

News Writing, II

Leads and story forms

Types of news leads

- Hard news, often focused on Who, What, When and Where.
- Soft news, with an anecdotal opener.
- Feature / anecdotal (more on this later)
- Second-day leads
- Teaser leads
 - (Common in broadcast and on websites that aggregate content summaries on a landing page)

Other types of story leads

- History/Background Leads
- Direct Address (the “You” Lead)
- Roundup Leads
- Declarative Leads (opinion especially)
- Question or Quote Leads (rarely)

Writing leads

- The lead begins the story with the most important or exciting information.
 - It must spark immediate interest. Imagine the reader saying, "Don't waste my time! Tell me the STORY!"
 - Keep it short. Generally, hard news leads should be 25 words or less.
 - Get to the point. Don't say, "The Police Commission met last night." Tell the reader what they actually *did*.
 - Be direct. Use active voice.
 - Hook the reader. A novel might take hundreds of pages to lead up to the climax; a news story often puts the climax first and then explains what led up to it.

Helpful hints

- Almost always write hard news leads in the past tense (*he was there*) or the past perfect tense (*he had been there*).
- Make sure the lead includes the major angles of the story.
- If it is substantially shorter than three lines of text — not three sentences — you may have left out key elements.

Deputy Mistakenly Kills Homeowner in Hunt for L.A. Parolee

Lead #1 (too short?)

A 54-year-old bystander was killed Friday night by a Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department deputy in a chaotic shootout with a parolee, authorities said.

An alternative version

An innocent homeowner was mistakenly killed and a parolee was fatally shot by deputies early Saturday after an hours-long hostage situation and standoff in Pico Rivera, authorities said.

The incident began about 4:30 p.m. Friday when deputies were searching for 24-year-old Cedric Ramirez, who was wanted on two felony warrants, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department said in a news release.

A Local News Lead

Scattered thunderstorms and showers Saturday knocked out power for thousands, closed Los Angeles County beaches and put a damper on the North fire in the Cajon Pass.

(31 Words)

A Local News Lead

Scattered thunderstorms and showers (WHAT) Saturday (WHEN) knocked out power for thousands (WHO), closed Los Angeles County beaches (WHERE, WHAT) and put a damper on the North fire in the Cajon Pass. (WHERE, WHAT)

What are some WHY and HOW possibilities for a story like this?

(31 Words)

Helpful hints

- Do not put names in leads unless the person is well known. If information comes from several different sources, try:
 - officials said
 - police said
 - fire officials said
 - eyewitnesses said
 - authorities said
- Why so much attribution?
 - Unless you as a reporter witnessed the event, you must continue to use attributions throughout the story, especially if the topic is a crime or a contentious topic.

About attribution

- Leads do not always require attribution, especially if a story is based on multiple sources (police, eyewitnesses, firefighters).
- The attribution can come later, with specific details and direct quotes.

More hints about leads

- ***Don't*** feel compelled to use the names of spokespeople, especially in leads.
- After the lead, ***do use*** the names of authorities, such as police and fire officials who give out information.
- ***Do use*** the name of a spokesperson if you are quoting him or her in the body of the story.

More lead-writing hints

- Be sure to get the right “Who” to start off your lead.
 - When you don’t, a weak lead in the passive voice often results:
 - “Gunshots were heard...”
 - “Six people were dead after a gunman....”

Here is a better example

A 16-year-old Los Angeles high school student used a handgun Tuesday morning to kill six people at his school, including the principal, in what police described as “totally random violence.”

The verb “to say”

- ***This is a great action verb.*** We use it often in daily speech.
- Use it often in news writing and make it sound natural:
 - Thomas said . . .
 - ... not said Thomas.
- Avoid “according to” when attributing to people.
- Also avoid “creative” substitutes for the simple and effective “said.”
 - No “chortled” or “smiled.” Let your use of detailed description and quotes carry that freight.

Story structures

- **The Pyramid (outline)**

- Most important info at top, progressively less important info follows.

