There are two types of people in the world: the ones that can’t bear to look at crime, and the ones that can’t bear to look away. The first are terrified by the sight of blood, nauseated by even the thought of a crime scene. The second has a fascination for crime. They cannot peel their eyes away, whether it be for the gore or because of a genuine curiosity towards an aspect of human nature they do not understand. We do not imply that these people commit crimes, but they crave the thrill of the chase, even if they are watching it unravel from behind their television screen.

However, it is the fascination and glorification of these crimes that fuels the minds and actions of real criminals. Is it possible that this infatuation with the lives of criminals is becoming a motive to commit violent crime? Or, does this fascination stem from an escape from the mundanity of a “normal” life? Either way, crime is now more than a sin, it is a media sensation.

According to the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting Program, there are four offenses that compose violent crime: murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. In fact, in 2017 alone, there were over 1.28 million violent crimes committed in the United States (Statista).

Media coverage of such violent crimes and heinous acts can be quite controversial. While some viewers remain captivated by crime and those who commit it, others would much prefer that these atrocities are kept out of the limelight. As newsworthy crimes are committed and investigated, it may be more beneficial to report these crimes objectively, rather than creating entertaining movies and TV series in which the criminal is seen as an anti-hero or protagonist instead of a violent criminal.

A wildly popular topic of discussion in today’s society has been the sexualization of serial killers, such as Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer in modern films about their lives and the crimes they committed. In the 2017 film, My Friend Dahmer, the notorious serial killer is played by Ross Lynch, who has been active in the public eye as a teen heartthrob since 2009.
Likewise, in the soon-to-release chronicles of Ted Bundy’s crimes, Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile, Zac Efron has been cast to play the infamous killer, which has stirred up worries that audiences will sympathize with and sexualize Bundy, since Efron has such a strong media presence. Social media platforms recently exploded with opinions about and reactions to modern crime programs.

While some viewers find a serious issue with the glorification of violent crime and the sympathy of offenders, others have chosen to look past the heinous acts and romanticize the events for entertainment. So the question remains, is our infatuation with violent crime normal, or does it imply a darker thread throughout our society as a whole?

### Why are we infatuated with violent crime?
Whether it is a cultural expectation or a survival instinct, we believe that the way we are intrigued by violent crimes is a natural thing, or is it? Through investigating the psychology of our obsession with the macabre, we will explore if it is all right if we acknowledge the darkest sides of humanity or if we should cast a shadow on this already dark corner of society and suppress our innate sinister curiosity.

### How are we infatuated with violent crime?
Violent crime is prevalent in today’s media and cinema. Often, the media can build fame and glory for large criminals, like school shooters. In fact, some media portray criminals as anti-heroes or even protagonists. There certainly is a line between writing an effective villain and creating empathy for hardened criminals. Ultimately, it is not appropriate for content creators to create situations where the criminals are overly humanized to the point where fact and fiction become blurred.

### What is the effect of our infatuation with violent crime?
Most people have a morbid fascination with violent crime, an attraction that simultaneously repels them. But some have an overwhelming infatuation, which can sometimes lead to imitation - in this case a very base form of flattery. While others, also titillated by humanity’s most vile acts, put their fascination to use for the good of society. What are the ramifications of allowing, and often encouraging, these obsessions?
Kill or be killed. While this cliché may seem like the motivation behind the human mind’s natural obsession with crime, our fascination may be a result of a less traditional aphorism: be afraid or be killed.

Consider a scenario when you are driving along the highway, and you see the aftermath of a car accident on the side of the road. You gaze at the crash as you pass, gently tapping your foot on the brake, buying yourself a few more seconds to stare. This phenomena of not being able to look away is called “rubbernecking,” as you attempt to crane your neck at impossible angles in order to view the crash. It is not because you want to cause a collision yourself, as the aggressive “kill or be killed” mantra suggests, but rather driven by a psychological, instinctual fascination with the macabre.

Our fascination is a product of thousands of years of evolution. As Charles Darwin suggested, the current state of all life is due to natural selection. This process starts with variation in traits of organisms. Some of these traits are more favorable in given environmental conditions, and organisms that possess these superior traits survive to reproduce at higher rates than those without the traits. As a result, offspring also possess the favorable trait and live to pass it on. Eventually, the trait becomes normal in the population (Darwin).

