

2025 Plea Bargaining Institute Newsletter

From the Co-Chairs: Welcome to the Academic Working Group

October 2025

Thank you for joining the Plea Bargaining Institute's (PBI) Academic Working Group (AWG).

In collaboration with the Policymakers and Practitioners Working Groups, the AWG seeks to facilitate the aims of the PBI to advance science-supported reforms, prepare amicus briefs based on empirical work, and foster new research that will inform policy.

The AWG will foster new and cross-disciplinary research collaborations relating to guilty pleas with the goal of furthering the translation of research in this area into policy. We will release a quarterly newsletter to keep members abreast of the PBI's and the AWG's work. Each newsletter will feature plea-related policy developments, article spotlights (summarizing notable academic papers published since the last newsletter), future funding opportunities, guest columns, collaboration opportunities, domestic and international news updates, etc. In the future, we also hope to announce PBI-specific research funding opportunities!

We would love to include **your content** in these newsletters to foster collaboration and interaction in the working group and to ensure we share a wide range of information that may be of interest to members. Please use [this Google form](#) to make us aware of new developments, to make personal contributions, or to learn about ways you can get involved in AWG programs. You can also use this form to provide general feedback on how to make the working group most useful for all of you.

Sincerely,

Rebecca K. Helm, Ph.D./J.D.
University of Exeter

Miko M. Wilford, Ph.D.
Iowa State University

Tina M. Zottoli, Ph.D.
Montclair State University

A Message From PBI's Founding Director

I'm very pleased to write a brief word of welcome to you as part of this initial Plea Bargaining Institute (PBI) Academic Working Group email. Let me thank you for engaging with the institute. The PBI was created to provide a global intellectual home for researchers, practitioners,

policymakers, and advocacy groups to share knowledge and promote collaboration related to plea bargaining and its role in the criminal system. Thus, the PBI launched in 2022 with several goals in mind. First, to ensure that practitioners, policymakers, and advocacy organizations have access to important research findings and case developments so that this information might assist them in their work, advocacy, and litigation.

We have done this thus far through our website with the creation of our global plea bargaining reports clearinghouse, the issuance of several PBI reports, and the establishment of our searchable database of plea bargaining caselaw and academic articles. Second, the PBI seeks to create opportunities for dialogue and collaboration between academics, practitioners, policymakers, and advocacy organizations to assist in identifying new areas for research and inquiry in this field. We have done this thus far through the creation of our working groups, the hosting of two symposia – one in collaboration with the Quattrone Center – and participation in several trainings, including for the U.S. State Department.

There is much more in store for the PBI, including the creation of online training materials to further assist in bringing important academic findings related to plea bargaining into the hands of practitioners, courts, and policy groups. Through these and other efforts, the PBI hopes to assist in the dissemination of cutting-edge research and the creation of opportunities for plea bargaining reform efforts, policy initiatives, and legislation informed, influenced, and assisted by research. We look forward to your engagement with the PBI and we hope that the collaborations and opportunities created by this institute will be of great benefit to your work.

Lucian E. Dervan

Founding Director | Plea Bargaining Institute

Professor of Law and Director of Criminal Justice Studies | Belmont University College of Law

Recently-Published Article Summaries

[Quick and dirty: An evaluation of plea colloquy validity in the virtual courtroom](#)

The legal system presumes that criminal defendants are waiving constitutional rights (e.g., to a trial) knowingly, intelligently, and voluntarily. The current study demonstrated ways in which those presumptions may be inappropriate, particularly in the context of virtual plea colloquies in the United States. Judges scrutinize the validity of defendants' decisions to plead guilty in hearings called colloquies, and many switched to a virtual format during COVID-19. The study evaluated 234 virtual colloquies, noting their brevity (< 4 minutes), limited consistency in validity inquiries, and frequent audio-only defendant participation (which raised doubts about defendants' identities and states of mind).

This article was selected by the *Law and Human Behavior* Editor-in-Chief, Dr. David DeMatteo, as the Editor's Choice for the special issue on Justice, Legitimacy, and Technology, making it open-access for a limited period of time.

The “partial innocence effect:” False guilty pleas to partially unethical behaviors

This study experimentally examined what the authors term the “partial innocence effect” – when individuals who committed an offense are charged with a comparable crime that they did not commit. Across three studies, participants were assigned to a “guilty,” “partially innocent,” or “innocent” group, either by actual behavior (in a cheating task where participants were induced to behave in a particular way), or by imagining themselves in a similar scenario. Participants who were partially innocent were not guilty of the offence they were accused of, but were guilty of a comparable offence. All participants were told that they were facing an academic integrity board and had the choice to accept or reject a deal to avoid disciplinary sanctions. Across all three studies, those in the partially innocent condition pleaded guilty to cheating nearly as often as those in the guilty condition and significantly more than those in the innocent condition.

The article is the first, to our knowledge, to empirically examine the plea decisions of individuals who are factually innocent of the crimes they are charged with but are guilty of a similar offence. As such, it extends existing research on innocence in plea decision-making and has the potential to open up important new lines of inquiry in relation to guilty plea decision-making in the criminal justice system.

News and Announcements

United States Sentencing Commission Votes to Improve Its Policymaking Process

On August 8, 2024, the United States Sentencing Commission voted unanimously to “prioritize one or more” of the suggestions it received from the public on how to [improve its policymaking process](#). One of these priorities was “Promoting evidence-based approaches to offense and individual characteristics”, which included the [creation of an ad hoc advisory group](#) on “Research and Data Practices” (RDPAG). The creation of this group was in line with a [comment submitted by the Plea Bargaining Institute](#) in which we called for the creation of an Academics Advisory Group. The RDPAG has been established for a minimum of 18 months during which it will advise government agencies and NGOs on best practices for data collection, use, analysis, and dissemination. It will also make recommendations to the United States Sentencing Commission on ways to incorporate best data practices for the future. The [list of members](#) was announced on August 15, 2025.

An Update from the Law Commission in England and Wales

On February 26, 2025, the Law Commission in England and Wales [published a paper](#) as part of their public consultation on the law relating to criminal appeals. In the paper, they considered the circumstances under which defendants can appeal a criminal conviction via guilty plea, both generally and in relation to child defendants specifically. The consultation period has now closed, and the Law Commission is now analyzing the responses before making final recommendations to the government. They are planning to publish their final report with recommendations in 2026.

Grant Opportunities

[Russell Sage Foundation: Early Career Criminal Justice and Core Research Grants](#)

[William T. Grant Foundation: Institutional Challenge Grant](#)

[American Psychology-Law Society: Research to Enhance the Impact and Diversification of Psychology and Law Research](#)