- **Narrative storytelling**

- The story has a beginning, middle and end (“close the circle”).

- **Hourglass**

- The top tells the news quickly.
- The turn provides a nimble transition, often with a nut graph.
- The body features a narrative retelling of events, often chronologically.
- The end wraps things up or points toward next steps.
 - The hourglass works particularly well with police stories, courtroom dramas, game recaps and other news that lends itself to chronological narration once the hard news angle has been summarized.

Attribution style

- Include useful details about sources, written in a reader-friendly manner
 - Sally Student, a senior music major ...
 - **Not:** Sally Student, a fifth-year senior majoring in Composition in the USC Thornton School of Music ...
 - First reference should include full name; just use the last name on subsequent reference unless there has been a significant gap between attributions or two sources share the same last name
 - Work long titles into second reference – or later

Broadcast leads & tips

- **Barbara will lead this section**

Writing tips

- When writing news, stick to one idea or topic per paragraph.
- If you raise a new topic or angle, break to a new paragraph. Paragraphs can be two or more sentences but should not exceed five or six lines of text or they become difficult to absorb. (And may look daunting on a page or cellphone.)
- Avoid using the passive voice (“There is...” “There are ...”)
- Cut all unnecessary words. (Especially adverbs, the “-ly” words. They tend to tell the reader in a vague way, rather than show the reader with action, quotes and details.)
- Employ a chronological story structure if possible, especially on deadline. It’s faster to organize that way and readers will follow along instinctively.

More writing tips

- **Take the time to read your notes, reports, papers, etc., carefully and understand what the story is about before starting to write.**
- Sketch your own charts and maps, especially for complicated fire or accident stories.
- Make a list of key points and highlights (create outlines if you have time and it's appropriate)
- Find and clearly mark (with colored pens or comment colors) good quotes and key statistics or numbers.
- Recheck after writing a first draft to make sure all the key stuff got in. Look for 5 Ws and H too.

More writing tips

- Give both sides of a story, particularly in government stories that involve conflict and disagreement. But they don't have to be equally balanced. Pair off reasonable people with reasonable arguments.
- Downplay or ignore ignorance, craziness, blatant expressions of a specific ideology.
- Indicate when information is coming from a press or news conference. (“He said at a press conference,” or “She told reporters.”)
- Indicate how you got a quote: A phone interview, in an email response, in an interview at her office (home, at the beach).

Follow a style

Associated Press style is simply a standardized way of writing everything from dates to street addresses to job titles. Here are some essentials:

Dates

Dates are expressed as numerals. The months August through February are abbreviated when used with numbered dates. March through July are never abbreviated. Months without dates are not abbreviated. “Th” is not used.

Example: The meeting is on Oct. 15. She was born on July 12. I love the weather in November.

Numbers

One through nine are generally spelled out, while 10 and above are generally written as numerals. **Example:** He carried five books for 12 blocks.

Percentages

Percentages are always expressed as numerals, followed by the word “percent.” **Example:** The price of gas rose 5 percent.

Ages

Ages are always expressed as numerals. **Example:** He is 5 years old.

More AP Style essentials

Dollar Amounts

Dollar amounts are always expressed as numerals, and the “\$” sign is used.

Example: \$5, \$15, \$150, \$150,000, \$15 million, \$15 billion, \$15.5 billion

Street Addresses

Numerals are used for numbered addresses. Street, Avenue and Boulevard are abbreviated when used with a numbered address, but otherwise are spelled out. Route and Road are never abbreviated. **Example:** He lives at 123 Main St. His house is on Main Street. Her house is on 234 Elm Road.

Job Titles

Job titles are generally capitalized when they appear before a person’s name, but lowercase after the name. **Example:** President Barack Obama. Barack Obama is the president.

Film, Book and Song Titles

Generally these are capitalized and placed in quotation marks. Do not use quote marks with reference books or the names of newspapers, magazines or websites. **Example:** He watched “Game of Thrones” on HBO. She cited “War and Peace” in an op-ed piece in the Washington Post.

