

Justice for Small Crimes: The Debate on Minor Offenses

Date: May 2, 2026 Topic: Should Minor Crimes Be Punished? Are small offenses really serious? This B2 ESL ...

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify and define eight key terms related to minor criminal offenses and legal punishments.
- Analyze the effectiveness of proportionate punishments versus alternative social rehabilitation methods.
- Construct and defend complex arguments regarding the social impact of minor crimes.

VOCABULARY

Word	Definition	Example
graffiti (noun)	Unauthorized writing or drawings on a public surface.	<i>The city council spent thousands of dollars removing graffiti from the bridge.</i>
littering (noun)	The act of leaving trash in public places instead of using a bin.	<i>Littering in the national park carries a heavy fine to protect the environment.</i>
fare evasion (noun)	The act of using public transportation without paying the required fee.	<i>The bus company installed new barriers to prevent fare evasion.</i>
illegal downloading (noun)	Obtaining digital files without permission or payment to the owner.	<i>Many people don't realize that illegal downloading hurts independent filmmakers.</i>
proportionate (adjective)	Corresponding in size, degree, or intensity to something else.	<i>The punishment should be proportionate to the seriousness of the crime.</i>
deterrent (noun)	Something that discourages someone from doing something.	<i>Cameras in the hallway serve as a deterrent to theft.</i>
community service (noun)	Unpaid work intended to help people in a particular area.	<i>Instead of jail time, the judge sentenced the teenager to community service.</i>

Word	Definition	Example
rehabilitation (noun)	The process of helping someone return to a normal life through therapy or education.	<i>The prison system should focus more on rehabilitation than just punishment.</i>

GRAMMAR & KEY CONCEPTS

Second Conditional for Hypothetical Situations

We use the Second Conditional to talk about imaginary or hypothetical situations in the present or future. The structure is: If + Past Simple, would + Base Verb.

- *If the fine were higher, people would stop littering.*
- *What would you do if you saw someone skipping the fare?*
- *If they focused on rehabilitation, the crime rate might drop.*

READING PASSAGE

In many bustling cities, the sight of **graffiti** on subway walls or the persistent issue of **littering** in public parks has sparked a heated debate: should minor crimes be punished with the same vigor as serious offenses? While some view these acts as mere nuisances, others argue that they erode the social fabric. For instance, **fare evasion** costs public transport systems millions of dollars annually, leading to higher costs for honest commuters. Similarly, **illegal downloading** impacts the creative industries, depriving artists of their rightful earnings and impacting the economy. The central question for policymakers is how to ensure that a punishment is **proportionate** to the crime. If a fine is too low, it fails to act as a **deterrent** for future bad behavior. However, if it is too high, it may cause undue financial hardship, especially for low-income individuals. This has led many to advocate for alternatives like **community service**, where offenders contribute back to the neighborhood they affected. Proponents of this approach suggest it fosters a sense of responsibility and aids in the **rehabilitation** of the offender, rather than simply punishing them through isolation or debt. Critics of leniency, however, point to the 'Broken Windows Theory,' which suggests that ignoring small crimes leads to an environment where more serious criminal activity can flourish. They believe that maintaining strict order is essential for public safety and social discipline. On the other hand, reformers argue that the legal system should focus on education and social support

rather than just penalties. Ultimately, finding the balance between strict enforcement and social empathy remains one of the most challenging aspects of modern urban governance and legal theory.

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PRACTICE EXERCISES

1. The judge ordered 50 hours of _____ for the teenager caught spray-painting the wall.
2. Many people believe that a high fine is a strong _____ against speeding.
3. The punishment must be _____ to the severity of the offense to be considered fair.
4. _____ ruins the appearance of historical buildings and is expensive to clean.
5. He was caught _____ on the train and had to pay a penalty on the spot.
6. If the government ____ more police, crime would decrease.
A) had
B) have
C) will have
D) has
7. If I ____ you, I wouldn't download movies illegally.
A) was
B) am
C) were
D) be
8. Which of these is considered a 'minor' crime in the text?
A) Armed robbery
B) Littering
C) Arson
D) Assault
9. What is the main goal of rehabilitation?
A) To make offenders pay money
B) To help offenders return to normal life
C) To lock people away forever
D) To ignore the crime
10. Illegal downloading is often referred to as digital...
A) theft
B) piracy
C) vandalism
D) evasion