



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 7-12
About the Author: MediaSmarts

Perceptions of Youth and Crime

Overview

In this lesson students develop an awareness of the ways in which public perceptions regarding young people have been affected by media portrayals of youth violence and youth crime. Students begin by assessing their own attitudes towards youth and crime through class discussion and a Youth Crime Quiz. Next, they learn how to recognize bias in news reporting and then apply this knowledge by monitoring youth-related stories that appear in newspapers, magazines and television news. A “take action” component to this lesson encourages students to contact news sources that demonstrate bias in the reporting of youth-related stories.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- become aware of the gap between Canadian's perceptions about crime and actual crime statistics.
- understand the media's influence on society's perception of young people.
- understand the impact that the media's portrayal of youth violence has on their own lives.
- understand how media bias can result in negative depictions of young people in the media.

Preparation and Materials

For background information on this topic, read the selected resources on the right sidebar of this page.

Photocopy:

- *Youth Crime Quiz* (educational handout)
- *Youth Crime Quiz Answer Sheet* (educational handout)
- *Detecting Bias in the News* (educational handout)

Procedure

Guided Discussion

Ask your students:

- In terms of crime, how old is a "youth"? (*Between 12 and 17 years of age*)



- When you see stories about teenagers in the news, or read stories about teenagers in the newspapers, what types of stories come to mind? *Stories connected to crime and violence will likely dominate student responses. An American survey in 2001 reported that 48% of television news stories about children were connected to crime or violence and 40% of newspaper news stories made the same connection. Source: "Off Balance: Youth, Race and Crime in the News."*
- When you hear stories about teens and violence in the news, how does it make you feel? *(Answers will vary; many students may feel offended that teenagers are often portrayed in a negative light; some may feel that these stories reflect reality. Give your students the opportunity to fully explore their feelings)*
- Do you ever see teenagers like you and your friends in the media?
- Why are there so little emphasis on stories about regular kids, and so much emphasis on negative stories about kids?
- How do media stories about teenagers and crime affect your perceptions and attitudes on this issue?
- How do they affect your parent's perceptions and attitudes?
- The term "media myth" is used to describe the media's continued portrayals of images and information that are not based on fact. A "media myth" is created when whole groups of people are misrepresented because the extreme actions of a few of them dominate the media.
- Can you think of any examples of groups of people who have been affected by media myths?
- What media myths have been created regarding teenagers?
- Do you think media myths about teenagers have ever affected how you have been treated?

Activity One

- Distribute the *Youth Crime Quiz* to students.
- When students have completed the quiz, discuss the answers as a class. (Were they surprised by the results of the quiz? Do they agree with the reactions to media violence identified in Question 9?)
- In a journal entry, have students describe how they perceived youth crime before, and after, taking the quiz.

Activity Two

Distribute the *Detecting Bias in the News* handout to class and discuss with students.

- Divide the class into six groups.
- Assign each group the following news sources:
 - newspapers (three groups — each with a different newspaper)
 - a nightly newscast (two groups — each with a different station)
 - four news magazines (one group will study the contents of the latest issues of four news magazines)
- Each group is to monitor its news source for two weeks, keeping track of all stories that pertain to youth.
- As a group, students are to tally the total number of stories by category – i.e.; violence/crime, human interest, sports, education, and 'positive portrayal' – and create a chart of their results.



- Students will summarize each story, noting the prominence of the story, i.e. whether it was a lead story or front-page news, or buried in the newspaper or newscast.
- any bias contained in the story
- the reaction of at least one person who has seen or read the story
- When each group is finished, they are to present their findings to the class.

Class Discussion

- Identify the similarities and differences between the reporting styles of the three news sources.
- For stories dealing with the same news item, was there a difference in how the story was presented by each news source?
- In stories relating to youth and crime, were the young people involved portrayed as victims or perpetrators?
- How does the portrayal of teens as victims affect our perceptions of them?
- What about the portrayal of teens as perpetrators?
- Which news source are teenagers most likely to get this story from? What about their parents?
- Does the news source make a difference to a person's perception of a story?

Activity Three: Taking Charge

If students found a disproportionate number of negative articles about teenagers, let them write letters to the editors or producers of their news sources, voicing their concerns and offering suggestions for stories that will provide a more balanced portrayal of young people.

Evaluation

- Journal entry
- Group assignment



Youth and Crime Quiz

What are the facts regarding youth crime in Canada? Test your crime-I.Q. with the following quiz.

