

**ENG4C-A**



# **Crime and the Media**

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# Introduction

In this unit, you will have an opportunity to read about the part of society that is not engaged in lawful, gainful employment: the criminals. The readings will provide subject matter for you to practise analyzing informational texts and opinion pieces. They will also give you a starting point for developing your own opinions and expressing them in writing. The topic of crimes and criminals is linked very closely in our society to the role of the media. News reports, television shows, and movies thrive on the public's interest in details about crimes. In this unit, you will learn about how the media describe crimes and how they influence people's responses to criminals and to the justice system.

This unit will also give you some insights that you can apply to the study of crime fiction in Unit 3.

## Overall Expectations

After completing this unit, you will be able to

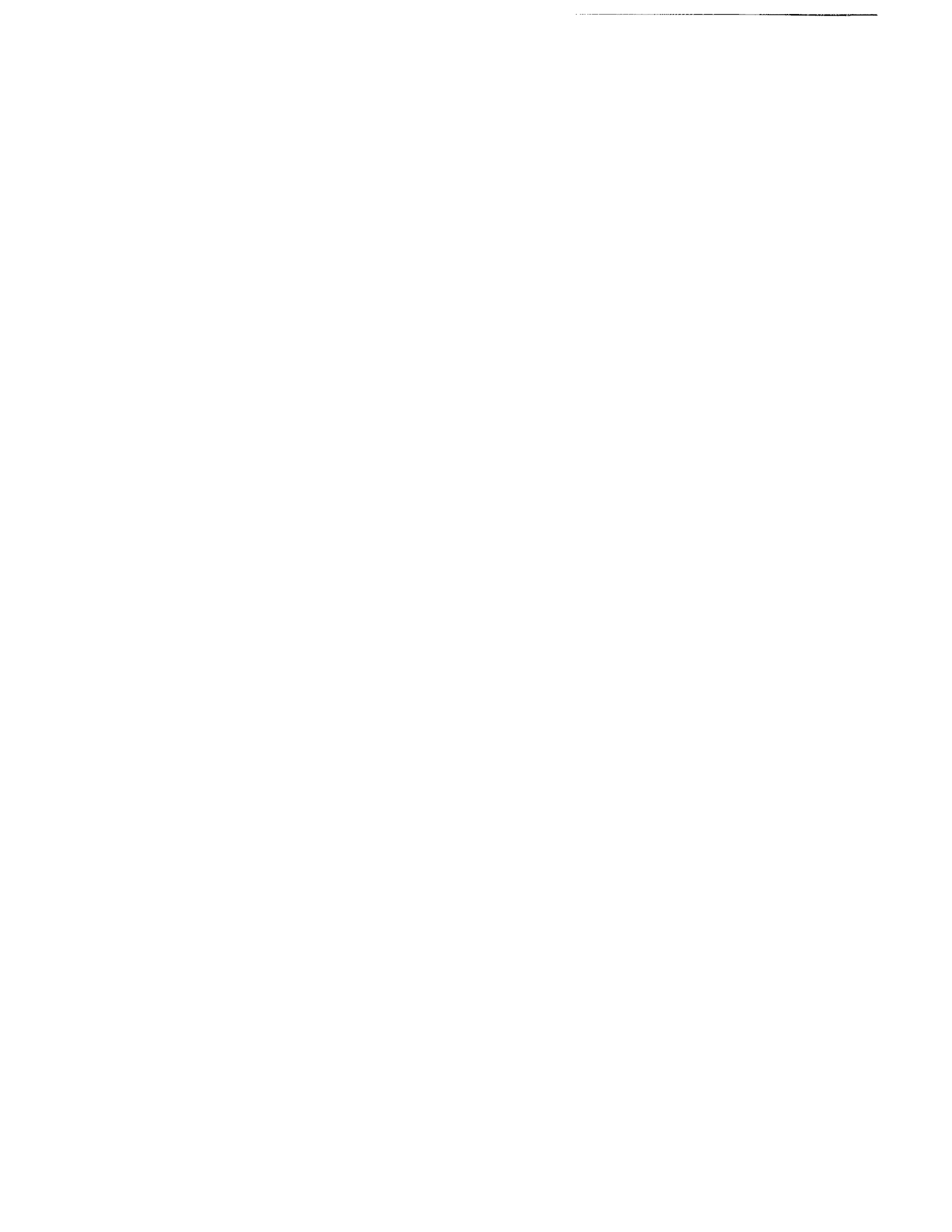
- analyze and assess ideas, issues, and information
- use evidence to support your opinions
- compare the ideas, values, and perspectives in different articles
- demonstrate critical thinking skills by identifying bias and analyzing messages in media works
- analyze an author's use of language and a variety of literary techniques
- analyze how an author's work affects you through its use of language, syntax, and literary devices
- create and develop a thesis using information and ideas from prior knowledge and research

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- assess information and ideas to determine whether they are sufficient, reliable, credible, and suitable to the form and the purpose of your writing
  - use appropriate structure and language to present information and ideas in reports and essays
  - revise your work for greater correctness and readability
  - use new vocabulary appropriately
  - identify and analyze the camera techniques and social messages in a movie or television show
  - design a media report of a crime, a crime investigation, or a crime follow-up
  - design a documentary movie about an aspect of the criminal justice system

**ENG4C-A**



**Crime**



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# Introduction

The history of crime is as old as history itself. Every society operates within a framework of law, and when laws get broken, as they always do, the result is crime and criminals. Naturally, different societies have different laws, and as societies change over time, the laws usually change as well—that is what parliaments are for. Therefore, what is a crime in one country or at one time is not necessarily a crime in another country or another time. From 1921 to 1931, for example, it was illegal to consume alcohol in the United States, but it was legal to do so in Canada.

