

1.10: Media Coverage of Crimes

Violent Times Example

One morning, after checking email, which is a pretty standard task, my grandfather writes a daily email. This morning he discusses the violent times we are all living in and how murder is everywhere. He discusses how he worries about the future of his family members because the United States is a dangerous place to live. He often provides explanations for this ‘increase in crime’ that I, as a criminologist, know to be untrue. Sometimes he will say kids are violent because of social media or video games, other times he will blame it on immigrants. Regardless, my grandfather lives in fear. He is fearful of someone breaking into his home, and at the age of 80, had a security screen installed in their nice suburban area in Colorado. He avoids downtown Denver because of his belief it is overrun by ‘gang bangers.’ However, where could all these ideas come from for him. My grandfather has never worked in the criminal justice system, he never studied it, he did not attend college but has such strong thoughts about policies that need to get enacted, problems with society, and he often states them as a fact. The answer: THE NEWS.

Perhaps watching too much television can cause an overestimation of rates of crime both in reality and on television. ^[1]

Media is not a terrible thing that is conspiring to ruin our minds. Please know it is very beneficial and can help share information, but we need to be aware of the downfalls of media and even which media we choose to watch. Do not want to say “I am over the news” because it serves an important purpose! Also, keep in mind that crime is going DOWN and has been consistently doing so. However, research has shown that entertainment and news media create an image that we are living in a dangerous world. ^[2] It can be easy to become fearful after watching too much news if we let ourselves fall trap to losing the facts. “Factfulness recognizes when we get negative news, and remembering that information about bad events is much more likely to reach us. When things are getting better, we often do not hear about them, which can lead to a systematically too-negative impression of the world around us, which is very stressful.” ^[3]

Public knowledge of crime and justice derived largely from the media. Research has examined the impact of media consumption on fear of crime, punitive attitudes, and perceived police effectiveness. Studies have found that the more crime-related media an individual consumes, the more fearful of crime they are. ^{[4][5]} However, we also are attracted to specific types of crime and victims when we choose to consume media. In other words, the media is aware of our crime preferences and will report on those more. Glassner (2009) describes what he calls the ‘ideal crime story’ for journalists to report. He notes that society likes to read about innocent victims, likable people, and the perpetrator needs to be scary and uncaring about the crime. ^[6]

Our society is fascinated with crime and justice, where we spend hours watching films, reading books, newspapers, magazines, and television broadcasts that keep us constantly engaged in crime “talk.” Perhaps what we do not always realize is the mass media plays an important role in the construction of criminals, criminality and the criminal justice system. Our understanding and perceptions of victims, criminals, deviants, and police largely determined by their portrayal in the mass media. ^[7]

The majority of public knowledge about crime and justice derived from the media. ^{[8][9][10]} Since Gallup polls began asking whether a crime had increased in 1989, a majority of Americans have usually said there is more crime than there was the year before. There is only one year where people did not think it did, which followed 9/11. ^[11]

Despite decreases in U.S. violent and property crime rates since 2008, most voters say crime has gotten worse during that span. Mostly, Americans’ perceptions of crime are often at odds with the data. ^[12] Research has also shown that there are stark differences across party lines. Specifically, almost eight-in-ten voters who supported President Donald Trump (78%) said this, as did 37% of backers of Democrat Hillary Clinton. Just 5% of pro-Trump voters and a quarter of Clinton supporters said crime has gotten better since 2008, according to the survey of 3,788 adults. ^[13] All of this is at odds with official data reports that will get discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Since this is the case, how do people have this misperception about crime and criminality? Where do these myths develop?

In the News: This clip was broadcast and could create fear in young women and parents of young women who may want to go running in broad daylight. The initial comments that they believed it was a stranger-rape makes it frightening, even if that is not the most common victimization. [6abc.com/news/new-video-shows-ny-woman-on-run-hours-before-murder-/1509645/](https://www.6abc.com/news/new-video-shows-ny-woman-on-run-hours-before-murder-/1509645/)

The media plays an important role in the perception of crime and the American public’s understanding of how the criminal justice system operates and policies Americans are willing to support for reform. Public opinion gets connected with pressure to change

crime policies.^[14], especially when there is a high fear of a certain crime^[15] The media can provide the public with an estimation of how much crime there is, the types of crime that are common, trends in crime rates, and the daily operations of the criminal justice system. However, the media often does not portray an accurate portrayal of crime and criminal justice.^[16]

In the News: Follow Up to Case Above https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/mistrial-karina-vetrano-killing_us_5bf5909ce4b0eb6d930ad6f9

“Fear is produced more readily in the modern community than it was earlier in our history because of increased publicity”
Edwin Sutherland.^[17]

Research by the Pew Research Center found that most Americans get their news from social media, despite having concerns about the accuracy and reliability of those sources. Almost 66 percent of Americans get news on social media. The majority (57%) say they expect the news they see on social media to be mostly inaccurate.^[18] It appears that convenience outweighs concerns with accuracy.

