

Fear of Crime and the Media: from perceptions to reality

Derek Chadee summarises research findings on how crime news affects the public's perception of crime.

"Perceptions are the solid facts of reality." The media in both industrialised and many non-industrialised countries is a potent force in influencing the public's perceptions on important issues: politics, culture, environment and social issues such as unemployment and crime. In the case of crime news reporting, the final news output is a result of a social process which involves the collection of information, the interpretation of that information, the writing of a news-worthy report, and the editing by news producers. After such refinements of the initial information gathered, which in itself is a subjective process, the final crime news report is quite often not reflective of the social reality from which it was constructed.

Ferraro (1995) defined fear of crime as an emotional response of dread and anxiety to symbols associated with crime. Though fear has a protective and adaptive element, fear of crime can lead to many negative social responses including excessive spending on protective devices (car alarms, guns, gates), suspicion of other social groups, decreased

were 1040 crimes with the following break-down by crime type: six per cent fell within the murder category, two per cent wounding/assault, six per cent rape, 21 per cent robbery, 26 per cent larceny and 44 per cent burglary. The study found that front page articles on crime over-reported crimes against the person and under-reported crimes against property. For example, of all the front page crime items reported (59 per cent in the *Express*, 59 per cent in the *Trinidad Guardian* and 45 per cent in *Newsday*) were related to murders when this crime type constituted less than one per cent of all serious crimes reported for the month of January. Wounding/assaults constituted two per cent of all serious crimes, however, 32 per cent of all front page crime reports in the *Express*, 15 per cent *Guardian* and 20 per cent *Newsday* reported crimes related to wounding and assaults. Where rapes constituted six per cent of all serious crimes committed, 35 per cent of front page crime reports in the *Newsday*, 15 per cent in the *Guardian* and 5 per cent in the *Express* were related to rapes. Burglaries constituted the largest proportion of all serious crimes yet in all three

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community interaction, people or communities taking criminal justice into their own hands and decreased interaction between the community and the police. The social, psychological, economic and political effects of fear are numerous. Hence the study of this phenomenon is justified.

This short article presents a summary of some of the major findings from a number of research projects on fear of crime being conducted at the Ansa McAl Psychological Research Centre at the University of the West Indies, Trinidad. The findings from this research have cross-cultural relevance to other fear of crime and media researchers.

A research project supervised by the author and conducted by Khan, Ramlogan and Hardy (1999) assessed the reporting of front page crime news in the three daily newspapers (*Guardian*, *Express* and *Newsday*) in Trinidad during the period January 1-31, 1999. The actual number of serious crimes reported to the police during this same time period

newspapers there were no front page reports related to burglary.

The study also found similar results when the crime news lead items in television prime time news reports in January 1999 for the two major television stations were assessed. A crime news lead item is the very first news item reported on prime time news. On average, 69 per cent of all crime news lead items reported for January 1999 on the two television stations were murder related, 11 per cent wounding, eight per cent rape, eight per cent robbery, three per cent larceny and zero per cent burglary.

In a fear of crime study on high and low crime areas, randomly selected, conducted by the Ansa McAl Psychological Research Centre in February 1999, the findings showed that 51 per cent of the sample indicated that they were fearful of being a victim of crime (Chadee & Ditton, 1999). More specifically, 43 per cent indicated they were fearful of being a victim of rape, 48 per cent murder, 47 per cent wounding/



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assaults, 47 per cent robbery, and 59 per cent burglary. Similar findings of fear were found in both high and low crime areas (these areas being determined from official police statistics of serious crimes). Further, victimisation questions showed that residents in the low crime area experienced less victimisation yet displayed similar fear levels to residents living in the high crime area.

In another study using the same methodology as the February 1999 study and conducted by the Centre in August 2000, 728 respondents were asked to rate each of the following media as the main source of crime news. The results showed that 75 per cent said "television was the main source of crime news most of the time", 45 per cent that "newspapers were the main source most of the time", 35 per cent that "radio was the main source most of the time". On an average, 16 per cent of respondents said they read the newspapers seven days a week compared to 60 per cent who said they view prime time news seven days a week. Further, the survey also consistently found that television, followed by the newspapers, was the main source of crime news for the last three crimes respondents heard/read.

The findings from these three studies are very suggestive that the media is a major source in influencing perceptions of crime. Clearly crime news reports, especially front page and lead news items on television, place heavy emphasis on sensational stories such as murder, wounding and rape and less emphasis on crimes against property which constitute over 80 per cent of all serious crimes committed in any one year. The findings clearly show that over forty percent of respondents were afraid of being victims of both property and personal crimes.

At present, the Ansa McAl Psychological Research Centre is undertaking a content analysis of crime reporting in the three major newspapers in Trinidad for the period January-December, 2000. The next stage of the fear of crime research programme will be to undertake experimental studies to assist in clearing up some of the questions about causality between the media and fear of crime.

Both social psychologists and criminologists idealistically hope, through their research findings, to give the public a more accurate picture of social reality. However, we should remember that such information finds its way to the masses through the media.

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