Punishments are likely to be different in different countries, too, and to change over time. Two hundred years ago in England, for instance, a person might be hanged for stealing bread. In Prince Edward Island (before it became a province of Canada), two men were actually hanged in 1815 for stealing a loaf of bread! In some states of the United States, murderers are still executed, whereas in Canada there is no capital punishment at all, no matter how horrible the crime. So when you think about crime, remember that you are not thinking about something fixed, and that attitudes towards crime may and do change. Of course, perceptions of what a crime is are not completely relative. However, it would be hard to find a society that accepted murder or stealing.

## What You Will Learn

After completing this lesson, you will be able to

- analyze the way in which the media treat crimes of personal violence
- use a wider vocabulary
- organize your writing by ordering your ideas logically
- edit and proofread your writing for spelling and grammatical correctness

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# Some Modern Views of Crime and Criminals

People view crime and criminals in several different ways. Some think that criminals are just bad, and should be punished. Others see criminals as a threat to society—for them the point is not so much to punish the criminal as to protect the rest of society from him or her. Some think that criminals are born bad and will always be bad; others think that they have been damaged—neglected or abused as children, either by their families or by society as a whole. Some think criminals should be helped to become useful citizens; others think that this is either impossible or not worth the effort. Some people think that criminals are pushed into crime by unreasonable laws or by economic necessity.

What, then, is society supposed to do—help the criminal or help the victim; preserve society or improve it; safeguard property or help the poor; maintain virtue or promote freedom; be generous or be just? Which of these approaches to crime should society concentrate on? Since all of us can be victims both of crime and of circumstances, we need to consider these questions.



### Support Question

(do not send in for evaluation)

1. Before you begin, consider what you think right now. Pretend that you are being polled on your attitude towards crime and criminals. The following questions will mostly be “closed” questions (they will ask you to say yes or no, or to choose between alternatives), but with each question, you will be offered the chance to make further comments in order to explain or qualify your answer. Use that chance as often as you can. You can answer right on these pages, if you wish.

- .....
- a) Do you think that our laws are designed to protect the average citizen? \_\_\_\_\_  
Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- b) Do you think that i) our laws are designed to help the weak against the strong, or ii) they are designed to maintain the position of powerful people in society? \_\_\_\_\_  
Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- c) Are criminals i) responsible for what they do, or ii) are they helpless victims of social or economic pressure? \_\_\_\_\_  
Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- d) Do you think that criminals should be made to pay in cash or services for their crimes? \_\_\_\_\_  
Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- e) If you said “yes” to d), do you think that payment should be made to the state or to the victim of the crime? \_\_\_\_\_  
Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- f) Do you think that a criminal should be punished for his or her crime? \_\_\_\_\_  
Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- g) If you said “yes” to f), which of the following purposes would you expect punishment to serve? (You may check as many answers as you like.)
- to teach the criminal a lesson
  - to deter other people from committing crimes
  - to satisfy the victim’s desire for revenge
  - to satisfy society’s desire for revenge

- to satisfy the demands of justice, because crime deserves punishment

Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- h) Do you think that efforts should be made to help criminals?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- i) If you answered “yes” to h), who should offer this help? (You may check as many answers as you like.)

- state employees (guards, psychiatrists, counsellors, doctors, teachers, social workers, and so on)
- representatives of non-governmental organizations (churches, the Salvation Army, legal aid, and so on)
- the criminals’ families
- the victims

Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- j) Do you think that repeat offenders should continue to receive help? \_\_\_\_\_

Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- k) Do you think that certain crimes are so bad that no help should be offered to the criminal? \_\_\_\_\_

Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- l) Do you think that certain criminals should be executed? \_\_\_\_\_

Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- m) If you answered “yes” to l), which of the following types of criminals do you think should be executed? (You may check as many answers as you like.)
- all killers
  - serial killers
  - mass murderers
  - child killers
  - killers of police officers
  - those who plan a murder even if someone else actually commits the murder
  - rapists
  - child molesters
  - kidnappers
  - spies
  - people who betray their country by selling its secrets or fighting against it
  - criminals judged to be incorrigible (unable to be corrected, almost certain to re-offend)
  - criminals classified as “dangerous offenders”
  - frequent re-offenders

Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_

- n) Do you think that certain criminals should never be paroled?

\_\_\_\_\_

Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_

- o) If you answered “yes” to n), which of the following types of criminals do you think should never be paroled? (You may check as many answers as you like.)

