The media, criminals and 'criminal communities'

Ian Marsh and **Gaynor Melville** consider the criminalisation of communities through negative media reporting.

This short article looks at the way that different communities are represented in the media; and in particular the negative representation of certain communities as 'criminal'. Indeed, before reading on you might consider which cities in the UK have a positive media image and which negative; and what impact crime plays in promoting those images.

In recent years, in particular, 'local leaders' including politicians and decision makers have emphasised the importance of their cities or areas having a positive, attractive image. It is believed that public image, which is largely spread via the different forms of media, can and does have major implications for their area – a positive image can work in terms of attracting business and money, new residents and cultural developments; while a negative one can have the reverse effect. Indeed a negative image is seen as an obstacle that will work against a better future for the city or area. While many different factors will influence the image of an area, crime rate is one of the most significant – a high crime rate, or even the perception of an area as having a high crime rate, leads to bad publicity and a negative effect on the area. The American city of Chicago was heavily associated with gangland crime in the early years of the twentieth century – infamous for the exploits of Al Capone and others in the 1920s and 1930s. And even though the crime rate in Chicago was one of the lowest among American cities by the later years of the twentieth century, it is still generally perceived and referred to as a city of crime and violence – in other words,

the stereotype, perpetuated by the media in films and books, persists.

Criminology as an academic, scientific discipline developed in the early twentieth century, and much of early criminological theorising focused on explaining why crime occurred in urban areas and cities. And a concern about the effects of urban and city living on crime rates did not begin with criminologists; many of the great early social theorists and sociologists such as Durkheim, Weber, and Tonnies wrote about the changes to society and social relationships that resulted from the transition of societies from rural, village-based ones to urbanised and industrial ones.

It was in the 1920s and 1930s that social scientists based at the University of Chicago explored the notion that modern, industrial, and urban societies would bring with them greater social disorganisation and a growth in social problems, including crime. The approach and theorising of these sociologists became known as the Chicago School. The notion of criminal areas, then, is one which has been developed by social theorists and criminologists and so it is perhaps not surprising that the media portray certain cities, areas and neighbourhoods in such a light. And these representations are accepted and used by other bodies. Insurance companies, for instance, vary the premiums they charge people for insuring against theft according to the area in which people live. As an example, the Endsleigh insurance company analysed its claims data covering tens of thousands of households across Britain and published on its web page a list of

the cities with the highest risk for burglary, and those which were safest for burglary. The company found that Leeds was the city where you are most likely to suffer a burglary (with a burglary rate 99 per cent above the national average), followed by Hull and Nottingham; with Edinburgh, Cardiff and Swindon the least burglary prone cities. Other internet sites refer to crime rates in promoting or not a particular area – so in relation to house buying, for example, an American site, www.ezinearticles.com, highlights 'signs of a bad neighbourhood', including broken windows, graffiti, and abandoned cars. It suggests that a less obvious indication is whether there are people walking around on a warm evening or at weekends – suggesting that the area is likely to have little crime. Indeed, the importance of visual images of crime and crime control was the focus of the last edition of *Criminal Justice Matters* (No. 78), with Keith Hayward referring to the 'comforting image of the bobby on the beat'.

In the UK, Liverpool is one of a number of northern cities that is portrayed in the media as crime-ridden, and is regularly the butt of jokes to that effect. Amongst others, Boris Johnson, the Conservative MP, was forced to apologise for making unflattering comments about the city, as was TV presenter Anne Robinson for joking about 'thieving Scousers' on *The Weakest Link* game show. Writing in *The Independent,* Jonathon Brown (2006) commented that the British national media has 'written off the country's second most famous town as a shell-suited, hub-cap-nicking "self pity city"'. He refers to the editor of the local paper, *The Liverpool Echo,* Alastair Machray, commenting that Liverpool gets a rough ride from the rest of the country; a combination of bad news and Liverpool is guaranteed to generate special coverage and excitement in the London-based media:

