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Fads in Fear: Cycles in Crime Construction

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Crime Waves

There is a sequence familiar to all students of the media's crime coverage. First, something—perhaps a particularly terrible crime, or pronouncements from activists or politicians, or a rumor, or even a fairly routine news story—draws attention to some form of criminality. The media then begin to focus on this crime problem: they watch for additional instances about which they can report; they consult experts who pontificate about the problem's causes and recommend solutions; and they provide a forum for victims, worried citizens, law enforcement officials, prosecutors and defense attorneys, legislators, even the criminals themselves—anyone moved to speak out on the issue. All of this coverage conveys a sense that the problem is already bad and rapidly getting worse; people begin to speak of a “crime wave.” If this crime can be constructed in sufficiently melodramatic terms, coverage will spread from the news media to “info-tainment”—that is, to talk shows, reality tv, and other news/show business hybrids—and even to such pure entertainment genres as detective novels, feature films, and comic books. Eventually, of course, this particular story becomes stale, old news; coverage dwindles, and the media turn their attention to some fresh topic.

We could point to countless examples of crime coverage following this trajectory. Within the last forty years, for instance, Americans have worried about bath salts (Kavanaugh & Biggers, 2019), carjacking (Cherbonneau & Copes, 2003), child abductions (Best, 1990), crack (Brownstein, 1996), crystal meth (Jenkins, 1999), cyber porn and cyberstalking (Potter & Potter, 2001), date rape (Gilbert 1994), daycare center sexual abuse (de Young, 2004), drive-by shootings (Ramos 1998), drunk driving (Gusfield, 1981), Ecstasy (Jenkins, 1999), freeway violence (Best, 1991), gangs and gang initiation rites (Best & Hutchinson, 1996), fentanyl (Kennedy and Coelho, 2020), hate crimes (Jenness & Grattet, 2001), human trafficking (Bernstein, 2010), identity theft (Levi 2001), the knockout game (Best, 2019), media piracy (Yar, 2005), militias (Chermak, 2002), pedophile priests (Jenkins, 1996), road rage (Best & Furedi, 2001), satanic ritual abuse (Victor 1993), school and mass shootings (Burns & Crawford, 1999), serial murder (Jenkins, 1994), sexual predators (Jenkins, 1998), stalking (Lowney & Best, 1995), terrorism (Jenkins, 2003), transgender violence (Westbrook, 2021), wilding (Welch, Price & Yankey, 2002), and workplace violence (Burns, 2001)—to list just some of the crime problems that emerged, peaked, and—⁽¹⁾ for the most part—have already slipped into relative obscurity. The same

(1) In composing this list, I limited myself to crime waves that emerged in the United States after 1980. Expanding the focus in various ways could have produced a much longer list. For example, there were somewhat earlier waves of concern; child pornography, domestic violence, PCP, rape, and child sexual abuse are among the crime problems that began attracting intense attention during the 1970s. I also have ignored recent claims that focused on non-criminal issues, including the numerous waves of concern over such medicalized problems as fetal alcohol syndrome, HIV/AIDS, and multiple

pattern is repeated across time and space—Londoners, for instance, have a long history of worrying about disorderly youth subcultures, such as Mohawks in the eighteenth century (Statt, 1995), hooligans in the nineteenth (Pearson, 1983), and skinheads in the twentieth (Brake, 1974).

The media coverage of these crime waves tends to be credulous; that is, it assumes that a crisis exists. In contrast, sociologists, criminologists, and other scholars often are more skeptical, although their analyses usually focus on the content of the particular claims. That is, when they're dealing with claims about serial murder, they ask how and why serial murder has emerged as a topic of concern; when road rage is in the news, they try to explain its celebrity. Thus, most case studies of crime waves subject specific claims to careful, critical examination, precisely because the analysts consider those claims dubious. In some cases, it can take time for skepticism to emerge, particularly when the initial claims evoke the analysts' sympathies. Sociologists—like journalists, politicians, and members of the general public—can get caught up in the alarm over some new social problem. For example, claims about violence against women or hate crimes—offenses involving victims whom sociologists are likely to view as sympathetic figures—tend to be slower to attract skeptical analyses than, say, the newest drug scare. But, if the concern lasts long enough, skeptical critics are likely to emerge.

