondents identified as bisexual, responses across other non-heterosexual categories were comparatively low. To enable meaningful analysis, these identities were aggregated into a single “LGB+” category, balancing inclusivity with statistical robustness. Ancestry and ethnicity were self-reported. Given our small sample size, granular ethnicity variables were not feasible; instead, European heritage was included as a dummy variable (1 = European heritage, 0 = other heritage). We acknowledge this is a blunt measure that obscures considerable variability in multicultural communities' experiences of the police, but it represented the most statistically viable option available for our analyses.

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics for Covariates*

Variable	M	SD	Range	α	n (%)
Individualising moral motive	4.630	0.621	1-6	0.680	386
Binding moral motive	3.421	0.888	1-6	0.824	386
Punitiveness	2.780	0.994	1-5	0.706	366
Political orientation	2.450	0.871	1-5	-	420
Attitudes towards the criminal legal system	73.175	11.994	25-125	0.863	384

Data Analysis

Latent class models specifying between one and six classes were estimated in LatentGOLD, using a probit estimator and 50 random start values to minimise the risk of converging on local rather than global solutions. Missing values were assigned a code of -999 and treated as missing at random. Models were compared using the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), Akaike Information Criterion with a penalty factor of three (AIC3), entropy, class size, and substantive interpretability.

To examine predictors of respondents' probability of membership in motivational profiles for studying criminology, we employed the bias-adjusted three-step multinomial logistic regression approach proposed by Vermunt (2010), which accounts for class classification error probability. Class 1 (described below) was selected as the reference category, as it attracted the highest proportion of respondents by posterior probability and none of the remaining guidelines for reference category selection outlined by Johfre and Freese (2021) were applicable. Multinomial regression assumptions were assessed prior to model estimation. Linearity was evaluated using ANOVA (deviation from linearity) and residual diagnostics, and all independent variables satisfied this assumption. Multicollinearity was assessed using Pearson's correlation, which indicated no cause for concern: no predictor variables approached the commonly recommended $r = 0.7$ threshold (Bachman & Paternoster, 2017, p. 399). One outlier was identified via Mahalanobis distance at $p < 0.001$; however, it was retained in all models, as a robustness check confirmed that its inclusion did not substantively alter the direction, magnitude, or significance of key coefficients.

Findings**Descriptive Statistics**

The three most influential factors informing respondent decisions to study criminology all related to interest in the subject matter. Personal interest ($M = 4.39$) was the most reported factor: very influential (28.8%, $n = 124$), extremely influential (57.7%, $n = 248$). A general interest in crime and justice issues ($M = 4.08$) and a desire to understand the causes of crime ($M = 4.05$) recorded slightly lower mean levels of perceived influence. Fewer respondents reported that exposure to crime through media was influential in their decision to study criminology ($M = 3.70$) though, notably, the majority still believed that media exposure to crime was moderately (21.6%), very (30.5%), or extremely (30.9%) influential to their decision.

Job availability was not a particularly significant influence for most respondents ($M = 2.07$), with 42.6% ($n = 183$) indicating that this was not at all influential in their decision to study criminology. Similarly, few students identified personal experiences as a victim of crime ($M = 1.96$), personal experiences witnessing a crime ($M = 1.92$), or personal experiences with the criminal justice system ($M = 1.88$) as highly influential in shaping their study decision. These findings are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3

Factors that Influence Student Decisions to Study Criminology: Percentage of Sample and (n), (overall n = 430)