> *Negative stories always get followed up by the nationals and all newspapers are guilty of focusing on the negative. But… if something bad happens it makes*

it a better story if it happens in Liverpool, rather than Leeds or Colchester. That is bewildering. (Brown, 2006)

In considering these ideas on the importance of the image of cities and towns, the success of and publicity around the book *Crap Towns* (published in 2003) is worth considering briefly. While the title hardly suggests this is an academic source, it is important to bear in mind that the role of the popular media is probably more important in influencing public perceptions – and the popular media include books, as well as newspaper, television and the internet. The idea for *Crap Towns* came after Sam Jordison wrote an article in *The Idler* (a magazine for people who enjoy their leisure) criticising his home town, Morecambe, for its 'desolate' promenades. This led to him being sent comments and opinions on different towns from all over the country, which he and his friend Dan Kieran edited into the book (they had previously produced a book on *Crap Jobs*). They felt that everyone had either grown up in, or at least visited, a town they despised and the replies from readers suggested they were right. The sub-title of the book was *The 50 Worst Places to Live in the UK* and the authors found that Hull came out at the top – one former resident of Hull describing it as 'a sad story of unemployment, teenage pregnancy, heroin addiction, crime, violence and rampant self-neglect'. The local media's response to this illustrates the importance attached to how the image of location is represented. The Hull Daily Mail got on to the story and invited the writer to the above quote to have a look around Hull and ran a front page article on his experiences and his subsequent comments that he 'actually quite liked the place'. The book certainly touched a nerve and the authors found themselves insulted on Radio Wales and joked about in *The Sun*.

The negative media portrayal of certain areas and towns is further evidenced by looking at the opposite end of the spectrum – peaceful,

small scale, rural-based areas are, in contrast, represented as places where crime is unusual. Indeed, so much so that when crimes, and particularly serious crimes, occur in such areas, they tend to make bigger news than if they had occurred in more 'expected' places. Murders in rural areas or villages invariably attract comments about 'sleepy villages being shocked' – both in terms of the media reporting and representation of real crime and fictional crime. Starting with fictional portrayals, the popular television series *Midsomer Murders* (a series which has been running since 1997) plays on the fact that it reverses the stereotypical of English village life. Based on the detective novels of Caroline Graham, and filmed in the English countryside, the programme uncovers and probes the criminal undercurrents that lie beneath the idyllic surface of village life in Midsomer. Part of the programme's attraction and certainly its surprise element is that behind the peaceful and picturesque facade of this prosperous village all sorts of vices and intrigues are afoot.

In terms of the media reporting of real life crime, those crimes which occur in rural areas are typically described in relation to the backdrop of their supposedly peaceful environment. The following headline from *The Independent* illustrates this tendency, 'Typical English village, except for the paedophile moving back home' (24 August 1998). Below the headline the article continues,

In a scene typical of any English village a group of carefree children laughed and joked this weekend as they rode their bikes outside the village post office in Sonning Common. But this group is unlikely to be allowed out on their own for very much longer. In a couple of weeks, Rhys Hughes, a predatory paedophile with a 30 year history of abusing children, will be released from prison. He intends to return to his house in the scenic Oxfordshire village from where he terrorised children, including a five-year

old girl who lived nearby… And because the 65 year-old retired gardener was sentenced three months before the introduction of the 1991 Criminal Justice Act he cannot be made to conform to any supervision … He can come and go as he likes from the house he still owns.

In one of the most widely reported and harrowing of child murders in recent years, the abduction and murder of 10-year-olds Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in August 2002, the nature of the location of the crime, the Cambridge village of Soham, was regularly commented on by the media. The following extract is from BBC News 24:

On visiting Soham the first thing that strikes you is how small it is … Soham feels sleepy, safe and typically English … it's the kind of place where parents could let their children out unsupervised without undue concern. (17 December 2003)

Although such crimes are reacted to with outrage and anger wherever they occur, the fact that they have occurred in rural areas or villages, with their sleepy, idealised images, adds an extra, almost sensationalised, element to the way that they are reported in the media. ■

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