These critical case studies point to a larger pattern; most analysts recog-

personality disorder. And, of course, it would be possible to list many topics that attracted considerably more attention in other countries than in America. All of the sources that I have cited adopt a constructionist stance; that is, they focus on how and why these crimes became topics of concern.

nize that such concerns tend to be cyclical. Criminologists generally view crime waves as waves in media coverage, more than waves in actual criminality.⁽²⁾ They speak of moral panics, drug scares, and contemporary legends—terms that convey doubts about the reality of the threat at hand. They recognize that different concerns tend to follow similar trajectories, even though they almost always focus their attention on the particular case in the headlines.

My goal in this paper is to step back from the particular, to try and offer a more general perspective on crime waves. I intend to pay relatively little attention to the details of case studies, and to concentrate on two larger is-

(2) The classic account of the media's role is Lincoln Steffens's (1931) description of his experiences as a Progressive-era reporter: "I Make a Crime Wave." Case studies describe the media's production of crime waves in the eighteenth (King, 1987), nineteenth (Adler, 1996), and twentieth centuries (Fishman, 1978). The hallmark of the media-generated crime wave is its specificity; that is, the press insists that there is a wave in some particular crime (such as school shootings). The evidence for this claim is almost always anecdotal; the claims point to a few visible incidents as proof that this crime is increasing. Very often, the relevant statistics do not bear this out (for instance, all the available statistical evidence suggested that school shootings declined during the 1990s, yet the media claimed that there was a wave of school shootings in 1998 and 1999 [Best, 2004]). Criminologists who trace patterns of criminality over time, however, do find that there are periods when crime rates rise and fall; in some cases, these analysts speak of crime waves (LaFree, 1999; Sacco, 2005). Their explanations for these shifts tend to focus on demographic factors (e.g., when the population's proportion of young males [the most criminally active segment of the population] rises, crime rates often increase) or economic factors (e.g., the booming economy of the 1990s is credited with much of that decade's decline in crime).

sues: first, I want to explore the connections among different crime waves; and, second, I want to consider the faddish nature of these concerns.

Connections among Crime Waves

Anyone who studies crime waves notes that today's new concern often bears a family resemblance to other, historical crises. Beginning in the nineteenth century, for example, Americans have experienced repeated drug scares, characterized by dire warnings about the dangers posed by some new drug problem. At particular historical moments, concern has focused on alcohol ("Demon Rum"), opium smoking, morphine, cocaine, heroin, marijuana, LSD and other hallucinogens, amphetamines, PCP, crack, Ecstasy and other club drugs, crystal meth, bath salts, and—most recently—prescription opioids (Jenkins, 1999; Musto, 1999). Some of these drugs had only brief moments in the limelight; others have returned to center stage on several occasions. Typically, each new drug scare features warnings that this drug is different than other, once-frightening-but-now-familiar drugs, that this new drug is more powerful, more damaging, that it threatens to spread widely and do untold damage (Reinarman, 1994).

There are many other examples of such "families" of crime waves. Americans find it very easy to worry about children menaced by deviants—child abuse, child pornography, child abductions, school shootings, and the like (Best, 1990)—and about random violence—such as workplace violence, drive-by shootings, or freeway violence (Best, 1999). I don't mean to suggest that these aren't concerns in other countries, just that we need to be alert to the possibility that different concerns tend to pop up in different places. For example, East Africa has experienced waves of concern about

vampires—one worry that does not really resonate in the U.S. (White, 2000)⁽³⁾.

It seems to me that such recurring concerns point to what we might think of as cultural fault lines.⁽⁴⁾ Thus, a culture may characterize children as precious, vulnerable innocents, who need and deserve protection from harms. While every culture doubtless values children, this theme may become especially prominent in contemporary societies that have managed to reduce childhood death rates (via requiring vaccination, the use of car seats, and so on), so that fewer people have direct experience with children suffering terrible harms, and there is a taken-for-granted expectation that children can and ought to be protected from serious threats. At the same time, declining birth rates mean that families invest their hopes in fewer children, so that each child is defined as priceless, and the loss of a child becomes an awful, almost unimaginable tragedy (Zelizer, 1985). In this context, claims that society is failing to protect its children become rhetorically powerful (Best, 1990). It is easier to construct crime problems that speak to such underlying cultural issues. Mapping these cultural fault lines can not only help us understand why crime waves emerged in the past, it may also help us predict what sorts of issues are likely to emerge in the future.