- all killers
- serial killers

- 
- mass murderers
  - child killers
  - killers of police officers
  - those who plan a murder even if someone else actually commits the murder
  - rapists
  - child molesters
  - kidnappers
  - spies
  - people who betray their country by selling its secrets or fighting against it
  - criminals judged to be incorrigible (unable to be corrected, almost certain to re-offend)
  - criminals classified as “dangerous offenders”
  - frequent re-offenders

Further comments? \_\_\_\_\_

p) Is there anything you would like to add on the subject of crime and criminals?

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**There are Suggested Answers to Support Questions at the end of this unit.**

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## Crime in the News

Crimes of personal violence make up the bulk of media treatment of crime because they arouse the most intense emotions—fear, pity, sorrow, and sometimes a desire for vengeance. Some of the news media serve up a diet of war and violent crime simply because people like to read about it. Publishers and producers of media know that people will read and watch reports of violent crimes, and will follow the unfolding stories over a long period of time. The media industry is interested in what sells, and crime sells! Listen to news on the radio, watch it on television, or read it in the newspapers or supermarket tabloids, and you will notice an emphasis on violent crime, disasters, and incidents where people suffer harm. As consumers of media, we come to know the names and personal details of the victims and of the perpetrators.

Fortunately for most of us, at least in this country, these terrible events are not the main elements of our daily lives. That's what makes them "news"—they are unusual and different. We find them interesting and scary. However, the media's emphasis on violence and criminals endangers people's perception of reality: it may become distorted, and people may see the world as being more threatening than it really is.

The following article shows you how a crime trial is typically covered in the newspapers. You have probably read, seen, and heard similar cases and reports many times.

**Note:** Real names have been replaced with fictional names to protect individual privacy.

## **Killed classmate, teen sentenced to 7 years to life**

**Youth, now 15, said he strangled student because jail was preferable to home**

**by James Rusk**

**Updated at 7:46 a.m. EDT**

**Friday, Apr. 23, 2004**

BRAMPTON, ONT.— In a dramatic test case of the new Youth Criminal Justice Act, a Brampton teenager who pleaded guilty to first-degree murder was given a life sentence as an adult yesterday, even though he was only 14 when he strangled a fellow Grade Nine student during a lunch hour.

Mr. Justice James Blacklock of the Ontario Court of Justice ruled that James Meuble must serve seven years before being allowed to apply for parole, the maximum allowed under the act.

He also ruled that James should begin his sentence in a youth facility, and did not set a date at which he would be transferred to adult prison.

After the sentence, the family of his victim, 14-year-old Ian Lovatt, told reporters that the sentence was too lenient and that the judge should have ordered James, now 15, to serve his entire sentence in an adult prison.

“There is a possibility that he could be convicted as an adult and spend all the time in a youth facility, which I think is pretty ridiculous,” George Lovatt, the dead boy’s father, said.

Mr. Lovatt said James “has shown no remorse whatsoever. He didn’t seem to care who it was [he killed]. It was the luck of the draw that my son just happened to be picked. It’s still a nightmare. We’re suffering. We’re struggling every day. We’ve already been sentenced to life.”

Debbie Lovatt, Ian’s mother, said that “my son lost his life for no other reason than he [James] was not

happy at home.... Today is the one day that I saw him even blink. He is so emotionally detached.”

Speaking of her son, she added: “He was a beautiful guy, very caring. He was smart, very, very smart.... He was tall, he was just coming into himself. He was just getting past that very difficult puberty stage, and becoming a very beautiful young man.”

James, who said he killed his classmate at Heart Lake Secondary School in April of last year because he felt jail was preferable to living at home, has been diagnosed as a borderline psychotic with no remorse for his crime and has a high risk of reoffending, his presentence hearing heard three weeks ago.

In imposing the sentence on James for a crime that the judge said “tears holes in the hearts of those who are left behind,” Judge Blacklock noted that “James had a chance to let the victim go, but still chose to go ahead.”

While the new act allowed him to sentence James as a juvenile offender, which would mean that he would serve a maximum of six years in a juvenile facility, “such a sentence would not be consistent with the offence,” he said.

An adult sentence is for life, and James will be released only if the National Parole Board approves it. The Lovatts said that they plan to spend the rest of their lives opposing bail for their son’s killer.

The judge also found that James has the best chance of rehabilitation if he starts his sentence in a youth facility, which, unlike an adult prison, has programs for offenders of his age.

James’s family did not comment. Once it became clear that the judge intended to lift the publication ban on their son’s name, his lawyer, William Bain, spoke to family members.

They left the courtroom long before proceedings ended.

James could not previously be named under the provisions of the act, but Judge Blacklock ruled yesterday that his identity could be made public once he was convicted and sentenced as an adult.

Similarly, the act prohibits the publication of the name of a juvenile victim unless the family agrees, but while Ian Lovatt's parents have been anxious to allow the press to use their son's name and picture, they said they did not want to interfere with the judicial process.

