

UMBC Social Sciences Forum

"A Pound of Flesh: Monetary Sanctions as a Punishment for the Poor" Alexes Harris Professor of Sociology, University of Washington

Wednesday, March 7, 2018

4:30-5:30 pm

University Center Ballroom (3rd floor)

Book signing and reception to follow talk

Organized by the School of Public Policy



Alexes Harris
(Photo by Stacie Youngblood)

Harris will discuss her book, "A Bound of Flesh: Monetary Sanctions as Punishment of the Poor" where she presents her research about the contemporary relationship between the United States' systems of social control and inequality and specifically, the expansion of and use of monetary sanctions as a criminal sentencing tool. Monetary sanctions are a type of criminal sentence imposed by state superior courts nationally, and include fines, fees, costs, interest, surcharges, and restitution.

Organized by the School of Public Policy and co-sponsored by Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology and Health Administration and Policy, and the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

"A Pound of Flesh" documents the contemporary relationship between the United States' systems of social control and inequality. Specifically, the expansion of and use of monetary sanctions as a criminal sentencing tool. Monetary sanctions are a type of criminal sentence imposed by state superior courts nationally, and include fines, fees, costs, interest, surcharges, and restitution. Until these debts are paid in full individuals remain under judicial supervision, subject to court summons, warrants, and jail stays. As a result of interest and surcharges that accumulate on unpaid financial penalties, for many offenders, this portion of their sentences become permanent legal debt (punishment) that they carry for the remainder of their lives. Given that the vast majority of people who receive felony convictions in the U.S. are disproportionately of color and poor, with minimal employment and income prospects post-conviction, the practice of imposing financial penalties cements people to lives of poverty and reinforces existing inequalities. Legal debt matters because of the large number of people it affects, and for the pernicious impacts it has on their lives.

Speaker Bio

Alexes Harris is a professor of sociology at the University of Washington. She received her PhD in sociology from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2002. Her research focuses on social stratification and inequality with an emphasis on juvenile and criminal justice processing and outcomes. Dr. Harris' research has been published in a number of academic journals, including *The American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *Law and Society Review* and *Symbolic Interaction*.

Since 2004 she has taught undergraduate classes on social problems, race and ethnicity and juvenile justice, and senior research practicums on payday lending, monetary sanctions, and sports and higher education. She also teaches graduate courses on qualitative research methods, juvenile justice and teaching sociology.

Dr. Harris' book, "A Pound of Flesh: Monetary Sanctions as a Punishment for the Poor" investigates fiscal sentences imposed to felony defendants and the consequences for legal debtors (NYC: Russell Sage, American Sociological Association's Rose Series). Her research for this book has already received widespread media attention from outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker* *The Los Angeles Times*, *NPR*, *Mother Jones*, *Aljazeera*, *King5 News* and *The Seattle Times* (see book review tab for links). With a recently awarded grant from the Arnold Foundation, she is continuing her research on monetary sanctions to replicate and expand the Washington study in seven other states with collaborators.

Dr. Harris' overarching aim with her scholarship is to produce empirically based research that is theoretically informed, and has real world policy implications for addressing social problems and inequality in the United States.