A related phenomenon is the cyclical emergence of the same concern at different historical periods. For example, during the twentieth century,

(3) Similar concerns can emerge in settings separated by considerable time or space. For instance, alarms that someone was stabbing or cutting people at random emerged in late eighteenth-century London (Bondeson, 2001), as well as pre-World War II Halifax (Goss, 1987) and post-war Taipei (Jacobs, 1965).

(4) Erikson (1976) uses a somewhat different image: “axes of variation” to identify a culture’s vulnerable spots.

Americans experienced three intense waves of concern about youth gangs: first during the late 1920s and early 1930s; again during the 1950s; and then during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Gilbert, 1986). Each period featured extensive news coverage, and each inspired a body of social scientific research, as well as movies, novels, and other popular cultural depictions of gang life.

Gangs are by no means the only example of such recurring concerns. The historian Philip Jenkins has published several books tracking the rise and fall of various public issues in the United States. His examples include sex crimes involving child victims (also the subject of three twentieth-century waves of intense concern, interspersed with periods when the threat was downplayed) (Jenkins, 1998), the dangers of new religious cults (Jenkins, 2000), and even theologians getting periodically caught up in the idea that religious authorities have ignored “hidden gospels” that reveal that Christ’s teachings have been misapplied (Jenkins, 2001). Reading Jenkins’s work drives home some clear lessons. First, it is not uncommon for Americans to display a pattern of oscillating concern: that is, there are periods when gangs, sex crimes against children, or whatever become the focus of intense public alarm, interspersed by periods when these threats receive far less attention.

Collective Amnesia and Crime

Second, there is a sort of collective amnesia—people not only don’t acknowledge this cyclical pattern, but they generally don’t recall that there were earlier periods when today’s menace also aroused widespread alarm. Rather, there seems to be nostalgia for the Good Old Days when people did-

n't have to worry about all the terrible problems that plague us today. We envision a past when children used to be safe from victimization. And, should a critic point out that, say, people used to worry about gangs, those earlier fears are dismissed as naive. In the 1950s, we'll be told, people worried about rumbles between youths armed with switchblade knives and home-made zip guns, but today we fear gangs who engage in drive-by shootings using automatic weapons. The past's fears are dismissed as quaint.

Thus, we see a pattern. Society—at least American society, but I am assuming this probably occurs elsewhere in the world—becomes repeatedly aroused about the same problems—drugs, gangs, threats to children, whatever. And, each time this occurs, people downplay—even completely ignore—the fact that this concern has a history, that it has been the subject for alarm in the past.

This is not a trivial observation. We can easily imagine other possible patterns. After all, the common-sense—or perhaps I should say the idealistic—interpretation of journalism is that the news media report on the most significant recent events; according to this model, if the media cover crime waves, it must be because there has been a real increase in some sort of crime. The recognition that crime and coverage vary independently—that many crimes waves are really media creations—is itself important.

Moreover, the fact that these waves tend to focus on the same topics, rather than, say, addressing a random array of crimes, suggests that there are cultural fault lines, issues about which it is relatively easy to arouse concern. We can suspect that different cultures might have different key concerns, which helps explain why reports of foreign crime waves may strike us as a little peculiar.

And, finally, the observation that waves of concern—sometimes quite intense—soon fall out of collective memory seems interesting. There are exceptions, of course. Americans' collective memory recalls the 1950s anti-communist crusade led by Senator Joseph McCarthy and its excesses ; McCarthyism continues to be referenced as an example of irresponsibly arousing political fears. But the great bulk of moral panics, crime waves, and drug scares turn out to be episodes of short-lived concern.

The Importance of Fads

It is this short-lived quality to which I want to turn. Sociologists have a natural tendency to focus on what endures; after all, what lasts is presumably important. As a result, a good deal of sociological research examines social institutions, social structures, values, and other aspects of social life that seem largely stable. To be sure, sociologists are also interested in social change, but the great theorists of change—Marx, Durkheim, and Weber—sought to explain long-term, enduring changes, and most modern sociologists share this concern. For example, there is a rather large sociological literature on diffusion, which is the name social scientists give to the process by which things—ideas, objects, whatever—spread from one group to another. Much of the diffusion literature implicitly assumes that diffusion is desirable, that it represents progress and will endure, that once some innovation has been adopted, people will continue to use it, at least until something clearly better comes along (Rogers, 1995). In short, sociologists tend to presume that what's important is what lasts, and that what lasts must therefore be important.