An example of this is the peppered moth. In England in the 1800s, there were two colorations of the moths: white and black. As the Industrial Revolution generated pollution, trunks of trees turned black with ash, and the black moths had better camouflage than their white variants. The white moths, lacking camouflage, were more quickly preyed upon and thus, reproduced less than the black moths. The result was the majority of the population of moths began to possess the trait of black coloration (Rutowski).

In the case of humans, the attribute in question is not physical but behavioral. The trait of curiosity has long prevailed in the human psyche. Born out of the fear of the unknown, natural curiosity fosters the gathering of new information (Kidd). In the past, curiosity helped to keep humans safe. It drives us to investigate threats, to assess — and ultimately avoid — danger. Think about a dark room. We are unnerved because of all that could lurk inside, but we do not scamper out of the room scared; rather, we turn on a light. The light provides us with more information, so we are able to judge what is hiding in the darkness, to ascertain whether previously perceived threats are actual dangers. Those that do not check risk peril from the unknown.
One thing that sets humans apart from other animals, even our close primate relatives, is our ability and desire to ask questions. Gorillas and other apes have the ability to communicate, some even using human made sign language. But of all the primates that have been taught how to communicate with humans, none have developed the ability to ask questions (Premack). Curiosity is prevalent in all biological life, but the knowledge that there are answers we do not know, and we possibly have the ability to find out those answers, are exclusively human. Our dreadful hunger for violence may not be a biological response to our survival instinct but us carrying out our biological duty of needing to know more. Humans have transitioned from surviving based on fear responses to surviving based on understanding. While it is sinister, the way we view violent crime isn’t as an endorsement, but as a desire to comprehend something so alien to our prosaically peaceful daily experience.

If Darwin’s evolutionary theory applies, then there were beings that were curious and beings that were not. In a world with treacherous environments and killer animals the complacent beings did not learn any more information about their surroundings, did not survive, did not pass on the trait to offspring. Furthermore, although nonhuman threats became smaller and smaller problems, humans have been continually at war with each other. A constant curiosity — a constant fear — helped to keep people alert for their enemies. A general lack of security caused this trait of fear to remain advantageous, and thus, humans maintained their curiosity. Although we no longer wonder about attacks from wild beasts, we have yet to conquer our greatest enemy: death.

From a technical perspective, there are two basic types of curiosity: perceptual and epistemic. In an interview with Public Radio International, Astrophysicist Mario Livio describes perceptual curiosity as, “...felt as a sort of uneasiness, an unpleasant situation, a bit like an itch you need to scratch” (Wernick). This very directly translates with our fascination with the macabre and violence: it is something that piques your interest, nags at you. You cannot look away. Epistemic curiosity, on the other hand, is satisfying. This is the curiosity that motivates us to continue the pursuit of knowledge, often coupled with feelings of exhilaration and achievement when said knowledge is gained (Mussel). In an interview with The Atlantic, sociologist Dr. Margee Kerr described how this enjoyment of learning manifests within the macabre. When people are confronted with something scary and ultimately outlast or overcome it, they have a sense of, “Yes! I did it! I made it all the way through!” (Ringo). Violence and death create achievements that we can earn by temporarily escaping them.

The sense of achievement comes from a release of the chemical dopamine caused by fear (Ringo). According to Psychology Today dopamine, “…enables us not only to see rewards, but to take action to move toward them. Since dopamine contributes to
feelings of pleasures and satisfaction as part of the reward system, the neurotransmitter also plays a part in addiction” (“Dopamine”). In an article for Psychology Today, David J. Ley, Ph.D. likened dopamine to “…a little red flag to your brain, saying, ‘hey, pay attention, this is about to feel good, and you want to remember this, so you can do it again’” (Ley). This dopamine release alters our brains’ reaction to violent crime.

Desensitization is a natural process. When faced with a threat to our safety or the safety of others, humans become numb to the negative cognitive impulses that comes along with the news of another violent crime. Throughout biological history, desensitization has become an innate response to danger, making us more susceptible to the fear of change rather than the fear of peril. The impact felt by mass shootings, pictures of war-torn land, and iPhone camera footage of police brutality has dulled. Violent crimes, specifically the ones that trigger our sinister curiosities, have become mystical in our society. No longer do we think about them as a threat to our safety, but rather as a form of insight into the darker side of our psychology. Due to their prevalence, and seemingly continual rise in frequency, gruesome murders have lost part of their sense of urgent danger. Humans have been able to disassociate violent murders with the loss of actual life because that is a biological response. If humans can make themselves feel more comfortable by ignoring the reality behind certain things, we tend to relax our empathy.

