

# Crime and the Fear of Media

Jason Ditton uncovers an anomaly and suggests a possible solution.

**W**e can take some things for granted when we wonder why there is so much crime fear. First, there is quite a lot about crime in the media. It is hard to be very specific as those researchers that have tried to measure it have all used different methods, sampling approaches, sampling sizes, measurement techniques and definitions of what crime is. Marsh, in one of the few comprehensive reviews, reckoned that crime figured in between 1.6 per cent and 33.5 percent of newspaper coverage. Not very helpful – and that's just crime news, and just in newspapers. Television is studied more often (radio less so) and, as far as I know, new media hasn't been considered at all.

Second, it is also generally agreed that crime drama on television is pretty weird stuff: violent, exciting and with somebody in handcuffs usually within the hour. Crime news, more the province of newspapers, is a predictably distorted and small selection of stories from the police blotter, with a disproportionate emphasis on sex and violence. Third, most people don't have much, if any, direct personal experience of crime, and are thus believed to get most of their information about it from the media. As criminal victimisation becomes more of a normal than atypical event this may be changing, but the general proposition is probably true. Finally, most people consume a lot of media and virtually nobody consumes none at all.

So, it seems obvious that people's fear of crime must come from the media. The only fly in this analytic ointment is that most studies show this not to be the case.

## Media consumption and fear of crime

Sarah Eschholz (1997) has carefully detailed the research evidence, from which it can be deduced that of 14 studies of the effects of newspaper consumption on fear of crime, and 25 studies of the effects of television consumption on fear of crime, a total of 73 attempts to discover a general relationship have been made. Of these, 30 (41 per cent) discovered a positive relationship, and 43 (59 per cent) did not. If simple broad rank order effects and those with significance levels of  $p < 0.05$  are discounted, then only 20 (27 per cent) discovered a positive relationship, and 53 (73 per cent) did not.

From another angle, there certainly isn't a consistent set of findings indicating that, whatever their media consumption, people are uniformly and hugely misinformed about crime. So, although it can be demonstrated that media coverage of crime is both selective and distorted, it cannot be assumed that people's beliefs must be skewed in the same way.

## Perceptions of crime

Indeed, in a series of studies, Tom Tyler (1980) has shown that people base estimations of their personal risk of victimisation on their own experiences and what they perceive to be those of friends and neighbours. They tend not to rely on media accounts as the latter are typically insufficiently informative, memorable or upsetting. Separate from judgements of personal victimisation risk are general concerns about crime, and these are demonstrably influenced by media accounts.

In considering the evidence about perceptions of crime, there are actually three dimensions of relevance. One, whether it is people's belief in crime generally or about specific offences. Two, whether it is belief in the relative frequency of separate crimes, or in the degree and direction of change in rates of victimisation. Three, whether beliefs refer to the local, regional or national level. Available data doesn't always separate these dimensions. But the evidence that exists does permit some reliable statements to be made.

First, there is no match typically between people's belief in the direction of regional or national change in crime, and changes in crime as measured by officially recorded crime rates, or by national victim surveys. Usually, people believe that crime is increasing a great deal, when it is only increasing slowly, or even declining.

Second, people seem to be better at estimating the degree and direction of change in rates of crime as the area in question gets closer and closer to their own neighbourhood. People generally believe that crime is rising very fast in the nation as a whole, somewhat less rapidly in their own city than in the rest of the country, but is not rising very rapidly, if at all, in their own neighbourhood.

Third, people seem rather good at specifying the relative frequency of crime types, and characteristics of offenders. They tend to overestimate the frequency of the least frequent offences, and underestimate the frequency of the most frequent ones, but this specific finding reflects a discovered general tendency to do that in other studies of judgemental processes. Fourth, as Michael Hough and Julian Roberts have shown, people can be quite good at estimating the actual national frequency of serious crimes like murder.

Fifth, given the well-known inadequacies of criminal statistics, it is even possible that public beliefs are more accurate than police recorded rates. Mark Warr (1982) suggests this for adultery and homosexuality. How could he possibly know? Well, he was researching in a place (Arizona) where, and at a time (1980), when both were illegal.



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Understandably very few cases of either came to police attention, but his general public sample estimated the frequency of each to be greater – and they were quite possibly right!

So, there's a problem. Or rather, two. One, people's source of information is distorted but the picture they build isn't. But if we stop thinking that people are mere empty vessels into which media idiocy is poured and see them instead as being as intelligent and discerning – if not more so – than most criminologists, then the problem disappears.

But two, why can't we usually connect their high crime fear levels with their media consumption? The puzzling failure of most researchers to trace a significant effect of media consumption on fear may well be due to a typical research strategy of asking about the degree of fear, and about the frequency of media consumption. We ask how much fear they have, and then try to correlate this with how often they consume media. Steven Farrall and David Gadd (2004), in a quite revolutionary article, have, for the first time that I am aware, asked respondents how frequently they felt fearful of crime – rather than just how fearful they felt. And they found, to much surprise, that those who were very fearful didn't really feel that way very often.

Accordingly, future attempts to correlate media consumption with crime fear might usefully consider the degree of media consumption as well as the sheer frequency. Such an approach might well yield the level of relationship between media and fear that seems to lurk beyond the grasp of current analytic techniques.

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## References

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