In contrast, sociologists tend to pay less attention to transitory, ephemeral,

short-lived phenomena. Most of these are relegated to the category of collective behavior, which is a conceptual mish-mash. Sociologists usually include, within the broader category of collective behavior, riots, crowds, social movements, disasters, rumors, fashion, and fads. This miscellany is justified as belonging to the same category on the grounds that these are all phenomena that seem relatively ungoverned by social institutions. Which means, of course, that these tend to be short-lived phenomena. Not surprisingly, collective behavior—with its focus on the transitory—has been a relatively low-prestige specialty within the larger discipline of sociology.

And within the low-rent domain of collective behavior, the study of fads has usually been seen as especially unimportant. The most familiar examples of fads are playful enthusiasms of young people—toy fads (such as the hula hoop), dance fads (such as the twist), and campus fads (such as streaking). Thus, the very examples that come to mind when sociologists speak of fads make the topic seem unworthy of serious consideration. Even collective behavior textbooks define fads using terms such as “trifling,” “insignificant,” and “trivial” (Goode, 1992; Miller, 2000).

My own view is that fads are not just common, but also consequential (Best, 2006). Our most serious institutions—including science, medicine, education, and management—display what I call institutional fads. These are short-term enthusiasms that take hold among serious people, so that physicians adopt fad diagnoses and fad treatments, educators get caught up in educational fads, just as managers endorse management fads. Anyone who follows the news realizes that it is not at all uncommon for future developments to be heralded with great fanfare, yet never come to pass. Rather, there is a short-lived pattern of emerging (when some novelty arrives on the

scene), surging (when people scramble to adopt the innovation), followed by purging (as adopters abandon what they previously seized with such enthusiasm).

Conditions Fostering Fads

But what do fads have to do with the media's coverage of crime problems? If, as I have already argued, that coverage reveals a pattern of short-term fascination with particular crimes, then we can suspect that crime waves—that is, waves of media coverage about specific crimes—resemble other short-lived enthusiasms, such as fads. We might then ask how what we know about fads can help us better understand the media's issue-attention cycles, not just about crime, but about all manner of other social issues.

I want to begin by considering the culture and social structure that foster fads in general and, I will argue, the media's fascination with crime waves in particular. Fads flourish where the culture celebrates change and the possibility of progress, and where the social structure features decentralized institutions. These conditions encourage the emergence of innovations that have the potential to spread. In particular, a media environment that offers lots of alternative sources for information, each placing a premium on novelty (and the very word “news” suggests that the media's focus is on what's new), will be receptive to fads. In recent years, the development of multiple 24-hour cable news networks and the Internet have made it vastly easier to promote all sorts of news stories to very large audiences.

These media developments display at least two themes that deserve special mention. The first is the increasing tendency of the media to adopt a form of the sociological imagination. That term, of course, was devised by

C. Wright Mills (1959), who argued that the social sciences offered a way of linking private troubles to public issues: thus, instead of viewing my inability to find work as a personal problem, we can focus on the broader phenomenon of unemployment. The sociological imagination, then, shifts our attention from the particular case, to some larger social condition. Consider the first notorious crime story in American journalism history—the 1836 axe murder of Helen Jewitt, a New York City prostitute (Schiller, 1981; Tucher, 1994). Jewitt died just as the penny press newspapers were emerging, and the media devoted unprecedented amounts of attention to her life and death. Vast amounts of ink were consumed describing her story and that of her killer, but this pre-sociological coverage treated her murder as a terrible incident—not as an instance of a larger problem.

Contrast today's coverage of terrible crimes. In 2006, there was a shooting in Quebec: a man entered a high school and shot twenty people, killing one, before being shot himself. This was a sensational story, particularly in Canada. An American sociologist I know who happened to be in Canada at the time sent friends an e-mail message complaining of “the onslaught of wretched, pseudo-sociological explanations for a statistical anomaly.” These included claims about lax gun control laws, violent video games, goth culture, the marginalization of immigrants, a culture grown insensitive to violence, vampire fans, and Quebec's “alienating, . . . decades-long linguistic struggle” (Cornacchia, 2006; Dougherty, 2006; Mandel, 2006; Rocha, 2006; Wong, 2006). That is, rather than covering the crime as an awful event, the media immediately began searching for the larger social problem that the killings represented. Inspired by a single incident, they imagined a crime wave. In the United States, at least, we see the same logic justifying televi-

sion talk shows, where hosts interview people whose lives have taken some dramatic turn, and present those folks as embodiments of a larger phenomenon, e.g., “Men Who Have Sex with Their Babysitters.” The media version of the sociological imagination means that virtually any crime story has the potential to inspire a crime wave.