Humans have evolved a lot since our innate responses to danger were our primary rescuers; our mental capabilities have largely transcended the need to rely on instinct. This deterioration of our relationship with natural selection calls into question the nature of our mental obsession with violent crime. Is it still a means of survival or does it play into another evolved capability of the human mind?

**APPROACH TWO:**

Turn on a TV in 2019, and you are bound to find some reference to violent crime. Start channel surfing on CBS; your eyes will be graced by a shooting on the streets of New York from the hit television drama Blue Bloods. Hop on over to NBC, and you can follow the story of career criminal Raymond “Red” Reddington on The Blacklist. Not a fan of cable? Punch in the channel number for HBO and see Hollywood’s biggest stars investigate a slew of murders and kidnappings on True Detective. More into the new school scene? Flip on Netflix to follow the aftermath of violent crimes in the prison drama Orange is the New Black. Or if you’re more into true crime stories, join the nationwide sensation and choose Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes. Want to watch TV News after work? More often than not the lead story is going to be
about some sort of violent crime, even if said crime would not have otherwise affected your day-to-day life. And what did you listen to on the way home from work? Maybe you chose the most downloaded podcast ever, Serial, an investigative report on, you guessed it, a violent crime.

No matter how you slice it, today’s entertainment landscape, whatever medium that may mean for you, is chock full of violent crimes, but this was not always so. Sure, violence has piqued the interest of mankind since before the first gladiators of Rome ever picked up a sword, but it really does not seem so long ago that Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood’s discussion of death was the most controversial thing one would see on their television set.

Looking back to see when the infatuation with violent crime hit the small screen, one must acknowledge BBC’s hit series, Telecrimes, one of the very first television dramas ever created. A dive deeper into the 17 episode production reveals that the show put the audience in the role of detective and had them attempt to solve the crime along with the on-screen sleuth. The innocence of this whodunit model does still exist today, but many alterations have been made to increase viewer engagement. The first of these changes debuted on the big screen, in the Alfred Hitchcock classic, Psycho. In this film, the viewer sees the female lead enter the shower, turn on the water, get stabbed repeatedly, and die an exceptionally bloody death. While causing quite the stir at the time, witnessing the violent crime on screen eventually became the industry standard.

The next development of the violent crime viewing experience came in 1989 with the debut of the reality TV phenomena, Cops. With over 1000 episodes, Cops, a series that centers around real cops catching real criminals, often in the act of committing a crime, brought a new energy to the violent crime television circuit that focused on realism. This show was the gateway for the semi-realistic series, Law and Order, which highlighted the day-to-day activities of fictional NYPD detectives.

The final evolution of violent crime on television came at the beginning of the 21st century when the developments of the prior millennia were taken to the extreme. Psychotic criminals were reserved for season finales and specials in the 90s, but in the 2005 crime drama Criminal Minds they became the norm. And as for being as realistic as possible, the 2010’s took that tactic to an entirely new level with a series of in depth looks at, or reinvestigations of, famous criminals and cases like the ever-popular Ted Bundy documentary and the hit drama Making a Murderer.

One of the primary motivations for extravagant crime is fame. Due to the rise of the twenty-four hour news cycle and social media, coverage of major crimes can last for days or even weeks. To many criminals, this is a significant goal when executing this
crime. They feel the attention gained will shine a light on the misdeeds that they feel society has committed against them. Therefore, censoring the identities of criminals can circumvent this motivation.

Unfortunately, especially famous criminals are further memorialized in the public eye through the entertainment industry. For example, the serial killer Ted Bundy has been in the public eye for almost 40 years; there was a 2002 film called Ted Bundy and furthermore a 2019 Netflix documentary series, Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes. Clearly, Ted Bundy will go down in history as one of the most famous criminals of all time. Are we giving Ted Bundy what he wants? A Ted Bundy survivor stated, “I believe that in order to show him exactly the way he was, it’s not really glorifying him, but it’s showing him, and when they do say positive and wonderful things about him ... that’s what they saw, that’s what Bundy wanted you to see.” According to this survivor, they believe it is important to show the worst of humanity as a cautionary tale in order to prevent future actions. On the contrary, the mother of one of the victims stated, “It’s very disgusting to me. ... It’s kind of aggravating to me, but I just try to ignore it and move on,” and, “Why keep rubbing our face in it all the time? It’s very hard to deal with and when they keep bringing it up and putting it up.” Clearly, different accounts of the events create contrasting viewpoints. The rise of true crime television probably stems from the violent crime spike in the United States in the 90’s (see Figure 1). However, the continuous drop in crime rates post-1994 undermines the negative effects of crime dramas.