1. **According to the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, how many youths were charged with homicide in 1997?**
 - a) 13
 - b) 54
 - c) 94
 - d) 136

2. **How many youths were charged with Violent Crime (including murder, sexual assault, assault, robbery with a weapon and abduction) in 1997?**
 - a) a) 5,639
 - b) b) 16,903
 - c) c) 22,252
 - d) d) 99,611

3. **Of the following property crimes, which were youths most often charged with?**
 - a) Motor Vehicle Theft
 - b) Theft Over \$5,000 (includes bicycles, goods stolen from automobiles and shoplifting)
 - c) Theft Under \$5,000 (includes bicycles, goods stolen from automobiles and shoplifting)
 - d) Breaking and Entering

4. **Identify the drug that youths were most often charged in connection with (either for possession, importing or trafficking).**
 - a) Cannabis
 - b) Cocaine
 - c) Heroin
 - d) Other Drugs

5. **If you are female, you are most likely to be a victim of violence from:**
 - a) a stranger
 - b) a friend or acquaintance
 - c) a family member



6. **If you are male, you are most likely to be a victim of violence from:**
 - a) a stranger
 - b) a friend or acquaintance
 - c) a family member

7. **The largest percentage of arrests for Criminal Code incidents involves people between the ages of:**
 - a) 14 and 22
 - b) 23 and 30
 - c) 31 and 40

8. **The majority of Canadians believe that youth crime has**
 - a) decreased in the past decade
 - b) increased in the past decade
 - c) remained the same

9. **Many academics believe that the media are chiefly to blame for false public perceptions regarding crime. Media sensationalism of violence has been cited as the cause of:**
 - a) increased fear
 - b) desensitization to real-life violence
 - c) aggressive behaviour
 - d) all of the above

10. **Distorted portrayals of youth in the media have led to:**
 - a) increased demand for tougher young-offender laws
 - b) demands for curfews for children under 16
 - c) more regular transferring of young offenders to adult courts
 - d) all of the above

Source: Canadian Crime Statistics 1997. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.



Answers: Youth and Crime Quiz

1. According to the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, how many youths were charged with homicide in 1997?

- a) 13
- b) 54**
- c) 94
- d) 136

Answers:

- a) Incorrect.
- b) Correct! In 1995, 42 male and 12 female youths were charged with homicide. Compare this to the 380 adult offenders who were charged with the same offense during that year!**
- c) Incorrect.
- d) Incorrect.

2. How many youths were charged with Violent Crime (including murder, sexual assault, assault, robbery with a weapon and abduction) in 1997?

- a) 5,639
- b) 16,903
- c) 22,252**
- d) 99,611

Answers:

- a) You're half right. This was the total number of female youths charged with violent crime in 1997.
- b) Incorrect.
- c) Correct! In 1997, 16,613 male and 5,639 female youths were charged with violent crimes.**
- d) Incorrect. This was the total of adult males charged with violent crimes in 1997. (15,350 adult females were also charged.)



3. Of the following property crimes, which were youths most often charged with?

- a) Motor Vehicle Theft
- b) Theft Over \$5,000 (includes bicycles, goods stolen from automobiles and shoplifting)
- c) **Theft Under \$5,000 (includes bicycles, goods stolen from automobiles and shoplifting)**
- d) Breaking and Entering

Answers:

- a) Incorrect - 6,503 youths were charged with Motor Vehicle Theft in 1997.
- b) Incorrect - 542 youths were charged with Theft Over \$5000 in 1997.
- c) **Correct! Youths – 18,950 males and 9,045 females – were charged with Theft Under \$5000 in 1997.**
- d) Incorrect - 17,143 youths were charged with Breaking and Entering in 1997.

4. Identify the drug that youths were most often charged in connection with (either for possession, importing or trafficking).

- a) **Cannabis**
- b) Cocaine
- c) Heroin
- d) Other drugs

Answers:

- a) **Correct! 4,128 youths were charged in 1997 – 3,084 for possession, 973 for trafficking, 5 for importation, and 66 for cultivation.**
- b) Incorrect. There were 359 youths charged in connection with cocaine in 1997.
- c) Incorrect. There were 64 youths charged in connection with heroin in 1997.
- d) Incorrect. There were 431 youths charged in connection with drugs other than those listed in 1997.



5. If you are female, you are most likely to be a victim of violence from:

- a) a stranger
- b) a friend or acquaintance
- c) **a family member**

Answers:

- a) Incorrect. In 1997, 21.3% of violations against females were committed by strangers.
- b) Incorrect. In 1997, 31.4% of violations against females were committed by friends or acquaintances.
- c) **Correct! Where violent crime is concerned, the most hazardous place for a female to be is in the home, with 42.4% of the violations against females in 1997 committed by family members (30.8% of this total was from a spouse or ex-spouse).**

6. If you are male, you are most likely to be a victim of violence from:

- a) **a stranger**
- b) a friend or acquaintance
- c) a family member

Answers:

- a) **Correct! In 1997 44.8% of violations against males were committed by strangers.**
- b) Incorrect. However, this group was the second most likely source of violence towards males, totalling 36.4% of violations in 1997.
- c) Incorrect. For males, 11.2% of violations were committed by family members in 1997 (with nearly half - 4.2% - from a spouse or ex-spouse).