Writing traps to avoid

- Injecting yourself

- “When asked how she felt ...”
- “A reporter arrived to find ...”
- “I was immediately struck by ...”
- “School of Journalism’s amazing new facility ...”
- “Please plan to arrive early, as seating is limited ...”
- “Any true Trojan will know ...”

- Biased statements disguised as questions

- “What was Pete Carroll thinking when he called that play?”

More traps to avoid

■ Needless jargon

- Academics seem to love acronyms and proper nouns

■ Clichés and superlatives

- all-out effort
- as a matter of fact
- bated breath
- conservative estimate
- deafening crash
- each and every
- foreseeable future
- general public
- head over heels
- leaves much to be desired
- mystery surrounds
- news leaked out
- point with pride
- reliable source
- AND MANY MORE

■ Writing for the source, not readers

■ Post-event stories that read like advances

Statistical essentials

Rates: Per person (or per capita): Death rates, crime rates, etc.

There were 80,000 crimes in Pittsburgh out of a population of 2.5 million. There were 60,000 crimes in Tucson out of a city of 700,000.

- *Therefore:* The crime rate of Tucson is more than 2 1/2 times that of Pittsburgh ($86 / 32 = 2.7$)

Percents: What percentage of your city's residents are Pacific Islanders.

Percentage Change: The city is slashing its Public Library budget from \$1.450 million last year to \$1.135 million this year.

What is the percentage change?

Inflation: The library's budget was \$500,000 three years ago. It will be \$450,000 this year. The Consumer Price Index was 166.6 three years ago and was 179.9 this year. What should the book budget have been this year to keep up with inflation?

More statistical essentials

Understanding averages and ranges:

- Mean = the total of all numbers, divided by the number of entries (you probably think of it as the average; can be skewed by one very high or very low exception in the range)
- Median = the exact midpoint of a range of numbers (location in a list at which half are above and half are below)
- Mode = the most frequently occurring numbers

Incidence rates: How common is the occurrence of a new case?

Prevalence: What proportion of people in a population have a given condition *at any given time*?

Response Rate: The response to a survey...

Statistical significance: How likely is it that findings reflect more than chance association? (random variation; Pvalues / probability values)

- For many reporters, this is the key concept to understand.

TIMES INVESTIGATION LAPD MISCLASSIFIED NEARLY 1,200 VIOLENT CRIMES AS MINOR OFFENSES

By **BEN POSTON, JOEL RUBIN**

AUGUST 9, 2014, 6:04 PM

Once police had Nathan Hunter in handcuffs, they tended to his wife.

She was covered in blood. She told the officers Hunter flew into a rage that night in February 2013 because she hadn't bought him a Valentine's Day gift. He beat and choked her before stabbing her in the face with a screwdriver and throwing her down a flight of stairs at their apartment in South L.A., according to police and court records.

Hunter, 55, was convicted of felony spousal abuse and sentenced to six years in prison.

RELATED: Records show LAPD reclassified incidents

Under FBI rules followed by police departments across the country, the beating should have been counted as an aggravated assault because Hunter used a weapon and caused serious injuries.

That's not what happened. The Los Angeles Police Department classified it as a simple assault — a minor offense not included in the city's official tally of serious crimes.

It was no isolated case. The LAPD misclassified nearly 1,200 violent crimes during a one-year span ending in September 2013, including hundreds of stabbings, beatings and robberies, a Times investigation found.

The incidents were recorded as minor offenses and as a result did not appear in the LAPD's published statistics on serious crime that officials and the public use to judge the department's performance.

