# Tourism, Crime and the Media

**Paul Brunt** surveys the damage to tourism caused by 'holiday crime' coverage, and notes some innovative responses.

In the last fifty years tourism has rapidly grown to become the world's largest industry, bringing society-wide improvements in income, education, employment and local infrastructure and services. However, not all of tourism's expansion is so welcome. In some quarters, the environmental and sociocultural impacts have caused damage that may be irreparable. Pollution, prostitution (of person and place) and prejudice result.

Among the necessary conditions for a prosperous tourism industry are safety and security. Travellers have always been the targets for criminals. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that tourism researchers have, for many years, been interested in how issues such as tourist victimisation affect the industry. In a review of the literature, Brunt and Hambly (1999) note that not only are tourism locations areas of high crime (especially where there is a concentration on the youth market and large drug subculture) but tourism also causes higher levels of deviant activity (gambling, prostitution, drug use). Furthermore, while nobody is exempt from the possibility of becoming a crime victim, research shows that tourists may be particularly vulnerable. They represent highly visible targets, carry items of portable wealth, are ignorant of the locality and local customs, and are often careless and unaware of the risks. A study of a group of British holidaymakers (Brunt et al 2000) found tourist victimisation rates for burglary, car crime and mugging were far higher while on holiday than rates for people at home. Such findings are congruent with previous research around the world, that has shown that tourists are more vulnerable to property crimes, as well as the violent crimes of robbery and rape, than are local residents.

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Incidents of violence and crimes against tourists can clearly have a negative influence on the tourism industry. While tourists tend to select their holiday destination on the basis of price, location and weather, rather than concerns about safety and security, those destinations that gain notoriety as crime hot spots are likely to experience difficulty. The problem here is that tourism is particularly vulnerable to outside forces, with it being so strongly linked to advertising. As potential tourists, we cannot test-drive our holiday beforehand, so we seek information about destinations from different forms of media. Hence, media headlines broadcasting outbreaks of disease, a swing in exchange rates, poor tour operators, poor accommodation, flight delays, acts of terrorism or a rise in tourism-related crime may put off potential tourists. In the latter case, Pizam et al (1997) notes that destinations such as Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg have suffered significant declines in overseas visitation in response to widely reported incidents of crime against tourists.
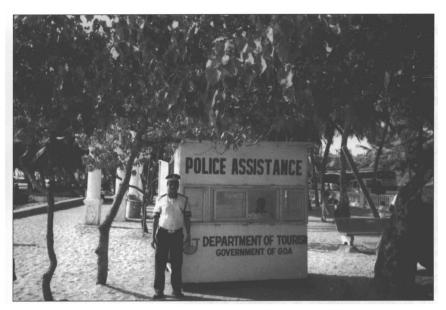
## Decline in visitors

Perhaps the most notable example of this was in Florida, when a spate of crimes against tourists in 1993 produced over 800 media reports (Brayshaw 1995; Pizam and Mansfield 1996). Despite the fact that crimes against non-residents were falling, the tragic murders of a pregnant German tourist and a male English tourist, and a number of other random violent incidents against holidaymakers were reported by the international media as suggesting crimes against tourists were rampant and on the increase. As a result, in the following year there was an overall decline in the number of overseas visitors to Florida of 11 per cent, with the proportion from the UK and Germany falling by 22 per cent.

It is certainly the case that crimes against tourists are 'newsworthy', with all types of newspapers, for example, often adopting a sensationalistic style of reporting. This is particularly criticised within the industry because it is known that too often 'perception becomes reality' and while official statistics might suggest a fall in crime, media reports suggest otherwise, and tourism numbers decline. Mawby (2000) found that with UK holidaymakers, while even being the victim of a crime on holiday hardy dampened the desire to go away again, some 42 per cent of the sample had previously rejected certain destinations early in their holiday decision-making process because of security fears. This, it would seem, is less likely to be a very conscious decision: rather, certain destinations are either hardly or not even contemplated.

## Innovative policy

To address the negative images of tourism crimes, attention inevitably turns to local law enforcement agencies. Here, research shows several innovative policy decisions in an attempt to protect the industry's investments, provide a safe environment for tourists

and combat negative media reporting. The types of reaction may include, at a first level, crime prevention measures that are common in non-tourist locations: CCTV, alarms, and other architectural or technological improvements may take place. At another level are measures aimed specifically at tackling crimes against tourists. In Florida, for example, a Tourist Orientated Policing Unit (TOPS) was established in the early 1980s, with 60 officers patrolling and assisting in the principal tourist zones. Following the incidents in the 1990s, other measures included the replacement of licence plates that identified vehicles as hire cars. At a recent conference, an officer from TOPS (Pena 1999) illustrated how good practice from other US destinations continues to inform their tourism policing strategy. Of crucial importance is co-operation between police and the tourism industry to boost tourist crime prevention through education and safety campaigns. Clearly though, the finance necessary for a specialised police resource is a precursor and often a stumbling block.

Certainly tourists can become crime victims, but media reporting can get this out of all proportion. As a result, the reporting of such crimes can have an adverse impact on demand, especially where the nature of the reporting is widespread and sensationalistic. It is unlikely that such a reporting style will change when the attitude is that 'a dead westerner is a media ticket to ride' and while 'few identify with a murdered diplomat, a murdered tourist is one of us' (Jenkins 1997). Innovative policing is one approach that has been used to recreate a positive image of security and peace, as well as address the rather more important issue of the local crime problem. Such approaches require effort in equal measure from the tourism industry and law enforcement agencies. To date, though, progress from both parties could best be described as 'patchy'.

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