Although the CBC applied to the court to have James's psychiatric assessments made public, Judge Blacklock decided that, while most of the evidence before the court could be released, he would hold a further hearing on the documents next Thursday.

In the following article, the writer tells about a case in which the media actually made up reports of a crime wave that wasn't really happening. The New York news media convinced readers and listeners that there was a new and significant kind of crime wave: crimes against the elderly.

## **Media-generated crime waves**

**by Cecil Greek**

In 1976, the NY news media created a major crime wave that resulted in an entirely new category of crime, one we are all now familiar with, "crimes against the elderly." The wave lasted for seven weeks and was a major news theme covered by three daily newspapers and five local TV stations. The reported muggers, murderers, and rapists of the elderly were usually Hispanic and black juvenile delinquents, who came from ghetto neighborhoods near areas in which the victims, characterized as elderly whites, resided. The media crime wave began with the reporting of a series of gruesome murders against elderly victims. The *NY Daily News* started the crime wave and the other media followed suit,

even the usually circumspect *NY Times*. The raw number of reports went from about one story a week by each media organization before the wave began, to over 4 per week per media outlet carried during the wave period.

The response from the community and the political establishment was immediate. The Mayor of NYC publicly pledged to “do something about it.” The NYPD increased the efforts of its already existing Senior Citizens Robbery Unit by creating a new plainclothes operation. The NY state legislature introduced bills to deny 16- to 19-year-olds juvenile court status if they victimized a senior citizen, to enact mandatory prison sentences for crimes of violence against the aged, and to make previously closed juvenile records available to the judge when [an] elderly victim was attacked. If teens, the attackers were to be tried in adult court as adults.

But, were crimes against the elderly really on the rise? When [author Mark] Fishman reviewed the NYPD crime statistics for the period of time covered by the media crime wave, he found the statistics did not show that crimes against the elderly were increasing. In fact, homicides against the elderly were down 19% from the previous year.

So, why did the crime wave occur? Adopting a news theme (not the theme music played by TV news shows), in this case “crimes against the elderly,” is an example of how the news media makes sense of events for us all the time. The media do not want to simply report haphazard events, but try whenever possible to make events fit news themes. Elderly victims are newsworthy in that they are easily depicted as innocent victims, just like small children killed accidentally at the scene of a drive-by shooting. By reporting on such crimes, the media can also claim that it [is] fulfilling its public trust to warn the public of possible dangers, so that precautions can be taken.

News themes allow journalists to cast an incident as a specific instance of something; in this case the murder of an elderly victim becomes an instance of a crime wave against the elderly. Once the media identifies a new news theme, they become sensitized to future reports of similar incidents. They may do a series of stories on a particular newscast or in one edition of the paper linked by the theme. A piece on the latest attack may be followed by one showing the formation of a citizens' neighborhood watch group, followed by a story on action in the legislature, etc.

How does the media get the type of information it needs to construct a crime wave? Of course, the media cannot report on crime waves or upon the topic of crime at all without the aid of the local police department. While the police are under no obligation to fully report to the media daily on all the crimes that occurred in a city, most police departments are willing to help out. All departments must make certain public information available to the media.... The NY media had come to depend upon the NYPD's summaries of the crimes that occurred each day. In other cities, the DA's office may also send summaries to the media as well. Philadelphia is an example. In Oklahoma City, the designated police press spokesperson called every newspaper and local TV station whenever a "major" crime took place. In NYC, the NYPD's Office of Public Information used a teletype "police wire" to send its daily report to the media. The police wire fed the media a steady diet of street crimes because the police department believed these were the stories the media wanted. Shootings and stabbings accounted for 42% of the felony crime reports sent over the wire, with 66% being robberies and burglaries.

Today many police agencies maintain Internet press release sites, some updated throughout the day and night. For example, the FBI has a press room, Tallahassee PD has a press release page, while

non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International publish press releases on human rights atrocities around the world.

However, there are a number of types of crimes which were never reported over the police wire. These included consumer fraud, price-fixing, environmental crimes, political bribery and corruption, etc. As a result, such crimes were reported on less frequently, because more time-intensive investigative reporting by the media would be required. Also, obviously, agencies other than the city police enforce these types of violations of law. The kinds of things the police wire provided plenty of examples of were: crimes between strangers, crimes in public places, and crimes specific to age. From such reports the media could create a number of new crime waves (i.e., subway crime, schoolyard crime, youth gang crime, drug crimes, etc.) Since the police wire rarely mentioned if the victim and offender knew each other, an impression was given that crimes occurred among strangers more frequently than they do in reality.

Why didn't someone simply expose the fact that the media had concocted the crime wave against the elderly? The media helped perpetuate the satanic crime hoax of the 1980s, but then reversed itself and exposed it as fantasy. However, one would first have to ask whose interest would be served if the media reversed its position on elderly victimization? Certainly, it was not in the interest of the media, the police, or public officials to do so. Public officials were willing from the outset to assume that the crime wave represented something real. Even the elderly may have benefited from the stepped-up police protection and the citizens' action groups that sprouted as a result of the media campaign. Nevertheless, fear of victimization did rise as a result of the reports, along with the negative over-responses this engenders.