	Not at all influential	Slightly influential	Moderately influential	Very influential	Extremely influential	M	SD
Personal interest in the subject matter	1.9% (8)	1.6% (7)	9.5% (41)	28.8% (124)	57.7% (248)	4.39	0.869
A general interest in crime and justice issues	0.9% (4)	2.6% (11)	17.7% (76)	45.1% (194)	33.3% (143)	4.08	0.833
A desire to understand the causes of crime	1.2% (5)	4.4% (19)	21.9% (94)	32.8% (141)	39.1% (168)	4.05	0.947
Exposure to crime through the media (news, TV shows, movies, podcasts, documentaries, etc.)	6% (26)	10.5% (45)	21.6% (93)	30.5% (131)	30.9% (133)	3.70	1.187
A belief that the criminal justice system needs reform	6.3% (27)	10.5% (45)	25.8% (111)	27.4% (118)	29.1% (125)	3.63	1.189
Job availability	42.6% (183)	22.6% (97)	21.9% (94)	9.8% (42)	2.6% (11)	2.07	1.128
A personal experience as a victim of crime	56.3% (242)	15.8% (68)	10.9% (47)	7.4% (32)	8.8% (38)	1.96	1.334
A personal experience witnessing a crime	55.8% (240)	15.3% (66)	14.7% (63)	7.7% (33)	5.8% (25)	1.92	1.242
A personal experience with the criminal justice system	60.5% (260)	14.9% (64)	7% (30)	9.1% (39)	7.7% (33)	1.88	1.316
A family member or friend working in a criminal justice profession	58.6% (252)	14.4% (62)	13.3% (57)	7.4% (32)	5.3% (23)	1.85	1.222

All five of the motivators measured recorded high mean scores: most respondents indicated that they were at least moderately motivated by each. Helping victims of crime was reported by the largest number of respondents as a considerable motivation ($M = 4.19$), followed by solving complex problems ($M = 4.10$), addressing social injustices ($M = 4.00$), working in a fast-paced and exciting environment ($M = 3.87$), and advocating for policy changes in the criminal justice system ($M = 3.76$). These findings are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4*Factors that Motivate Students: Percentage of Sample and (n) (overall n = 430)*

	Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely	M	SD
Help victims of crime	2.3% (10)	3.3% (14)	13.7% (59)	33.7% (145)	46.5% (200)	4.19	0.954
Solve complex problems	1.2% (5)	4% (17)	18.8% (81)	35.6% (153)	40% (172)	4.10	0.921
Address social injustices	1.9% (8)	5.8% (25)	21.9% (94)	30.7% (132)	39.5% (170)	4.00	1.009
Work in a fast-paced and exciting environment	4.4% (19)	8.4% (36)	20.2% (87)	29.5% (127)	37% (159)	3.87	1.138
Advocate for policy changes in the criminal justice system	4.9% (21)	8.1% (35)	25.8% (111)	27.7% (119)	33.3% (143)	3.76	1.143

Latent Class Analysis

LCA was conducted to identify distinct motivational profiles among respondents, with models ranging from one to six classes estimated and compared (see Table 5). A five-class solution (BIC = 14943.423; AIC3 = 14589.31) was retained as it provided the best balance of statistical fit, parsimony, and practical interpretability (Muthén & Muthén, 2000; Urdan, 2022). Although the six-class model produced a marginally lower BIC, it yielded a very small class (< 10%) whose motivational profile did not differ substantively from one of the classes identified in the five-class solution, rendering the additional class of limited practical utility. The final five-class model was estimated across a total of 425 weighted cases, with 116 parameters. Classification quality was strong, with an entropy R^2 of 0.858, indicating that the model discriminated well between classes. The overall classification error rate was 8.28%, and the reduction-of-errors statistic (Lambda = 0.889) confirmed substantial improvement over a null model. The five classes are depicted in Figure 1, and summarised in the next section, ordered from largest to smallest.

Table 5*Goodness-of-Fit Indices for Latent Class Analysis Models (N = 425)*

	LL	BIC (LL)	AIC3(LL)	Npar	L ²	df	Classification error	Entropy
1 class	-7761.94	15862.84	15691.89	56	10652.8*	369	0	1
2 classes	-7399.75	15229.25	15012.5	71	9928.415*	354	0.0472	0.835
3 classes	-7296.04	15112.61	14850.07	86	9720.988*	339	0.064	0.839
4 classes	-7184.18	14979.69	14671.36	101	9497.278*	324	0.0651	0.868
5 classes	-7120.66	14943.43	14589.31	116	9370.224*	309	0.0828	0.858
6 classes	-7052.6	14898.1	14498.19	131	9234.107*	294	0.0905	0.854