7. The largest percentage of arrests for Criminal Code incidents involves people between the ages of:

- a) **14 and 22**
- b) 23 and 30
- c) 31 and 40

Answers:

- a) **Correct! Persons in this age category represent 12 percent of the population aged 12 and over, but were involved in 44 percent of total arrests. Nearly half of the sentences to custody in this age group are for property related offences.**
- b) Incorrect.
- c) Incorrect.



8. **Many Canadians believe that youth crime has**

- a) decreased in the past decade
- b) increased in the past decade**
- c) remained the same

Answers:

- a) Incorrect.
- b) Correct! Yearly Macleans/CTV polls show a consistently high and increasing number of Canadians claiming youth crime has been getting worse. Also, in a 1996 poll, 50% of Canadians felt less safe than they did five years ago.**
- c) Incorrect.

9. **Many academics believe that the media are chiefly to blame for false public perceptions regarding crime. Media sensationalism of violence has been cited as the cause of:**

- a) increased fear
- b) desensitization to real-life violence
- c) aggressive behaviour
- d) all of the above**

Answers:

- a) You're partially right. When faced with constant sensationalism of violence in the media, some people develop a "mean and scary world" syndrome, where they feel victimized and fearful.
- b) You're partially right. When faced with constant sensationalism of violence in the media, some people become desensitized to suffering and violence in the real world.
- c) You're partially right. Some people, especially younger children, can become more aggressive when they are exposed to violence in the media.
- d) Correct! Increased fear, desensitization to real-life violence and aggressive behaviour have all been linked to the media's representation of violence.**



10. Distorted portrayals of youth in the media have led to:

- a) Increased demand for tougher young-offender laws.
- b) Demands for curfews for children under 16.
- c) More regular transferring of young offenders to adult courts.
- d) All of the above.**

Answers:

- a) You're partially right. Try again.
- b) You're partially right. Try again.
- c) You're partially right. Try again.
- d) Correct! When youth crime is sensationalized in the media, the public often responds with a cry for tougher treatment towards youth – even though media coverage often sharply contrasts the official data on youth crime.**

Source: *Canadian Crime Statistics 1997*. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics



Detecting Bias in the News

At one time or another we all complain about "bias in the news." The fact is, despite the journalistic ideal of "objectivity," every news story is influenced by the attitudes and background of its interviewers, writers, photographers and editors.

Not all bias is deliberate. But you can become a more aware news reader or viewer by watching for the following journalistic techniques that allow bias to "creep in" to the news:

1. Bias through selection and omission

An editor can express a bias by choosing to use or not to use a specific news item. Within a given story, some details can be ignored, and others included, to give readers or viewers a different opinion about the events reported. If, during a speech, a few people boo, the reaction can be described as "remarks greeted by jeers" or they can be ignored as "a handful of dissidents."

Bias through omission is difficult to detect. Only by comparing news reports from a wide variety of outlets can this form of bias be observed.

2. Bias through placement

Readers of papers judge first page stories to be more significant than those buried in the back. Television and radio newscasts run the most important stories first and leave the less significant for later. Where a story is placed, therefore, influences what a reader or viewer thinks about its importance.

3. Bias by headline

Many people read only the headlines of a news item. Most people scan nearly all the headlines in a newspaper. Headlines are the most-read part of a paper. They can summarize as well as present carefully hidden bias and prejudices. They can convey excitement where little exists. They can express approval or condemnation.

4. Bias by photos, captions and camera angles

Some pictures flatter a person, others make the person look unpleasant. A paper can choose photos to influence opinion about, for example, a candidate for election. On television, the choice of which visual images to display is extremely important. The captions newspapers run below photos are also potential sources of bias.

5. Bias through use of names and titles

News media often use labels and titles to describe people, places, and events. A person can be called an "ex-con" or be referred to as someone who "served time twenty years ago for a minor offense."

Whether a person is described as a "terrorist" or a "freedom fighter" is a clear indication of editorial bias.



6. Bias through statistics and crowd counts

To make a disaster seem more spectacular (and therefore worthy of reading about), numbers can be inflated. "A hundred injured in air crash" can be the same as "only minor injuries in air crash," reflecting the opinion of the person doing the counting.

7. Bias by source control

To detect bias, always consider where the news item "comes from." Is the information supplied by a reporter, an eyewitness, police or fire officials, executives, or elected or appointed government officials? Each may have a particular bias that is introduced into the story. Companies and public relations directors supply news outlets with puff pieces through news releases, photos or videos. Often news outlets depend on pseudo-events (demonstrations, sit-ins, ribbon cuttings, speeches and ceremonies) that take place mainly to gain news coverage.

8. Word choice and tone

Showing the same kind of bias that appears in headlines, the use of positive or negative words or words with a particular connotation can strongly influence the reader or viewer.

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