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**Support Question**  
(do not send in for evaluation)



2. Look back at the article you just read and reread the section on “news themes.” In your own words, explain what a news theme is, and why the media might develop one.

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Here is another article about crime. This time a Toronto newspaper is stating that the Toronto public believes that the biggest issue in their lives, and their most serious concern, is the high level of crime in their city. As you read the article, think about where most Torontonians would get their information about crime from, in the first place. Might it be from the newspapers? Could newspapers have an interest in making sure that their readers remain concerned about crime so that they keep buying the paper in order to read about it? Just a thought to keep in mind!

### **Violent crime: The public gets it**

**by Lorrie Goldstein**

***Toronto Sun*, April 11, 2004**

If ever there was a poll that shows the disconnect between the people who live in and around Toronto and the politicians who govern us, it's today's Leger survey done exclusively for the *Sun*.

While crime always scores high among the concerns of Greater Toronto Area residents, this time it utterly dominates with 42% of those surveyed saying it is the single biggest issue we face.

Nothing else comes close, not even taxes (17%), homelessness (11%), public transit (10%), garbage (8%) or gridlock (8%).

And yet at Toronto City Hall, Queen's Park and on Parliament Hill, our politicians still have to be dragged kicking and screaming into any serious discussion about dealing with violent crime.

Indeed, Toronto Police Chief Julian Fantino's job would be a relative breeze if all he had to do was focus on actually fighting crime instead of constantly fighting rearguard actions from politicians who want to whack the cop budget to fund social services.

This is not to argue the police should be immune from civilian oversight, or the chief exempt from defending his budget like every other senior city bureaucrat. But when even city auditors can find less than \$1 million in savings in a \$679.1 million police budget for this year (any more would have meant cutting officers), isn't it time to give all this politically motivated talk about cutting the fat out of the police budget a rest?

### **Growing concern**

To be sure, it would be unfair to suggest nothing has been done in the wake of growing public concerns about crime.

Toronto Mayor David Miller does have a plan to combat it, including a committee studying ways to attack its root causes headed by Ontario Chief Justice Roy McMurtry.

Ontario Attorney General Michael Bryant has Crown attorneys working to convince judges a special message needs to be sent through sentencing about deterring gun and gang-related crime.

As for Ottawa ... well, it's pretty much business as usual.

Save for a few exceptions, the wall-to-wall Liberal MPs we keep electing to Parliament Hill are as reluctant to talk about violent crime as they are to talk about white-collar crime—specifically the theft and fraud that may well have occurred in Adscam.

The point is that most politicians have to be dragged kicking and screaming into any serious discussion about combatting violent crime. And even then this inevitably comes only after massive public pressure has been applied and only for as long as it continues to be applied, before it drops off their radar again.

The only exception is a handful of politicians like Scarborough Centre Councillor Michael Thompson at City Hall, who did much of the heavy lifting on this subject months ago until it finally burst its way onto the city agenda. Then again, Thompson's a rookie—not yet infected by the political culture that permeates City Hall, in which most politicians would rather talk about anything—for example setting pie-in-the-sky goals for recycling our garbage—than confront the problem of urban, violent street crime.

As a caution, we should keep in mind that the Leger poll of 502 GTA residents from March 29 to April 5 was conducted at the height of public concern over the murder of 9-year-old Cecilia Zhang and 15-year-old Rene Charlebois, plus a wave of gang-related and random shootings in and around Toronto.

But the public is not irrationally panicked by crime. Even with this huge spike in concern—the largest ever recorded by Leger—almost nine of 10 GTA residents still feel their own neighbourhoods are either “absolutely safe” (28%) or “somewhat safe” (60%).

### **Violence mostly confined**

And that is an accurate expression of life in and around the GTA today. Most of us, at least those of us fortunate enough not to live in certain parts of Toronto, do not wake up every morning worried we'll be gunned down on our way to work. Much of the worst gang violence is confined to a few sections of town and even in and around a few local clubs.

But the broader concern is that crime is gradually draining the life blood from our city and that no one remembers the kind of random high-calibre gun violence we now hear about all the time.

While overall crime rates may be going down, gun crime is up.

Given all that, are our politicians listening? Will they listen? Only if we make them.

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**Support Question**  
(do not send in for evaluation)

3. “Violent crime, the public gets it” is an example of an interested media treatment of crime—that is to say, the writer is not just reporting, but is using facts to make a point. There’s nothing wrong with that, of course—you’re supposed to make a point, and facts by themselves will not do it for you. As long as you do not falsify the facts, or suppress facts that might be used against you, you are playing fair. Lorrie Goldstein may be guilty of over-generalization in his characterization of the federal Liberals or the “political culture that permeates City Hall,” but he does provide the relevant facts. Your exercise is to list these bare facts and then to state the author’s main point in the article. Then, in an article of your own, use the same facts to make the opposite point.

