Law Module- Week 5: Introduction to Criminal Law

Objective:

- Understand the definition, purpose, and principles of criminal law.
- Differentiate between types of crimes and penalties. Comprehend general principles of criminal liability

Introduction to Criminal Law

Criminal law is the branch of law that deals with acts considered harmful to society as a whole. It punishes offenders to maintain public order, protect individuals and property, and promote justice.

Purpose of Criminal Law:

- Deterrence: Discourage individuals from committing crimes
- Protection: Safeguard society and victims
- Rehabilitation: Reform offenders
- Retribution: Punish wrongdoing proportionally

Example: Theft is criminalized to prevent loss of property and maintain social order.

Difference from Civil Law:

Criminal Law

Violates public law; prosecuted by the state

Example: Murder, robbery

Remedy: compensation, specific performance

Civil Law

Violates private law; resolved between individuals Punishment: imprisonment, fines

Example: Property dispute, breach of contract

Elements of a Crime

For an act to be considered a crime, it must satisfy two essential elements:

Element	Definition	Example
Actus Reus	Guilty act; physical element of the crime	Stealing a wallet
Mens Rea	Guilty mind; intent to commit crime	Planning and intending to steal the wallet

Explanation: Both elements must coexist for criminal liability.

Exception: Some crimes are strict liability (actus reus only), e.g., traffic violations.

Scenario Example: Juan accidentally hits a pedestrian while obeying traffic laws. Actus reus exists (accidental harm), but mens rea is absent → likely no criminal liability.

Classification of Crimes

Based on Severity:

Type	Definition	Example
Felonies	Serious offenses with severe penalties	Murder, robbery, rape
Misdemeanors	Less serious offenses	Petty theft, vandalism, traffic violations

Based on Victim / Target:

Type	Definition	Example
Crimes against persons	Harmful acts toward individuals	Assault, homicide
Crimes against property	Acts damaging property	Arson, theft

Scenario Example: Theft of a neighbor's car → crime against property, felony depending on value. Physical assault → crime against person.

Principles of Criminal Liability

1. Presumption of Innocence: Everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

2. Accountability: Individuals are responsible for their own acts.

3. Proportionality: Punishment must fit the severity of the crime.

4. Legal Punishment: Only crimes defined by law are punishable.

Example: Maria is accused of fraud. She cannot be punished until the court proves all elements beyond reasonable doubt.

Defenses in Criminal Law

Self-defense: Protecting oneself from imminent harm

Insanity / Mental incapacity: Lacks mens rea due to mental condition

Mistake of fact: Honest misunderstanding negating criminal intent

Duress / Coercion: Forced to commit crime under threat

Scenario Example: Juan steals food while trapped without resources. Court may consider necessity as a defense.

Case Studies and Examples

Case 1: Theft (Felony) Juan steals ₱50,000 from a store.

Actus reus: Taking the money

Mens rea: Intent to permanently deprive the owner

Remedy: Prosecution; possible imprisonment and fine

Case 2: Traffic Violation (Misdemeanor / Strict Liability)

Maria runs a red light and causes minor accident.

Actus reus: Violation of traffic rule

Mens rea not required → liable even if no intent

Case 3: Crimes Against the State

A person plotted to overthrow the government.

Crime: Treason

Penalty: Severe; imprisonment or death depending on jurisdiction

Discussion Questions / Exercises

1. Identify three crimes in your community and classify them (felony/misdemeanor, type of victim).

2. Discuss a scenario where a person may have actus reus but no mens rea. What is the legal outcome?

3. Explain the importance of proportionality in punishment.

4.Research a recent criminal case and summarize: the crime, elements, and outcome.

Summary

 ➢ Criminal law protects society by punishing harmful acts.
 ➢ Elements of a crime: actus reus (act) and mens rea (intent).
 ➢ Crimes are classified by severity (felony/misdemeanor) and victim/target (person, property, state).
 ➢ Criminal liability is governed by principles such as presumption of innocence, accountability, and proportionality.
 ➢ Defenses like self-defense, insanity, or duress may exempt a person from liability.

Homework

1. Write a 1-page report on a recent criminal case in your country, including: The crime committed Classification (felony/misdemeanor, victim type) Court decision and punishment
2. . Create a table of 5 examples of crimes you are aware of and classify: Felony or misdemeanor Against person, property, or state