Nearly all the misclassified crimes were actually aggravated assaults. If those incidents had been recorded correctly, the total aggravated assaults for the 12-month period would have been almost 14%

Write a news lead & nut graph

POLICE REPORT:

- A car accident occurred late yesterday at the intersection of Exposition Boulevard and Vermont Street.
- The driver was killed.
- The driver was John Frazier.
- His car smashed into a traffic pole.
- He was driving an electric blue 2012 Ford Mustang V6 Deluxe Convertible.
- The car was seen traveling west on Exposition at about 11:45 p.m.
- He lost control of the car.
- He was not wearing a seat belt.
- He swerved to avoid a pedestrian.
- He was alone in the car.
- The convertible top was down and Frazier was thrown from the car.
- He landed head-first on the pavement about 20 feet away.

USC SPOKESPERSON:

- Frazier was a student.
- He was 20 years old and lived in Cardinal Gardens, Room 322.
- He was expected to graduate next May.
- He was the top running back on the USC football team.

OTHER INFO:

- “Johnny had the goods to be an NFL star, and it’s such a tragedy to lose him like this.” – Robert Smith, USC linebacker
- On Twitter, people say he was driving at least 25 mph over the speed limit.
- The word around campus is that he was texting on his cellphone when the crash took place.

Summary

- Choose the best type of lead
- Catch readers' attention
- Write short, direct sentences and paragraphs
- Don't neglect the nut graph
- Employ a story structure that fits the material
- Remain fair and balanced
- Fine-tune your writing, especially the lead
- Recheck your work for completeness, accuracy, clarity and reader interest

Questions?

Appendix

If you think it's done ...

- Check your story closely to fix problems before turning in your work.
- Clean up bad grammar, typographical errors and misspellings (Note: Spell checks are unreliable; you don't want to be the one who writes "pubic" when you meant "public.")
- If you have time, correct and rewrite your draft – maybe several times. *Be your own tough editor!*

More number advice

Plenty of journalists chose the profession because they hate math. Yet reporters routinely write stories based on statistics. Some suggestions:

1. Ask yourself, 'Is it truly a big number?'

- Big numbers are only big if you understand the context.

2. Take the long view

- Checking a longer run of data may show that certain changes are pretty common every couple of years.

3. Compare like with like

- Are comparisons between, say, two countries or two groups of people really the way that they seem? Maybe those groups are inherently different.

More number advice

4. Take the wide view

- Be wary of a calculation that suggests a story when there is not any great change. A 100 percent increase in risk can be a change from one in a million to two in a million.

5. What is the source of the data?

- Understand the methodology. If you ask the right people the right selective questions, you can get almost any result you want.

MATH AND STATISTIC FOR JOURNALISTS

Books you should own ...

The best:

“Numbers in the Newsroom:

Using math and statistics in news,”

by Sarah Cohen

And one or more of these:

ALL THE HELP YOU'LL EVER NEED!

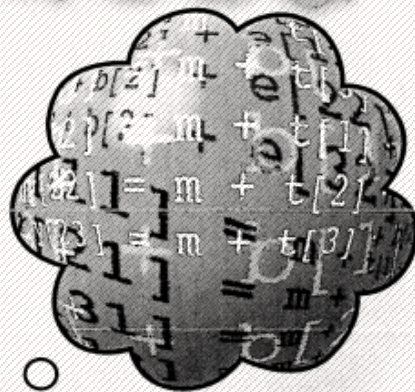
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for the