Before you begin, however, here is a note about bias. A mental bias means a predisposition to think in a certain way. It is doubtful that anyone is without bias—we all get our ideas from experience and naturally expect them to be confirmed in the future. The trick is 1) to be aware of your own and other people’s biases, and 2) not to let your biases blind you to new evidence and ideas.

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## Is It a Crime?

There is probably no one over the age of six who has not broken some law or other, but jaywalkers or those who forget to feed the parking meter are not usually branded as criminals. If you think about it, everyone has been bad or has hurt others, at one time or another. The next article introduces the issue of being bad, even though the behaviour isn't criminal. You need to distinguish between bad or evil actions, which are immoral, and criminal actions, which are illegal. This is not complicated, but it is important.

Behaviour that is against the law is criminal behaviour. Stealing is a crime because Parliament passed a law making it illegal. As you read in the introduction to this lesson, most countries have laws against stealing and murder. But many countries, including our own, have had laws in effect previously that would not be acceptable nowadays. That means that some behaviour was called "criminal" even though it wasn't (or isn't) "bad." For example, in some countries, including Canada, it has been illegal for people of different races to marry one another. In present-day Canada, this kind of law would be considered an intolerable interference in personal freedom. So, you can say that behaviour can be criminal without being bad. It can be against the law, without being against morality.

This is an important distinction. Actions can be illegal and they can be immoral. Sometimes, what is immoral is perfectly legal, as you will see in the next article. Sometimes what is illegal is morally acceptable, as in the previous example of marriage. Morality comes from several sources, including one's religion, upbringing, and culture. Ultimately, there are moral principles that are widely, if not universally accepted, such as "Treat others as you would like to be treated" or some variant of that rule. Failure to abide by moral principles is the source of feelings of guilt and remorse. This is the kind of behaviour that the next article talks about. Although the author says "we are all criminals," she doesn't mean that we all break the laws. She means that we have all done bad things that were probably not illegal at all.

Why is she bothering to say something so obvious? She is probably doing this because she wants her readers to think about innocence and guilt for themselves, and not to rely on the law and the courts to do it for them. Are those of us who have not been convicted of a criminal offence totally innocent? Hardly!

## **Crimes of the heart**

**by Sally Tisdale**

I haven't been arrested since I was caught skinny-dipping at the age of 15. Easy enough to read the newspaper with both alarm and a certain complacency. Crime is something done by others—perhaps to me, but not by me. It's easy to presume the gulf that separates me from you, us from them, is wide and deep, but I know better. I'm a criminal, and so are we all, and the difference between the crimes that send us to prison and the headlines and the other kind is only one of degree. Like all criminals, I think we carry our crimes with us until we are done with them and they are done with us—until they are confessed, and we are punished; and sometimes even after that.

When I teach writing to adults, I sometimes give them a phrase and start a clock, asking only that they keep writing until the clock stops, never taking the pen from the paper. I want them to stop editing in their heads, to put everything, anything down, and especially the unexpected, petty, surprising thoughts floating through their heads, which they never think to call writing. I like to use short, ambiguous words to get them started—words like “fired” or “dark”—and phrases with emotional gravity, like “doctor visit” or “lost object.”

A few years ago, I happened upon a particularly useful phrase: “the crime I committed.” I expected these beginning writers to take it literally. They were summer workshop students ranging in age from 20-something to 73, college students, a housewife, a lawyer, a retired reporter and a real estate agent.

I was prepared for a series of anecdotes about teenage shoplifting and vandalism, perhaps a few confessions of drunk driving. My hope was to get the beginnings of storytelling, and speaking from one's own experience.

I sure had that wrong.

It was a beginning of a different kind, the beginning of real writing—these raw, artless stories about the crimes that really mattered, the crimes they still carried hidden away, undeclared. One woman, crying, read about her failure to visit a dying friend. Another wrote about a cowardly escape from difficult circumstances. They wrote about yelling at their children. About broken promises. Faithlessness. Cruelty.

We're all bearers of a double standard, and not a simple one. This one has two sides to its doubleness: We forgive ourselves for acts we despise in others, despise ourselves for what we forgive in others, in a continual dance of separation. Hurting, we lash out; hurt by others, we retreat; and rarely do we just explain.

I've been thinking about this because I've had so many conversations in the last weeks about how things are falling apart around us, how the center seems like it cannot hold, perhaps has never held at all. I know a lot of people who feel innocently embattled in their daily lives, locked in a house, a job, a city, a relationship—locked in by fear. We're afraid of losing money, health, love, genuinely afraid of being shot, run over, stolen from, victimized, picked out. Picked out by those others, the ones who lose control, who get mad, and get even.

We visited my grandmother several times a year when I was a child. I committed one of my greatest crimes against her. I was about eight years old, and she'd been widowed only a short time. Nothing in her tidy house had changed—it was still a sunny, well-kept house with clearly delineated territories. She had a large yard, steadily tended, full of the lush,

continual growth of a fertile, warm valley. She had a number of prize plants; one of them, a split-leaf philodendron several feet tall and the deep green of jungle shadow, stood beside the back door.