Class 1: Curious

The largest class, which accounted for approximately one-quarter of the sample (25.32%, $n = 108$), was characterised by moderately high general intellectual interest in crime and a desire to understand it ($M = 4.06$ and $M = 4.17$, respectively, on a 1–5 scale), alongside high ratings of media exposure to crime as an entry point into criminology ($M = 3.82$). Members of this class showed very low endorsement of personal experience motivations: being a victim of crime ($M = 1.00$), witnessing a crime ($M = 1.07$), and having direct experience with the justice system ($M = 1.11$) were rated as negligibly influential. They also did not strongly endorse a desire to reform the justice system ($M = 2.75$), nor did they rate addressing social injustices ($M = 3.50$) or advocating for policy changes ($M = 2.95$) as central study motivations, though they were moderately to highly motivated by

the prospect of working in an exciting environment ($M = 4.01$) and solving complex problems ($M = 4.06$). In short, this profile suggests students who arrived at criminology primarily through intellectual curiosity were stimulated substantially by media portrayals of crime, rather than through personal experience or a normative commitment to criminal legal system reform.

Class 2: Activist

The second class, roughly equal in size to Class 1 (Curious) (24.87%, $n = 106$), was distinguished by an exceptionally strong orientation toward systemic reform and social change. Members rated the desire to reform the justice system ($M = 4.41$) as a highly influential reason for studying criminology, and study motivations centred on addressing social injustices ($M = 4.76$), advocating for policy changes ($M = 4.62$), and helping victims ($M = 4.54$) were among the highest of any class on these items. General interest in the topic of crime ($M = 4.41$) and a desire to understand crime ($M = 4.34$) were also strong motivational factors. In contrast, personal experience through victimisation ($M = 1.23$), witnessing crime ($M = 1.33$), or justice system experience ($M = 1.47$) were rated as only minimally influential, comparable to Class 1 (Curious). Media exposure was moderately high ($M = 3.78$). In short, these students' study choices appear to be socially and politically motivated, grounded in a principled concern for justice and structural change, but not driven by direct experiences of crime or the criminal legal system.

Class 3: Lived Experience Altruist

The third class, similar in size to the first two (24.62%, $n = 105$), was characterised by a pattern of moderate scores across most indicators but stood apart through the relative salience of personal experience as a pathway into criminology. Members rated being a victim of crime ($M = 2.85$), witnessing a crime ($M = 2.67$), and personal experience with the justice system ($M = 2.41$) as meaningfully influential – substantially higher than Classes 1 (Curious), 2 (Activist), and 5 (Unclear), though not as high as Class 4 (Lived Experience Reformer). General interest in crime was somewhat lower than in other classes ($M = 3.93$), and reform of the justice system was rated moderately ($M = 3.33$). Study motivations were moderate: helping victims ($M = 4.05$) was relatively high, while addressing social injustices ($M = 3.39$) and policy advocacy ($M = 3.08$) were more modest. Media exposure was moderately high ($M = 3.81$). In short, this class appears to represent students whose criminological interest was at least partially seeded by direct encounters with crime or the criminal justice system as victims, bystanders, or individuals with system-adjacent experiences, though this did not translate into the high reform commitment seen in Class 4 (Lived Experience Reformer).

Class 4: Lived Experience Reformer

The fourth class was the second smallest of five and displayed one of the two most striking profiles in our model (14.29%, $n = 61$). Members rated virtually all indicators for both pathways into criminology and study motivations at the highest levels. Personal experience was notably central: victimisation ($M = 3.80$), witnessing crime ($M = 3.66$), and justice system experience ($M = 3.43$) were rated as among the most influential motivational factors (and at higher levels than Class 3 [Lived Experience Altruist], the other class wherein personal experiences played a non-trivial role in participants' motivations for studying criminology). Simultaneously, this class endorsed the strongest reform motivations: desire to reform the justice system ($M = 4.62$), helping victims ($M = 4.91$), addressing social injustices ($M = 4.87$), and advocating for policy changes ($M = 4.82$) were rated at near-ceiling levels. General interest in crime ($M = 4.52$) and desire to understand it ($M = 4.45$) were also highest in this class, as were motivations related to working in an exciting environment ($M = 4.43$) and solving complex problems ($M = 4.59$).