Utterly Confused

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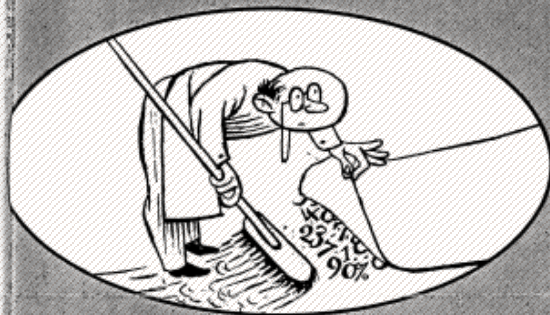
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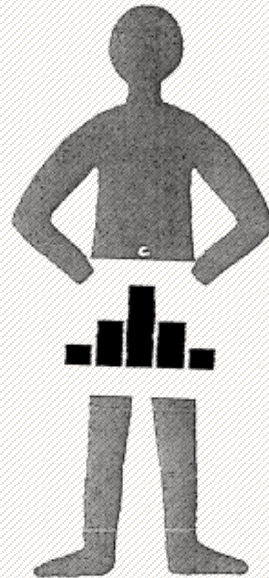
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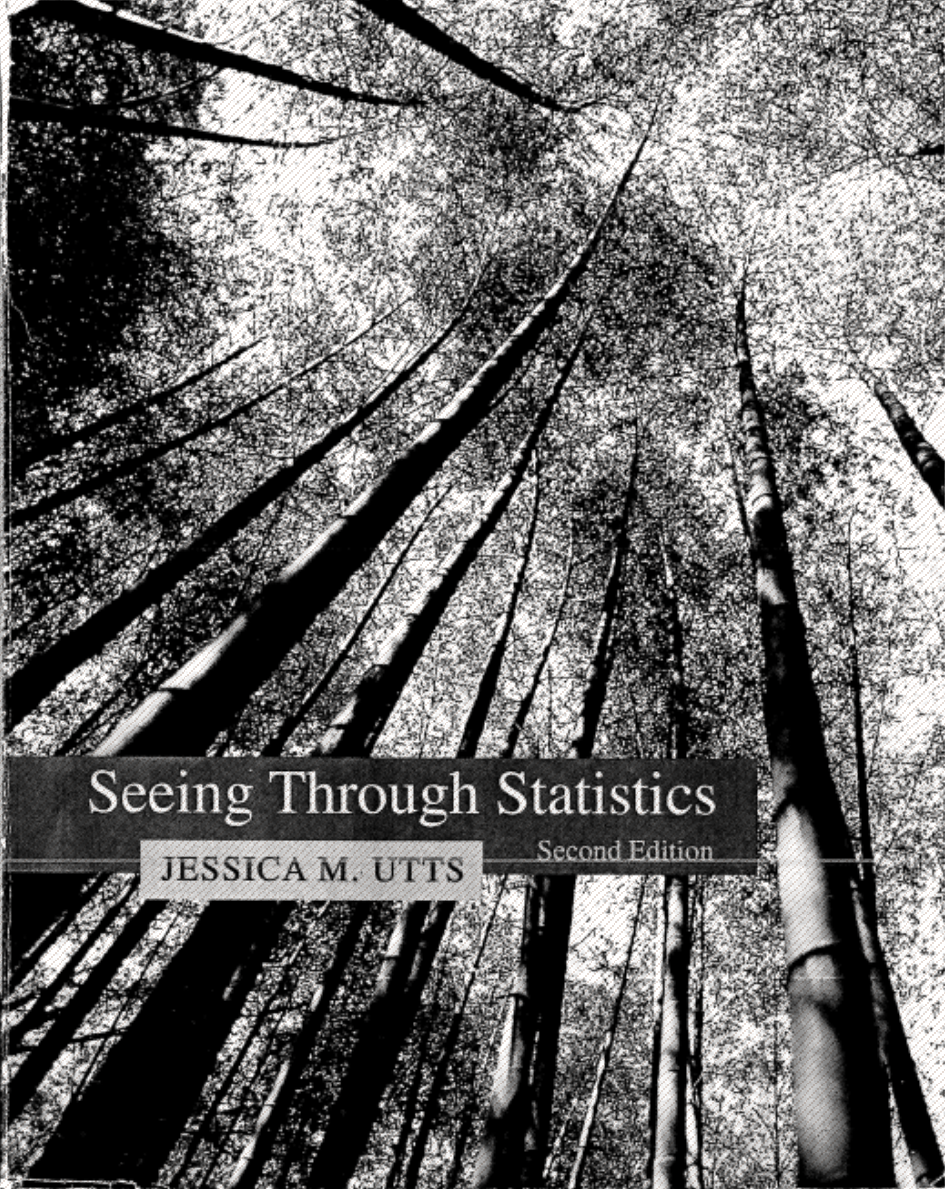
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STRIPPING THE DREAD FROM THE DATA