I have no idea what angered me; I was simply angry, with the kind of anger that fills every space and controls every muscle, every word. The leash was off the beast, and I stood outside the back door by my grandmother's kitchen—my reserved and silent grandmother, her perfectly clean, white kitchen—and I tore her philodendron to shreds.

Not a second thought. No more thought than a pack of wolves spotting a weak caribou—ferocious, that anger. Cruel, ferocious, but carefully directed: I didn't tear up a neighbor's plant, after all, or pull up dandelions. Anger, and something weaker than me, something that couldn't fight back—something to kill—was all I needed. So I killed it—bit by bit, leaf by leaf, until there was nothing in the cool shadows of the brick patio but green confetti, me in the midst of it like a leprechaun after a night's debauch.

And then I realized what I'd done, and it wasn't killing a plant. My grandmother stood in the doorway, her face a stone mask. But behind her—my mother. That was the crime hidden inside the crime, that terrible act—exposing my mother to her mother like that, proving my mother inadequate, her child a terror. And her face—that was punishment.

There my memory ends, fades into the lost time of childhood. I'm sure I was disciplined, but I've confessed it many times because the hidden crime remains, without restitution. I'm still trying to figure out what proper restitution might be.

A friend tells me one of his childish exploits—a chemistry-set experiment ending with a big hole in the bathroom linoleum. He covered it with the clothes hamper and was on the phone, trying to arrange a repairman's visit, when his mother returned. But when I ask if this is his biggest crime, he says no. That was shooting a squirrel with a

BB gun—wounding it and leaving it to die. He can outrun the sneaky attempt to cover up an accident, but he can't outrun the fact that he was a coward.

I think we all tend to presume that cowardice and destructive tantrums are childish things, something we outgrow, suppress, control. But the beast is always there. It isn't always angry, either; sometimes the beast is scared, sometimes the beast is sad, or just selfish, hungry for something it sees and wants. I've felt that leash slip many times as an adult, and I don't think I deserve much in the way of congratulations because I haven't done a lot of visible damage at those times. I've done lots of damage, wielded many weapons.

So many broken promises, large and small: "I'll call." "I'll be there." "I won't forget." So many lies: "It's nothing personal." "I had a wonderful time." "I'm fine." We're like gardens, all flowers and weeds, not always sure which is which. Crimes of commission, mostly, and sometimes omission, crimes of intent, and lack of. Faithlessness, of so many kinds—petty dislikes and thoughts of disdain, dust motes of bad opinion and harsh judgment clouding the air. Little weeds, with long roots.

Little outlaw acts. An undercharged item at the grocery store. Too much change. A too-small tip. A little cheating here and there, just a little padding, a little undercutting, just a little. Misplaced blame. Exaggeration. They're all forms of stealing—robbing from others, taking what we want and have no title to, just because we want it. Because we want.

Intimate crimes, private ones: irritability, sarcasm, the short temper. Glib jokes at someone else's expense—someone else, paying for you. Cheap shots, ba-da-boom, take a bow. Abrupt ends to conversations, unanswered letters, unreturned calls and wavering attention. The thank-you notes never sent, the presents never given, the niece's volleyball games never attended, the son's award dinner missed. Complaints, mostly small—whining, mostly

old. All forms of assault, killing small parts of other people, killing hope and kindness and self-esteem, little knife wounds of neglect and pricking self-defense.

The list is as long as our lives. These are simply the symptoms of being human, after all. What we so easily forget is how close to each other we are. The gap between an angry shout and a slap is very small—I know, I’ve slapped. Weapons are always at hand, some deadlier than others, and the thoughts we use to make it all right to pick one up are in each of us, always. I keep reading the paper and listening to people talk about the criminals in the news, listening to the fear and anger and violent wishes for revenge. I try to remember that this fear, anger, this sense of powerlessness, these wishes are precisely the emotions that drive the acts we dread. Only humans can commit crimes against humanity, and no one is innocent of that.

*Salon* 11 June, 1998



**Support Question**  
(do not send in for evaluation)

4. Which acts are criminal and which are immoral? Your challenge is to indicate, as well as you can, where to place a variety of acts within a Venn diagram. First, you will be provided with a numbered list of acts, and then, with a Venn diagram consisting of two overlapping circles. The left circle represents immoral acts, and the right circle represents illegal ones. If you think one of the acts listed is immoral but not illegal, put its number in the left circle; if you think it is illegal but not immoral, put its number in the right circle. If you think it is both immoral and illegal, put the number in the area of intersection common to both circles. If you think it is neither immoral nor illegal, put the number in the area outside both circles. If you are