The second consequence of the proliferation in media venues is the ease with which alternative, often conspiratorial narratives can spread. The 1960s provided a series of shocks to American political culture: three major assassinations, extensive social protests and rioting, numerous revelations that government and business had lied, and so on. No doubt there had always been a paranoid strain in the culture, expressed in conspiratorial thinking (Hofstadter, 1966). But the assassination of President Kennedy seemed to launch a new era, in which event after event became the subject of unending speculation about what really happened. In recent decades, social scientists have studied all manner of stories that endure in folk culture and alternative media, and even, on occasion, break into mainstream news coverage. Consider, for example, claims that U.S. authorities store all the evidence of flying saucers in the mysterious Area 51, that the World Trade Center buildings only collapsed because explosive charges, previously implanted in the structures, were detonated, or—in the current QAnon claims—that pedophile, Satan-worshipping, cannibalistic Democrats are smuggling children through a vast network of underground tunnels. Such notions prove almost impossible to discredit; whatever contrary evidence is offered can be dismissed as further proof of the conspiracy’s reach. The powerful conspiracy whose

(5) Violent crime waves are often characterized by multiple claimants offering such competing explanations (Best 1991, 1999).

workings can be detected by discovering the links among apparently unrelated bits of information has become a major theme in popular fiction, television and film, and other popular culture.

These alternative explanations also influence how we think about crime waves. Popular culture formulas require that heroes confront dangerous, powerful villains, which encourages the portrayal of fictional criminals who are far more powerful than their real-life counterparts. In turn, we begin to imagine that terrible, real crimes must be the work of powerful villains, that reality must mirror our fictional formulas. Similarly, rumors and folklore invoke the theme of the powerful conspiracy to explain crime waves. For instance, there are tales that the CIA or other government agencies deliberately introduced crack and HIV into black ghettos (Sasson, 1995). The proliferation of media forums—such as cable channels, radio talk shows, and Web sites aimed at homogeneous, sympathetic audiences—makes it quite easy for these claims to circulate among those who find them compelling, and of course social media only exacerbate this process. The mainstream American news media—that is, the network news programs, and the major newspapers and newsmagazines—devoted almost no attention to the concerns about satanic ritual abuse. Nonetheless, a satanic panic flourished during the late 1980s and early 1990s, thanks to religious publishing houses and broadcasters, as well as to the more sensational secular talk shows.

Crime Waves as Fads

In other words, the cultural and structural arrangements that encourage constantly shifting attention to all manner of fads also affect the media's treatment of crime problems. This media coverage follows the trajectory

that characterizes all fads, which we can describe as a three-stage process: emerging, surging, and purging.

Fads in crime coverage can emerge for various reasons. Here, we can think of the media as a marketplace, in which all manner of stories compete for attention. Whether a particular story takes off depends upon the competition. It can be almost impossible to draw attention to a new topic when rival stories are sufficiently compelling. For instance, crime news went largely uncovered in the days immediately following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, when network television devoted 24-hour, commercial-free coverage to that story, and newspapers used most of their space for the same purpose. In contrast, reporters speak of the “dog days” of summer, when news seems hard to come by. A good share of American crime waves seems to begin during those slow summer months.

Of course, it also helps to have a melodramatic event that can serve as a typifying example for the crime wave. Thus, the crack problem was launched when a prominent athlete died of a cocaine overdose, just as the abduction of a Utah teenager from her home in 2002 revived concerns over missing children. There is, of course, no need for the typifying example of be in any statistical sense typical: the more extraordinary the event, the more it arouses fear and other intense emotions, the easier it is to inspire attention to a broader crime problem that, in reality, consists largely of far more mundane incidents.

Similarly, it is easier for a crime wave to emerge if the problem can be constructed as somehow relevant to what I've called cultural fault lines. Threats to children, out-of-control youth, and the pernicious consequences of immigration are all familiar motifs—larger concerns that may be depicted as re-

lated to the specific crime being addressed. Crimes receive more attention when they can be linked to such compelling concerns.