Media Exercise

Go about a daily routine, but record every time crime is discussed. Write down every time it happens such as watching TV, listening to the news, scrolling through newsfeeds, reading, and more. What was the message? Listening to the radio on the way to work? The goal is to record anything heard in the day related to crime and attempt to see the messages one may be receiving. Once enough instances get recorded, write a summary of the findings.

The media focus their attention on crimes that will capture viewers attention. The more shocking, upsetting, gruesome, and dramatic the case the better! In the above case of Katrina Vetrano, it is shocking that a 30-year-old woman goes out for a jog and winds up raped and murdered. It is even more shocking that it is in the day and then adds to it by a stranger. People will click on this case because it preys upon fears, but this causes problems. How do we devise policies that protect people if we get driven by fear? Women are more likely to be victimized by people they know, not strangers. However, the media makes it seem like it is strangers that are most likely to victimize women. Is this problematic? Yellow journalism is the practice of using sensational stories in print media to attract readers and increase profit, and it works, but not without problems.^[19]

While the media plays an important role in creating fear of crime and myths, they are not the only ones that do so. In subsequent chapters, we will talk about the government, politicians, and power-elites.^[20] In the next section, we will discuss the wedding cake model in an attempt to understanding how what we most commonly see in the news media can distort our understanding of crime frequency and types of crimes. The media may report on the stuff that will appear to be interesting, ‘If it bleeds, it leads,’ even if that is the crime that is less common. Homicides account for more than a quarter of the crime stories on the evening news, but they represent less than 1 percent of all crimes.^[21] In order to get people to read or listen to the story, they have to capture our attention. How many people want to read about another marijuana arrest? Not many probably! Most of us want to hear the gruesome crimes that keep us up at night; despite them being rare. By covering these crimes in-depth, we create fear and distorted reality of crime, criminals, and criminal justice.

Immigration and Crime Exercise

The fear of immigrants bringing crime to the United States is popular rhetoric right now, especially among politicians https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/06/22/the-original-source-for-trumps-claim-of-63000-immigrant-murders-bad-data-from-steve-king-in-2005/?utm_term=.f6a353aa5109. In the 2016 election, immigration and crime were one of the most perpetuated myths by Republican candidates, such as Donald Trump. He demonized media, suggesting they do not also perpetuate this myth https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/08/27/trump-in-undocumented-immigrants-we-are-going-to-get-rid-of-the-criminals/?utm_term=.d9962af916ee. Be aware that this fear tactic is not unique to Donald Trump and his campaign and has been going on forever. Additionally, fear may change, but fear is an excellent tool to get people to support an agenda. Border control became a hot button, and the argument was that we would remove crime and criminals. This myth was created and ‘sold’ to citizens via social media, news, films, and other media outlets.

First, find two news articles that argue that immigrants are dangerous and bring crime to the United States.

Second, read both NPR links <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/22/622540331/fact-check-trump-illegal-immigration-and-crime>
<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5365863>

Third, evaluate current belief systems before and after reading these. Write a summary of the knowledge gained from merely double-checking news outlets.

BONUS: To learn even more go and find peer-reviewed research and government research to support the argument that immigrants do not bring crime and are not more dangerous. Start with Sampson. 2008. Rethinking Crime and Immigration <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1525/ctx.2008.7.1.28>

Chavez, L. (2001). Covering immigration: Popular images and the politics of the nation. About this book: Media images not only reflect the national mood but also play a dominant role in shaping national discourse. This book brings new questions about the media's influence over the public's increasing fear of immigration.

Immigration

Reduces

Crime

<http://www.umass.edu/preferen/You%20Must%20Read%20This/Lee%20Immigration%20and%20Crime.pdf>

The article below is a great opinion piece about media and crime.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2001/apr/15/opinion/op-51152>

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