Class 5: Unclear

The smallest class presented a similarly distinctive profile (10.90%, $n = 46$). Members rated almost all indicators as low to minimally influential. General interest in crime ($M = 2.86$) and desire to understand crime ($M = 3.21$) were substantially lower than any other class. Reforming the justice system ($M = 2.29$) was rated as only slightly influential, and the personal experience pathways of victimisation ($M = 1.09$), witnessing crime ($M = 1.18$), justice system experience ($M = 1.27$) were negligible in their influence on Class 5 members' motivations for studying criminology. Critically, media exposure, which was strongly cited as an influential factor across the remaining classes, was rated as only slightly influential in this group ($M = 2.44$). Study motivations were also uniformly low: helping victims ($M = 2.87$), addressing social injustices ($M = 2.90$), and policy advocacy ($M = 2.91$) were all near the 'slightly' end of the scale, and even the intrinsic motivation of solving complex problems (the highest rated item for this class) reached only $M = 3.52$. What drew these participants to criminology is unclear from the variables included in our model.

Figure 1

The Five LCA Motivations for Studying Criminology Classes (n = 425)

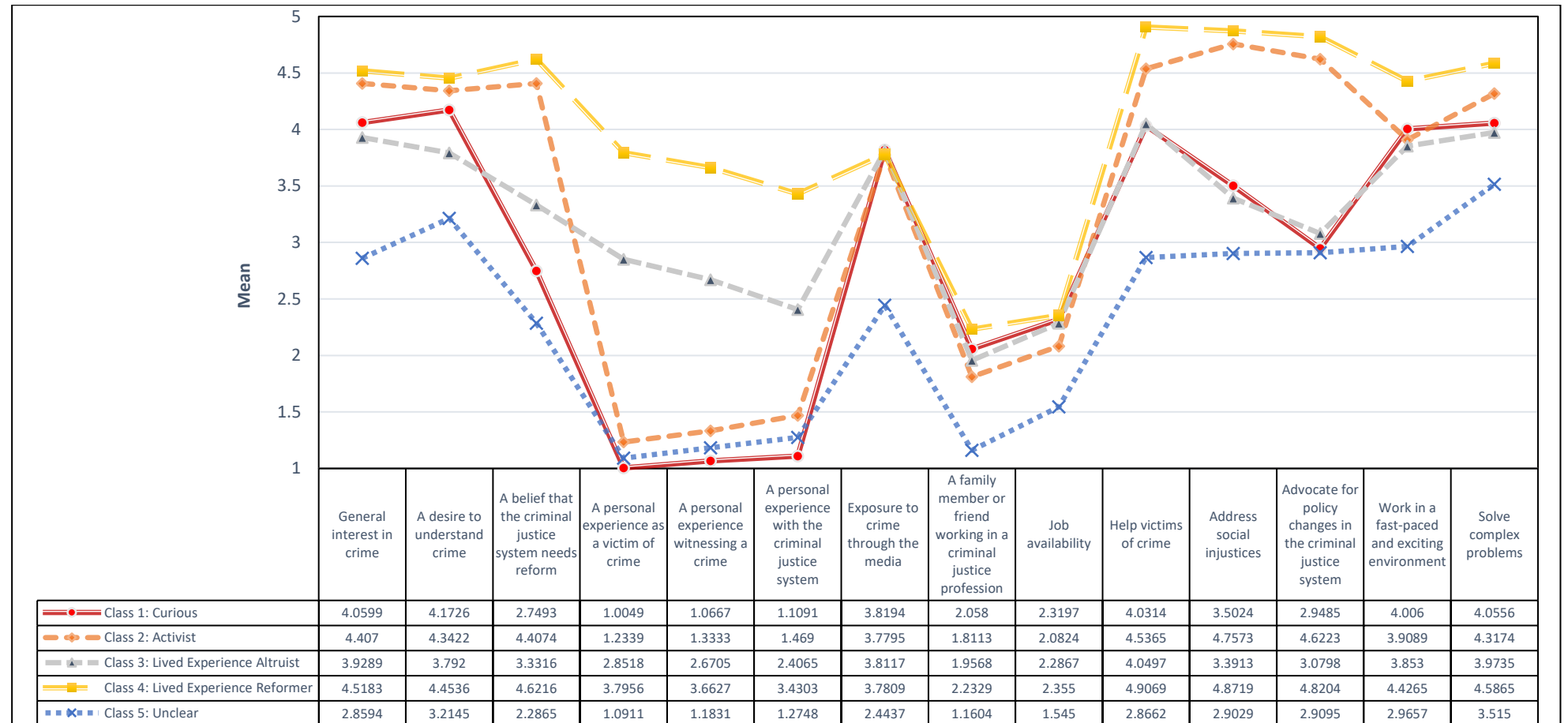


Table 6

Multinomial Logistic Regression Models Predicting Probability of Membership in Classes 2-5 Compared to Class 1: Curious