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JESSICA M. UTTS

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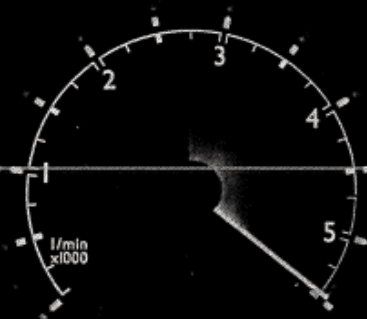
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Why Statistics?

LAPD watchdog to launch broad inquiry into misclassified crime stats - LA Times

8/15/14, 10:07 AM

LAPD watchdog to launch broad inquiry into misclassified crime stats



LAPD Chief Charlie Beck addresses the media during a news conference where he and Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti announced midyear crime statistics at the LAPD 77th Street Police Station in South Los Angeles. (Mel Melcon, Los Angeles Times)

By **JOEL RUBIN, BEN POSTON, DAVID ZAHNISER**

AUGUST 11, 2014, 9:12 PM

The Los Angeles Police Department's civilian watchdog said Monday he would launch a broad inquiry into the accuracy of the agency's crime statistics after a Times investigation revealed that the LAPD understated violent crime in the city.

Inspector General Alex Bustamante said he planned to expand on The Times' review, which focused on a recent one-year period, and that he would conduct an examination of multiple years of data to determine whether declines in crime in Los Angeles were as dramatic as reported by the department.

The Times reported Sunday that the LAPD had misclassified nearly 1,200 violent crimes as minor offenses during the 12 months ending Sept. 30, 2013. Nearly all were aggravated assaults. Had the crimes been recorded correctly, the official

L.A. area resident, how safe do you feel?



Sandy Banks

LOS ANGELES TIMES

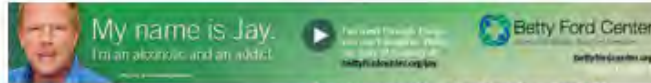
sandy.banks@latimes.com



A bicyclist pays no attention to a crime scene where sheriff's deputies and detectives are investigating a stabbing death at the Western Motel along Vermont Avenue in the Westmont area of Los Angeles. (Genaro Molina, Los Angeles Times)

JUNE 16, 2014, 8:16 PM

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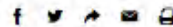


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Another reason for L.A.'s low homicide rate?

DECEMBER 16, 2010 | 12:41 PM



(<http://opinion.latimes.com/.a/6a00d8341c7de353ef0147e11e115a970b-popup>)

Between effective gang intervention, community programs and thoughtful policing (<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/editorials/la-ed-crime-20101228,0,5878808.story>), Los Angeles has found productive ways to contain violent crimes, and 2010's low crime stats (<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-la-crime-20101217,0,1871598.story>) prove it. We found hope in these numbers -- fewer

Video

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RELATED: Records show LAPD reclassified incidents

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Nearly all the misclassified crimes were actually aggravated assaults. If those incidents had been recorded correctly, the total aggravated assaults for the 12-month period would have been almost 14%

An experiment in zero parenting

A controversial study of Romanian orphans reveals long-term harm to the intellect

By Eliot Marshall

An unnerving sight greeted U.S. scientists a decade ago at an orphanage in Bucharest. The institution housed "many children rocking back and forth while sitting or on all fours, turning their head from side to side, or repeatedly bringing their hand to their face, often slapping themselves," write neuroscientists Charles Nelson and Nathan Fox and psychiatrist Charles Zeanah in their book *Romania's Abandoned Children*, published in January. The children's empty motions, or "stereotypes," are like the pacing of a tiger or elephant in the zoo. They are one of the abnormalities under scrutiny in a study of child neglect Nelson and his team launched in 2000.