![Figure 1. National Violent Crime Rate, 1960-2016](image)

Obviously, the spike in the rate of violent crime greatly influenced American pop culture. However, is this a positive or negative attribute of society? Although it has decreased over time, has Americans’ perceived crime rate increased? The focus of this approach is on television because of its episodic nature: Unlike a feature-length film, viewers can come back week after week for more. Without a doubt, the combination of empathetic writing and viewer’s desire for more create the perfect environment for the popularity of crime dramas.
2019 The Ted Bundy Tapes
18 Evil Genius
17 Abducted in Plain Sight
15 Making a Murderer
14 True Detective, Serial
13 The Blacklist
12 Major Crimes
10 Blue Bloods
05 Criminal Minds
The Closer
01 Law and Order: Criminal Intent
99 Law and Order: SVU
One of the first spin-off crime dramas
90 Law and Order
88 Thin Blue Line
84 Miami Vice
An American classic about organized crime
1975
72 The Godfather
An American classic about organized crime
60 Psycho
Alfred Hitchcock’s masterpiece including the infamous shower scene
38 Telecrimes
The first crime drama introduced in the UK
The cause of our sense of morbid curiosity is interesting to ponder, but its effects are tangible and urgently in need of attention. As the old adage goes, like begets like; exposure to violence will often lead to more of it. This issue stands at the crux of the mass shootings which have integrated themselves with ever greater frequency into our culture over the past half century. But the infatuation with our bestial nature is not just a tumorous growth on the heart of our nation; it can also function as healthy tissue, working productively to keep America a safe home for freedom, fairness, and justice.

In Adam Smith’s seminal work, The Wealth of Nations, he describes a system in which an “invisible hand” of competition drives the economy, keeping firms fighting against each other to offer the best product at the lowest cost (Smith). By working towards their own personal benefit, merchants and entrepreneurs end up promoting the public good. Adam Smith’s economic engine came to be known as capitalism and is the basis of the wealth of our nation. But what happens when what the public wants, what companies compete to provide them with, is detrimental to the general welfare of the country?

Sometime in the mid-twentieth century, television news stations discovered that the more shocking, the more vile, the more sensational their coverage was, the more viewers their broadcasts would garner. With higher ratings came more advertisers, willing to pay higher rates, and, as a result, big bonus checks in the producers’ pockets (Roberts). As coverage of these heart-wrenching, dramatic incidents abounded, so did the events themselves. In recent years, social media rose to prominence, providing yet another platform for sensational attention mongering. According to researchers from the Columbia Law Review, “murder is the most politically important crime, attracting greater media and political attention than other crimes,” and school shootings, threatening our youth, our nation’s future, attract more attention still (Fagan).
The graph above tracks the number of shootings, and the deaths they are responsible for, at educational institutions from the 1940 to 2017. The 66 deaths caused by 21st Century shooters has already zoomed past the 20th’s 55-casualty benchmark after only 18 years, and there’s nowhere to go but up (Katsiyannis). This increase can be explained by the Media Contagion Effect, a phenomenon in which increased attention to a criminal proportionally raises the likelihood of someone imitating their heinous act. Hard evidence backs this trend. In the two weeks following the highly publicized Parkland High School massacre, 638 copycat threats targeted schools nationwide (Pew). The ever expanding acceptance of the contagion effect engendered a movement, known as No Notoriety, to spring up. Founded by the parents of a victim of the Aurora Batman shooting, the organization works to take mass shooters’ names and faces out of media coverage, thereby reducing the glorification of wanton butchery. As noted on their website, the killings often take root in a pathological desire for attention. For instance, “The VA Tech [killer] – studied and was inspired by the Columbine killers. Mailed a pre-prepared package of video, photos and manifesto to NBC News” (No Notoriety). The economic incentives for indulging our fascination with the macabre are self-evident, but even more tangible are the threats such indulgences pose to the safety and harmony of our nation, and every community it encompasses.