	Class 2 Activist			Class 3 Lived Experience Altruist			Class 4 Lived Experience Reformer			Class 5 Unclear			Wald	Sig
	OR	SE	Sig	OR	SE	Sig	OR	SE	Sig	OR	SE	Sig		
Age	1.9167	0.535	0.224	1.739	0.526	0.293	2.122	0.518	0.146	1.895	0.619	0.302	2.5271	0.64
Man	0.7077	0.400	0.388	1.102	0.356	0.785	0.560	0.484	0.231	1.163	0.518	0.771	3.6187	0.46
LGB+	2.4853	0.454	0.045	1.843	0.502	0.223	2.300	0.515	0.106	1.359	0.679	0.652	5.2835	0.26
European	0.4089	0.505	0.077	0.410	0.426	0.036	0.559	0.484	0.230	0.272	0.607	0.032	5.7836	0.22
Lower-socioeconomic status	1.8227	0.476	0.207	2.509	0.452	0.042	3.383	0.469	0.009	3.261	0.584	0.043	8.36	0.079
Political position	0.5146	0.286	0.020	1.375	0.252	0.206	1.005	0.261	0.985	1.093	0.304	0.769	12.6614	0.013
Individualising moral foundations	1.0869	0.089	0.351	0.968	0.069	0.632	1.145	0.097	0.162	0.734	0.095	0.001	18.368	0.001
Binding moral foundations	1.1617	0.083	0.070	1.086	0.069	0.231	1.097	0.083	0.263	0.957	0.092	0.635	7.0053	0.14
Attitudes towards the criminal legal system	0.9591	0.018	0.019	0.968	0.014	0.018	0.948	0.017	0.001	0.948	0.021	0.010	12.5483	0.014
Punitiveness	0.6061	0.215	0.020	1.026	0.180	0.886	1.131	0.237	0.603	0.588	0.235	0.024	12.5923	0.013

Multinomial Logistic Regression Analysis

To identify predictors of class membership while avoiding bias introduced by using covariates in the initial LCA step, a three-step modal assignment approach was employed. Class 1 (Curious) served as the reference category. The overall model was statistically significant (LL = -600.43; BIC = 1,467.18; AIC = 1,288.86), and several covariates significantly differentiated classes (see Table 6).

Political orientation was a significant predictor of class membership (Wald = 12.661, $p=0.013$). Specifically, a more conservative political position was significantly associated with lower odds of membership in Class 2 (Activist) relative to Class 1 (Curious) ($B = -0.664$, $p=0.0201$). Students with more left-leaning political views were substantially more likely to be Class 2 (Activist) than Class 1 (Curious) students, consistent with the reform-oriented and socially progressive motivations distinguishing that class. Political position did not significantly differentiate other classes from Class 1 (Curious).

Similarly, punitiveness also emerged as significant predictor (Wald = 12.592, $p = 0.013$), with higher scores on the punitiveness scale associated with significantly lower odds of membership in Class 2 (Activist) ($B = -0.501$, $p = 0.0198$) and Class 5 (Unclear) ($B = -0.530$, $p = 0.0239$) relative to Class 1 (Curious). This indicates that Class 1 (Curious) students tended to be more punitive than their Class 2 (Activist) and Class 5 (Unclear) peers. Classes 3 (Lived Experience Altruist) and 4 (Lived Experience Reformer) did not significantly differ from Class 1 (Curious) on this variable.

Individualising moral motive – moral concern oriented around avoiding harm to others and promoting fairness and reciprocity – was also a significant predictor overall (Wald = 18.368, $p = 0.001$), with higher scores on individualising moral foundations being significantly associated with lower odds of membership in Class 5 (Unclear) relative to Class 1 (Curious) ($B = -0.309$, $p = 0.0011$). Students with the highest likelihood of being categorised into Class 5 (Unclear), in other words, scored markedly lower on harm- and fairness-based moral reasoning than those in Class 1 (Curious).