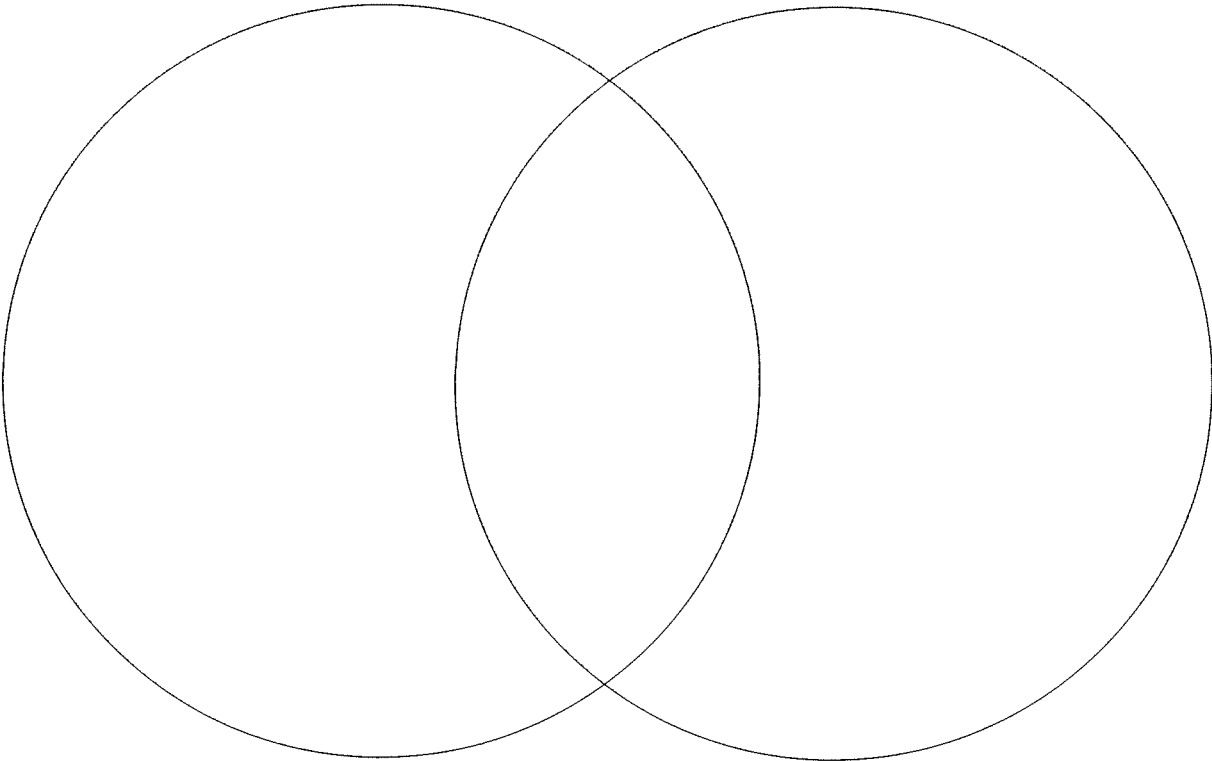
not sure about where to put an act, do what you think is probably right, but add a question mark.

- 1) Tell a lie to protect yourself
- 2) Tell a lie to protect someone else
- 3) Hurt someone's feelings by telling them what you really think about them
- 4) Kill an animal deliberately
- 5) Kill an animal by accident
- 6) Kill a person deliberately
- 7) Kill a person by accident
- 8) Kill an insect deliberately
- 9) Kill an insect by accident
- 10) Damage someone's things deliberately
- 11) Damage someone's things by accident
- 12) Wound someone deliberately
- 13) Wound someone by accident
- 14) Break a promise
- 15) Steal from your friend
- 16) Avoid paying taxes
- 17) (Add something of your own)
- 18) (Add something of your own)
- 19) (Add something of your own)
- 20) (Add something of your own)



**Immoral**

**Illegal**





## Key Question



Save your answers to the Key Questions in your Course Journal or e-Journal.

6. Here is a list of criteria that a newspaper or TV station could use to determine whether to publish a story about crime or not:
- Does the reader/viewer need to take action?
  - Is there an immediate threat to the public's safety, or to the safety of children, the elderly, or other vulnerable members of the public?
  - Is the crime likely to have a significant effect on the community?
  - Would publication of the story help to prevent crime?
  - Does the story help to increase public understanding of the crime by providing some kind of context?

Clip **five** news articles reporting on crime from a newspaper, and explain how well each article satisfies (or doesn't satisfy) these criteria. **(100 marks: 20 marks for response to each article)**

Set up your answer as follows.

- Write the title of the article at the top.
- Then, write your responses to each criterion in the same order as the criteria are listed in the question.
- Write your responses in sentences. Use quotes from the article to support your opinions on at least two of the criteria. Your responses can be short, as long as they answer the question precisely.
- After completing the responses to the criteria, write a conclusion in which you state whether or not the article should have been published, based on your responses.
- Clip or staple the article to the page with the responses.

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Your answer to the Key Question will be marked according to the following Marking Guide.

**Marking Guide (5 x 20 marks)**

- Clear, relevant answers to each of the criteria (**10 marks**)
  - Relevant, accurate, and significant quotations used to support at least two answers (**6 marks**)
  - Accurate spelling and grammar (**4 marks**)
- 

**Now go on to Lesson 7. Remember, you do not send your journal to the Independent Learning Centre until you have completed Unit 2 (Lessons 6 to 10).**