Our infatuation with violence and crime in recent years has also brought on a new, and interesting pastime among thrill-seeking citizens: court watching. These avid court watchers are citizens who come to court each day to see the justice system at work, as well as to be informed, and entertained by the drama that unfolds as the case proceeds. The suspense of deciding who is guilty and who is not, and the pull of
personal testimonies is an easy draw for these mystery-loving watchers. For those people who become court watchers, their obsession goes beyond curiosity — they may have been involved in a legal matter themselves or sat on a jury and become so fascinated with the court experience that they decided to stay. One avid watcher states that, “Court is better than a movie or the theater and it’s free, so why would you want to be anywhere else?” (Wells). While this is simply a pastime for some, it is a civic necessity for others.

In some cases, our innate human obsession with the obscene and forbidden has begun to be put to good use within the court system. Recently, various criminal justice reformation organizations in some states started to use courtwatchers to keep tabs on our court proceedings and systems. They are also used to help provide constructive criticism about the court systems, and any other feedback that they may have noticed during their extensive experience while trial viewing. They are integral cogs turning the gears of reformation to produce a more fair and efficient court system. Court watchers also act as key informants in many proceedings, and can provide a sense of ease to some extent. “Everybody in the court system — judges, clerks, attorneys, even janitors — function a little bit better if they know an informed person is there to observe what’s going on”, this is exactly the kind of support and clarity that court watchers provide (Fradin).

In Chicago, court watchers are not only used to monitor judges, but also to make sure that the judges are abiding by a law that was just recently put into place. This law requires bail to be set at an affordable amount for low level offenders. This was a necessary precaution because, according to The Marshall Project, a nonprofit criminal justice news site, “There have been almost 100 instances where a judge asked the defendant how much they could afford, as required under the rule — then set the bond higher than that” (Schwartzapfel). This was not only an unfair practice, but something necessary to amend, and a newfound job that many court watchers were more than pleased to complete. While our obsession with violence and crime influenced this seemingly dark pastime, it has also given way to many benefits for our court system in the long run.

The consequences of humanity’s dark obsession are nearly ubiquitous, never far from touching our daily lives. But, even among the many souls tainted by this darkness, some light continues to shine through. As our country continues to evolve, we must strive to achieve a society which nourishes our fascination to provide service and entertainment without allowing it to feed upon us.
Humans stand in almost unanimous agreement that violent crime is wrong. That is, in fact, a basis of ethics. But that is not to say humans are infallible.

Our psychological tendency to embrace and produce drama is paralleled in entertainment and legal media. While some view freedom of violent expression a deontological right of content creators, others view its disastrous consequences as reason to finish off our obsession. Thus, our debate revolves around three fundamental premises: thought, action, and consequence. Can we practically separate thought and action? And for those of us who can, is it worth humoring those who cannot? We aim to take an investigative look into how our thought, action, and reprimand of violent crime leads us to fall short where it matters.

The first premise resides at the topos of thought. Little is known about our intrigue towards gruesome events...besides the fact that many of us are intrigued. From a neuropsychological perspective, humans have an innate fascination for violent crime, even though most of us strongly denounce it. How damaging is this overlap between fascination and disapproval? How do ancient survival tactics, like the fight or flight response, play into modern, non-immediate conflicts?

The second premise resides at the topos of action. The prevalence of violence in media, and publication thereof, yields undue memorialization of criminals. Our response to violent crime, by enamoring the unease and producing shows contingent on the theme of criminal action, puts the problem in full view.

The third and final premise resides at the topos of consequence. It is significant to realize how increased publication in media is correlated with increasing imitation crimes. Furthermore, the intrigue seen in the entertainment industry is mirrored in the legal system. Court watchers, who sometimes attend long court proceedings on the daily, demonstrate this claim. How much can we attribute trends in crime to the publication of crime outbreaks in media?

We see how these topoi interact: in the form of imitation crime, in criminal TV show patterns, in court watchers, and yes, even in side-glances of a passing accident on the highway. While little is known about this intrigue, circumstances have come to allow, and even endorse, it. Until we see a decrease of criminal romanticization in life and media, perhaps we should watch our backs more often than the latest episode of NCIS.