ATCLS scores were a significant predictor of class membership (Wald = 12.548, $p=0.014$), with higher ATCLS scores associated with reduced odds of membership across Classes 2 (Activist), 3 (Lived Experience Altruist), 4 (Lived Experience Reformer), and 5 (Unclear) relative to Class 1 (Curious) (Bs ranging from -0.033 to -0.054). Students in Class 1 (Curious) tended to hold more favourable or uncritical attitudes toward the criminal legal system compared with students in other classes, particularly compared with Class 4 (Lived Experience Reformer) ($B = -0.053$, $p = 0.0014$) and Class 5 (Unclear) ($B = -0.054$, $p = 0.0103$).

Finally, though none of our demographic variables reached significance at the overall model level, one marginally significant demographic variable is worth commenting on. Lower socioeconomic background was a marginally significant predictor at the overall model level (Wald = 8.360, $p = 0.079$), and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to belong to Class 3 (Lived Experience Altruist) ($B = 0.920$, $p = 0.0419$), Class 4 ($B = 1.219$, $p = 0.0093$), and Class 5 (Unclear) ($B = 1.182$, $p = 0.0431$) relative to Class 1 (Curious). These associations are noteworthy given the distinct profiles of these classes: lower socioeconomic status students appear to be overrepresented both among those most personally affected by crime (Class 3 [Lived Experience Altruist] and 4 [Lived Experience Reformer]) and those with the least identifiable reasons for studying criminology based on the motivations we measured.

Discussion

For our cohort of 430 respondents, this article identifies five motivational pathways that informed their decisions to enrol in criminology degrees. Before discussing some of the key differences between the classes, it is worth briefly commenting on some of their commonalities. The most notable was the influence of media exposure to crime and justice issues. Four of the five classes had nearly identical mean ratings for news media exposure to crime and justice, whilst Class 5 (Unclear), in line with the other attributes of this class, attributed news media coverage a somewhat lower significance.¹¹ This is not unexpected, as news media exposure to crime and justice is likely to influence numerous other motivating factors that we measured. It is also in line with previous research which has documented the influence of crime-related media on student decisions to study criminology (Barthe et al., 2013; Collica-Cox & Furst, 2019; Sarver et al., 2010; Stringer & Murphy, 2020; Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2022). However, the relationship between crime-related media and decisions to study criminology is contested. It is difficult to examine the effect of news media consumption on behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs, given the active nature of content interpretation and the varying motivations and factors that shape which news media content individuals consume. When it comes to media effects (as with many social phenomena), there is a chicken and the egg problem. Do individuals consume crime and justice related media content due to existing beliefs, needs, uses, and gratifications that they derive from this content? Or does repeated exposure to certain forms of crime news content inculcate and inform individual beliefs about crime and

justice? This is certainly not an either/or situation. The forms of media content we consume are shaped by our dispositions, beliefs, and situational needs, just as our consumption of this content in turn can shape these beliefs and needs in ways more and less subtle. Given our project's research design, there is little we can do to pick apart the role played by the consumption of crime and justice related media on other student motivations for studying criminology, beyond noting, somewhat tritely, that it is complicated and reflects an area for further research.

Also notable, though again somewhat unsurprising, was the small role played by family and friends working within the criminal legal system. Our LCA identified no subclass of students whose motivations for studying criminology were driven significantly by family or friends who work in the criminal legal system. This is not to say that there were no students who attributed their studies to this influence, but this subgroup was small and could be easily subsumed within the five classes of student motivation profiles detected by our analysis.

Four of the five classes – Class 1 (Curious), Class 2 (Activist), Class 3 (Lived Experience Altruist), and Class 4 (Lived Experience Reformer) – emphasized empathic motivations as shaping motivations for studying criminology, as seen in previous literature (Eren et al., 2019; Gabbidon et al., 2003; Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999; Tontodonato, 2006). Our LCA uncovered no class of students that placed a low emphasis on empathic motivations. Four of our five profiles varied in the direction and mode to which they emphasised providing empathic care to victims of crime, but all placed an emphasis on this motivating factor. Class 5 (Unclear) differed, but still placed a reasonable emphasis on helping victims of crime as a motivating factor. Notably, this emphasis was not predicted by gender or any of our remaining demographic variables. It was their political leaning and differing moral emphasis that primarily predicted how students hoped to provide care to victims of crime.