What the researchers saw was the legacy of a tragic scheme to boost Romania's population. Former dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu decided in the late 1960s that Romania needed to grow; the government taxed women who had fewer than five children, regardless of what they could afford. To care for thousands of unwanted children, the government filled orphanages. They weren't designed or funded to mimic family life, but they were busy.

At their peak in the late 1980s, the orphanages housed nearly 170,000 children. Most grew up in a stunningly blank and unresponsive environment. Caregivers came and went in three shifts, and a single staffer might watch over 10 to 15 children. Infants spent time staring at the walls and ceiling, and a child might come in contact with 17 different caregivers in a single week. Nelson, a professor of pediatrics and neuroscience at Harvard Medical School in Boston, calls it an experiment in zero parenting.

After Ceaușescu's fall and execution in 1989, people from around the world adopted thousands of the orphans. (Romania later put a brake on this.) Researchers have studied these early international adoptees—some with serious emotional problems—for



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2 decades now, examining how child rearing can go wrong, how it alters behavior, and how foster parenting can rescue lives. The Nelson group, known as the Bucharest Early Intervention Project (BEIP), saw a chance to answer an additional, specific question: How does neglect in early childhood change neurological development?

The researchers launched a radical and, at the time, controversial study. Using U.S. and private foundation funding, they teamed with Romanian officials to run a controlled study comparing a group left in orphanages with a group randomly selected for high-quality foster care in Romania. In a stream of reports since 2003, they have shown that children reared in institutions suffer an array of setbacks, some reflecting long-term changes in the brain (*Science*, 21 December 2007, p. 1937). The team is now analyzing data from the 12th year, measuring things like disparities in brain structure.

Findings from the Bucharest project have buttressed those from smaller and

less controlled studies, many based on U.S. children in troubled homes. "We are all reporting the same effects," says Megan Gunnar, a clinical psychologist at the University of Minnesota (UMN), Twin Cities, who is not part of BEIP. "The brain needs stimulation to develop," and when it doesn't get it, cognitive and emotional growth are stunted.

Today, Nelson is convinced that early life without parenting can be "more disastrous for brain development" than living with an abusive caregiver. But the Romanian work also confirms that many children can bounce back to something like normality, if placed in a supportive environment. No country should be complacent, Nelson adds, noting that what he saw in Romania is "not all that different from the kind of neglect that many kids in the United States experience."

"Children are learning: 'Why should I cry, or gesture, or make eye contact if no one is responding?'"

Seth Pollak
University of Wisconsin, Madison

CHILD NEGLECT IS "A HUGE PROBLEM" and probably "the most common form of child maltreatment in the world," says Seth Pollak, a clinical psychologist at the

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- *Fabrication* is **making up results and recording or reporting them.** This is sometimes referred to as "drylabbing". A more minor form of fabrication is where references are included to give arguments the appearance of widespread acceptance, but are actually fake, and/or do not support the argument.
- *Falsification* is **manipulating research materials, equipment, or processes or changing or omitting data or results such that the research is not accurately represented in the research record.**
- *Plagiarism* is **the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit.** One form is the appropriation of the ideas and results of others, and publishing as to make it appear the author had performed all the work under which the data was obtained.

Another Hard News Lead

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. – A gunman opened fire Thursday on two military centers more than seven miles apart, killing four Marines and wounding three other people in what authorities are investigating as a terrorist attack.

HOW WAS THAT CONSTRUCTED?



CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. (WHERE) – A gunman (WHO) opened fire (WHAT) Thursday (WHEN) on two military centers more than seven miles apart, (WHERE) killing four Marines and wounding three other people (WHAT) in what authorities are investigating as a terrorist attack. (POSSIBLE WHY)

A Second-Day Lead

ALHAMBRA, Calif. (AP) –A giant tortoise found ambling down a street in suburban Los Angeles has been reunited with its owners.

The Alhambra Police Department said a local family claimed the 150-pound reptile named Clark on Sunday, a day after it was spotted strolling on the street and was captured by officers after a very brief pursuit.