In some cases, crime waves are products of the press's entrepreneurial activities; reporters' coverage may launch the process (Best, 1991). But, in other cases, advocates guide what happens. Philip Jenkins (1994), for instance, has explained how the modern fascination with serial murder was very much the product of an FBI campaign that used the threat of serial murderers to justify the introduction of a potentially controversial federal database for crime information. In still other cases, advocates may latch on to stories introduced through news coverage; such coverage seems to have led domestic violence activists to realize that they could use news about stalking to revive interest in the movement for women's shelters (Lowney & Best, 1995).

The second stage—surging—involves a rapid expansion of interest in the newly discovered crime problem. Here, various media outlets clamber aboard the bandwagon, sensing that they, too, can extend the story in some way. This can take various forms: most obviously, one can point to additional cases as evidence that there is a trend, a wave of increasing crime, but there are other possibilities. For instance, reporters can show that the crime extends into previously unrecognized corners of society, or that it is taking new forms, or that it has important consequences, or whatever. When crime stories straddle major cultural fault lines, the media may discover that advocates of various causes are standing by, eager to link the current concern to their ongoing issues—such as the availability of firearms, or the corrupting influence of popular culture on the young. There are all sorts of ways to ring the changes so as to extend the story, but coverage must not stand

still. Crime waves are like sharks: if they stop moving forward, they will die. Additional coverage is needed. Remember that there are always competing claims hoping to attract media attention.

One important form of surging involves spreading the crime wave to alternative media. In particular, successful crime waves make the transition into popular culture. They find their way into both info-tainment and pure entertainment (such as comic books, detective novels, and television series) (Fishman & Cavender, 1998). This is important because popular culture—and not just those forms that claim to be “ripped from the headlines”—can keep awareness of a crime wave going, even after the news media can no longer justify remaining focused on the topic.

But, of course, all fads die—it is their short life-span, after all, that characterizes them as fads. Crime waves enter the third stage—purging—when the media can no longer identify and exploit new angles, when the story begins to seem stale, familiar, no longer novel enough to merit coverage. This process often occurs unannounced and unnoticed. Rather, the media turn to other topics—perhaps a new crime story, perhaps something entirely different for a while. Often their shift in coverage is aided by an event that makes some new topic seem much more compelling and newsworthy, so that the media can justify turning their attention to what’s new, often without bothering to acknowledge that their new focus is replacing the topic that previously held their attention. It is this silence that makes purging the least-studied aspect of fads. It is only later, when tracing media coverage on an issue, that we discover that it emerged, surged, and then—well—the topic seems to have been purged from the media’s agenda.

Conclusion

It can be satisfying to conduct case studies of crime waves. Such studies allow analysts to debunk widely held beliefs; this in itself often attracts audiences larger than those captured by most scholarly work. People are interested to discover that their fears are exaggerated, that they have been manipulated by the agendas of the media and various advocates. In addition, crime waves tend to be short-lived, which can make it relatively easy to gather the relevant data and conduct analysis. No wonder that we have accumulated a substantial stock of such case studies.

My point, however, has been that we need to move beyond case studies, to pay more attention to the larger patterns in the media's coverage of these short-lived stories. In particular, I think analyses of media crime coverage can benefit from borrowing ideas from studies of other short-lived phenomena, including analyses of fads. Examining both the circumstances that foster the spread of fads and the processes that compose fads' trajectory offers insights for better understanding crime waves, drug scares, and other moral panics. Thankfully, most of these fears are short-lived. It might be worthwhile to consider more systematically just why this is the case.

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Fads in Fear: Cycles in Crime Construction

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ABSTRACT

Crime waves involve concentrated media and public attention on forms of crime that are said to be particularly common or threatening. Sociologists and criminologists often view these as waves of attention, rather than criminality; they seek to explain these episodes as the product of claims made by the media, officials, or activists. Focusing on particular cases ignores the connections among crime waves that reflect similar underlying cultural concerns. Many crimes tend to fall into and out of attention over time, although collective amnesia tends to obscure this fact. It makes sense to view crime waves as a form of fad. Fads are short-lived enthusiasms; although we tend to think of fads as trivial, they can be found in major institutions. Institutional fads are fostered by decentralization, and the proliferation of media platforms encourages both the adoption of a sociological imagination that views particular crimes as instances of larger problems, as well as conspiratorial explanations. The stages in a fad's career—emerging, surging and purging—can help us understand the dynamics of crime waves, so that we can move beyond the focus on particular crime problems.

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