Perhaps the biggest schism among the profiles – with the exception of Class 5 (Unclear) – were differences between profiles that emphasised helping and providing care at the individual level and at the structural level of policy change and reform. Previous research affirms the alignment between motivations to study criminology and a desire to help others (Dertadian et al., 2026; Eren et al., 2019; Gabbidon et al., 2003; Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999; Tontodonato, 2006). However, our analysis documents specific differences in how students believe help and care of crime victims could be furthered. Classes 1 (Curious) and 3 (Lived Experience Altruist), whilst differing in the extent to which lived experiences of crime and the criminal legal system played in their motivation for studying criminology, shared an emphasis on helping individual victims of crime but a lesser importance on a desire for reform within the criminal legal system. By contrast, students in Classes 2 (Activist) and 4 (Lived Experience Reformer), whilst again differing on the role lived experience played in their decisions to study criminology, shared not only a desire to help victims of crime but also to advocate for changes to the criminal legal system and policies pertaining to crime and justice. Of course, a desire to help victims of crime is in no way mutually exclusive with advocating for reform. These differences could reflect varied options for helping victim survivors. For Classes 2 (Activist) and 4 (Lived Experience Reformer), care and help to victims of crime may be best provided through structural reform by overhauling policies and systems. A second mode of helping can be more micro-sociological, by emphasising the actions of individual criminal legal actors. Classes 1 (Curious) and 3 (Lived Experience Altruist) place a greater emphasis on a micro-sociology of care, whilst Classes 2 (Activist) and 4 (Lived Experience Reformer) place greater importance on structural changes to improve support and care. This interpretation is further borne out by our multinomial logistic regression, which indicates that the probability of being classified into each of the classes is influenced by student political leanings, their attitudes towards the criminal legal system, their level of punitive beliefs, and their individualising moral foundations. The picture that emerges here is one of several motivational classes that are shaped by student beliefs about how best to render help to those impacted by crime and justice.

These findings have key practical implications for criminology curriculum and point to some of the challenges criminologists face as educators of such a motivationally heterogeneous cohort. Criminologists are, of course, far from alone in teaching students whose motivations for enrolling vary greatly. But a key challenge associated with criminology over, say, dentistry, extends beyond the number of potential career pathways, to the diverse and sometimes conflicting motivations, reasons, and beliefs that inform student decisions. To use a term from media studies, prospective students ascribe criminology degrees a range of imagined affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Affordances are our action possibilities: what a particular object or artefact affords us the ability to do (Wood & Arpke-Wales, 2025). Imagined affordances are what we *believe* a particular object will enable us to do or become (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Prospective students imagine that enrolling in a criminology degree will afford them the ability to become particular people and to do particular things. While the same goes for dentistry, criminology is a more ontologically open degree, in the sense that it can entertain a wider range of imagined affordances. Of note, in Australia, there are no accreditation requirements informing criminology curricula.¹² By contrast, much of the literature cited in this paper is U.S.-based, where the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences certifies relevant programs and upholds national standards.

Given the sometimes diametrically opposed motivations, a cynic might wonder whether it is possible to offer a curriculum that speaks to the often-conflicting reasons for enrolling in criminology degrees. Can a degree effectively cater to such a broad church of values and motivations? Should we more actively disabuse students of certain imagined affordances they ascribe to our degrees? In answering these questions, we need to be careful to avoid leaning into a neoliberal view of students as customers, as has occurred within UK higher education policy where students can be framed as customers (e.g., Sabri, 2010). The latent motivational profiles we have identified are not “customer” profiles from which we should curry favour through targeted advertising. They can, however, help to inform the development of criminology programs – particularly those that focus on employability – by providing varied career development activities (see Gretgrix et al., 2026) aligned to specific motivational profiles and/or particular values. Further research may wish to track the temporal evolution of motivational profiles and consider whether and how they may vary: for example, between different institutions.

