

COURTS REPORTERS KEEPING TRACK OF JUSTICE

We often read news stories about crimes, but do you ever wonder what happens afterward? Was the person accused of the crime innocent—or found guilty? Did they go to jail or pay a fine?

Alyshah Hasham is a courts reporter for the Toronto Star. For six years, she has been going into courtrooms and reporting on trials, to let readers know what is happening.

Trials are open to the public, but most people don't have time to sit in a courtroom for hours on end, to watch trials. "My job is to go so other people don't have to go," says Hasham. "Justice is done in the name of all of us, all the people of Canada. Those things can affect us, our families, people we care about. You should know what's going on."

Unlike in a TV drama, where it's clear what's happening—and who's guilty—real courtrooms are complicated, with lots of people doing different jobs during the trial.

"Courts can be very confusing," says Hasham. "Sometimes even judges don't know what's going on."

Hasham often follows a case right from the time the person is accused of a crime. She finds out from the person's lawyer when their trial will be. She reports on what happened at the trial and later, about any punishment that was given to the person. That process can take a year or two years—or even longer.

There are different kinds of trials.

In a "sentencing trial," the guilty person goes before a judge to find out what their punishment will be. It could be a fine (money they have to pay) or jail time. Or, they may have to do volunteer work in the community.

Not only does Hasham watch and report on trials, she keeps an eye on the justice system—the way our country treats people who are accused of something. She says the system is often unfair to people who are racialized or marginalized.

"A disproportionate [too high compared to the population] number of Black and Indigenous men and women are not only arrested but have generally worse experiences throughout the justice system."

That's also the case for other vulnerable members of society, she says, such as low-income adults, people with mental health issues and people who are struggling with a drug addiction. Someone who has a high paying job may find it easier to take time off work to go to court, compared to someone who cannot get time off easily. If that person then loses their job because they couldn't come to work, it may also affect their ability to pay their rent and the resulting homelessness may cause the court to prevent them from having access to their children.

"A lot of what I do is about making sure the justice system is being held accountable for how it treats people," says Hasham.

Hasham says she feels a strong sense of duty to fairly report each person's story, "which is often the story of the worst time in their life. It's a big responsibility to tell it accurately and fairly. They put a lot of trust in (me) to do that."



My job is to watch everything that happens and make sense of it, and then explain why it's important.

--Alyshah Hasham, courts reporter

Most of a courts reporter's time is spent covering the most serious kinds of trials, involving violence or murder. Those trials have a jury, 12 people from the province or territory, who decide if the accused person is guilty or innocent.



A COURTS REPORTER'S WEEK

Some weeks, Hasham sits in on a trial every day. She writes daily articles and may also tweet. Other times, she writes longer articles about why what happened is important. She sends each article to her editor at the Star, where it is fact-checked and edited for clarity before being published in the paper or on the website.



DID YOU KNOW?

Hasham's office isn't in a newsroom. It's right in the courthouse, alongside the lawyers and judge. That way, she can easily ask them questions or head into a courtroom if there's a trial.



THE "S" MAKES A DIFFERENCE

A courts reporter is a journalist who writes news articles about the justice system.
A court reporter (or court stenographer) keeps an official record of everything people say in court.

WORD SCRAMBLE

CAN YOU UNSCRAMBLE THESE LAW-RELATED WORDS?

TORUC

CDSAUCE

LAJI

TILUGY

RAWLEY

NITOCENN

UGEJD

TIECUSJ

YUJR

ANSWERS: COURT, JAIL, LAWYER, JUDGE, JURY, ACCUSED, GUILTY, INNOCENT, JUSTICE