



**Criminal Justice Experience Survey**  
**Samantha Snyder (COL, 2018)**  
**Advisor: Charles Loeffler**

My experience conducting research this summer through the PURM program has been nothing short of incredibly fascinating. Specifically, I was working on the Criminal Justice Experience Survey with Professor Loeffler of the criminology department. The goal of this project was to study rates of wrongful convictions in the Pennsylvania criminal justice system. We sought not only to capture (self-reported) rates of wrongful convictions, but also the reasons for these wrongful convictions. That is, were these individuals completely innocent, or did they perceive their conviction as wrongful for other reasons – for example, they weren't as involved as their conviction implied, they lacked intent when they committed the crime, their lawyers were incompetent, or they had an unfair trial? To capture these statistics, we administered surveys to inmates at Pennsylvania's SCI Camp Hill (Pennsylvania's state correctional facility). Additionally, we observed preliminary hearings in various counties around the state to see what, if any, differences existed in regards to procedures in these courts (in the hopes that these differences might explain between-county variation in wrongful conviction rates). Finally, later in the summer, we began a new phase of survey administration, this time with the probation population in Philadelphia (we administered surveys in the probation office within Philadelphia's Criminal Justice Center to newly sentenced probationers).

In terms of hard facts, we learned that upwards of 70% of inmates feel they were rightfully convicted. That the percentage of inmates admitting guilt was so high gave us faith in the reliability of the responses – that is, inmates weren't all reporting wrongful convictions and pleading innocence out of fear that law enforcement might see the surveys. I specifically examined how attorney type (a proxy for attorney quality) relates to wrongful convictions. The research showed that court-appointed private attorneys had the highest rates of wrongful convictions, whereas private attorneys and public defenders actually had comparable rates of wrongful convictions. In crafting a literature review to give these findings context, it appeared that court-appointed private attorneys likely have the highest wrongful conviction rates because of their pay structure (the structure provides no incentive for these attorneys to adequately prepare for trial). But more than these findings, I learned through my experience how real-world research actually works. It can be frustrating at times, but this only prompted me to work harder and problem solve in creative ways. Ultimately, the sense of accomplishment I felt after submitting my final research findings and my literature review was well worth all the hard work. Getting hands-on experience in my field of

study was invaluable and only furthered my interest in this area. I learned so much more about criminology by actually getting into courthouses, speaking with judges, police officers, and probation officers, and reading inmate survey responses. Opportunities like this are precisely why I chose Penn, and this summer did not disappoint.