

Faculty Investigate Environmental Crime

Environmental sociology and criminology have historically been two major focus areas of the WSU Sociology Department—but few scholars have attempted to intersect the two disciplines.

That is, until Associate Professor Erik Johnson stumbled on a trove of environmental crime cases on the EPA website more than five years ago. Most of Johnson's scholarship focuses on the environmental movement—but the cases presented an interesting opportunity.



Dr. Erik Johnson



Dr. Jennifer Schwartz

“The two biggest job markets for sociologists are crime and the environment, in that order,” Johnson said. “I just looked at it as ‘Oh, we should have students that are interested in environmental crime.’”

Johnson didn't have to look far for a collaborator—he is married to fellow sociology professor Dr. Jennifer Schwartz, who studies crime. Specifically, her work analyzes trends in social control, gender, and white-collar crime.

“I'm starting to think more about how crime groups and organizations are comprised and who benefits in crime groups,” Schwartz said.

Schwartz noted that the case studies “list who is involved, what they've done, what organizations are involved, and what the sanctions are.... It allows me to look at crime groups in a different way and different context than white collar crime.”

The cases include all environmental crime investigations that the EPA forwarded to

the Department of Justice since the inception of environmental protection laws in the early 1980s.

“We have the most serious cases.... They’ve been really investigated, really vetted. If we are going to look at really serious offenses against the environment, this is the place to look—this is where the damage ought to be,” Schwartz said.

The project received funding from the Edward R. Meyer Project Grant from the College of Arts and Sciences last year. Johnson and Schwartz used the funds to hire about a dozen undergraduate students and a graduate student supervisor, Alana Inlow, to help code the cases. Some of the students also participated through a research internship class—where they helped carry out the research, met every week to discuss the project, and earned class credit.

“They were really integral,” Schwartz said. “Some went to gather information on the organizations involved, some we sent to newspaper archives to find the cases. Those were the big things.”

Christina Hubbard, a senior sociology major, received a research experience for undergraduates grant to work on the project last summer and will present her work at the Academic Showcase in Spring 2017.

Building a new research area

Criminologists often use large databases collected by local and federal governments about the occurrence, severity, and location of criminal activity. However, virtually no similar data source exists about crimes against the environment—and, by extension, human health.

“Unlike street crime—where there is a clear victim and offender—these crimes are just more difficult to get public support behind,” Schwartz said. “It’s the same fate as white collar crime—where it may be more damaging than any street crime—but it’s more diffuse and more invisible.”

The collection of criminally prosecuted cases is important because existing environmental crime studies often focus on civil cases, which mostly include relatively minor violations of environmental regulations. But the cases in Johnson and Schwartz’s database are more serious and can result in jail time for offenders.

“Ten percent of our data are environmental remediation firms. They take samples, but don’t really test them, and come back with numbers,” Johnson said.

“The most surprising [part],” Schwartz added. “is how much fraud there is in air

quality, water quality, and emissions. There are falsified tests, just made up.”

Johnson is also interested in how the agencies’ definitions of environmental crimes change over time. For example, early environmental crime cases mostly consisted of hazardous waste violations, but the types of environmental crimes prosecuted have diversified since then.

Schwartz is especially interested in the characteristics of people and organizations held responsible for committing environmental crimes. For example, one important unanswered question is whether organizations or individuals are more likely to be held responsible for environmental crimes.

Following the publication of ongoing studies, Johnson and Schwartz plans to make the data available on a website so other scholars, policymakers, and the public can access their work.

Meanwhile, they continue to collaborate and brainstorm new ideas—sometimes over family meals.

“It makes for an interesting dinnertime conversation, but I think there is a good synergy between both of our interests,” Schwartz said. “It was neat for us to come together to do this project.”