Research Limitations

This research used a self-selecting, non-probability sampling strategy. As a result, it carries the standard limitations of a study without a representative sample. Additionally, though our sample size avoids the concerns associated with LCAs on samples of 300 or less, simulation studies have indicated that LCA performs with higher accuracy in studies with samples exceeding 500 (Finch & Bronk, 2011, p. 148; Nylund et al., 2007, p. 560; Sinha et al., 2021). As our sample of 430 falls 70 shy of this threshold, some concerns may be raised about the reliability of our findings. However, it is worth noting that Nylund-Gibson and Choi (2018, p. 452) suggest that 300 or more cases is desirable, a benchmark our sample comfortably exceeds, and our sample size is certainly not without precedent in published LCA research. Concern might also be raised about the size of one of our LCA classes – Class 5 (Unclear) ($n = 46$) – given Muthén and Muthén’s (2000) contention that it is “doubtful that classes with so few individuals [less than 50] allow a trustworthy generalization” (p. 889). Class 5 (Unclear) does, however, represent 10.9% of participants, comfortably clearing Nylund-Gibson and Choi’s (2018) recommendation that no class should contain less than 5% of the sample, and the class itself is conceptually distinct, recording lower mean scores than the remaining four classes in 11 of the 14 indicator variables. Taken together, these considerations suggest that Class 5 (Unclear), despite its relatively modest size, captures a meaningful and interpretable subgroup within our sample rather than a statistical artefact of the classification procedure. Finally, we did not include variables addressing whether perceived desire to help to reintegrate or assist perpetrators of crime was an influence in respondent decisions to study criminology. Given the extent of overlap between perpetrators and victims of crime, some students may have embedded this consideration of perpetrators into their interpretation of the desire to help victims of crime survey item. However, this is speculation and will need to be better delineated in future research.

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Endnotes:

- ¹ Our use of the term criminal legal, rather than criminal justice, reflects a preference for linguistic neutrality. It more accurately describes the processes, agencies, and actors within a “system” that does not necessarily or inherently align with or deliver justice.
- ² In Australia, criminology has evolved from a law-based sub-discipline into a significant standalone degree. There is now substantial diversity with respect to curriculum content and focus, and much less distinction between “criminology” and “criminal justice” (Bartels et al., 2015; Burns et al., 2024).
- ³ Cognate disciplines (e.g., policing and justice) were included in the study scope. Across the paper, reference to criminology programs/degrees typically includes associated areas of study.
- ⁴ Australian National University, Deakin University, Flinders University, La Trobe University, Macquarie University, Monash University, Murdoch University, Adelaide University, The University of Newcastle, The University of New England, University of Technology Sydney, University of Wollongong, Victoria University, and Western Sydney University.
- ⁵ Australian Catholic University, Federation University Australia, Griffith University, University of New South Wales, The University of Queensland, Adelaide University, The University of Western Australia, Swinburne University of Technology, Edith Cowan University, and University of the Sunshine Coast.
- ⁶ Charles Sturt University, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and Victoria University.
- ⁷ James Cook University, The University of Melbourne, The University of Sydney, University of Tasmania, Swinburne University, Adelaide University, and University of Southern Queensland.
- ⁸ Queensland University of Technology (Justice), Southern Cross University (Legal & Justice Studies), University of Canberra (Justice Studies), Macquarie University (Security Studies), Charles Sturt University (Policing & Public Safety), and Western Sydney University (Criminal & Community Justice, Policing).
- ⁹ The edu.au internet domain name extension is used exclusively by students and staff at verified Australian educational institutions: universities, secondary schools, and technical and further education institutions.
- ¹⁰ Thresholds for including partial survey completions – along with what is considered a ‘partial completion’ – vary significantly. Courser (2008) notes that the partial completions threshold may be set as low as 50% and as high as 90%. We set our completion threshold at the more liberal end of this spectrum at 66%, though the overwhelming majority (86%, n = n.395) of our respondents would have met a stricter 80% completion threshold.

¹¹ Our findings did not allow us to determine definitively why Class 5 (Unclear) differed from the other classes across the findings. Respondents placed in this class may have had other motivations for studying criminology which were not measured in our survey. For example, to complement another degree, such as law (see Wimshurst & Manning, 2017).

¹² Some of the cognate degrees undertaken by survey respondents – such as law, psychology, and social work – are accredited. Their curriculum is governed by external bodies, such as the Australian Association of Social Workers.