

School of Social Work Presents:

“Care and Control in Crisis: Organizational Life Inside a Closing Psychiatric Emergency Department”

A Colloquium by

Lester J. Kern III, MSW

Ph.D. candidate at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work,
Policy, and Practice

Assistant/Associate Professor Candidate

Lester J. Kern III is a scholar of mental health, criminalization, and organizational change. His research examines how mental healthcare and criminal-legal systems intersect, with particular attention to psychiatric crisis response and how workers and marginalized populations navigate these systems.

His dissertation, *Between Two Worlds: A Case Study of a Closing Psychiatric Emergency Department*, draws on two years of engagement with the local behavioral health ecosystem and six months of ethnographic fieldwork to analyze psychiatric emergency care under institutional decline. Across three papers, he investigates humor as a multifunctional organizational resource, how interorganizational power asymmetries produce racialized categories of patients, and how staff negotiate the moral and organizational politics of physical and pharmacological restraints. Collectively, this work advances sociological understandings of care, control, and institutional uncertainty in safety-net settings.

Additionally, Lester has contributed to evaluations of street outreach and violence prevention programs in Chicago and county-level jail diversion efforts in Michigan, and his research on jail-based healthcare appears in *Psychiatric Services*. His work has been supported by the Ford Foundation and Council on Social Work Education.

Prior to joining the University of Chicago, Lester received an MSW from Wayne State University and a BA from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.

Monday, November 10th, 2025
10:30-11:30am
MHC 1442
[MS Teams Link](#)



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